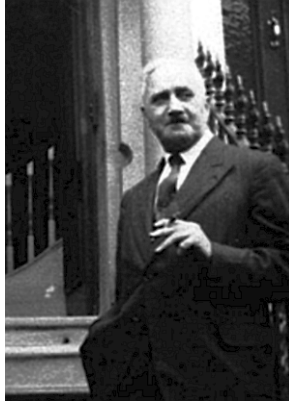


NIGHTMARE FARM

Jack Mann
[Charles Henry Cannell (1882–1947)]

Erstausgabe Wright & Brown, London 1937

Das Titelbild zeigt das Cover der Erstausgabe bei Wright & Brown, London 1937.



Charles Henry Cannell

Jack Mann was one of the many pseudonyms of Charles Henry Cannell (1882–1947), a British editor and writer of fantasy and supernatural, detective novels and stories.

Prior to becoming a writer, Cannell was a former soldier in the Boer War and journalist for THE DAILY TELEGRAPH. Cannell began writing novels under his mostly used pen-name “Evelyn Charles Henry Vivian” in 1907. Cannell started writing fantastic stories for the arts magazine COLOUR and the aviation journal FLYING (which Cannell edited after leaving the TELEGRAPH) in 1917–18, sometimes publishing them under the pseudonym “A.K. Walton”.

Today, Vivian is best known for his Lost World fantasy novels such as “*City of Wonder*” and his series of novels featuring supernatural detective Gregory George Gordon Green or “Gees” which he wrote under his “Jack Mann” pseudonym. Vivian also wrote several science-fiction stories, including the novel “*Star Dust*” about a scientist who can create gold. Critic Jack Adrian has praised Cannell’s lost-world stories as »*bursting with ideas and colour and pace*«, and »*superb examples of a fascinating breed*«. Influences on Vivian’s work included Rider Haggard, H.G. Wells, Arthur Machen and the American novelist Arthur O. Friel. Vivian also published fiction under several other pseudonyms, including Westerns as “Barry Lynd”. J. Adrian has noted that some of the pseudonyms Cannell used »*will never now be identified*«. For younger readers, Vivian wrote “*Robin Hood and his Merry Men*”, a retelling of the Robin Hood legend.

Vivian also edited three British pulp magazines. From 1918 to 1922 Vivian edited THE NOVEL MAGAZINE, and later, for the publisher Walter Hutchinson (1887–1950), HUTCHINSON’S ADVENTURE-STORY MAGAZINE (which serialised three of Vivian’s novels) and HUTCHINSON’S MYSTERY-STORY MAGAZINE. In addition to UK writers, Vivian often reprinted fiction from American pulp magazines such as ADVENTURE and WEIRD TALES in the Hutchinson publications.

Outside the field of fiction, Vivian was noted for the non-fiction book “*A History of Aeronautics*”.

List of all Novels of the Gees-Series:

- Gees First Case (1936)
- Grey Shapes (1937)
- Nightmare Farm (1937)
- The Kleinert Case (1938)
- Maker of Shadows (1938)
- The Ninth Life (1939)
- The Glass Too Many (1940)
- Her Ways Are Death (1940)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._C._Vivian

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Chapter 1

The Tale of Angus Hunter

A tall, pleasantly ugly, youngish sort of man, with very large hands and feet, stood gazing out from an upper window into Little Oakfield Street, which is in the south-western district of London and lies off the Haymarket, in mid-afternoon of a chilly day in May. Beneath him, and on the opposite side of the street, was an outfitter's shop, and, eyeing the display in the shop window as well as he could at this height and distance, he meditated over buying ties. There was nothing else to do, it appeared, so why not go out and buy ties?

He faced about, still considering the idea, and looked at his well-appointed desk in the middle of the room, with its swivelling chair for himself, and comfortable leather-upholstered armchair for clients—but it appeared that there were no clients. Therefore, ties!

Lots of ties. Striped ties, speckled ties, plain-coloured ties—any old ties! He had reached that point in his meditations when a tallish, graceful girl entered, approached him, and silently handed him a card. Gazing at it, he postponed the expedition in quest of ties.

"Angus d'Arcy Hunter," he read out. "Does he look it, Miss Brandon?"

His secretary, used to his ways, neither smiled nor frowned. She merely looked at him with that superior air which, for over a year, now, had impressed on him that familiarities would not be tolerated.

"Oldish, stout, and red-faced," she said.

"High blood-pressure," he diagnosed. "All right, I'll see him."

She left the door open as she went out, and presently returned.

"Mr. Hunter, Mr. Green," she announced and also introduced. The visitor proved decidedly stout, bay-windowed, in fact. He had scant grey hair, grizzled eyebrows, deeply-set and widely-spaced grey eyes, a

purplish nose, and a firm, rather thin-lipped mouth. The younger man sized him up as good-tempered in a general way, but choleric, and, on sight, liked him. He stood at gaze, two paces inside the room, as Miss Brandon closed the door on him.

“Won’t you sit down?” the younger man inquired politely, indicating the comfortable armchair intended for clients—such as this.

“Young man”—Hunter spoke clearly and incisively—“can you lay ghosts?” And he made no move to accept the invitation.

“Well”—Green spoke in a thoughtful way, as if doubtful of committing himself—“so far, I’ve only laid two. Both at once, though.”

“How?” This second question was even more incisive.

“Shot ’em, and then burnt ’em,” Green replied. “To make sure, you know. But do sit down, won’t you, Mr. Hunter?”

Hunter advanced toward the indicated chair, lowered himself into it, and shook his head gravely as the other took the swivel chair at the desk. “No good, I’m afraid,” he said. “Not for mine, I mean.”

“My secretary brought in your card,” Green observed, rather abstractedly, “but there was no address on it.”

“No. Well, that can wait. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Which way did you come here?” Green inquired in reply.

“Which way? Why, Piccadilly Circus and the Haymarket, of course.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Hunter! Not of course. You might have rolled up from Charing Cross. But if you think of all that Piccadilly Circus and the Haymarket are—if you consider this mechanised city, you will realise it as impossible to believe in ghosts, here. In the quiet places of the earth, though, one is forced to admit, sometimes, a belief.”

“The quiet places of the earth,” his visitor echoed thoughtfully. “I see, Mr. Green, that you are not altogether a fool.”

“If ever we get to know each other, I hope to be able to return your compliment, Mr. Hunter,” Green said. “Meanwhile—?” He paused, suggestively, and lifted his wrist to look at his watch.

“Yes,” said Hunter, quite unabashed. “But—this Gees. Who is he?”

“I am,” Green said. “I have four names, and it is my solitary initial. Therefore, when I founded this firm, I used that name.”

“And the firm?” Hunter asked.

Gees frowned slightly at this apparently unreasonable inquisitiveness. “Myself, and my secretary,” he answered. “I had thoughts of an office boy, but decided against it. Too banal. Too conventional.”

"Well, Mr. Green"—Hunter appeared to have made up his mind to get to business at last—"happening to be in town—"

Then he paused, and Green waited, but in vain. "One might almost say it is obvious," he prompted gently.

"Yes." Hunter appeared to rouse himself. "In the club to-day, I happened to meet your father, and he recommended me to you."

"Well, well!" Green observed, with mild surprise. "Getting liberal-minded—and at his age, too! Recommended me as a ghost-layer?"

"As nearly as I can remember, he said you were fond of cock-and-bull tales, and fool enough to undertake anything. Murmured something about mumps to murder, in a tone of extreme disgust."

"Ah! That will be my slogan. 'Consult Gees for anything from mumps to murder.' He doesn't like it, I know. But—I conclude, from your knowing him, you are one of the Shropshire Hunters?"

"The last one, except for my son," Hunter admitted, "and he is at present with his battalion in India. I may tell you, Mr. Green, that my object in calling on you is neither mumps nor murder. Er—were you serious when you said you had laid two ghosts?"

"Perfectly serious," Green answered gravely.

"Then you might undertake to lay another—for a consideration?"

"The consideration would be serious, too," Green informed him.

"Name your own terms," Hunter said promptly. "For laying the ghost, I mean—not for merely attempting to lay it."

"Then"—Green settled himself comfortably in his chair, and put his foot on a button which warned Miss Brandon to take down a conversation—the microphone which would give it her was in front of Hunter, but invisible to him—"if you will particularise, Mr. Hunter, I will decide whether the undertaking would appeal to me."

There was a momentary gleam of anger in Hunter's eyes. He had come here to employ a certain man for a certain task, and give him his orders, but it was not working out like that at all. He controlled himself, though, and proceeded to detail his affair.

"We Shropshire Hunters, Mr. Green—that is, my family, own practically all Denlandham, as probably you know," he said. "Have you been there, though? Your father knows it, but—"

"I have not been there, nor met any of your family," Green interposed.

"Miss nothing out—tell it as to a stranger."

"Very well, then," Hunter assented. "An ancestor of mine received the estate from Henry the Eighth as reward for services when the monasteries were being broken up—I believe it was entirely church lands, till

that time. And the family residence was a house called Knightsmere, now known as Knightsmere Farm, and still belonging to the estate."

"But no longer the home of the Hunters," Green suggested.

"No. It ceased to be that early in the eighteenth century. Through siding with Charles against the Parliament, the family lost everything. The second Charles gave back the estate—the lands, that is—but forgot the very large sum of money which my ancestor of that day contributed to the royal cause. Knightsmere was half ruined by the Parliamentary troops, and was restored to no more than a farmhouse, with the rooms all set round one tremendous chimney, when an Angus Hunter took back the estate after the accession of Charles the Second. The family was too poor to make a mansion of it again."

"I have an idea it is not a poor family now," Green remarked.

"Since I am the family," Hunter said, "I may as well own that I do not consider myself poor. Because, toward the end of the seventeenth century, a certain Robert Hunter went adventuring in the East, slave-trading, and what-not. He was a younger son, and went to make his fortune, but returned in middle age to find his brother had died childless so that he was next in succession, with enough of capital to build the present Denlandham House and still leave a respectable fortune in addition to the income from the land. That income has dwindled till the land is more of a responsibility than an asset, in these days."

"As is the case with our Shropshire estate," Green put in.

"Yes. Taxation, hen-roost-robbing by the Criccieth charlatan, and—but if I begin on that, I shall never put my case before you. The ghost, Mr. Green, begins with Robert Hunter, the adventurer."

"Oh! Not before his time?" Green inquired in surprise.

"No. No shadowy monk, and not the knight who was murdered by being drowned in the mere—which gives the old house its name. It never appeared, as far as family records and traditions go, until Robert came back from the East and built our present home."

"It sounds slightly interesting," Green remarked thoughtfully.

"Are you being sceptical?" There was a hint of anger in the query.

"No," Green answered. "An open mind is as good as a banking account, though one may make an overdraft on either. Proceed, Mr. Hunter. The ghost came in with your ancestor Robert—and still walks?"

"Never has walked," Hunter demurred. "It whirls and gurgles—I call it gurgling, and it's like the noise of liquid being poured from a bottle,

nearly, a sort of clucking, gurgling noise. And it only appears intermittently. It seems to have been quiet after Robert's death till his grandson had inherited, missing out a generation entirely."

"What sort of man was the grandson?" Green interrupted.

"Rather—well, not an attractive character," Hunter confessed. "In fact, a murder was traced to him, but after his death."

"Ye—es." He sounded thoughtful over it. "And after his death it went quiet again—refrained from appearing, that is?"

"Exactly." Hunter sounded pleased as he confirmed the surmise. "I gather you know something about this type of ghost, Mr. Green?"

"No. I have not—well, collected ghosts, as one might say. I've never collected them enough to range them in types, I mean. Then—the next appearance, if there were one prior to your own annoyance over it."

"Did I say I was annoyed?" Hunter spoke rather testily. "Never mind, though, because I am, and worse. The next appearance was in my grandfather's days—my father was at Cambridge at the time. There is some doubt as to whether it were an actual appearance, or a hoax played for his own ends by a man named Utter—Henry Utter. He was the son of one of the estate tenants, and grew up as a ne'er-do-well, eventually drifting to crime and going to serve a two-year sentence for a particularly despicable type of offence. The ghost is said to have re-appeared for the period between his coming out of gaol, and his death."

"A fairly long period, then?" Green asked.

"No. Oh, no! Henry Utter broke into Denlandham House one night and gathered up the family silver and some other trifles. A branch of ivy gave way as he was climbing down from an upper window—the one he had used for entry—and he fell. There was a gold-hafted poniard, one of the curios our adventurer Robert brought back, among the loot, and Henry was so unfortunate as to fall on the point of it. That was eighteen months after his release from prison, and the ghost was seen during that time, but not after. So it was generally thought that he resurrected the old story by playing ghost, though I don't see what he gained by it, if he did that. And the description of the thing tallies with the old stories, and with what I know."

"Appeared with Robert, vanished at Robert's death," Green summarised reflectively. "Again appeared with an ancestor who was a murderer, and vanished at his death. Appeared again with Henry Utter, and vanished at his death. Only those three appearances, Mr. Hunter?"

"Only those three periods of appearance, as far as I know," Hunter answered. "That is, until this present outbreak."

"Which began when?" Green asked.

"Last November. There is neither rhyme nor reason in it, as far as I can see. The thing seems to haunt Knightsmere Farm and the roadway leading to it—that has always been its location, according to the records of it. It delights in frightening women."

"As how?" Green appeared to take all this as matter of course.

"Merely by appearing to them," Hunter answered, rather nervously. "I, of course, give out that I don't believe in the supernaturalness of it, but when I tell you that the only time I saw it myself, I emptied two twelve-bore cartridges of number five shot into it, and saw it caper away utterly unharmed, you will realise that I am forced to believe there is something uncanny about it."

"Or a shot-proof suit," Green suggested. "But supposing you had killed someone quite human, how would you have accounted for your act?"

"I don't know," Hunter confessed frankly, "but after Norris's daughter—Norris was my tenant at Knightsmere Farm—after the girl had been taken to a mental home through encountering the ghost, I gave out that I intended to shoot the masquerader on sight, and he must take the risk if he persisted in his horrible impersonation."

"I see. And was it dusk, or full dark, when you shot this ghost?"

"How do you know it wasn't daylight?" Hunter demanded.

"I don't," Green answered. "What was it, anyhow?"

"The last of the dusk. I'd been to Knightsmere to inquire about the girl, and was coming back along the roadway—that is, the private lane between the farmhouse and the road, and I had a double-barrelled twelve-bore hammerless loaded in the crook of my arm—I'd been potting rabbits, which are a nuisance on that farm. The roadway is enclosed between two enormous hawthorn hedges, each well over twenty-five feet high and quite impenetrable for all their length, so it was practically dark between them—and it's about half a mile from the house to the gate leading into the road. Half way between the house and the road I first heard this thing and then saw it. I called to it, 'What are you doing here?' or something of that sort—I don't remember clearly what I said, because, I've got to confess, I was in a more awful state of fear than I'd thought possible to myself. It didn't answer, and I managed to get the gun to my shoulder and loose off both barrels. And—and it just went twirling and gurgling in among the hawthorns on one side of the roadway, and disappeared, with no trace of how it had got away."

"Climbed through the hedge," Green conjectured.

"Haven't I told you that's impossible?" Hunter exclaimed angrily, "A child of five couldn't squeeze through between those hawthorn stems, and certainly nobody could climb through. Both hedges are utterly impenetrable to anything bigger than a small terrier. They're the pride of Knightsmere, and haven't been more than slashed back to shape—the outer branches trimmed back—for over half a century. No. The thing vanished as a ghost vanishes, not humanly at all."

"And at what distance were you when you shot at it?" Green asked.

"Anything between twelve and twenty yards—not more than twenty."

"Being what sort of shot?" The question came after a long pause.

"I don't miss, with a twelve-bore only left-choked, at that distance," Hunter answered. "And if you've got another question in mind, I've been a teetotaller for over twenty years, by medical orders."

"Yes." He thought over it. "And this girl—in the mental home?"

"May Norris. Yes. Will recover, they say, in time. Mind deranged by shock. I offered anything Norris chose to ask, but he refused everything and left the farm at the April quarter. I put a bailiff in to manage, since I took over the growing crops at a valuation when Norris left, and now he—the bailiff—is quitting my employ altogether at the end of this month. Would have left sooner, if I hadn't almost begged him to stay till I could get another man to replace him."

"Is he married, this bailiff?" Green asked.

"Yes, and says he's leaving on account of his wife—at her wish."

"Ah! Have you seen this wife lately?"

"Not since they went to Knightsmere. Why? Do you think—?"

"A lot," Green said in the pause. "Now tell me, Mr. Hunter, are you overstocked with bad characters round about Denlandham just now?"

"Overstocked—bad characters?" Hunter echoed in a puzzled way.

"Why—what on earth has that got to do with it, even if we are?"

"Possibly nothing," Green admitted—but he shifted his ground of questioning at once. "What's this poltergeist of yours like, Mr. Hunter, since you've actually seen it yourself and—"

"Poltergeist be damned!" Hunter interjected angrily. "They're things that throw plates and crockery about, mischief and no more—not one atom impressive, by all I've read and heard. And this is impressive! I know that from my one encounter with it."

"But not impressionable," Green observed. "At least, it doesn't react to two charges of number five shot in the way one might expect. Could you give me any description of it, though?"

"Does that mean you're going to lay it?" Hunter asked.

"You haven't told me enough about it, yet," Green countered.

"Well, it's"—he hesitated—"it's tall. Taller than I am. Taller than you are, I'd say. Mind, it was practically dark when I shot at it, but light enough for me to align the gun on it, though I couldn't see the bead of the foresight. And it seemed to be wearing—well, a thin sort of fur, I suppose it was. Something that looked all fuzzy, and made it look broad as well as tall. But whatever that was, it was thin stuff—almost semi-transparent by daylight, I should say. Features I couldn't see—if it had any. And it didn't keep still."

"Do you mind explaining that?" Green asked.

"Well, I got the impression that it was twirling and twisting all the time," Hunter said. "Rather like—like one of those miniature whirlwinds that gather up dust and leaves in harvest time, twirling round and round as if it were on a pivot instead of feet—till I shot at it. Then it appeared to run, tremendously fast, till I lost sight of it."

"No blood, nor any trace of the results of your shots?"

"Nothing whatever. That roadway was muddy, but there was no footprint, apart from my own. I struck matches, and came back the next morning as well, to look, but there was no trace of it at all."

"Has it done anything?" Green asked abruptly, after a pause.

"Done anything—what do you mean?" Hunter snapped.

"Exactly what I say. Can you trace any activities to it?"

"If you don't call frightening a girl into a mental home, and driving one man after another out of living at a farmhouse, doing anything, I don't know what is," Hunter snapped still more sharply.

"The girl may have had delusions, her father may have believed her story and left on account of it, and your bailiff may be a superstitious type that gets frightened of living in an old house," Green said.

"And I—in such terror of the sight of it as I had never believed possible of myself—what am I?" Hunter demanded. "A rank coward?"

"No-o-o," Green conceded, rather dubiously. "It seems that there may be something in it. And you say you are willing to pay for results over laying it. Well, money is generally truthful, even if—"

"If you mean that you are prepared to put an end to this—this haunting, call it—name your own terms. Payable for success, mind. I pay nothing at all if you fail, not even your expenses."

"Very well," Green said calmly. "Two hundred and fifty pounds."

"Agreed!" The word was uttered eagerly, without a second's delay.

"Very good, Mr. Hunter." Green stood up as he spoke. "Put that in writing and send the letter to me here—no conditions or stipulations, only that when you are satisfied that this ghost is laid, you will pay me the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds. I think that is all."

"Yes, I'll send you the letter. And when shall I see you at Denlandham, ready to begin on it?"

"I said, no conditions or stipulations, Mr. Hunter," Green reminded him quietly. "Send the letter, and leave the rest to me."

For some few seconds Hunter looked as if he would not merely repudiate the bargain, but speak a piece of his mind as well. Then, meeting Green's steady, tranquil gaze, he thought better of it.

"Very well, I will send the letter," he said. "It commits me to nothing, until you can report success. Good afternoon, Mr. Green."

"Good afternoon, sir. My secretary will see you out."

Hunter, quite unaware that Miss Brandon had heard that last remark through the microphone, was not a little surprised to see her open the door and stand ready to escort him to the exit from the office—and from Green's residence as well, since all but the two rooms which he and his secretary used as offices were living quarters. He left, and Green lighted a cigarette and then went from his own room to Miss Brandon's, to see her stand gazing down at the pothooks in her notebook.

"I think we'd better have a transcript, Miss Brandon," he remarked.

"Then I will get on with it," she answered, and seated herself at her desk in readiness to begin.

"No hurry—we've got to wait for his letter," he said, and leaned against the doorpost to exhale smoke. "What did you think of him?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," she answered emphatically.

"No? It's a wide term, though—takes in quite a lot of things. His is a wealthy family, I happen to know—my father is vaguely acquainted with him, as he let me know, and two hundred and fifty pounds to him is equal to the same number of shillings to me, which is why I fixed that figure. And he'll pay it, too," he ended with conviction.

"For what?" she asked, gazing straight at him.

"Laying the ghost," he answered tranquilly, and blew more smoke.

"You talk about it—and he talked about it too—as if he were asking you to go and shoot rabbits," she declared with some impatience.

"Well, I might do that," he admitted, "since he says they're a nuisance in his part of the country. But how should we have talked?"

"The supernatural—or whatever you choose to call it—one hardly considers it—well—I mean—in that everyday sort of fashion."

"And why not?" He smiled slightly as he put the question.

"Well, I should think—" She hesitated. "And are you, as he puts it, going to lay this ghost—going there to do it?"

"I certainly am," he answered decidedly.

"There is no such thing," she declared with equal decision.

"Then I am going to persuade him I have laid it."

"And take the money for doing it?"

"Inevitably," he said coolly. "You don't think I'd waste the time it will take, all for nothing, do you, Miss Brandon?"

"It wouldn't be you if you did," she answered with conviction.

"No. Meanwhile you haven't answered my question—what you think of him. You deliberately hedged away from it to state a disbelief in the existence of ghosts, without defining what you mean by ghosts."

"I mean—" she began, but he held up a protesting hand.

"No, no, Miss Brandon. I rely at times very largely on your—your feminine intuition, call it. What did you think of him?"

"On the strength of this, you mean?" She pointed down at her notes of the conversation that she had taken down.

"On that, since it's more than what you saw of him," he assented.

"Well, I don't believe in ghosts," she repeated.

"In other words, Angus d'Arcy Hunter is a liar. Feminine intuition wins once more. I began by being prepared to like him, but when he passed out that my father had recommended him to come to me—well!"

"But if there isn't any ghost, why?" she began, and broke off.

"Oh, that part of it is sound enough," he assured her. "He believes in his twirling gurgler, whatever it is. But my father has gone all wild over my revival of that mumps to murder slogan in the personal columns of his favourite dailies, and he wouldn't recommend a goat to come to me to be groomed. Moreover, I know he'd studiously ignore Angus—there's been a coolness between the two families ever since a Green went off with a Mrs. Hunter and didn't come back. And because Hunter knew that I'm the son of General Green, owner of the Shropshire property, he pitched me that tale to get me there, hoping I wouldn't contact my father and get put off going to Denlandham for him."

"But, if so, how did he know of you?" she asked.

"Through that Cumberland business, of course, when I put an end to the grey shapes. Somebody told him all there is known of that story,

but I think he got it that the business was done by Gees, not me, which is why he asked after Gees—whoever told him knew that name for me.”

“But why—why not be straight about it?” she demanded. “Why should he lie about General Green, or—or be roundabout over it?”

“You’ll find, Miss Brandon,” he said, “that it suits some natures to be roundabout. They’ll go to no end of trouble, and even make trouble for themselves, rather than take a straight course. Hunter knew that a Shropshire Green would have no great liking for any one of his family, he wanted Gees to come and lay his ghost, and he found himself faced by a Shropshire Green for a beginning, and then found that particular Green was the Gees he was after. He hoped to get straight to Gees, missing out Green, and told that little tale when he found they were one and the same. But”—he straightened himself with a start—“by the holy pancake, I forgot all about the two guineas for initial consultation!”

“I didn’t.” She took up her note-book, and revealed two pound notes and a two shilling piece which it had concealed.

“Miss Brandon, you’re a pearl of exceeding price,” he told her feelingly.

“If that letter arrives to-morrow morning, I’ll start for Denlandham after lunch, and meanwhile I want to consult some authorities on twirling gurglers, so you can mind the office.”

“You don’t mean you believe in it, Mr. Green?” she asked.

“An open mind,” he answered, “is as valuable as an account with a book-maker, and I keep both. That two guineas will help to pay the book-maker’s account for last week—if I hand you the account, you can make out the cheque for me to sign, Miss Brandon. Thanks so much.”

Chapter 2

At the ›Hunters' Arms‹

The Rolls-Bentley, smoke grey with black wings, drew up outside the town house of General Sir George Green, K.G.V.O.¹, D.S.O.², and the general's son got out and, with one glance of pardonable pride in ownership at the quiet aristocrat of sports cars—he had bought it out of the somewhat illicit proceeds of his first case as Gees—rang the bell and got himself admitted to the house. In the library, his father gazed at him in a way that indicated a possible storm.

“Well, what do you want?” the general snapped out.

“Oh, lots, father,” the son answered, “but I didn't come here looking for any of it. Just a simple inquiry, if you don't mind.”

“Which is the business of confidential agencies, as you call that preposterous pretence at occupation of yours,” the general observed.

“But it hasn't been altogether preposterous,” Gees—as his intimate acquaintances usually called him—protested gently. “Even you yourself handed me a bouquet over the Kestwell case—”

“I don't like your slang expressions, Gordon!” the general interrupted. “That one case is all you appear to have done or ever intend to do—except for maintaining a very pretty secretary on premises which include your living accommodation—”

¹ Soll möglicherweise K.C.V.O. heißen, Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order.

² Der Distinguished Service Order (Orden für hervorragenden Dienst) wurde 1886 von Königin Victoria gestiftet und als zweithöchste Tapferkeitsauszeichnung nach dem Victoria-Kreuz angesehen. Die Verleihung konnte regelmäßig nur für Tapferkeit während Kampfhandlungen erfolgen. Üblicherweise erfolgte die Verleihung an Offiziere vom Range des Majors aufwärts.

"My secretary, father, could give Caesar's wife ten yards in the hundred and come out an easy winner," Gees interrupted in turn. "It's not the first time you've made that imputation against her, and I'd call any man but you a liar for making it, and hit him if he were not too old. Now do we drop this wrangling while I ask what I came to ask—"

"Quite apart from the girl, you've started that infernal advertising again, I see," the general broke in again. "That ludicrous and perfectly damnable mumps to murder sentence that makes me ashamed to own that you are my son. Consult Gees! Consult the devil!"

"A matter of taste," Gees said blandly. "Which you consult, I mean. But unless you have any more observations to hurl at me—"

"What do you want here?" the general interrupted yet once more.

"Being on my way to Denlandham—" Gees began, only to meet another interruption, uttered in a tone of wrathful surprise.

"Denlandham? You—going to Denlandham?"

"I believe I said so. To make an investigation—"

"Why—what has Hunter been doing?" the general broke in again.

"I don't know what anyone has been doing till I've got on to my investigation," his son told him as patiently as ever. "But I wanted to ask you—did you see Hunter in your club, the day before yesterday?"

"I did. What has that got to do with your investigation?"

"Did you speak to him?"

"Speak to him? What do you take me to be, Gordon? Of course I didn't speak to him! How dare you suggest such a thing?"

"But you were talking to somebody about me," Gees accused, "and you said whatever it was loudly enough for Hunter to overhear it."

"I—what?" The general looked like making some outburst, but checked himself. "I—yes, I remember, now. Palliser was inquiring about you, questioning whether you were keeping on with that agency in co-operation with the man named Gees. I didn't deceive him, and I said that either you or Gees was fool enough to keep on with anything, or something of that sort. Hunter may have heard me—I don't care if he did. Your mumps to murder advertisement is enough to make me say anything. I loathe and detest it. Hate it! Resent it!"

"You're terribly redundant with your verbs, father," Gees said placidly, "and now you've told me what I wanted to know, I'll not trouble you any longer, but head for Denlandham to make it by nightfall."

"If Hunter is the culprit and you land him, I'll forgive you everything except that advertisement, Gordon," the general promised.

"There appears to be precious little else to forgive, father," Gees pointed out. "Besides, I'm acting for Hunter, not against him."

It stands to General Green's credit that he restrained himself. He merely pointed at the library door and said, "Get out of this house!" in a small voice—but it was like the rustle of a zephyr travelling just ahead of a tornado. And, foreseeing that the tornado was imminent, Gees got out of the house and set his course for Denlandham.

The quiet of the marshes, with old-world Ludlow behind and Shrewsbury ahead, at the end of the serene day. Limpid green over the sunset and opal shades in the lower west. Green meadows, placid streams, and the foliage of the trees at its best, with the scent of hawthorn blossom burdening the air after Gees had turned off from the Shrewsbury road to take the winding, narrower way to Denlandham, placid as the day itself after his late tea in the old, half-timbered Ludlow inn.

It was, he reflected, the first time since childhood that he had felt even reasonably cheerful over coming to Shropshire, for his father had designed that he, Gees, should manage the family estate as soon as he was old enough, and had made him learn all the intricacies of management so thoroughly that he detested the idea as much as the general detested his slogan. But this business on which he was engaged promised to be interesting, and probably profitable as well, so that he was quite prepared to concede to anyone that the scenery through which he drove was lovely, and that Shropshire as a county was worth knowing. Moreover, with the rattle and smoke of London hardly out of his ears and nostrils as yet, and the very last word in mechanical perfection under his control, he was half-inclined to regard Angus Hunter's twirling gurgler as did Eve Madeleine, whom he called Miss Brandon in speaking to her. Yet, he knew, Hunter had detailed his case quite practically and reasonably, as if he knew rather than believed in its truth.

And now, ruminating, Gees wished he had his father's knowledge of the Hunter family. Grandfather Green's brother had annexed Celia Hunter three-quarters of a century before, making the breach between the families which still showed no sign of closing—Hunter's lying about a talk with the general in the club could not be taken as a sign—and, knowing of the breach, Gees had made no attempt to learn the full history of these Hunters. Angus of that name had confessed to a slave-trader and a murderer in the family, and Gees had a half-memory of a legend to the effect that, when the first of the family to come to notice had dispossessed the monks of Denlandham, he had been guilty of senseless cruelties. There had been a convent, too, and the nuns—

Not nearly so placid as he remembered the old tales, Gees looked about him and felt that the May landscape was not quite as beautiful as it had appeared when he first began this train of reflection. It had already occurred to him that Hunter's letter, which he carried in his note-case, had no more cash value in the event of his success on this mission than had the paper that contained it, but, bad though the record of the family was, in spots, and from the view-point of a Shropshire Green, Angus would surely not be swine enough to repudiate that obligation. Or would he? The sum was little enough to him, but—

A jab at the brake pedal, for a small boy of four or five darted into the narrow road from a wayside cottage gateway, almost under the front wheels of the slowly and silently moving car, which came to a standstill while the urchin completed his journey across the road and gained the bank on the far side from the cottage gateway, where, thumb in mouth, he stood divided between pride in his achievement and a desire to howl loudly over the narrowness of his escape.

A woman came out from the cottage to the gate, and looked out at the child and the long car. She was about to speak, but Gees forestalled her: he did not know if she would begin on him or the child.

"Madam," he asked, removing his hat and speaking most ingratiatingly, "could you tell me how far it is to Denlandham?"

"Denlum?" she amended for him. "Why, this is it."

"All of it?" He looked past her at the cottage.

"Willie!" she called past him to the child, "coom heer, you little davy! Runnin' out inter the rud like that, you!"

But heedless of whether the child obeyed or no, Gees let in his clutch and moved on. Denlandham or Denlum was somewhere handy, evidently, and there must be a hostelry somewhere about. He found it about a quarter of a mile farther on, and would have hated to total up the bends and twists in that quarter-mile, for the road could give a worm points and a beating on turning. Then, set back from a sort of forecourt, which was shaded by a chestnut tree that would have set any toiling village blacksmith rejoicing, he saw ›The Hunters' Arms‹ declare itself by means of a swinging signboard, and turned off the road to discover that one Nicholas Churchill was licensed to retail ... but then Gees got out to search for Nicholas or some accredited representative, for the rest of the sign was of no consequence. Here was an inn, and the first of the May twilight was at hand. Leaving the car, he entered what proved to be the public bar.

Behind the bar was a red-faced man with a perceptibly humped back and a nose that would not have failed by comparison with Cyrano de Bergerac's facial centre. Two youngsters paused from competing at darts on the far side of the low-ceiled room at the entry of this stranger, and two rather elderly men of the hedger-and-ditcher type, seated on a long settle at right angles to the bar, gave him a glance and then ignored him. He addressed the hunchback.

"Are you Mr. Churchill?"

Mr. Churchill made a shrill noise of assent, a sort of "Yeahp!"

"Well, then, Mr. Churchill, could you put me up for the night?"

Again Mr. Churchill made his noise, and added something like

"Sir."

"Thank you," said Gees. "I'll go and get my belongings."

He returned to the car, took out his suitcase, and faced about to see a woman as tall as himself standing in the inn doorway.

"Coom along o' me, mister," she invited or commanded. "Ah'll show thee tha room, an' what'll tha loike to eat?"

"Oh, anything that's handy," he answered, as he followed her to the staircase beyond the doorway leading to the bar.

"Ah've a gradely ham on coot," she announced, "an' happen tha'd loike eggs wi't. An' a pot o' tea."

"Splendid," he assented, and came, at the top of the stairs, to a tidy bedroom with—the thing he noticed first—an illuminated "God Bless Our Home," over the head of the bed. Facing it from the opposite wall, he saw next, was an oleograph "Soul's Awakening"—but there was room under the bed for both, he decided.

"An' theer's a staable at the back wheer thee can put thy car," she told him. "When'll thee loike tha sooper?"

"Oh, in an hour, say," he suggested. "I'll put the car away and drop into the bar for a bit. Mr. Churchill can tell me when the meal is ready, if you let him know. You don't belong to this part of the country, I gather, Mrs. Churchill?" He risked calling her that.

"Noa. We coom fra nigh Sheffield," she informed him, and added in a lower voice after a brief pause—"Worse luck," before leaving him to a wash and brush-up after his journey.

He looked out from the casement window and saw a squat church tower and the slated roof of what he decided was the vicarage or rectory not far from the church. There was a row of aged cottages a little way along the road from the inn, and behind these tokens that this was indeed

Denlandham—perhaps a mile distant from the inn—glimpses of a big residence set on a slight rise of ground were visible among trees. That, Gees reflected, would be Denlandham House, Hunter's residence, for it was unlikely that two such—for this part of the country—imposing mansions would exist in one village.

He found the stable and backed the Rolls-Bentley inside, after driving out a half-dozen hens which, he decided, must roost elsewhere for the night. Then he returned to the bar, leaned against it, and requested a pint of bitter, which Nicholas Churchill provided without even a comment on the weather. Apparently the landlord was not loquacious.

Sipping at the pint glass, Gees watched the dart players in an abstracted, dreamy way, and presently had his reward. For the two elders on the settle, considering him not interested in them, renewed the conversation his entrance had interrupted. They talked with long pauses between sentences, and without emphasis: it was as if the conversation were part of their evening ritual, and not very interesting to them.

"My beans begun to flower," said one.

"There be a mortal lot o' fly this year," the other observed.

"Aye, Tom, yu're right," said the first one.

Tom looked into his pint glass, and decided to drink no more yet. One dart-player missed the board altogether, and danged it loudly.

"Squire back yit?" Tom inquired of his fellow.

"Yistiddy," was the reply.

"I did hear Norris's gal is hoam."

"Yistiddy," said the other again.

Tom shook his head over his glass, gravely. "Still mazed," he said, and Gees took care to avoid any expression of interest or look at them.

"Aye," said Tom's friend, with equal gravity.

"Stoppin' at Cosham's till Michaelmas, they say," Tom observed.

"They'm cousins," said the other.

"Aye, but Cosham'll want pay for their keep, till Michaelmas,"

Tom averred. "He 'on't keep three on 'em till then for nothin'."

"I 'ouldn't neether," said Tom's friend, after thinking it over.

"An' noobery know what did happen to that gal."

"Narves. Growed too fast, I reckon, an' got narves."

"Then yu don't believe?" Tom glanced at Gees, and did not end it.

"That?" The other spoke with his first sign of interest in what he or Tom was saying. "Them tales'll do to frighten children with."

Tom thought it over, and drank some beer to aid his reflections.

"I lay yu 'ouldn't go oop to Nightmare alone i' the dark, Jacob Hood," he said eventually, very deliberately and with conviction.

"If there was," Jacob Hood remarked after another long silence, "it ain't never touched nobody that I heerd. Them as believe about them things do tell yu might shove a hand right through 'em, an' they can't feel it. An' if there is things like them, which I 'on't believe, they'm no more'n wind an' shadder, an' couldn't so much as hit anyone."

"But I lay yu 'ouldn't go oop to Nightmare alone i' the dark,"

Tom repeated, as if he were challenging Jacob to make the trip.

"I ain't got no call to go," Jacob said. "Time I done for the day, I bin on my feet aplenty 'ithout traipsin' up to Nightmare or anywhere else. I gotter soak my corns to-night afore I go to bed."

"I did hear tell once," Tom observed, after thinking it over, "as the right bottom end o' a bindweed root'd cure any corn, an' I'd got a right bad 'un jest then. So I took a spade down the end o' my garden, an' dug at a bindweed. I got the hole a good seven foot deep, an' the bindweed was still agoin' down as thick as ever."

"So yu didn't try it?" Jacob inquired.

"I don't believe bindweed got a bottom end to the root," Tom averred with a spice of disgust at the habits of the plant. "I believe they go right down to the middle o' the earth, or nearabouts. Seven foot down I dug, an' was about wore out at it, an' still that root was agoin' down as strong as ever. Bill Thacker next door, he wanted to know if I was diggin' a well when I put my head up outer the hole."

"An' what'd yu say?" Jacob asked.

"I said what I'd bin diggin' for, an' he larfed like anything. So I filled up the hole, an' got some green stuff in a little bottle off a pedlar, an' it eased that corn most wonderful."

At that point, the landlord consulted a little square wicket in the back of the bar, and learned from it that Gees' supper was ready. He let his guest through by a side door into a room in which the meal was set, and paused to look over the table and assure himself that all was in order. An incandescent paraffin lamp lighted the room brilliantly, and showed Gees a bookshelf containing works one would scarcely expect to find in such a place as this. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, in the condensed one-volume edition, Eliphaz Levi's two big tomes on magic, and Lytton's *Zanoni*, were volumes that Gees observed and recognised.

"Nice little library you have there," he remarked.

Nicholas emitted his squeaky assent, and moved the mustard pot.

"Do you mind if I look at some of them?" Gees inquired.

"As many as thee like and as long as thee like, sir," Nicholas shrilled. "They bean't to my taste. Th' wife's first husband, they belonged. I'd burn the dinged lot, if I had my way."

Which, Gees thought but did not say, indicated the superiority of the grey mare in this establishment. He gave up his scrutiny of the book-shelf, and seated himself at the table.

"I suppose you found trade brisker in the Sheffield district than it is here, Mr. Churchill," he remarked pleasantly.

"So that dinged wife o' mine been chatterin' again, have she?"

Nicholas inquired morosely. "I don't belong to that part. I married her there, that was all. She belonged that way."

"Nicholas?" The voice of Mrs. Churchill sounded to them. "Bar!"

"Aye," said her husband gloomily, "she'd die afore she'd do a hand's turn in it. If thee want anything else, sir, there's the bell."

"I'd like to ask a few questions about the village and district," Gees told him. "If you wouldn't mind, after closing time?"

Churchill shook his head. "I don't know 'em well, sir," he said. "Most o' these folk are hard to know. But there's Phil Bird, the sexton, he's a sort of walkin' directory for the place, an' he'll talk half an hour for a pint about the place an' the folk in it."

"Then I think somewhere about two quarts ought to do it," Gees surmised. "How can I get hold of Phil Bird and start him warbling?"

"It's nigh on his time for comin' in," Churchill answered.

"Well, would you tell him that a gentleman interested in the district would like a four-pint talk with him, and let me see him in here?"

"I don't think she'd raise no objections to that, sir, if she's let clear away first when thee've had thy supper."

Gees took the cover off the dish before him and saw its contents.

"This is all I shall need, and then some," he said. "If you'll tell the lady that when I ring it will mean clearing the table, and then induce Bird to come in"—he slid a pound note along the tablecloth toward Churchill—"this will have nothing to do with what you charge for putting me up. It's extra."

"Thankye, sir." Nicholas brightened considerably as he took the note. "He's a queer character, Phil, an' tha better not believe everything he got to say, but he'll tell thee a lot that's true as well."

"I hope so," Gees said fervently. "Thank you very much, Mr. Churchill."

Chapter 3

Phil Bird

A thin, smallish man, with a shiny bald top to his head, deep-set eyes which appeared to hold a laugh—at the persistent irony of life, perhaps—and his whole face, even to the full of his cheeks, crossed at all angles by innumerable lines, he stood just within the door of the room as Nicholas Churchill closed it on himself, and took in Gees standing by the table, the two pint glasses and big jug which Nicholas had provided, and, as reinforcement, the wicker-covered, two gallon jar on the floor. He wore an old-fashioned and rather rusty suit of broadcloth, and above it his face showed the colour of good old oak that has not been too deeply stained—and even the bald top of his head was as much brown as pink. When he opened his mouth to speak, he revealed a set of teeth too perfect to be natural at his age—Gees estimated him at not much less than seventy, and perhaps more.

“Service, sir,” he said, in a pleasant, easy way.

Gees smiled. “You don’t often hear that said, nowadays,” he remarked.

“Why, no, sir, I suppose you don’t,” the other man agreed. “Times change, and manners too. But us old ’uns—well!”

“Come and sit down, Bird,” Gees invited, “and have a spot of beer. You’re not in a hurry to get home, I hope?”

Phil Bird advanced to the armchair that Gees indicated, and stood beside it. “I live alone,” he stated, “and never count on gettin’ to bed much afore one in the mornin’. I—I read a lot.” There was almost an apology in the concluding sentence, as if he ought not to read a lot.

“Excellent idea.” Gees filled the two big glasses from the jug, and handed one over. “Now sit down and try that. You’re not native to this part of the world are you?”

"Bred an' born here, sir." He seated himself in the chair as Gees took another like it, facing him. "What made you think that?"

"I suppose there is a local dialect?" Gees queried in reply.

Phil Bird shook his head. "I dunno, sir," he said. "What with the motor buses takin' 'em to the cinemas, and the youngsters buyin' second-hand motor bikes to go off to the towns—why, only the other day I heard a young feller say he'd put a rival on the spot sooner'n see him get fresh with his bird, an' that ain't Shropshire. It's pure cinema stuff from Hollywood. But me, I made off to sea when I was about nineteen, and it was all of thirty year before I come back."

"With enough to settle on, here," Gees suggested.

"Well, not quite, sir. I take on odd jobs of all sorts to eke out my little, but I always reckon I brought back wealth. You see a lot in thirty years, places an' people, an' I wouldn't change my store o' memories for a tidy fortune. Here's health, sir." He drank deeply, and put the glass down on the table.

"Thanks, Bird, and long life to you," Gees said, imitating him.

"Good stuff," Bird observed. "Nick's got good brewers, an'—But what was it you wanted to see me about, sir?"

"I was told that you're the best work of reference to consult on Denlandham—or Denlum, if you like—and the people in it," Gees said.

"Well, I know a bit," the little man admitted. "Some folks think I know a lot. It's—well, not missin' things when you see an' hear 'em, an' a pretty good memory. Anyone particular you wanted to know about?"

"A place—Knightsmere Farm," Gees answered.

"Nightmare, they all call it around here," Bird amended for him. "A natural sort of version, easier to say. It's what they would call it."

"Any other reason for the change?" Gees inquired, and refilled the glasses from the jug, since Bird had already emptied his.

"I see-e." The little man looked at his glass, but did not touch it. "I knew this would happen, sooner or later."

"You did, eh?" Gees asked easily. "But what has happened?"

The deeply set grey eyes which looked full into his own were grave, now, and, instead of relaxing to his chair, Bird sat stiffly.

"When I went away from here, sir, nigh on fifty year ago, I had a sister," he said. "Our parents were proud of her, and so was I. She went to a big house near Shrewsbury as lady's maid after I'd gone, and kept at that for years—till the lady died. Then she went on to London, and it

happened one day she went to a spiritualist meeting. She had an idea—or else they gave her the idea—that she’d make a medium if she tried, and she did try. From their point of view she was a big success. Used to go into trances, I heard after, and become a sort of channel for spirit communications, not herself at all while she was in the trances. Got so much money out of it that she gave up her job and took to medium work only—and then broke down. She came home to her mother, who was still alive, then, about a month before I got back to settle here. And before I’d been back a week I could see—it wasn’t ordinary nervous breakdown she’d got, but possession.”

“Meaning?” Gees asked.

“It got worse—she got worse, I mean,” Bird pursued. “More irrational, sometimes entirely wicked, according to which of the things she used to be channel for had got possession of her at the time—and when I left her as a girl, she’d had as sweet a nature as you could find. In the end she got dangerous, and died raving mad in a mental institution. The shock of it killed her mother, who might have lived another ten years, I believe, if it hadn’t been for this.”

“Meaning?” Gees asked again.

“Meaning this,” Bird answered, tensely. “All that—that lifting the veil, as they call it, and getting communications from beyond, and talk from them who have passed over—all of it!—is delusion, devilish and dangerous delusion. A good bit of it is hocus, played for cash, but some is genuine—my sister’s case concerns the genuine. But you don’t get any communications with the spirits of people you knew who have passed over, as they put it. All you get is what I might call low grade spirits, anxious to get in touch with humans for their own ends, whatever they may be. And they’ve got power, these low grade spirits, if you let ’em get hold of you as they did of her. They destroy your soul as surely as a murderer destroys your body, enter in and take possession of you, and turn you to less than human, as they are themselves.”

“Quite so,” Gees said. “Now will you tell me—where does my saying that I want to know about Knightsmere Farm come in?”

“This way,” Bird said almost fiercely. “If you’ve got anything to do with the spiritualism that uses mediums and trances and talks about astral bodies and calling back spirits that have passed over, then I’ll pay Nick Churchill for this pint of beer and tell him to take it off your bill and have no more to say to you, except maybe tell you to go to hell out of here and leave Nightmare Farm alone. I’ll say no word that might set you trying to get communications from spirits there or anywhere,

and”—he stood up—“I reckon that’s all.”

“No, it isn’t,” Gees demurred. “Sit down again, Bird. Do I look or talk like one of that type—the spiritualist type?”

“There is no type,” Bird said, and kept on his feet. “Off that subject, they’re as practical and common-sense as ordinary people—till they’ve gone too far to draw back, got themselves possessed.”

“All right, then, there is no special type,” Gees agreed, “but I’ll tell you in confidence, Bird, that I’m here by request of Squire Hunter—I suppose you call him squire, since he owns the parish, pretty much—here by his request to destroy whatever it is that appears to centre on this Nightmare Farm, if it can be done. Not get in communication with it or try to make capital out of it for any cult or creed.”

“Well, that sounds different,” Bird admitted doubtfully.

“In fact, it’s the reverse of what you feared,” Gees told him. “I have my own ideas about this—but do sit down and have some more beer.”

Slowly, Bird resumed his seat. He took up the full glass and looked at Gees over it, and his eyes twinkled again as at first.

“Good beer, sir,” he said. “Luck to you.”

And, when he put the glass down again, that pint had followed the first. Gees refilled the glass, and took up the two-gallon jar to uncork it and refill the jug, while his guest wiped his lips.

“What do you specially want to know about Nightmare, sir?” Bird asked, as Gees returned the jar to the floor beside his chair.

“History—anything,” Gees answered. “The more I know, the better prepared I shall be for what I have to do—mean to do.”

“Why, yes, that’s true, sir,” Bird agreed thoughtfully. “History, now. I’ve read pretty much all there is about these parts, an’ remember a good deal of it. There’s a big pool back of the house, very deep—they say it’s bottomless in the middle, but that can’t be true, of course—and back in the old days of armour and crusades and things, a knight was murdered by being drowned there. That’s the legend, and the place took its name from it. And the murderer was named Dyne or Dane or something like that, so it was Dyneland or Daneland with the ‘ham’ for home, and so you get the name of the parish. But to get pardon for murdering the knight, he made over all his lands to the Church at his death, and the big chimney at Nightmare is all there is left of the monastery. There was a convent, too, somewhere, but the first of the Hunters—the family goes right back to Henry the Eighth under the same name—the first of them simply wiped out everything except that one chimney, or else the Roundheads made such a mess of what he kept standing for his own

use that nothing but the chimney and the rooms round it was worth keeping. There appears to have been a considerable family mansion there up to their time, but all there is left now is the chimney with four ground floor and four first floor rooms built round it—and the attics, of course. That's Nightmare."

"The Hunter family, I understand, lived there till the present Denland-ham House was built by one of them?" Gees half-questioned.

"That is so, sir. It was a Robert Hunter built the House."

"Any idea why he didn't rebuild on the original site?" Gees asked.

"I might have ideas, sir," Bird answered, "but no grounds for 'em."

"Quite so. Know anything about this Robert—don't let that beer get flat while you talk, for we've only just begun on the jar."

The best part of another pint vanished, and Gees took a liberal drink himself. Bird put his glass down and looked at it thoughtfully.

"Robert Hunter," he said, "made a fortune, mainly in the slave trade, but other things as well—it's so long ago that it's safe to say rank piratin' was one of 'em—an' came back to find his brother dead without children, so Denlum fell to him. Married, had three children, and built the House and moved from Nightmare into it not long before he died. Must have been not long before, because the birth of two of the children was entered as at Nightmare, and the youngest was only a year old when he did die. I've looked it all up."

"Just why?" Gees inquired, and glanced at his watch. Half-past ten now, and Bird had owned to going to bed after midnight. Plenty of time.

"Well, I was curious, that's all," Bird confessed. "You see, sir, Robert Hunter had sailed an' maybe plundered away East, and I've been East too—" He broke off suddenly. "I don't know how much you know, sir," he said, in a questioning way. "Because, you say you're actin' for Squire Hunter. Not that I owe him anything."

"Curious as to what Robert Hunter brought back from the East," Gees suggested. "You can talk right out, Bird. It's quite safe."

"Well, yes, that was it, sir. Because of the tales—they were no more than tales, till half a year or so ago. I was curious."

"Kir Asa¹," Gees said, half-questioningly.

"Why"—the man before him looked startled—"what d'you know about that, sir? It was Kir Asa you said, wasn't it?"

¹ Legendäre Stadt in Cannells Roman "City of Wonder" (London 1922), veröffentlicht unter dem Pseudonym "E. Charles Vivian".

"It was," Gees assented. "I know very little about it, and that little out of an old legend of the East which a writer put into a novel of his—and even then only as a side-issue. Just enough to give me the idea that seems to have crossed your mind, in fact."

"That—that Robert Hunter found 'em, and brought one back?" Bird asked. "Because that's how it looked and still looks to me."

"I am inclined to think so," Gees assented. "And now—I'm beginning to wonder why a man with your intelligence and knowledge has to do odd jobs in a village like this, Bird, but that's your business—"

"No. If you'll forgive me for buttin' in, it ain't, sir—that is, I don't mind your makin' the remark. Like this. I had my wander years, as I count 'em, east and west and everywhere. Some people store up money, but I was never that sort—I've made a good bit in my time, and spent it too. I stored up adventures, people, scenery, stories and legends, odd customs—made a savings bank of my mind, and came back here quite content to end my days on the income of it. I can sit and live back in what I've seen and done by the hour together, and if you know any better wealth than that for a man my age, you're welcome to it."

"There is no truer wealth," Gees agreed soberly. "Now do we carry on with Kir Asa and what it means, or take the Hunter family first! I think it would be better to clear them off before we come to—to why Robert Hunter built a new house rather than rebuild Nightmare."

"As you like, sir," Bird said. "You've told me why you want to know all I can tell, an' I'm all for helpin', an' the night's young."

"Therefore," said Gees, "we will have more beer."

"It's a pleasure," Bird admitted, "to meet a gentleman like you, sir. Knowledgeable about these things, and still level-headed."

"Rare combination, eh?" Gees suggested. "Well, the Hunters. In succession from Robert, habits and characters—all of 'em."

"To be quite frank about 'em, sir, although you're as you might say workin' for the present one?" Bird asked cautiously.

"Quite frank," Gees assented. "Like you, I can say I owe the Hunters nothing, and know the family record is none too white. This present one owned to me—never mind, though. I want an unbiased history."

"An' because of—of Kir Asa, say—I studied 'em up, sir," Bird said. "From Robert's time—I didn't go back of him, because there didn't seem to be need. I don't find much about what he was after he got back here, but it appears that out East he was as black-hearted a devil as ever sunk a ship with its crew aboard or packed a hold with slaves. Some of the men he'd had under him got back, an' tales got about—there's a sort of

log that a man named Jarnley kept, for one thing, and he served under Robert Hunter. It says they lost half their men on the hunt for Kir Asa, and had to give it up, and it looks as if that was just before Robert made his lucky strike, whatever that was, an' decided to come home. Then, as I said, he married, and had three children, two boys and a daughter. She died raving mad."

"Odd," Gees commented.

"No, sir, quite natural," Bird dissented quietly. "An' that, up to her death, which was nearly the same time as her father's, was what you might call the first appearance. And it looks as if her brother, the one which succeeded to the estate, tried to atone for his father, as you might say. He restored the church and started a charity that still goes on—the Angus Hunter charity, it's called."

"One moment," Gees interrupted. "That name, Angus. Not a usual name in this part of the world, but it persists in this family."

"Robert Hunter married a Highland lady," Bird explained. "Better breed than he was, by all accounts, and they keep it for that connection, I believe. There's generally one Angus to a generation."

"Celtic strain, which may mean anything or nothing," Gees commented. "Carry on—but have some more beer first." He refilled Bird's glass and had recourse to the stone jar again. "Angus—yes. Next?"

"Another Angus, just the opposite of his father. Wild in his young days, gambled a lot in London till he had to fight a duel over cheating. He didn't kill the other man, but nearly, and then cleared out and came back here. Managed to fascinate a Mrs. Kingsley, a lady of these parts, and either her husband knew nothing about it or else he let it go on—till he died, and this Angus married the widow. He died and left her a widow again, and on her deathbed she confessed that Angus had poisoned her first husband and she'd known he was a murderer when she married him. That was the time of what I'll call the second appearance, which went right on, it seems, from the time Angus came back from his duel to the widow's death. They left no children. A nephew took over."

"How do you know all this?" Gees asked.

"The vicar of that time kept a diary," Bird answered. "It's not been printed, but I managed to get a look at it by asking one of his descendants and telling him I was collecting material for a history of Denlum. I still think I might write it, if I had somebody to put it into proper words for me, but that's neither here nor there."

"So we come to the nephew of the murderer," Gees suggested.

"Thomas, he was," Bird said. "Must have been an ordinary sort of man, or else a good sort, because I couldn't find out anything much about him. That vicar's diary mentioned him once or twice, in a casual sort of way. Coals and beef at Christmas, the sort of thing the squire of the parish used to do. His son, Captain Angus Hunter, was killed at Waterloo, and left this present Mr. Hunter's grandfather a baby in arms for the mother to bring up. She didn't make a very good job of it."

"No?" Gees questioned interestedly.

"Not very," Bird said. "You see, sir, he brings us to times I can talk about as things I've heard from people living then—my grandfather knew him, and lived to be a very old man—old enough for me to hear and remember a good many of the tales he told. Robert Hunter—that was the name they gave the baby—began as a thorough bad lot. When he was a young man, I suppose the squire of a parish used to look at the girls in it in a way that wouldn't do nowadays, but he didn't stop at that. One of his tenants nearly killed the squire over what happened with the tenant's wife—and got turned out of his farm over it. Other cases of the sort, too. And drunken parties up at the house—every rip and bad lot for miles round welcome there, and never a decent woman would go near the place. His wife died in childbirth over her second son, but my grandfather said Robert Hunter had broken her heart before that, and she was glad to die. And I'd call that the time of the third appearance—my grandfather could tell tales of that, too—which lasted till this Robert Hunter died. I should say he was killed, because a horse threw him in Nightmare roadway and broke his neck there."

"That is, between the big hawthorn hedges," Gees suggested.

"It would be, but they weren't so big, then, though I remember my father saying he'd never known 'em cut back, and they were pretty immense when I first remember 'em. May be two or three feet higher now than they were when I was a boy. Wonderful hedges, they are."

"And this third appearance"—Gees remembered Hunter's story of the man Henry Utter—"lasted how long? More than eighteen months?"

"Oh, a lot longer'n that," Bird said. "More like seven or eight years, I'd think, from first to last. From time to time, that'd be. If it'd gone on all the time—well, I dunno what'd have happened, but it didn't. The last of it was when they found the squire lying in that roadway with his neck broken, and my grandfather said that was what made the horse throw him. It might have been. I dunno."

"Is there a man named Henry Utter in that part of the tale?"

“Utter? Oh, yes! He was son of the man who farmed Nightmare, then, and he and Squire Robert used to hunt in couples when they were lads—Robert was always about with him on some devilry or other. Then Utter got caught thieving and was sent to gaol, but even after that the squire had him up to the House and they got drunk together. Then Utter tried to rob the House one night, and fell on a knife of some sort getting out of a window. That was what was given out, and it wasn’t contradicted, but some people felt inclined to believe the squire got Utter there again, and the pair of ’em quarrelled. It was the squire who roused the house and showed ’em the body with the stuff Utter was supposed to have stolen in a sack beside him, except for what had fallen out of the sack. Utter’s bad character, and the fact that he’d served a sentence already for theft, helped to make the squire’s tale good, but—”

“An open question,” Gees remarked. “And—Utter’s death didn’t put an end to this third series of appearances?”

“Lord, no, sir! It went on for a good year after that, till the squire was found with his neck broken in Nightmare roadway.”

“We will now have some more beer,” Gees said gravely.

Dispensing it gave him time to think, to question of himself why the present squire had distorted fact in telling his version of the appearances. For he felt sure that Bird was telling the truth, as he knew it. Resident as he was in the village, it would not pay the man to asperse the characters of the squire’s predecessors at Denlandham House, even to a stranger—and especially when that stranger had proclaimed himself here in Squire Hunter’s interests. Hunter had owned to a murderer, and a particularly nasty type of murderer at that, among his ancestors—though not in the direct line of precession from himself—but possibly, Gees reflected, he drew the line at revealing the real character of his own grandfather, and so attributed what Phil Bird called the “third appearance” to Utter’s presence in the village.

“And all these Hunters,” he remarked, “are direct descendants of that Robert who came back from the East and built Denlandham House.”

“Why, yes, sir, that is so,” Bird assented.

“Some bad, some good, some merely negligible.”

“I’d say a pretty average family for people in their station,” Bird observed thoughtfully. “One—two—three real bad ’uns, but nothing to be said against the rest of ’em, that I know.”

“There was a wife who left her husband for another man,” Gees pointed out. “Where does she come into this family history?”

“Not to any extent, she don’t,” Bird said. “Her husband was never squire here—he was a younger son and died abroad after she left him. Got drowned, trying to save a boy’s life in some foreign river.”

“Then the father of this present squire?” Gees asked.

“A right good sort,” Bird told him. “A good landlord to all his tenants, and well liked by everybody. I can just remember him with his long white whiskers and cherry-red face—he married late in life, and Squire Hunter that is now is a younger man than I am. They said his father took a terrible lot out of the estate, but he put it all back. Lived a quiet country life, and died respected.”

“Like that, eh?” Gees reflected. “Well, that’s that, and now, if you’re willing to go on talking a bit longer, I think we come to the marrow of the bone. Therefore, we will have some more beer, eh?”

“Very good beer, Nick Churchill keeps,” Bird observed gravely, as he watched the refilling of his glass.

Chapter 4

May Norris

“**f**n’ when you say the marrow, sir, you mean the present Squire Hunter?” Phil Bird questioned, putting the big glass back on the table.

Gees shook his head. “Acting for him as I am, it wouldn’t be fair,” he said. “Also, I prefer to form my own opinion, without help. Be guided by the impression he makes on me. No. Kir Asa.”

“I see-e.” He dragged out the comment, thoughtfully. “Well, sir, I dunno if you ever was out that way. If I might ask, now, what do you know about the tales they tell of Kir Asa—for I don’t believe anyone ever got there to get the whole truth? They are only tales.”

“And yet,” Gees said, “I believe somebody did get there, once, and put the facts of the place in the form of a novel. Coloured them, altered them, maybe, but left enough truth for me to remember the novel when Squire Hunter told me his story of what was happening here. And I got hold of a copy and looked it up—but there wasn’t much about the part of the story that concerns us now. So never mind what I know, but tell me all you learned to make you jump when I spoke that name.”

“It did seem a bit odd,” Bird admitted, “because it’s a long while ago since I heard that tale, and the man who told it me is dead. Also, I never heard anyone else mention the place, and he—the man I mean—only gave it at second-hand, and from a native yarn at that. Which I hadn’t any chance to verify or question about.”

“No?” Gees asked. “Tell it in your own way, Bird.”

“There’s plenty of time, sir”—he looked at the clock—“that is, unless you’re in a hurry to get to bed, which I take it you ain’t. The way I couldn’t verify it is, though I was out there for years, I never learned any more’n enough of what you might call kitchen Tamil an’ Malay

to carry me along—never got really proficient in the native languages. Further to that, I don't know whether this tale come first from a Malay, or a Dyak, or even a Kanaka, nor where Kir Asa is, beyond that it's somewhere in the Pacific—if it's anywhere, that is. Do you happen to know anything on that side, sir?"

Gees shook his head. "No more than you say you do," he said.

"Most people here seem to think you could put the Pacific islands in a washing-bowl, and Macassar is next door to Singapore, but I realise that an island the size of Yorkshire would be no more than a pin-head on a fairly large map, and Kir Asa may be anywhere in a circle with a diameter of two thousand miles. That's all I know as to where it is."

"Same here, sir. The tale interested me, but I didn't ask where to find the place in time. Else, I might have gone lookin' for it, given I'd had enough money to spare the time to look. The way of it was this. I got stranded on the west coast of South America, a year or two after I'd started life as a rollin' stone, an' then shipped before the mast on a voyage that finished at Manilla. From there I got on a boat that took me among the islands—still before the mast, you understand, sir—and so came to ship on the ›Nusa Siri‹—I don't know if you ever heard of her gettin' sunk in a cyclone—driven on to a reef?"

"I did not," Gees confessed.

"No. Things that look big on the spot, like the islands when you're there, never so much as get heard of here. But I was one of the five that came out alive from the wreck of the ›Nusa Siri,‹ an' that was the end of my career before the mast. Because I fell in with a chap named West, an' a very nice chap he was. His game was oil—prospectin' for oil. Geologist, you'd call him. He'd made one big strike for some company or other, an' then branched out on his own. Consultin' geologist was what he called himself. His idea was to browse around in what he thought might be likely places, tryin' to find seepages, as he called 'em, an' then get an option an' sell to some big company. Make more money that way, than if he was just workin' for a company as he had been before, if he had any luck at all at it."

"Making a gamble of his life, in fact," Gees commented.

"I reckon it was that, takin' a chance," Bird agreed. "Well, he'd been in with another chap of the same kidney, but the other one died."

"Was his name Carr?" Gees interposed.

"It sure was," Bird answered with surprise. "But how did you know, sir? That wasn't in the novel you read, was it?"

"It was," Gees asserted, "and apparently there was more truth in the tale than I thought when I read it. Never mind—that's about all it does give that's material to your story. Carry on."

Yet again he refilled the glasses, and Bird went on with his tale.

"Yes, Carr was the name of the one who'd died, an' West wanted someone to take on with him to sort of fetch an' carry while he scrabbled for signs of oil—not a man skilled at his own game, but just a handy man with a fryin' pan an' skillet, an' able to shoot for the pot if we had to live on the country. That was me, an' we got on very well together. As for the oil part of it, I learned a lot about seepages and anticlines and synclines and things I've mostly forgotten since, though I could still tell the difference between a Texan rig and a Galician over a boring. He spent money, did West, and made one good strike in the four years I was with him, and what I didn't learn about leeches an' snakes an' jungle life generally wouldn't be worth your notice. Four years of it, I had with him, always moving on somewhere else, always seeing new things. Suited me down to the ground, it did."

"And then?" Gees asked. He took a drink himself and reached for the two-gallon jar: he had to tilt it some way to pour, now.

"Then he took to havin' pains in his side," Bird said, "an' we headed for somewhere civilised. Got to Macassar, by which time he was much worse. It was abscess on the liver, an' they operated. While he was seemin' to be gettin' better, I used to go an' sit an' talk to him to cheer him up an' help him along all I could, an' it was then he told me all he ever told of this tale of Kir Asa."

"So now we come to the marrow," Gees observed.

"Second-hand marrow, as I said before," Bird pointed out, "for he'd had the tale from a native, an' whether that native was a head-hunter or a civilised Malay, or even a Kanaka or Filipino, is more than I know. He wasn't in the state when I could question too much, and I was more interested in the tale than where it happened, though I did think I'd ask more about it when he got better, in case I might take a chance on finding this place. But he never got better. After a time when he seemed to be on the up-grade every day, he suddenly went downhill again, and after he was dead they found there'd been two more abscesses on his liver in addition to the one they'd operated for."

"And the tale as he told it?" Gees asked. "Did he say anything about a white man—or white men—having been to this place?"

"Not to me," Bird answered. "No, but he told me that when he and Carr had been prospecting together, they'd run into a tribe of poison-dart

people—the sort who use poison-darts, that is, but quite friendly. They made the proper presents to the head man—chief, or whatever he was called—and so got safe-conduct to browse around in his bit of country as long as they liked, and when the tribe got really pally with 'em, enough to offer 'em a temporary wife or two apiece for as long as they stayed in that part, he warned 'em against going north-east, and in the end told West why they'd better be careful about going that way. There was a tribe that lived in a big village—a stone village, this head man said—and they wouldn't have anything to do with strangers, either white or black or brown. Killed 'em, one time, if they got to the village. But, on top of that, they never got there, because these people trained troops of big monkeys to go for 'em and wipe 'em out. I counted that part of the tale too tall altogether. You might train ourang-outang to some tricks, but I don't see using 'em as troops."

"Let it pass, then," Gees said, "though that was part of what I read—one herd as part of the guard over the place."

"Well, sir, I just shouted for the salt-cellar, over that. And the head man told West there was another sort of guard, one that no woman, especially, could pass. Only he called it a place, not a guard—the place where ghosts chase women, was what he told West it was. Enough to keep his sort of man away, too, because you won't find any of the uncivilised or partly civilised people of that part of the world facing up to anything they can't place as natural—anything at all spooky. There was a place, he told West, where these ghosts swarmed, on the way to Kir Asa, and if you didn't starve or get killed before you got to that place, you had to face crowds of 'em. And no woman could face 'em and live—or else, if it should happen that one did live after coming up against these ghosts, the tribe killed her, reckoned her not fit to live. Not for immorality, but because these things, their witch doctors and people believed, put evil spirits in her which couldn't be got out again—made her a danger to the tribe if she went on living."

"Then the tribe had been up against the things," Gees suggested.

"West didn't find that out—or if he did, he didn't tell me," Bird answered, "but they must have been at some time or other, to make that rule about killing any women who'd come up against 'em. And one thing, West said, that head man insisted on. Neither spears nor poison darts would harm these things. They were evil spirits, not men."

"Any description of them?" Gees asked.

Bird shook his head. "Only that. Evil spirits, not men."

For the last time, Gees tilted the two-gallon jar over the jug. Inverted it, in fact, and put it down without replacing the cork.

"Well?" he asked, after a thoughtful silence.

"In these appearances in Denlum," Bird said, "there's more than one case of a woman going mad and dying mad—as my sister did, though not through any of these things. Whatever possessed and killed her didn't come from here, as far as I know. Besides, it wasn't the time of an appearance. But others—and now Norris's daughter."

"And the connection between that and the things of Kir Asa?"

Gees asked, though he knew well what the reply would be.

"Robert Hunter, the one who built the House because he couldn't stand Nightmare any longer—wouldn't rebuild there," Bird said. "By all I've read, if ever a man was near on devildom, it was Robert Hunter. Not so much after he got back here, but the things he did out East, beyond law, as it was then. I believe, sir, he brought one back, maybe was possessed by it himself. And Nightmare is its home, to this day."

The ugly black marble clock on the mantel of the room struck midnight, and then there fell a silence between the two men that lasted for what seemed a long time. The stillness of the night seemed to press on them, to become a sound in their ears.

"Then," Gees asked, and found that his own voice sounded still and small to himself, "why only these intermittent appearances?"

"Human wickedness," Bird said solemnly. "I think—mind, it's only what I think—but it looks to me it takes wickedness to give this thing strength enough to show itself. Maybe it's there all the time, just as a dormouse is in his nest in winter, and human wickedness is warmth and strength to it, food and drink, as you might say, because it's evil."

"That's a pretty heavy accusation against—somebody," Gees remarked thoughtfully, after another long pause.

"I can't help it, sir, and since you trusted me enough to tell me why you wanted to know, and I've told you what I have, I'm trusting you."

"Not without good reason, you'll find," Gees told him.

"And now, sir, if you ain't in a hurry to go to bed, what do you make of it—of the ghosts that chase women, or whatever this is?"

"I agree with you," Gees said slowly. "Robert Hunter brought it here, unwillingly, in all probability, but he did bring it, or them. There may be more than one. I don't know much about it, yet."

"What makes you think more than one, sir?" Bird asked, rather uneasily.

"What I have heard about the present state of this Norris girl, and Hunter's telling me he shot at the thing, apparently after she had had her seizure, or whatever you choose to call it."

"But how—why should that?" Bird began, and paused.

Gees poured the last of the beer into the little man's glass, and inwardly marvelled at his tankage capacity and the fact that he was totally unaffected by the alcoholic content of what he had drunk.

"For that," he said, "on the theory that I'm inclined to accept, you have to go back to the very beginning of things—of human life."

"I'd like to hear that theory, sir," Bird said, "if—if it ain't too late for you to explain it. Get the whole thing clear, I mean."

"That is, as far as one can on what is not much more than guesswork," Gees pointed out, "and it's not too late as far as I'm concerned. I don't know if you know that the first civilisation of which we have even so much as legendary record—or series of civilisations, it may have been—was that of Atlantis?"

"It's in Plato and Homer," Bird assented. "I've got Homer—Pope's translation. But I never thought of it as a series of civilisations, till now."

"But why not? It may have been that, before the final catastrophe. Just as we've had Assyria, Egypt, Rome, and all the rest up to our own, with our catastrophe of a different sort just showing in the making. But never mind that. You admit Atlantis?"

"From what I've read, I'm inclined to believe there was a continent that sunk between Africa and America—when the Andes were pushed up in place of it, maybe," Bird said. "Homer had grounds for what he said, I reckon, and other old writers mentioned it too, they say."

"Yes, and Atlantis was peopled by mankind as it is to-day, *homo sapiens*, as our breed is called. Know any anthropology, Bird?"

"Precious little, sir. I've read there were other sorts of men that died out. The Piltdown sort, and the Chinese skull they found."

"Exactly. Neanderthal, Mousterian, and all the rest—you can study the casts of their skulls at South Kensington any time. Man in form, without doubt, differing altogether from the ape, and the highest forms of life in their time, but differing, in a very marked degree, from *homo sapiens*, the man of to-day, as well."

"As how, sir?" Bird asked. He was listening with tense interest.

"Nearer the beast," Gees said. "Beast in all but form and brain content, in fact. More cunning than other beasts, but still beast."

"You mean—this thing is—that, survived?" Bird asked.

Gees shook his head. "Entirely the reverse," he answered. "You say you admit the existence of Atlantis. Now go back behind it in time, and admit the existence of the Pacific continent of Lemuria."

"You mean, before the moon was torn off the earth?" Bird suggested.

"It may have been—the deepest part of the Pacific is supposed to be the part of the world from which the moon was pulled by centrifugal force. But try to imagine a vast continent there, sunken now—sunken before ever man appeared on Atlantis, perhaps before Atlantis rose above the waters to sink again in its time. And the world still in its shaping, then, far hotter than it is now. Jungle and marsh, steamy and incredible to us if we should see it, and the things that inhabited it incredible too, dinosaur and brontosaurus, nearly all reptilian life, and among it, such a being as we know only by the Chinese skull or the Piltdown remains, man as he was then, beast in all but form."

"That's a weird picture, sir," Bird said, "but as yet I don't get how these things come into it, if you say they're not that sort of man."

"As nearly as I can remember," Gees said slowly, "the words in the story of the creation are—'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.' I believe they are the words."

"You mean—that first type was given a soul?" Bird asked.

"Some part of that first type—the best of it. Enough to survive and evolve to *homo sapiens*, our type. That is to say, spirit amalgamated with beast—that 'breath of life' stands for eternal life, the soul that survives beyond the body. Physical life the creature already had."

"Which is why, as it's put in Scripture, the spirit wars against the flesh," Bird suggested. "The beast side and the spirit side—"

"Blended and become one, as nearly as possible," Gees completed for him. "They can never become quite one, but you get lower and higher instincts in every human being. And that blending of the two began on Lemuria, countless ages ago. Man, the part of him that survives beyond his physical body, came to earth as a spirit—was sent, to form humanity of to-day. A germ of spirit, call it, such as exists in a young baby, that had to learn to use the physical frame and the physical brain just as the baby has to learn before it can even move about, let alone think connectedly. At the best, a small manifestation of the goodness of God, and at the worst—well, Robert Hunter, say."

"I don't get it yet, sir," Bird said, in a slightly puzzled way.

"Probably not," Gees agreed. "To carry on, I think those wandering spirits were attracted more to the female than to the male, tried to blend in with the female rather than the male, knowing that the women were

the mothers of the race. That's mere conjecture on my part, but you may link it up with that head man's saying that those 'things of the waste' meant death to women, whatever they might do or not do to men. That is to say, they try to blend with women, either knowing or ignorant of the fact that a soul is already there—they try to be the souls of those already soul-possessing bodies, and so you get demon-possession where they succeed. So much so, that even that tribe of poison-dart people wouldn't let live any woman who had encountered them, if the hellish madness of that possession didn't kill her of itself."

"Then this, and—good God! Norris's daughter!" Bird exclaimed.

"One moment, Bird," Gees said. "You know—you can see for yourself every day of your life, that there are spirits and spirits, ranging in type from, say, a Pasteur or a Father Damien, giving his life for his kind, to Robert Hunter, to take an opposite example that you know of. So in that beginning of mankind of to-day in Lemuria, there were spirits and spirits, from good to evil, and some of them so utterly, entirely evil that even the soulless being which represented man was incapable of blending with them, revolted from them as beneath itself. They survive as elementals, and move tables about at séances, play what are called poltergeist tricks, give those foolish and misleading messages you can get through mediums, and try in every way fools like to give them to get into touch with humanity. Personate the dead for bereaved people who are deluded into believing they can get into touch with their loved ones who have gone past that gulf, though man is forbidden to attempt crossing it or looking beyond it except by death. They are all round us now, these elementals, and hating me like anything for what I'm saying, because it's damming up one avenue of approach for them."

"If you mean me, sir, I'm no avenue," Bird said grimly.

"A possible one, as long as you live," Gees pointed out. "So am I, if I were fool enough to change my mind about them. And apparently a particularly dangerous form of elemental survives in some quantities near this place they call Kir Asa, with enough of solidity accreted to it—not solidity, though, but astral entity of a sort that can become visible to human eyes, given human wickedness, as you said, to strengthen it—enough of that quality to give it visibility."

"Not in any way human—not even a soul?" Bird asked thoughtfully.

"I should say not of high enough type to become a human soul in the first place—in the very beginnings of time," Gees said. "The dregs, if you consider human evolution as a fluid. The slag, if you consider it as ore and a perfected soul as gold. And you know, I think, that every soul

is given choice, evil or good. These things have chosen evil, survived from the beginning of time and gone on making themselves more and more evil, till they are so terrible that even the people of a poison-dart tribe regard them as death itself."

"And that, something like that, has got hold of Miss Norris." Bird said. "You sure have handed me a packet to think about, mister."

Gees noted the form of expression: this man, he realised, was varying his way of talking, and even the accent that he used, from sentence to sentence. He watched while Bird drank the last of the beer and put his empty glass down on the table.

"I ain't had an evenin' like this, some subject that got me and held my mind all the time, since I don't know when," he observed.

"What are the facts about this Miss Norris, before you go?" Gees asked him. "What, exactly, did happen to the girl?"

"She'd been over to see the Coshams—Mr. Norris and Mr. Cosham are cousins, and the Norrises are stopping with him till Michaelmas, when Norris takes over a farm on the other side of the county," Bird said. "She'd been over there one afternoon last November, and started back home about dusk—the beginning of the dusk, it'd be, by what Mrs. Cosham said, because they wouldn't think of keeping her to be out after dark, or so she couldn't get home before dark."

"But isn't that rather unusual?" Gees asked. "How far had she to go to get home from the Coshams' place?"

"A bit over a mile," Bird answered. "Not a mile and a half."

"Well, surely, in a normal way, a country girl would be safe in a country parish for that distance, even if it were dark?"

Bird shook his head. "This is Denlum, sir," he said, "and what happened in the time of this present squire's grandfather is still talked about—or was, till this fourth appearance of Robert Hunter's devil. No woman would go about this parish alone after dark, and not many men, alone. Especially anywhere near Nightmare. She started out all right, and didn't arrive, so Mr. Norris and one of his men went to look for her, and found her senseless between the two hedges that shut in the Nightmare roadway. And something went away from where she was laid as they two came up and found her. Danced away and laughed, Mr. Norris said, a sort of laugh that sounded to him like a devil out of hell. Mind you, sir, if ever there was a man who'd laugh at any sort of superstition, up to then, it was Mr. Norris. When he first took Nightmare—ten year and more ago, it was—he said he'd run down and throttle any ghost there was about the place, and nothin' was ever goin' to scare him away

as it had other tenants. But he owned the sight and sound of whatever it was that danced and laughed away turned him cold with fear. He called out, but the thing danced away and didn't answer."

"No, it wouldn't," Gees reflected. "And the girl?"

"Mr. Norris picked her up and took her home while the man he'd had go with him run for the post office and telephoned for their doctor—there ain't a doctor in the village, and if I dig four graves a year it's the outside. It was forty-eight hours, they said, before she did more'n breathe, and the doctor—Doctor Haverstock, it was—said the condition pointed to concussion, but there was no mark nor anything to show how she'd come by it. He pooh-poohed the idea of anything supernatural or out of the common. Then she begun to come round, and that was worse, in some ways, than if she hadn't. Doctor Haverstock changed over from concussion to what he called mental shock."

"How was it worse?" Gees asked.

"Well, May Norris had been not only the prettiest girl for twenty parishes round, but the nicest as well. It was a pleasure to see her as well as talk to her, and they were rare proud of her, the Norrises. Everybody liked her. And she come round to screamin' fits, and a sort of cunning look in her eyes when she was quiet that frightened her mother and Norris, too. It wasn't her right mind, they could see nearly at once, but a bad mind, one that spoilt her for them and made 'em afraid of her. Doctor Haverstock said whatever shock it was had deranged her for the time, and through him Mr. Norris got her into some sort of nursing home or mental place where they deal with cases of that sort. She wasn't certified or anything of that sort, you understand, sir, just sent there for cure. Doctor Haverstock said it was only for the time."

"And now, being cured, she's back home," Gees suggested, remembering the conversation between Tom and Jacob in the bar.

"Don't you think it, sir," Bird said gravely. "There was some sort of specialist, mind specialist—I forget what he was called—"

"Alienist?" Gees interposed helpfully.

"That's the word! Charged Mr. Norris heaven alone knows how much to treat her, and said he reckoned hypnotism could put her back to her right self. I reckon he started on it, too, because last week Mr. Norris said he'd have her back home out of there if it killed her—he wasn't goin' to have her mauled about by doctors any longer, since they made her worse instead of better. So she was fetched back yesterday in a closed car, but as for being cured, she's no nearer that than she was when she

went to this place. And that'll be why Squire Hunter called you in, I guess, sir, because she ain't cured."

"Why, how d'you mean that?" Gees asked. "How does she affect it?"

"This way," Bird said. "Such of us as know that thing at Nightmare is, because there's some that don't believe it—such of us as know, haven't much doubt that it came here with Robert Hunter, and clings to the Hunter family. So the squire reckons that if he can get it put an end to, he may free Miss Norris from it—if it wasn't troubling her, she'd get back her right mind and get well. Being the straight sort he is, he holds himself responsible as the head of his family, and wants to do the right thing, although Mr. Norris cursed him to his face and spat in it. An' you—you're a specialist in these cases, sir?"

"An open mind," Gees hedged, "is as valuable an asset as a good car, but you may crash with either. I keep both."

"Well, I'd already come to the conclusion you were," Bird said, as if he had received an emphatic affirmative to his question. "And I've got to thank you, sir, for as interestin' an evenin' as I've spent for a very long while, as well as that remarkably good drop of beer."

When he had gone, Gees gazed thoughtfully at the empty two-gallon jar and three-pint jug, before going up to bed. If Bird considered that quantity a drop, what would he regard as a drink?

Chapter 5

Nightmare Farm

Since, according to Nicholas Churchill, it was little over a mile from the inn to Knightsmere Farm (but Nicholas called it Nightmare, as had everyone else in the place whom Gees had heard mention the name, so far) Gees decided that it was not worth while turning out the car.

“Is it easy to find?” he inquired.

“Couldn’t miss it if thee tried, sir,” Nicholas squeaked—this was when he brought Gees the inevitable eggs and bacon, in spite of the ham and eggs of the preceding night—“for tha’ll see the hedges, one each side the roadway—the may is out, now—an’ there ain’t another pair of hedges like them in the county—in the whole country, I’d say.”

“Hawthorn hedges—yes,” Gees observed. “And which way is it?”

“Soon as thee get outside the front door, turn to the right an’ keep straight,” Nicholas answered.

“If everyone did, there’d be less trouble in the world,” Gees said. The landlord gave him a puzzled look, but did not question the observation. He moved the inevitable marmalade pot off the sideboard on to the table, and left his guest to his breakfast, and, after a cigarette with a final cup of tea, Gees went out. First, he had a look at the car, and found that someone had left the stable door open, giving one of the hens a chance to get her day’s work over early by laying an egg just in front of the driving seat. A word with Nicholas, who thanked Gees for retrieving the egg and assured him that the door should be kept closed as long as the car was in the stable, and then—turn to the right and keep straight. But no—the road waggled from right to left as persistently as life itself, and keeping straight was merely metaphorical, though it was easy to tell what Nicholas had meant, in the absence of

any roads diverging from this one. A fine pair of ironwork gates set against stone pillars, into each of which was chiselled a shield bearing a badly battered coat of arms, marked the entrance to the grounds surrounding Denlandham House—the residence itself was invisible because of trees, from the gateway. Gees passed it, and found the road enclosed between high, thick hedges of neatly trimmed hawthorn—too well-trimmed, in fact, for much blossom to appear. He topped a slight rise, and saw the border hills blue in the distance before him, descended again, and a little more than half a mile from the entrance to the House drive came to what was beyond doubt the roadway—as they called it—leading to Nightmare Farm.

A wooden gate had sagged down on its post so that Gees had to lift it to gain ingress, and, having passed it, he paused to look ahead. The roadway, rutted and grass-grown, with puddles here and there left by recent rains in the ruts, went arrow-straight for some half-mile—counting his paces, Gees found that he made eight hundred from end to end—between two mighty hawthorn hedges which, even in this full sunlight, made a dimness over the way. Thirty feet or more they towered, the white blossoms that decked them beginning at about ten feet from the ground and forming sheets of flower to their tops. The stems or trunks of this growth were anything up to a foot in diameter, trees rather than mere hedge stems, and so thickly set that, as Hunter had declared, both hedges were quite impenetrable by anything larger than a small terrier. They had been cut back to a width of about twelve feet for the height of a good load of hay or corn in the sheaf, but then arched in toward each other so that there was no more than three feet between their twigs where the mass of flower began. And, since the sunlight did not yet strike directly along this slit, the way between them was little more than twilight. On a moonless night it would be Stygian. The fences were unique. Except that a width of roadway between them that would serve for all the traffic of the farm had been maintained, they had been allowed to grow until, probably, they had reached the limit to which hawthorn will attain, and the length of time they had stood was beyond Gees' ability to estimate. Phil Bird had said that they might have heightened two or three feet within his memory, which indicated that they must have been planted somewhere about a century before this present time. And, passing along the roadway between them, Gees questioned what was the life of a hawthorn tree? Probably, though, if any stem died, another sprang up to replace it, and the dead wood rotted out from its place. He saw no dead stems, nor gaps that decay might have left: nor could he see through to the land on either side of

the roadway; the hedges were too wide, their growth too dense.

And the way itself was eerie, even in full, sunlit day—mid-morning, as it was then. Tufts of grass grew rank and pale; here and there a shovelful of stones had been dumped into a specially bad pothole, but the surface as a whole was unmetalled, or, if there were metalling, leaf-mould from those gigantic hedges had covered in the work. No bird twittered or rustled in flight: except for the sheets of blossom and the leafage high up, and that unhealthy-looking growth of grass in places, there was no sign of any kind of life, nothing other than vegetable life, and, having covered a hundred yards or so from the road, Gees felt as if he had moved into another world, an abnormal, uncanny substitute for known reality. Then almost with a start he saw a clump of fungi, shading from orange to scarlet, in the gloom under the right-hand hedge. Great moons of flaunting colour, smaller circles and knobs that flamed against the darkness of the hawthorn stems, they appeared outrageous, sinisterly misplaced in their setting, almost like live eyes in a corpse.

The way ascended slightly from the road, and appeared to reach a crest at its inner end, for he could see nothing but the blue of sky ahead as he went on. It came to his mind that, if Norris's daughter, returning home in November twilight with the tales of those appearances in her mind, had abruptly sighted anything at all as she passed along this eerie way, she might well be shocked to insensibility, harmless though the being or thing that met her sight might be. For here between these gigantic hedges brooded mystery even now, boding, threatful, intangible to outward sense, but so present as to waken the inner, guarding consciousness that exists in some minds—or perhaps has its place in the soul rather than in the mind. In darkness, such darkness as normal twilight would bring here, that mystery would become terror, if the viewless influence that caused it were present then.

There—there ahead, and away to the right! Was that the chattering of a blackbird half a mile away, or was it the ghost of a laugh?

Steadily, beating down a growing desire to look behind him, Gees went on, and the monotony of bodeful gloom appeared to lengthen out as he advanced, as if this were another wonderland in which one had to keep moving to remain in the same place. Ten minutes at most, common sense told him, were taken up in traversing the distance from the sagging gate to the inner end of this roadway, but his racing thoughts made an hour of it, and then he came to light as at the end of a tunnel, saw solid earth and its contents before him, and breathed more easily. He had seen nothing, imagined all, from a practical view point: Hunter's

tale, and his talk with Phil Bird the night before, had their part in the effect the dark way had made on him, but he knew with utter certainty that the facts concerning things past were not all that had produced such an impression on him: there was something else, present in time and near him, even clinging round about him, in place.

Now, free of the shadowing way, he could see the house and outbuildings and the sheet of water that had given its name to Knightsmere Farm—the place itself, he decided at this first sight of it, ought to retain that name: it was the roadway leading to it that was a nightmare. The mere was a pleasant, tree-shaded sheet of water of perhaps an acre in its oval extent, in a meadow of good grass on which four big shire horses were feeding; it lay on the right as Gees stood at gaze, a little farther back from him than the house and buildings, and at this nearer end a gravelly, short slope led down to shallows at which the farm stock might drink. To left of it a rickyard declared that the farm produced good straw, whatever might have been the grain that had been threshed from it, and both meadow and clover hay. Then the outbuildings still more to the left, a very high barn of tarred weather-boarding with thatched roof most prominent among them, and round it neat, well-kept stables and sheds of red brick and tile. In front of these and still more to the left, Knightsmere farmhouse.

For centre, a mighty square chimney of age-faded red brick, rising a tall storey's distance above the ridges of the cruciform-gabled roofs. Those roofs of old, weather-paled slate, with tufts of house-leek growing down near the eaves, and under them walls of rough-cast that may have been colour-washed at some time, but now were streaked and patched from dun to pale grey. Casement windows, deeply set, indicated that the walls were thick—these windows appeared small, especially those of the upper storey, and as far as Gees could see there were no windows at all for the second or attic storey. There was a creeper-shaded porch, before which a woolly-coated sheep dog lay apparently asleep, and as Gees stood just free of the exit from the roadway a man, shirt-sleeved and wearing leather-belted corduroy trousers, with short leggings and muddy, heavy boots, appeared in the porch and stood with his thumbs tucked into his belt, gazing stolidly at this visitor—or intruder, he may have thought.

He did not move as Gees crossed the space intervening between them, nor speak when the caller halted before him. His face was woodenly expressionless, his eyes devoid of interest; he might have been sleeping in an upright posture with his eyes open, by the look of him.

"You are Mr. Hunter's bailiff for this farm?" Gees asked.

"My name is Stukeley," the man answered, slowly and uninterestedly.

"Yes. The farm is to let, I understand. I'd like to look it over. The house, that is. I can tell what the land is like from the rickyard, and what you can tell me about it, and the buildings look well kept."

"They are," said Stukeley, and kept his thumbs in his belt, nor moved any part of himself but his lips in response to the statement.

"What is it, heavy or light land?" Gees inquired.

"Mixed," said Stukeley, uninterestedly as before.

By that word, though, Gees placed the man as no native of this part. The term "mixed soil," he knew, was current and fully explanatory in the eastern counties, but was not in general use here.

"I see. And the last tenant farmed it well?"

"He did," Stukeley owned, and left it at that.

"Is it possible to see what the house is like inside?" Gees asked, after a brief pause in which he waited vainly for some move in response to his statement that he wished to make an inspection.

"Yes," said Stukeley, and maintained his position.

"Then"—with a gust of irritation—"why are you standing there like a wooden imitation of Nelson's column with the top blown off, man?"

"Because"—Stukeley evinced no resentment, nor any other form of animation—"whoever you are, mister, you'd better turn round and go right back, and forget you ever thought of hirin' this farm."

"And why?" Gees asked, his irritation all gone, now.

"I come outer Essex—the squire here advertised, an' I come outer Essex to manage this place till Michaelmas," Stukeley said in the same uninterested, almost lifeless way, "an' I'm throwin' it up an' goin' back, end o' this month, though I don't know what I'll do. He won't give me a reference, I know, after throwin' up the job like that, but I'm goin', all the same. You'd better turn round and go right back."

"And I asked you why?" Gees insisted.

Stukeley shook his head. "I'm workin' for Squire Hunter," he said, "so it ain't for me to say why. But I do say—that much."

Loyalty to his employer, evidently, held him from saying more. With his thumbs still stuck in his belt, he gazed past Gees at the exit from the roadway: was it there that he looked for the reason behind his warning? Yet his face was expressionless as ever, his eyes unlighted.

"Having said that much," Gees suggested placidly, "perhaps you will now let me see over the house, as I asked at first." Momentarily he

wondered if the man would ask for some order to view, or other document authorising him to conduct a stranger, but Stukeley did not appear to think of such a thing. He drew back a step.

"All right," he said. "There ain't so much to show."

Then a smallish, worried-looking, middle-aged woman appeared beside him, and made a silent appraisal of Gees with her faded blue eyes.

"Gentleman want to see round the house, Annie," Stukeley explained.

"Did you tell him why we—" she began, but her husband—Gees concluded that he stood in that relationship to her—put his hand over her mouth for a moment, gently, but enough to silence her.

"I told him all I got a right to tell him, an' maybe a bit more," he said.

"Now, if you'll make way, Annie, I'll show him over it."

"I'll show him," she dissented. "Our room ain't tidied."

"I'll show him!" Stukeley insisted, with his first show of animation over anything. "Else, there's no tellin' where your tongue'd stop."

There was a sternness in his tone that silenced the woman. With a slight movement of his head Stukeley invited Gees to enter, and drew back into a wide passageway that ended, nearly midway of the house, it appeared, in a blank wall, with a door at right angles to it on either side. Stukeley opened the right-hand door and turned.

"Squire Hunter hired the furniture," he said. "Livin' room."

Gees entered, while his guide remained in the doorway. The furniture comprised only bare necessities for two people, and appeared lost in the room, which was full twenty feet square. To left of the doorway as Gees faced inward was an enormous open fireplace, and after the merest glance round the room he stepped into it and looked upward to see that it occupied only a part of the whole area of the chimney, since a party wall went up for nine or ten feet and above it the main wall of chimney showed farther back, soot-encrusted, rising to a square that revealed open sky, clouded by smoke which rose from some other fireplace of the house. A curing-bar with half-a-dozen or more pendent hooks for hams and the like went across the back of this fireplace, and its ends were recessed for settles. It was a good five feet from front to back, and of such height that Gees walked in and out easily.

"Yes," he said emerging. "Now the next, please."

Stukeley opened the door facing that of the living room. "Stair to the bedrooms, and the parlour through there," he said.

Passing the foot of the stairs, Gees opened the parlour door and saw that, smaller than the living room only by the width of the staircase, it was totally unfurnished, while the fireplace had been bricked in and an

old-fashioned, high-grated register stove fitted at some time. Stukeley, beside him, pointed to a door in the right-hand wall.

"Kitchen through there," he said. "We ought to made this the livin' room, if it'd been an ordinary house. But we use the other."

"Any special reason?" Gees asked.

"I said, if it'd been an ordinary house," Stukeley answered in his wooden way. "Because, this is next the kitchen, and the other ain't."

He would say no more, evidently. Gees crossed the room and, opening the other door, saw a very large kitchen, brick-floored, with an old-time brick oven as a cavity in the chimney wall and some faggots lying beside it: apparently Stukeley and his wife used that troublesome but unsurpassable form of cooking. An enormous gallows arm with chain and hook, all red with rust, showed how pots had once been hung over fires on the open hearth, which was swept clean, now. Again, stepping on to the hearth, Gees saw the party wall and sky above: at floor level, he estimated, this chimney was not less than fourteen feet square inside.

Emerging, he looked through an open doorway into a scullery as large as the kitchen—save for the space taken up by the staircase cutting off a piece of what Stukeley called the parlour, these four ground-floor rooms were identical in area. There was a large copper set in brickwork, by the side of this room's portion of the chimney, which here again had been built up to enclose a large grate, and on one hob a kettle sang—the cheerfulest thing Gees had yet seen since he entered the roadway to Nightmare—while in the grate itself small logs burned silently and with but little flame. Both here and in the kitchen the cheap, new-looking furniture and utensils covered two people's needs, but no more.

"We might had more stuff," Stukeley remarked, "if we'd liked. The squire said I could order what I wanted for the six months, but more stuff, more work for the missus. So this is what I got."

"And now, upstairs, please," Gees suggested.

They went back to the unfurnished "parlour," and in the middle of the room Gees paused for a few moments, Stukeley going on and looking back as if to see why he lingered. The reason was the position of what Stukeley called the "living room." As things were, Mrs. Stukeley would have to carry whatever she cooked in the scullery—which by the look of the kitchen hearth meant everything, except on days when the oven was heated—through the kitchen, through this parlour, and across the entrance passage, unless they took their meals on the kitchen dresser. Apart from that, there was no table in either kitchen or scullery. Use of this room would have saved her half the distance.

"Did you make this your living room, at first?" he asked.

"I'm showin' you over the house," Stukeley answered from the stairs' foot.

Toneless though the reproof was, it declared that he would do what he had to do under protest, say what he had to say and no word more. At the same time, it revealed that he and his wife had begun their time in the house with this as their living room, as was only reasonable: otherwise, the man would have had no cause for withholding answer to the question. Reaching that conclusion, Gees saw Mrs. Stukeley come down from the upper floor and disappear in the living room, and with that, guessing she had been to do some tidying before he made his inspection, he joined Stukeley and they clattered up the bare stairs together.

At the top, a door on the right gave access to a narrow passage, unlighted except by such ray as came through an open doorway at its far end, which led to the room over the kitchen, and then there were two doors facing each other just at the top of the stairs, one for the apartment over the living room, the other for that over the parlour. Stukeley led on to the open door first, and Gees saw an empty room of about the area of the kitchen, with, to the right, another open door, beyond which was the room corresponding to the scullery beneath it. Bare boards, white-washed ceilings, and flowered wallpaper with pale oblongs showing where pictures had hung, gave the rooms a desolate look out of keeping with the sun-rays striking through their windows. Here was nothing to call for comment, and he retraced his steps to find his guide opening the door which admitted to the bedroom over the living room, sparsely furnished, and with the bedding on the cheap iron double bedstead obviously straightened in haste. Here, as in the other two rooms, a small register stove had been fitted, long ago, if the pattern of it went for anything.

"Bathroom?" Gees inquired abruptly.

The first suspicion of a smile half-dawned on Stukeley's face, and faded. "A tin bath, the scullery tap, an' a kettle," he said. "I s'pose that's what the people afore us did, too."

So that was that, and nothing in this room called for comment. Gees emerged, and tried the door facing him, but it did not give.

"Locked," said Stukeley.

"Where's the key?" Gees demanded.

"It's like the others, only there's no stove. Empty, too," Stukeley parried, quite without interest, apparently.

"Shall I come down with you while you get the key, or wait here for you?" Gees asked, and made his words sound uninterested. A minute, nearly, of silent battle, and then Stukeley gave in.

"I'll fetch it," he said, and went down the stairs.

He returned almost immediately, turned the key in the lock that protested with a screech over being disturbed, and pushed the door open. Gees entered the empty room, which should have been of identical area with the "parlour," at least from the outer to the inner wall, but, as Gees saw at once, being on the alert for something because of the locked door, was not. Further to that, it had no stove in it.

Here, by the door, the distance from wall to outer wall was identical with that of the room under it, Gees decided, but the shape of the room was different. For a minute or so he stood puzzling over the difference, and then he saw it. The wall of the chimney projected farther into the room than into that of the room beneath. With Stukeley's gaze on him, he moved slowly to the right, eyeing the projecting angle of the chimney wall, papered, as was the rest of the room, in a pattern gay with roses, rather faded, now. Down in the angle made by the chimney's emergence lay a crumpled and faded blue bow of silk, as, perhaps, May Norris had left it. Had this been her room? But the chimney wall itself, narrowing the width of the room by fully a yard, compared with that of the parlour ... Smoothly and neatly papered from ceiling to floor, and giving no sign that a stove had ever been fixed in this room, or that it had in any way been connected with the chimney, the wall projected. No casual observer, merely inspecting the place with a view to occupancy, would have noticed it: probably neither Norris nor any of his predecessors had so much as thought about it. And Stukeley?

"What's the idea in keeping the room locked up?" Gees asked.

"We don't use it," Stukeley answered baldly.

"I can see that, but you don't use those other two either. Why not keep them locked as well, while you're about it?"

"Never thought of it," said Stukeley.

"Then why keep this one locked, specially?" Gees persisted.

"We don't use it," Stukeley repeated.

There was nothing in his utterly passionless sentences to indicate stubborn refusal to give his reason, but, all the same, Gees gave it up. A final glance round, and he moved to the doorway.

"Attics?" he asked.

Stukeley pointed up at a trapdoor in the ceiling over the top of the staircase. "There," he answered.

"There is a ladder, I suppose?"

"Broke," said Stukeley.

"You mean, broken since you came here?" Gees persisted.

"No, I found the pieces."

"Well, have you been up there yourself?"

"I certainly have!" There was a momentary vigour in the reply, almost startling after his previous lack of any emphasis in what he said. But then, as if recollecting himself, he went on his flat, normal way. "No floor, only beams an' lath an' plaster—it'd break the bedroom ceilin's in if you stepped off the beams. No windows—you'd want a candle. An' bare rafters an' a maze o' cross-beams. That's all. I forgot, though—cobwebs, an' bats to put the candle out."

"If there is no ladder, how did you get up there?" Gees asked.

"Put a box on a chair, stood on it, an' shoved my head through. I didn't go no farther," Stukeley explained. "Didn't want to."

Gees stood irresolute, looking up at the trap-door. It was fitted with a hasp and staple, and padlocked, he saw. The hasp and lock appeared very new: the brass of the lock was quite bright.

"Neither do you," said Stukeley, as one stating an uninteresting fact.

On that, Gees felt a momentary determination to get up into those attics if he had to fight Stukeley to do it, but the resolve was no more than a gust that passed and left him incurious about the attic floor. He backed into the stoveless bedroom, the door of which Stukeley had not closed, and, again looking at the projecting chimney wall, saw that it came within a foot of a line drawn across the room from the edge of the window—less than a foot, in fact, for it was within one plank width of the window framing's outer edge. He came out again.

"No," he said. "I want one more look into the parlour."

Stukeley left the door of the room open with the key in the lock, and followed down the stairs to find Gees already in the parlour. Its window, as Gees had noted before he approached the house—though he meant to make quite sure when he left—was directly under the bedroom window and of almost similar dimensions, yet here the line of the chimney wall was four and a half planks width back from the edge of the window framing. A full yard farther back, in fact. Was that bulge a cupboard of some sort belonging to the bedroom, but papered over and thus hidden? With no word to Stukeley, Gees ran up the stairs again, entered the room, and hurt his knuckles on the protruding wall. It gave back no resonance anywhere, but was solid as old brickwork should be. Returning, he faced Stukeley at the foot of the stairs.

"I'd like one more look into your living room," he said.

"It's there," said Stukeley.

Gees entered the room, and went to stand on the open hearth again. He saw, what he had missed before, that in the right hand corner facing him, and therefore in the angle of the party wall, a series of cross bars formed steps by which one might ascend inside the chimney. The soot that encrusted all but the lowest three of these bars went to prove that they had not been used as steps for a very long time. Standing back at the edge of the hearth as he faced inward, Gees counted ten of the bars to the top of the party wall, and, higher up, light enough came down the chimney to show him a series of u-shaped, soot-encrusted irons going up the farther main wall of the chimney. Thus, if one climbed to the top of the party wall by these bars, it would be possible to cross by its top to those u projections, and continue the ascent, but only for ten more steps, for there were only ten u-pieces in the wall.

And no visible doorway, nor anything to show why it had been rendered possible to climb just that far up the chimney and no more. Other projections, higher up, might have been removed, of course. As far as the steps went up, the chimney wall showed in the dim light as unbroken in any way, crusted with soot that had ridged into little stilled waves, furry-looking at their edges.

Furry-looking at their edges! The phrase had drifted into Gees' mind, and he gave a little shiver as he stepped out from the hearth. He went out into the passage and faced Stukeley.

"I've seen all I want to see of the house," he said. "Thank you very much for showing me round."

"Don't mention it," said Stukeley, uninterestedly.

Chapter 6

Perivale

At a little distance from the end of the shadowed roadway Gees halted and looked back. He saw, now, that his impression of the smallness of the upper windows of the house compared with those of the lower storey was due to the fact that the window of the apartment which the Stukeleys used as a living room was very generously proportioned; it was evidently the best room or parlour of the house, normally, and thus had been specially favoured in the matter of lighting. The other three windows of the frontage were all of the same size, and, viewing the house cornerwise, Gees saw that there was no window at all in this end wall. The window of the bedroom which Stukeley kept locked was directly over that of the empty room beneath, so that the protrusion of the chimney into that bedroom, a good yard farther than it extended into the room beneath, was actual, and not an illusion on his part.

And now he knew he had made a mistake in not insisting on a survey of the attics. Stukeley had first said that they were tenanted by bats that put out candles, and infested by cobwebs—and then had said that he had done no more than stand on a box placed on a chair and put his head through the trapdoor. He must have done more than that, gone up into the attics: else, how did he know about the bats, and the absence of flooring over the bedroom ceiling beams? Merely sticking a candle through the trapdoor opening was not likely to rouse enough bats to extinguish the candle, for that type of animal hid itself in remote crannies. No, Stukeley had been in the attics, and for some reason had placed a totally unnecessary (from a normal point of view) hasp and padlock on the trapdoor. As if he thought someone in the attics might try to get down, to the lower floors, and wanted to prevent it.

Too late to go back and insist on exploring the attics, now. A second visit, perhaps, after opening up other avenues of investigation. But why had Stukeley wanted to keep him out of the attics?

Then, the dog—Gees remembered it suddenly. It had been lying apparently asleep when he had approached Stukeley standing in the porch: to the best of his recollection Stukeley had not spoken to it, and he had not noticed whether it moved before he went inside. But, he knew, an ordinary dog would have displayed some sort of interest in a stranger, and, in nine out of ten cases, would have barked at him. This dog had simply melted away, for it was not lying there now. He could not remember whether it had been still lying there when he had entered the house with Stukeley, but knew he had not seen it move.

A small circumstance, with nothing really abnormal about it, but he was tensed up in a way that caused him to remark and question even so unimportant a thing as that—if it were unimportant. Now, too, he was not so ready to acquit the house of deserving the local title for the place, or to confine that title to the eerie, shadowed roadway. When Norris had lived here, perhaps, it had been just an ordinary farmhouse, up to the time of May Norris's seizure, or whatever it was, but now it was in a state that made Stukeley keep one room locked, move his "living room" furniture to his own and his wife's inconvenience, and go to the expense and trouble of fitting a padlock to the attic trapdoor. And Stukeley, Gees would have sworn, was no sort of man to yield to superstitious fears: yet, at the cost of breaking his agreement with Squire Hunter and thus depriving himself of a reference for any other employer to take up, he was running away at the end of the month.

Abruptly Gees spun about to face toward the roadway. Was that a distant blackbird, disturbed and chattering as it flew off, or was it a laugh, somewhere near at hand and half-suppressed?

He listened, but the sound did not recur. Faced away from the house as he was, he saw a tract of meadow land extending toward the road, on the left of the great hedges, and on the right grew a good crop of wheat, its deep green, vigorous blades indicating rich soil beneath it. From the road to this exit from the roadway, the ground sloped gently upward, and then down again to the mere and farmhouse level, so that Gees stood now on a summit. The great chimney, he had been told, was all that remained of the ancient monastery, and he could see no lines in the earth indicating other remains, either of that or of the nunnery in connection with which the first Hunter to own these lands had done deeds which marked him as no better than Robert of evil fame.

Midday, and there was more light along the roadway now, though still the sun rays came down at an angle that left the rutted track in shadow. A last look back at the house and the thin line of smoke wavering up from the chimney and flattening to north-eastward, and then he entered the shadowed way with that bird's call or other being's laughter still in his mind. And—was it fancy, or was the dimness of the way peopled by other, deeper shadows, between him and the gate at the far end? Things of unsubstantial haze that appeared, spinning like transparent tops, and disappeared to appear and disappear again?

He told himself with angry vigour that fancies like this at high noon proved him no fit person to undertake an investigation of this sort. Phil Bird's tale and Stukeley's warning and hints were affecting his nerve, and he was letting imagination master reason. He began to whistle "Pack up your troubles," but stopped, for it seemed that the ghostly laughter broke out again. Yet, when again there was no sound but the faint crunch of his footfalls, he could not be sure that he had heard anything, and if there were any tenuous shadows moving in the twilit way before him, they receded as he advanced. There was nothing, either in sound or sight, of which he could be sure.

He ought to have insisted on going up to the attics!

From the sagged gate to the house he had seemed to himself to take a very long time in making the journey, but this return between the towering walls of hawthorn appeared to take no time at all. He was at the gate, out in the road with normality about him, and headed back toward the inn, and here came a boy driving an empty milk-float. Gees held up a hand, and the boy reined in and gazed at him, open-mouthed. "Can you tell me where a Mr. Cosham lives?" Gees asked.

The boy pointed ahead of himself. "Goin' right away from it, you are, mister," he answered. "Thud gateway along on the left—thud farm, I mean. White house, wi' apple trees in front."

"That is, on your left as you're pointing?" Gees suggested.

"That's what I mean, mister," the boy said in an injured way, almost as if he had been accused of intent to mislead.

"Thank you very much," Gees said, and pursued his way.

But, when the boy had whipped up and gone on, he faced about and followed. He might be late for lunch at the inn, but he would find what Cosham's would yield, first. So he went on, past Nightmare roadway again—it looked normal enough as he glanced along it in passing, an avenue of which Denlandham might well be proud, with its scented coverlets of white blossom—and, on the opposite side of the road about

a mile farther on, came to a white farmhouse set at the back of a quarter-acre apple orchard, almost past its blossom time, now.

"No, Mr. Norris isn't in," the vinegary-faced little woman who came to the door informed him, while she scrutinised him intently.

"Mrs. Norris, perhaps?" he suggested.

She went on inspecting him through a long pause. Then—"Can I tell her what it's about—why you want to see her?"

"No," said Gees, baldly.

Another, longer pause, and then she said, "I'll see," and turned away, to leave him standing on the doorstep, gazing into a wide hallway in which a grandfather clock ticked loudly, just beyond an antique oak coffer that would have set a collector of such things yearning fiercely. Then from the far end of the hallway another woman approached and faced him: she was taller than the first, and it was easy to see that she had been beautiful in her youth, though now, in late middle-age, her face was lined and thin, her brows drawn down and together as if she lived in constant anxiety, or perhaps fear.

"I am Mrs. Norris," she said. "What is it you want, Mr.—?"

"Gees," he supplemented. "Mr. Gees, you may make it. To tell the truth, I'd rather have seen Mr. Norris, in case you don't care to assume any responsibility in his absence for"—he ended very slowly—"letting me see your daughter for a few minutes."

"Oh, but that's quite impossible!" she exclaimed sharply, and now he saw real fear in her eyes as her gaze at him became a stare.

"In the hope of effecting a cure," he said quietly.

"Of—did Doctor Haverstock send you?" she demanded.

"No," he answered, quite frankly. "I have just been to—to the farm where I understand you and Mr. Norris and your daughter lived till a little while ago. Made a thorough inspection of the place, after making some inquiries when I arrived here last night, and I am convinced that your daughter's case is not a matter for any doctor."

"Then what—who—what do you mean?" she demanded, sharply, now.

"Exactly what I say," he answered quietly and confidently. One sign of wavering or lack of confidence and, he knew, she would turn him away.

"It is not a case for an ordinary doctor."

"Then what—who could cure her?" she asked, less sharply.

"I—I don't know who or what you are, coming here like this, and I dread the thought of—of—" she broke off. "Who could cure her?" she repeated.

"God, and I say it with all reverence," he answered.

She stared at him searchingly, and he returned her gaze with steady assurance. Again, one sign of wavering—

"Are you a religious crank?" she asked at the end of a long pause.

"No," he answered. "I call myself a confidential agent, and as that I am here to investigate and—if I can—put an end to certain things that make trouble in Denlandham. And it appears to me that the first and most important thing, since it involves a human being and perhaps life itself, is to cure your daughter, Mrs. Norris."

"A—a confidential agent?" she echoed. "Not—not religious?"

"Did you ever hear of the Kestwell murder case?" he asked.

"I—yes, I do remember reading about it," she admitted.

"Well, I am that Gees, the one who sent the police to the murderers."

"But—but that was Anarchists," she objected. "Nothing like this."

"Possibly," he half-agreed, "but I succeeded there in what I set out to do. My only reason for mentioning it was to convince you that I do succeed. I don't suggest charging you or Mr. Norris one penny for what I will do—or get done—if you let me. And before doing anything at all, I think it will be necessary to see your daughter. Then, if the case is beyond anything I can get done, I'll tell you so, frankly."

Through a long interval she faced him in evident indecision, and he said no more, waited for her to make up her mind.

"My husband has gone for another look over the farm we're taking at Michaelmas, and he won't be back till to-morrow," she said at last. "I don't know what he'd say, or whether he'd consent to your trying anything of any sort. You'd have to get his consent."

"I shouldn't think of attempting anything without it," he told her. "All I ask now is just to see the girl for a minute or so."

"Well, I suppose there wouldn't be any harm in that," she admitted rather dubiously. "I don't know—my husband got so terribly angry with the doctors, the things they tried on her before he fetched her back."

"And I promise you to try nothing, do nothing, without his consent," Gees said. "Merely seeing her, as you admit, can do no harm."

"Then, if you'll come in"—she drew back to make way for him—"only for a minute, though. This way, Mr. Gees."

She preceded him along the hallway, and stopped to tap gently on a door beyond the grandfather clock. After a brief period of waiting the door opened, and the vinegary-looking woman put her head out.

"All right, Emily," Mrs. Norris said, "I'll look after her again now." She turned to Gees. "You may come in, for a minute," she added.

He waited for Emily—Mrs. Cosham, he guessed—to emerge, and then followed his conductress into the room. A claw-leg table, black with the polish generations of owners had applied, stood in the middle of the room, and on it, each on a woollen mat, stood three paraffin lamps, one of which was alight, although sunshine rayed in through the window. The rest of the furniture appeared as old as the table, and in a carved armchair beyond a Jacobean dresser that held old china on its shelves sat a girl, barefooted, and clad in no more than nightdress and dressing gown, this last so far open at the throat that the curves of her breasts just showed. She sat with her head bent down as she gazed at the floor or at her own feet projecting beyond the edge of the long nightdress, and her little white hands grasped each an arm of the chair with a fixity that rendered the knuckles still whiter. She had rippling curls of red-gold reaching almost to her shoulders, tangled by lack of care, and as lovely a profile as Gees had ever seen. She did not move or look up: her mother turned to look at Gees, and he pointed at the lighted lamp on the table in silent questioning.

"In case the sun should go in—behind clouds," Mrs. Norris explained. "At night, they are all kept alight. She can't endure darkness."

He nodded understanding. "The real May Norris can't endure it," he said, and made it an affirmation, not a question. Perhaps the sound of a strange voice, and a man's voice at that, roused the girl from her apathy. She looked up, straight at Gees, and at first her eyes were blank and expressionless, while her lips, slightly parted, revealed perfect little teeth. But then her mouth closed to a thin line, and into her eyes came such a fire of evil hatred that all her beauty vanished, and involuntarily Gees backed a step toward the door behind him, lest, tigress-like, she should spring at him.

"It was I who brought the gentleman to see you, May," Mrs. Norris said. "He won't—only to see you, dear, for a minute. Nothing else."

The fire died out from the girl's eyes. She relaxed her hold on the chair arm, to put up one hand and draw her dressing gown over her breast, and then, resuming her clutch on the wood, looked down at the floor again. Every line of her, Gees could see, was tensed and rigid: it was a posture that she could not maintain for long without exhaustion.

"Thank you, Mrs. Norris," he said. "I should like to ask you—"

"Outside," she interposed. "If you go out, you'll find my sister-in-law, Mrs. Cosham, either in the hall or the dining-room. Ask her to come in,

and then I can come out and speak to you.”

He went out and, finding the other woman looking out from a doorway, asked her to go into the room. A minute or less after she had complied with the request, Mrs. Norris came out and faced him.

“What good has it done, seeing her?” she asked, half-resentfully.

“You can’t make her wear ordinary clothes?” he rejoined.

“She tears day clothes off herself, if we put them on when she’s quiet,” she answered. “I mean, when she’s exhausted herself by sitting like that and is all relaxed. As soon as the fit comes on again, she tears at the clothes—rends them to rags. So we gave it up.”

“And you don’t leave her alone,” he suggested.

“Not for a moment. The lamps—not that she’s attempted to touch them, but she might. And you saw—saw what she looked like when she was looking at you. Always like that. She hasn’t looked like our own daughter since Mr. Norris brought her back, and I begin to wish he hadn’t done it, but had left her there. Worse now than when she was taken away after—after it happened. These two days—”

She broke off, and Gees saw despair in her eyes. He shook his head.

“Don’t give in, Mrs. Norris,” he said. “It isn’t a case for doctors. Most emphatically it is not a case for doctors. Now tell me, what time can I see your husband to-morrow? The sooner the better.”

“If he’ll let you do anything,” she said.

“That’s my affair—to see that he does,” he pointed out. “Just tell me when I can see him, and leave all the rest to me.”

“Any time after midday to-morrow, then,” she told him. “Oh, Mr. Gees, do you really think you can—can cure her?”

“I know with absolute certainty that I can’t,” he answered, “but I believe she can be cured, quite simply. So I’ll be here to-morrow, probably between two and half-past, though it may be even later, to see Mr. Norris and hear what he has to say about it. Now just—I know it’s useless to tell you to stop worrying, but just try to believe that the world holds as much good as evil, if not more, and if all goes as it should your own daughter will be given back to you, very soon. I would never say that much if I didn’t believe it possible.”

“You mean—she—my own daughter, you said?” she asked timidly.

“That’s not your daughter, that in there,” he said, nodding toward the closed door. “Her physical body—yes, but not what it holds. Now wait till to-morrow, and begin hoping and keep on at it.”

"Oh, if you mean it all!" she exclaimed, sobbingly. "You—you drop down on out of the sky, as it might be, and talk like this, persuade me against my judgement! And then, if it isn't true—"

She stared at him, almost fiercely, but he smiled.

"If it isn't, put a mother's curse on me for deceiving you," he said. "And if there's a worse curse, I don't know it. Now I'm off. Tell your husband as much or as little as you like, and I'll be here to-morrow afternoon to talk to him, and perhaps more."

With no other valediction, he left her and went out from the house, turning back toward the inn. He reached it in time to dispose of one satisfying pint of the type of beer that Phil Bird had found so good, and then migrated from the bar to the dining-room, where Nicholas Churchill placed before him more roast duck than he had ever seen as one helping, and squeaked an apology for the green peas, which were not even in flower as yet, let alone in pod. But there was the cauliflower.

"If you can keep this up," Gees told him, "I shall probably stay here for the rest of my life. Now tell me, what's your parson's name, and what is he, rector or vicar?"

"It's the rector, Mr. Perivale, sir," Nicholas informed him.

"Ah! Well, that's all I want to know, thank you. And I think another pint of that excellent bitter, if you will. A duck like this deserves a good swim, and I'd hate to rob it of its rights."

When nothing but bones remained on his plate, he refused rhubarb tart and cream, and cheese as well, for the most obvious reason, and sat awhile reflecting. This task he had imposed on himself over the girl May Norris was quite extraneous, independent of his mission here on Hunter's behalf, but he had known he must undertake it, before all else, after he had taken a dozen paces along Nightmare roadway toward the farmhouse. Nightmare! Yes, but he felt reasonably certain of putting an end to the nightmare in which Mrs. Norris and probably her husband as well were held in dreadful grip. And the girl herself

Where, in the eternity in which earth swims, was that girl? Was she inert, stunned to helplessness by the terrible power that had usurped her place, or was she fighting, striving to regain possession of the beautiful physical organism from which she had been driven?

Did she know that he planned to help her—was she perhaps with him now, praying, imploring aid that might come through him?

"Anyhow, my child," he said aloud, as if she were in truth there, but not in language he would have used to a girl, "I'll do my damndest.

Unfortunately, though, it isn't all up to me, and it might be hell and all making the man I want to act see that he's got to take a hand."

With which he stubbed out his cigarette, lighted another, and went out. A mere hundred yards or so in the direction in which he had gone in the morning brought him to the churchyard gateway, and he entered there, to stand awhile gazing at the church itself, rather than at the rectory, as the house whose grounds communicated with the churchyard by a side gate appeared to be. From those grounds came the chatter of children's voices, and once or twice a squeal of protest from some youngster, and Gees nodded to himself as he stood listening as well as sizing up the architectural details of the church.

"Clerics and rabbits—strong analogy," he told himself after he had distinguished four undoubtedly different voices. "Meanwhile, the church. Late Norman or early Gothic, and it doesn't matter. This end, a Hunter restoration, and he made the devil's own mess of that doorway, too. It looks like late foolery or early drunkenness, the way that arch was restored. Never mind, he meant well, probably. But the damned fool bunged up an authentic leper hole! Oh, blast his restoration!"

He went on, and found the west door gave him access. By the font, two brasses had evidently been ripped away from tombs, and Gees breathed a malediction on Cromwell's iconoclasts. The coco-matted nave ended at a scrolled ironwork railing, and the altar beyond was lighted by late daffodils and flame-coloured tulips under and to each side of the Cross. Behind it, the east window showed Christ with little children.

For the moment in which he dropped to one knee, Gees forgot the iconoclasts and all else, saw only the simple, telling beauty of the altar and its pictured background. Before he could rise again, a shadow obscured the doorway through which he had entered, and he stood up hastily to face a stout, middle-aged cleric, with rather hard eyes that softened as he realised he had caught a stranger kneeling in his church.

"You are very welcome here, sir," he said.

"And you," Gees said, "are Mr. Perivale."

"I am," the rector owned. "You are—staying in this district?"

"For some while," Gees answered. "I don't know how long, though. Partly, I think, it depends on you."

"On me?" The rector stared at him, his eyes hardening again as he anticipated a request for charity of some sort. "Surely not!"

Gees pointed momentarily toward the east window.

"You may remember, sir, He said, about His little ones—it were better that a millstone had been hung round their necks, those who offend. I don't remember the exact words, but that was the sense of it."

"Well?" the rector asked stiffly, and went on staring, possibly under the impression that he had to deal with a madman.

"I want your help over one of them—May Norris," Gees told him.

"Norris's daughter," Perivale said, as if not quite so doubtful of the other's sanity. "Well, sir, I don't know who you are or what you are, or why you say you want my help, but I may tell you that I went to see the girl yesterday, and Norris refused me access to her—almost drove me away. So I don't see that I can help."

"I don't wonder at his doing that," Gees said. "I saw her this morning, myself. Now—do you mind if we go outside, while I explain?"

Perivale turned to the doorway. "By all means," he said. "I should be glad—especially since you say you have seen the girl—I should be glad if you would explain."

Chapter 7

Isabella

It was a very puzzled-looking clergyman who, after hearing Gees' statement of his case to its end, put question after question, and found pat replies rained on him with unvarying rapidity.

"I must grant, Mr. Green, that cases such as you allege this to be are not altogether unknown in our history, but I have no proof that this is such a case, only your word for it. And you may be mistaken."

"And what do you lose, beyond a bare ten minutes of your time, if I am?" Gees retorted. "Could anything be simpler than what I ask?"

"It may seem simple to you, a layman," the rector said, "but even if you convince the father, and then I act as you say—and it fails to produce any result? In other words, if you are wrong?"

"Then," Gees answered thoughtfully, "I suppose I can only apologise to you, and devote whatever sum you choose to name to any charity you favour for the receipt of the cheque. Fifty pounds, call it?"

"That sounds to me perilously like a bet," Perivale objected.

"Let's wash it and every other suggestion—apart from my main request—out, then," Gees said. "And if you refuse that request, then—at the risk of offending you, I'd say you're going near qualifying for that millstone I mentioned before we began this discussion."

The rector's eyes hardened again. "Are you attempting to define my duty for me, young man?" he demanded coldly.

"No," Gees said, and met his gaze squarely. "I'm telling you something that at the bottom of your heart you know yourself, and trying to be respectful, even if I don't sound like it."

For nearly a minute Perivale gazed at him, sternly, and then quite suddenly he laughed with unaffected amusement.

"I'll do it, Mr. Green," he said. "You know, you're about the most impudent young man I've met for a long time, but I feel that you're absolutely sincere and disinterested over this, and admit that you may be justified in your conclusions, though it is a unique case for modern times if you are. Now can I offer you a cup of tea at the rectory?"

"That's a splendid idea," Gees admitted. "I've talked myself thirsty, and a spot of tea in return for my rudeness will be real coals of fire on my head." Together with Perivale, he began walking toward the gate in the churchyard wall that gave access to the rectory grounds. "Now I think of it, would you mind telling me whether those two tombs that the brasses have been snatched off belong to the Hunter family?"

"Oh, no," Perivale answered. "They were both Aclands, a family that has died out long since from this part of the country. The Hunter family had an old-fashioned vault in the churchyard that was opened every time a member of the family died, and the coffin deposited on a shelf inside. But it was closed finally during last century—and this present squire's father buried in the usual way in the churchyard."

"The vault being full up, I conclude," Gees observed.

"I couldn't tell you if it were or no—it was before my time," the rector answered, and led the way through his well-kept garden toward the large, creeper-covered house before them. They entered, and Gees saw a long hall table crowded with a miscellany which included sundry caps, girls' hats, coats and mufflers, a toy railway engine, a couple of tennis racquets and half a dozen balls, a tangle of fishing line and the top joint of a rod—there was much else in the heap too, but Gees found himself looking over the rector's shoulder into a large room, in which he saw a hedgehog curled up on the hearth-rug, a terrier with his nose down on his paws regarding it, two kittens at play round a table leg, and a tortoise just emerging from under a sideboard. The rector faced about.

"Hummm! Nobody in yet, apparently," he said. "A family of seven, in addition to myself and my—er—my second wife, and I think we'll have tea in my study, just you and I, shall we?"

"Only five, surely," Gees said, counting up the hedgehog, tortoise, dog, and kittens. "But I suppose the others were there and not visible."

Perivale's frown indicated his lack of understanding, and then he laughed. "Seven children, not their pets," he explained. "Terrors in the house, but I wouldn't have one less for the world. Ah, Celia!" as a tall girl with grave grey eyes appeared in another doorway. "Has your stepmother come in yet, do you know?"

"Not yet, father," the girl answered, and glanced at Gees.

"I see. This is Mr. Green—my eldest daughter, Mr. Green—and we will have tea in my study—just the two of us, if you'll tell Bessie, my dear. And if your stepmother comes in, you might tell her where to find me. And Tony's finger—did Bessie tie it up for him?"

"I did, father," the girl said. "It was rather a deep cut."

"Ah! Yes, well it may teach him to be more careful next time. If it were not for you, Celia, I don't know what would happen to the rest of them—but come along, Mr. Green, I'm forgetting you."

"Not at all," Gees assured him, and followed to a room just at the top of the staircase, looking out to the front of the house and furnished mainly with a flat-topped desk and pair of shabby but comfortable armchairs. The rector indicated one for his guest, and took the other.

"About—your request," he said. "I have acceded to it, whether wisely or no I have yet to find out, and would rather not discuss it any more, if you don't mind, Mr. Green. Except—you did not come to Denlandham because of—of this girl, I take it?"

"I think I can say I did not," Gees answered deliberately. "I note you give the place its full name. Denlum, most of them call it."

"An obvious contraction, and pure laziness," Perivale said.

"As one might say of Nightmare Farm," Gees remarked.

The other man gave him a long, intent look. "Yes," he said after a silence. "I suppose so. Knightsmere needs more saying."

"I wonder," Gees asked, "if you ever met a Cumberland vicar named Amber, Mr. Perivale? His living is a small village—"

"Amber of Odder?" Perivale interrupted. "Yes, a very old friend and a perfectly charming man. Why—do you know him?"

"Got in touch with him over an affair not exactly like this which made me put my request to you, but something in the same category, and I'm pleased to say he is my friend, too—proud to say it, in fact."

A rather untidy girl brought in the tea tray and put it down on the desk. Perivale began pouring out, and ascertained Gees' tastes in milk and sugar. There was food enough on the tray for a substantial meal.

"Nothing at all to eat, thank you," Gees answered a query. "I had a lunch at the inn that I'm not likely to forget in a hurry."

"Ah, well, if you won't, you won't, of course. Churchill is a good fellow, but his wife! I feel sorry for the man. And"—he stood up, looking past Gees at the doorway, and Gees stood up too and faced about—"come in, my dear, I'm so glad you've got back. This is Mr. Green—"

He broke off as the woman in the doorway grasped at the lintel and even swayed a little as she stared at Gees. She was wearing a frock and hat that were obviously as costly as they were simple, and her dark beauty was set off by just the right amount of make-up, but for the moment she had gone pale as she stood there, and her eyes betrayed fear.

"Why, what is wrong, Isabella dear?" Perivale asked anxiously.

"Do you feel faint, or—" He advanced past Gees toward her.

"No—no!" she insisted, recovering herself. "Perhaps for a moment—but it was only momentary. The stairs, perhaps—I ran up."

"Isabella!" The name completed Gees' knowledge, or rather memory. Before turning to his present occupation, he had tried the police force as a career, and during the two years of his service had been chosen on one occasion to assist a certain Inspector Tott, with others, in raiding a disreputable night club. Among those rounded up had been a woman—this woman, beyond doubt—who had given her name as Isabella Carter, together with a false address. Gees had found her out as Isabella Curtis at the right address, and made her attend with the rest of the habitués for trial. And, as he had recognised her, so did she know him, in spite of this different setting and the passing of time.

"Well, won't you join us, my dear?" Perivale asked.

"I—I think, if Mr. Green will excuse me, I'd rather go to my room, Arthur," she answered. "Later, perhaps—I do feel slightly faint, now."

"Then by all means go to your room and rest," her husband urged. "I'm quite sure Mr. Green will understand."

"Why, certainly," Gees assented at once. "I'm sorry Mrs. Perivale has this—er—indisposition. Another time, perhaps, Mrs. Perivale."

"Yes—yes, certainly," she trilled languorously. "Don't worry over me, Arthur—I shall be quite all right in a few minutes."

And she left them. The rector motioned to Gees to resume his seat as a door slammed not far off, and again seated himself.

"It's a pity," he said. "I should have liked her to have a talk with you. Sometimes I wonder—such a brilliant personality as she is, and a place like this, but—well, love will carry us through, under Providence. And if you think it strange for a middle-aged man with a family of seven to talk like a moonstruck boy, Mr. Green, I may tell you that it is less than a year since she crowned my life by marrying me—gave me a second lease of youth, I might say."

"I wish you every happiness in it," Gees said gravely.

"That's very good of you—very good of you, Mr. Green. There were difficulties at first, of course, with the children—the obvious objection to

a stepmother. But thanks to Celia, the one you saw, they are practically all smoothed away, now. A wonderful girl, my Celia."

Gees did not answer. He remembered the old, ill-fitting frock the girl had been wearing, and contrasted it with Isabella's attire and appearance: a fourth part of what the woman must have spent on that one ensemble would have dressed the girl attractively and well.

"Not that my wife is less wonderful," Perivale went on. "She has been to Denlandham House again this afternoon—one of the maids is ill there. My wife is the greatest help to me, and the way she has settled to visiting in the parish and made herself a help to me, so soon after giving up her society life in London, is wonderful, and a constant surprise to me. You, I take it, are still a bachelor, Mr. Green?"

"I have that disability—or advantage," Gees answered.

"Ah! Being outside the fold, you cannot realise the felicity within. Well, I can only hope you may find such happiness as has been given to me, when you do marry—and forgive my maundering over it like this. To cease the maundering—do you expect to be staying here long?"

"I can't tell, yet. But I rather think you're anxious over Mrs. Perivale, and I really ought to get away and attend to what brought me to your village. So if you'll excuse me, sir, and let me run away—"

"You're quite sure?" the rector asked, and Gees could tell that he was only too glad to accede to the suggestion, and go to his wife.

"Quite. If I may rely on you to keep an eye out for a car at the churchyard gate about three to-morrow afternoon—or let me come and inform you if there is any alteration in the time, or anything?"

"Why, certainly!" Perivale agreed with energy. "And I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you here again—you're sure you won't stay for just one more cup—another five minutes, say?"

"Quite sure, thank you. And I, too, hope we shall meet again, after to-morrow and all it may bring."

He got away then, and went down the stairs alone. From inside the room of the hedgehog and tortoise sounded the clatter of cups and voices of a happy and noisy party of youngsters. Gees went out by way of the open front door, and gained the road without going through the churchyard, to return slowly and thoughtfully toward the inn.

"Isabella Curtis, fined ten pounds and five guineas costs," he murmured to himself. "As were the rest. Just an escapade, probably."

And, as he turned toward the inn, a fervent sentence: "I hope it was only that, for his sake."

Nicholas Churchill scratched his head to stimulate his brain.

"Tallerfone, sir? There's the post office, o' course, an' I reckon they got it at the rectory an' up at the House, but—" He shook his head in conclusion, as if to say he knew of no others.

Gees looked at his watch. "I'll run over to Ludlow," he said.

"Back for sooper, sir?" Nicholas inquired.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Gees told him.

He went to the stable and ran the Rolls-Bentley out. There might be nearer points than Ludlow at which he could get undisturbed telephone communication, but he knew his way there. A quarter past four now—he wound the clock on the dash after turning into the road—and if Eve Madeleine left the office before five in his absence, he would tell her all about it when he got back to London. He drove carefully along the winding road, but made as good time as he could, and on the way marked down an unusually large roadside garage where a sign announced that it provided cars on hire. A well-kept old Daimler saloon appeared to be one of them, by the hackney carriage licence plate at its back.

By ten minutes to five Gees had drawn up before the ›Feathers Hotel‹ in the beautiful old town, and, entering, found he could get a trunk call to London and, apparently, anything else he might require. He made his call, and nodded approval as he heard Eve Madeleine's voice.

"Gees, Miss Brandon," he told her. "Take down my address. ›Hunters' Arms,‹ Denlandham, Shropshire. Got that down?"

She repeated the words after a brief interval, for checking.

"Right. Now get hold of a file of the TIMES for two years ago last April—no, I don't mean get it right away, because I know we haven't got one. Get it—steal it, borrow it, consult it somehow, even if you have to pay for it, and look up a raid—what's that? Yes, a raid, I said, on the ›Peppered Pig‹ club. ›The Peppered Pig,‹ a night club. You'll find the name Isabella Carter among the people charged, and her address. Put that down. Then go on to the trial of these people, and you'll see her as Isabella Curtis, with a different address. Put that down—I've forgotten it, but it's Upper Gloucester Place way somewhere. Got that?"

"Isabella Carter and Isabella Curtis—yes, Mr. Green," she said.

"Right. Get that done to-night if you can, and charge me overtime. Take it out of petty cash, and any expenses as well—expenses all the way along. To-morrow morning, turn yourself into a private detective, which means don't look like one. Got that?"

"I quite understand, Mr. Green," she answered coldly.

"Good! Find out anything you can about Isabella Curtis. Relations, social standing, tastes and habits, history from childhood—any da—anything you can. Make it snappy, Miss Brandon. Write a report of all you've got by to-morrow night, and register and express it to me at the ›Hunters' Arms.‹ If you don't think you've got everything by then, send the report of what you have, and go on detecting. And remember, if you get caught at it, or anyone suspects you're inquiring about her, my name is likely to be mud—the unpleasant sort of mud too. Got that?"

"Quite," she said. "I'll send the report to-morrow night."

"Then that's that. Now what have we in the way of inquiries?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid. Someone appears to have got hold of your Cumberland case—the grey shapes, as you call it—and people seem to think this is some sort of psychic establishment. A Croydon woman asks if we could recommend her to a good medium, and—"

"Snap that mumps to murder personal ad. into the three principal dailies, alternate days for a fortnight," he interrupted. "I'll lam 'em—mediums! And nothing worth following up, apparently?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Green."

"All right. Providence will send another case when I'm ready for it, and for the present you can get on with that inquiry. I've no idea when I shall be back, but will get in touch with you again when things are a bit more advanced. And that will be all for now, Miss Brandon."

"I'll send the report to-morrow night. Good-bye, Mr. Green."

He nodded approval again as he put the receiver back.

"Stout girl," he murmured, "though not physically, thank heaven. I can trust her to get her nose down to it without sneezing."

He paid for the call and went out to set off on the return journey. When he reached the garage he had noted on his way to Ludlow, he pulled up before it and waited until a youngish, pleasant-looking man in dungarees came to the side of the car in an active, businesslike way.

"Petrol, sir?" he inquired.

"Fraid not," Gees answered. "That Daimler there. For hire?"

"Yes, sir, it is," the man answered, with a look along the bonnet of the sleek tourer as if he wondered why its driver wanted to hire any other car, since that driver looked like owner as well.

"Who'd drive it, on a hire job?" Gees inquired.

"Well, that would depend on the job, sir. I'd either send the boy, or leave him in charge here and drive myself."

"You'd better drive yourself, for this job. Be outside the ›Hunters' Arms‹ at Denlandham at a quarter to two to-morrow. I want you to drive to a farm about two miles beyond the inn, and wait there for further instructions, and here's two pounds on account. All clear?"

"Delighted, sir. Just a moment, and I'll get you a receipt—"

"No, you won't. If you fail to turn up, I shall come back here and hammer hell out of you. ›Hunters' Arms,‹ a quarter to two. See you then without fail, and mind it is you, and not the boy."

"Very good, sir. I'll make a point of driving myself."

But, since he addressed the last words to Gees' rear number plate, he left off speaking, and went thoughtfully back to his garage, pocketing the two pound notes, while the long tourer vanished round a bend.

It came to rest in the stable behind the inn. Gees shooed out the hens which sought to return to their evidently normal abode, closed the doors of the stable, and went round to the front of the inn to stand under the spreading chestnut tree and meditate on his first day's discoveries, together with all that Phil Bird had told him. He gazed meditatively at the little bit of Denlandham House visible among its trees from this point. Hunter would know by this time that he had arrived in the village, and might be wondering why he had not reported himself at the house. Well, let him wonder: the terms Gees had imposed were clear enough: no conditions or stipulations, but he would conduct the inquiry in his own way, and claim payment only on results. For the present, he did not want to see Hunter again: the man had perverted fact in the course of his recital—naturally enough, but Gees wanted his facts straight and unalloyed; this quest appeared to be concerned with things more vital than protecting the good name of the Hunter family, and even if it meant losing that two hundred and fifty pounds, making nothing at all out of it, Gees would do it in his own way. Not yet six o'clock. He moved out from under the chestnut tree and went slowly along the road toward the church, though with no particular destination in mind. There appeared nothing more to do until H. Jones turned up with the Daimler at a quarter to two to-morrow—Friday, it would be. Gees passed a row of cottages with pleasant little gardens before them, and was aware of faces at windows—the stranger in the village was bound to arouse a certain amount of curiosity, he knew. He eyed the village shop and post office, plate-glass-fronted on both sides of the doorway and showing groceries one side and all things from drapery to ironmongery on the other. J. Jones presided here, evidently. Another row of cottages, neat and well-kept as the first both as to buildings and

gardens, and then he came to a small house standing alone behind a neatly trimmed privet hedge, with a solignumed matchboard and felt-roofed shed at its end. Through the window of the shed Gees discerned Phil Bird, in shirt sleeves and evidently busy over something, and, opening the gate in the hedge, he went along the path and looked in through the open doorway of the shed. Phil Bird put down a chisel and strip of whitewood on his small carpenter's bench, and turned.

"Evenin', sir. Come in, if you like. I was just amusin' myself, makin' a chest o' drawers for a niece o' mine to save her buyin' one. All the stuff you can buy at a reasonable price nowadays is that rotten plywood blown together by mass production, an' I thought she might as well have somethin' real. But I was just about to knock off."

The chest itself stood back from the far corner of the bench, as good a piece of work as any professional cabinet-maker could have turned out. Gees took up the piece of wood Bird had put down.

"Dovetailed corners for the drawers, eh?" he observed. "Takes time to make the joints, doesn't it?"

"When you've got the time an' love your work, sir, it don't take too long," Phil answered. "An' I've nothin' else to do, just now."

"Neither have I," Gees observed thoughtfully.

"An' how'd you get on with our parson, sir?" Phil ventured.

"Oh, very well indeed. You saw me with him, I suppose?"

"I guess the whole village's got it that the gent stayin' at the ›Hunters' Arms‹ took a look at the church an' then went along to tea with the rector," Phil said, and smiled. "When there's little to talk about, as there generally is in a place like this, people do all the talkin' they can about what there is. You can lay to that, every time."

"I should have said they had plenty of subject for talk," Gees objected. "Since—well, since last November, say."

"There you're wrong, sir, if you don't mind my sayin' so. Women among theirselves, maybe, an' men too, but not in a general way. The children might overhear, an' the fearful sort might get worked up—an' on top o' that there's them who cold-water the whole thing, sneer at it and at anyone who thinks as—well, as I do, say. No, you're not likely to hear any talk about that in Denlum."

"I see. Well, the gent from the ›Hunters' Arms‹ did go to tea with the rector, and just saw a very charming girl—and that's all."

"That'll be—you mean the new Mrs. Perivale, sir," Phil suggested.

"I mean the eldest Miss Perivale," Gees dissented. "You'd hardly call her stepmother a girl, I think."

"Ah, Miss Celia: Mother to all the rest, she is, since her own mother died four years back, though Miss Celia was no more'n a child herself, then. No, I s'pose you couldn't call this Mrs. Perivale a girl."

"No," Gees agreed, and left it at that.

"Surprised us all, he did, last September," Phil Bird pursued reflectively. "I dunno—it's not for me to say, but—she's not liked."

"A stepmother's position is always difficult," Gees remarked.

"There's that—yes," Phil conceded. "An' they say she's got her own money, but when you see the way them children go about, an' then see her—I've seen worse dressed women drivin' with millionaires along the Avenida in Rio, an' my niece wears better clothes'n Miss Celia's. You'd think she—well, I dunno. But they're bound to notice."

"But she helps him in the village," Gees pointed out. "Visiting, and that sort of thing. There's bound to be prejudice against a stranger, and a very attractive stranger at that, taking his first wife's place. She's got to live that down. As for the children, probably she finds it very difficult to interfere, in any way."

"Visitin'?" Phil echoed scornfully. "All I ever heard o' that was when she went to visit old Martha Evans, an' Martha told her straight out to put some o' her money on to the children's backs as well as her own, an' then borrow a hoe an' scrape that red paint off her lips. I never heard of her tryin' any more visitin', after that. Goes off for long walks on her own, noobery knows where, an' maybe persuades him she's visitin' somewhere. Been right away on her own for a week at a time twice—twice, since he brought her here all unexpected only last September! Is that a proper village parson's wife, sir? No use goin' by what he thinks of her. The Reverend Perivale is a just man an' a good man, an' you'd go a long way to find a better country parson, or one better liked an' respected in his parish. But over her—well, she's got him, an' the Lord above only knows why she did it."

"Well, heaven save me—and her too—from village gossip," Gees said, "though it looks as if there were no saving, in her case."

"A long-tongued, slanderous nuisance in the parish, Squire Hunter told me I was," Phil Bird observed, and grinned over it. "He may be right, but Mr. Perivale don't think so, nor do a good many others. I ain't afraid to say what I think, because I owe no man anything except respect where it's due an' such help as I might ask myself in need. As far as that woman is concerned, I say she's no fit wife for him, nor is she tryin' to make herself fit, or tone down to what Denlum would accept. It ain't altogether barbarous, sir. You may blame the films over some things,

but they've taught people like there are here to see between class and class—and by that I don't mean higher and lower in the social scale, but the rank selfish and them worth respect."

"Squire Hunter doesn't like you, then," Gees remarked.

"About the same as the devil likes codfish on a Friday," Phil said, and grinned again. "Maybe I know too much, an' he thinks I might tell some of it, though he's wrong there. But I do know if this place was not my own, I wouldn't be livin' in Denlum, because nearly all the rest of it is his, an' he'd take good care that what ain't was kept out of my reach if I wanted it. No, I couldn't call him really friendly."

He looked up at a large watch hanging on a nail over the bench.

"I dunno—could I offer you a cup o' tea in my little place, sir?" he inquired rather diffidently. "I'm thinkin' o' one for myself."

"Not now, thank you," Gees answered. "You'll be in the inn bar this evening, I expect?"

"Eightish, or a bit later, sir, for a bit."

"Well, I'm pretty sure to look in. See you then, I hope."

He returned, as thoughtfully as he had come from the inn. Later, in the dining-room, he removed the cover from the dish Nicholas had placed before him, and disclosed ham and eggs.

"It's simply got to be kippers or sausages for breakfast," he told himself, "or I shall sprout feathers and grunt."

Chapter 8

Expulsion

The worthies of the ›Hunters' Arms‹ bar, Gees found, while not prepared to accept him as one of themselves or even open converse with him, talked at him this second evening. They showed off, in fact, like children in front of a stranger, and Tom Myers brought out an anecdote when his crony, Jacob Hood, gave him the opportunity by complaining about a pair of boots he had bought from a “chap wi’ a van.”

“Aye,” said Tom, “I don’t howd wi’ dealin’ wi’ them chaps, nohow. These here boots let water then, Jacob?”

“Noo, not yit, but they du most mortal draw my feet, so’s I can’t hardly walk in ’em,” Jacob explained. “I reckon ’t ain’t good leather to du that. I had to wore the owd uns agin, mostly.”

“F’r everlastin’ moanin’ about suthin’ or other, yu are, Jacob,” observed a third worthy whom Gees had not seen the preceding night.

“Mind me, that du,” said Tom Myers, “o’ owd Noah Lewis, him ’at useter farm Butterkins, that little farm now took in along o’ Cosham’s.”

“What about him?” the third man enquired.

“He’d moan where I’d ’a kep’ quiet about it,” Tom said, with a side glance to assure himself that Gees by the bar was listening—as he was. “One year Noah was terr’ble troubled wi’ turnip fly, an’ he read it advertised in the paper ’at all anyone got to do was to send a shillin’ to some chap i’ Manchester, wi’ a stamped envelope, an’ he’d git instructed how to kill turnip fly. So Noah got a shillin’ postal order an’ put a stamp on a envelope, an’ sent ’em, an’ all he got back was a letter writ on one o’ these here machines. Galled him dear sir, it did, an’ it said all he’d got to do was to catch the turnip fly an’ put it on a flat stone, an’ hit it wi’ another one—an’ that’d kill it.”

"Well?" Jacob Hood inquired, and at the grave concern of the query Gees almost spluttered into his tankard. "What'd he du?"

"Went an' moaned all over the place about it, 'stead o' keepin' quiet an' not lettin' folks know how he'd been had, like I'd done," said Tom. "Same along o' them boots—yu ain't goin' to see that chap wi' the van again no more, so it ain't no use moanin' about 'em."

"But Noah coulda got his money back, if he'd gone to law about it," Jacob persisted, "I'd 'a gone to law, if it'd been me."

"Then yu better go to law about them boots," Tom advised calmly.

"Stand ter reason I can't find that chap wi' the van!" Jacob expostulated with heat. "Else, yu may lay to it I would."

"Needier could Noah 'a found the turnip fly man, if he'd 'a looked, I reckon," Tom pointed out. "That chap knew what he was doin'."

"Ketch the fly, put it on a flat stone, an' hit it with another one," Jacob repeated thoughtfully. "I'd say that chap was a born fule, if yu ast me—why, Noah'd been forever a ketchin' o' turnip flies!"

"An' the chap caught the shillin's," Tom remarked, "which go to show what a born fule he were. There's others. I'm havin' one more half pint, an' then goin' hoam to bed." He reached up and put his mug on the bar, and searched for and found three pennies to put beside it.

Gees went out, shaking with silent laughter and keeping his face averted from the settle on which the worthies sat. He stood under the chestnut tree, revelling in the faint scents that freighted the air of the still, moonless night, hawthorn and sweetbrier, the tree itself, and momentarily, a drifting layer in the mass, the unmistakable reek of grazing kine somewhere near. He could hear the faint, swishing crunch as one of them tongue-lapped mouthfuls of grass.

Then light, quick footfalls, passing in the shadow on the far side of the road, and with them the faintest of rustles, as of silken skirts. Someone hurrying away from the village—the sound went pattering almost at the rate of a run. Someone who had been to post a letter, Gees surmised, and now hastened back home, since women in Denlandham feared the darkness and all that it might hold, after last November's event.

Then he caught another layer of the night's scents, and knew it for no natural product of country growth. Faint and delicate, yet oversweet, it came to him for a few seconds and passed as had those hurrying footfalls, fading out, gone entirely.

"Rimmel, Houbigant, or Lapeyrac?" he asked himself.

Then more footsteps, slower, heavier, in the middle of the road this time. Phil Bird came in under the chestnut tree, and stopped.

"I thought it was you, sir," he said. "Wonderful still night."

"Quite," Gees assented. He saw Bird's gaze at him, and knew that more than half his face was lighted by the ray from the bar window, but did not turn to conceal it. Phil Bird went on gazing at him.

"It look like—have you been seein' anything, sir?" he asked.

"No," Gees answered. "Only my ears and nose were busy."

"Ah!" said Phil. "Went past my gate just as I was openin' it. I don't think there's another woman in Denlum'd be out alone after dark."

Gees did not answer. Did Perivale know his wife was out alone?

"We'll be seein' you inside presently, sir?" Phil inquired.

"Not to-night, I think," Gees answered. "I've just come out, in fact, for a breath of air before turning in to make a very early night of it. There was a turnip fly story—do you know it?"

"That'll be Tom Myers," Phil decided accurately. "Never a stranger's come into the bar any time these twenty year but what he's told that tale, an' many's the pint he's had for tellin' it."

"He was unlucky to-night, then," Gees observed.

"Aye, but they're a pack o' swingers, all of 'em," Phil asserted.

"So would I be, on their pay, I expect," Gees said. "Look here—two half-crowns. Tom Myers and all the rest of them—you too, as far as it goes. But I won't come in there again to-night."

"Lord save us!" Phil ejaculated as he took the coins. "I'll tell 'em it's you doin' it, sir. They'll all sing anthems—five bob to go on a Thursday night. And—and thank you very much, sir."

"That's all right, Bird. Good night."

"Good night, sir, an' thank you again for us all."

The next day's dawn came slowly, with chill, intermittent showers driving across from the border hills on a fitful wind, and with them a grey reek that thickened ever and again to actual fog, only to thin to mere gloom through which the rain came down. Gees found a welcome fire lighted in the inn dining-room when he reached it, and Nicholas Churchill, bustling in soon after, put down a dish and removed its cover to expose two grilled bloaters, either of which would have been enough to extinguish any normal man's appetite.

"Thowt tha might like to start wi' fish for a change, sir," he piped.

"I'll bring th'eggs an' bacon along presently."

"For heaven's sake, don't!" Gees exclaimed. "If I get outside half this I shall be hungrier than I think myself."

"Maybe it's th' air don't suit thee, sir," Nicholas observed with some concern. "I hope th'art not goin' off thy feed." He took an unstamped enveloped from his pocket and put it down on the table beside Gees plate. "This just coom, for thee," he added.

"Ah, thank you." Gees waited till the landlord had left the room and then took out the single sheet of paper from the envelope, to see that it was die-stamped "Denlandham House, Shropshire," and undated.

Dear Mr. Green, he read, in small, clear handwriting,

I have learned only to-night that you have been staying at the 'Hunters' Arms' since yesterday, and am rather surprised that you have, apparently, begun your investigations without first acquainting me of your presence. I have no objection to your visiting Knightsmere, but consider that you might first have acquainted me of your intention of doing so. I shall be glad if you can make it convenient to call at the House to see me to-morrow (Friday) at any time that may suit you, as I shall be in all day.

Faithfully yours,

Angus d'Arcy Hunter.

"Learned to-night, eh?" Gees observed to himself, and laid the letter beside his plate for re-perusal while he moved and began on one of the bloaters. "Possibly a little more illuminating than you meant it to be, Squire Hunter. A certain amount—a glimmer, say—of light begins to appear—or does it? Is it a cure for turnip-fly, perchance?"

Absorbed in consideration of the letter, even of what the type of handwriting might convey, he found eventually that he had disposed of both the bloaters, and sat back aghast at himself.

"Nicholas, you're right," he apostrophised. "The air doesn't suit me. But, by gosh, they were good, both of 'em!"

A desk in the corner of the room provided paper and envelopes, and he wrote a reply to Hunter's letter.

Dear Mr. Hunter,

I have not called on you because, so far, I have nothing to report, and do not feel inclined to waste either your time or mine by troubling you without cause. I believe I defined the method in which I would conduct this inquiry, quite plainly, when you called at my office in London. Since you appear to wish to see me, I will try to be at Denlandham House late this afternoon, say between five and

six, but fear I cannot spare time before that hour. Also, by that time, I may have something tangible to tell you, which I have not now.

*Yours truly,
G.G.G. Green.*

He stuck this in an envelope, addressed it to "Angus Hunter, Esq.," and rang the bell. Nicholas appeared, and looked at the fish bones.

"An' now tha'll have t'bacon an' eggs, sir?" he asked hopefully.

"To-morrow, but not to-day," Gees answered with friendly firmness. "But I'd be glad if you could find a boy to take this to Denlandham House some time-this morning. No hurry, as long as it gets there by noon." He offered the letter, and Nicholas took it and looked at it.

"T'squire, eh?" he observed. "T'butcher's man'll be along round about eleven, sir, an' he might deliver it. Will that do?"

"Admirably," Gees assured him, "if you're sure he comes to you before going on to Denlandham House—doesn't go there first."

"Noa," said Nicholas. "Greedy for his mornin' pint, that chap is. This'll be t'first call he'll make anywheer i' Denlum. 'Sides, I'm on his way. If he went to t' House first, he'd have to coom back heer."

"One fluid reason, and one sound one," Gees remarked. "All right, let the butcher's man have the honour, and tell him it's not merely important, but much worse. I'll be back about one."

"Roast pork, sir, wi' the cracklin' done to a turn—a bit o' loin, an' some new tatures Tom Myers tried growin' under glass—lovely, they are. An' the very laast cauliflower outer our own garden. Doan't be laate, sir," he ended with wistful pleading.

"One o'clock, if I ruin my health hurrying," Gees promised.

"Nay, doan't do that, sir," Nicholas urged. "Else tha wouldn't enjoy t' pork. I'll see to this," he added, indicating the letter. Gees went out, and turned out his car after putting up hood and side curtains. Driving easily, he passed Nightmare roadway and Cosham's farm, merely following the road with no object in view but that of movement as aid to thought—and to get away from any chance of contact with Hunter for the present. He had an idea that the man might seek him out if he remained at the inn or anywhere within reach, while, before any meeting could take place, he wanted to clarify his own ideas, and get more data for others. In his mind was a sentence of Phil Bird's—"Human wickedness is warmth and strength to it, food and drink."

Short of murder of the physical body, Gees asked himself, could there be worse wickedness than he was beginning to glimpse dimly—or imagine as existing? Something that at any time might turn to murder of faith and love, perhaps of all belief in humankind and of purpose in life. Something that he himself saw no means of averting—if it existed outside his own imagination! If it did, then no wonder that whatever made nightmare at Nightmare Farm had food and drink, warmth and strength to waken and go ravening, if one admitted Phil Bird's line of belief.

There was nothing certain, nothing tangible. Except—Gees knew now that he had been wrong about the girl May Norris, though he could not have said how he knew. The soul of her had not been driven out, but still inhabited the physical body that he had seen. Crushed down by something far stronger, something that had accreted strength from wickedness for ages, but still present, still living. Else, that other would have dominated its habitation completely, and those fits of rigidity and following exhaustion would have ceased, to leave her apparently normal in action, though changed in motivation. It was May Norris, not that which possessed her, which tore clothes to pieces, to keep it from contact with the outside world in which it sought desperately to appear as human. The spirit belonging to that frail body still had strength, might even conquer without aid, in the end, though the chance of such conquest was so small as to be set aside, negligible.

"Rhuddlan, 5," a signpost declared, and, mindful of roast pork and Tom Myers' tatures grown under glass, Gees turned about and found that, absorbed in his reflections, he had not only travelled faster and farther than he had intended, but also that he did not know his way back. A general sense of direction and careful observation of the slant of the rain, with knowledge that the wind had been south-west when he set out, brought him eventually to a signpost with an arm pointing the way to Ludlow. With that he was at ease again, and reached the ›Hunters' Arms‹ in time to see Nicholas stand on the doorstep and relax from anxiety as he recognised the car. Gees left it under the chestnut.

"In time, I hope?" he asked.

"Aye, but I was mortal feared—t' pork'll be dished up i' five minutes, sir, an' if tha'd missed it, t' missis'd niver let me hear t'last on't. I'm reet glad th'art back in time."

"Five minutes—time for a pint," Gees observed. "Have one with me, won't you, Churchill?"

"Th'art a reet good sort, an' I will," Nicholas conceded.

With the Daimler saloon turned about to face toward Denlandham, and H. Jones waiting behind the steering wheel, Gees faced a man both taller and broader than himself on the doorstep of Cosham's farmhouse. A man easily angered, he saw at once, resolute rather than obstinate, and hostile to him on sight. In the passage behind the man, the vinegary-faced woman hovered, and the gloom of the rainy afternoon was not so deep as that which clouded the face of the man who half-hid her from Gees' sight.

"Mr. Curtis, I hope," Gees said pleasantly.

"That is my name. What do you want?" Curtis demanded.

"I? Want?" Gees echoed, as if in surprise. "Why, nothing, Mr. Curtis. It's you who want—want your daughter restored to you as she was before her—her seizure, call it. At least, I hope you do."

"Yes?" Curtis half sneered. "And what do you reckon to make out of torturin' my poor girl, like the other doctors did till I stopped it?"

"In the first place, I am not a doctor," Gees told him calmly. "In the second, I ask to do nothing at all, myself—not so much as touch your daughter or even speak to her. You yourself shall do all that, if I can convince you that there is a way of restoring her—"

"I don't know if you're a quack or what you are or who you are," Norris interrupted, "though my wife pitched me a tale about you being a detective of sorts, which I don't for one moment believe now I see you. Everything that could be tried, I believe, has been tried on my daughter, only to make her worse instead of better, and I'm damned—"

"No!" Gees interposed there. "But she will be, if you refuse to save her. Your rector, Mr. Perivale, will be waiting in Denlandham church this afternoon for her, with you or her mother or both of you, and that is the one thing that has not been tried—that no doctor would think of trying in these days. Now think, before you speak!"

A look of utter amazement came on Norris's face. "Perivale?" he said, with all the certainty gone from his voice. "Why, he—"

"He, I believe, can do in five minutes what no doctor has been able to do in more months," Gees told him. "You asked what I get out of it, and I tell you—nothing, beyond the satisfaction of giving such help as I might ask myself at need—as a man in your own village put it to me yesterday. Your own parson, mind, and your daughter in your own care—not taken out of your sight for a moment. Think hard, Mr. Norris, before you refuse to save the girl, as I honestly believe you will if you do just this. That car at your gate is waiting."

"I—I don't know—" Norris said, altogether uncertainly, now.

"Maybe you'd better come in out of the wet, Mr.—Mr. Gees, I believe it is. It's all—why a stranger like you should come and talk like this is more'n I can—and you say Mr. Perivale knows about it, too?"

"If I hadn't got his consent and co-operation, I shouldn't be here," Gees told him as he stepped in off the threshold. Movement, and the opening and closing of a door along the passage, caused Gees to glance past Norris. The vinegary-faced woman had disappeared, he saw, and Mrs. Norris stood gazing toward him and her husband.

"You mean she's—?" Norris began, and broke off.

"—in need of something more than human doctoring," Gees completed for him. "I've been to Nightmare, sensed what's there, and seen her—yesterday. Now I've told you, and it's up to you."

"Fred"—Mrs. Norris grasped her husband's arm—"don't refuse! Oh, you mustn't! Another day, and I shall go mad too! Even if it's only a chance, you'd be wicked to refuse it. Don't—I beg you, Fred!"

"Get her dressed," Norris said abruptly—harshly, it sounded.

"No," Gees interposed. "Just as she is, after what Mrs. Norris told me yesterday about trying to dress her. Wrap a blanket round her to take her out to the car—anything, but don't distress her by trying that. In half an hour or less, I hope, you can be back here with her."

"All right, then," Norris said. "You go out to the car, and I'll fetch her out, since you say Mr. Perivale'll be waiting. You'd better come along too, Jean." He turned to his wife with the final sentence. She shook her head. "Not—not both of us," she answered, "and she always turned more to you than to me."

In that remark, as Gees turned to go out to the car, he sensed an inevitable jealousy on the mother's part. He seated himself beside H. Jones, leaving the back of the car to Norris and the girl.

"Two passengers, as far as the church gate," he said. "And wait there to take them back. I'll square with you—it's not their hire."

"Right you are, sir," and H. Jones restarted his engine. Then Norris, bareheaded and just as Gees had left him, came along the garden path and out to the car, carrying his daughter in his arms. He had wrapped her in a blanket, and there were embroidered indoor slippers on her otherwise bare feet. Her tangled hair was uncovered, her face hidden against her father's breast. Gees, out again, opened the rear door and closed it on them, and seated himself again beside the driver.

"As I told you—go," he said.

There came no sound from behind him, and in a very little time the Daimler drew up close by the churchyard gate, with a sudden flurry of

the dreary day's rain beating on its roof and the windows of one side. Out again, hatless and heedless of the rain, Gees opened the door, and Norris backed out with the blanket-wrapped girl in his arms. As he faced toward the church she lifted her head and saw where they were, and instantly, with unnatural strength, began struggling to escape from her father's hold. She made no sound, but tried to push herself free from him, and, strong man though he was, it took all his strength to prevent her from releasing herself.

"You've got to be cruel to be kind," Gees told him. "Straight in and up the aisle—he should be waiting. See that she faces him within touching distance—that's all you have to do. Go on, man—go on!"

His face white and contorted, Norris entered the churchyard. Once, as he went along the path, the girl almost got away from him—Gees picked up the blanket of which she had managed to rid herself and, following closely, dropped it in the porch and darted ahead to swing wide the heavy oaken west door. Then again he let Norris precede him. Once they had passed the portal, her struggles ceased altogether. Norris halted to peer down at her face, for only a dim light came through the little, heavily-lead window panes on such a day as this, and all the chancel and choir, as well as the nave, were in deep gloom. Beyond, immediately before the altar, stood Perivale robed in a white surplice, a still, almost ghostly figure with his face quite in shadow, since all the light that revealed him fell downward from the east window behind him. And, when they neared him, Gees saw that he held in his right hand a little silver cross.

"On, straight on!" Gees whispered desperately as Norris would have stopped outside the scrolled iron railing. The man obeyed him, still carrying the girl, and went on until he was close to Perivale.

"Think you can stand on your feet, my dear?" he asked her, and the commonplace, practical sentence struck oddly on Gees' ears, there. As the girl did not answer, Norris gently lowered her until she stood, but kept hold on her arm.

"Let her stand quite alone," Perivale bade quietly.

Slowly, doubtfully, Norris withdrew his hand. The girl swayed, but kept her feet. Perivale held the silver cross aloft, and spoke—

"In nomine Patris, Filii, et Spiritus Sancti"—his hand struck downward with lightning swiftness, and with the cross he touched the girl on her breast—"Retro!"

No more, for with an inhuman shriek that volleyed and echoed about the church she flung up both arms—Norris caught and held her before

she could quite fall. But Gees did not see him support her: he saw Perivale's awestruck gaze go past him, and turned about to see what the rector saw. Something spun and twirled through the open gateway in the iron railing, went whirling, twisting, a misty, unreal shape, down the matted aisle, and when the echoes of May Norris's shriek had ceased the two men heard as well as saw it.

"Gluck—gluck—gluck—" it went, and—"Gluck—gluck—gluck!"

Spinning like a dervish of the whirling cult, travelling with ever-increasing speed as if it gained strength in receding from the altar, changing direction by the font, spinning toward the door—gone! And Gees heard Norris's voice, "If you've killed her with this"—fierce, denunciatory, grindingly determined—"I'll kill you, you, Gees!"

"Silence, man!" Perivale bade sternly. "And pray God on your knees to forgive you such an utterance on His holy ground. Take her away." For a moment he stretched out his hands over the girl.

"Daughter, go hence in peace. In the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Norris took her up in his arms again and carried her out without another word, and Gees followed as far as the aisle, but faced about as he heard Perivale speak. Then he saw that, here in the chill of the church, beads of perspiration were dripping from the rector's forehead.

"Simple, you called it," Perivale said shakily, like one released from a strain that had all but broken him. "But—did you see?"

Gees nodded—for the moment he could not speak. Then he reached out his hand, and Perivale grasped it momentarily.

"God bless you, padre," he said. "No more, now. I—I've simply got to get outside."

"God bless you too," Perivale said, and for a moment held up the little silver cross.

The Daimler had gone when Gees reached the churchyard gate. Odd, he thought half-dazedly—Norris had forgotten his blanket.

The rain—where did that thing go?—the rain—>Hunters' Arms<—the rain ...

He walked, rather unsteadily, toward the inn. It should be only a little way. Only a little way. That shriek, and—"Gluck—gluck—gluck!" Spinning faster, growing stronger, as it receded from holy ground. Shadowy, not of earth—the blanket—the rain He reached the inn, and got up to his bedroom unperceived. There, just as he was, he dropped down on the bed and lay, exhausted, spiritless. If Mrs. Churchill complained

about spoilt bedclothes, he would pay for them. Spoilt bedclothes—the blanket in the church porch.

Then he slept.

Chapter 9

Dismissed

At the sound of Nicholas Churchill's voice Gees sat up hastily on the bed. Something about a blanket—then he was fully awake.

"Chap wi' a big black car, sir," Nicholas told him. "By gum, t' bed's i' a mess, too! Yeahp, a big black car, an' he said he'd wait to see t' gent what druv t' car under t' chestnut—tha left it oot i' t' rain, sir. Waitin' outside he is, sir—what'll I tell him?"

"Leave him to me," Gees said. "I'll go down."

He went, and beckoned H. Jones to come into the porch, for it was raining more heavily than ever. The man got down from his driving seat and scuttled across to shelter.

"Thought I'd better settle up before goin' home, sir," he said.

"Naturally," Gees observed rather dryly. "How much do I owe you?"

"I make it I owe you ten bob, sir, overpaid in advance."

"Well, of all the—and you waked me after only half an hour's sleep to tell me that! Keep it, man—give it to the poor—buy an estate with it, and good luck to you. You got your passengers back safely?"

"Thank you very much, sir—I did that. Only the girl was crying and seemed all upset, though I thought the man might have made her think he was more sorry for her than he did. It wasn't—it wasn't that Miss Norris that I heard got took away a while ago, was it, by any chance?"

"No," Gees improvised gravely. "This girl was going to see about the banns for her marriage, and I rather think her uncle—that was the man with her—I have an idea he's persuading her into it against her will. So, you see, she would be a bit upset over it."

"I see. Yes, of course," H. Jones agreed equally gravely, and ruminated, apparently about a girl going wrapped in a blanket and with no more than indoor slippers on her feet on such an errand—to a church, too. He gazed hard at Gees, and in the end smiled. "And you, sir—you don't happen to be the President of the United States, do you?"

"I do not," Gees answered, very gravely indeed. "When I'm working, I sell beehives to Eskimos, but I'm on leave just at present. Now, Mr. Jones, a still tongue may not make a wise head, but it may save the man who keeps it one hell of a lot of trouble. You get me?"

"Perfectly, sir, and you can bet on me. I'm very much obliged indeed for your generosity over this little job, and if you do happen to want anything at all for that very nice car of yours there, you know where to find me. I'll get along there right now, and—not a word!"

He bolted back to the Daimler and drove off, and Gees, fully awake and himself again, now, went back to his room to change into the only other suit he had brought with him, after a satisfying wash and rub down. The ›Hunters' Arms,‹ as he already knew, did not run to a bathroom.

He looked out at the dreary, sodden landscape. It was nearly five o'clock, but surely Hunter would not expect him to turn out on such an evening as this—the visit could be deferred till to-morrow. Even if he did take the car, probably there would be nobody to open those gates at the entrance to the drive, and he would have to get out and get wet again doing it himself. In fact, any excuse to put off the visit: he did not want to go to Denlandham House, and that was that. But he went down and out to the car to drive it round to the stable for the night. Nobody had closed the doors after he had gone out in the morning, and now the hens, deceived by the unduly early gloom of approaching evening, had already perched upon rails and partition tops to make a long night of it. Sundry kuk-kuk-kuk's greeted his entry, but they ceased as he switched off the fog-lamp he had turned on for guidance through the double doorway. He left the birds alone; with hood and side-curtains up, they could not get at his upholstery, and they were settled for the night, evidently, and not likely to move on to his radiator top.

Back in the inn he met Nicholas.

"A nice drop o' tea, now, sir. T' missus just maade it."

"Sounds good to me," Gees admitted. "Thank you very much."

"An' she's baaked some pikelets. A plaate o' them, now, an' a few hot bootered scoans 'll stay thee till sooper time."

“One scone, and one ‘pikelet,’ whatever that is¹,” Gees amended severely, with a memory not only of the roast pork, but of two bloaters that had preceded it when he had meant to eat only one.

“Eh, but th’art not i’ health, surely,” Nicholas protested gravely. “Tha must keep thy strength oop, runnin’ about on foot an’ i’ that car.”

“Two pikelets, then,” Gees amended recklessly, “but only one scone.”

Nicholas shook his head with deep concern, but let it go at that, and Gees went to the dining-room and took out “*The Golden Bough*” as means of killing time. He made his first essay on pikelets, invoked a benison on the good soul who invented them, and had settled to the book again and got deep in the Isis cult when Nicholas appeared again.

“Mr. Norris’d like to see thee, sir,” he announced.

“Pikelets,” said Gees, “are grateful and comforting. Throw him in.”

By the light of the lamp he had already been compelled to light he saw Norris in the doorway of the dining-room, big, resolute, gloomy-looking. Gees stood up to face the man.

“Come in, won’t you, Mr. Norris?” he asked, friendly-wise. Norris advanced far enough into the room to close the door after Nicholas had gone out with the tea tray, and there stood, a grim figure.

“I told you I’d kill you if it killed her, you remember,” he said.

“I do remember your saying something of the sort,” Gees admitted.

“But”—he took another step forward—“I didn’t say what I’d do if you cured her.”

“Since I didn’t cure her, it doesn’t matter if you did say anything about it,” Gees told him. “I didn’t hear it if you did, but there was so much else going on, just then. How is she now?”

Norris disregarded the question. “I’ve taken a farm, over near the Lancashire boundary, to go in at Michaelmas. Nightmare was one of the best farms in the county. I treated it well, and it treated me well. In farming, as in most other things, you’ve got to give to get. Since my daughter was born, too, I’ve been careful, and though I started with very little, and lose by leaving Nightmare as I did, I’ve got about three thousand pounds. It won’t cost me that to go into this place I’m taking at Michaelmas, by a considerable sum.”

“Depends on the size of the new place, of course,” Gees observed.

¹ “Pikelets” kenne ich als angeblich typisch australische und neuseeländische Mini-Pfannkuchen mit einem Durchmesser von etwa 7,5 cm. Wie aus dem folgenden Dialog hervorgeht, scheinen auch die Namensvettern im ›Hunters Arms‹ nicht besonders groß zu sein.

"And I'm here to ask you, Mr. Gees," Norris pursued, as if he had carefully rehearsed all he meant to say—"how much can I give you in return for what you've done for me?"

"Ah, don't be a fool, man!" Gees exclaimed. "The help that was given your daughter to-day was past any money's buying—come and sit down and tell me all about it, and let's have a drink." He backed to the fireplace and pressed the bell-push. "What's yours?"

"Anything—whatever you're having," Norris said. "But you mean—"

"Forget it," Gees interrupted him. "Two pint tankards of bitter" this to Nicholas in the doorway.

"Now do sit down, Mr. Norris, and tell me how she is. I didn't even see you go away from the church."

"She's terribly exhausted, but her old self," Norris said as he seated himself. "I left her with her mother, and not a sign of—of what's been for the last seven months, nearly. To come straight to you, to see if there's any way of repaying you."

"There might be, yet," Gees admitted thoughtfully, taking in the strength evident in the other man's face and figure. "I don't know."

"Whatever it is, you've only to ask," Norris told him.

"I'm sure of that. But not in money—don't think of it. Yet—even that. I'm sending Perivale a cheque for fifty pounds to use on whatever he likes, and I hope he uses some of it on himself and his family. If you care to do something in that line—"

"I'll double it, gladly," Norris interposed.

"On your own—you needn't know I'm doing anything of the sort."

Nicholas, entering, put down two tankards, and retired. Gees handed one to his guest and took the other himself.

"Here's to temperance," he said. "No, though—to the little lady who begins her life again to-day, and may it be a happy one."

"Amen to that, and to you for saving her," Norris added.

Gees, put his tankard down, half-emptied. "But I did not save her!" he exclaimed emphatically. "Get that out of your head, man!"

"If it hadn't been for you, she wouldn't be herself again," Norris insisted. "But would you mind telling me—that car at the gate all ready—you didn't know you'd be able to persuade me, did you? I mean, it was no ordinary thing to ask me to do."

"I did not know," Gees admitted, "but I had an idea that if I didn't rush you into it there and then, before you could think it over and see what a preposterous suggestion it was from a material standpoint, I'd never

have got her there. Which was why I fixed Perivale beforehand, asked him to be all ready when the car stopped at the gate."

"One other thing, Mr. Gees," Norris said. "My wife, and May too, want to see you and—and thank you, though that sounds rather feeble, I know. But could you find time for it, while you're here?"

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind," Gees said slowly. "If you'll give my best wishes to Mrs. Norris, and—and your daughter, though she doesn't know me, and probably—"

"But she does!" Norris interrupted. "She's asked me to ask you. Big hands and big feet, she said—excuse me for repeating it. She's just as anxious as her mother to see you."

"Well, they are—noticeable, I suppose," Gees admitted. "Odd, though—I'd have said that as her real self she wasn't conscious of my existence, unless you told her about me—"

"She told us," Norris interrupted again.

"Very odd indeed," Gees remarked thoughtfully, "and in that case—what about Sunday afternoon? I could just look in on you, then."

"For tea—I'll tell them to expect you," Norris said.

"Very well, then, but for heaven's sake tell 'em to treat me like an ordinary stranger and not make a fuss, to save me from jumping through a window in desperation. And now I expect you'd like to get back to them. Glad to know you, Mr. Norris, and just as glad to know I was right about it. Guessing right always makes me think no end of myself—till I go and spoil the effect by guessing wrong next time."

"I'd call it inspiration, not guessing," Norris observed. He stood up. "And over—over anything of that sort—I never believed in the possibility of it, but for the future I'm keeping an open mind."

"Yes, do," Gees advised. "It's as valuable as—as a traction engine, though either of them may run you down."

After Norris had gone, he took up "*The Golden Bough*" again, but sat for a long time without opening it. Just when, in the terrible state in which he had seen her, had May Norris noticed his big hands and feet?

He settled to the book in the end, and ceased to be conscious of the rain pattering steadily on the window of the room. Nicholas came in, laid the table and finally appeared to put down a covered dish.

"Thy sooper, sir," he announced, and withdrew.

Gees moved to the table, and removed the cover.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Is there no originality in that woman's mind?"

It was ham and eggs, again!

Rather than spend the whole evening with no company but his thoughts, Gees went into the bar at near on nine o'clock, and found a larger assembly of worthies celebrating pay-night in their modest way at what was, for them, the only form of congenial club available. His entry brought an absolute cessation of the buzz of conversation, and he made his way to the bar and ordered a half-pint tankard in an awesome silence, except that Phil Bird, also up at the bar, returned his smile and nod with a cheerful—"Evenin', sir," that seemed to convey deep respect. Then Tom Myers piped up, bravely but nervously.

"Us as was here last night, sir, 'd like to thankye f'r helpin' out a Thu's-day night the way yu did. It wur good o' yu, sir."

"Aye, it wur," chorused Jacob Hood and some others, including a wizened-looking little man in the corner of the side bench.

"Forget it," Gees counselled them, "and have another on me, all round. Set 'em up, Mr. Churchill—whatever they like to call. I've had a good day, and feel just like that."

"Nay," objected the little man in the corner. "Reckon, bein' pay night, it's f'r us to ast yu what'll yu like, mister, specially since we heerd the beauty o' Denlum'll be seen about again, now."

"Thass right, Tod," Tom Myers assented. "Now, chaps, give it lung!"

He led off with—"For he's a jolly good fellow," and the rest joined in, even Nicholas Churchill squealing his contribution from behind the bar, while Gees wished himself anywhere but there. When the final three cheers had finished, Tom spoke up again, with high self-approval.

"Us said we would, an' us did," he announced. "Now, mister, whatever Nick's got that's best, yu have, an' us'll stand it."

Gees finished his half-pint, on which he had made inroads for occupation while the chorus was in progress, and put the tankard down.

"Right," he said. "One pint tankard of bitter. I don't think he's got anything better than that."

"Somethin' short in it," Jacob Hood urged persuasively. "Us'll pay."

"Not for the world," Gees dissented, and kept his gravity. "It's very good beer, and from the standpoint of health, now—" He took up the tankard. "Good health to you all," he added, and drank to them.

"An' yu too," was the general response.

"Mister," piped up the little man whose name had been revealed as Tod, "yu be mortal clever, bain't yu?"

"Very," Gees agreed gravely. "I'm glad you realise it."

"Aye. Then happen yu know a cure for warts?" He held up two hands specked as might be buns with currants—fruity buns at that.

"Of course I do," Gees assured him, when the laugh had died down.

"Drink four pints of water first thing in the morning, and another four pints before coming along here in the evening."

"Thankye, mister," Tod said after considering it, "but I reckon I'll keep the warts."

"Mind ye, Tod, they'll soon be past countin' if they keep on,"

Jacob Hood warned him gravely. "Might try th' cure. It's cheap."

"I don't like worter," Tod objected gloomily.

"Countin' 'em," Tom Myers observed after a silence that nobody appeared anxious to break. "Mind me, that du, o' Sam Cottrill an' his pig!"

"Why, what happened to the pig?" Gees inquired interestedly.

"Bacon, an' fry, an' things, years ago," Tom said gravely. "Sam, he uster work f'r Noah Lewis, him 'at got so done over killin' turnip-fly, an' Sam allus kep' a pig to help things out, farm wages not bein' more'n ten shillin' a week in them times—my father knew him, right well. An' he got a pig once 't he took a real likin' to, named it Ahab, outer Scriptur, 'cause he 'ouldn't take a name for a pig outer Scriptur like a prophet or a 'postel or anything o' that sort. Reckoned to fat it on what Noah Lewis give him i' the way o' skim milk an' a drop o' middlin's now an' then, an' scraps, through the winter, an' kill it about Easter. An' he looked at it one day an' counted it warn't fatten' as nice as he wanted, an' allowed it oughter have some green stuff. So he ast owd Noah for some swedes outer a clamp what 'ouldn't keep much longer, an' Noah said he could have what he wanted for his pig."

"Swedes ain't green stuff," Tod objected, interrupting.

"All right," Tom said, "yu know best," and subsided to silence.

"No, no, tell us the rest—please," Gees urged.

"Sam took a couple o' big swedes outer the clamp, an' cut 'em each inter fower quarters, an' laid 'em out while the pig was busy at the skim milk an' middlin's in the trough," Tom went on after a long, injured interval, "an' it happened he laid 'em out in a row. When Ahab, which was the pig's name, got done all there was in the trough, he come along an' set down in front o' them quarters o' swede, on his hunkers, an' Sam said he counted 'em afore he begun on 'em."

"Hoo-oo-oo!" A general chorus of derision.

"Counted 'em," Tom insisted doggedly. "Like that." He nodded emphatically, eight times. "Two big swedes, eight quarters. An' ev'ry day, for

about a fortni't, Sam fed him eight quarters o' swede, an' ev'ry day he set down on his hunkers an' counted 'em first, an' then et 'em. An' that pig, Ahab his name was, fattened up most wonnerful, Sam said."

"Swedes don't last till Easter," Tod observed gravely.

"Yu're right," Tom assured him. "Sam reckoned on gittin' fresh green stuff for the pig when they run out. An' what wi' him a takin' 'em, an' Noah Lewis a using 'em f'r his stock, they come to the end o' the clamp, an' it wur only littl' uns. So one day Sam took three little swedes hoam f'r his pig Ahab, an' bein' as they worn't big, he cut 'em into halves stedly quarters, an' put 'em down while Ahab was at the trough like he'd allus done. An' Ahab cleaned out the trough, an' come along an' set down a' front o' them halves o' swede like he'd done afore, the quarters o' big uns, nodded at 'em to make sure, like. Then he grunted hard, an' stedly startin' on 'em, he counted agin. One—tu—three—fower—five—six—an' no more! An' he looked up at Sam, an' the good fat was runnin' away down his cheeks in tears, because there worn't on'y six pieces, an' he'd been done outer tu."

"Well, if that bain't a master one!" Tod said reverently.

"An' Sam was in a tur'ble to-do," Tom pursued. "He run hisself outer breath all the way to Noah Lewis's swede clamp, an' got another little 'un, an' cut it i' half an' took the halves to the sty. An' there set Ahab, still cryin' i' front o' them six halves till Sam put the other tu down wi' 'em. Then he stopped crying an' et 'em all up like anything, an' arter that, as long as them swedes lasted, Sam didn't never give him no more'n no less'n eight pieces, an' he allus counted 'em afore he et 'em, an' got so fat he c'd hardly see to count, but the swedes was all done an' Sam took to givin' him green stuff long afore Easter. An' when Sam killed him, my mother spoke f'r some o' the fry, an' I 'member it wur rattlin' good an' my father said it come from Sam's pig Ahab. Which go to prove it's all true, an' his name wur Ahab."

"Don't prove nothin' about the pig knowin' how to count," Tod objected. "But it mind me," he went on with his gaze directed at Gees, before Tom could protest the pig's mathematical prowess, "o' Henery Purkis an' his donkey. Henery kep' the donkey in a medder next his garden, an' one day he stood a basket o' cabbages close up to the garden hedge, an' it's easy to see what happened to them cabbages, ain't it, mister?" He addressed the query directly to Gees.

"One guess is enough," Gees assented.

"Arter that," Tod pursued, "Henery was keerful about that basket, but one day he forgot an' left it close up agin' the hedge agin, an' this time

he'd got it full o' young spring carrots—toppin' full, it wur. An' the donkey put his head over the hedge an' seen that basket an' all them carrots, an'—well, yu c'n tell what he was thinkin', I reckon, mister?"

"I can," Gees agreed heartily and unsuspectingly.

"Aye, I thowt so," said Tod, hugging himself, "an' so c'd the rest o' his family."

He had got his own back for the wart cure, his expression said. Gees waited till the laughter had died down.

"On me," he said frankly. "Tod, I'll hope to catch somebody else with it, yet. Drinks all round, on me, Churchill, and don't forget yourself, if you don't mind drinking with my family here."

Nicholas set up the round, and then turned in response to a call from the wicket at the back of the bar. He turned again and motioned Gees toward the entrance. He himself went out at the back of the bar, and met Gees in the passage.

"T' squire. Coom to see thee," he said.

"Ah!" Gees observed quietly. "Where did you put him?"

"T' dinin' room."

"Right. I'll attend to him, and don't forget—put that round on my bill." And he went on to the dining-room and entered. Hunter, standing on the hearth-rug, his shirt front and dinner jacket showing from under an unbuttoned waterproof, gave him a cold, silent stare. He was an angry man, evidently.

"A late call," Gees remarked coolly. "I'd say—Mahomet, behold the mountain, if I were not afraid of being disrespectful, but the rain, and I'd been wet through once—"

"You may save your excuses, Mr. Green," Hunter interrupted coldly. "I called to see you this afternoon, but you were out—in the rain."

"Yes, I said I got wet through," Gees reminded him, still quite calmly. "Had you—er—any further information that might be useful?"

"My object in making that call is of no consequence now," Hunter answered, and thrust his hand in his pocket to take out a small, folded paper. "Since then, I have heard that you have restored the girl Norris to sanity—been instrumental in restoring her, I should say, and so"—he put the paper down on the table—"I bring you this."

Gees took it up and, unfolding it, saw a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds, made payable to himself and not crossed. He stared from the cheque to Hunter, in utter surprise.

"But—but I've hardly begun!" he protested.

"On the other hand," Hunter said, with almost a sneer on his face, "you have finished. That girl's state was all I wanted put right."

A lie, Gees knew—or else Hunter had lied more than had been apparent, in London. Then again, as over a phrase in the letter Hunter had sent him that day, Gees saw daylight.

"That—the girl—was no more than an effect," he said. "I have yet to locate and deal with the cause."

"You have not," Hunter contradicted with quiet firmness. "In curing her, you have fulfilled your mission here. So I pay you, and dismiss you, and"—he added it as an afterthought—"thank you for your aid."

"Very good of you, but I'm not satisfied to leave the case like this," Gees objected. "It's not finished—the cause of the trouble still exists. And then"—as a thought struck him—"how do you know the girl is really cured? Your intelligence service must be good, if you are able to say that already—which is more than I can."

"I had it from the best possible source, the rectory," Hunter said.

"The rectory, eh?" Gees echoed musingly, after a long pause.

"Why not? Perivale knew I was distressed about the girl's state, and as head of my family felt a responsibility over her, although"—his face darkened momentarily—"her swine of a father dared to insult and go so far as to spit at me. Perivale would let me know, first."

"He told you himself that she is quite cured?" Gees asked.

"No," Hunter answered, after a pause in which, Gees felt sure, he decided not to risk the lie. "Instructed that I should be told, by telephone from the rectory to the House."

"Yes? And by whom?" Gees asked, still apparently musing.

"I fail to see why you should catechise me over it," Hunter retorted sharply. "By your tone, one might think that you are the employer and I the employed. It was either Celia Perivale or her stepmother, though I don't know which. Is that enough for you?"

For a few moments Gees stood silent, reflecting. He had heard both those voices, and knew them to be so dissimilar in pitch and intonation that it was impossible to mistake one for the other.

"Either Mrs. or Miss Perivale," he remarked at last. "Yes."

"Do you dare doubt the truth of what I am saying?" Hunter demanded, openly angry, now. "The telephone distorts voices. I heard that the message was from the rectory, and was instigated by Perivale himself, who was too exhausted or something to speak to me but knew I should be glad to hear of the girl's recovery. The message told of that—why this senseless curiosity about the messenger?"

"Of course—it is," Gees assented placidly—but he knew it was not.

"Aside from that," Hunter said, "I wish no further investigation whatever made. As I said, I pay you, and dismiss you, here and now."

"Curtly, and most unsatisfactorily," Gees protested.

"As for the curtness, the amount of love lost between your family and mine ought to help you to account for it," Hunter told him with a certain vindictiveness in his tone. "For the rest, I am satisfied, with the cure of the girl Norris. You have your pay as agreed, and the absence of that is your only possible cause of dissatisfaction. As a workman, you have been quick and efficient. As an idle personality, I should prefer your absence from this village. Good night, Mr. Green."

"One moment," Gees arrested him. "I'm not going to gratify your obvious wish by tearing up this cheque and flinging the pieces in your face, Mr. Hunter. I'm going to cash it, first thing to-morrow morning, since it's payable at Ludlow and not crossed. And—I—am—going—to finish—this case!" he ended slowly and emphatically.

"The case is finished—closed," Hunter said coldly. "Don't try to scare me with melodramatics, because it can't be done. Get back to London, to your mumps or murders, whichever you prefer. You are no longer wanted here."

"I'm damned if I will!" Gees exclaimed heatedly.

But that was after Hunter had gone, and he addressed the closed door of the room with the apostrophe.

Chapter 10

Not Illegal

Gees pointed at the plate before him, next morning. It contained three kidneys—that is, six halves, each on a little round of toast—and was garnished by four large sausages, pushed perilously out by the kidney toasts to the edge of the plate. Nicholas Churchill looked down at the pointing finger, anxiously.

“It’s a change from the eggs and bacon breakfast, certainly,” Gees told him, “but surely you don’t think any one man could wrap himself round more than half that and even stagger away from the table?”

“A man must eat, sir,” Nicholas replied gravely, and apparently without complete comprehension. “T’ missus got a nice cowl ham—happen tha’d like a slice to follow them pickin’s.”

“Happen I would not,” Gees said hastily. “Don’t think of it!”

“I got to take care o’ thee, sir,” Nicholas told him. “T’ whole parish got it that curin’ Miss Norris wur thy doin’, an’ th’art a gradely chap, aside o’ that. What’ll tha like f’r thy dinner, now?”

“For the love of Mike don’t talk to me about dinner with these pickings in front of me!” Gees expostulated. “Anything you like—or Mrs. Churchill likes, and I know it’ll be good. Oh, any letters for me?”

“Noan, sir. Else, I’d a browt ’em.”

He retired, and left Gees to the pickings, as he called them. Also to ruminate over the speed with which news spreads in a village. Evidently the maid at the rectory, or somebody at Cosham’s—sour-faced Mrs. Cosham, perhaps—could give a chameleon points and a beating over length of tongue. Norris’s visit to the inn the preceding night had doubtless been observed and reported; Norris himself, though, was not the sort to let fall so much as one word, Gees felt sure.

Miss Brandon's report, he told himself hopefully, would come in later in the day. With only one day in which to collect the information he wanted, she had worked at the actual collecting as long as possible, and had been late in getting her screed typed and sent off. Meanwhile, a nice little drive in the soft sunshine of late spring that had replaced yesterday's weeping clouds and oppressive gloom. He turned the car out from the stable—the hens had not gone near it, as far as he could see, though Nicholas Churchill found an egg under where it had been standing, later—and headed for Ludlow. Arrived there, he found the bank branch on which the cheque was drawn, endorsed it, and presented it. The cashier scrutinised it and the presenter in a doubtful way which made Gees realise that he could not look as honest as he thought he did, and eventually the man went off to consult with the manager. That gentleman accepted Gees' driving licence as proof of identity after being offered a free trunk call to London with a view to proving it, and the money was paid over. Possibly Hunter rang the bank later with a view to stopping payment: over that, Gees never learned anything. He had got the money, and was as determined as ever to earn it to the full. He tucked the pleasantly-rustling notes away and drove back to Denlandham.

There, at the inn, he wrote his cheque for fifty pounds, payable to Arthur Perivale, and with it a little note in which he asked Perivale to accept it and devote it to whatever cause he thought worthy, "and you know where charity begins. Mere money is no reward for the service you rendered, and there is no possible reward among corruptible things. That you, like many of your cloth, have heavy personal responsibilities is easy to see. Let me feel that I have the honour, in this very slight way, of helping to lighten them." So he ended his note, and pocketed it just in time to receive from Nicholas a registered express package which had been "browt by a young chap wi' a moty-bike." Alone again, Gees opened it with keen anticipation, and read the writer's covering communication before turning to the report itself.

Dear Mr. Green,

I had no idea one had to waste such an awful amount of time over an inquiry of this sort. I know I have had the whole time since you rang me till now to devote to it, but seem to myself to have nothing at all to report. However, all my activities, or rather their results, are detailed in the enclosed statement and I will report again at the end of Monday's work. Will keep at it over the week-end

too, as closely as possible. All good wishes,

Sincerely yours,

Eve Madeleine Brandon.

P.S. I am abstracting my week's salary, without overtime, from the petty cash.

"Don't blame you, Eve Madeleine," Gees observed, "but now what have we? A cure for turnip-fly, or a pig with a mathematical mind?"

He opened out the sheets of single-spaced typing which comprised her report, and began reading—

ISABELLA CURTIS, alias ISABELLA CARTER.

Correct Address: 224A, Upper Gloucester Place, N.1.

The above address no longer holds good, nor has it done so since September of last year. I will take the TIMES police reports first, in regard to the raid on the Peppered Pig night-club. The woman's name was taken, with those of thirty-one other frequenters of the club, as Isabella Carter, of 108, Carvalho Road, Bayswater. There is no such road in Bayswater. In giving evidence at the trial, Inspector Horace Tott stated that the woman's real name and address were discovered through the painstaking keenness of P.C. G. Green, who took part in the raid and on whose acumen and general ability as a police officer, as displayed in this case, the presiding magistrate commented very favourably.

"Which, of course, put Tott's back up," Gees observed to himself. "Now take your tongue out of your cheek, my jewel, and tell me something I'm really honing to know. Fine and costs—yes. Get to the meat."

224, Upper Gloucester Place, is a divided house, the separate tenancies being lettered upward as A, B, C, and D. The basement, a fifth tenancy by a sort of caretaker charwoman, is not lettered. A, the ground floor—two rooms, and probably combined kitchen and bath, I estimated it—is occupied by "Madame Stephanie, Clairvoyante." I rang the bell, which was answered by Madame herself. In the late fifties or early sixties, very untidy as to clothes and hair and not too clean, and speaks broken

English interlarded with French phrases—uses “ze” and “zis” for “the” and “this,” more often than not, though not always. She showed me into the front room, and I noticed old-fashioned communicating doors, closed then, between it and the back room. It was very shabbily furnished, and the cretonne on the two armchairs and settee was disgracefully dirty, while I think the carpet had not been swept for a week. Madame asked which client of hers had recommended me, and I told her a Mrs. Smith—Mrs. Amelia Smith—on the spur of the moment. She said she knew ze lady, but where was her card or ze written recommendation. Which finished me, for I had nothing of the kind, of course. Then she said that she only accepted ze new clients on ze written recommendation of ze client she already knew. She could see I was “gentille,” but she must make ze rule, to be safe. Would I come again wiz ze written recommendation?

And thus she turned me out, but not before I had sighted a cabinet photograph, in one of those bevelled-edge plain glass frames, of a dark and very beautiful girl probably about my own age, signed in the lower left hand corner in purple ink that had faded a good deal—“Love, Darling,” in one diagonal line, and under it—“Belle.” Nothing else in the room that appeared to me worth noting for report.

“Oh, darling Eve Madeleine!” Gees murmured softly, “I’d kiss you, only I know you’d give notice on the spot, and the perfect secretary doesn’t grow on every potato tree.”

He read on—

A sight of the basement tenant, and I went home to change my clothes. Returned to interview her, suitably made-up. ‘Ad ‘eard there was a job as ‘ousemaid at number 224, interviewed ladies on every blinkin’ floor, an’ couldn’t ‘ear nuthin’ about it. Did she think it was spoof, an’ blimey, I ‘adn’t ‘arf got a thirst, I ‘adn’t.

My outfit must have been convincing, for she fell for it like a lamb. There wasn’t no ‘ousemaid wanted in that ‘ouse, she knew, and as for the thirst, she hadn’t got a drop in the place. I owned to my last month’s wages, and a nice little present from the gentleman for bein’

nice to him—though she was a 'oly terror, an' that was reely why I 'ad to leave—and, it being then about opening time, we migrated for further confidences—on my part, at first—to the private bar of the Rose and Crown, I think it was called, on the corner. Not a corner, but the—they are always on or round the corner, I have observed. And the scandalous character, or lack of one, I gave your secretary in her role of discharged housemaid before I left that old harridan will not bear thinking about. Quite impenitent, too, and hoping for a nice gentleman and an unobservant lady in my next place.

And number 224 seemed an odd sort of 'ouse, I thought.

The harridan's tipple was gin and peppermint, which is filthy!

No other word for it, in my opinion. I reverted to Guinness, and she observed that they all went for that, at my age, with no regard at all for their figgers. "Make yer fat, it do, ducky." As for the 'ouse, it was just like any other, bricks an' mortar. The people was like others, some good, some bad, an' some stopped, an' some didn't, either owin' rent or not, accordin' to luck. Now there was a gent which 'ad the first floor, B. it was, when she first come there. Eighteen year, it must be since he left. No, it wasn't, it was only seventeen. Wait a bit, though...

She was wearily discursive, and I had to listen to the story of the gent, who was no gentleman. I got her down to the ground floor and to the queer-lookin' old lady which 'ad arnsered the door to me there, and it was about the time of the fifth gin and peppermint, or it may have been the sixth. No, it wasn't—it was the seventh. Am I being too discursive?

"Eve Madeleine," Gees answered the query, "you're being photographic and I can see it all. Oh, keep it up, girl—keep it up!"

Well, maybe the old lady did look a bit queer when you first took a dekko over her marketplace (phrase hers, and quite beyond me, though I hazard that marketplace is rhyming slang for face) but you soon got useter her, an'

she reely was clever the way she told fortunes. She had told the harridan there was unexpected money coming to her—"an' strike me pink, ducky, if Noah's Ark didn't come in first at thirty-three to one next day, an' me with a bob on it only because I see the name jest as I was buyin' my sister's youngest a Noah's ark in a toy shop. Lovely kid 'e is, too, an' clever. Well, clever ain't the word! 'E can add up, an' substract, an' fair turn you dizzy, an' 'im only five! But where was I? Yes. Thirty-three to one—whatcher think o' that, now, ducky!" (Bear up, Mr. Green, this is but a microscopic sample of what I had to endure.) And so back to the point, and another gin and peppermint. She had a wonderful capacity, and the stuff took no effect—yet! Except that "ducky" became "ducks," and I bore it bravely.

The old lady (to resume) had been there years, an' there useter be a young lady in A. too, but she'd gorn, now. How many years? Well, nine or ten, an' p'raps more'n that, even. Ten, though, because young Sid, her sister's fourth what died, was born after they come there, an' he'd been ten last birthday, if he'd lived. So it must be more'n ten. Wonderful child, he was, an' you could see he wasn't long for this world only to look at him. Why, he ...

Back to the point again, and I more careful in doling out the gins and peps, for she was becoming argumentative and difficult. Yes, the young lady. Real smart, she was, bit of a high-flyer. Useter get called for by real gentlemen an' took out evenin's, an' dressed lovely, she did. Up to the nines, whatever she had on, an' undies too, right down to (blackened out by censor). You see a lot, livin' in a basement. I giggled applause, and got her back to the point yet once more—and another gin and pep!

"Then how the devil did you manage to leave enough in the petty cash for your salary?" Gees inquired. "That's ten at the least, and I know you had to make a show of keeping level on Guinnesses."

Again he resumed reading—

The old lady didn't never say she was the young one's

mother, and her name was really Stephanie, because the harridan had got a look at her rent book once an' seen it—Madame Lucille Stephanie, it was. An' the young one was Curtis—Miss Belle Curtis. Most of the gentlemen called her Miss Curtis, an' one or two called her just Belle, only sometimes she choked 'em off for doin' of it. (My harridan was well away and keeping to the point splendidly, now.) An' there was one, not young, he wasn't, an' gettin' stout, but a rich man you could see as soon as you lamped his fizzog (nearly beyond me, but not quite) which always called her Belle. An' last summer—no, last autumn, it would be—they must of got married, because they'd come back there twice an' stayed some days each time, an' she never useter let him come an' stay there before that, only call to take her out. She'd left for good some time in August, my harridan believed, only to go to the seaside for a holiday, an' she never come back except them twice with him, an' it'd be once in November or December—before Christmas, it was, because (more abstruse calculations are indicated by that "because," and I will spare you them) an' the next time in February. My harridan knew about that eggsactly because they come on Valtin's Day (easily translatable) an' stayed six days. Six nights, that was, because they was mostly out all day, though it was weather fit to put mittens on a horse's ears. Yes, six nights, beginnin' Valtin's Day. Not the night before, but the night of Valtin's Day itself.

The old lady'd seemed rather upset when the young one didn't come back after sayin' she was only goin' to the seaside, so it looked like the young one was her daughter, though they was always rowin' an' squabblin' when they was both there. The names was different, you got to own—Curtis ain't nuthin' like Stephanie, is it, ducks? But maybe the old one got seduced by a earl or somebody when she was younger, an' you gotter excuse me, ducks, because I got to go an' be sick. Must be the 'eat. It was the thirteenth gin and pep, I feel sure. Thirteen is always unlucky. I fled, and came straight down to the office to write this from such few scrappy notes as I was able to take, not staying to change or

anything. I can smell my own breath, and there is no pleasure in doing it. I could hardly see myself in a mirror just now—the mirror in my office—for shuddering. And I have sipped Guinness till I feel like emulating the harridan's exit just before my flight from a bright lad who suggested "the pictures for a start, me little rosebud." If he hadn't gone away when I told him, I'd have breathed at him.

And that's all for my very first day as lady detective. I trust you may find something useful in it. Will report again on Monday next.

"Useful?" Gees said, and folded the report and put it away in his pocket almost reverentially. "You're the world's greatest treasure, Eve Madeleine, and heaven save me from ever falling in love with you! Because I want to go on dictating to you, not have you dictate to me."

He sought Nicholas Churchill, and found him polishing glasses in the bar in the absence of customers. Churchill took down a pint tankard.

"Put it back," Gees counselled. "It's too early, yet. All I want is to ask you a few questions about the place. That very charming lady I saw at the rectory must be Mr. Perivale's second wife, surely."

"Aye, she's that," Nicholas agreed—about the second marriage part of it, obviously, but possibly not about her charm.

"Is it long since he married her?"

"It'll be—last Friday in September they coom back, but he took a extry week holiday f'r t' honeymoon, parson did," Nicholas said.

"Married in the church here, of course?"

"Noa, tweren't an' all. 'T'were in Lunnon, an' I can tell thee exactly wheer, too, f'r t' church got t' same name as t' church wheer I wur born—christened, I mean. Saint Alphege, it is—odd name f'r a saint, which is why I remember it so well." He spelt the name out for Gees' benefit. "I read it i' our paaper, afore he coom back wi' her, an' it fair knocked me silly, him wi' all that family a'ready. An' his church's name was funnier'n what mine was, because it worn't only Saint Alphege, but Saint-Alphege-by-the-Wall, which don't maake sense, to me!"

"Easy," Gees said. "In the old days, the church stood against the city wall, or some wall enclosing a nobleman's estate or something of the sort. And Mr. Perivale took another holiday in November, after—"

"Heere, who been a tellin' thee that?" Nicholas interposed sharply. "T' rector niver left this parish arter his honeymoon."

"Sorry," Gees said. "My mistake. Of course he didn't go away again last year. It was February of this year he took a week, of course."

Nicholas gazed at him sorrowfully, and shook his head.

"I know what 'tis," he said. "Thee's starvin' thyself, lad. Three sausages an' two bits o' kidney I took away on thy plaate this mornin'. Thee ain't eeatin' proper—an' I tow'd thee about t' ham, but tha said noa, noan on it! An' if thee wean't eat, thee'll have delusions, like this. T' rector ain't gone outer this parish, 'cept maybe to Loodlow an' back i' the day, or to Shrewsbury an' back i' the day in Squire's moty-car, since he coom back hoam wi' his new wife."

"My mistake, then," Gees admitted. "I don't know how I got the impression that he'd taken the inside of a week away."

"Mr. Perivale think moor o' his parish 'n goin' gaddin'," Nicholas said severely, "an' if thee hears anyone say he'd go away like that, tell 'em it's a lie right out—an' have thy fists ready to back it."

Gees looked at his watch, and decided that he could just make Ludlow and back for the second time before lunch—dinner, Nicholas called it. If he left it till after lunch, there was no possibility of catching Eve Madeline at the office—slender chance of catching her now, in view of her present occupation, but she might be there.

"I'll remember, especially about the fists," he promised, "but just for the present I think I'll take the car and try and work up an appetite, to save me from having any more delusions."

"That's a reet good scheme," Nicholas admitted, "but doan' thee be laate, sir. Rooast beef and Yorkshire, an' t' missus a Yorkshire lass. They's t' only ones can maake it, an', lad, 'tis gradely!"

Thence to the ›Feathers Hotel‹ at Ludlow—knowing the road well, now, Gees was able to make good time—and through to London on the telephone after only a brief delay, to hear—he breathed a thanksgiving—Eve Madeline's voice. He had caught her in the office, bless her!

"Ah, Miss Brandon! Morning. How are things at your end?"

"Very quiet, Mr. Green," she answered. "But you've only just caught me. I'm glad you did, so I could ask you—did you get the report?"

"I'll say I did!" he told her with energy.

"And was it all right?"

"All right? My dear Miss Brandon, it's the best piece of work you have ever done for me—I'm delighted with it. And now I want you to switch over to another branch of the same enquiry. There is a church somewhere in London called Saint Alphege-by-the-Wall. Got that?"

She repeated the name back to him correctly.

"Find that church," he bade. "Ask leave to inspect its marriage register for last August and September. Somewhere in those two months you should come across the name Perivale—Arthur Perivale. Got it?"

Again she repeated back to him—"August and September of last year, Mr. Green—and Arthur Perivale will be the bridegroom, I take it."

"If he were the bride, I'm Greta Garbo," Gees told her. "Arthur Perivale. A full and accurate copy of the record of his marriage, Miss Brandon, and—yes. If you can get it at any time to-day, wire it to me in full. No comment or signature, just the record itself."

"I understand, Mr. Green, but I may not be able to get it to-day. Saturday, you know, and there may be difficulties."

"Then include it in your Monday's report, and send that report, even if the extract from the register of marriages is the only thing you have to put in it. Shelve everything else till you get it."

"It shall be done, I promise you," she said.

"And I'm registering you a fifty pound note to put into petty cash in case I'm not back in time to pay your next week's salary. Take out expenses for yourself on a liberal basis as well."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Green."

"That's all, Miss Brandon. Good-bye." He frowned fiercely as he went out to his car. Another letter to write, and no secretary to take it in dictation! But at the post office he saved the situation by getting a registered envelope, putting one of the fifty pound notes he had got in exchange for Hunter's cheque inside, addressing the envelope to Miss Brandon at his office, and posting it. She would understand—there was no need to write.

When he reached the inn, he found another letter headed from Denlandham House on the die-stamped notepaper. It was quite short.

G.G.G.

Green, Esq.

Dear Sir,

I understand you found my cheque in order at my bank. Will you be so good as to make time to call at the House some time this afternoon. An explanation is due to you, and I do not wish you to leave the village without hearing it.

Yours faithfully,

Angus d'Arcy Hunter.

Yes, Gees decided, he would go and hear the explanation. Was Hunter prepared to climb down from his high horse—or, now that the cheque was cashed and the proceeds irrecoverable, did he determine to get his money's worth? If so, the theory on which Gees was now acting went up in the air, a wrong guess to balance his recent right one.

"I'm not sure if 'e's in the house, sir. If you'll take a seat—"

The smart parlourmaid did not end the sentence, but went off to look for Hunter. She had only just missed that aspirate, but that and her accent were enough to declare her Cockney, not local produce. There were plenty of seats, though Gees remained standing. This entrance hall of Denlandham House was in truth a hall, occupying probably more than half the depth of the house and a good twenty-five feet from side wall to side wall. It was panelled in old oak for about ten feet from the floor, and lighted only by the glazed roof—it was the full height of the house, with a fine staircase at one side and galleries giving access to the rooms of the two upper floors. The furniture was all Jacobean or replicas of the period, and, set on the top of the panelling except on the staircase side, were paintings in oil, all portraits, the styles of dress of the sitters covering two centuries. Gees recognised this present Hunter as a young man, a handsome, debonair figure in riding kit. But for that corporation of his he would be a good-looking man still, Gees decided generously. He moved to his right—the staircase was on the left—to make closer inspection of the portrait in the centre of the row on that wall. A seafaring Hunter, this, by his attire, with a couple of pistols in his sash and a cutlass belted at his side. His features markedly resembled those of the other males pictured here, but it was his beard that attracted Gees' attention. Others were clean-shaven, merely moustached, or with average beards or whiskers for their periods, but this man had a black beard that hid his collar—black, except for a line of vivid white pendent from the left side of his chin. If it were a faithful reproduction, it must have made him an arresting being in his lifetime, and possibly was responsible for the decidedly sinister look of him, to some extent. The artist had not flattered him, and, though a fine-featured man, he did not look attractive.

"Are you waiting to see Mr. Hunter?"

Gees literally jumped as he faced from the picture to the speaker, a white-haired, almost ethereal-looking woman in a self-propelling invalid chair. Either its pneumatic tyres rendered it absolutely noiseless, or else he had been too absorbed in his scrutiny of the portrait to hear such slight sounds as it had made in approaching.

"I'm so sorry if I startled you," she added as he faced her.

"Not at all, madam," he answered, rather confusedly. "The—er—the maid has gone to look for him. I am in no hurry."

Her gaze appraised him, even approved him, he thought. He had never heard a sweeter voice, nor seen in a woman of her age—though her condition probably made her appear older than her years—a face of more delicate beauty. And her hands, finely-moulded, lay on the arms of her chair, models that any artist might covet.

"And so you admire Robert's beard," she said. "While you wait for his descendant, that is. I think he went to look at our electric lighting set. It's refusing to charge the battery for my wireless."

"I think, if it had been my beard, I'd have shaved," Gees remarked.

She laughed, as musically as she spoke.

"Oh, no!" she protested.

"See how distinguished it makes him! Think of him swaggering about the village—not with the pistols and sword then, of course—but proud of himself as the restorer of the family fortunes!"

Hunter entered from the back of the hall in time to hear her concluding sentence, and approached them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Green," he observed, and to Gees' surprise he might have been speaking to his greatest friend, by his tone. "I see you've already made my wife's acquaintance."

"And that of the great Robert," Mrs. Hunter said. "But I suppose you came to talk business, Mr. Green. I won't delay you."

She wheeled herself away, and Hunter made no move to open doors or assist her. Gees saw the front of the wheeled chair strike noiselessly on a door which gave easily at the impact and revealed a drawing-room, as Gees decided by what furnishing he could see. The door swung closed again behind the chair, slowly and without sound.

"I had several doors altered like that for her," Hunter observed. "But come along, Green—I'm glad you were able to get here."

Mystified at the utter change of front, Gees followed him, and found himself ushered into a small, comfortably-furnished room which was given quite a businesslike appearance by a desk and two shelves of files. Hunter indicated a leather-upholstered armchair.

"Now sit down while I apologise," he bade. "Would you like a whisky-and-soda or anything, while we talk?"

"No, thank you," Gees answered, and seated himself, still puzzled. Hunter followed suit. "I'm afraid I was in rather a bad temper when I came to

see you last night," he said. "I'm sincerely sorry for practically insulting you as I did, and hope you'll accept my apology."

"Why, certainly," Gees answered without hesitation. "Quite probably I was rather irritating too, as I know I can be at times."

"You were," Hunter agreed, and smiled disarmingly. "Well, let's forget it, since you're good enough to forgive it. Now—why I asked you to come and see me. About Nightmare."

"Yes?" Gees asked.

"The fount and centre of all this trouble, as by this time I expect you know as well as I do. The trouble itself is over, May Norris being cured, and the bailiff and his wife leave the place next week."

"I disagree with you about the trouble being over, as you know," Gees told him. "But—about Nightmare, you said. It is the centre."

"Yes. And far and away the best farm on the estate, but—it's got to go, as a farm. I shall not let it again. I shall not even try to put another bailiff in the house, but get it managed from outside till after harvest—there is very little to be done, till then, as it's clean land—Norris kept it well. Further to that, I shall sell off all there is in the rickyard, some valuable stacks of hay and a certain amount of good straw, and divide up the land among the surrounding farms—those adjoining Nightmare fields and pastures. My tenants will jump at the idea of getting hold of land like that."

"And what becomes of the house and buildings?" Gees asked.

"The buildings can remain," Hunter answered. "They can be included with part of the land when it is divided up. The house—I shall wait for the autumn rains, choose a day that will protect the buildings from catching—watch for the right wind, as well—and then set fire to the house. Burn it to the ground and clear away the remains."

"But—" Gees began to protest, and stopped.

"Why not? It's my own property, and I shall inform the insurance company in advance that I am doing it and will make no claim on them. It's not illegal—no more illegal than if I burnt one of my old suits."

"I suppose not," Gees admitted doubtfully. "Still—" He did not end the sentence, and Hunter resumed in the pause.

"So, you see, Green, the case is closed. Everything, from Robert's day onward, has emanated from that house—he built this place because of what was there, wouldn't rebuild there. Oh, and those hedges—they will have to come down too. And then, the case is closed, you see."

"But is it?" Gees asked doubtfully.

"I want you to be satisfied that it is. You were not satisfied last night, and I didn't attempt to put it all fairly to you, as I'm doing now. Stay on here if you like, but there's really no need, and I know your vital interests do not lie here. I want you to feel you have fully earned the sum I agreed to pay you, and that I'm more than grateful for what you have done—you and Perivale between you. That you can leave here with a far more friendly understanding between us than there usually is between our two families, and even if we never meet again you can feel that I shall remember you with real regard."

For a brief while Gees did not answer. The appeal—it was no less than that, sounded utterly sincere, but—Oh, clever, clever Angus Hunter! Clever Isabella Perivale! He remembered her, faint with fear at sight of him, clutching at the lintel of her husband's study door—and Hunter, having failed to force him to leave Denlandham, was now tempting him. The voice was Hunter's—but the motive that it revealed?

"Very good indeed of you, Mr. Hunter. Now if you'd only made things clear like this last night—but that was my fault, I know. I can be the most irritating devil on earth, and I felt like that last night. Now I can pack up with an easy conscience, thanks to you, and point my radiator cap at London to-morrow afternoon."

"I'm glad to hear that," Hunter said, and Gees knew he was really sincere in saying it. "Now stay and have tea with us, won't you? My wife sees very few people, and she'll be delighted if you do."

"Thank you very much, but I must go and see Perivale. It's my last chance, to-morrow being his busiest day."

"Yes, of course. Well"—he stood up—"sorry you have to refuse, Green, but of course I understand. Leaving to-morrow—yes. And we shall not see you in this part of the country again, I suppose?"

"Unless a case should pull me in this direction." In uttering the words, Gees felt himself as clever as Hunter had just been.

"Well, you have all England to choose from—all the world, I might say, so probably Denlandham will be no more than a memory to you after tomorrow. Not an unpleasant one, I hope. Good-bye, Mr. Green, and I wish you plenty of cases and as much success in them as you have had in finishing mine for me."

He conducted his visitor to the front door, and watched him drive away—back to the inn, for Gees decided to put the car away and then walk to the rectory to see Perivale, or, failing that, hand in the cheque with its covering letter. He stabled the car, and was about to set out again when Nicholas Churchill beckoned to him from the doorstep and, oddly

enough, disappeared inside it. He reappeared again as Gees reached the doorstep, a slip of paper in his hand which he held out.

“T’ rector’s weddin’,” he said. “I kep’ t’ cootin’, an’ I thowt happen tha’d like to see it.”

Silently Gees took the slip, and read its contents.

PERIVALE-CARTER. At St. Alphege-by-the-Wall,

Southwark, on the 21st inst., by the Rev. D.T. Freeman, the Rev. Arthur Penley Perivale, M.A., rector of Denlandham, Shropshire, to Isabella, only daughter of the late Commander N.R. and Mrs. Carter. Shropshire and Cumberland papers please copy.

“Isabella Carter!”

But, Gees reflected, marriage in a false name, like setting fire to one’s own property after informing the insurance company about it, was not illegal.

Chapter 11

Celia, One Other, and May

The rather untidy, but evidently good-natured and probably over-worked maid, whom Gees had heard the rector mention as Bessie, admitted that Mr. Perivale was in, but she didn't know whether he could see anybody. If he'd wait, she'd see, and with that she departed, leaving him on the doorstep but not, he reflected, closing the door on him.

At the foot of the stairs, though, she met Celia Perivale, emerging from somewhere at the back with a Thermos flask in her hand. They stopped for inaudible exchanges, and then Bessie went to the back of the house instead of up the staircase, and Celia advanced to face Gees.

"Do come in, Mr. Green," she invited. "Bessie tells me you asked to see my father, but if I can do anything or tell you anything you want to know—Saturday afternoon, and his sermons and all the rest, you know. In here, if you'll forgive the untidiness."

He entered the room. "I quite understand, Miss Perivale, and won't disturb him. In fact, I wrote a little note in case—Hullo!"

It was the tortoise, against which he had stumbled. The girl looked down at it, picked it up, and put it under the big centre table.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Harold is always getting in the way."

"Why Harold?" he enquired.

"Why, because he lost the battle of hasting—won't hurry. It's my small brother's pun, but you asked. Won't you sit down?"

She sat on an armchair arm, herself. Gees drew out one of the cane-seated chairs from the table and occupied it. "And the hedgehog—what's become of him to-day?" he enquired.

"The children have him out in the garden—they'll bring him in for his milk when they've finished their pirate picnic. I'm a base deserter from the party for a little while. I wanted a rest."

"Ummm! I see. Has the hedgehog got a name?"

"Oh, yes! He's Isle of Wight, because of the Needles. By the same author, after Lai—my youngest sister—had picked him up carelessly and found those needles uncomfortable. But I forgot—that's not why you came to see my father, to hear how we name our pets."

"Possibly not, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world," he assured her. "Nor the pleasure of a talk with you, either."

A sudden access of colour revealed her as a very attractive girl, if only she were just a trifle less shabby. The tweed skirt had been darned more than once—neatly, but darned all the same, and it was worn thin and napless at the knees. He thought of the cheque in his pocket, and hoped Norris would not forget to double it.

"You—you like Denlandham, Mr. Green?" she asked nervously.

"Haven't had time enough to think whether I do or no," he answered.

"On the whole, though, yes. The worthies at the village pub—I'm staying there, as you probably know—ought to be heard on the radio—and the landlord feeds me as if I were an elephant. Except that the elephant would be lucky to get cooking like Churchill's—or his wife's."

"I'm glad she has one gift," the girl said, "but—"

"I'm keeping you from the rest you came to find?" he asked.

"No—certainly not. I'm afraid of keeping you, talking about nothing in particular when you came to see my father specially."

"Don't let that trouble you, Miss Perivale. I've absolutely nothing to do between now and to-morrow afternoon, and then only go to tea with some people before starting back on my journey to London."

"And just now you said you had no time!" she reminded him, smiling.

"The past tense is correct," he said. "Still—I suppose you know the rector did me a very great service yesterday?"

She shook her head. "All I know is that he was meeting you in the church in the afternoon. As for doing services, it's his work."

"Stern judge, aren't you?" he remarked, and smiled. "You know, I expect, that he was meeting others beside me?"

"No," she answered, and smiled back at him. "I tell him sometimes that the family is my parish, and he must look after his."

"Unfair division of labour—you can't dodge your parishioners," he commented. "Still, after what he did for me, it's criminal to talk like that

about him, even in jest. And I want to do something for him in return. Now, Miss Perivale”—he looked full at her and spoke with purposeful gravity—“a good many country parsons have a hard time of it in these days, keeping up church and buildings and all the rest.”

“I know it,” she said, not less gravely.

“Forgive me for saying that I can see you do, or call me tactless over it, if you like. Now I’ve written a little note to Mr. Perivale to cover a small acknowledgement of his kindness to me that’s enclosed with the note, and put it as tactfully as I know how, and I want you to hand it to him, and do me a favour at the same time, if you will.”

“And that—the favour?” she asked.

“Is he likely to show you what I’ve written?” he asked in reply.

“If it’s—yes, I expect he will,” she answered.

“Then put your weight on the side of what I’ve said in that note, please. Don’t let him go distributing my few pennies all over the parish and forgetting himself and his family.”

She considered it. “How many pennies?” she asked at last.

“Fifty—I mean fifty pounds.”

“Mr. ... Green!” She stared at him, aghast.

“Miss Perivale,” he said earnestly, “it’s not one tenth—not a hundredth, for no money could repay—of the value of what he did. Leave it at that—don’t ask either him or me what it was. Just persuade him—a good time for his children, books or things he wants for himself, because I mean it for that and don’t want to offend him by saying so outright. But you can say a lot, I think.”

He stood up hastily as he saw her lips quivering and tears gathering in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Miss Perivale—I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Oh, stop!” She shook the tears away and laughed unsteadily.

“As if—he’s so worried, I know, and you—you can’t know what it means!”

Momentarily his lips tightened grimly. For he had remembered Isabella in her dainty, costly clothing—and the children were this girl’s parish, not Isabella’s! Then he smiled and held out his hand.

“Then I know you’ll back me up, and—that’s all, Miss Perivale.”

She took the offered hand and held it. “If I could tell you—” she said, and broke off, looking into his eyes.

“Quite—but you have told me,” he answered. “Please don’t make me feel all embarrassed—I’d far rather hear about Harold and the Isle of Wight

and things like that. The lighter side. Let's get back to it when we next meet. And now I'll win the battle of hasting—back to the inn. Pikelets for tea—tried 'em the first time yesterday, and you'd need a mighty long tape measure to take the size of my yearn. Don't forget. Oh, here's my note for him, and I nearly nearly went off with it in my pocket! Good-bye, Miss Perivale—I will not miss my pikelets for anything on earth. My regards to your father."

Past question, he realised as he left the house, Isabella had telephoned Hunter yesterday afternoon, for this girl obviously knew nothing of what had transpired—did not even know that Norris and his daughter as well as Gees had been due to meet her father. The rector would tell his wife—everything, in his present state over her, Gees reflected.

And here, brilliant as the late spring sunlight, she faced him at the rectory gate, about to enter as he was about to leave. Svelte and tall, dark-eyed, dark-haired—beautifully waved, that dark hair—and perfectly dressed in different colours from those she had been wearing when he had seen her in the study doorway (Celia wore the same old tweed skirt and home-knitted jumper); she paused, quite composed, now.

"How d'you do, Mr. Green?" A languid, insolent drawl.

"As well in my present occupation as my last, thank you," he answered promptly. "And you, if I may ask?"

He had angered her, he saw. She spoke sharply.

"Your previous occupation—yes. But you still do your spying in the clothes worn as a rule by gentlemen, I notice."

"I thought that word was reserved for snobs and charwomen in these days," he remarked coolly. "Or for—clairvoyantes, say."

She drew a sudden, audible breath. "Once—once before you tried to ruin me," she said unsteadily. "And now—again?"

"Again?" he asked. "But how could I?"

"Tell him—my husband—that," she said.

"Oh, no!" He spoke almost carelessly. "You paid your fine, which was the end of it. But"—his tone changed to grim earnest—"are you quite sure that is all, Mrs. Perivale?"

"All?" she echoed. "What else? Of course it is!"

"Better make sure it remains so. I'm off to London to-morrow, though, so must take your word for it. Unless, of course, you happen to be coming up for a few days again. If so, I might see you. Sorry I must go now. Be very careful, Mrs. Perivale, that the episode of the ›Peppered Pig‹ remains all you need to conceal from your husband."

He left her—guessing, as he intended she should. That the warning he had given reached her far too late—years too late, probably—he knew, but it might render her more careful to conceal. Perivale would waken in time to the reality of the woman he had married, but he might be spared the blasting of his life in entirety, if accident or her lack of caution did not bring full enlightenment to him. His state, now, was that of a man walking in black darkness and ignorant of a precipice edge beside him! Perivale might get to the end of his journey without finding himself at the foot of the precipice—and might not!

What a village! Motor buses and cinemas available, yes, but parson and squire, the farmers, the rustics and their nightly gatherings in the bar, all as in old time. And the thing that had fled down the church aisle and out, active, perhaps still potent.

Where? Nightmare Farm still offered harbourage. Was it there?

A small drop-head coupé of a previous year's vintage stood outside Cosham's gateway on Sunday afternoon, and, since it was a perfect spring day with a threat of summer in the strength of the sun's rays, the coupe was unroofed and revealed a significant black leather case on its seat. Gees drew his long Rolls-Bentley in behind the coupe, got out, and went along the garden path in time to see a monocled, pale-faced man of about his own age emerge from the house, and to hear Mrs. Norris' voice.

"Why, here he is! This is Doctor Haverstock, Mr. Gees. We have just been telling him about you. Mr. Gees, Doctor."

"Ah! How d'you do, Mr. Gees? Mrs. Norris has just been attributing a miracle to you, and I've been trying to tell her it was simply a matter of suggestion, influence of the mentality of the patient by the right person. The worthy rector of the parish, a man she knew and respected. Don't tell me we ought to have thought of that, Mr. Gees—don't tell it me! We doctors have to confess to more of empiricism than precedent, you know—no two cases respond identically to the same treatment, as perhaps you are well aware?"

"I am," Gees answered. He felt that he knew this type.

"Ah! I felt sure you would be. Simply a matter of hitting on the personality capable of effecting the—well, the hypnosis, really. Clever of you to think of the one person the girl would, as one might say, be certain to obey. And he snapped her out of it, after our good Norris had tried everything—and even Sir Wagram Snoot had to own he had at last come on a case that baffled him. Sir Wagram Snoot, my dear sir!"

"Sir Wagram Snoot," Gees echoed solemnly.

"Well," said the very dapper and suave physician, "I must be getting along—I must be getting along. Yes! I may say that never have I found myself happier to be robbed of work than in this case. I think it extremely probable, Mr.—er—Gees, that it has been a case in which the—er—the fortunate guesswork of the layman has been of more avail than the accurate yet ineffective diagnosis of the trained mind."

"Undoubtedly, doctor—undoubtedly," Gees assured him.

"Mrs. Norris has been trying to convince me, Mr.—er—Mr. Gees, that there was—er—she believes there was an element of the supernatural or shall we say of a psychic nature among the causes of this—er—seizure. Of course you, with your wider knowledge of the world, know what to think of credulity of that sort?"

"I do, doctor. Oh, most certainly I do!"

"Yes, I was convinced of it. In this age of scientific achievement and research, with the bubbles of alchemy and astrology dispersed by the mere breath of reason and practicality, one can only regard such leaning toward almost mediaeval superstition as—but I must be getting along, Mr.—er—Mr. Gees—I must be getting along. Good day to you, sir—good day. I am sure Sir Wagram Snoot will be delighted over the joke against himself when he hears how easily you disposed of the problem that defeated him for the first time in his distinguished career. Good day to you, sir, and my congratulations—good day."

He went briskly and happily along the path to his coupe. Gees turned for a last, lingering look at this disciple of materialism.

"That man deserves to get on," he said gravely.

"He is getting on, Mr. Gees," Mrs. Norris assured him. "People go to him much more than they will to the older doctors. He's so—so up-to-date, and he's got such a wonderfully impressive manner, which is half the battle, for a doctor."

"I'd say seven-eighths, in his case," Gees remarked pensively.

"But do come in, Mr. Gees. This is Mr. Cosham, my husband's cousin, and Mrs. Cosham you've already met, I know. Mr. Gees, James."

"I'm sure glad to see you, sir," said Cosham, a red-faced, typically honest-looking and apparently simple farmer, but, as Gees had overheard in the ›Hunters' Arms,‹ the slyest and craftiest man on a deal for miles round. He shook hands with the pair, and was relieved to see them retire into the room from which they had emerged and leave Mrs. Norris to conduct him to the apartment in which he had first seen her daughter,

where the claw-leg table was laid for what looked more like a sumptuous cold supper than mere tea, and Norris and his daughter stood to welcome their guest.

The girl came first, with both hands outstretched, and her beautiful violet-blue eyes alight with pleasure, her lips parted in a smile.

"Daddy's told me you don't like fuss, Mr. Gees," she said, "so—just that I know you realise what it means to me to be free, and what it means to him and mother too. For all you have done for them in finding the way out for me, I can say thank you. For myself, I don't think any words exist to tell you how glad I am to see you here."

She was perfectly self-possessed, and said what she wished to say as easily and fluently as Doctor Haverstock himself. Gees held her hands long enough to perceive that she was steady nerved, quite at her ease, and then released them to shake hands with Norris.

"I find myself glad to be here," he said, "but with a confession to make to you all, for a beginning. Gees is only a business alias, built up of the first letter of all my names—Gregory George Gordon Green. It was fastened on me at prep school, and stuck, but I'm nothing but a plain Shropshire Green from the other side of the county."

"Your home county too, is it?" Norris observed rather than questioned.

"It is," Gees said, "but I kept out of it to dodge estate management, which my father wanted me to take up. I—well, I don't like work!"

"But—you don't mean to say Sir George Green—the general—is a relation of yours, surely?" Norris sounded quite excited over it.

"I'm afraid I've got to own he is," Gees said. "It's not my fault, but his. He's my father. I generally keep it dark for his sake."

"Bless my soul, it's one of his farms I've hired from Michaelmas!" Norris exclaimed. "Well, sir, this is a pleasant surprise!"

"Which farm?" Gees asked interestedly.

"A man named Moore farmed it—died last March, and the widow got the general to let her get out under the year," Norris said.

"Moore's—I know it. Clay subsoil to the west of the house—keep that part well drained and you've got the best farm on the estate."

"But I shall go on calling you Mr. Gees," May Norris said softly.

"And I shall go and get the teapot," her mother said practically.

"No—please don't get up, Mr. Gees—Mr. Green, I mean." And she went out from the room, while Gees resumed his seat.

"The wheat looked as strong and healthy as any I ever grew at Nightmare, and it's splendid pasture," Norris remarked.

Gees nodded assent, and glanced at May to see how mention of that name effected her. But she shook her head at him and laughed.

"Daddy will talk shop!" she exclaimed. "Please, Mr. Gees, I've been out of the world for six months, and there's such a lot of leeway to make up. I know you've got to drain when it's a clay subsoil, but not on a Sunday afternoon. Oh, it was you who said that, though, and not daddy at all! But he is trying to lead you into the wheat."

"Oh, May blossom!" Norris said softly—for him—"you shall talk about whatever you like, and old daddy will be glad to hear your voice!"

"He will call himself old, Mr. Gees, and he's still good at tennis and can run like a—like a charging rhinoceros. Yes, I said rhinoceros, daddy. I read once that it's faster than a galloping horse."

"And you play tennis too?" Gees suggested, as a subject for talk.

"She will again when she's stronger," Norris interposed.

"They will persist that I've been physically ill, Mr. Gees," the girl said seriously, "but I know I haven't. I was utterly exhausted yesterday after I wakened to hear Mr. Perivale speak that benediction over me, and I must have been a little dazed too, because daddy tells me you were there, and I didn't see you. But I wasn't physically ill, or my body would have lost weight—more than the pound or two it did lose. And I'm not physically ill now, though they won't believe it."

"And you didn't see me?" Gees asked curiously.

She shook her head. "This is the first time I have seen your face," she answered. "At some point in the dream I knew you would come here, and through you I should get release. You were not here then, nowhere near here, and not even on your way, but in the dream I knew. I saw—" she broke off in a rather embarrassed way, her first sign of discomposure.

"That I had big hands and feet," he completed for her with a smile.

"Yes," she admitted, "but I didn't like to say it. And that—that other knew something had given me hope, and would have killed—"

"May," Norris broke in, "I don't want you to talk about it. You'll only upset yourself, and it was only a dream, you know."

"All right, daddy," she assented—Gees heard a note of yielding to what seemed to her a totally unnecessary command—"but I know perfectly well what it was, and so do you. And if I talked about it all day—Mr. Gees, if you'd been captured by brigands and sentenced to be shot, wouldn't you even like talking about it to the one who took the bandage off your eyes and told you you were free again?"

He shook his head, and glanced at Norris. "I dunno," he said.

"Never tried it. But I think it quite probable that those who cared most for me, and had to see me in the hands of the brigands, wouldn't want me to talk in a way that would recall their awful anxiety over me."

"Peccavi!" she exclaimed, with a rueful little smile. "Daddy, I'm a selfish little pig. And you said Moore's farm was clay subsoil to the west of the house, Mr. Gees—what's the rest of it?"

"Good, honest loam, not too sandy," he answered. "And there's one thing I think will interest you—one collective thing, that is. My father keeps one of the few surviving herds of aurochs in the country—the old-time wild cattle of Britain, survivors from pre-Roman days."

All three of them, he found, were keenly interested, and his description of the shaggy little beasts and other matters connected with the home to which they would go in the autumn provided subject matter for talk until tea was finished and he declared that he must be going if he were to reach London in reasonable time that night. He bade good-bye to Mrs. Norris and May, and Norris accompanied him to the outer door.

"I suppose, Mr. Green, all I can do is wish you a good journey," the big man said as he stopped outside the house and held out his hand.

"I'm afraid it isn't," Gees answered, and did not take the offered hand. "In fact, before we say good-bye—remember you said I had only to ask, if there were anything you could do for me?"

"Well, it holds good," Norris answered, "and I'd be glad if there is anything. You mean—you can find some way for me to repay you?"

"For the present, just this," Gees told him gravely. "Get me a pickaxe, a pointed crowbar, and a claw-ended crowbar, and keep them handy till I call for them—and for you too, I think. Can you do that?"

"A pickaxe, a claw-ended and a pointed crowbar," Norris repeated.

"Why, certainly I will. That means you're coming back here, sir?"

"I surely am coming back—on the day you send me a wire to say that Stukeley has left and Nightmare farmhouse is empty," Gees answered.

"Or at the latest, the day after I get the wire, you may expect me."

"It shall be sent," Norris promised, "and—and one man can't use a pickaxe and crowbar both at once, Mr. Green. You'll need help."

Gees held out his hand, then, with a laugh. "Good man!" he said. "It looks as if I don't even need to ask for that help."

"It's waiting for you, sir. I shall be ready."

With that, Gees left him and got into the car, turning it about by the farm gateway to drive back through Denlandham. Beyond the end of the orchard and garden combined he sighted May Norris, standing beside the road and holding up her hand as a signal. He pulled in and stopped,

and, instead of coming beside him to speak, she went round to the near side of the car, opened the door, and got in and seated herself beside him, all without a word of explanation. He stared at her, and she smiled back, quite composedly.

"The fare," he said, "is a pound a mile. How far do I take you?"

"To the end of Nightmare roadway," she answered "and then—I had to talk to you, Mr. Gees, and it would only upset them if I had gone on trying while they could hear. Will you stop at the end of the roadway?"

He drove on, and stopped as she had asked, with the hawthorn-shrouded tunnel abreast of the car, so that they could see the light at its far end. The girl got out and stood waiting beside the car.

"Won't you get out too, please?" she asked.

"But—here?" he demurred. "The last place, I should think."

"But—oh, don't you see!" she pleaded. "I'm immune, to use a silly-sounding simile, but the only one I can think of, it's as when one has had measles. They can't harm me again. I can't tell you why, but it is so. I'm perfectly safe from them, and know it. That benediction, perhaps."

"They?" Gees asked, and did not move from the driving seat.

"They," she insisted. "Please get out. I want you to go with me, there." She pointed along the roadway. "I want to see the house again, and we can talk as we go. Won't you go with me—please?"

He got out, then, and opened the sagging gate. They passed into the gloom and silence of the roadway and he knew it empty of the influences that had made it a place of fearful mystery when he had been here before. It was no more, now, than an ordinary way to a farmhouse—perhaps that house was ordinary too, but of that he was not sure.

"To see it once more—I grew up there," she said. "And I'm glad you consented, glad you let me talk to you for a little while. To tell you—if I never see you again, it won't alter my caring for you."

He stopped, and she, too, perforce stopped and faced him.

"But that's—what would they?" he began and stopped, but could not voice the words until the colour had begun to flood her face.

"No—don't misunderstand like that!" she begged, in a distressed way. "I don't mean—not the caring a girl keeps to herself till it's asked of her. More as I care for my father, but deeper, more intense. Of the spirit—some tie between you and me that will never loosen again as far as I am concerned, though you may not feel it. If I'd had a twin brother, say, and cared for him intensely. Is it strange?"

"Sudden, call it," he answered, rather grimly.

She shook her head, and smiled as she gazed full at him. He felt that he had never seen lovelier eyes than hers, violet and deep, here in the gloom that enlarged their pupils and darkened them.

“Not in the least sudden, for I have known you quite a long time,” she said. “I was in a state where time lengthens out, terribly. Do you know—let us walk on, because they will miss me, soon—do you know a nightmare where something terrible is hiding, waiting to clutch you, a horror that makes you wake and thank heaven you were not caught?”

“I have had that experience,” he admitted as they walked on.

“Well, it caught me,” she said soberly. “The horror was ten times intensified, a torture beyond imagining. And then—you, somewhere ahead in that awful state. You, meaning release. I knew it. In all that horror and darkness, that agony which was hell itself—I knew it. Through a time that was longer than years, because it was out of time and every moment of it was agony—I knew you would come to set me free. So—do you wonder that I care for you in the way I do?”

“You make it sound almost reasonable,” he admitted.

“Almost?” she echoed, with a tinge of amusement. “I don’t expect you to understand entirely, or to feel for me any of what I feel for you. You with your many interests, your totally different life from mine—from any that I can ever have. But let me try to make clear all I mean, as nearly as I can. If you’d seen me drowning, say, and plunged into the water and saved my life, I might reasonably say that life really belonged to you, mightn’t I? Admit that much.”

“I suppose you might say that, if you wished,” he half-agreed.

“Well, then, don’t you see? If you hadn’t found my way back to freedom for me, this voice might have gone on talking, and this body might have, been capable of walking as it walks with you now, but the real me, that me which my father and mother love, the reason and emotion that make up me—the soul, call it if you will—would have been prisoned away from expressing itself by means of my physical body. You found the way back to freedom for the real me, rescued it as surely as ever anyone was physically rescued from drowning, and so I look on it as belonging to you, just as my physical self would belong—my physical life, if you had saved it. You saved infinitely more.”

“Well, I’ll admit there’s something in your line of reasoning, if you don’t embarrass me by making too much of my part in—in what after all I could never have done myself,” he said seriously, “and in the way you claim to care for me, I believe I care for you, though—well, less, if you’ll forgive my bluntness over it. But naturally there’s a bond, for we’re

sharers in something nobody else can realise quite as completely as we do—unless perhaps that good man Perivale realises it and is one with us. And now you feel quite safe, even here?”

“Even here, where it caught and overpowered me,” she answered. “I am safe. They can never harm me, never touch me again. Not through my own strength or anything I can do, but through what has been done for me. Immunised, call it. Beyond their power, for as long as I live.”

“Again—they, and their power,” he observed. “More than one?”

“Legion—remember where I have been,” she said. “Not that the darkness which made my prison was caused by more than one being, but I know now that we are surrounded by them always, some strong, and some weak, but all trying to get human beings, to be them.”

“Then why don’t they succeed more often?” he asked—merely to hear what she would say, rather than for knowledge.

“Because their intelligences are so small,” she said, and so confirmed his own belief. “They are less than human, which is why they try to possess human beings—to achieve humanity. Which doesn’t mean they are weak, for obviously the thing that caught me must have been stronger in the spirit sense than I am, or else it could never have held me as it did. Stronger as physically a horse or an ox is stronger, but having less intelligence as an ox or a horse has. Either of them might catch and conquer me physically, but it wouldn’t alter the fact that I am more intelligent than either of them. I can’t put it more clearly.”

“You needn’t,” he said. “Put in another way, it means that evil is a less thing than good, though at times it may prevail.”

“I’m so glad of this talk with you!” she exclaimed. “You say so easily what I mean. But—no farther. Just to see it.”

They stood, then, at the exit from the roadway, with Nightmare farmhouse, its buildings, and the mere to the right, all plain before them in the afternoon sunlight. Except that the four big shire horses still grazed on the far side of the mere, there was no sign of life about the place. No smoke rose from the big chimney, now.

“I grew up here, and was very happy here,” the girl said softly, “and so—to see it just once more, like this. With you. Better so than in any other way, because of the bond. That upstairs window on the left was my room window. I used to go up there when I came back from school holidays and feel so glad to be home again.”

Gees remembered the little, soiled blue bow he had found, thrown down in the angle caused by the chimney’s projection. Stukeley kept that room locked, he knew: had it no terrors for her?

"It was not till last autumn that the change came," she went on, as if answering his unspoken question. "The end of September, it would be. I began to have terrible dreams, nightmares, and would think I could hear laughter when I wakened. Strange, uncanny laughter, but never so loud that I could tell who laughed, or where. I tried to tell myself it was not laughter, but the bats in the attics—there are swarms of bats up there. And I grew to dread the room, and yet to be fascinated by it—I can't explain that. And an odd feeling—it was never empty. Some other beside myself was there, but I was tongue-tied about it, mustn't speak of it to anyone. I think now it was the growing power over me, the sweeping and garnishing of the chamber that being wanted to inhabit—or a gradual unlocking of the door that now, through you, is locked against any such possession for evermore."

"You're a strange girl," Gees said, more because he felt this dwelling on her terrible experience as morbid than for any other reason.

"But then"—she looked up at him and smiled—"I have had a strange experience. I must be the only one in modern times who has come back unharmed from that terrible prison of mine. And I'm so tremendously happy to be back, don't you see? Is that strange?"

He shook his head and smiled at her, but gave no other answer.

"Now I've seen it again as I wished, with you, too," she said.

"Mr. Gees, isn't there anything at all I can do for you?"

"Not that I know of," he answered reflectively. "Except—be normal. Don't let this experience colour your life."

She laughed. "Don't fear for me," she said. "I am quite normal. I'm going to live quite an ordinary life, fall in love and marry, probably, a little later on, and till then get into mischief, flirt, and do all the things an ordinary girl does. Help my mother in the new farm—there's nothing to do till we go there—and eat and drink and sleep and get as much fun out of life as I can. Is that normal enough?"

"It sounds reasonable," he admitted. "And forget—what happened?"

She shook her head. "That would mean forgetting you," she pointed out with a little frown. "No, I should hate to do that. But I'll promise you to put it behind me, the horror of it that was till you came to give me back my freedom. And will you promise me something?"

"I'd better know what it is, first," he said.

"Something very big. Something you can do, though. At least, if you can't, with the insight you've shown over me, nobody can."

"Well, what is this wonderful thing for the wonderful man to do?"

“Destroy that”—she pointed momentarily at the farmhouse—“that which makes a home there, whatever it is. Don’t go away to London, but stay here till you have destroyed it, ended the nightmare.”

“I’m coming back here for that purpose and nothing else,” he said. “But I want only your father and you to know that I’m coming back.”

“You are—that is a promise?” she insisted, gazing at him intently.

“To make the attempt,” he said. “I’m not sure if it can be destroyed, but it may be possible to free that house and this way leading to it of what seized on you. What will happen after, I don’t know. The immaterial, surely, is indestructible. Or is it?”

“Somehow, its power is there,” she said, and nodded to indicate the house again. “Drive it from there, take away its power.”

“And then?” he asked in the pause. Her certainty, rather than belief, over this problem that he had determined to solve impressed him. He regarded her, now, as equal with himself in knowledge, if not as one of greater, clearer sight. But she smiled at him and shook her head.

“I’m just May Norris, Mr. Gees, not a seeress,” she told him. Then she laid her hand on his arm and impelled him toward the roadway. “We will go back, now,” she said, “and I’m quite content, because I’ve seen Nightmare for the last time with you, and you’re coming back here and the nightmare will end. Nobody can be harmed by living here, then.”

“If I succeed,” he cautioned her.

“Oh, you’ll succeed!” she prophesied confidently.

Somewhere near them sounded the chattering, clucking noise that he had heard when he first came along this roadway—very nearly such a sound as that thing had made when it fled down the aisle of Denland-ham church, but fainter and more confused. Both he and the girl were deep in the shadows of the roadway, now, and she stopped and grasped his arm again, momentarily, while she looked back.

“There!” she exclaimed. “Did you hear it? The sound I used to hear in my room last autumn, and I tried to tell myself it was the bats.”

He did not answer, but took her arm and led her quickly on to the outer end of the roadway. There, beyond the gate, he stopped to face her, and took a card from his pocket to hand to her.

“For your father,” he said. “I asked him to wire me, and forgot to give him the address. Hand it on to him for me, will you?”

“Why, of course I will. But— isn’t this rather—well, flamboyant, Mr. Gees? Not quite like you, I mean?”

“I dunno,” he said. “It’s effective, anyhow.” She read aloud—

GEES
Confidential Agents
Consult GEES for everything
From Mumps to Murder!
37, Little Oakfield Street,
Haymarket, S.W.
Initial Consultation: Two Guineas.

“Well, it gives the facts,” he said. “And now—” He held out his hand. She took it in both her own. “They laughed at you, there in the roadway,” she said, “just as they used to laugh at me. But I know this is not the end—you will come back.”

“Yes,” he said, “though to what result I am not sure.”

“And so, Mr. Gees, for a little while, good-bye.”

As he drove on, he could see in the driving mirror that she turned and waved her hand, and at that he lifted his own hand in response. Then a bend of the road hid her, and he gazed ahead, seeing more clearly, since the walk and talk with her along the roadway to Nightmare Farm, the way that he must go.

Chapter 12

Madame Stephanie

Rising late on Monday morning, Gees went out to Piccadilly Circus and got himself a breakfast at the Corner House which he ate with a rather yearning memory of Nicholas Churchill's idea of breakfast. He returned to Little Oakfield Street to find that Eve Madeleine had not even yet arrived, and that the woman who "did out" his living rooms and the two offices and usually cooked breakfast for him had finished her chores and gone—knowing nothing of his return the night before, she had not come in early enough to get breakfast for him as she usually did.

He settled himself in Eve Madeleine's office with the library book she had left there, and tried to get interested in it until about half-past eleven, when the rightful occupant of the room entered the flat and appeared in the doorway, to stand staring at him as he put the book down on her desk and rose to his feet.

"'Fraid I've dropped cigarette ash about, Miss Brandon," he greeted her, "but you're late. I've been waiting for you."

"I went to get those particulars from the Saint Alphege marriage register before coming on here," she answered. "But—is the case finished?"

"Barely begun," he said. "Let me see that copy, please."

She handed it to him, and then removed her hat and coat to seat herself at her desk. Scrutinising the copy, Gees saw that "Isabella Edwina Carter" recorded her birthplace as "Lymington, Hampshire," and gave her age as thirty-two. He pocketed the paper.

"And both parents deceased," he remarked. "Well, we shall see. I'm grateful to you for that report of yours as well as for this, Miss Brandon. Now take your little notebook and pencil, and we'll have a précis of the case to date, as nearly as I can remember everything."

He seated himself beside the desk and for over an hour dictated steadily. Then he lighted a cigarette for himself and one for her.

"I think that's all," he remarked. "How soon can you type it out?"

"By four or five o'clock," she answered. "There's a good deal."

"And in taking it down, you haven't taken it all in," he remarked. "Get it typed, and then study it yourself. We'll go over it together—I'm going out on an inquiry—and you can ask questions and talk it out with me, make yourself a wall, and I'll heave ideas at it and watch them bounce. It's a good way of clarifying my own views. Count on seeing me back some time this afternoon, and I may want you to talk overtime. Most of that, you'll find, concerns the girl May Norris, and she amounts to no more than a side-issue. The main case is to come."

"And you believe in these—these twirling gurglers?" she asked.

"Miss Brandon, get hold of a book called '*Aylwin*,' by Watts-Dunton, and read it," he counselled. "You'll find there a saying—I forget the exact words, but something like this.

"'Quoth Ja'afar, bowing his head—Bold is the donkey-driver, O Ka'dee, and bold is the ka'dee, who dare say what he will believe, what disbelieve, not knowing in any wise the mind of Allah—not knowing in any wise his own heart and what it shall some day suffer.'"

"That may not be exactly what the author said, but it's the sense of it. As far as my belief goes, I've seen one gurgling twirler, and heard some more—or the same one, maybe. We will continue the discussion when I get back."

He went out, and took a taxi to Baker Street Station. A short walk back along Baker Street brought him to Canuto's, where he lunched and sat long over his coffee. In the end he went out and, heading for Upper Gloucester Place, discovered the dingy brass plate announcing that "Madame Stephanie, Clairvoyante," resided there. He rang the bell. Madame herself, recognisable by Miss Brandon's report, opened the door and surveyed him with disfavour that grew as she took in the type of man confronting her. She shook her tousled head at him.

"I theenk you make ze meestake, m'sieu," she said. "Ze wrong door."

"Oh, no, madame," he dissented easily. "You are Madame Stephanie, and I was careful not to come without a recommendation for a sitting."

"Zen p'raps you will come een, m'sieu," and she drew back to admit him, going on to the room described in Miss Brandon's report, untidy and even dirty, to turn there and face him, still with suspicion.

"You 'ave ze recommendation, you say, m'sieu?" she asked.

"It may be stretching a point to call it that," he answered coolly. He had got inside the place, which was his main object for a beginning. "The name I bring as introduction is Isabella Edwina Carter."

He saw her start of alarm. "Carter?" she asked. "Ze first two names, m'sieur—oui. But not—not Carter. Let me see!" She held out her hand, in expectation of a card or something.

"Nothing to see," he answered coolly. "Just—your daughter, madame." For the facial resemblance was enough for the assumption.

"But—but ze name eet is not Carter," she protested. "No. Eet ees now d'Arcy, since she marry. I do not geev you reading of ze 'and, m'sieu."

"Probably not," he said. "If you did, I wouldn't believe any of it. D'Arcy, eh? Well, I think that's about all I want."

"What do you mean?" Angered and flustered, she dropped her pretence of an accent. "If you are police, you can prove nothing—nothing! They have tried before to catch me, to prosecute me, but I do nothing illegal. You—you swine of police! Get out of my house!"

"D'Arcy," he repeated, and did not move. "But Carter first."

"It was not!" she almost screamed. "My daughter's name was Curtis, not Carter, till she married Mr. d'Arcy last year!"

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Curtis," Gees said. "And your husband—don't get excited, for I'm nothing whatever to do with the police—is your husband still in the navy, or retired now?"

"My husband is dead, long ago. He was never in the navy. What do you want? Who are you? Why do you come here questioning about me and my daughter, if you are not police? I try to make an honest living, and a poor one it is, but you have no business to come here like this! What do you mean by it? Why don't you go when I tell you?"

"Never in the navy. And you're sure your daughter married d'Arcy?" he asked, and made no move toward going.

"Sure of it? How dare you say such a thing? Of course she married him! A wealthy landowner in the west country—though it makes very little difference to me. They've stayed here with me since she married him—are you making insinuations against my daughter?"

"Calm down, Mrs. Curtis," he urged. "I'm asking, not insinuating anything against anyone. They came here on the fourteenth of February and stayed six days—yes. If you think I'm wasting your time, I'll pay you for it, and do get out of your head that I intend you any harm, for I don't. See—here's a guinea." He put down a note and a shilling on a small, rickety table beside him. "And they were married last September, I believe, but where? Were you at the wedding?"

She looked uncertainly from him to the note and shilling, took them up from the table, and held them tightly in her bony hand.

"I—if you mean no harm—no, I wasn't there," she said more calmly. "She—I thought she was coming back, when she went away, and the next thing I knew was that they'd married. She's known him a long time. There's no harm in telling you, since you know they're married. At Bournemouth, it was. She went there. I thought she was coming back."

"And they did stay a week with you, last February?" he asked.

"Yes, and before that, too. After the honeymoon. Why shouldn't they?" She peered up at him, shortsightedly, perplexedly.

"Ah, why shouldn't they?" he repeated. "The answer, I fancy, is by echo. D'Arcy. And his first name will be Angus, I take it?"

"Since you know so much, why ask me?" she retorted.

"I won't, then," he promised. "In fact, Mrs. Curtis—not Carter—I won't ask you anything more whatever, but obey you and go."

"Yes, but why do you keep on saying Carter?" she demanded.

"She—she only called herself that once, when—when she didn't want her real name known over something that's all finished and forgotten. Why do you keep on saying the name like that?"

"Oh, I expect it's a lapse of memory or something of the sort," he answered. "Never mind, Mrs. Curtis—I won't trouble you any more, for the present. Probably not at all, from now on. Good afternoon."

He went out and, since Eve Madeleine would not yet have finished her transcription, headed for Madame Tussaud's and got himself a seat in the cinema. The vacuity of the film then in process of presentation served as aid to reflection, rather than as a deterrent, and he sat on, fitting together the pieces of the puzzle—its main features presented no difficulties, and only the motives of the people concerned were obscure—until five o'clock, when he emerged and took another taxi for Little Oakfield Street. The transcription would be finished, now, and Eve Madeleine would have had time to study it.

"Just a wee spot more to take down before we begin our talk, Miss Brandon. Interview with Madame Stephanie, alias Curtis. No, the other way about. Her real name is Curtis. Now go ahead."

He dictated the interview as nearly as he could from memory, and as he finished the girl looked up with pencil poised, ready for more.

"That's all," he said. "Transcribe it later. Put it aside for now. Have you gone over all I dictated this morning—the sense of it?"

She nodded. "If it would make sense," she answered.

"Well—questions, Miss Brandon. That's the way to get it all clear for myself as well as for you. Plenty of time. I don't have to go back to Denlandham till I get that wire from Norris."

"I don't see that, yet," she said. "But—what sort of girl is this Miss Norris? A hysterical type, I deduce from your dictation."

"Then you're wrong," he interposed, "and you don't deduce it from my dictation at all, but from your determination to find a material cause for an extra-physical result. Miss Norris is a level-headed and incidentally very lovely and very charming girl, quite self-possessed, and looking on her experience with not the slightest sign of hysteria or even of fear, now it's all over."

"In love with you," she half-accused.

"Not in the way you mean it," he dissented. "I couldn't have made it clear in dictating. Perfectly frank in telling me that she cares for me, as she might tell her own brother, and as free of any other sort of love for me as if I were her brother. And, from now on, a side-issue. That part of the case is finished. It was an effect, and from now on I'm concerned only with the cause. As soon as Stukeley has gone and Nightmare stands empty, I go to tackle that cause."

"Yes, I can see that," she observed thoughtfully. "And you want questions. You'll ascertain all the particulars of this marriage of Isabella Curtis-Carter and the rector before you go back, I suppose?"

"Why should I trouble to do that?" he asked in reply. "I have the fact, and her motive I shall never have in full, no matter what inquiry I make. I deduce from the little I know that she and he met at Bournemouth, and by lies that he still believes and her own power of fascination she enslaved an elderly and rather simple-minded cleric—there is no fool like a middle-aged fool over things of that sort. She owns to thirty-two on the marriage certificate, so call her thirty-five or even forty, in reality. She found out he was rector of Denlandham, and saw him as an anchorage for her declining years—there may have been a spice of revenge on Hunter in marrying him, though I think she knew she could never marry Hunter. I think, too, that as far as a woman of that type can care for anyone but herself, Hunter was the one passion of her life, and when they met there she persuaded him to those two weeks at her mother's place as Mr. and Mrs. d'Arcy—you haven't transcribed and studied that part of it yet. I think, too, that Hunter has been and still is in love with her, or he wouldn't have taken that risk—of carrying on the Isabella Curtis intrigue with Isabella Perivale, I mean. And there,

you've got to take into account the character of Hunter. A descendant of Robert Hunter, as ripe for evil as was Robert, but until last September with no special temptation to real, downright evil like this, the possible smashing of another man's life. Not that even now he means to smash it, if that can be avoided, but his motive in the affair, and hers with it, are evil enough to waken that curse of the Hunter family and make it active again as in the case of Miss Norris—and other possible cases of the same sort as well, if it's not ended."

"Why marry under a false name?" she asked.

"For the mother's benefit—Madame Stephanie, as you know her," he answered without hesitation. "She's a horrid hag, I know, but I believe she is convinced that her daughter has married one Angus d'Arcy, a west-country landowner, and they come to London and stay with her occasionally. Far safer than going to any hotel, where they'd have to register and Hunter might possibly be recognised, and madame firmly believes her daughter is happily married to this d'Arcy and knows nothing at all of the Perivale that a girl named Carter married. Isabella's clever enough to know she mustn't outrage the sense of respectability that goes with her mother's generation, and I don't doubt she's deceived that mother."

"But—but why this terrible deception?" Miss Brandon persisted. Gees made a little gesture of impatience.

"My dear child, don't you see? Once she's inveigled Hunter into one of those trips to London, she's got him! Denlandham is under the impression that she has her own private fortune, and so she has—but she's getting it from Hunter! New clothes, anything she wants, and he has to pay. He knows she doesn't care a button for Perivale, knows she'd as soon as not smash Perivale's life by proclaiming what's going on and then making a bolt for it, if he—Hunter—doesn't stump up. Or it may be that he wants to see the love of his life well-dressed and prosperous-looking, wants her to be somebody to rouse pride in his manly breast when they meet over a sick housemaid at Denlandham House or some pretext of that sort—if you refer to those notes you'll see she goes visiting, and there is some sick retainer at the House to visit. So what have you? Talking to you like this and answering your questions makes it clear to me, and you're a blessing if ever there was one—the perfect secretary, and no small shakes as lady detective, either."

"That's quite beside the point, Mr. Green," she said rather severely—but she coloured with pleasure, all the same. "You wanted to discuss this Denlandham case, not me, I believe."

"You're right, and I'm wrong, as you generally are, Miss Brandon," he assured her. "The case, the whole case, and nothing but the case. What's the next point that's perplexing your agile brain?"

She displayed a slight frown of annoyance.

"Where, how, why, does Nightmare Farm come in?" she asked. "How can you connect this rather sordid—very sordid—intrigue between those two with what happened to this Miss Norris, or fear that it can affect anyone else? It doesn't make sense, as I see it."

"The extra-physical, as I prefer to call it, rather than use the terms supernatural or sub-natural, never does make sense, Miss Brandon," he answered "because the things or beings involved in it haven't any sense, from a human point of view. Count up all the ghost stories you have ever heard or read, from the old clanking-chain ghost in armour to Wells' magnificent story of the red room, and there's no sense in any of it, from a material viewpoint. Because these extra-physical beings are not strong on sense. They have desires, and strike right across human understanding in trying to gratify them. But they use human evil, as in this case, as a means to gratification. Just as they use the unmeant evil of séances, and all the prying curiosity of morbid minds, to gratify their desires—gain strength from their human dupes and work on and through them. Just so with these things. Hunter and this woman have given and are giving that thing or those things strength, which so far is being used against other people, not against Hunter or Isabella. On that head, I'd say these things or beings have sense enough not to kill the geese laying their golden eggs—they're not harming the actual source of their strength while the evil goes on giving them power. They're silly, but not as silly as all that."

"You might be talking about apes in the Zoo," she said acridly.

"And a darned good comparison, except that these are not in the Zoo," he commented with some enthusiasm. "It is a sort of ape level of intelligence, with envy of the human and intense desire to blend with human, make itself human, though horribly evil in itself. Hence that possession of Miss Norris, and quite possibly, if the evil goes on and they or it retain their or its strength, of any other approachable human being, preferably feminine and of marriageable age. The ghosts who chase women, remember—who make the women of poison-dart tribes not fit to go on living, if they succeed in capturing their souls."

"One thing more, Mr. Green," she asked after a thoughtful pause. "If Squire Hunter wants to get rid of you with these things still active, why did he ever employ you to get rid of them as he did?"

"That's too easy," he answered. "Somewhere, somehow, Hunter heard of the grey shapes in Cumberland and how I put an end to them. He must have heard of me as Gees, not as Green, and more particularly not as a Shropshire Green. And not in any way would he connect me with the particular Green who did two years in the police force and was in on the raid on the Peppered Pig club when Isabella got caught, or he'd have run the other way so fast that he'd set fire to himself by friction with the atmosphere. No, he came to find Gees, and found himself up against one of the Shropshire Greens, but still didn't connect me with Police-Constable Green, and decided that if I could eliminate grey shapes I could also put paid to his gurgling whirlers. Engaged me, and I ran up against Isabella and put the wind up her to a point that made her go to Hunter—and keep on going to him, too, as witness my hearing her and smelling the scent she used when I stood outside the ›Hunters' Arms in‹ the evening. She told him at all costs to get rid of me, and he paid what he had agreed to pay and risked what might happen with the gurglers still active about the place, for the only harm they had done so far had been undone again. He tried to bluster me out of the place at Isabella's bidding, and had to report to her that bluster wouldn't move me. Then she gave him the line of peaceful persuasion that he tried when I went to see him at Denlandham House, and his sigh of relief when I said I was going back to London blew Robert's portrait clean out of it's frame. Or maybe it ought to have done that, and didn't, to be strictly accurate. Because Isabella's mortal scared of me—not of what I know about her sticky past, but because of what I might find out about her sticky present if I remained in Denlandham with an open eye."

"But—that is, assuming that this thing or being does exist—Hunter knows it's still active and dangerous," she pointed out.

"Not half so dangerous to Isabella and him as a nosey Green poking about Denlandham and picking up information, possibly putting two and two together, finding out that Hunter was absent from the village from the fourteenth to twentieth of February last, as was Isabella, and making up his mind, vulgarly speaking, to blow the gaff."

"Which you wouldn't do," she suggested.

"I'd do nothing that might cause pain to Perivale, no matter what felony I have to compound to avoid it," he said. "But Isabella judges me by herself, probably thinks that if I found out all this which I already know, I might follow her example, fill my pocket out of Hunter's."

"She's a most unpleasant character," Miss Brandon said decidedly.

"Maybe," Gees half-assented. "I can't be quite certain of her motive in

all this, marrying one man apparently to be near another, or possibly to make an anchorage for herself in the knowledge that she's getting on in years, or—I don't know. But then, one never can know all that impels another human entity, and still less the impulses governing the extra-physical. I never knew fully what motive or motives drove the grey shapes to act as they did."

He offered his case, and she took a cigarette which he lighted for her, together with one for himself.

"And that's all, for the present, Miss Brandon," he said. "Charge up an hour's overtime, and I'm immensely obliged to you for this airing of my views. Transcribe that interview to-morrow, not to-night."

"One thing I can't understand," she said. "How do you think you will put an end to this—this extra-physical thing, as you call it?"

He shook his head. "I dunno, quite," he confessed. "The direct way would be to take a double-barrelled shot gun, empty one barrel into Angus d'Arcy Hunter and the other into Isabella Perivale, of course. Eliminate the two sources from which this trouble gains strength to manifest itself, as it did before when this present Hunter's forbears followed evil rather than good. But I'm too fond of me to try that course. I know there's something at Nightmare Farm which appears to make it and its vicinity home to them—or to it, though Miss Norris insisted it was a they, and I'm going looking for that something as soon as Nightmare is unoccupied, for a start. As to whether it is they, or they are it, until I find out some more I'm keeping an open mind, which is as useful as a fur-lined coat in a blizzard, though you may go all numb and silly with either. At present, I incline to they rather than it."

"If there is anything at all," she observed.

"This is London, Miss Brandon," he told her. "You've got a nice electric train to take you home, probably an electric cooker to make your dinner when you get there, a wireless to turn on after you've dined, and a telephone handy if you want to talk to somebody miles away and hear their natural voices—which isn't grammar, but recites far greater wonders than these whirling gugglers, and yet you accept them as perfectly natural and see nothing strange in their being to your hand. Out on you for a sceptical materialist, able to believe nothing that isn't a product of a limited company and included in the quarterly account, or paid for as you pay for your season ticket!"

"I didn't say definitely that I don't believe in it—or them," she protested. "Only you must admit it is outside ordinary experience."

"Gugglers, Limited," he remarked reflectively. "Whirlers produced to order—five per cent, discount on quantities of one dozen upward. Terms, cash within thirty days. If guggle-and-cluck is required, add twenty-five per cent, to quotations for plain guggle. Rate of whirl guaranteed for twelve months, and defective ones replaced free of charge, if the defect is caused by other than fair wear and tear—whirl and guggle, I mean. Special quotations for large quantities."

"In other words, you're doubtful yourself," she accused.

"An open mind, Miss Brandon," he said gravely, "is as valuable as a Rolls-Bentley, and either may fail to get you there. I keep both. Now one word of advice, before we say good-night."

"And that—?" she asked.

"Do not look behind the door of your room or in the wardrobe before you undress to-night, and do not look under the bed before you get into it."

"I won't," she promised calmly. "Good night, Mr. Green."

Chapter 13

Recall

The morning's mail lay on Gees' desk, each letter opened and with its envelope neatly clipped on its back, and Miss Brandon stood beside the desk. On top of the opened letters she had laid one marked "Personal" and still in its uncut envelope, and under them all a sheet of paper with numbers down its left-hand side, corresponding to the numbers she had accorded to the letters. Gees withdrew the sheet, merely glanced at the first opened letter, and scrawled "Rats" against the figure 1 on the sheet. Then he took the second letter, read it, and marked against 2—"Reject. Soften it down." And so on through them until he came to the last but one—his secretary always arranged them so that he could get rid of the impossibles first—which he read carefully, and even scanned a second time.

"Ah-humm-m!" he observed. "Did you think I'd take this on, Miss Brandon? Do I look like nosing round an office to find discrepancies in the accounts? In other words, am I a goat, or merely a nonentity?"

"I don't know, Mr. Green," she answered gravely. "They're a very poor lot this morning, and I ranged them in order as usual."

He merely inscribed "Reject witheringly" against the number of the inquiry, took a look at the last of them, and flung it down.

"When I go sneaking round for divorce evidence, Miss Brandon, you can go looking for a job as dresser in a nudist colony!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Green. The title, you see—"

"I don't care if her father was premier peer of the realm—and he's only a dirty little Liberal creation who paid for his title thirty years ago and swelled a certain party fund's chest—or if her mother claims descent from the Conqueror with three bends sinister between his time and Fair

Rosamund's!" He took up the letter and tore it in half. "There! Send those pieces back to her, with no comment."

"But—Mr. Green—" she protested, and left it at that.

"Send them back, Miss Brandon," he said, very quietly. "Just like that. We are confidential agents, not garbage collectors. And that's the lot for to-day, is it—apart from this personal letter?"

"All for this morning," she assured him.

"It's because I don't want another case while I have this of Hunter and his gugglers on hand," he reflected aloud. "The next attractive proposition will manifest itself when I'm ready for it. All right, Miss Brandon. Fire these back at their senders, get my interview with Madame Stephanie typed, and then you can finish that novel I was reading yesterday till you turned up—if you've got the patience. Of all the fat-headed drivel I ever tried to read, it's the fattest."

She left him, and he opened the "Personal" letter. As he had half anticipated, it was from Perivale.

Dear Mr. Green,

Norris called to see me this morning, and gave me your address. Otherwise, I should not have had the privilege of expressing my gratitude to you for your wonderful and altogether unexpected gift, though now I try, I find that expression in words is quite beyond me.

I am, selfish though it may be, acting on your suggestion, and accepting the cheque personally for my family, especially for my eldest daughter, who, poor girl, really needs many things which calls on my stipend have not enabled me to provide. Not that she only will have cause to be grateful to you. My wife, I am glad to say, is able to maintain herself as she has been accustomed to do out of her own means, but all the children, and I their father, gladly and humbly accept your kindness, and if, as we are taught to believe, prayers bring answers, then an eightfold blessing will rest on you. I have less qualms of conscience in thus accepting your gift because Norris insisted on my acceptance of a cheque for a similar amount, which, as unexpected as was yours, will be used for the benefit of the church and parish—the only way in which I would accept it from him.

I am, as usual, full up with work, for a parish like this monopolises all one man's time. My daughter Celia, whom you met, is a veritable Martha in her care of me and the children, and my wife is

of the greatest assistance in taking from my shoulders a good deal of the work of visiting, especially at the House, where, as probably you do not know, all the staff is imported from other districts, no natives of Denlandham of either sex having been employed there since the time of the present Squire's grandfather. I might have been inclined to blame their superstitious prejudice until last week, but cannot find it in me to do so now. I wonder if I shall ever have the pleasure of seeing you again?

Probably in your busied and varied life, you have little time to spare for thought of Denlandham, but you may be assured of the prayers and lasting remembrance of all at the rectory—my daughter Celia especially asks to be remembered to you—and assured, too, that as warm a welcome as we can give will always be yours if you should come this way again. In gratitude and sincere regard,

*Very truly yours,
Arthur Perivale.*

P.S.—You may be interested to know that the “cure,” as it is called in the village, of Miss Norris has made a great difference here. There is a feeling among the villagers that all is well, now, and that, to use a familiar expression, “the ghost is laid,” for good.

“She would take Denlandham House off his shoulders,” Gees reflected, “and I wonder what Mrs. Hunter thinks of it? Thank you very much, Mr. Perivale, for useful information. But it isn't laid, sir—it isn't laid! Heaven send they have cause to keep their complacency till it is, but Stukeley isn't due out for five more days, yet.”

He went and leaned in the doorway of Miss Brandon's room, and assured her, when she paused in her transcribing to look up at him questioningly, that he wanted nothing whatever, but just felt like that. She went on with her work for a little while, and then stopped.

“Mr. Green, I simply can't type correctly with you looking at me like that. I'm sorry, but I can't.”

“I suppose I am rather a disconcerting sight,” he observed placidly. “The bank chap at Ludlow distrusted my face, and altogether I'm losing confidence in myself. And now you make it worse. Well, I'll go out and get some lunch, in the absence of anything better to do, and maybe you'll come and lunch with me as a peace-offering. Yes?”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Green, but I already have a lunch appointment,” she said. “Otherwise I should have loved to come to lunch with you.”

"Stumped again! I'll be back about three, Miss Brandon, in case of any inquiries or anything of the sort. Don't work too hard."

He opened the telegram, and glanced at it.

"No reply, Miss Brandon. Give the boy a push, and let him roll gently down the stairs. It'll wear them less than if he walks."

The message consisted of five words only. "Stukeley left this morning. Norris." Gees glanced at the desk calendar before him.

"Five days early. That means, probably, that he's forfeiting a month's pay rather than stay till the thirty-first. And after buying a lock for that trapdoor, too!"

He went to his room, and with a sort of leisurely discrimination packed a suitcase. When he had it locked and ready, he went to Miss Brandon's doorway again, hatted and ready to go.

"I won't trouble to take the script of that interview with me, Miss Brandon. No special instructions that I can think of. I'll probably ring you from the other end as I did before, and find out how things go at this end. And I'll be back with the case finished, but I don't know when. If beyond the end of the week, there's plenty in petty cash for your salary and overtime. And so to Denlandham."

He went straight out to the garage where he kept his car, placed his suitcase in the back, and drove off, with no tarrying at his father's town residence as on the last setting out for Denlandham. It would be too late to take any action that day after arriving, but he would be ready for what he proposed to himself to do, as early as he chose to set about doing it after the next day's dawn. Stukeley's unanticipated departure perturbed him: for the sake of no more than five days the man had sacrificed a month's pay; possibly he had heard of some other post and had given up this to secure it, but Gees did not think so. Rather did he think that Stukeley and his worried-looking wife had been unable to endure Nightmare any longer, and so had fled.

If that were so—the miles between Gees and Denlandham grew fewer as he reflected—whatever tenanted Nightmare in addition to its human occupants must have been ominously active. Perivale's letter had spoken of a reassured village, but it carried only up to a day or thereabouts earlier than Norris's telegram, and what had happened since Perivale wrote, to drive Stukeley out? The man was not over-imaginative; he had felt the influence of Nightmare, and had warned Gees against the place: also, he had fastened down the trapdoor of the loft and locked the room which Gees himself suspected of being the centre of the trouble

that made its home in the house, but he had appeared stolidly determined to stay on to the end of the month, as he had agreed with Hunter. And, it appeared, had not been able to stay on—had been driven out.

May Norris's release would make a difference, of course. Given that—as Gees believed—there were two of those presences, both were outside humanity, now, both capable of inflicting whatever harm such beings could compass. And two together would be far stronger than one in one place and one in another; they could aid each other, pool such intelligences as each of them possessed, and so work far more evil. In addition, they could draw more and more power from the evil that was in Denlandham, if Phil Bird had been right when he said that human wickedness was strength to them. For the effect on the character of the wrongdoer, of such evil as Gees now knew existed in two people there, is cumulative: those two who wronged Perivale without compunction and so terribly were dragging themselves down by their own acts, radiating evil which the beings that took their strength from human crime lapped up as a kitten laps milk, gaining more and more vigour as Hunter grew less and less mindful of honour and duty.

Odd, that only the wrong-doing of a Hunter could waken them to activity. In the period that had elapsed since Robert Hunter brought back these familiars from the East, there must have been men and women as bad as any Hunter in Denlandham, possibly worse, but only when a Hunter ran counter to accepted standards of conduct—more, only when a Hunter outraged such standards—did these beings manifest themselves. Isabella was a mere accessory, Gees felt, as far as they were concerned. Had it not been a Hunter who shared her guilt they might and probably would have remained quiescent, judging by the previous appearances, as Phil Bird had called them. And why had even Robert Hunter, near on devil in human form as he appeared to have been, built the House rather than restore the home of his family? Had he feared Nightmare as it was feared now, even by such a one as Stukeley, or—?

The long car sped north-westward with Gees taking every advantage he could on the way to shorten the time of his journey. He came to a standstill only under the chestnut tree outside the ›Hunters' Arms,‹ and entered the bar in time to hear Tom Myers speaking.

“Gorn, they are. Reckon Squire ain't goan' to git noobery else to live theer, neether. What wi' Mr. Norris, an' then them—”

He broke off with dropped jaw at sight of Gees, who advanced to the bar and held out a hand which Nicholas Churchill grasped joyfully.

“Dang my buttons, mister, but I'm rare glad to see thee agin! Us niver

reckoned thee'd coom back like this. What'll I gi'e thee—a pint while t' missus gets thy sooper? T' room's waitin' for thee, too."

"Good hearing, Churchill," said Gees. "Aye, make it a pint—and get Tom Myers another, dang his old eyes! One for Jacob, too—and you, Tod, we mustn't leave you out if you can hold another."

"Aye, mister, I got a holler leg," Tod assured him. "It ain't nigh filled up, yit, an' I'm a rare 'un at drinkin' healths."

Churchill paused only to summon his wife through the wicket at the back and inform her of their guest's return, and then he turned to the business of serving pints, thoughtfully assuming that Gees intended him to have one with the rest. And Gees drew a long sigh of relief: Tom Myers' words had as good as told him that, beyond the flight of the Stukeleys, nothing abnormal had happened in the village. Had there been anything to transcend the desertion from Nightmare, it would have been a topic for talk here to-night, overshadowing Stukeley's departure.

"And how are things going on here?" he inquired of Tom after his health had been duly drunk by the four recipients of his bounty.

"We eats our grub, mister, an' we manages to sleep pretty well,"

Tom assured him, "but it do be tur'ble f'r us when it come to work. Us don't like that no more'n ever us did, but us gotter live, I reckon."

"Us ain't gotter live, us wanten live," Jacob Hood amended severely.

"Happen it's that way," Tom admitted. "Mind me, it du, o' when Fred Butters went to owd Doctor Adams—dead an' gone, now, Doctor Adams is. Fred wur a tur'ble skulker, an' owd Doctor Adams knowed it, too. Fred went along t' him, a groanin' an' a grumblin', pains heer an' aches theer, an' the owd doctor knew all he wanted wur to skulk while his wife took in washin' to arn money to keep him an' the childern. An' the owd doctor towed him—I know what'd be good f'r yu, Butters.' An' Fred, not suspectin' nuthin', says—'An' what might that be, sir?' Sorter groanin' an' painin', he 'peared to be when he ast it. An' owd Doctor Adams bellered at him—fair bellered at him—'A good ground ash stick acrost y'r showders, ye lazy varmint!' An' they say Fred Butters run outer there like a rabbit, all the way hoam, an' hid hisself behind the copper. But it dedn't cure him. Nuthin' would."

A brief consultation by Nicholas at the wicket behind the bar, and then he turned to Gees, just as Tom Myers ended his recital.

"T' missus says it's latish, sir," he announced, "an' theer's nowt but cowed beef an' pickles f'r thy sooper, wi' some green stuff t' make a salad. 'Less

happen tha'd wait while she puts a match to t' fire an' fries thee some ham an' eggs."

"Cold beef, by all means," Gees responded hastily, knowing that it was a hundred to one chance that he would face eggs and bacon in the morning. At Nicholas' request he handed over his suitcase for conveyance to "t' same room as thee had afore," and then listened to the talk of the worthies while he waited for the cold beef to be laid ready.

Talk of crops and weather, of corns and bunions, a sow that had had a litter of nineteen young 'uns, mother and family all doing well, an unusually fine crop of onions on Jacob Hood's 'lotment, old Martha Evans having the doctor in again, and probably it was only her rheumatic, poor owd soul, though she'd been threatenin' to die any minute these last ten year, an' happen her daughter Jinderline (Gees suspected Martha of romantic tendencies in the early days of her married life, and translated Gwendoline as a correct rendering of the name) 'ud not be tu sorry f'r herself when owd Martha did pop off. All normal village talk: apart from Stukeley's premature departure, evidently, nothing that might evoke comment beyond the normal had transpired in Denlandham during the two days and a half that Gees had been absent from the village.

"Yu sim to like this plaace, mister," Tod piped from his corner.

"Yes, it's an attractive village," Gees answered, knowing full well that the little man wanted to draw him as to his object in returning.

"Happen yu think o' settlin' heer," Tod suggested.

"Well, I don't know about that," Gees said doubtfully. "I've not seen enough of it to make up my mind, yet."

"Better'n Lunnon an' plaaces like that," Tom Myers observed gravely.

"I du read in t' paaper as they do be f'rever gittin' theirselves run over i' them parts, an' it's all that Horble Isher's doin', it seem."

Gees was saved from reply to this somewhat unjust aspersion of the activities of the one time Minister of Transport by Nicholas, who announced that t' cowl beef wur in t' dinin' room. With a general good night to the worthies, who responded heartily, Gees went to his meal, and found in addition to cold beef a plate of cold chicken and ham cut and placed before his seat, evidently as an appetiser. There was a fresh and tender lettuce cut into four, and, to follow the solids, a dish of trifle and a rhubarb tart, with a half pint jug of cream.

"Us niver reckoned thee'd coom so laate," Nicholas apologised from the doorway. "Else, t' missus'd a got thee a proper sooper. Happen tha'll maake do on odds an' ends f'r once, mister?"

"If these are odds and ends, never bother about the middle,"

Gees assured him. "One more good pint, and I'll count myself in clover." Having finished the pint and done his best with the odds and ends, he remembered the car and went out to move it into the stable. He had opened the door and was about to get in when a voice came to him from the road, and, turning, in the light of a half-grown moon, now near its setting, he recognised the rector.

"Mr. Green! Well, I am glad to see you here again! How are you?"

"Quite fit and cheerful, sir." And, shaking hands, Gees saw real pleasure in Perivale's expression.

"Just arrived, eh?" Perivale suggested. "And what a car!"

"It likes travelling," Gees admitted. "And how are you, sir?"

"Busy, as usual. I've just been to see old Martha Evans in response to an urgent summons. I don't know if the old lady really means to die this time, or whether it's just another false alarm. I've had so many of her urgent summonses in the last few years."

"In fact," Gees remarked, "she's an old nuisance. I've heard a few remarks about her in the bar here to-night, among other topics."

"There is always one of that sort in a village," Perivale said, "and Martha has her good points. You'll look in on us at the rectory to-morrow, Mr. Green? Both I and my daughter will be terribly disappointed if we don't see something of you now you're here again."

"I'll hope to have time to make a call—in the afternoon, say."

"Admirable. And—did you get my letter before you left London?"

"Got it with me now," Gees assured him. "I thought I should see you, so didn't answer it. You wouldn't have had the answer yet, if I had. Many thanks for it, and I'm glad you took my advice."

"Neither in that letter nor in any other way can I express—"

"One moment, sir," Gees interrupted him. "If you say another word, I'll crawl under this car and not come out again till you've gone. If I could have thought of any better way of acknowledging your kindness, I'd have taken it, but my brain was all woolly—it goes that way at times. Now you want to get home, I know, and I want to put this car away. My regards to Miss Perivale, and salaams to Harold and the Isle of Wight—I've still got to meet the rest of the family. Oh, sorry! Remember me to Mrs. Perivale. Inexcusable, that omission."

"Not at all, Mr. Green. My wife will be pleased to hear you are back among us, if only for a short stay. Are you staying—but I won't keep you talking now. We shall look forward to seeing you to-morrow."

He went his way, and Gees, getting into the car, damned coincidence most heartily, and bestowed a curse or two on old Martha Evans for getting the rector out at this time of night. For, after this meeting, Perivale would certainly tell his wife that Mr. Green was back in Denlandham, and Mrs. Perivale would lose no time in passing the information on to Squire Hunter—and the very last thing Gees wanted was that Hunter should know of his presence before he had had a chance of going to Nightmare Farm. But the mischief was done, now, and he could not have asked Perivale to keep his presence in the village from Mrs. Perivale's knowledge: such a request would have set the rector thinking, trying to puzzle out the reason behind it: it had been out of the question. The stable door was open, he found, and the hens roosting inside. Therefore, he put up the hood of the car and fixed the side-curtains as well: eggs for breakfast were admissible things; eggs laid on his upholstery or floorboard rugs were altogether different, matter decidedly out of place. Moreover, on leaving the stable he carefully closed the doors: the hens might mistake the darkness for a continuation of night, and remain roosting as they were now until Nicholas or himself arrived to open the doors again in the morning: it was a slender chance, but a chance all the same, and he would not neglect to take it.

But when, in the beginnings of the dawn, he heard the cockerel issuing his challenge to all other cockerels in Denlandham, after the manner of his kind, Gees abandoned all faith in closed doors as a means of prolonging the slumbers of domestic fowls. Those cursed birds knew it was morning, he reflected, as he sat up in bed and reached for his cigarette case. And, after a few moments of reflection, he got out of bed, put on trousers and a dressing gown over his pyjamas, and in slippers went down and out by the back door of the inn. He opened the stable doors, chased the chirrawking and chattering fowls out from their resting place, closed the doors again, and went back to bed, but not to sleep. For the cockerel, out of resentment, perhaps, crowed persistently and raucously until human time for rising, and, eyeing him out of the bedroom window, Gees meditated throwing boots and hairbrushes, but refrained. Not out kindness, but because he knew he would miss: the cockerel crowed from an eminently safe distance.

Chapter 14

Unlawful Entry

“I must apologise for appearing as early as this, Mrs. Cosham—”

“Early, sir?” A smile of amusement entirely altered the vinegary-faced woman’s expression, and made her almost attractive.

“Half-past nine early? You don’t know anything about a farmer’s life, I can see. We had breakfast and finished with it an hour ago. And if there’s anyone welcome in this house at any hour, it’s you. Do come in, Mr. Green.”

“Just a word with Norris, if you’d be so kind,” he asked, entering the hallway, and pausing to note that the grandfather clock had been made by J. Pollexfen, of Truro, in 1756. He was still wondering what connection the Coshams had with the West Country when May Norris appeared and held out her hand to him with a dignity—even a sort of reserve, he would have said—that contrasted strongly with her attitude when he had parted from her at the end of Nightmare roadway.

“How nice to see you again, Mr. Gees,” she said. “Do come into our special room—the one you know. Daddy won’t be a minute.”

He followed her into the room, and received Mrs. Norris’s greeting, a hearty welcome back to Denlandham, and a hope of seeing him often.

“My husband’s gone to look at a cow with Cosham, but he won’t be more than a minute or so. Do sit down, won’t you? May, look after Mr. Green while I go and see why your father isn’t here yet. Perhaps that girl couldn’t find him, but I know where to look.”

“No, don’t trouble, Mrs. Norris,” Gees began to protest, but she left the room without heeding him or waiting for the end of his sentence even. He looked at the girl, standing aloof and cool—inexplicably so!—by the claw-legged table. Lovelier than ever, he thought her.

"I expect you know a little about farming, Mr. Gees?" she asked.

"To quote your doctor, empirically more than by precedent, Miss Norris," he answered, with a flashing memory of dapper Haverstock.

She smiled. "He's just a fool," she said, and moved from the table to seat herself on a carved-back chair which, even for Gees, made the tenth commandment a mere futile restriction. "If I don't sit down, I suppose you won't," she observed. "But it's a cow that calved the day before—before I came back. And it looks like milk fever. I don't know if you realise it—it takes only a very little time to get attached to animals, even a cow. And though it isn't daddy's cow, I'm troubled!"

"I can quite understand it," he assured her. "What's the bother, anyhow? I've got a way with animals, if I could help."

"You?" She looked as nearly contemptuous as May Norris could look. "It's not a Pekingese, nor even an Alsatian. It's a cow."

"Much more useful than either of the others," he observed. "I wonder, just in case I could do anything—might I see the animal?"

"It isn't even ours," she pointed out. "Daddy's only gone to see it with Mr. Cosham out of the goodness of his heart."

"Credit me with a little of that quality," he urged, "and take me along to look at this cow. Fools rush in to some purpose at times, though you might not think it."

She shook her head. "If you talk of yourself like that, I can't talk to you at all," she said. "I'm not so forgetful—"

"But the cow, Miss Norris—the cow!" he interrupted.

"Very well, then." She rose to her feet. "Come and see it, since you appear to insist. Though if two experienced farmers can't—"

She broke off as Gees followed her out toward a back exit from the house.

"Once upon a time there were some experienced doctors," he remarked. "But that had nothing to do with animals, only a particularly charming lady. Not a fair analogy, now I come to think of it."

She turned to face him, all the colour gone from her cheeks.

"Do I keep on my feet to tell you that wasn't fair, or say it on my knees, Mr. Gees?" she asked tremulously.

"Miss Norris, I'm terribly sorry," he answered. "It was an unforgivable remark, I know. I do apologise, very humbly."

"And meanwhile, you wanted to see the cow," she reminded him, and turned to lead on toward the range of farm buildings.

"Since you say you're troubled over it, I wouldn't go without seeing whether a mere amateur can do anything," he answered.

She went on, and he followed, to a small shed in which the cow had evidently been segregated. Inside the shed stood Cosham and Norris, and Mrs. Norris too, beside a cow obviously in great distress. Norris started at sight of his daughter and Gees.

"Why, bless my soul, Mr. Green! I was just coming along, but this cow—it looks as if nothing more could be done—"

"What has been done?" Gees asked, interrupting him, while Cosham offered a hand and Gees shook it, silently as far as he was concerned.

"Everything, I reckon," Norris answered for the cow's owner.

"The calf died, you see, and she won't give her milk. We've tried even throwing her, but nobody can make her yield it. And maybe you know what that means, very soon, too, by the look of her."

"I'd say I do," Gees admitted. "Just a minute, though."

There was an armful or so of green clover in the manger before the animal, and, moving up near her head, he took out a handful of the stuff and held it out to her. Yoked as she was, she could not get at him, but the flourish of her horns showed her opinion of his offer, and she moaned, rather than lowed, in her pain. Still holding the handful of clover, he scratched her neck gently, and worked forward to scratch behind her ears. The pained moaning ceased.

"Get some hot water, somebody," he bade.

Mrs. Norris ran out. Gees went on with the gentle scratching, and began working backward of the animal, along her spine, and then down toward her udder. Norris and Cosham and the girl watched him.

"That's wonderful," Cosham said softly. "She wouldn't let anyone go near her like that, before. Not even Bill Marsh, and he's always milked her, ever since she had her first calf."

"Temperamental repulsion between the cow and Bill Marsh, Mr. Cosham," Gees told him. "Animals have a group-soul—but this is no time to talk theosophic maunderings. Ah! Thanks so much, Mrs. Norris." He dipped first one hand and then the other in the jug of almost scalding water that she put down in the straw beside him.

"Now we'll see. Coo, old girl! Yes, I'm talking to you. Coo! Cooo-oo-o! Gently, now."

He grasped a teat with his painfully-heated hand, stroked it, pressed it—and the milk flowed, a half-clotted, thin, yellowish stream. The cow mooed her relief before he had induced half a dozen of those streams to

flow into the straw in which she stood, and Cosham breathed an audible sigh of satisfaction.

"Mr. Green, you've saved me forty pound," he said.

"Then shut up and let me finish," Gees ordered, in little more than a whisper. "She's giving her milk—don't interrupt."

And, squatting on his heels with his head tucked into the cow's flank, he milked her dry, while his four of audience—for they could hear the hissing streams of milk impinge on the straw—stood dumb. At last it was finished, and he went to the cow's head, moving stiffly after remaining so long in one cramped position, and scratched behind her ears while she licked at his disengaged hand.

"Well, that's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen!" Cosham said.

"A mere matter of affinity," Gees told him with a final stroke down the front of the cow's head. "Probably, in some previous existence, I was a calf. I hope I made good veal, but it's doubtful."

May Norris leaned against her father, helpless with laughter.

"Nothing to laugh about, May," Cosham said solemnly. "He's saved that cow—forty pound, if she's worth a penny."

He looked surprised when Gees himself began roaring with mirth, and staggered out from the shed to lean against its wall and go on laughing.

"Well, I reckon you're a genius, Mr. Green," Cosham told him. Gees got his breath back. "Not that at all," he said. "She recognised me. Obviously, a calf from way-back. But don't tell anyone."

He saw May Norris gaze at him, and took her father by the arm.

"Got those tools I told you about?" he asked.

"Well, sir, what do you think me, after what you done for us?"

Norris answered, with a hint of resentment in his tone.

"Sorry—I thought we should have had more time," Gees said.

"Never mind. Come right along—don't give that cow too much green stuff, Mr. Cosham. Dry food and a bran mash or two will suit her better. Come along, Mr. Norris, and we'll see how much of a lawbreaker you are."

"Even if it comes to that, whatever you ask, I'll give," Norris promised.

"You said there might be a way I could repay you."

"And you've got the tools. Well, we can get going, then."

May Norris faced him, preventing his return to the house.

"Mr. Gees, you'll be careful—for him?" she asked.

"So careful, that whatever he incurs, I'll pay," he promised.

"And—and for yourself? I can't forget what you did for me."

"The calf has grown into a bull, Miss Norris," he told her solemnly. "A whale of a bull, in fact. Woe to any toreador that crosses its path. Stand back, and let your father and me proceed."

He rejoined Norris and Cosham, neither of whom had heard the little interlude. May Norris took her father's arm.

"Saved me forty pound, you have, Mr. Green," Cosham remarked.

"According to Maurice Hewlett," Gees responded, "that's the sum which raised trouble between Richard Lion-Heart and the Duke of Burgundy, and spoilt a whole crusade. But that was gambling, not cows."

"I'm much more concerned over the poor cow than the money,"

May remarked across her father. "How—what made you able to do it?"

"I suppose I've got to return thanks to my father—for once," he said. "He made me go through the whole rigmarole of farming when he wanted to turn me into an estate manager, and I even learned to milk cows. Maybe my beefsteaks of hands help to make me a good milker, too. The experience comes in useful for once, as most of 'em do, sooner or later. Probably when I go to gaol I shall learn something useful."

"No fear of that, Mr. Green," Cosham dissented with energy.

"I dunno," Gees retorted dubiously. "Mr. Norris and I are just going to qualify for about seven years apiece—but don't tell anyone. If you collect those tools, Norris, we'll get along. The sooner it's over, the happier I shall be, I don't mind owning."

"Well, you're a rum 'un, if you don't mind my saying so,"

Cosham observed in a puzzled way.

"Rum is my middle name," Gees assured him, and moved to enter the house. "But, as I said before, don't tell anyone."

He grinned at the rather mystified farmer, and followed May Norris into the house, while her father turned aside to get the required tools. In the room that he knew, she faced him—of her mother, he had as yet seen nothing since returning to the house, nor was Mrs. Norris present now.

"Nightmare?" May asked.

"Quite possibly it won't deserve that name after we've finished there," Gees told her soberly.

"It will be—my room," she asserted rather than asked.

"There's a little blue bow down on the floor," he said. "I wondered when I saw it if it were yours. Is it?"

She nodded. "I remember throwing it away," she answered.

"Soiled and spoilt—they must have left it when they packed my things."

"When it was new, the colour was not one tenth as lovely as that in your eyes," he said. "But tell me—what have I done?"

"Done, Mr. Green—Mr. Gees, I mean?" she asked in a puzzled way.

"Done," he echoed solemnly. "You're—well, different from what you were the other day, when we walked together to look at Nightmare."

She shook her head and smiled. "There's no difference, except in your imagination," she said. "I mean all I told you then, just as much as I did then. There is no difference in me."

Norris, entering then with the pickaxe and two crowbars across his shoulders, put an end to Gees' questioning. With—"Well, we mustn't waste time, Miss Norris, and I expect I shall be seeing you later," Gees turned to the doorway, and Norris followed him out to the car.

He stopped, there, to get out two fairly large electric torches—"one for you and one for me, in case we need 'em—have to go up to the attics," he explained—and a .32-bore Webley automatic pistol, all of which he had in readiness in the side pockets of the car. Then he relieved Norris of one of the crowbars and shouldered it.

"Fair division—you're bigger than I am," he observed. "We'll walk and leave the car here—the distance is next to nothing."

"Over a mile, altogether," Norris said. "But that's not much."

With no more conversation they tramped to the gateway of Nightmare Farm. All along the rutted way between the two great hedges may-blossom petals sheeted the ground like soiled snow, and in a little breeze that troubled the stillness other petals were fluttering down thinly. Norris gazed up at the sky which, brilliantly clear earlier in the morning, was now becoming overcast, while away in the west the edge of a blue-black cloud appeared. The freshness had gone from the air, which now was moistly warm and even oppressive, in spite of the breeze.

"Storm coming," Norris remarked. "Thunder, by the look of things."

"Appropriate weather for a job like ours," Gees commented. He lifted the gate just so far open as would give them ingress, and they went along the slightly-rising roadway. It had been no more than a deeply shadowed walk, may-blossom scented, when Gees and May Norris had gone along it to look at the farmhouse.

Now, the sinister quality of stillness and watchful presences had returned to its gloom. Gees could see that Norris felt the influence equally with himself, saw that the farmer kept glancing quickly, first to one side and then the other, and even slackened pace, once, to look back.

"Haunted," he said, in little more than a whisper, "or is it the storm in the air? It seems to me more than that—something else."

"If we're successful, it may be different on the way back," Gees said. "Don't yield to it—ignore it."

"What do you expect to find?" Norris asked after a silence.

"I haven't the slightest idea. Anything—nothing. Something, I think, but what it is I simply don't know."

They said no more. Without actually echoing, their voices appeared to them to have just such a quality as that of a note struck on a piano with the loud pedal held down, a sustained resonance that added to the oppression in which they plodded on, endlessly, it seemed.

Yet at last they came out to view of the farmhouse, under a sky more clouded than they had seen before entering the roadway, while the blue-black curtain over the west was higher, bigger. Without pausing, they went on to the house. The window of the room that had been May's was opened a little way, but the other three were closed. Gees tried the door, and found it locked.

"It would be," Norris remarked. "He might have left a window unfastened at the back, though. Let's leave the tools here and see."

They stood the crowbars and pickaxe against the wall, and went to the back. But both the kitchen and scullery windows were fastened, and the back door, giving access to the kitchen, had been bolted on the inside—it had no lock, evidently, for there was no keyhole.

"It's a case of unlawful entry," Gees remarked thoughtfully.

"Let's go and estimate the chances of getting in at that upstairs window. If we can't, it means either breaking a pane in a downstairs one, or forcing the door—and since it's only locked from the outside it will be easier to force than this one with bolts shot top and bottom."

They returned to the front, and he looked up at the window and shook his head. The sill was too far above the ground for entry; there might be a ladder somewhere about the buildings, he knew—but might not.

"The door, I think," he said. "We might find a way of closing it again, but we can't repair a window pane. Let's see."

"What about a ladder, if there is one?" Norris asked.

"I propose we go into the house together, not singly," Gees answered. He did not explain, nor did Norris ask for explanation. He went to the door, and, turning its handle, pushed at it and saw that it yielded about an eighth of an inch back from its framing. Then he took up the pickaxe, intending to thrust the flat end of the blade in the crack and force the lock by leverage. But Norris laid a hand on his arm.

"You'd damage the woodwork, that way," he said. "Stand back."

He set his great shoulder against the door and thrust at it. The slot for the bolt of the lock, not mortised into the wood but screwed on the inside of the lintel, broke away, and the door itself swung open to reveal the passageway, dark, except for such light as entered by the doorway, since all doors leading to the rooms were closed. The two men stood, gazing in, and from the stairway, invisible to them since it began at the inner end and neared the outer wall in its ascent, came a faint rustling and clucking, chattering sound that ceased almost as soon as it began. Gees thrust his hand in the pocket that held his Webley automatic, and got in front of Norris to call out—

“Is anybody inside there?”

Dead silence followed. He backed, and took up a crowbar.

“Come on,” he said. “It might have been a creaking or something of the sort, caused by bursting in the door like that.”

Norris took up the other crowbar and the pickaxe and followed him in. He threw open the door of Stukeley’s living room to admit a light that only half-illuminated the staircase, and to reveal the cheap, scanty furnishings of the room still in it. Then he led the way up the stairs and found the key in the lock of the room that Stukeley had kept locked. Opening it, he saw the room empty—and now the storm cloud was higher in the sky, the light of day lessened, and the house was eerily still, a stillness of waiting presences rather than of emptiness.

“We’ll get to work, I think,” he said in a matter-of-fact way.

“Where—how?” Norris asked, looking round the room.

Gees put down his crowbar, and pointed at the projection of the chimney. “There,” he said. “Break through that wall.”

“Into the chimney?” Norris asked again, rather incredulously.

“I think not,” Gees said, and began stripping off his tweed coat and vest.

“In fact, I’m practically sure not.”

He took up the pickaxe as Norris began removing coat and vest, and went to the middle of the projection. With the pointed end of the implement he struck at the wall near the ceiling—and the point went in almost up to the helve, while plaster spattered down. He withdrew the point and struck nearly a foot lower, with the same result, and Norris watched him. A third blow, about six feet above floor level, brought away plaster, but the point of the pick did not enter. Instead, it thudded against solidity, and Gees lowered it to stand and gaze.

“Yes,” he said. “Built out from the chimney, but not up to the top of this room. Brickwork where I hit last, and only plaster above that to keep the line. We’ll clear away a bit, I think.”

With the flat end of the pickaxe blade he chipped at the plaster to either side of the point where he had struck for the third time. It flaked away under his blows, revealing bricks set as a very shallow arch, and with some three feet of them uncovered he stopped work.

"A room of some sort," he said. "I make it as standing out a yard beyond the line of the chimney in the room below, and quite possibly the chimney wall itself has been thinned here to give more width—with this projection, whoever did it could have got about six feet altogether. Six feet by about ten—a small room, but still a room."

"And I never noticed that before!" Norris exclaimed.

"Because you never looked for it," Gees told him. "I did, when Stukeley let me see over the place. That is, I was looking for anything there might be out of the ordinary, and saw this."

Again he lifted the pickaxe, and chipped two lines, about three feet apart, down from the shallowly arched line of bricks to the floor.

"We'll cut that bit out—if we can," he said. "Make holes through to the inside with the pick, and then lever it out with the crowbars. And whatever we do, we mustn't let it fall inward, because of what may be inside there. Here—you take a hand. You're stronger than I am."

He stood back and mopped away perspiration while Norris swung the pickaxe. A dozen or more crashing blows, and the point went through.

"Just so!" Gees remarked in a satisfied way. "Not more than a brick and a half thick. Not the chimney wall at all, in fact."

"Only a brick and a half," Norris assented, pausing, "but bricklayers did better work when this was built than they do now."

Abruptly he broke off and stood listening. The purr of a motor sounded up to them, and Gees went to the partly opened window and looked out, while Norris stood listening.

"Gosh! Come and look here! Hunter himself, too!"

Norris went to the window, and saw, as Gees saw, a motor van with, scrolled on its side, the legend—"COLLINS & SONS, COMPLETE HOME FURNISHERS." Beside it Hunter, on a big, glossy-coated bay horse, gazed toward the house. The noise of the van's engine ceased.

"No need to have met you with the key." They could hear Hunter's voice distinctly through the opened window. "Somebody's broken in."

Then, glancing upward, he saw Gees' face, and his own set vengefully. "Still there!" he exclaimed. "Wait here, you—I'll tackle him alone. Don't come inside till I tell you—hold this horse for me."

A man got down from the driving seat of the van and took the rein as Hunter dismounted. Norris turned and looked at the fallen plaster.

"What now?" he asked.

"Wait, and leave it to me," Gees answered.

Bending down, he took his cigarette case and lighter from his coat pocket, and was lighting a cigarette when Hunter stormed into the room.

"Got you—you too, Norris!" he exclaimed exultingly. "Both of you!"

"Have you, though?" Gees asked nonchalantly, and blew a whiff of smoke. He held out his case to Norris. "Have one?" he inquired.

"Have I?" Hunter retorted fiercely. "Breaking and entering enclosed premises—malicious damage to property—the pair of you will sleep in cells to-night. As a justice of the peace I charge you—"

"Don't!" Gees' command cut across his angry denunciation like a pistol shot. "Listen, first! Mr. and Mrs. d'Arcy, two hundred and twenty four A, Upper Gloucester Place. February fourteenth to twentieth of this year. Now think whether you'll charge us with anything."

"Why—" Hunter began, and ceased to stand for some seconds, staring with dropped jaw. "Why, you blasted fool," he went on, "you've no evidence! What the devil are you talking about?"

"The very best of evidence," Gees contradicted coolly. "Madame Stephanie, in fact, who believes—you know what she believes, though. Think hard, and then charge us if you feel like risking it."

Through another long pause Hunter stood staring. Again Gees held his cigarette case out toward Norris.

"Do have one," he said. "It goes well in a breather."

Norris took a cigarette, but did not put it to his lips. Gees closed his case and, dropping it on his coat, held out his lighter. Norris took that too, but did not use it. At last Hunter spoke.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly.

"Earning my pay—finishing the case," Gees answered quietly, and flicked ash from his cigarette. "You told me yourself you mean to burn the house down, so I don't see that any damage we do to it—"

"Ah, finish it, then!" Hunter interrupted him, and took a step toward the door. "And may it land you in hell!" he added fiercely.

"Curses of that sort sometimes come home to roost, Squire Hunter," Gees warned him. "Do you still intend to charge us—"

"Damn you—no!" Hunter interrupted again, and stamped out and down the stairs. Then Norris put his cigarette between his lips and lighted it, handing the lighter back to Gees, who dropped it beside the case.

"Well!" he said softly, and left it at that.

"Quite," Gees told him. "Listen, though."

Through the window came the sound of Hunter's voice, harsh, angry—

"You can go back with that van. I'm not having the furniture taken away to-day, after all. Come again one day next week."

"But—all the way from Shrewsbury—" the driver protested.

"Two of us, me and my mate, sir."

"I don't care if you've come all the way from John-o'-Groats! That furniture is not being moved out to-day. You're not going into this house to-day. Charge your time and the use of the van up to me, and it will be paid with the rest of the account. Here—give me that rein!"

Gees saw him mount the horse and wrench it round to face toward the roadway. It went off at a gallop, and the van driver got back into his seat and started up his engine. The van went about, and began following Hunter as he disappeared between the hedges with sods of turf flying back from the horse's hoof-falls. Then Gees turned away from the window.

"Scuppered him," he observed, "and now we can get on with it. If you'll do a bit more with the pick, I'll lever out some bricks with a crowbar. I think this one with the point will be handiest for it."

"You mean—he's letting us carry on?" Norris asked.

"It looks like that to me. We can tear the whole house down, if we like to keep at it for a week or two. Let's get busy again."

Chapter 15

The Dweller on the Threshold

Both men stood back from the results of their work and mopped away perspiration. Where Gees had chipped lines in the plaster, there were now two jagged, nearly vertical slits in the brickwork, with a closely spaced, horizontal line of holes between the slits and just under the shallow arch that supported whatever ceiling there was to the hidden room, while before the wall lay a mess of broken bricks and rubble. Full daylight had given place to deep gloom, for now the sky was entirely hidden by the black cloud that had moved slowly up from the west.

“As I said, they were good bricklayers, then,” Norris remarked.

“I don’t think it was Union labour,” Gees admitted, “and probably they did more than an eight-hour day, too. Gosh, it was a tough job!”

A few drops of rain pattered against the window. Norris started at the sound, and gazed behind him, rather nervously.

“The weather makes me jumpy,” he said. “I wonder—is it going to be a thunderstorm, or just rain? Showery, the forecast was.”

“Well, what about finishing it?” Gees suggested. “If you stick a crowbar through one of those slits, and I do the same with the other and we lever gently, that oblong ought to fall outward.”

They acted on the suggestion, one on each side of the door-like oblong, and standing well back to be clear of the falling brickwork. Under their joint leverage, the brickwork cracked and bulged a little. The wall to either side cracked too, but the main effect of the pressure showed between the two cuts, the bulge growing more pronounced.

“Try a shade lower,” Gees advised, and they shifted their crowbars six inches or more nearer to the floor. “Now—steadily—”

The oblong was yielding—a loose brick thudded down on the boards. Then a blaze of lightning half-blinded both of them for seconds, and as fully two-thirds of the cut-out portion of wall crashed to the floor between them a deafening peal of thunder took on and prolonged the sound, to die to a rumble, in which the sharp rattle of rain and hail on the window panes became audible. And, vaguely, dimly, as the specks before their eyes ceased to dance as result of the lightning flash, they saw what Gees had foretold, a chamber extending back for a good six feet from the wall through which they had cut, to another wall of bare red brickwork—the chimney itself, thinned here for added width of the hidden room, which, if the daylight had been normal, would have been visible to within knee height above the floor, since below that level the brickwork had held firm, and concealed what was inside. But now, with the less than half-light in which they stood, and the dust thrown up from their demolition, they could get no more than a vague glimpse of that farther wall, at first.

Stooping, Gees took one of the electric torches from his coat pocket, snapped on the light, and directed it into the secret room, and at that Norris cried out, an inarticulate sound that was half a shriek. For, ranged in a row, stood or hung suspended or merely floated in air three shapes, if shapes they could be called that had no form nor substance, but were no more than ever-moving, coiling and twisting columns of dense fog that vignettted out to nothing at their edges. Of a little more than the size of a tall man in outline, they were faceless, armless, legless, mere columns of shifting, twisting fog, and as the ray of light revealed them they went—“Gluck-gluck-gluck”—in an incoherent chorus that was like nothing so much as liquid—some thick, oily liquid—gugbling out from a full bottle. So for a second or a year—for with sight of them time had no value for Gees or Norris—they remained, and then the two on the left swayed and glucked and spun toward a hole that the torchlight revealed as the entrance to a stairway in the chimney wall. The one on the right swayed and spun out through the opening, into the room where Gees stood his ground while Norris reeled helplessly back toward the window. And, as the misty, tenuous thing came on, Gees bent forward and struck at it with the torch—but the shining nickel tube struck through it with no shock of impact, and Gees recovered his balance in time to see it go whirling, glucking, through the open door toward the stairs. When he ran to the doorway and rayed the torchlight downward, the stairway was vacant, and, shivering with sudden chill, he turned back into the room and saw Norris, his face ghastly white,

leaning against the wall by the window, shivering too, and with his teeth chattering.

"Have we—have we let hell loose?" he croaked.

Gees went to him and struck him in the chest, a smart blow.

"Man, get past that dweller on the threshold!" he bade sharply.

"Dweller—what?" Norris asked, trying to recover self-control.

"Fear—you don't know the phrase, I see," Gees told him.

"Fear—the dweller on the threshold that divides the material world from theirs. Fear—get past it—get rid of it! If you'd been alone in this present state when that thing came out, it might have got you as one of them got your daughter, made of you what she was."

"God forbid!" Norris exclaimed.

"That's right—keep that Helper in your mind—call on Him if you feel the need, and you're safe. But get out of that state of fear. We haven't finished with our work yet, by the look of it."

"They—where are they now—what are they?" Norris asked after a pause in which he appeared to get nearer to normal poise.

"Where, I don't know," Gees answered. "Whatnot ghosts, in the ordinary sense of the term. They couldn't vanish as ghosts are supposed to do—they had to get away, and did get away, just as material beings like you or I would do. Astral, I'd say, with just enough of material substance gathered to them as will make them visible to ordinary sight—about as much as there is in a patch of fog. But traceable, visible, elementals with the devil's own seal set on them. Untaught spirits with far less than human intelligence, but with power of their own gained from—gained from—" Suddenly he leaned against the wall beside Norris. "Gosh, but I'm utterly done!" His voice dropped to no more than a muttering. "Like—like I was after Perivale drove that one out. I know!" His voice strengthened again. "That sudden chill—they drain away your physical vitality when they come near you. Perivale was like that too, after—after it had gone."

He pressed his hands to his cheeks and drew long breaths. Save for that sound, and the rain plashing on the window panes, with once a flash of lightning and a distant, lesser crack and rumble of thunder than the first, there was a long stillness in which both men leaned side by side against the wall. The plash of rain had decreased to a patter when Norris spoke, and stood erect again.

"Man, but you're wonderful!" he said.

"I did two years in the police force, and they teach you wonderful things if you've got any wits at all," Gees answered. "One was self-control—in

face of nearly anything. To tell strict truth, Norris, I wasn't far short of being as frightened as you were, down inside me."

"The storm is passing—it's getting lighter," Norris remarked after another silence. "And—what more do you want to do?"

"See what's in there." Gees nodded toward the hole in the wall and, stooping, picked up the electric torch that he had dropped. "Get the other torch out of my coat pocket. We can't have too much light."

Drooped wearily, grimed with dust and sweat, he stood waiting while Norris found and switched on the second torch. Then they moved together toward the knee-high remnant of wall in the opening, and stopped as one man when the light fell inside. Stopped, and stared.

"Heavens above us!" Norris exclaimed whisperingly.

"All round us, too," Gees said, "just as surely as any elemental shapes can be. But—yes, as I live! Robert Hunter! Now I know"—his voice rose to an exultant shout—"why they made their home here! Look, man! The white streak in the beard—the original of the portrait at Denlum House! Robert Hunter! Oh, this ends it!"

"Is he—is he still alive?" Norris asked fearfully.

"Smash past that dweller, man!" Gees retorted. "He's dead and yet not dead—but there's nothing to fear. Material, and we can deal with him materially—fetch him out, and end their homing here."

"Fetch him out?" Norris echoed incredulously.

"What else? D'you think I'll let him stop in there?"

They looked in at what appeared to be a low bier, an oblong covered by a pall that had once been black velvet, but now, to within an inch or less of the outline of the body, moth had eaten away all but the linen backing of the fabric, which showed as a dark and dirty grey. The body lying rigid on this pall was that of a tall man clad only in a sort of sleeveless shift, this also of a dirty grey that might once have been white, and that covered him from neck to ankles. His hands were clasped under his shaggy black hair, and the bare elbows stuck up, one on each side of his head, while from under it twisted, horny slivers projected—finger nails, grown to a foot or more in length since he had been placed or himself had lain down there. So, too, on his bare toes the nails had grown to horny slivers that curled and corkscrewed back on to his feet, horrible to see. His long hair was shaggy and unkempt, a black mass that covered the clasped, hands under his head, but his long black beard, with its startling streak of white—longer by inches than it had been when his portrait was painted—lay neatly straightened down his chest. Except that his eyes were clouded by a greyish film, it was the exact original

of the painted face Gees had been studying when Mrs. Hunter wheeled herself up to him in the entrance hall of Denlandham House. Robert Hunter, and, but for the filmed eyes, decay had kept so far off from him that he might have been alive.

"Is he alive?" Norris asked again.

"Strictly speaking, no," Gees answered. "Bear in mind, Norris, all this is capable of rational explanation. Keep your head, and I'll try to make it all clear to you, later. For the present—I don't know what he's lying on, but we'll see if we can get it out, whatever it is."

"But—but ought we to interfere with him?" Norris objected.

"He's made a little hell-centre here for about a century and a half, or even more, so it's time he came out," Gees answered coolly. "Come on in and give a hand—let's fetch him out and see what happens."

The thunder cloud had passed over, now, and the light in the room was fast increasing. Gees stepped over the barrier of brickwork and, lifting the edge of the pall, tossed it upward so that it covered the feet of the body and revealed the lower part of an oblong oaken frame set on stubby legs, with the interior of the frame laced and crossed by rope as support for a mattress or whatever might be placed on it—an old-fashioned pallet bedstead, in fact. He grasped the end and lifted.

"Light—quite light," he said as he put it down again. "He's dry, dusty-dry and not half the weight he was in life. You take this end and I'll take the head." He moved alongside the pallet as Norris stepped into the secret room, put his torch down beside Robert's head, without switching it off, and took a grip on the oaken framework with both hands. "Now, lift. I'll swing round and back out of the hole, and you come face first. Quite light, you see. Easy—back a bit."

Stepping over the brickwork, he backed out into the bedroom, and Norris, bearing the foot end of the pallet, followed. They set it down before the window, and Gees threw back the pall from over the feet.

"And that's that," he said. "Why they made home here. I suppose, if the Hunter vault in the churchyard were opened again, you'd find Robert's coffin—and brick ends inside if you opened that. Obviously he had this chamber made for himself, probably after he'd built Denlandham House and moved there with his family, and either came here when he knew he hadn't much more ordinary life to live, or else had himself brought here and put away like that after he'd appeared to die."

"Appeared to die?" Norris queried in a puzzled way.

"He didn't quite die, or he wouldn't be as complete as we see him, even dried and sere as he is. Apart from the blood stream, he is all there, as

you can see.

"And as for the dryness, a Doctor Alexis Carrel has just proved or is now proving that dried organs of the body can be brought back to life—glands, brains, heaven knows what. A sort of holding life in suspension, apparently, and then reviving it. It looks to me as if these things anticipated Carrel, held Robert Hunter here in a state of suspended animation, and derived some life of their own from him. Not enough to manifest themselves—they had to have other food and warmth and strength for that—but this undead-dead Robert Hunter was home for them, a nucleus round which they could gather when they seemed quiescent. So it seems to me, and now—what to do with Robert!"

"A puzzle," Norris said, and frowned perplexedly. "But—why did he do it, Mr. Green? Why—why harbour those—those horrors?"

"Couldn't help himself, I'd say," Gees answered. "Somehow he put himself in their power when he was out East—quite possibly he was possessed by one of them as your daughter was till it was driven out, and the other two we saw are familiars of that one, managed to get here with it. That's all conjecture. Unless there's some record at Denlandham House—and if there is we're not likely to see it—unless there's something of that sort, it will never be known how the body got here, even, or how he managed to get this room enclosed without knowledge of it leaking out, let alone the actual facts of why he did it. By what I've heard, he was as much devil as man, so quite possibly one of these things was the driving power behind his actions, and his own spirit was driven out from this body here, killed—"

He broke off, for Norris thrust out a pointing figure toward the form on the pallet, his eyes wide with utter horror.

"Look!" he almost screamed. "Look—rotting before us! The eyes!"

"Quiet, man!" Gees bade. "It's all natural, quite rational. He's been lying in still darkness, and now the light and air—all natural."

Natural it might be, but even to him the sight was awful. Where the filmed eyes had been were now nothing but shrunken, empty sockets. The dry lips shrivelled back from the yellowed teeth in a mirthless, ghastly grin—all the face and figure were shrinking, changing moment by moment; With a tiny rustling sound the toenails of one foot dropped from the browning, wrinkling toes, and themselves curled and shrivelled toward nothingness, or at best a pinch of powder. Disintegrating hair fell from one side of the head, exposing the fleshless skull, and then one of the upraised arms parted at the elbow, the bones of upper

and forearm falling separately and unclothed by any flesh on the moth-ravaged backing of the velvet pall. Then Norris ran out and clattered, half-fell down the stairs, and Gees followed him more slowly to where he stood outside the house, gazing toward the roadway's end.

"You've got to take hold of yourself, man," he said gravely. "I'd never have asked you to help if I'd thought you'd be like this."

"Like—but it's hell and the grave!" Norris exclaimed. "I've never seen, never in my worst dreams." He broke off, dreadingly.

"Think again," Gees bade. "Norris"—earnestly—"I don't want to be priggish or try to pretend I'm not a bit shaken too, but do bring reason to bear on—on that, for heaven's sake! It's been laid away in utter stillness and darkness, preserved in some way by those things as that Doctor Carrel preserves organs till he wants to reanimate them—and now all that state has been destroyed—by us, I'm glad to say. Of course he disintegrates—there's nothing to hold him back. All of natural processes that they held back rushes at him, does in moments the work of a century and a half, and it's a shattering thing to see, I admit. But rational—as rational as the growth of a blade of wheat, or milk fever in a cow unless someone can come along and make her feel confidence enough in them to yield her milk. I'm trying to give you similes you'll understand, not cracking myself up over what I did with that cow. Push past the dweller on this threshold, and be yourself!"

Norris thought awhile. "I'm a rotten coward," he said at last, bitterly. "You're right, too—you ought to have brought a better man."

"Gosh damn, man, I didn't say anything like that!" Gees protested. "I wouldn't want a better man than you with me. It's just that knowledge kills fear, and I've got more knowledge of this than you have."

"Do we go home now?" Norris asked abruptly.

"And leave that up there for Hunter to find?" Gees asked in reply. "Or for someone else to find? Then, an inquest—in this country they'd hold an inquest on Noah's bones if they could find 'em under the splinters of his ark. Hunter, as owner of the place, giving evidence of our burglarious entry, your name mud and mine too—he'd see to that. Moreover, the things that made this place horrible have gone—can't you feel that they have? We've nothing but the material to face."

"Except in the attics—two of them went up there, remember," Norris countered. "But—what could you do with it—him?"

Gees pointed at the mere, silently.

"It's deep, away at the back and to the right, there," Norris said. "Some say bottomless, but that can't be, of course. Then—"

"Come back up with me," Gees urged in the pause.

Norris stood silent, gazing at the open door of the house.

"Or must I go back up there alone?" Gees asked him.

"No—no! I'm not as bad as that. I'll come with you."

They went back, up the shadowy staircase and into the room. And now, they saw, there remained little more than a skeleton on the pallet, its bones fallen and still falling apart, the skull utterly fleshless and grinning, the hair and beard no more than tiny, woolly wisps. Gees lifted the backing of the pall at the foot end, and the dry bones rattled against each other as they heaped toward the middle of the pallet. He lifted the head end, and the skull and bits of vertebrae slid down among the ribs. He folded both ends over, twisted the sides—the linen emitted clouds of dust, but retained strength enough in itself to stand the strain—and tied them, once and again, making a shapeless but secure bundle. Then he took one of the crowbars and thrust it under the knot.

"To make sure of its sinking," he said.

"But—oughtn't he to be given Christian burial?" Norris objected.

"By whom? And d'you want to face that inquest? Then again, I'd say every bone in Denlandham churchyard would stand on end in protest if these were laid there in consecrated ground. The man was little better than a devil in life, in this half-death he made his body a home for things little better than devils, if any, and—Christian burial! I've known dogs that deserved it more, and a cat or two as well."

He lifted the crowbar with its dangling, rustling bundle, and went out and down the stairs again.

Norris followed him out and to the mere, along the side of it farthest from the house, till he stopped.

"Deep here?" he asked.

"Deepest—I could never find bottom," Norris answered.

Gees swung the crowbar once, twice, and thrice, the last a mighty, heaving swing. Bar and bundle went out toward the middle of the mere, splashed, and vanished instantly from sight, and Gees turned away.

"Now the attics," he said.

"Man, is there no end to it?" Norris demanded, half-angrily.

"I told myself I'd clean up Nightmare," Gees retorted. "You go home if you like. I'm going to finish the cleaning up, now I'm here."

Without a word Norris followed him. Back to the room with its broken-down wall, and the gloomy recess beyond. Gees took up the torch he had put down from the pallet, switched it on, and directed it toward the

narrow stairway leading up from the back left-hand corner of the secret room. As much of it as was visible receded directly from the back and parallel with the end wall of Robert Hunter's hiding place.

"Comes out in the attics directly over the scullery, by the look of it," Gees commented. "Half a minute, though."

He took the pick, and went out to stand under the trapdoor that gave access to the attics. It was still padlocked, and he got the point of the tool in the loop of the lock and wrenched. Lock and staple both came away and clinked down on the floor. Then he half-struck, half-pushed, at the trapdoor itself with a sudden jerk, using the end of the pickaxe handle, and the door flew up, hung poised for a fraction of a second, and fell flat back from the oblong it had covered.

"Just in case of needing another way down," Gees remarked. Then he went back to the staircase up which those two tenuous, guggling things had fled from the light, took out his automatic pistol and switched on the torch he meant to carry in his left hand.

"Just a second—I'm coming too," Norris said.

He switched on the second torch and followed Gees to the staircase. It was roughly hewn in the thickness of the chimney wall, narrow and straight, and the brick steps appeared as fresh and unworn by the tread of feet as if newly cut. Gees went up until he came to a flat wooden barrier at the top of what was apparently the highest step.

"Is it a cure for turnip-fly, then?" he asked.

"Eh?" Norris, behind and much lower, asked. He could see nothing, for Gees' shoulders touched both walls, so narrow was the stairway.

"A mere—Ah!" Gees had found that he could rock the wooden barrier from side to side, and he got it so far over to the right that he was able to thrust a hand past its edge. A push sideways, and it yielded easily to let him pass through and stand on a beam of the attic floor—or rather, a beam on which no flooring had been laid, so that the laths and plaster of the first-floor ceiling were visible in the ray of his torch. He held the squared piece of wood aside until Norris had emerged from the stairway, and then let it swing back to cover the hole, when it was indistinguishable from any of the upright beams that helped to support the rafters of the slated roof.

"Clever," he said. "It's one chance in a thousand that anyone would ever find that beam was movable instead of fixed."

"I never guessed it," Norris remarked. "But then, as you can see, these attics have never been floored for use—Whup!"

A twittering, fluttering bat had struck him full in the face. Scores of them fluttered and shrilled, disturbed by the lights and flashing through their rays—Gees shook off one that had fastened on his hand by its claws. He heard or imagined a different sort of rustling, somewhere back among the shadows thrown by the maze of beams, but could not be sure of it. Stepping away from the chimney, he saw the oblong of dim light that marked the trapdoor opening, and nothing else, no movement nor sign of life but that of the swarming bats.

“Norris, they’re gone!” he said confidently.

“But how do you know—and how could they go, if you say they can’t vanish ghost-fashion?” Norris demanded perplexedly.

“Maybe they just floated off—I dunno,” Gees answered. “But I can feel they’re not here. These darned bats—faugh, get out, you brute!—they’re uncanny enough to frighten you, but I’m absolutely sure nothing else is up here to trouble us. They’ve gone—maybe gone out to join the one that scared us so when it bolted off downstairs.”

“What next, then?” Norris asked.

“Drop through the trapdoor—I’m not going back down that staircase, nor even going to look for the swinging beam,” Gees answered. “T” other way looks a lot easier, to me. Come on—we’re finished up here.”

He led the way, stepping gingerly from beam to beam, bending to dodge the timbering that supported the roof, and coming at last to kneel beside the trapdoor opening after pocketing his automatic pistol, and lower himself to swing by his hands and then let go. He stood from under, and Norris dropped beside him.

“One more look at the hole in the wall,” he said persuasively.

“This is getting monotonous,” Norris remarked, and grinned.

“If I’m anything like you, the look of us isn’t,” Gees told him. They were grimed from head to foot, dusty, cobweb-draped, as disreputable a pair as one could imagine, let alone find in duplicate anywhere. Again Gees entered the room that had been May’s, and again saw the faded blue bow lying in the angle of the wall.

“If we’d spent a morning in a cement factory, and an afternoon wrestling with sweeps and getting the worst of it, we might be nearly as bad as we are now,” he said. “But look!” Passing on, he had come to a halt facing the opening they had made. “Now d’you see why those irons are planted inside the chimney, up to this level and no farther?”

There was a plain door of planks and crossbars in the back wall of the secret room. Gees took the remaining crowbar and, entering the place,

struck at the door with the round end of the tool. A broad plank fell, and a shower of soot dusted down and round him.

"Complete—sooty as well as all the rest, now," he remarked. "I think you'll find that plank on one of the hearths, if you look—the one directly under us, probably. That was his way in, I'd say—up the chimney and through that doorway. The easiest way in, anyhow, and whether he came by it or down from the attics is more than we shall ever find out. And not a solitary paper or hiding place for any!"

"Did you expect that, then?" Norris asked.

"I didn't expect anything—didn't know what to expect. I felt sure this was a hidden apartment of some sort, but you could have knocked me down with this crowbar when I saw Robert with his white-streaked beard. And by heck, Norris, we've broken up their home! We've driven 'em out, made this place no more than any other to 'em, and Nightmare is a nightmare no longer! D'you get that? And oh! for a gallon of Nick Churchill's best! Two pints to get rid of the dust, and the rest for sheer enjoyment."

"Cosham keeps some good cider," Norris ventured.

"Lead me to it, man! Half a minute, while I get my coat and weskit. I propose jettisoning the pick and crowbar—I'm far too done in to carry either of them. Lead me to that cider, and have him tap a fresh barrel. One won't be enough, I know!"

Chapter 16

Merely Homeless

Vigorous and waving in the light breeze after the storm, the dark-green field of wheat struck Gees anew as a remarkably fine crop when, with Norris, he reached the inner end of the roadway to return to Cosham's. He wished now that he had driven to Nightmare instead of walking. The exhaustion that he had felt and Perivale had evinced after the exorcism in Denlandham church was on him again, though perhaps in rather lesser degree than then: Norris beside him dragged wearily, too.

"You farmed well, here," he remarked.

"I think I said to you once before, in farming you've got to give to get," Norris answered as they began their walk along the sodden strip of may-blossom petals. "Got to pet and coax the land, just as you did with that cow of Cosham's, and it'll yield, give back double all you put into it. There's seasons to beat you sometimes, I know, but—well, suppose we'd had a drought the last few weeks, instead of rain as we have. A crop like that wheat covers the land in, keeps the moisture from evaporating twice as long as a poor crop would. So you win again."

"The old chap who taught me all I know about it—including making me learn to milk—told me that if you couldn't raise five quarters of any corn to the acre on reasonably good land, then you'd better go and get apprenticed to a sweep, because you'd never make a farmer," Gees observed. "Five as a minimum—given the season, as you said."

"And Nightmare's good land," Norris asserted gravely. "But—I felt all nervy when we came along here a little while ago. Now it's different. Maybe because I'm too bone-tired to feel anything else."

"It may be that," Gees assented, though he knew it was not. Only that those travesties of shapes had gone—where? On that head, he knew

only that the roadway was free of them, as the house had been when he and Norris left it.

"I think I'll try that cider some other time," he remarked when they were near the gateway leading to the road. "Just hop into the car when we get back to Cosham's, and buzz off to the inn and clean up. I'm in no state even to pat a dog on the head, let alone meet a decent human."

"You could clean up just as well at Cosham's," Norris urged.

"No, I'll get along. And, by gosh! I've just thought of it. I left the car hood down! It'll be swimming, after that storm."

"All the more reason for coming and getting a clean up—I can get one of Cosham's men to mop it out for you. He's got a bathroom, too."

"Bathroom?" Gees thought of the mere basin and jug on the old-fashioned washstand in his room at the inn. "The bloated sybarite! All right—I cave. But let's sneak in by the back way."

Of that, though, there was no chance. They emerged from the gateway to see May Norris within a few paces of it, and still hurrying till she saw them. Then she stopped, facing her father.

"Mother and I both got so anxious about what had happened to you," she began, "that I—why, what on earth have you two been doing?" She gazed from Norris to Gees and back in amazement.

"Cleaning up," Gees answered before Norris could speak. "A messy job, as you see, Miss Norris. Lots of dust and a certain amount of soot, cobwebs in the attics—bats too. Oh, no end of things!"

"And now Mr. Green is coming in to clean himself up," Norris added.

"I'll hurry along and see to towels and hot water in the bathroom," she announced, and, turning, ran on ahead of them. They followed, in no mood for keeping pace with her. Mrs. Norris conducted Gees to the bathroom without comment as soon as he set foot in the house, and he spent a luxurious quarter of an hour.

"Now, if you don't mind waiting for my husband," Mrs. Norris told him when he emerged, "you can both have what ought to have been your midday meal. He's taken the worst off at the kitchen sink."

"But—" Gees began, and looked at his watch.

It was far too late, he saw, to go back to the inn for lunch. "Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Norris, it would be most acceptable. We've been working hard."

"Like navvies, by the look of you both," she said. "Oh, and May and I put the hood of your car up—she saw it was going to rain, and I helped her with it. I hope you don't mind."

"Just as much as I mind your hospitality now," he assured her.

"It was very good of both of you to think of it."

She escorted him to their room, and he saw the claw-legged table laid in a way which went to show that starvation and this household were utter strangers. By the table stood May, and she pointed at an enormous jug and two glasses as Gees followed her mother in.

"Daddy said you wanted a lot of cider," she observed. "I've just brought this in, and now I'm going to fill another jug."

"Don't, please," he urged. "I've had one bath—I meant cider to drink. And thank you very much for saving my car from flooding."

"It was a bad storm," she remarked, as her mother left the room.

"There was one big flash—it seemed to be directly over Nightmare, I thought, and mother and I both wondered what had happened—whether the house had been struck with you in it—you and daddy, I mean."

"It wasn't struck, though at first I half-thought it was," he answered, with a thought of the outward-falling section of wall and those three things behind it. "We were in the room you told me used to be yours. The little blue bow was still on the floor. I left it there."

"Just as well. It was—finished," she said with a hint of nervousness and a glance at the open doorway, as if looking for her father or mother to reappear. "Quite finished—spoilt," she added.

"Spoilt—yes," he agreed. "Far too much so for you ever to touch it again. I didn't wish to touch it—though it had been yours."

"You mean—what did you find?" She looked full at him as she asked.

He shook his head. "Dust and soot and cobwebs, as you saw," he said.

Then Norris entered, freshened and alert, himself again.

"Not started on the cider yet, eh? Pour him a glass, May—one for me, too. You sit there, Mr. Green. I feel half-starved, don't you?"

"Compared with me, a wolf in a desert would be a mere anaemic trifler," Gees assured him, and took the glass that May held out to him. "Here's to you, Miss Norris, and to the man who invented apples at the same time. Ah! ... Now I feel much more like an ex-policeman."

"But were you ever in the police force?" Norris asked. "Really?"

"Look at these hands," Gees replied. "If my feet were not under the table, I'd say look at them too. When I used to hold up a hand on point duty the shadow in the sky made old ladies open their umbrellas. If that's for me, you'd better leave it there and hand me the dish. I mean, it looks as if you intend to leave less beef on the joint than there is on that plate."

Hit him over the head and make him stop carving, Miss Norris. He's worse than Nicholas Churchill."

"Then they feed you well at the ›Hunters' Arms,‹" Norris observed, passing him the filled plate.

"If I ate as they try to make me, the doorways would need widening," Gees assured him. "No, thank you"—to May—"I never spoil the flavour of good beef with any sauce but horseradish, and he's given me enough of that. And this is good beef!"

"And if you don't stop talking, you'll never eat it," she observed as she put down the cider jug after refilling his glass. "Therefore I'm going to leave daddy and you to it, and go and find mother."

She glanced back at them from the doorway, hesitating a moment, Gees thought. A tall, graceful figure of a girl, far more tastefully dressed than one would expect to find her in such surroundings, and of uncommon beauty. Again, as she stood thus, Gees saw her in profile and realised what cause Norris had for pride in her. She turned her head still more to smile and nod at the two of them, and then had gone.

"I don't think we've spoiled her," Norris said. "Given her the best, and she's the only one. I wanted a boy. She'll marry and I shall lose her— young Hallam from the other side of Ludlow, I expect, though so far it's more on his side than hers. A boy, now—he'd have taken on where I leave off, whoever he married."

"Inevitable," Gees observed. "And this Hallam—a good sort?"

"One of the best. If she's got to go, I'd trust her to him as soon as to anyone I know. And she'll make him a good wife, too. She's fond of pretty things—and I like to see that in a woman, within reason—but she's got horse-sense, as you might call it, as well. Not mere cleverness, but something that goes deeper. If she marries Hallam, she'll complete him, if you know what I mean. Give him what her mother has given me, the drive to make the best of my life, and just that spice of fun and—I was going to say devilry, but it's not quite the right word. Sense of adventure in common things—d'you know?"

"Get on with that beef and don't talk so much," Gees advised.

"And I thought you'd piled me too much, but if I might have a leetle bit—"

"Hand me that plate, Mr. Green. Y'know, I can't quite realise what an extraordinary experience we've had. It'll come to me by degrees, I expect. I don't want to think about it too much now, else it'd spoil my appetite. The way he as you might say melted away—."

"Stop carving and give me that plate back," Gees interrupted him. "This beef's melted away some since we started on it, and I'm going in for the melting championship, if there is one. A spot more of that horseradish sauce, and the King is not my uncle."

When, satisfied as to food, they pushed their chairs back, Norris took a cigarette from Gees' case and accepted a light.

"We say nothing about—about him," he suggested.

"Say what you like—I'm keeping quiet," Gees answered.

"Squire Hunter might go fishing for bones and raise the devil's own hullabaloo," Norris mused. "I'll follow your example."

He smoked on it for awhile, thoughtfully.

"And what happens to those—those things?" he asked at last. "I mean—you seem to know a lot about them—what happens to them now?"

Gees shook his head. "Nobody knows much," he answered. "It's unexplored territory, for the most part. Very low in intelligence, but strong just now through—through a chance to gain strength, call it. Strong, anyhow—remember how they turned us both cold, and left us exhausted. That one that came out at us did, I mean. Strong enough to drain vitality from us two—for their own use, of course. And as I see it, Nightmare itself was not their centre—their home, as you might call it. What held them to that place was what we found there—what I threw into the mere as bones. That was their home, not the house."

"And now they've lost it," Norris suggested.

"I'd say that the bones I threw in the mere are no more to them than—the bone on that joint of beef," Gees answered. "It was the shape and form and likeness, capable, though you may not think it, of being brought back to life as"—he glanced toward the doorway—"Robert Hunter of nearly two centuries age. Destroyed, now—their home."

"But they're not destroyed," Norris said reflectively.

Gees shook his head. "Impossible to destroy them," he concurred. "What we've done to-day—well, take it this way. Consider those three as the mechanism of a watch. We've smashed the case of the watch, and maybe ripped off its hands as well. But the mainspring and hairspring are still untouched—the watch is still ticking away, somewhere, and I don't see any chance of getting at either mainspring or hairspring—any chance of stopping that mechanism and rendering them powerless."

Norris thought it over, and his cigarette shortened to not much more than a stub before he spoke again.

"Well, Mr. Green, what do you make the mainspring and hairspring that keep them going? Why can't you get at those springs as you got at what was hidden in Nightmare till you came along?"

Gees shook his head and glanced at his wrist watch.

"I can't," he said. "D'you know, we've been stuffing ourselves and getting all contented over it, and I ought to have been at the rectory a good hour and a half ago? Too late, now—I'll roll along and see if Perivale's free for a talk after dinner—and heaven help me to face Churchill after missing the lunch he probably tried to keep hot for me!"

"The rectory, eh?" Norris observed. "Well, the rector is one of the best, but—just between ourselves, Mr. Green—nobody in the place can stand that new wife of his. Infatuation, I'd call it, on his part."

"But there's nothing to be said against her?" Gees urged. Norris shook his head. "If my daughter went about painted and powdered like that woman, she'd feel the flat of my hand, grown-up though she may be," he said. "No, nothing definite to be said, but—well! The man's blind. Must be, or he'd tell her what any ordinary country village must think of a woman like her. Like—like a gorgeous poppy in a good crop of corn, and you know when you see it that if you don't root it out, it's going to seed and rob the goodness out of the soil. That's the present Mrs. Perivale—nothing against her, but herself."

"The soil being?" Gees asked.

"His family," Norris answered. "Seven of 'em. Miss Celia—salt of the earth, that girl, clever, good-hearted, and might be as good-looking as May if she had half a chance to make the best of herself. No more than servant to the rest of 'em, and her father can't see that she's using up her best years for them while that woman"—he stood up—"Ah! let's stop talking about it, Mr. Green, because neither you nor I can do anything. But tell me—have you had enough to eat?"

"Heaven help anyone who tries to make me eat any more," Gees answered fervently. "One more glass of that excellent cider, I think."

Norris poured it for him. "Why I asked—it's just on tea time," he said. "You say it's too late to go to the rectory—you'll stop and have a cup with us, won't you?"

"Let me go outside and walk about a bit," Gees pleaded. "I'll think about it, then. And it'll give a chance to clear this table of the wreckage we've left, too. Oh, you're good people up this way!"

He finished the glass of cider, and stood up too, grinning at Norris and shaking his head while he held out his cigarette case again.

"Not just now, thank you all the same, sir," Norris said. "I'd better have a bit of a talk with my wife, I think, but if you feel like a bit of air before tea, there's the orchard out at the back—Cosham goes in for fruit far more than I would—and it's pleasant there with the sun out as it is now. I'm glad you'll stay on for tea with us."

Gees found his way out. Passing the farm buildings, he looked into the shed in which he had milked Cosham's forty-pound cow, and saw her lying down and chewing the cud contentedly enough. Then he went on, lighting himself another cigarette, and found an apple orchard of young trees with whitewashed trunks and a reasonable crop of fruit in embryo on their branches. There were, he estimated, a good four acres of fruit trees, set in grass land with a circle of dug soil about the roots of each: Cosham was a practised fruit farmer, evidently.

He sauntered to the far end of the orchard and there stood, finishing his cigarette and ruminating, and saw May Norris approach him, apparently of set purpose. Then he threw away his cigarette end.

"I saw you come out, and came to look for you, Mr. Green," she said, rather uncertainly. "In case—in case we don't see you again—what were—what did you and my father do at Nightmare to-day?"

"Cleaned up," he answered coolly. "A lot of dust and some soot, as you saw before—before I had a chance at that excellent bathroom."

"You mean—you're not going to tell me?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I am not," he said with decision.

"My father won't either—I've just asked him, though I hadn't any hope he would," she explained. "You see, Mr. Green, I feel it concerns me, somehow. I can't explain that, but I feel it does."

Again he shook his head. "It doesn't," he contradicted.

"Over your lunch—you and he were talking about it," she half-accused. "After I'd left you together, I mean."

"We were talking," he said slowly, "about a very good young man named Hallam. At least, your father considers him a very good young man."

"Oh, does he?" she snapped. "Let me tell you, Mr. Green, the very goodness of that or any other young man isn't of the slightest interest to me. Nor any other quality Harry Hallam happens to have."

"Gee-whiz! That's a teaser in aspirates," he remarked. "Harry Hallam happens to have! Got it right, first time! Now tell me, Miss Norris, why am I degraded from my high estate?"

"Why are you—are you making fun of me?" she demanded angrily.

"Asking you a straight question," he retorted coolly. "You promised—promised, mind!—that I was to remain Mr. Gees to you. And now I'm degraded to plain Mr. Green. How have I offended you?"

"You haven't." She looked straight into his eyes. "I felt—well, it was noticeable, with everyone else calling you—calling you that."

"Might be—yes," he admitted thoughtfully. "I see. And—we've got it all to ourselves here, so I'm going to have things out. You didn't mind my leaving that little blue bow where it was, did you?"

"Why on earth should I?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, because it had once belonged to you, say," he answered deliberately. "Now go back to the day I went back to London, if you don't mind. You told me then you cared for me, felt a sort of tie between me and yourself, but only in a way that admitted of your telling it—nothing else that might make you feel embarrassed. Remember it?"

"Quite well," she answered steadily, but not now meeting his gaze.

"Yes. I remember it too. But if—I've got what you may consider a silly fancy, Miss Norris. I don't know, unless I put it to you. And so—I want you to tell me—and if the answer isn't what I want it to be, let's still go on being friends—I want you to tell me, now I've got you to yourself, whether—whether ... well—whether you could ever care for me in the way you couldn't talk about unless I asked you—whether you could care about me in another way enough for us to think about getting married. I'm no hand at this sort of thing—never tried it before, but—but—do you think you could?"

She stood before him, silent, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously, and he saw her shake her head slightly.

"Right," he said at last. "That's that. Now forget I ever said anything of the sort, and let's go on being good friends. Eh?"

"But—but"—she gave him an instant's glance—"I could, Mr. Gees."

"May!" His arms went round her. "May, darling—tell me quick! D'you mean that? I love you as I never meant to love anybody—d'you mean it? Darling, tell me!"

"So much—I didn't know till you'd gone—till there was only the empty road after you'd waved to me. So much—terribly. Till you said that, it frightened me. I—Oh, Mr. Gees, you don't know! ..."

Both hands against his chest, she pushed herself away from him, evaded his kisses, a flushed, breathless beauty.

"You said—as you never meant to love anybody. My dear, how I love your big hands! But give me time—let me speak to you."

He released her. "My dear," he said gravely, "you've told me enough without words to make me love you more than I did ten minutes ago—and I had an idea then that I'd gone the limit. I hadn't, I find."

"Your way of talking—all that makes you," she said. "But—because of that. Where one loves most, one thinks most deeply, and—I can tell you now, dear. When you drove away, that day, and I knew there would be no happiness for me like—like the miracle of your loving me—even then I began to think. No—please let me talk, Mr. Gees. I believe you do love me, now—yes, I know it. But think how little we know of each other, how different your life is from mine."

"All the more to learn—all the more happiness in learning," he said. "The root fact is there, May, and the rest will make our happiness."

"Will it?" She held both his hands and gazed up at him, and the violet eyes he had so soon learned to love were grave. "My dear, I've thought it all out—thought is very quick, when one loves as I love you. I've thought of what you are and what I am, the brilliant man and the ordinary farmer's daughter—no, don't interrupt, please! Different lives—so different! Different stations in life—so different! My father a tenant farmer, and yours—no, please don't interrupt! If this is to be, Mr. Gees—if I'm to have the thing in life I want most after so very little a time, I want to build a sure foundation before you and I begin building together. Do you see? Oh, Mr. Gees, I love you so! It isn't that I don't know, but you—you with all the interests you have, all the things you know and the life you live—I want you to be sure! We've known each other so little a time, though I knew you before I ever saw you with my human eyes. I know—but you!"

"May, darling, you make me want to pray that I may be worth a love like yours," he said soberly. "I knew you had it in you, but I didn't know all that was for me. You—you wonder-girl!"

"I'm not—I'm just human, and believe I've found the best gift life has to give me. But still—Mr. Gees, will you listen?"

"Solemnly and honourably, I'll listen," he promised. "You've owned you love me, and as long as you don't take that back ..."

"I couldn't. If you hadn't—hadn't said what you have said, I think I should never have been anything but May Norris. And even now—Mr. Gees, I want us to wait a year—one year."

"Gosh! That's a whale of a long while!" he said dubiously.

"A year," she insisted. "I want you to be quite sure—I've thought it out—you may count me un-maidenly for doing that, or what you like, but I have thought it out. I want you to do what you have always done, meet

the people you have always met, be just Mr. Gees as you were before you knew there was a May Norris, and then, if you still love me as you believe you do now—Oh, darling!”—she drew herself close to him—“I want to give you all myself and all my life! I’m—you’ve only just told me, and I’m showing you what you mean to me. I don’t care—I don’t care! You do mean it, but we’ve got to wait the year, and then I’ll know my man loves me as I love him.”

“And you?” he asked rather grimly. “If you forget it?”

“If that were possible, I’d write and tell you honestly,” she answered.

“Dear, I have no fear of myself—what I have given, I can never take back. It’s your life, your people, your interests, that make me say this. And I don’t forget—I owe you my very soul, my freedom from hell’s own ministers. Bad words for a girl to say, but you know they’re true. Mr. Gees, if you’ve got the courage, ask for what belongs to you because of what you did for me—tell me you want me now, and you shall have me. Quite freely, because I owe you that and I love you. Ask it of me!” She gazed up at him, confidently, and smiling at him.

“No.” He shook his head. “That offer convinces me, May. I’ll be patient for a year. The first of next June—yes?”

“If your love then is what it is now. Yes, the first of June next year. But be honest with me, Mr. Gees. If it isn’t, write and tell me, as I’d write and tell you if there were any possibility of mine growing less. And if you don’t tell me that, on the first of June next year I’ll come to you. Oh, how I love your big hands, and your eyes that say so much! ... Please, Mr. Gees, may we go back, now?”

Quite suddenly, out of nowhere, it seemed, for the sun shone as brightly as ever, a shadow came to his mind, and he heard or seemed to hear a faint clucking, chattering sound, somewhere not far off from them.

“Yes, darling, we’ll go back if you wish it. And I’ll be good and wait your year. D’you know, I’ve got a very charming secretary in my office, and I’ve been praying for something to come along and stop me from falling in love with her—and behold, it’s you!”

“Is she very charming?” she asked.

“Delightful,” he assured her, “but if I tried to kiss her she’d give notice or else walk out on me with no formality. So I don’t try.”

“You’re a bad man, Mr. Gees,” she accused severely.

“Haven’t I just told you I don’t try?” he demanded.

“It’s just as well to give you the year’s probation,” she remarked as they walked along between two rows of trees. “Else, I should never be sure

you really cared for me. But why didn't you fall in love with that secretary, if she's so charming?"

"I thought it out," he answered, "and you've convinced me I'm quite right. Almost as soon as we've found each other, know we belong to each other, you start dictating to me about this year of yours, and I want to dictate to her, don't you see?"

She thought it over. Half-way toward the inner end of the orchard, she stopped and faced him.

"If you wish—I offered," she said. "Now—tomorrow—if it means losing you, though only for a little while."

"Darling,"—for a moment he held her close—"you're wise as you're lovely. May, I'm quite sure of myself, or I'd never have spoken—because, as I told you, I never meant to love anyone like this. But the year will prove it to you, and we're both young enough to afford it. You're just as sensible as you're dear, and—and if you stand as far away as that, I'm going to rip around and say things. May—darling—"

Some five minutes or more later, they moved on toward the house. Mrs. Norris met them, looking rather anxious.

"May, you must have known tea was ready! It's positively stewed, now. Do come in, Mr. Green."

He put his arm round May and held her close to him.

"D'you think you could spare her, Mrs. Norris, with a year to get used to the idea?" he asked.

"Mr. Green!" The way of it reminded him of Celia Perivale's exclamation. "Why, you—you've hardly met her!"

"What have you got to say about it, May?" he asked, looking down at the girl.

"I love him, mother," she said.

Chapter 17

Where?

Norris <cried>, utterly flabbergasted: “But—Mr. Green, I’m taking one of your father’s farms!”

“And I’m taking your daughter, on the first of June next year. The limit is hers, not mine—I’d take her away now, but she wants to be sure I’m a decent and honourable citizen of our great empire. God bless her for it, and I’ll wait cheerfully for the best and sweetest girl between here and—I was going to say—well, never mind. The dearest ever, as you know her, I’m sure.”

“Aye, and she told me it’s her doing, the year’s waiting. To make sure of you, sir—she’s sure of herself, though the little you and she have seen of each other—well! And it’s my daughter and my landlord’s son, if you don’t change your mind in the year.”

“Norris, drop that ‘sir.’ To me, anyhow. The sweetest daughter a straight man ever had to give—damn it all, I’m going to be your son-in-law, don’t you understand? May, God bless her, is going to be my wife, on the first of June of next year!”

“God bless you both, sir. Never mind me—God bless both of you.”

“And you. If I could swing a pickaxe the way you did, I’d—I’d hire myself out to haul Lenin’s corpse out of its glass tomb and bury it properly. Sometimes, too, May and I will come up and look at the aurochs my father thinks as much of as he does of me, and you’ll see her then, even if we do go wild in the intervals. So don’t worry. Don’t think you’ve lost her, but just ask yourself where the devil is that chap taking her—and grow wheat like that crop at Nightmare. Six quarters to the acre, not five, if I know anything. Now I want just another sight of May before I go.”

E. C. V.

Nicholas Churchill <was> apologetic, yet remonstrative.

"Y'see, sir, 'twur a guse. T' first guse us've had since laast November. T' missus coot thee t' best paarts, an' thee uzzent theer! I tow'd her, thee might be coombered wi' many cares, but she dang nigh scratted me! T' first guse since laast November, an' she maade me git oranges to go wi'! An' thee wurn't theer!"

"Bear up, Churchill. I feel like a spot of sleep, and I'm going to see if it's waiting on that remarkably comfortable bed Mrs. Churchill makes for me. After that, if you'll turn out the bits I ought to have had hot if I'd had any decency at all, tell her, I'll mop 'em cold. Goose is goose, be it ever so—tasteish, and I'm on it like a bee on a dog's west end when he's going east. Goose for supper, by all means, and if I don't eat enough to please you, bring in the ham and eggs."

Nicholas, his hump more evident than ever, rubbed his forefinger along his mighty nose, and rubbed back again.

"Dost thee mean, sir, thee'll have t' guse first, or t' ham and eggs? T' missus'll sarve 'em which way thee likes, an' I'll tell her."

"We will begin on the goose, Churchill, and finish on it. From what I know of your providing, the only thing to be done with the ham and eggs after the goose is to throw 'em at the walls as decorations."

"Eh, then, I'll tell her t' guse—it ain't two month since t' walls was paapered. An' now I think o't, sir. Happen thee don't know Bill Marsh, Master Cosham's cowman?"

"I've heard of the gentleman—what about him?" Gees asked.

"He got himself circumcised—I mean circumstanced—so's the prevention o' cruelty come down on him—'tis all over the village. Ill-treatin' a yearlin', it wur. T' first time the prevention come down on anyone in Denlum. Us don't maul animals about, mostly."

"If I could get next-door to that cockerel of yours, I'd be a case," Gees ruminated darkly. "Never mind, Churchill—goose for supper, and me for a sleep in the meantime. Did you ever see a grig?"

"A what, sir?" Nicholas' eyes goggled as he asked it.

"A grig. Proverbially merry. That's me, to-day. So merry that if anyone comes to disturb me before, six-thirty, I'll strangle 'em. Reason for the mirth—I've just found out I'm going to get married."

"Well, sir, I wish thee loock," Nicholas said dubiously. "They say 'tis a lottery, an' I hoap thee's not drawin' a blank."

"The voice of experience. Call me in time for goose, but don't make it a minute too soon. I've got an urge—bedward. S'long, Churchill."

"We'll see thee's roused in time f'r t' guse, sir."

Evidently, Gees reflected as he climbed the stairs to his room, Bill Marsh was not the right type of man to handle cows that had lost their calves. He had frightened the animal, instead of gentling her and thus inducing her to yield her milk. The milk fever that Cosham had seen as imminent would, almost certainly, have supervened if Gees himself had not appeared and reversed the results of "throwing" and similar expedients. But Bill Marsh could go hang: for this present, sleep was all that counted, sleep with the memory of May's kisses and the lovelight in her violet eyes.

Gees, caught at last! And happy over it!

"Darling, I accept your decision—Oh, hell!"

"T' guse, sir." Nicholas Churchill loomed beside the bed. "'Tis cowl, but t' missus done the best she could wi' it. Happen thee'll be down soon? T' taters'll be cowl, else, an' thee missed thy dinner."

"I'll be down in two shakes of a maiden's prayer," Gees promised. "If you know anything more sudden than that, tell me about it from the foot of the stairs—and put a pint tankard alongside the goose."

"Aye. 'Tis good bitter, sir, if I do say it mysel'."

Somewhere about two hours later, Gees sat in Perivale's study, and the rector ruminated long and deeply over the story of Nightmare Farm, which Gees had told in detail, shapes and mouldering body of Robert Hunter, and everything that he and Norris had done and seen.

"This needs thinking over," Perivale said at last.

"The only thing I can see as needing any thought," Gees said, "is whether I ought to tell this present Squire Hunter what I did with the bones of his ancestor, or whether I keep it to myself, as I'm perfectly sure Norris will. Hunter doesn't like me, hates me like poison, in fact, but still I've got a—monition in my bones, call it—I ought to tell him what I found and dumped in Knightsmere."

"You're a singularly honest person, Mr. Green," the rector observed after a pause. "If you chose, you could have kept all this to yourself instead of coming and talking to me about it—not under any seal of confession, because the Church of England abhors any such foolish interventions between God and man—coming to me and asking my advice as between one man and another in ordinary confidence."

"Norris might let it out some time," Gees pointed out. "If he does not, I've got it on my mind. I, against Norris's expressed wish, remember,

deprived Robert Hunter of any chance of Christian burial—that is, deprived the bones that remained of any such chance, after his final dissolution. Ought I to tell the present Squire Hunter about it?”

“That is for you yourself to say, Mr. Green. In your place, honestly, I don’t know what I should do. Squire Hunter is an excellent landlord to his tenants, and has been a good friend to me, especially lately. But you say he dislikes you. Well, do as you please. I know him as a short-tempered man, capable of extreme generosity, but at the same time capable of violent outbursts against people he dislikes, and in particular I would cite the man Bird—Phil Bird, one of the kindest and most broad-minded men in our village. Yet Squire Hunter literally hates him, for some reason that I cannot fathom. You say he dislikes you—any reason, within your knowledge?”

“There is no reason whatever,” Gees lied gravely and successfully.

“Well, frankly, Mr. Green, I can’t advise you over this—”

He broke off, and Gees stood up, as Celia Perivale appeared from the head of the stairs, bearing a tray on which were a cup and saucer, the cup emitting steam, and a couple of biscuits. Gees responded to her smiling greeting as she put the tray down.

“My nightcap, Mr. Green,” Perivale observed. “I don’t know if you’d care for one like it—just ordinary cocoa and milk?”

“Not guilty, sir—that is, I don’t think I will, thank you. Now you’re here, Miss Perivale, may I make you and your father the first to know a spot of village news? It’s solely my property, so far.”

“Well?” she asked. “What is the news—exclusive, you say?”

“One of your father’s parishioners has just gone and got herself engaged,” he told her. “To wit, Miss May Norris, to me.”

He had never seen more sincere pleasure than he saw in the girl’s face as she took in the meaning of his statement.

“Oh, Mr. Green! The beauty of Denlum! I’ve often wondered whom she’d choose in the end, and—someone really worthy of her!”

He laughed. “I’ll eat my hat and boots if anyone pays both of us a better compliment than that, Miss Perivale,” he said. “I’m the fortunate one, but when it comes to worthiness—well, if you knew me a bit better, you’d be more careful over what you say. But how’s Harold?”

“Still losing,” she answered. “He started to move from under the table to under the sideboard half an hour ago, and I don’t know whether he’s got there yet. The Isle of Wight is peacefully asleep in his basket, in case you feel interested about him—but please tell May how glad I am about this, and give her my very best love.”

"Consider it done," he assured her. "Won't you stay with us a bit, though? That is—I'm issuing your invitation, sir," he ended, turning with the final sentence to Perivale.

"I can't," the girl said. "It's Bessie's evening out—our maid, I mean—and I haven't nearly finished all there is to do, yet. Some other time, Mr. Green—this is not the only time we shall see you, I hope. And don't forget when you see May next—if you can remember anything but her when you do see her. She's such a dear."

She went out. The rector, nibbling a biscuit, gazed hard at Gees.

"So you're stealing Denlum's loveliest flower," he observed.

"That is, my wife is not a native to the village, so Miss Norris retains the title. I'm sorry you have to miss seeing my wife. She gets fits of sleeplessness and has to take long walks to avert them, and tonight she went to her room very early. But you'll be seeing us again before you leave the village, and"—he paused and stirred his cocoa—"I was about to ask you, when my daughter came in, your honest opinion of what you—well, disturbed, call it—when you discovered the body of Robert Hunter. The whole of it is an utterly incredible tale, but having seen what I did see in—by God's mercy—restoring Miss Norris to sanity, I feel myself compelled to admit its truth. These—things, call them. You have proved you know more than most people—what are they?"

"Elementals, if that means anything to you," Gees answered unhesitatingly. "Old, incredibly old, by human standards, and capable under favourable circumstances—which they enjoy just now—of very great influence. Unusually strong for elementals, in fact. I'm talking the jargon of the spiritualistic cult, sir, but for heaven's sake don't accuse me of belonging in that galley, for I loathe and abhor the crowd and all their works. They've never added one iota to the sum of human knowledge, and never will, though they may make money out of deluded folks who believe it's possible to get in touch with departed loved ones, and get false messages from such beings as these I found at Nightmare. Because those beings, and all their gang, are anxious to raise themselves by getting in touch with humanity on any terms—they'll lie and cozen and play up through what you may call genuine mediums, personate the beloved dead till their nearest can't tell that the representation isn't the reality. They're all round us now—not those things I drove out from Nightmare, because we should see and feel them, but the lesser elementals, plentiful as humans. Those three, astral with the slightest trace of material to make them visible anywhere, damned dangerous—I'm horribly sorry, sir! It slipped out, thinking of

them.”

“Both damned and dangerous, I should say,” the rector observed meditatively. “Carry on with your most interesting explanation, please.”

“If you find it so,” Gees observed. “I don’t know if you’ve read or heard anything about experiments being made by a Doctor Alexis Carrel just now—experiments with what he appears to call an artificial heart?”

Perivale shook his head. “I can’t say I have. How does that?”

“Carrel, it seems, finds that he can reanimate certain organs, even including a brain, after they’ve been dried and are apparently quite dead. There’s no complete account, so far, of what he’s doing or how he does it, but I suppose he uses this artificial heart to pump a blood stream through these organs and make them—well, wake up, call it. As I see it—the connection between his experiments and what Norris and I found to-day, I mean—he seems to prove that as long as organs are intact they’re not completely dead. There’s a possibility of restoring them to life, as he seems to be doing. And when we discovered the body of Robert Hunter, all of it was intact. The eyes a bit gone—filmed over—but still there. Kept like that, I make it, in some way beyond our comprehension, by those things, those three elementals we found with him. Forming a rallying place for them, a home, in fact, which we destroyed by exposing him to light, taking the control, and letting natural processes have their way with it.”

“You think that frees Nightmare Farm of their influence?”

“I think it renders Nightmare no more a home to them than anywhere else, leaves nothing there that would attract them. I think, too, that they’ll wander, now, seeking some congenial place—congenial to them, I mean—instead of centring at Nightmare, as they have done in the past, since Robert brought them to this country and planned that rendezvous for them as he undoubtedly did.”

“Then where are they now?” Perivale asked, after an interval for thought. “What would be a congenial place for them?”

“Where?” Gees echoed, and shook his head. “Wandering somewhere, still strong—but where? I don’t see them attempting to harm this present Hunter. They’ve maintained an affinity with the family, by what I’ve learned—very intermittently. But it appears that all the harm they’ve done has been to other than Hunters. I’ve found their home and broken it up, but don’t see what else I can do.”

“In fact, you’ve turned them loose on the parish—on the whole country, for that matter,” Perivale broke in.

"I'm afraid that's just it," Gees admitted slowly. "Weakened them, though. They must have derived a certain amount of strength from the late Robert, or else they wouldn't have clung to him like that. If I robbed you of your bed and turned you out to wander, you wouldn't feel as strong and comfortable as you do now."

"No-o," Perivale agreed. "But where are they, now?"

Again Gees shook his head. "I think I'll stay round here for a few days, just in case they manifest themselves, and I may be able to do a bit more toward making them thoroughly uncomfortable. Though—"

He broke off, knowing that with the theory he held as to the present source from which these beings derived their power for evil, the rector was the last man he could tell everything about them. Perivale nodded, and thought it over silently.

"Meanwhile," Gees remarked, "I can't make up my mind whether it's incumbent on me to go and tell Hunter how we found his ancestor and what we did with him. As it is, he can learn nothing but what Norris or I might tell him—unless he opens up that tomb you told me the family used to use, and looks in Robert's coffin. If it's there, that is!"

"Opening up the tomb would mean getting a faculty, perhaps applying to the Home Office, now that it's permanently closed," Perivale said, "and that's a long and tedious business. I doubt whether Hunter or anyone could show sufficient cause for permission to open it."

He put down his empty cup, and sat thoughtful awhile.

"If you do make up your mind to tell him," he said at last, "I might be able to assist you to a certain extent. You say he dislikes you, and I know what that means, with Hunter. So I suggest, if you decide that you ought to tell him, that you let me go with you. As I said a little while ago, he is quite friendly to me, and so—well, my presence at any interview between you might be useful."

"That's very good indeed of you, sir," Gees said as he rose to his feet. "I'll sleep on it, and in any case let you know what I decide."

"And"—Perivale moved to accompany him down the stairs—"tell Miss Norris I am very glad indeed to hear this news about her, and wish her every happiness—as I do you. I'll believe you'll both find it too!"

Gees bade him good night and went off. He saw a light in Phil Bird's window, and at a thought went and knocked at the door. Bird appeared, and smiled at sight of him.

"Come in, sir, do!" he invited. "I heard you'd got back, and I'm real glad to see you. Come in—it's early for me."

"I won't come in, thank you," Gees told him. "I've had rather an eventful day, and feel more like a good night's rest than anything. I wanted to tell you, though, there are three of the ghosts who chase women—I found 'em at Nightmare to-day and turned 'em out, so they're wandering loose somewhere. If you hear or see anything—"

"I'll let you know at once, sir," Phil promised. "Three, eh?"

"Three. The rector told me, too, that the village as a whole feels much more comfortable about things since Miss Norris was—cured, call it. You get about a good deal, I think, Bird?"

"I—well, how d'you mean that, sir?"

"I mean, spoil that feeling, if you see a chance. A hint here and a word there to make people uneasy over wandering about o' nights."

"I get it, sir—leave it to me. And you're sure you won't come in for a bit and tell me more of what you found at Nightmare?"

"Not to-night. I've talked for six already to-day, and done some fairly hard work as well. No—I'll say good night, Bird, and trust you to spread the impression that indoors is the best place after dark!"

He went back to the inn, which was in darkness, now, and found a candle left for him on the hall stand. Having lighted it, he bolted the front door and went up to bed, to sleep dreamlessly until Churchill appeared with early-morning tea and the information that it looked like bein' gradely weather, to-day.

Chapter 18

Retribution

The girl stood by the claw-legged table, hesitant, silent, doubtful, until Gees held out his arms. Then she came to him, quickly.

“Oh, I’m so glad! I thought—in the night—perhaps you’d thought it over and—and found it was all a mistake—”

“May, I shall have to think seriously about spanking you if you dare to think things like that. Three hundred and sixty-four more days to go, too. Thank heaven next year isn’t leap year!”

She laughed. “Let’s go out in the orchard—will you? I’ve got so much to say to you, Mr. Gees. I won’t need a hat—it’s a glorious day!”

“Glorious is right, because you’re in it, May. But”—he followed her out from the room—“you’ll say I’m always complaining, about being Mr. Green yesterday and Mr. Gees to-day. It’s—you’ve got to consider yourself engaged to me, you know—and it’s too formal.”

“But I love it—my name for you,” she protested. “And those names you told us were yours. Gregory—George—Gordon—you don’t look any of them. I don’t know—they won’t shorten down to fit you. Mr. Gees does fit you, because—perhaps because I knew you by it first.”

“I suppose you’ll have to have your way, then. But subtract the mister and make it plain Gees. It’s more—more matey.”

She shook her head. “Not plain—too dear to me for that,” she said. “No—let go! If you try to kiss me before we get all by ourselves, I shall squeal. Well... only that one, then. We don’t know who may be looking. Dear, I’m almost too happy, and yet I’ve got so much to say to you. Things that kept me awake last night—quite happily awake. I didn’t want to miss one minute of realising the wonderful thing that’s happened to me—your love. Ooh! Mr. Gees!”

Instead of opening the orchard gate, he took her up in his arms and lifted her over it, putting her down on her feet and then vaulting over himself to alight beside her and shake his head gravely.

"If you persist with that mister, I'm going to say—'I take thee, Miss Norris,' when the all-important question is asked. Now what about it? May, darling, your eyes are lovelier than ever to-day."

"Gees, I don't think—I don't believe anyone can see us, here."

Minutes later, they went on between the apple trees.

"What were the things that kept you awake, May?"

"It was—about us," she answered. "About—don't think me conceited, dear, but I wondered—perhaps you might stay here in Denlandham because of me. I don't wish that. Not that I don't hate the thought of your going, but—but it wouldn't be what I meant by the year, do you see? I want you to be sure away from me, not with me. To go away and stay away—we'll write to each other, if you wish, but—do you see?"

"To live my ordinary life and feel you in it, till you become a part of it in reality—yes. Who taught you to be so wise, May?"

"I don't think any woman needs teaching when she finds real love," she said. "Only, some of us snatch and spoil—I thought last night of what it will mean when you come back to me with absolute certainty, and we—Oh, my dear, I shall miss you, ache for kisses like these! ... But you do understand, Mr.—no, I didn't mean it! You do understand, Gees, don't you? You don't think me silly over it?"

"I think I like your 'Mr. Gees,' after all," he said as he released his hold on her. "It's got a sort of quaint flavour like patches and powdered hair and sun-dials and old gardens and—and loveliness like yours. When you're Mrs. Gees, I'm going to get you all dressed up in eighteenth-century fripperies and take you along to any old fancy-dress show that's worth your seeing—a patch here, May"—he kissed her cheek—"and another here—and the wonderful violet eyes to make every other man envy me. Introducing you—'This is Mr. Mumble, May—he can have you for one dance, but don't hang on to him too long and make me call him out for pistols for two.' Oh, we'll have fun!"

"And what will your dress be?"

"Police uniform, of course. These hands and feet—it'd be a sin to waste 'em. My father told me once I was a throw back to a mistake of some ancestor—that was when he was thoroughly wild with me, as he generally is, though I think he's got a soft spot down under that he wouldn't show for the world. And that reminds me—you've got to make one break in this year of probation, to meet him."

“Mr. Gees!”

“Darling—yes, keep the mister. It’s uniquely yours, anyhow. But you will? I know it’s going to be a horrible ordeal for you, but my father and my future wife have got to meet. I’m going to ram you down his throat, if it’s the last act and I go out with that shilling he took back when he repented of disinheriting me the last time.”

“But—just a tenant farmer’s daughter.”

“No! Gregory George Gordon Green’s future wife, darling. And he’s going to be as proud of his daughter-in-law as I am of my wife, or else he and I make a division of brass-rags and don’t even kiss each other good-bye. I don’t care one hoot in a coal-yard about that—it’s you who count. You’ll come along and meet him, won’t you? I’ll fix it all and make it as easy for you as I can, May. You will come along?”

“I—yes, if you really wish it.”

“It’s essential—seeing you may stop him from altering his will again. The amount he’s piled up in lawyer’s fees over that in the last few years would frighten you, and I would like to save him more expense if it’s at all possible. You promise to come along any time between now and the middle of August and meet him, and I’ll promise to go off to normal misdoings when I’ve finished here. Darling, do we?”

“Since you wish it, yes. But will you tell me one thing?”

“Anything you ask—as long as it isn’t about what your father and I did at Nightmare. On that subject I’m dumb, even to you.”

“Not that at all, dear. Just—why would anyone want to hoot in a coal-yard? Is it—is it a usual practice?”

He saw the laughter in her eyes. Then she closed them.

“Oh, Mr. Gees! I love you so much! All dreams come true!”

They went out in the Rolls-Bentley, along lanes that meandered and hills that rose behind to give place to sheltered valleys, and they stopped for tea at an old-world inn standing alone, halfway between a musical rivulet and a stark, gorse-specked ridge, from which they saw later the Welsh hills blue and mystic under the gold of the west. They came back in the twilight to Cosham’s gateway, and Gees stopped the car.

“A good day, May?”

“The most wonderful day I’ve ever known. Darling, what is your magic? How do you make simple things so wonderful?”

“Just love, sweet. It’s about all I can give you.”

"Dear, you've made it a perfect world. I—I don't know how to tell you, but just perfect. And now—I don't want you to come in—will you understand that? Not to talk to you with other people, but to keep this all to myself, keep you all to myself. My Mr. Gees."

"I know, May. I'd hate to tell anyone what a day we've had, too. I think I'm a little drunk, on your sweetness. All I want now is to go and realise all I've won. Yet—before you go—May?"

She nestled into his hold, held up her lips with closed eyes.

"All ... all my dreams come true Darling, good night ... and may God watch over you I love you, dear."

At last he drove on. They might have days and days like this—but then he realised that he had to be honest, play fair with her. The shapes he had rendered homeless from Nightmare might never appear again in Denlandham—where they had wandered, he could not tell. They might be hovering at séances, waiting their chance to butt in and impersonate darling Harry or lost Jim, give messages from beyond and so feel themselves in touch with humanity. Any old where, in fact, and staying here would be merely a pretext to keep near May. It would not be fair to her—he wanted to be fair to her, to live the year as she wished and prove to her that his love was no fleeting fancy, but something that could endure through separation and show itself stronger at the finish. It was late—Churchill would be wondering where he had gone and brooding over "sooper," perhaps hot—ham and eggs!—and getting scratted by his blank in the marriage lottery. But there was a thing to be done yet: Gees swung the car close into the side of the road by the rectory gate and got out. Before he left Denlandham, he had to tell Squire Hunter what had been done with Robert's bones, and Perivale had said he would come to Denlandham House for the telling. Best to arrange it all now—they might go along some time to-morrow and get it over. If Hunter chose to make trouble over it—but Gees did not see how he could. Even if he went to the trouble of raking those bones out of Knightsmere, they would tell nothing, were not identifiable.

The grown moon, a good two hours yet above its setting, shone on his face as he saw Celia Perivale in the doorway.

"Do come in, Mr. Green. What a perfect night, isn't it? Father's up in his study. Shall I tell him you want him?"

Gees gave her seconds of silent scrutiny. Norris had been right: given adequate dressing, this girl rivalled May in attractiveness, and now she was wearing a summer frock that made her altogether different from the being of dowdy tweed skirt and jumper. He entered. "Please," he said.

"Not to keep him long—just to make an appointment for to-morrow or any time that suits him. I've just left Miss Norris, or I might have come along here earlier."

"Did you give her my message?" she asked.

"I—Miss Perivale, I'm horribly sorry. I will, though."

She laughed. "I didn't really expect you would. It's all too new and engrossing, isn't it? Just a minute and I'll tell father you—"

"Miss Perivale—just one second, please. How do you know what a wonderful day I've had with her?"

Again she laughed. "That would be telling, wouldn't it?" she retorted, and turned away to leave him standing beside the littered hall table, no tidier now than when he had first seen it. She appeared again—or rather, her head appeared—over the rail of the staircase. "Mr. Green, will you come up, please?" He went up, to face Perivale in his little study. "It seems that you are never to meet my wife, Mr. Green," Perivale greeted him. "I do so want you to meet her—not as you did before, but really to be able to talk together. And to-night she's gone out for one of her long walks—insomnia is her great trouble. I hope she comes in before you go, and you really get to know each other."

"I hope so too," Gees answered insincerely, "but I didn't come to take up a lot of your time to-night, sir. I've made up my mind—I'm going back to London either to-morrow or the next day—it depends on what free time you have, to a certain extent. I want to tell Hunter, before I go, how I found his ancestor and what I did with the remains. I've no idea what he'll say or do, but I feel he has a right to know."

"You have chosen the right course, I feel sure," Perivale said. "I would not influence you in either direction, when you came to me last night, but I am sure you—well, you will be happier when you have told the squire what you found at Nightmare and what you did with it. If he is the man I think him, he will approve your action."

"And you said you'd come along with me," Gees reminded him.

"What about making it any time that suits you to-morrow?"

The rector frowned as he reflected over the duties of his to-morrow.

"Well, Mr. Green, it's rather difficult. I have a number of appointments for to-morrow—and you say you want to get back to London. What about to-night? All we have to do is to walk through my back garden into the grounds of the House—the park, as we always call it, where my children play and amuse themselves by Squire Hunter's permission,—and we arrive at the House. Would that suit you?"

"Admirably," Gees concurred. "Get it over—if he's in, that is."

"Oh, he'll be in! I saw him only a few hours ago."

"Very well, then, if you don't mind being dragged out into the moonlight—I mean, if you don't mind turning out at this hour."

"Not in the least—it will make a pleasant walk across the park. I think my hat and coat are in the hall."

They went down, and the rector donned his hat, but decided to leave the overcoat, since it was such a warm, moonlit night. They went out, passed the back of the rectory and took a path that led through a well-stocked vegetable garden to come to a wide gap in the hedge at the far end of the garden. Grass land, copse-specked, lay before them; there was a light haze over the grass, and the copses looked ghostly in the light of the setting moon. Gees thought of a Rackham water-colour: here it was, unsubstantial-looking, and winged fairies might appear at any moment, he felt. Nearly a mile away, the lights of Denlandham House showed, points of yellow against a background of black.

"Did you ever see ›Dear Brutus,‹ Mr. Perivale?" he asked.

"I did not," the rector answered. "Why—what is the connection?"

"This open, and the black background with lights—just like the end of the second act. Margaret—Barrie's loveliest fancy."

"I don't know the play," Perivale said as they walked on toward the nearest copse, and the lights of the House vanished beyond it.

"Margaret was the artist's dream-daughter—the one he wanted and never had—Barrie's idea of what life might be if—"

He broke off abruptly and stopped, gazing ahead at the copse. There was a sound on the air—*and he knew that sound!* Two misty presences came into sight, guggling, glucking, horrible, and again he felt the deathly chill he had felt when they had appeared at Nightmare and one had spun out to make him and Norris cold. Gluck-gluck-gluck—faint ghosts in the moonlight, vignetting to nothingness at their edges, they swayed and whirled toward him and the rector, receded, drifted through the hawthorn that encircled the copse, and were gone, and still the ghostly clucking noise hung on the air—were they still laughing, or was it the horrible echo of the sound they had made in their appearance.

"Two!" He had to grip on to himself to prevent a burst of silly laughter.

"Two—where's the other? Three, there should be."

"Powers of evil—did you feel the cold of them?" Perivale asked. "Impotent, though—the cross my first wife gave me and I always wear—impotent, quite. And vanished—I'd never have believed it—them."

"But there should have been three," Gees said dazedly.

They went on. The rector paused by the hedge encircling the copse, and looked at it. Then he turned and looked at Gees.

"Shall we hunt them?" he asked.

"Might as well chase the shadow of a cloud," Gees answered.

"They hang around here—we know that much. But I struck at one of them—they have no substance—they're no more than fog, materially. We know where they're haunting, and that's all. No use going in there." They rounded the bulge of the hedge, to see the lights of Denlandham House in the distance—nearer, but still in the distance. In the foreground, a man dropped on one knee, who held a woman in his arms and gazed down at her face—the moonlight showed her clearly, and him too.

They heard his voice—

"Belle! Oh, my darling! Belle—Isabella—speak to me!"

An infinity of pause, and Hunter looked up and saw the two men facing him with perhaps thirty yards of interval. Then Perivale clutched Gees by the arm—the marks left by his fingers were yellow blotches a fortnight later, but Gees felt no pain from them, then—

"Take me back! Let us go back, lest I do him some injury!"

Gees never knew how they reached the front doorway of the rectory. But there, full sense came back to him—there had been only two, and there should have been three!

"Mr. Perivale—there's something wrong with her. Don't you realise? Something wrong—something terribly wrong!"

"Let him care for her now as he has cared for her when there was nothing wrong. Leave me, man—leave me to myself! I can endure no more, talk no more. Go now. Come and see me to-morrow—you let these things loose! Come and see me to-morrow—not now."

Slowly, reluctantly, Gees went away, hearing the terrific slam of the rectory door as he went. He got into his car, and drove off toward the inn. The bar was still open, he saw. He went in at the main entrance and straight upstairs to his room: this was no night for facing the worthies. Up on his dressing table he saw an unstamped letter, and opened it to read—

Mr. Gees,

Marsh the cowman is taking this for me, to deliver it at the 'Hunters' Arms' for you. Such a little while since you left me, and all my heart is singing—if you don't know the song, I won't tell it. Our day! Such a wonderful day, my dear, and you made it all. If this is

what your love is going to mean, I know myself happier than any dreams. And I felt—I must talk to you. Nothing to say that you do not know. I think I told you all of it in the fairyland we entered together to-day—yet may I tell you once more that I love you, dear. I don't want to burden you with it, don't want to make you weary of me and my love, but just now it's new and wonderful. Mr. Gees, help me to keep it new and wonderful always—help me to be worth all you give, and not fail you. I owe you myself, the self that you found a way to help out of darkness, and I do so want that self to be worth all you give. To give to the uttermost in return, yet not to tire you with too much giving. Do you know, my dear—my dearest? I am your May. You know it.

He looked up. "Come in," he called, and Nicholas Churchill entered the room and stood there shaking his head gravely.

"Sitha, tha'll coom to a bad end, eatin' nowt," Nicholas reproved him. "T' missis got t' ham an' eggs all ready, an' thee's but to say t'word, an' she'll start cookin'. An' thee'll have a pint, sir?"

"I will have a pint," Gees assented. "Churchill, you're a damned good sort, and I don't care who knows it. But—Oh, make it ham and eggs, then, though this seems to me more an occasion for fasting than eating." He thought of Perivale, a man with his life smashed to ruin.

"Even if thee's a Catholic, sir, it ain't Friday," Nicholas assured him. "An' even if 't'was, fastin' never done no man no good. An' t'missus got t' ham an' eggs all ready to cook, an' two pair o' gradely kippers put aside for thy breakfast."

"To-morrow's Thursday, not Friday," Gees reflected aloud. "Nevermind. One pair of kippers, not two, and even then there'll be one left, if I know anything about it."

"Aye, thee's pernickety about thy food, sir—how thee keeps alive beeats me. T' air o' this place doan't agree wi' thee, happen, but us means to do our best by thee. I'll draw t' pint an' lay t' cloth."

He went down the stairs again. With May's letter in his hand, Gees sat on the bed, remembering Perivale's grey, stricken face.

"T' ham an' eggs is ready, sir," Nicholas informed him from the foot of the stairs, "an' I've drawn t' pint."

"Coming along," Gees called back.

Whatever happened, agony or bliss, life went on.

Chapter 19

Hunter's Apology

Dawn was just beginning when Gees wakened to question if it would be worth while to go out and wring that cockerel's neck, but decided to refrain, since, with his work in Denlandham done—as nearly as he could tell—the raucous summons from sleep would not be likely to trouble him again. He reached for and lighted a cigarette, and lay waiting for the arrival of Nicholas with early morning tea and hot water: as he waited, he reviewed the events of the past few days.

They had possessed Isabella—one of them had, just as May Norris had been possessed; of that he felt sure. With that, apart from any sustenance *they* may have gleaned from their shut chamber at Nightmare as long as the body of Robert Hunter remained intact, went half their strength. Yet, while this present Hunter remained alive and vicious, some power would remain to *them*. Two vapoury horrors still went questing somewhere: they would cling to Hunter, probably, haunt him ... Gees lost himself for awhile in speculation. Could Perivale exorcise and restore Isabella, as he had done in May's case? Failing him, could anyone drive that thing out from her? And, if it were possible, would she be warned by her experience, or would she ...? Where was she now? What had happened to her and Hunter after Perivale had left them together? Gees remembered the insane, murderous light he had seen in May's eyes before she had been freed: this woman, having yielded to evil before she had come in contact with the demon that would rule her now, would be far more dangerous. So he saw it, as he lay thinking with the dawn growing in the room.

He took May's letter from under his pillow and read it again. To-day he would see her, before going back to London. It was her wish, he

knew, that he should go back. Before going to her, he must see Perivale again, or at least find out if Perivale still wished to see him. With that reflection he got out of bed, took a pad and fountain pen, and got back to write to May:

May, Darling,

I'd be with you instead of this, and will be with you not long after it, but there is something to keep me at this end of Denlandham for awhile. When I left Perivale last night, in deepest trouble (his, not mine) he suggested my coming to see him today, and I feel it is up to me to comply with that request, though I know I can do nothing to lighten the blow that has fallen on him.

I fear that blow will be disastrous to him. Darling, quite possibly, when you belong entirely to me, I shall tell you the whole story, though I think we shall have so much more and so much happier interest at that time as to make this tragedy—it is that—something to forget rather than to engross ourself. You may think that word a slip in grammar, but it isn't. It's what I mean us to be. If I could tell you what your letter meant when I got back last night—well, wait till I'm with you, dear. It needs something other than words for the telling.

So—don't think it's anything but necessity that keeps me from being with you sooner this morning. And—just in case you want a scrap of real news—dearest, I love you.

Mr. Gees.

Churchill, entering not long after the letter had been finished and addressed, promised to find a boy who would deliver it at Cosham's farm within an hour, and with that settled Gees made a careful business of shaving and dressing, and went down to kippers. He dawdled over them: ten o'clock would be full early to go to the rectory. Quite possibly Perivale would not wish to see him, but he could not go on to May without making certain that the rector did not want him.

Thus, at just on ten o'clock, he went out to the car, which he had left standing under the chestnut all night, rather than drive round to the stable. He was busied over taking the hood down when he saw the rector approaching, and ceased the business of strapping to face a very white and shaken Perivale—an old man, he looked now. There was, too, something in his expression which warned Gees, before ever a word

was spoken between them, that he had not come because of what he had witnessed the preceding night.

"I felt it was my duty to see you at once, Mr. Green," he said. "A terrible thing has happened—one that concerns you."

"Yes?" Gees leaned against the side of the car, and gripped the door-handle behind him, for already he knew some, though not all, of what Perivale would tell him. Only in one way could a terrible thing affect him in the way that Perivale evidently meant.

"Concerns you indirectly, through Miss Norris," Perivale went on. "I don't know—remember I myself have something even worse to face—"

"What is this about Miss Norris?" Gees interrupted, and did not recognise his own voice. He gripped hard on the car door-handle, and for the moment felt incapable of moving.

"That—it is impossible to tell these things without giving pain," Perivale said. "That—that—you will not see her again."

Gees sat down on the running-board of the car. He felt oddly composed, and at the same time afraid lest his legs should not support him. "You mean—that can only mean one thing," he said. "Best say it—get it over. And I think I know. Their revenge, isn't it?"

"Their?" For a moment the rector looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Yes, though—I see. But where are you going?" For Gees had got to his feet again, and was opening the car door.

"Why, to her, of course," he answered.

Perivale grasped his arm. "Believe me—no!" he said. "You asked me to say it—she is dead. Keep the memory you have of her. I—it is very terrible for me to have to tell you this. Killed by Isabella, my wife, less than an hour ago. Don't go—keep the memory you have."

Gees shut the car door and faced about again. He had a feeling that somebody was telling someone else of a tragedy that had happened somewhere—it did not concern him or May, but was an altogether extraneous happening, one that did not affect him. Yet he knew that view of it would pass: all his agony was to come, later. This he knew, but for the time could feel nothing: the shock of Perivale's telling had numbed all feeling, though it had left his mind quite clear.

"Killed, by Isabella," he said slowly. "I think—yes, their revenge. Where is Isabella?"

"At Cosham's. Held, waiting for the police. Quite mad—quite. Man—" Perivale's face contorted momentarily—"don't you realise what this means for me?"

Gees shook his head. "I can't realise what it means for myself, even," he answered. "May—I was coming to see you, first—" again his hand sought the door-handle—"and you say—don't see her."

"I say, don't see her," Perivale echoed. "I think—Norris would not let you see her. In any case, I beg—do not."

For a minute or more Gees stood irresolute. Not to see May again—never to see her again! An utter incredibility.

"Now tell me what happened," he asked at last. "If—if I am not putting too much on you. Tell me what happened."

"I—Norris sent for me, at once," Perivale tried to explain. "It appears she got a letter—his daughter got a letter this morning. From you, I think. She went—there is an orchard at the back of Gosham's house—she went there, just after she had got the letter. To the far end of the orchard from the house. It was Cosham who heard her call for help, and he and one of his men went in answer to the call. They managed to get my wife away from her, but too late, and by that time another of Gosham's men had got there, to help—help hold my wife while Cosham himself took May—Miss Norris—back to the house. She was—she was dead then. I—I don't think I can tell you any more."

Gees looked at him, and wondered at the strength of the man. It was a fantastic, unreal situation in which he himself felt nothing, had no feeling, for the time. Yet he could realise and admire the marvellous self-control with which Perivale had ignored his own catastrophe to bring news of this. He gestured at the car.

"If you'll get in, sir, I'll drive you home," he said.

"Yet, first," Perivale said, "I must tell you. She did not come back, last night. Whether—what happened to her—whether Hunter knows where she went after we saw her with him—I know nothing. I want you to understand, to exonerate me, except that I might have restrained her if I had gone to her then and taken her home—"

"It's I who need exonerating," Gees interrupted him. "What I have done in this village comes back on me—on Norris and his wife, and on me. Their revenge—having possessed her, they used her for it, to strike at me. A human brain added to their devilishness, governed and driven by them. Not her will—theirs. And—and May is dead. Let me drive you home. It is on my way—to her."

With no protest, no repetition of his forbidding Gees to see her, Perivale got into the car. He knew, probably, that Norris would let nobody see what Isabella's maniac hands had left of May Norris.

It was difficult to face Norris, impossible to talk to him. Gees did not even suggest a visual farewell to that which had been May: the big man spoke of her in a measured, calm way which went to show that he was numbed by the blow, as yet. After less than five minutes with him, Gees went out from the house and back to his car, Norris walking beside him. He got in, and Norris held out his hand.

"Makes it difficult to—to keep any beliefs," he remarked.

"I would say—nothing can take away what has been," Gees answered.

"When I wake up to it," Norris said slowly, "that's going to make the future all the harder to face. You—you've got youth, enough of years before you for compensations, but for us—only the one hope. We shall go to her, though she will not come back to us."

Some trace of returning feeling sounded in the last sentence. He withdrew his hand from Gees' hold and half-turned away. Faced toward Nightmare gateway as he sat, Gees saw a white ambulance van approach. It would take Isabella away, he knew.

"Don't stay for the funeral," Norris said abruptly. "Good-bye, Mr. Green." And he went back toward the house, at which Gees drove on.

Past the gateway with its shadowing hedges, back to the inn, where Nicholas Churchill polished glasses behind his bar.

"I'm leaving you to-day, Churchill," Gees told him baldly.

"Eh, but I'm sorry t' hear it, sir. An' theer's more bad news i' t' village, too, since thee went out."

"I think I know it all," Gees said grimly.

"About t' squire, sir?" Churchill inquired.

"The squire? What about him?"

"I thowt thee couldn'ta heerd it so soon. T' squire's shot hisself—least-ways, it was up at t' House, him shot wi' a double-barrelled goon. Tod was in heer, an' said t' policeman towld him."

"Ah!" Gees observed. "Both barrels, I hope."

"I doan' know about that, sir," Nicholas said dubiously. "Only Tod said t' squire was dead. Happen one barrel was enough."

Gees remembered the beautiful lady in the wheeled chair. Had she known enough for realisation of the cause behind her husband's suicide?

"There is a son, isn't there?" he asked.

"A gradely chap, i' t' Army, he is. We got nowt but roast lamb f'r thee to-day, sir. T' missus ordered a fowl f'r to-morrow, but thee weant be heer, thee says—"

"Nor for the roast lamb, I'm afraid," Gees interrupted him. "I'm going to pack and start now."

"But thee must eat, sir," Nicholas protested earnestly.

Gees shook his head and turned away. For, quite suddenly, realisation of his loss had come to him, a surge of hopeless, bitter longing that rendered speech impossible. He knew he must get away from this place at once, beyond sight or sound of anything that might accentuate the agony he must face and endure.

May was dead!

E. O. V.

One morning, near on the end of July, Gees shook his head at Miss Brandon as he sat at his desk, while she held out a card to him.

"No good, Miss Brandon," he said. "I know I ought to get busy again, but—whoever it is, tell him to go away and come again in a fortnight's time."

"I don't think it is a new case, Mr. Green," she insisted. He took the card then, and looked at it. Then he looked at his watch, and again at her.

"All right," he said grimly. "Send him in."

She went out, very quietly. Instinct had told her, since his return from Denlandham, that she must move and speak quietly, for this Gees was a different being from the one who had gone to lay the ghosts of Nightmare Farm. There entered, as Gees stood up, a bronzed young man in flannels, and at sight of him Gees remembered again the woman in the wheeled chair at Denlandham House.

"How d'you do, Mr. Hunter?" he said coldly. "Sit down, won't you? I haven't too much time, but—well, what can I do for you?"

"I'll be as brief as I can," the other man promised as he took the chair beside the desk. "I got back to England in response to a cable from my mother—got back a week ago. I'm resigning my commission, of course. I got your address from Miss Perivale, the rector's daughter at Denlandham, and understand that you—"

"How is Perivale, do you know?" Gees interrupted. He had held no communication with the rector, but had come to understand in these weeks that had elapsed since he left the village that, if he had suffered loss, the rector had suffered far more.

Lieutenant Hunter shook his head. "It's little more than a year since my last leave," he said, "but I've never seen a man age so much in the time. I suppose it's not to be wondered at, with that terrible tragedy arising

out of his wife's insanity. But it was about—about my father that I came to see you.”

“Yes?” Gees asked, very grimly. “What about him?”

“It appears, from a copy of a letter I found among his papers, that he employed you on a rather singular business connected with Nightmare Farm, as they call it in Denlandham. I can learn nothing there, from anyone, and I want to know—was there any connection between—between his end, say, and your presence in Denlandham? Mind, I'm not trying to accuse you of anything—”

“No, don't,” Gees advised, interrupting.

“I say, I'm not,” Hunter insisted, sensing hostility. “I'm merely trying to find out why he—did what he did. Whether you know of any reason for the tragedy.”

“My business was with Nightmare Farm,” Gees answered carefully, after a pause for thought. “Undertaken, Mr. Hunter, at your father's request. In a way, I'm glad you've called to-day, because I can tell you what I had no chance to tell him. I found, in a hidden room at Nightmare, the corpse of your ancestor Robert Hunter, whom you probably believe was buried normally in the family vault. I have to own to you that all there is left of Robert Hunter is now at the bottom of the mere which gives the farm its correct name.”

“You found—you mean he wasn't buried in the vault at all?” Hunter asked, puzzling over it.

“For some reason—I have no chance of finding what it was, if you have n't,” Gees said, “your ancestor chose to conceal his remains there, instead of being buried with the rest of the family in the churchyard.”

Hunter thought over it for a time.

“I don't know that I'm particularly troubled about it,” he said at last. “I believe—if you hadn't done that, there'd have been an inquest and all sorts of unpleasantness. Probably you did the best thing, from the family's point of view. And my father knew nothing of this?”

“As far as I know, nothing,” Gees assured him.

“Mr. Green, honestly, now, do you know why my father shot himself?”

“Honestly, I do not,” Gees answered. For he did not know whether the man had so far cared for Isabella as to commit suicide when he heard of her murderous madness, or whether remorse over his own part in the tragedy had driven him to his end: it was all beyond learning, now.

“I thought you might, perhaps. Since you don't, I won't take up any more of your time. But there was an old legend, a curse of sorts connected with the family and with Nightmare Farm—”

"Absolutely nothing in it," Gees interrupted to assure him. "No curse anywhere—nothing in Denlandham to make you imagine anything of the sort, now. You're taking over there, I gather?"

Hunter nodded. "Marrying and settling down," he answered. "I am not sure—my fiancée has told me something of what happened while you were there. I don't know much—I don't know if you would consider it impertinent of me to offer my sympathy—"

He broke off, awkwardly.

"Your fiancée?" Gees asked, interestedly.

"Celia—Miss Perivale," Hunter explained.

For a little while Gees sat thoughtful. Perivale had accepted, as Celia's choice, the son of the man who had so much wronged him, kept hidden the tragedy Isabella and this man's father had made of his life. What a tapestry! Tragedy and happiness, Celia coming to her earned reward as the wife of this straightforward-looking youngster, while her father ...

"You met her, of course," Hunter observed at last.

"Having done so, I congratulate you," Gees said quietly, and with emphasis on the final word.

Hunter smiled as he got on his feet. "I will tell her that," he said.

"And she sent you her best wishes—I told her I should call to see you. If ever you come to Denlandham again, we shall be glad to welcome you. She will, I know."

"Thank her for me"—Gees shook his head as he spoke—"but I shall not willingly come to Denlandham again."

After Hunter had gone, he sat thoughtful for awhile, and then summoned Miss Brandon by means of his buzzer.

"Those inquiries we went through this morning, Miss Brandon," he said.

"There was one from a man named Kleinert¹, I remember, asking for an interview."

"There was," she assented.

"Have you answered it as I told you—turned him down?"

"The letter is waiting for you to sign, Mr. Green."

"Ah! Well, tear it up and write him another. Tell him—yes, Thursday morning at eleven, and remind him about the two guineas for the initial interview—no, don't remind him, though. I'll collect it at the interview."

¹ Dies leitet zum nächsten Buch in der Serie über, "The Kleinert Case", das im Übrigen ohne übernatürliche Wesen auskommt.

It's time we got busy again—the firm's going to seed, and we must do something to resurrect our reputation.”

“I'm glad you feel like that,” she said.

He smiled at her. “Fetch me Kleinert's letter,” he bade. She went quickly, happily. For he had smiled—in all the weeks since his return from Denlandham, he had not smiled until to-day.

THE END