

“Think of it as a challenge. You’re one of those people who looks great whatever you wear. At least try it on,” Daphne urged, placing the wig over Jenny’s head and making some tucks, in spite of all the vehement protests.

“It looks awful,” Jenny judged, with a disgruntled scowl, whilst making the final tucks herself. “Like Marie Antoinette before she lost her head. I hate restoration comedy worse than cricket.”

“Marie Antoinette was never a subject for restoration comedy. Not that losing your head isn’t funny - but it was the wrong century.”

“You mean they carried on wearing those stupid wigs for another hundred years?”

“Fashion hasn’t always changed so rapidly,” Daphne stipulated sagely. “Glossy magazines and empty-headed journalists are inventions of the twentieth century.”

“Thank God for progress. Imagine having to wear the same outfit twice.”

By Tax Fries:

A Spider Ballet

Ragnarok

The Levin Plays

The
Wulfmarsh
Weekend

Tax Fries

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CHAPTER ONE

Midnight - the witching hour - when Satan's minions emerge to seize the desperate, the foolish, and the unwary. Travellers who venture out on foot along tenebrous country lanes, without so much as the moon to light their pathway, have long since Creation fallen prey to those familiars which would spirit them away by force or favour and imprison their wretched souls in broad oak boughs - where the laments of muffled screams are often mistaken for the rustle of twigs in a breeze. But then, Christianity hit back with the advent of the motor car, as the animist sects of the Church will testify, seeing each squashed cat or toad as an imp set packing back to hell. By 1920, the blessed combination of bright headlights and swift pneumatic tyres were squashing the imps out of cats and toads everywhere.

On a lonely winding track, flanked by hedgerows and fields, just off the same Great North Road on which Dick Turpin made his apocryphal ride on Black Bess, a cute little bunny rabbit hopped past an amiable old hedgehog in search of greener pasture on the other side. The rabbit was in no particular hurry and paused some way short of cover, whiskers twitching as its keen senses detected the approach of a strange creature hunting on the road. A distant hum sang through the still night air, and a faint vibration played through the tarmac beneath its furry feet, just before the growling beast began to emerge from the acoustic shadow of a bend. The quick-witted rabbit closed its eyes and dashed blindly for sanctuary in the hedgerow, knowing the gorgon would petrify

all those caught in its deadly glare.

The hedgehog also took note of the portent, warning of an extraordinary danger, but its shorter legs were less adept at running. Salvation lay a mere six feet away as the screeching tyres held the bend and the mesmerising headlamps burst into view; searing the eyes of the prospective victim with blinding white light. The predatory beast rent the air with its unmistakable roar as it charged towards its helpless prey. The hedgehog froze, transfixed by the godly apparition, and prayed as a modest life in the hedgerow flashed before its mind's eye.

"Slow down or we'll end up in a field!" the front seat passenger in the open top saloon car counselled the female driver. His cheeks and brow were distinctly pale despite the warm night air of an Indian summer. "You're going too fast!" he warned. "The roads are always greasy this time of year!"

"Be quiet, Algae, you're worse than my mother," the driver chided him. "And just as bloodless. If you're cold, put your jacket on."

Both the passenger and driver wore short sleeved shirts. The fair-haired driver had opted for an attractive tangerine blouse and a delicate silk neck scarf. The passenger wore a Lincoln green polo shirt - a colour historically favoured by tree huggers - with a small wing-collar; though he failed to see how the simple act of adopting an extra layer of clothing would ease his present predicament.

"A lot of good that'll do if you wrap us round a tree," he gasped, abandoning all his life's ambitions and reconciling himself to an early grave. This morbid thought gave rise to another question. "I thought your mother was dead?"

"She is - but even she knows better than to talk to someone behind the wheel of a car. You asked me to drive - so shut up and let me drive!"

"I didn't ask, you insisted. Look out, there's a hedgehog!" he yelled, desperately seizing the steering wheel in a brave attempt to spare the living creature on the road.

The avoiding action came just in time; the front nearside

wheel swerving left, then right, leaving an elliptical tyretrack on the mud at the side of the road. The dark underside of the chassis past over the spiky ball, blotting out the moon, like the shadow of a destroying angel. But for Algae's humane outlook and fast reflexes, hedgehog and tarmac would have fused into a squidgy, spiky, red molasses, resembling the result of a dreadful experiment in cross-molecular fusion.

"That wasn't very clever," a second young woman, dressed in a light tweed jacket and a chic-looking beige clothcap, remonstrated loudly from the backseat; where she hung on to the arm of a fourth travelling companion - an extremely handsome young man with fair hair and a floppy fringe. The man wore riding boots and breeches like an equestrian, with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to reveal well-developed biceps.

"Too right, it wasn't very clever," Algae concurred. "There was a hedgehog trying to cross the road. Daphne should have more respect for our wildlife."

"Jenny meant you grabbing the wheel like that," the male backseat passenger interjected suavely, as he casually slipped a muscular tentacle around the narrow waist of his fellow traveller. "It's against the highway code to swerve for animals."

"It's after midnight, there are no other cars on the road, and hedgehogs are fast becoming an endangered species," Algae mitigated sternly. "And since when did you start reading the highway code?"

"Why don't you get a life, Algae? A *Country Life*!" Daphne chortled. "You might learn a thing or two about your furry friends. Nature *is* red in tooth and claw!"

The backseat couple shared in the joke by laughing at Algae's eccentric concern for a spiky little creature with fleas.

"*Country Life* is for horses - and people who look like horses," Algae retorted.

"Are you saying I look like a horse?" a seemingly piqued Daphne inferred, with slightly disingenuous ire. "You've got a lot to learn about women, Algae."

"And horses," Ralph piped in. "Daphne, why don't you give him a riding lesson this weekend?"

"No thanks," Algae muttered wryly, before Daphne could reply with another devastating put-down. "Horses are dangerous. I've seen the way they kick, bite, and scratch their riders."

"A bit like some women I know," Ralph chuckled, giving his very attractive companion another laddish squeeze.

"Do you have to keep doing that?" Jenny complained. "We should have brought a chaperone to sit between us."

"We don't need a chaperone, this is the Jazz Age. We're the generation who invented sex, drugs, and dance music," he insisted smugly.

"Hedgehogs are just vermin," Daphne preached from the country prayer book. "They steal eggs from our pheasants' nests."

This revelation left Algae slightly puzzled. "I didn't know they could climb trees," he confessed.

"My God, Algae, you really are green."

"Your driving has that effect on people. Couldn't we just slow down a bit?" he pleaded.

Daphne replied by depressing the clutch pedal and gunning the supercharged cylinders that were housed beneath a shiny steel bonnet of obscene length, painted in a dull coat of British-racing-green. Then she released the clutch to unleash yet more power to the driveshaft.

The sudden acceleration caused Ralph's head to jerk back as if they were on a rocket-sledge. "Where did you get the engine from?" he exclaimed, as he fought to breathe.

"A Fokker triplane," Algae replied, shouting above the din.

"A Fokking what?"

"A plane from von Richthoven's flying circus. They were selling them off cheaply at a German army surplus auction. If we help pay for the Versailles Treaty, there might not be another war in Europe."

"Some hope," Ralph retorted grimly. "Prussian militarism and French farm subsidies just don't mix. Next time, I just hope I'm too old for the Flying Corps - I can feel my stomach rising and we're still on the ground."

"Not for much longer at this rate," Jenny squealed, alarmed

by the moonshot simulation and fearing that they would actually become airborne. Flying was known to be harmful to the female constitution. "Slow down, Daphne!" she pleaded, concerned about the effects of g-force and sudden changes in air pressure on her womb. "Some day, I may want to have babies! Women's bodies are not built for this sort of speed!"

"Yours may not be, but mine is perfectly streamline," Daphne boasted, coaxing a few more miles per hour out of the converted aero-engine. "A hot, sweaty summer of dance, diet, and aerobic exercise has seen to that."

"If you don't slow down, we might hit something!" Jenny exclaimed in terror.

"Or someone," Ralph predicted, in a more measured tone.

Daphne laughed condescendingly, but did slow down a bit so that she could be heard more easily above the noise of the engine.

"Stop moaning, Jenny. You sound as if Ralph has already got his tongue between your lips."

"Is that what they call a French kiss?" Jenny asked Ralph.

"I think she means cunnilingus," he frowned.

"Isn't that the Latin name for the earthworm?"

"The only people abroad after dark around here are gypsies and poachers," Daphne disclosed. "Anything we hit will save us having to pay a gamekeeper's bounty."

"But will it also pay for the loss of my no-claims bonus?" Algae asked sternly. "And a good defence lawyer for you?"

"I thought they charged the owner for vehicle offences, not the driver," she mused. "You'd take the rap for me, wouldn't you, Algae? Like Tom did for Becky in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)."

"I'd have to think about it," he warned. "The times they are a changin'."

"Daphne doesn't think much of the local travelling community," Ralph informed his fellow passengers. "She wouldn't think twice about bagging any number of them if they tried to cross the road in front of us."

"Local travelling community?" Algae queried. "Isn't that a

bit of a contradiction in terms?"

"They had unfinished business in the area and decided to stick around."

"What unfinished business?" Algae asked ominously.

"An old bloodfeud with Daphne's family dating back centuries. Isn't that right, Daph?"

"If you say so," the driver answered whimsically, as she deliberately crunched through the gears to make Algae wince.

"See what I mean?" Ralph noted cogently. "That's a definite sign of subdued rage."

"Please be careful with the clutch, Daphne. It's very sensitive," Algae pleaded, through clenched teeth.

"It would be - with the heel of Daphne's jackboot on the peddle," Ralph chuckled. "You can see that she's determined to bag something bigger than a hedgehog tonight."

"That's what I'm afraid of. At this rate, we'll end up ramming a dike," Jenny remonstrated.

"Algae rammed a dike in Amsterdam," Ralph whispered in her ear.

"Algae had an accident in Amsterdam?" she gasped, leaning forward to place a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"More like misadventure based on ignorance of the local terrain," Ralph chuckled. "Driving on the wrong side of the road."

Algae threw him a withering glance. "You can't avoid the dikes in Holland, they're everywhere," he explained to Jenny. "They're used for flood control."

In the distance, a set of lights twinkled through the stygian gloom like a fallen constellation; obscured only by the copses, hummocks, and dikes of the timeless, haunting, and mysterious Cambridgeshire fenland. The inviting celestial vision would vanish intermittently from sight; only to reappear a few moments later, more resplendent than before - welcoming them to journey's end.

"There it is everyone! Wulfmarsh Hall!" Daphne announced opportunely, like an experienced tour-guide on an Alpine coach drive, briefly taking her passengers' minds off their

imperilled necks.

She slowed down to a respectable speed on final approach through a virtual tunnel of commercially planted pine that excluded the moonlight. The passengers breathed with relief as the sanctuary of the stately home loomed nearer. Its beckoning visage seemed to exorcise the ghost of Daphne's driving demons, or maybe she just didn't want her father to see what she was really like away from home. Either way, it seemed as if they had survived the hazardous journey intact; until a curious looking creature emerged unexpectedly from the impenetrable darkness of the trees and dallied in the middle of the road ahead. It was large and bulky, but of indistinct form in the shadowy penumbra just beyond the cones of the headlight beams.

"What's that? The back end of a cow?" Jenny speculated, as she leaned forward for a better look.

"It could be a stag," Algae suggested doubtfully.

Ralph gently pulled Jenny back into the protection of his arms to reassure her. "Don't worry, Jen. Daphne wouldn't run over a perfectly healthy stag that could be chased by a pack of baying hounds until its heart burst, and then shot to death for sport as it lay stricken, helpless, and writhing in the mud. Would you, Daph?"

"Wouldn't she?" Algae's tightening grip on the dashboard suggested that he wasn't so sure. "A moot point under the circumstances," he added tersely. "It's not a stag!"

The headlights had just revealed something rather more like a biped. Daphne took note of the anthropomorphic shape and began to accelerate again until they were approaching the thing at breakneck speed, like a big cat charging down its prey.

This was a slow moving creature of dark tincture - bowed over like a giant tortoise squatting on its hind legs so as to lack any other visible appendage, except for a small head protruding from the shell. It made no attempt to flee as the car bore down on its position. Intrusive light bathed the reptilian skin, whilst the fierce growl of the engine assaulted

whatever primitive ears it might possess. Algae looked at Daphne in astonishment; realising the extent of her murderous intent as her eyes lit up and her eyebrows dipped in the middle like a maniac. She gripped the wheel with white knuckles and snarled malevolently, revealing the sharp pointed canine teeth behind her tight lips.

"Do something, Algae!" Jenny screamed aloud, much more keenly concerned for conservation now that she was the endangered species.

When a collision seemed imminent, Algae yelled out a warning and grabbed the wheel firmly in both hands. The car swerved, missing the thing by a whisker. Despite a pre-occupation with keeping his arse in his seat - wearing seatbelts wasn't yet compulsory - Algae still managed to catch a fleeting glimpse of alarm and surprise in the accusatory yellow eyes just before the leathery face sank between its shoulder blades; like the head of a two-legged turtle seeking a last second escape from danger.

Daphne braked hard to prevent the car leaving the road; and after several orchestrated spins on screeching tyres, accompanied by Jenny screaming from the backseat like a mating tomcat, the vehicle stalled and came to a halt; still on the road, though facing back the way it had come.

The four young people sat in stunned silence, staring at a now empty stretch of road lit by the headlights. Three were in a minor state of shock from the religious experience of a near miss; whilst the fourth was merely disgruntled at having missed her target.

"It's gone!" Jenny observed, rising from her seat to view the road as her breathing stabilised and her pulse subsided to about one hundred and fifty.

"That's hardly surprising, given Daphne's cynical disregard for wildlife," Ralph mused. "She has a very predatory nature, according to the first fifteen pack." Ralph believed in grace under pressure and was determined to appear calm and unruffled in all circumstances. Being around Daphne occasionally tested his grace to the point of sainthood.

"Are you really trying to kill someone, Daphne?" asked Algae, in a sympathetic tone. "You've been acting very strangely since we left Cambridge this evening."

"She damn well nearly killed herself and us too!" Jenny protested, feeling a tingle in her stomach and strangely moist around the nether regions.

"Those thieving travellers are even worse than the thieving hedgehogs," Daphne declared, sounding more indignant than perturbed. "They shouldn't be this close to the house. We'll end up losing more than just a few pheasant eggs this weekend if we're not careful. Gypsies, tramps and thieves! We hear it from the people of the town; they call them, gypsies, tramps and thieves ..."

"But every night all the men would come around, and lay their money down," Jenny pointed out.

"I've always wondered what they were buying," admitted Algae.

"We don't want another hullabaloo weekend, just because Daphne is descended from a notorious line of ditchers, peers, and robber barons," Ralph let it be known.

"Another what?" Jenny piped in.

"The only reason I agreed to come out here is that nothing much ever happens in the Fens. Not since they were drained of their primeval character by those Dutch engineers. You'd be lucky to catch sight of a marsh tit now, never mind a will-o'-the-wisp."

"What is a hullabaloo weekend?" Jenny persisted.

"The sort you never forget."

"I wouldn't mind, I've never had one of those before," she confessed, as if hoping that something out of the ordinary just might happen to make the weekend more memorable.

"Well, we have, and we don't want anymore," Ralph stated flatly. "We haven't even left East Anglia this time so everything should be just fine. What can possibly happen to a carload of attractive young people all the way out here among the dungheaps and the haystacks?"

"We could crash into one," Jenny warned. "Daphne is

driving as if she's only just passed her test."

"Only just failed it, more like."

"How do you know it was a poacher or a traveller?" Algae asked Daphne. "I didn't see any traps, snares, or stolen BMWs."

"Didn't you see the shape of that thing?" Jenny interjected. "It was barely human. More like a hunchback gorilla."

"Maybe it was the local constable on his bike, wearing a full length cape and helmet," Algae suggested.

"Actually, it was female," Ralph insisted.

"How could you tell?" Jenny asked sceptically.

"When you've backpacked around the world a few times like I have, you soon develop an eye for that sort of thing," he revealed, with a modest shrug.

"If that's what you meet backpacking, maybe you're better off staying at home."

"But you don't see the sights if you stay at home."

"You mean like the Taj Mahal?" she presumed naively.

"I was thinking more of the topless bathers," he revealed shamelessly. "They don't do it over here - we don't have the weather for it."

"You mean we don't have the climate for it," ventured Algae. "But that doesn't explain why English women on holidays abroad in hot countries don't sunbathe topless either. Unless they're forced to at spear point. What about Daphne and Virginia in the Congo? It was over a hundred degrees out there in the shade."

"Actually we did," Daphne revealed immodestly. "We just didn't do it around you, Algae."

"I rest my case," grinned Ralph.

"We don't like the way you undress us with your eyes."

"I do not undress ..." Algae paused for thought in mid-sentence. "If I can undress you with my eyes, then what have you got to hide on the beach?" he countered, contemptuous of her logic.

"Cellulite, eczema, varicose veins ..." Ralph chuckled. "All the things we gloss over in our minds."

"Surely not even a policewoman could be that ugly," Jenny proposed, as if vainly conscious of her own alluring beauty. "Did you notice she had terrible split ends?"

"It wasn't a policeman, or a policewoman," Daphne stated flatly, her mood surprisingly sanguine given the near fatal incident. "If it had been, and I'd missed him - or her - he'd be standing here right now; giving us all a good bollicking just for being young and having fun endangering other people's lives."

"A good bollicking? What's that?" Algae inquired, wrinkling his nose and furrowing his brow like a dog sniffing a turd on a pavement.

"A dressing down. Are you sure you were in the war, Algae? You didn't learn much French."

"Daph's right," Ralph concurred. "A nipplehead wouldn't miss a fat chance like this to lecture us on the dreadful behaviour of young people. He'd be standing here right now, waving his notebook in the air like Attila the Hun."

As if on cue, a loud report from behind the car, deafening as a gunshot, put an end to this one speculation at least. All four jumped violently and twisted their heads in alarm. A cloud of green smoke hung in the stagnant air within a stone's throw of the rear passengers; and from it emerged a grotesque creature whose terrifying visage made Ralph catch his breath and Jenny recoil in terror. It approached them in squatting dance steps, with its legs apart and hands on knees; head twitching to one side as it hummed a few jaunty bars from a futuristic thriller.

"You were right," Jenny whispered in Ralph's ear. "It does appear to be female. Those bulges could be breasts."

"Either that or she's allergic to something," Ralph gasped. "You were right too, she has got split ends. She doesn't smell too good either."

"She probably doesn't fit in her rusty old bathtub."

The old hag was shrouded in black, as if in a state of mourning. She was a truly monstrous apparition, with a huge hooked nose and a chin that projected like a crowbar. Her physique was large and bulbous; her leathery skin creased,

wrinkled, and covered in warts; her dark straggly hair matted, unwashed, and streaked with grey.

Three of the occupants of the car were transfixed, just as the hedgehog had been in the headlights minutes earlier. They gaped and gawped with wide eyes and open mouths at this gut-churning being which, with great deliberation, lifted a gnarled digit; appended by a dirty, twisted fingernail; and singled out the fourth, Daphne, for interrogation.

The deep resonant voice rang out with a distinct continental timbre, as befitting a matriarch with a stentorian voicebox, a hairy chest, and lungs like an operatic Valkyrie.

"Daughter of Wulfmarsh - do you know what day this is?"

"Of course I do, you old warthog, it's Friday," Daphne replied sharply, showing none of the respect for older people which the Bible used to encourage on pain of death.

"Er, actually, it's Saturday," Algae noted, tapping the face of his wristwatch. "It's after midnight, Daphne."

"Then by the chimes at midnight, Daughter of Wulfmarsh!" the creature wailed mournfully. "The chimes at midnight!"

Daphne seemed less than impressed by this cryptic threat. "Alright, fine, by midnight. Anything else, you miserable old crow, or can we go now? I may be twenty, but I've still got the fragile ego of a teenager. What if someone sees me talking to a senile old bat, staggering home from the pub after a bucket of grog, and thinks you're my mother?"

The creature stopped wailing and frowned in disgust, as if somewhat perplexed and disappointed by Daphne's indifference to its bravura performance. Fortunately, for the sake of the narrative, it was saved from making an embarrassingly low key exit by Algae's gauche curiosity.

"What's all this about the chimes at midnight?" he had to ask.

The face of the thing lit up and it pounced on the fortuitous cue with improvised alacrity. "By midnight, our wrath will fall upon the heads of the Wulfmarsh clan. The recompense, so long overdue, shall be paid in full; and all that

which rightfully belongs to us will be returned.”

“Who the hell is she?” Ralph whispered keenly. “Your chief county librarian?”

“More like Grendel’s mother,” Algae gasped.

“This coming night, the Angel of Death will cast a shadow over Wulfmarsh Hall for the monstrous crimes of your forebears, and the terrible prophesy of vengeance shall be fulfilled. Your accursed bloodline will be severed for all time - and may God have mercy on your soul. That goes for all your friends as well,” the old witch added as an afterthought, her bony finger scanning the other three faces to make the point. Then she raised her talons to heaven in triumph and began to cackle maniacally, like a mourner at a heathen funeral.

“Sever your bloodline for the crimes of your forebears? That’s quite a serious threat,” Ralph observed keenly. “I hope this isn’t going to spoil our weekend.”

“The old hag’s been reading too much Conan-Doyle,” Daphne snorted derisively. “Next thing you know, she’ll be setting her dog on us.”

Algae joined in by rising from his seat and wagging his finger reproachfully at the hideous creature. “Now look here, Mrs __, whoever you are. You can’t just go around threatening decent, law abiding people like this.”

“Daphne’s family aren’t decent,” Ralph sniggered. “Or law-abiding. They made their money from sheep rustling and highway robbery - they weren’t called robber-barons for nothing.”

Daphne turned to flash dagger eyes at her handsome backseat passenger, as if piqued by the slander. “Do you want to sleep in the woods tonight?” she inquired, her tone intimating deadly earnest. “Maybe the old hag has got a double bed in her caravan she’d be willing to share.”

“I’d rather walk back to Cambridge in bare feet,” Ralph admitted meekly. “In spite of what they say, I’m not totally undiscerning when it comes to women.”

Insulted by the lack of audience appreciation, the enraged creature erupted for a second time; screaming and wailing in

fury, whilst clawing the air with her talons like a drama student climbing an invisible ladder. There was another deafening report; another cloud of green smoke; a few more bars of the jaunty thriller; and when the smoke had cleared she was gone.

"How do you deal with neighbours from hell like that?" Algae chided, shaking his head in dismay.

"Anti-social behaviour orders," Jenny suggested.

"Give 'em a short-sharp-shock," Ralph countered, slapping his palm with a riding crop.

"Jenny's idea sounds better. This is the twentieth century - the age of social reform," Algae reminded him. "There must be cheaper alternatives to locking people up."

"Like blowing 'em up," Ralph advised, taking a grenade from his breeches, pulling out the pin and tossing it into Algae's lap. "It's a cheap alternative to prison and it solves the problem of recidivism - there's not much chance of anyone re-offending either."

Algae viewed the gift with some astonishment at first, but then had the presence of mind to throw it into the air, where it exploded high amongst the trees.

"That should scare 'em off - for a while at least," Ralph declared, just as a baby hedgehog, buoyed up by the blast, fell into his crotch and impaled him with its spines; causing him to cry out in pain.

"You see, Algae, they do climb trees," Daphne chortled.

"One day, you'll be sorry for abusing nature," he assured them. "Mother pays her debts."

"I think she just made the first instalment," Ralph conceded, gingerly extracting the baby hedgehog from his fleshy parts and lowering it respectfully over the side of the car to run away into the long grass by the roadside.

"What did that old witch mean by those threats about a prophesy?" asked Jenny, with a shudder. "Is something bad going to happen this weekend?"

"Nothing to worry about," Daphne insisted, starting the car again. "The old witch is probably mad, or drunk, or both."

Angel of Death, my arse!”

“Daphne!” Jenny squealed, more shocked by bad language than bad people.

“Excuse me, but that old hag is no more on speaking terms with angels than I am,” Daphne chortled. “Present company excepted of course, Jennifer darling.”

“Daphne, you better let Algae drive the rest of the way to the Hall. We’re facing in the wrong direction now and women can’t do three-point-turns on narrow roads like this,” Ralph goaded her.

“Who needs a three-point-turn?” Daphne replied dismissively, revving the powerful engine, pushing the stick into reverse; releasing the clutch and slamming her foot to the floor. The car shot back at high speed like a dark-green dog out of a trap, trailing an acrid cloud of burning rubber.

“We’re going backwards!” Jenny cried.

“I just bought new tyres,” Algae groaned.

“But at least we’re going backwards in the right direction,” Ralph observed, admiring the driver’s skill and nerve. “No need to turn around, we’ll be there in a tick, first to arrive by a nose.”

“You mean we’ll be the first to hit a wall,” Jenny noted in alarm, looking out of the back of the car like the terrified front seat passenger on a roller coaster ride.

“Don’t worry, Daphne has passed her test. She’s even been on a high-speed driving course for extracting diplomats from kidnap situations. Watch this!”

True to Ralph’s prediction, the edifying demonstration of high speed reverse driving was short lived. Daphne pulled on the handbrake and spun the steering wheel. The momentum of the car converted into forward motion as it turned through one hundred and eighty degrees on the narrow road and continued hurtling on its merry way towards the stately home.

“Where did she learn to do that?” asked Jenny, eyes wide in amazement at the feat.

“MI5. Daphne was a driver during the war. They saw what happened to Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajavo and thought the

same thing might happen to the Prince of Wales in Cardiff.”

“But he’s our future king,” Jenny gasped.

“The Sons of Glyndwr don’t quite see it that way.”

The dramatic incident with the old witch and the political perils facing their future king were immediately pushed to the backs of their malleable young minds by a new spectacle - Wulfmarsh Hall in all its Gothic glory.

This early revival dated from the reign of Queen Anne, and featured lots of ridges, arches, spikes, spires, and other jagged and pointed bits on which to puncture a low flying Zeppelin; or impale sundry other such invaders abseiling down lines or parachuting from the sky. Wulfmarsh Hall was the maniacal creation of a revivalist architect on a bad opium trip; drawing up a surly facade with heaps of character, unfathomable depths of personality, and a hint of malevolence thrown in for seasoning. Incandescent light bathed the grotesque gargoyles that clung like limpets to the dark grey walls of their host’s residence and smiled luridly at the visitors; whilst high up in the crenellated battlements, shrouded in a supernatural mist, the prowling shadow of a vengeful ghost marked their arrival.

Daphne slammed on the brakes at the last second, locking the wheels and causing the vehicular statement to slide across the gravel forecourt on state-of-the-art pneumatic tyres like a drunken goose on a frozen lake. They narrowly avoided the thick trunk of a spreading oak tree on the edge of the finely manicured lawn and came to a halt within about six inches of the sheer granite face of an annex wall.

“Last stop, everyone out!” Daphne announced, roughly and rudely squeezing the rubber sphere of the hooter attached to the side of the windscreen to announce their boisterous arrival.

“My God, Daphne!” Jenny cried out, putting her hand over her mouth in melodramatic awe at the sight of the impressive building surrounded by extensive lawns.

“What is it now?” Daphne demanded to know. “I’m getting fed up with all this implied criticism of my driving. *I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman*, but I’ve passed the

advanced test they give to traffic cops and driving instructors.”

“It’s beautiful - like a fairy tale palace,” gasped Jenny.

Algae stared up at an extremely ugly stone gargoyle that was glaring down at them malevolently from a fountain in the middle of the well-lit courtyard. He frowned and glanced at Ralph, who readily concurred with a perplexed shake of his head.

“Don’t let Father hear you say that or he’ll get the cowboy builders in to renovate the facade,” Daphne warned. “Father thinks the only beautiful things in this world are horses. He grew rather fond of one in the Boer War. Mother cited it as grounds for divorce before she ran off with the owner of a glue factory and went down on the Titanic.”

“Why didn’t she take you with her, Daph?” Ralph inquired mischievously.

“Because I was always Daddy’s girl,” she replied, climbing out of the car and squeezing the horn again as she stood by the driver’s door. “Where is that old fart when you need him? He must be growing deaf as well as senile in his old age.”

“Your father?” asked Jenny, slightly shocked by the pejorative references.

“No, O’Flagerty, our butler. When I was last here, he was the only servant left alive. I hope nothing has happened to him or we could be in serious trouble.”

“What happened to all the others?” asked Jenny, feeling a slight touch of girly angst, as she gingerly opened the rear passenger door and stepped out onto the gravel surface. “A big house like this should have dozens of them.”

“They’re all buried together in a partition of the Protestant churchyard. We’ve had a lot of shooting accidents in recent years.”

“Why do you grow so much commercial pine?” Algae quizzed Daphne; like a student, in a sober moment, from an agricultural college; as he surveyed the woodland through which they had just come with a dubious eye. “It’s not good for the indigenous species at this latitude.”

"Red squirrels are indigenous - they love our pine trees."

"You can buy red squirrels in any pet shop. There are lots of flower and insect species facing extinction that need deciduous forest to survive."

"Sod the flowers and the insects - we're country folk!" Daphne reminded him. "Hunt it, shoot it, fish it; then plough up the land, tear up the hedgerows, and poison everything that lives and breathes with toxic chemical fertilisers - that's our motto. We've been screwing the environment for centuries, so why stop now - just when there's some serious money to be made from farming subsidies?"

Daphne squeezed the horn again.

Algae drew her hand away from the rubber sphere with some friendly advice. "Be gentle with it, Daphne, or I won't let you drive again."

"Don't be ridiculous, Algae. You know there's nothing you wouldn't do for me. That's why I despise you so much."

"We won't be needing a driver on Monday if that old witch is to be believed," Ralph cut in. "Unless, of course, he's driving a hearse."

"Don't say things like that, you frighten me," Jenny chided, while taking his strong arm for reassurance.

"Surely you're not afraid of a crazy old peasant woman," Ralph mused. "Personally, I'm much more concerned about meeting the vengeful ghost of Lady Lavinia's brutally murdered lover."

"Ghost? What ghost? You didn't say anything about a ghost!" Jenny exclaimed, her cheeks glowing with a smile and her eyes suddenly wide with delight.

Ralph frowned. "Why is it that someone's mad, gin-soaked old granny can frighten you so easily; and yet the prospect of meeting a handsome, bodice-ripping ghost, in an old Gothic style mansion, has the opposite effect of exciting you?"

"Sex and childhood - according to Freud," cited Algae.

"Hormones," Daphne diagnosed more prosaically. "I just hope she can control them if we get into a tight spot."

"We aren't going to get into any tight spots this weekend,"

Ralph remonstrated. "Well, maybe one or two," he added lewdly on reflection.

"I don't know the reason why it excites me," Jenny confessed. "But then, if I was a bit more intelligent, or a bit less good-looking, I wouldn't be standing here outside a creepy old haunted mansion, with three weird characters in search of a scriptwriter."

"We're not weird," Algae protested. "And we don't need a scriptwriter. We're very good at improvisation - we've all done the Drama Society workshop."

Daphne linked arms with Ralph and led him towards the granite stone steps which served the massive arched doorway that led into Wulfmarsh Hall.

Algae and Jenny followed closely behind. Ralph still had his sleeves rolled up to show off his exceptional arms. His riding boots were shiny brown and his breeches billowed at the thighs like a cavalry officer with drop-tanks fitted to his incontinence pants. The other three wore less flamboyant trousers and shoes. Light cotton fabric in sober colours as if out summer-walking - except for Jenny, who opted for an attractive, if slightly gaudy, pink.

They were greeted at the foot of the steps by a lifesize bronze statue on a granite plinth about seven feet high. The figure was in seventeenth century dress with a round-rim hat and a broad sword belt across its chest. It pointed down the road from whence they had come; forbidding them, in the name of God, to proceed any further.

"Who's this? John Bunyan?" Jenny asked naively.

"Bunyan came from Bedfordshire, a neighbouring county," Daphne explained. "Though we could use a statue of him out here for the nonconformists, if we could acquire one from a public place without causing too much uproar and local press speculation. This is Oliver Cromwell - Cambridgeshire's most famous son. Visitors expect to see historical connections like this, even though we were Royalist fanatics in the Civil War and would cut the ears off anyone foolish enough to utter the words 'down with the King!'."

They left the imposing statue to its evangelical vigil and continued up the stone steps to the massive doors. When they reached the great oak panels, embedded with wrought iron, that filled the Gothic arch, Daphne banged on a heavy bronze doorknocker and waited patiently. A few tense and suspenseful seconds ticked past before Ralph broke the silence again.

"Daphne?"

"Yes, Ralph?"

"Is there anyone at home? That is, home in Wulfmarsh Hall, as opposed to home in your emotionally overwrought head?" Ralph chuckled, playing on her innate feminine paranoia.

"I'll keep you guessing on that one," she decided, with an enigmatic and slightly disconcerting smile.

"You have got a front door key though, haven't you?" Jenny inquired tersely, as an owl gave a ghostly hoot from a bell tower. "I don't fancy spending an October night on a cold stone doorstep with a hideous madwoman on the prowl."

"Actually no," Daphne replied. "I don't need one."

Support for this proposition came from the door itself. The muffled screeching sound of bolts being drawn through iron rings behind the thick wood confirmed the presence of an occupant willing to greet them, and perhaps allow them to enter and explore the listed building. Jenny stepped back as a bifurcation appeared, first at the apex of the tall arch, but quickly spreading downwards to the stone floor as the doors parted to reveal the yellow light of the interior.

A funny looking old man with a mass of shaggy grey hair stood in the narrow gap he had created in the doorway to interrogate the late-night callers. He was long overdue a haircut and walked with a stoop, but his decrepit frame belied a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Good evening to ye all," he hailed them jovially, greeting the aristocratic filly and her guests with a dramatic bow and a low sweep of his arm, as if welcoming them to the Bourbon court.

Daphne's jaw dropped as if stunned by his unexpected appearance and funny mannerisms. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded to know, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"I could ask ye t'e same question," he replied.

"Daphne Wulfmarsh - I live here."

"O'Flaherty, ma'am," the sprightly old gentleman answered immediately. "At yer service."

"Where's O'Flagerty?" she barked.

"Oh, t'at was a sad case indeed, ma'am. O'Flagerty was bagged only last month in a hare shoot. Easy mistake to make oder t'e short grass and in broad daylight."

"You mean, he really was shot dead during a hare shoot?" Algae gasped. "I know Daphne jokes about these things, but I didn't realise that it actually happens."

"Straight t'rough t'e gizzard, so I heard. O' course, I wasn't t'ere at t'e time, myself, but t'ey say it was a good clean kill. It only took him an hour or so to choke to death on his own blood and vomit."

"So you're his replacement?" Daphne inquired, biting the air with her sceptical lips.

"T'at I am, ma'am, *aille do gud service or aille lig i' the grund for it*, just like O'Flagerty."

"Are you Scots or Irish?" Ralph queried, puzzled by the shifting accent.

"Scotch-Oirish," he claimed.

The features of this 'Ulsterman' were very similar to, perhaps inspired by, those on the statue of Cromwell; with puffy cheeks, a broad putty nose, and an unsightly wart over his eyebrow to challenge portrait artists.

"If you're a servant - why is your hair so long?" asked Daphne.

"I suppose I'm just an old-fashioned hippie at heart," he replied cheerfully.

"Hippie? What's that?" she demanded to know. "Sounds like some sort of Bolshevik!"

"Short for hypocrite, I think," Ralph ventured tactfully, like a diplomatic interpreter. "It's an American term."

"That's alright then, you've come to the right country," Daphne informed the old butler. "But why did Father not mention O'Flaherty's tragic demise in his telegram?"

O'Flaherty shrugged his shoulders. "Extra words cost money - and he's had a lot on his mind lately, what, wit' no servants and t'e estate going to rack and ruin; all t'anks to t'e government plans to ban foxhunting. He probably didn't want to trouble ye wit' t'e bad news and upset yer studies."

"Well, I'm here now, so you can start by unloading the car and bringing our luggage into the house," she ordered, still far from convinced by the explanation. "Then make sure there are drinks and sandwiches waiting for us in the study - and I don't mean lemonade. We're dry after a long drive and I'm desperate for some stimulation - like a pint of stout with a good strong head, followed by a slow comfortable screw against the wall. Think you can manage that, O'Flaherty?"

"Oh yes, ma'am, t'at'll be no problem at all," he answered agreeably. "T'ough I'm not sure yer fat'er would approve. Are ye sure ye're old enough for t'at sort o' t'ing?"

"Damn right, I'm old enough," Daphne growled.

"It's good to have ye back, ma'am; safe and sound," O'Flaherty proposed. "I hear t'e crime rate in Cambridge is just awful."

"It got worse when Daphne arrived," joked Ralph.

"T'e ot'er servants would be pleased to see ye too - if t'ere were any left still standing and breathing. Did ye do well in school and please yer teachers like a good little girl?"

"She certainly did not," Ralph recalled. "At prep school she couldn't keep out of the headmaster's study. Poor old fellow took early retirement for a heart condition. They say he overexerted himself with his cane."

"That was a long time ago," Daphne reminded Ralph, then addressed the butler sternly. "Are you being impertinent, O'Flaherty, or just patronising?"

"Oh patronising, yer Ladyshit, most definitely patronising, wit'out a doubt," O'Flaherty insisted earnestly. "What else would I be to such a wise and beautiful and virtuous young

lady as yerself?"

"A patronising servant is just as bad as an impertinent one," she pointed out. "Both make inappropriate use of the tongue."

"If ye say so, ma'am. But, as I recall, that sweet lass Queen Victoria seemed happy enough getting it from foxy old Ben Disraeli."

"Women's brains have evolved since then, so mind your lip or I'll have you taken to the stables and soundly flogged."

"Yes, ma'am." O'Flaherty paused for a moment to reflect, then furrowed his brow as if confused. "But t'ere might be a slight problem t'ere, ma'am. One ye might call an impasse of logic."

"Be careful what you say, O'Flaherty. Impertinence is a flogging offence, but insubordination is much more serious," she warned.

"I just wanted to remind yer Ladyshit, t'at t'ere is no one left around here to flog anyone anymore, exceptin' my own good self, o' course," he grinned, revealing an unsightly gap between his front teeth.

"Then you'll just have to do it yourself, won't you?" she insisted triumphantly.

"Yes, ma'am," he conceded, with a gently nodding head, but continued to dawdle as if preoccupied by a puzzling conundrum.

"Well? What are you waiting for? You'd better get on with it right away."

"T'at I will, ma'am, right away."

"But first make sure you bring our luggage in and fix our drinks. We wouldn't want to miss out on last orders."

"Yes, ma'am!" O'Flaherty murmured, then obediently hobbled off towards the car.

"And keep your eyes skinned for any strange looking characters lurking around," Daphne barked, as an after thought. "We saw an old witch acting suspiciously on the road not far from here as we drove up."

O'Flaherty paused to acknowledge this instruction by tug-

ging his grey forelock, which seemed to come away in his hand like a wig. He quickly and carefully repositioned it before hobbling back towards the little group as if intent, once more, on deliberately antagonising Daphne.

"He's determined to get the last word in," chuckled Ralph. "Here he comes again."

Jenny also giggled at this recidivism, as O'Flaherty walked right up to them, bold as brass - as if in his dementia, his senile old brain had already forgotten the sentence imposed for his previous impertinence.

"What is it now, O'Flaherty?" Daphne scowled. "I have been extremely patient with you so far, but now you're beginning to bore me."

"I was just wondering, ma'am, if ye've ever had t'e pleasure o' trying to flog yerself?" he asked, with an unbelievable level of cheek for the class-delineated twenties. "Ye see, it takes a certain combination of suppleness and dexterity t'at some of us no longer possess in our twilight years. Tis a bit like trying to pluck t'e hairs from yer own back. Ye really need someone else to do it for ye."

"Very well, you don't have to flog yourself," she relented.

"T'ank ye, ma'am."

"I'll telephone the agency in the morning and arrange for a temporary gamekeeper to drive up and do it for you."

O'Flaherty's eyes darkened for a brief moment with the fury of a defeated and subjugated underclass, thwarted in its latest attempt to throw off the oppressor; but then instantly lightened up again as he rebounded and smiled cheerfully to cover his ire. "Yes, ma'am. Whatever ye say. I just hope he gets here safely - in t'e morning."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she queried, alerted by a hint of menace in his wolfish tone.

"I hear t'e roads can be treacherous for travellers t'is time o' t'e year," he remarked, as he hobbled away with a surly grin on his face.

"He's another strange character," Algae noted thoughtfully. "I get the feeling we've just woken up Washington Irving's

Rip Van Winkle (1820) and he's not entirely happy about it."

"We better get used to meeting strange characters around here," Ralph advised. "Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) landed just up the coast at Whitby; and further up the coast in Hartlepool, they hanged a monkey they thought was French."

"I heard they thought it was from Sunderland. It was wearing red and white stripes, and they couldn't understand a word it was saying."

"That's a very dodgy accent he's got there, and if I didn't know any better, I'd swear he's wearing eye liner," Jenny ventured, referring to O'Flaherty again and wrenching their minds from the fate of the poor old Hartlepool monkey. "Did you notice he was wearing a wig?"

"Maybe he's bald," Ralph proposed.

"Vanity at his age?"

"They would have been fashionable in his youth. Thaddeus Stevens used to wear one just like it."

"Thaddeus who?"

"Didn't you see *Birth of a Nation* (1915)?"

"Of course I did. But not until 1917. It takes a while for films to cross the Atlantic."

"It shouldn't take two years," Ralph frowned. "Not since they invented paddle steamers."

"Maybe it got held up by Customs," Algae suggested. "Checking for bare flesh, bad language, and a carton of cigarettes hidden in the canister."

"That doesn't take two years either," Ralph ventured. "Not in a silent movie."

"But surely, O'Flaherty must be far too old for service now?" Jenny suggested charitably. "He should be put out in a field to pasture."

"Never underestimate servants," Daphne advised. "You never know what they are capable of until their backs break. Underneath that tired old crust, a fountain of youthful zest and vitality could still be spouting. His legs may be going, but I'll bet he's still great on horseback riding down a slave."

"A slave?" Jenny queried.

"I meant a fox, of course. We haven't had slaves in this part of the country since Soapy Sam's dad had them banned."

Algae looked extremely doubtful as he watched the crooked figure hobbling, one step at a time, towards the car, like a geriatric without a zimmer frame. "I doubt whether he could get on a rocking horse with a stair lift. You could have parked a bit closer to the front door. It's a fair old distance for anyone to have to carry four heavy cases."

"You're right," Daphne conceded for once. "O'Flaherty! Bring the car closer to the entrance so you don't have to carry those heavy cases quite so far!"

"Algae should go and start-up the engine for him," Jenny suggested. "He hasn't got the key."

"No need to waste petrol," Daphne replied. "He can slip off the handbrake and push it over here."

"But he'll leave dirty fingerprints on the paintwork," Algae remarked, with some concern.

"He can wipe them off afterwards. We provide a full valet service for our guests' vehicles," Daphne assured him.

"That car means even more to him than you do," Ralph whispered in her ear.

"Thank God for that, we all need something to love."

"Why is it that all your servants have got such Irish sounding names?" asked Jenny.

"They come over for the potato harvest each year and some stay on to pursue higher goals. Domestic service has long been acknowledged as a path to self improvement - better to work in the house than in the fields."

"The trouble is - Wulfmarsh servants never seem to rise very high before they end up six feet under," Algae noted. "Talk about taking one step forward, two steps back."

"It's all a matter of perspective," Daphne insisted. "If they are good Catholics, they'll get to heaven all the sooner."

"Don't they have to wait in the ground for the second coming?"

"Time passes quickly when you're dead."

"But they can pass the time dead without having to leave

the Emerald Isle and endure the ignominy of working here first."

"Time spent here could be purgatory," Ralph suggested, with sound theological sophistry.

Daphne led them through the entrance that beckoned somewhat impatiently. Ralph was last in line now, and tripped over a coarse doormat bearing an instruction to WIPE YOUR FEET! He came nose to nose with a plaque on the door insisting on NO PHOTOGRAPHY!! Just above the plaque; a grotesque, scowling little face on a bronze doorknocker looked down at him with sly contempt.

"Who'd want to photograph you?" he muttered to the hideous cast. "Come back and look at this!" he called out to the other three, who had just slipped inside ahead of him. "This must be one of Daphne's family forebears. No one else could be this ugly."

Algae popped his head back round the door and focussed on the doorknocker. "It looks like that old witch to me," he declared. "Maybe she's related to Daphne through an illegitimate liaison. It happens a lot in the countryside."

Daphne's head appeared below Algae's, forming a bizarre living totem pole of glum-looking mugs. "Sheer coincidence," she sniffed haughtily. "It's just an old doorknocker from the thirteenth century - like they have at Brasenose College, Oxford."

Jenny's head appeared below Daphne's. "I don't believe in coincidences. It's all so spooky. I just know something strange is going to happen this weekend."

"Father has a retroverted taste in architecture, that's all," Daphne explained. "He prefers the Gothic style because he is such a devout monarchist and thinks that all those neoclassical motifs you see around London are signs of encroaching republicanism."

"Then why does he allow that statue of Cromwell to stand outside the front door?"

"Cromwell was King in all but name - and a brave bad man. Father likes brave bad men."

Ralph passed under the decorated stone arch and vanished inside the building. The Algae and Daphne heads withdrew likewise, leaving the tardy Jenny head by itself; wide-eyed and pensive, staring out at the night sky and the woodland beyond the courtyard, as if expecting an attack by Injuns.

She heard more owl hoots overhead; and when she glanced back at the lawn, she noticed a ghostly figure in a black cloak looming out of a patch of mist. The figure was exceptionally tall and carried a gigantic scythe. It seemed to glide slowly in her direction, with its head bowed, and the scythe swaying to and fro over the blades of grass. As it grew closer, the head rose to reveal gaunt skeletal features and the long blade of the scythe was raised as if to lop off her head.

Jenny squealed; and was pulled back inside by Daphne's hand, which had reached out to tug at her collar. The doors slammed shut and the iron bolts were thrown, hermetically sealing the damned within the Hall and foreclosing on their doom. The doorknocker grinned smugly at the thought of what awaited them inside and a sinister chuckle emanated from its brass lips.

CHAPTER TWO

The guests found themselves in a broad, sumptuous foyer, with a high ceiling decorated in a baroque style. Winged cherubs in celestial flight took aim with their puny arrows; whilst far below, tiger and bearskin rugs from Empire days lay on the polished tiles with their mouths open, as if to express their utter exasperation at the indignity of their fate. Tall, menacing African tribal figures; exquisitely carved from ebony wood and bearing bright eyes and broad smiles; stood like sentinels on plinths and eyed-up Jenny as she walked passed. The fine figure of the white woman met with their approval. They hadn't seen anything like it since Jane crossed the dark continent to be with *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914).

The elegant spacious foyer gave way to a broad corridor that extended into the heart of the great building, and was adorned by pottery and sculpture dubiously acquired from foreign lands. The sumptuous oak panelled walls were beautifully decorated with paintings and tapestries hanging on either side, from which to trace the exalted lineage of Daphne's family since they welcomed the coming of Guillaume le Batard and cleverly avoided the Saxon *Gotterdammerung* which followed. Embroidered arras, dating back to Norman times, covered the portals to an arterial network of secret passage ways which had served the Hall faithfully in times of intrigue.

"I'm telling you, it was Death - he was out there cutting the grass!" Jenny insisted, trying to convince her sceptical companions.

"He's a grim reaper - he must like gardening. You shouldn't

let a coincidence like bumping into that old witch on the road unbalance your mind,” Daphne advised, taking the arm of her guest in a sisterly fashion and leading her ahead of the boys.

“Who said it did?” Jenny replied defensively. “But first a witch and then Death. That’s more than just a coincidence - it’s a bad omen - like a comet before a battle.”

“Nonsense. We live in a world of infinite coincidence, otherwise no one would ever get married.”

“What about arranged marriages?”

“We don’t have those in England.”

“They have them in Scotland.”

“That’s a different country.”

“Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon from Glamis Castle fancies James Stuart, gallant war hero with the Royal Scots and third son of the seventeenth Earl of Moray; but they’re grooming her for Albert Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha, so poor old James has been sent off to dig for oil in Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweepin’ down the plain ...”

“You’re very well informed,” Daphne remarked. “But don’t you mean Albert Windsor?”

“Er, no, my tutor definitely said Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha.”

“Who is your tutor?”

“An Australian bloke - er, fellow - just off the boat from Sydney.”

“Well, he obviously hasn’t read all the latest research in his field. Lizzie and Jimmy can’t marry each other, they’re both skint - relatively speaking, whereas Bertie’s family own castles and palaces in London, Berkshire, Norfolk and Scotland. Do you want to get married?” Daphne inquired pruriently.

“Oh yes, but only to the right man,” insisted Jenny.

Daphne glanced back furtively at Ralph, who was grinning lewdly as he drew Algae’s attention to a smooth, white, anatomically perfect sculpture of a neoclassical female form by Antonio Canova.

“I’m not sure that Ralph is the right man for you,” she counselled.

"Why do you say that?" asked Jenny, askance at the discouraging inference.

"Because I've known him a lot longer than you have and I know what he's like. We even went to the same prep school together."

"You went to a boys' prep school?"

"I had short hair back then - and a flat chest."

"So did I, but I didn't go to a boys' prep school!" Jenny exclaimed, horrified at the thought. "Why on earth were you sent to such an awful place?"

"The usual story. Father wanted a boy, and what Father wants he usually gets, one way or another."

"How long has this been going on for?" Jenny probed, like a social worker with deep concern for Daphne's emotional development.

"Father has been in parental denial at my lack of dangly bits for over twenty years now. But the prep school experience came to an end when Ralph started giving me funny looks in the showers. They didn't have primary sex education back then, so the boys didn't really know what a girl was. To be honest, I don't think those male primary school teachers did either. They thought Ralph was a bit ginger at first and gave him electro-convulsive therapy to straighten him out."

"Isn't there always the danger of that sexual aversion therapy making straight boys bend a bit?" Jenny posited.

Daphne glanced back again to see Ralph with his hand crudely massaging a marble breast like an art-history student examining the Venus de Milo.

"I think it'll take more than a few jolts to the testicles to bend Ralph," she proposed. "By the time I was eleven, four fifths of the boys in my year were on ECT, and the power bill was straining the school budget, so the easy option was to get rid of me before the end of the spring term."

"And you've been suffering from an acute sense of rejection by male institutions ever since, for which you subconsciously blame cerebral men like Algae and seek to hurt them for the way you were treated," Jenny proposed.

"The subconscious has got nothing to do with it," Daphne scoffed. "Algae may be bright on paper, but he knows nothing about the real world. He still hasn't worked out yet that young women like tall men who pretend to be stupid, not short men who pretend to be clever - watch this." Daphne cleared her throat and raised her voice so that both Ralph and Algae could hear. "As I was saying, we live in a world of coincidence. My throat is parched and I'll bet there just happens to be a large gin and tonic waiting for me somewhere through those doors."

"That's not a coincidence, it's causality," Algae piped in pedantically. "You told O'Flaherty you wanted drinks laid out for the guests."

"See what I mean?" she whispered to Jenny. "Threatening, isn't he? You wouldn't want him standing in front of you in the omnibus-queue, minding his own business."

Jenny nodded warily, and her eyes narrowed as she marked Algae down with a codified glance of disapproval.

The doors to which Daphne had referred lay some way off, situated beyond a broad, sweeping, spiralling stairway that invited them to ascend to the lofty heights of Wulfmarsh Hall where they could explore an even higher plane of sumptuous elegance.

The guests paused at the foot of the stairway and allowed their gaze to travel upwards in open mouthed admiration at the scale and grandeur of this magnificent architectural feature, embedded in the grand interior design.

"This could have been built by Robert Adam, the greatest neoclassical architect and designer of the eighteenth century," Ralph noted reverently, as he lightly rubbed the smooth, polished oak bannister with the palm of his hand.

"Ralph is so good-looking, he doesn't have to pretend to be stupid," Jenny cooed with girlie infatuation.

"Which is lucky for him, because he was never very good at arithmetic," Daphne revealed. "Robert Adam was born in Kircaldy in 1728. The interior of Wulfmarsh Hall was completed in 1707, just in time to celebrate the conquest of

Schottland.”

“The Scots were never actually conquered,” Algae remarked pedantically - again. “They were bribed into accepting the Act of Union.”

“That’s true. And we let them keep some of their institutions - like an education system and a national football team - for all the good it’s done them. They’ll have a far better chance of winning a Nobel Prize if they support us instead.”

“Maybe Wulfmarsh Hall had an Adam makeover after he was born,” Jenny suggested, in an effort to defend Ralph’s scholarly reputation. “I’ve heard they were very popular back in the eighteenth century.”

They left the stairway and continued towards the rear of the building. Jenny was last in line now - and glanced up at a wall portrait of an enigmatic looking young fellow in time to see the squinting eye glance in her direction. At first she thought she must have imagined it, but then the eye seemed to wink at her quite brazenly. She cried out in alarm and pointed an accusing finger at the portrait.

“He’s looking at me!”

“Who? Algae?” Ralph presumed, leaping to the defence of her virtue.

“Him!” Jenny pointed again at the offending individual so that there could be no case of mistaken identity.

Daphne was not impressed. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Jenny, don’t take it so personally. He’s been dead for centuries - just like all the other young men in old portraits you accuse of making eyes at you.”

“I’m telling you the eye moved,” she insisted fearfully.

“It’s the way he was painted,” Daphne explained. “His eyes look at you as you walk passed - like those posters of Kitchener they did in the war.”

The other three moved on, leaving Jenny staring up at the portrait. He winked at her again and revealed his rotting teeth through an amorous smile.

The odyssey continued onward, beneath the haughty noses of the Wulfmarsh hall of shame. The lineage seemed to

stretch for centuries and Jenny cautiously inspected each man-painting for a lewd or indecent expression. She shrieked loudly again when a grizzled old countenance, like an elderly Cromwell, suddenly appeared inside an empty picture frame and stared out with a goofy, gap-toothed grin. A bemused O'Flaherty tossed the frame aside and made an astonishing pronouncement.

"I've placed yer guests' luggage in t'eir respective rooms as ye commanded, ma'am. Drinks and sandwiches are awaiting ye in t'e study."

"Good. Where is Father, O'Flaherty?"

O'Flaherty seemed surprised by the question. "Oh, so ye heard about t'at?" he surmised. "T'at old miscreant, Fat'er O'Flaherty, was excommunicated for drinking and whoring on a Sunday. So he jumped on a ship to Canada and set up a business boot-legging illicit spirits to t'e Yanks in barrels oder Niagara Falls."

Ralph stepped forward to assist with translation. "No, she means her father. Not your parish priest from the saloon bars of County Cork."

"Oh, t'at old ____?" O'Flaherty leaned towards Ralph, as if to confide in him. "It's t'e received pronunciation - I can't understand what she's saying at times."

"So where is he?" Daphne growled impatiently.

"His Lordshit retired to his bed some hours ago wit' strict orders t'at he was not to be disturbed for any reason."

"That's odd," Daphne reflected. "He knew I was coming back tonight. You'd think he would have stayed up to greet us. What time is it now?"

O'Flaherty consulted a brightly polished, silver pocket-watch, suspended by a light chain from his waistcoat pocket. "Twelve t'irty five a.m.," he announced.

"In that case, you may retire for the evening, after you've wiped your dirty paw prints off the car and emptied the ash trays. You can keep the fagbutts for your own personal use," she informed him generously. "You do like fagbutts, don't you, O'Flaherty?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. But are t'ey t'e British, or t'e American, sort of fagbutt?" the discerning butler inquired.

"American, of course. British smokes are for working class people - and other ranks. Breakfast is to be served at seven thirty a.m."

"Have a heart, Daphne," Jenny groaned. "I never rise before midday on a Saturday."

"I was only joking," Daphne assured her, then continued instructing the butler. "My guests will sleep until nine tomorrow. However, I shall require breakfast at seven. By which time, you will have washed, waxed and valeted the car."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And get yourself a haircut. You look like a girl."

"Yes ma'am." O'Flaherty smiled convivially and left.

"That's him broken-in," Daphne concluded, with a self-congratulatory smirk. "Sometimes it takes a while, but they all learn to respect the whiphand of the mistress eventually."

"Does your father know how you treat his household staff?" asked Jenny, stung by Daphne's lack of charity towards the loyal servant. "When does the poor man ever sleep?"

"If you treat your servants right, they shouldn't have time to sleep," Daphne insisted. "

"How on earth did O'Flaherty manage to bring those four heavy suitcases in here so quickly?" Ralph wondered in amazement. "I didn't see him carrying anything."

"I warned you not to underestimate him," Daphne replied. "He probably used a shortcut through the servants' entrance. Come on, everyone, there should be drinks waiting for us in the study."

Daphne tried to shepherd them down a transept, branching off the main vestibule; but Jenny suddenly froze in her tracks, obstructing their way and causing them to pause before a pair of polished oak door panels that filled an arched portal and sealed off whatever lay within.

"What's the matter now, dearie? Seen a ghost, 'ave ya?" Daphne inquired theatrically.

"Daphne, that was excellent. Weren't you in last year's

Drama Society Christmas production of *The Chimes*?" asked Algae.

"Yes," she confirmed. "But Jenny isn't too impressed. She must have missed the show."

Jenny's attention was elsewhere once again. "What is that?" she stammered, whilst pointing resolutely ahead at some ill-defined point on the doors.

"The great dining hall," Daphne informed her, with the casual manner of a bored tourguide. "Don't worry, Jenny, you'll be amply fed as part of your stay here. We don't encourage anorexia nervosa in emotionally disturbed young women."

Daphne's jibe on a sensitive subject angered Ralph. He put his hands on Jenny's shoulders and spoke up for her. "Jenny's not anorexic, she's just right. You shouldn't say things like that, Daphne. She might start eating properly and put on weight."

Jenny shrugged him off. "Not the dining hall, you idiots. That thing up there!" she exclaimed fearfully.

All eyes followed her finger to a fierce looking canine head with dark hair, gleaming teeth, pointed ears, and a broad red tongue; mounted on a shield above the apex of the high double doors.

"Oh, that old thing!" Daphne laughed. "Just a mangy old wolf's head put up there to give the hallway a bit of sinister historical character. It may not look like much at the moment, but you'll begin to appreciate the spirit of the old place a lot more after a mickey finn, believe me."

Daphne took Jenny and Ralph by the arms and began to lead them away - leaving the sceptical Algae to ponder the true fate and nature of the unfortunate creature which could easily have been someone's pet Alsatian blacked-up with boot polish.

She guided them along another broad corridor and through a series of double doors to the study. A strangely evangelical place, with old oak trestles supporting the roof, and arched stone frames housing beautiful stained glass windows. On one

wall, the fourteen stations of the cross had been replaced with fourteen posters of sporting heroes, famous movie stars, and jazz musicians. But not all the religious iconography had been removed. A huge crucifix, with a life-sized wooden carving of Jesus, was still chained to the wall behind the altar, as it had been in the more pious days of worship in the bleak nineteenth century era of romanticism. However, by the more secular roaring twenties, the times they were a-changin' to modernism, pacifism and swing; and now Jesus also wore a grassy hula skirt and a crown of daisies. He was decked out in flowers like a Hawaiian god and a smoking spliff protruded from his lips.

The imposing marble altar, with cherubic carvings around its outward face, retained all the idolatrous silverware for a high mass, but now also doubled as a cocktail bar. A line of spirit optics were fixed to the wall beneath the holy feet, together with a shelf for bar glasses and bottled beers.

The traditional wooden prayer-benches, designed to cause maximum discomfort to even the most pious of buttocks through a long mass or sermon, had been replaced by a sofa and chairs; and a sumptuous rug covered part of the old stone floor. A snooker table stood in one corner, next to a dart board mounted on a wall; and a gramophone player, an upright piano, and some bookshelves made the place more personably secular. There was even a movie projector set up on a shelf at the back of the chapel; aimed at the space beneath a rolled-up screen attached to a beam just in front of the altar. And finally, inevitably; an old grandfather clock ticked loudly as a sharp blade on a pendulum swung relentlessly to and fro, like something out of Poe; reminding them all of the inexorable and illimitable passage of time.

"This is where we entertain our guests before dinner. Or, in your case, before bed," Daphne explained. "We would have made it here in time for dinner if Algae had stopped trying to molest me like a randy old driving instructor and allowed me to concentrate on the road."

"Don't blame Algae. You got us lost and took us up to

Lincolnshire,” Ralph reminded her.

“Algae was supposed to be navigating - he wouldn’t be much use in a rally.”

“In the dark, fields in Lincolnshire look just like fields in Cambridgeshire,” Algae stipulated sharply. “And with Daphne driving like a maniac, it was hard to read the map and spot the roadsigns in time. We’re lucky we made it here at all. Never again, Daph. No one loves you that much.”

The old clock suddenly chimed the third quarter before one a.m. making the three edgy guests jump and glance around nervously.

“Twenty-three hours and fifteen minutes,” Ralph mused, after regaining his composure.

The unperturbed, and perhaps unperturbable, hostess just smiled at this reference to her impending doom as she put a vinyl record on the turntable of the gramophone player and set the needle.

“Don’t forget, Ralph, you’ve been invited to share my fate this weekend,” Daphne reminded him. “We’re caught on the same wheel of fortune - there’ll be no escape for either of us.”

An obscure classical recording, which anticipated Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, began to build sonorously; until Ralph lifted the needle to spare Jenny’s frayed nerves. “There’ll be no escape for you perhaps, but with Algae about, I’ve got some one to watch over me.”

“I hope you find the experience more edifying than I do,” she remarked, with a total lack of grace.

Daphne put a different record on the turntable and a swing beat began to belt out of the horn, violating the ecclesiastic sanctity of the old chapel with an acoustic vulgarity that drowned out the ticking clock and their voices.

“It’s very loud!” moaned Jenny.

“What’s that?” asked Daphne, as she danced a Charleston to the tune.

“I said, it’s very loud!”

“What?”

“I said ...”

Daphne grinned and turned the volume down so Jenny could speak.

"... it's very loud. Won't your father be disturbed?"

"Nothing disturbs Father. He sleeps like an old bear."

"Let's hope he doesn't wake up like one," quipped Ralph.

"My God, Daphne, this is sacrilege," Jenny confessed. "It's an old chapel."

"Was an old chapel. Our religious ancestors used to build chapels in their country homes like we build garden sheds today. We didn't have much use for it though, being such wayward Catholics, so Father was going to demolish the building and turn it into a rhubarb allotment. But I persuaded him to let me do something far more daring with it instead. Brookie would have loved it, don't you think?"

"No, I don't!" decried Jenny piously. "Not unless he was a filthy heathen!"

"He was a bit of a neo-pagan," she had to admit. "But that was Cambridge before the war. You could get away with anything back then - if you were rich enough, and didn't have to work in a factory or worry about the police."

"What have you done to Jesus?" she protested.

"We've turned him into a superstar."

Jenny stood up on a stool to kiss the holy feet in a gesture of atonement, then dropped to her knees before the altar like Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion. She made the sign of the cross and, with her hands firmly clasped, began praying silently to God for the forgiveness of Daphne's fraught soul.

"Oh my God, she's one of them!" Daphne exclaimed. "Whose idea was it to bring her along anyway? She'll turn out to be worse than Ginny."

"No need to worry about Jenny. She just likes the drama of a high mass and gets carried away at the sight of Jesus in a loincloth," Ralph tried to assure Daphne.

"She'll go all the way to a virgin's heaven if she carries on like this," Daphne predicted in alarm.

"She comes from well-regarded Church of England stock. Her family attend Sunday services in Christ Church Cathedral

with the Primate of Oxford,” Ralph disclosed, as he proffered his revering hand to the serenely rising seraph.

“Primate of Oxford?” Daphne sniggered. “Do you think he likes being associated with monkeys?”

“I don’t suppose you thought to have the place deconsecrated first?” Jenny inquired righteously.

“What on earth for? There are a few rats about ...” she flung a castigating glance at Algae, who was examining an old suit of armour in the corner - which clutched a wooden shafted spear and sported a very fetching tartan skirt, “... but we don’t have any lice. I’m parched, and the subject of religion always drives me to drink.”

Daphne was drawn to the drinks on the altar bar, set next to a mountainous heap of corned-beef and lettuce sandwiches made with uncompromisingly thick slices of bread. An illustrated menu card was propped up on the tray containing four individually tailored and incredibly exotic looking cocktails, suggesting that O’Flaherty had experience of bar work and catering in far flung places. Bottles of whisky, brandy, vodka and gin, together with a small platter of sliced lemons, stood by in reserve; and in between sat a dark pint of stout with a perfectly formed head.

Daphne lifted the pint, took a deep breath, and sank her teeth into the creamy white head like an Irish vampire. She drained the glass in about ten seconds and slammed it down on the tray, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and exhaled through a loud, satisfied gasp.

Jenny looked on in open-mouthed amazement, silent and aghast until she recovered her wits. “Did you see that?” the innocent debutante demanded of her more worldly male companions, as if doubting the evidence of her own senses. “She just necked a pint of Guinness!”

“We see it every Friday night in the college bars,” Ralph revealed. “Daphne holds the record time for downing a pint in the women’s light-welterweight division.”

“You mean there are women out there who are faster than that?”

"Oh yes. The Opera Society has some really big women with deep throats and huge chests who drink barrel-loads of export lager out of horned-helmets."

"But we're not sure about them," Daphne stated, as she inspected her cocktail request. "We think they should be drug-tested."

She was more refined with the cocktail; sipping and savouring the slow comfortable screw before closing her eyes and letting out an orgasmic sigh. "That is just - so good," she hissed indulgently, like a python after a good meal. "Shame he isn't forty years younger."

"He'd still be a servant," Ralph pointed out, as he passed the prettiest cocktail to Jenny and took the macho looking rum-fizz for himself, leaving Algae with the one that resembled a glass of recycled pea soup.

"I've always been a firm believer in meritocracy," Daphne insisted, raising a few surprised eyebrows among her guests.

"Algae's a meritocrat - he went to a grammar school and got a scholarship to study at Cambridge," Ralph reminded her, as he helped himself to a hefty sandwich and took a massive bite.

"I meant sexual meritocracy. Those scholarship exams are a bit different to the sort of tests I have in mind. It takes a different set of faculties to pass. There's a very important practical element to the course. I doubt whether a theorist like Algae would score higher than a D-minus."

Algae was still poking around the suit of armour, which was part of a collection that included antique sabres, rapiers, battle axes and broadswords. "Daphne, where did this thing come from? Your old man's wardrobe?" he chuckled, as he rapped the shiny metal helmet with his knuckles.

"Don't try to be facetious, Algae. It only serves to expose your lack of wit," she replied.

"Who are these people over here?" asked Ralph, gesturing to a couple of paintings on a wall opposite the rogues gallery of sporting saints and angels. "The one on the left looks a bit like Douglas Haig - the educated soldier."

"These are my family favourites," Daphne revealed, referring to a brace of paintings, one of which was the Haig look-alike. "I had them moved from the hallway and hung up in here to give the old chapel some spirit."

"So which one still haunts the place?" asked Jenny.

Daphne ignored the question. "This one is Father," she explained, raising a glass to a broad, ruddy-faced man in his fifties; with a centre-parting and a Kitchener-style moustache. "You'll recognise him in the flesh easily enough. He hasn't changed much since he retired from the army, except for an expanding paunch."

"What about this one? A difficult pose to hold," Algae mused, as he viewed a white charger on a tall canvass, rearing up on its hind legs. A flamboyant-looking, Gainsboro-esque character sat astride it with the reins between his teeth. The poseur was dressed in early eighteenth century cavalry regalia; gaily waving a sabre in one hand and his plumed hat in the other. "I can imagine his ghost creating tiny movements on a creaking rocking horse in the wee small hours to curdle the blood."

"Is he the ghost?" Jenny probed again.

"What ghost?" Daphne queried sharply, as if irritated by the question.

"The ghost you all keep talking about. You did say your home was haunted."

"I've said no such thing," she declared.

"Actually - it was me who said there was a ghost," Ralph reminded them all.

"You shouldn't believe everything men tell you," Daphne advised Jenny. "Especially men like Ralph."

Ralph grinned as if he'd just received a compliment.

"If there really is an apparition stalking the corridors of Wulfmarsh Hall, then he's maintained an astonishing degree of discretion around me for the past twenty years."

"Oh?" Jenny sounded distinctly disappointed, as if this was not what she wanted to hear. "Then there isn't a ghost after all? None of it is true. It's just another male lie - perpetrated

with the intention to hurt and deceive.”

“Maybe he’s just shy,” Ralph smirked. “Brave men have been known to run away from Daphne.”

“Pity Algae isn’t a brave man,” Daphne frowned.

“He was brave enough to save you in Africa.”

“Schoolboy infatuation gave him a shot of adrenalin, otherwise he’d never have got away with it.”

“I’ve got a confession to make,” Ralph disclosed, drawing a thoughtful circle around the rim of his glass before polishing off the rum-fizz.

“Oh? Are you sure you want us all to hear this?” Jenny counselled warily.

“Oh yes, it belongs in the public domain,” he assured them. “I’ve researched this matter thoroughly for a thesis on hauntings in English stately homes, and have come to the conclusion that the ghost of Luca most definitely does haunt Wulfmarsh Hall, and this weekend I intend to prove it - beyond a reasonable doubt.”

“Oh? And just how are you going to do that?” Daphne inquired sternly, sounding less than happy with the idea.

Ralph grabbed Jenny’s cloth cap from her head and put it on his own, back to front; then, from behind his back, he conjured a small movie camera with a crank handle, fixed to a tripod. “With this,” he announced triumphantly.

“Where did that come from?” asked an astonished Jenny.

“It’s amazing what he hides in those breeches?” Daphne observed wryly.

“I meant, where did he get it from? He looks like Cecil B. Demille.”

“More like Erich von Stroheim,” grimaced Algae.

“I borrowed it from the Student Union Cinematography Society.”

“So what are you going to do with it?” Daphne demanded to know.

“I’m going to film Luca in action of course.”

“Sounds like an impossible dream to me,” Algae proposed.

This was Ralph’s cue for a song. “To dream the impossible

dream, ...”

Daphne interrupted the performance. “Didn’t you see the sign on the door when we came in? NO PHOTOGRAPHY!!! Es ist verboten! Verstehen Sie?”

“Yes, but that’s for the regular, fee-paying punters in the tourist season. I’m engaged in important high-level research - and I’m a friend of the management,” Ralph insisted earnestly.

“Not for much longer,” she warned.

“I’m also a life member of the award-winning and much loved English National Heritage Trust,” he revealed, taking out his wallet and flashing his gold card, together with a winning smile. “Don’t forget, this is a grade-one listed building, and we own half the lease since your old man failed to pay his land-taxes after the People’s Budget.”

“Even English National Heritage Trust can’t alter the fact that Luca has been dead for two hundred years. There’s very little chance of him rising before the second coming, and somehow I don’t think it’s likely to be this weekend. That would be too much of a coincidence even for me to swallow.”

“Maybe there won’t be a second coming; but according to my research, this weekend is going to be his bicentenary haunting. Don’t tell me he’s not going to show for his own bicentennial?”

Daphne’s eyebrows dipped in a puzzled frown. “I thought only Americans had bicentennials? Huge, shaggy, brown herds of them, with beady little eyes, that roamed the Wild West.”

“You mean bison,” Algae pointed out, in his usual, quick, pedantic manner.

“Whatever. Luca never toured America. He wouldn’t know a bicentennial from a buffalo.”

“That won’t matter when he sees this,” Ralph insisted, holding up the camera. “Everyone wants to be in the movies these days.”

“Everyone except a few precious stage actors,” Jenny presumed, as she stood at Daphne’s shoulder and stroked her

hair tendentiously.

"Luca was a Latino, like Rudolph Valentino. They're even better at making love to cameras than they are to women."

"I've never heard of anyone called Luca - except in books about American gangsters," Algae confessed meekly. "What's he famous for? Robbing people on the highway?"

"In a manner of speaking. Daphne, perhaps you would like to tell the story?" Ralph suggested graciously. "After all, he is part of your family history."

"It's boring," she insisted. "Let's talk about something else - like cricket! Algae, do you think England have any chance of winning the Ashes?"

"They could win, if they learn to bowl at the man and not the wicket," he proposed.

"You mean bodyline tactics?" Ralph queried disdainfully. "Are you allowed to do that? It could cause someone a serious injury."

"It's a man's game," Daphne insisted. "Accidents happen. It's up to the batsman to keep his eye on the ball and get out of the way in time."

"But what if the ball is heading straight for the stumps?" Ralph posited shrewdly.

"Well, that's what his bat is for, isn't it?"

"Still, it could cause a diplomatic incident. We wouldn't want to fall out with our Australian cousins - a trade war could mean the end of those tasty kangaburgers they sell in the college bars."

Jenny yawned loudly to put an end to this digression. "God, I hate cricket worse than death! Can't we get back to the ghost story?"

Ralph was happy to oblige, encouraged by Daphne's stony silence on the subject. "If I'm not mistaken, this family favourite of Daphne's is Lord Helmut, the thirty-seventh Earl of Wulfmarsh, and the founder of the modern Hall. Is that right, Daphne?"

"If you say. You're the card-carrying member," she answered peevishly.

"If he was the thirty-seventh earl and the founder of the Hall, where did the first thirty six earls live?" asked Algae.

"Right here, but in one of the few examples of early Anglo-Saxon architecture left anywhere in Britain," Ralph explained. "We know that a Germanic warlord from the Migration Age built his Valhalla here, circa 500 AD - but we have no idea what it looked like because Helmut had it demolished for the old stone and timber; and there are no surviving ruins of similar structures anywhere else in the world."

"You mean a priceless historical building was lost because someone wanted hardcore and firewood?" Algae mused.

"I think we can safely assume that it was a drafty, smelly old shack with inadequate sanitation," Daphne countered. "Lord Helmut should be applauded for removing two serious threats to public health in this area - the old Hall and the wolf whose head you saw mounted on the wall out there."

"He killed an eighteenth century wolf?" Algae groaned. "It could have been one of the last wild wolves left alive in Britain."

"He made the woods safe for decent people to take their dogs for walks and go jogging," Daphne cited, much bemused by Algae's bleeding-heart. "You wouldn't like it if a big bad wolf came along and snatched your poodle from right under your nose."

"I haven't got a poodle," he replied indignantly.

"Well, you might have, one day, when you give up those ridiculous notions of finding a girlfriend; and thanks to civic-minded men like Lord Helmut here, you and your poodle can go for walks in perfect safety any night of the week - except Fridays and Saturdays."

"Helmut's wolf wasn't a wild one," Ralph interjected, for the sake of historical accuracy. "It was Luca's pet. Wolves were virtually extinct in lowland Britain by the time of the Norman Conquest."

"Wild or not, a wolf is a wolf by any other name," she waxed lyrically.

"Or an Alsatian blacked up with boot polish. There are

rumours going about that your father bagged someone's family pet and mounted the head up there as an additional attraction to increase the tourist revenues."

"Malicious gossip. You know what those fanatical animal rights people are like - they'll say anything to blacken a Tory name."

"That doesn't explain why it suddenly appeared for the first time in last summer's catalogue."

"Things get rediscovered all the time. When someone noticed the ruins of the Colosseum standing in the middle of Rome in the fourteenth century, it sparked off a huge renaissance."

"With a name like Wulfmarsh, how did your family manage to hang on to so much valuable land after the Norman Conquest?" asked Algae. "Surely they'd have been killed off by the invading Williams and Harrys? You don't get many Wulfmarshes in the phone book these days."

"We backed the winning side by hunting down Hereward the Wake and helping to airbrush him out of East Anglian history," she replied smugly. "We would have offered the same service to Philip, Napoleon, or the Kaiser, if they had managed to come ashore. There hasn't been a successful invasion for quite a while now, but the Anglo-Normans won't rule this scepter'd isle forever."

"You traitor, Daphne!" exclaimed Algae.

"Empires come and go, just like Ancient Rome. When ours collapses and we're no longer able to defend our frontiers, there'll be a new Age of Migration, and we'll all end up worshipping Ubu or hanging from cranes. Learn to sup with the Devil, Algae. That way you'll never go hungry."

"Algae would demand a vegetarian dish, even in hell," quipped Ralph.

"You still haven't told us who this Luca person is," Jenny reminded her.

"It's all in the glossy summer guide for Dutch and German backpackers," Daphne sighed wearily. "You can pick up a copy in three languages for a guilder on your way out."

"Ralph, tell me, please," Jenny implored him.

"Luca was an actor who roamed all over England with his travelling theatre company in the eighteenth century, indulging in his infamous passion for ladies of the gentry and the aristocracy who found his exotic charm and devastating good looks difficult to resist, and who were not averse to rewarding him for his favours."

Ralph paused for breath, Jenny gasped and swooned, whilst Daphne snorted in derision.

"So there you have it," he concluded. "Luca, the actor and gigolo, who travelled from stage to stately pasture; living for gifts of gold and illicit rolls in the aristocratic hay."

"What about the ghost?" Jenny urged. "You still haven't said anything about the ghost."

At this point, in spite of herself, Daphne couldn't resist another cynical interjection. "Oh, he didn't just live for it; he died for it too; like the horned-god Pan, the impudent rascal."

"Pan isn't dead - according to some scholars," Algae butted in. "Christians thought they could use that part of the myth to mark the end of paganism."

"Well, Luca certainly is. Did you notice that big old oak tree standing out there on the edge of the lawn when we drove in?"

"You mean the one you nearly wrapped us around when you lost control and skidded to a halt?" Jenny jibed.

Daphne chose not to be provoked again by criticism of her driving. "That tree has been standing there for a very long time. To be precise, it was planted nearly three hundred years ago, and so it was there in full bloom when Lord Helmut was looking for a convenient windswept spot to string the greasy bastard up from."

"You mean he was hanged?"

"Sort of."

"What does 'sort of' mean?" asked Jenny, tiring of Daphne's evasiveness. "Either he was or he wasn't?"

"Alright, he was," she conceded. "But he was still alive when they cut him down and fed him to a pack of hounds,

hungry for fresh meat. News of the affair stirred up Luca's theatrical troupe and the rest of his travelling clan like a hornets' nest, and they came around moaning and wailing as if awards for acting had already been invented. They even threatened to burn Wulfmarsh Hall unless they were compensated in gold for emotional distress and future loss of earnings by their star player. In the end, the local yeomanry had to be called out of their grocery shops to mount up and drive them off with the sharp edge of their sabres. The protesters scattered so quickly the locals called it the run-to-the-loo massacre."

"That's awful!" Jenny exclaimed in disgust. "But why did Lord Helmut hang Luca in the first place?"

"What would you have done if you'd come home from a day's foxhunting to discover Luca's wolf humping your favourite border collie and Luca himself romping in the stables with your pretty young daughter Lavinia?"

"I still think it's dreadful," Jenny insisted.

"So do I," Daphne concurred. "It makes me shiver just to think of those rough, ill-bred hands on that soft, white flesh - in a stable of all places. They don't know what they might have started."

"A new and intolerant religion," Algae proposed.

"Centuries of bloody wars, censorship, persecution, and conflicts between competing factions," added Ralph.

"Not only that, they might have disturbed the horses."

"I meant it's dreadful the way that Lord Helmut took the law into his own hands just because his daughter chose to have an affair with a member of a lower social class," Jenny pointed out, harbouring a surprisingly deep sense of social injustice for a well-bred young lady. "Making love to an earl's daughter isn't a capital offence."

Daphne was quick to correct this belief. "It is in this county. It's a very important bylaw - like no dancing on Sundays. Around here, it's an offence to even think about it unless you are of equal social standing with the woman and not just a trumped-up little grammar-school boy like Algae.

We have to protect the bloodstock somehow or we'll lose our seats in the House of Lords."

"But you believe in sexual meritocracy," Jenny reminded her.

"In cosmopolitan Cambridge - but out here we must respect the laws and customs of the local community," Daphne counselled sagely.

Algae was, not surprisingly, eager to align himself with the more progressive faction in this debate. "Jenny is right. It sounds more like Luca was a victim of cold-blooded murder by a lynch-mob rather than any sort of due process."

"Hot blood, not cold," Daphne insisted. "Your romantic notions of egalitarian idealism are totally misplaced out here among the unwashed and the turnips. Townies don't understand the country code. There's only one way to deal with a fox raiding your chicken coup and that's to chase after it with a pack of hounds and a posse of redcoats drinking sherry on horseback. It was bound to happen eventually, somewhere down the line. He had half the dukes and earls in England after his hide, and he sired a whole generation of aristocratic bastards. You can still see the swarthy strains of Luca in the House of Lords today - that's why they call them the ditchers. He knew the score. He lived fast, died young, and left a beautiful corpse - or at least he would have done if they hadn't fed him to the hounds. A shame really. Helmut should have had him stuffed and wall mounted next to the wolf's head. That really would have been one for the collection. But you've got to admire the oily oik. He lived on borrowed time, like a stag one leap ahead of the hunt, and got off on it."

"Got off on what?" asked Jenny, needing some clarification of the last idiom.

"There are times, Jenny, when I think that you are even less worldly than Algae," Daphne mused. "If such a thing were possible."

"Er, I think Daphne means he enjoyed the danger aspect of eating forbidden fruit," Ralph explained, from the depths of his vague Jazz Age understanding of the human condition.

"But he wasn't a stag, he was a man," Jenny protested. "A real human being with thoughts and feelings."

"A peasant," Daphne corrected her. "Peasants need culling too, just like the foxes and the deer. If you think about it, you'll soon realise that it's for their own good. Otherwise, there'd be too many of them, and they'd starve in the winter time."

"Is that why you were using my car to aid the grim reaper tonight?" Algae inquired, with a gentle hint of sarcasm.

"Daph's just an old-fashioned Malthusian at heart," Ralph chuckled.

"I don't think that'll save her if she ends up on a murder charge - unless, of course, it goes to the masons in the House of Lords," Algae decided on reflection.

"No one has ever called me a Malthusian before. Is that a compliment, Ralph?" Daphne purred, putting her hands on his hips and rubbing herself against his back.

"No, it's just a name I picked up from an economics text," he divulged, stepping away from her to fill his glass with scotch and ice, and to collect another sandwich. "Luca and his band were never going to starve - in summer or in winter. His wagon was always filled with gold. No one knows what happened to all that gold after the yeomanry sliced up the rest of the troupe, but it was thought that Helmut used some of it for home improvements ..."

"I said this place has had a makeover," Jenny interjected.

"... and hid the rest somewhere in the Hall."

"Maybe that's what those people want back. Nothing to do with library books after all."

"What about the prophesy?" Algae pitched in. "That old witch said the Angel of Death will cast a shadow over Wulfmarsh Hall and the prophesy will be fulfilled."

"I wouldn't mind bagging this Angel of Death on film," admitted Ralph. "That would be a fantastic achievement - even better than a real ghost."

"Don't hold your breath," Daphne advised. "The old witch was just gobbing off to sound good - like one of those

spiritualist cranks Harry Houdini keeps exposing. There are no such things as Angels of Death," she insisted, pouring herself another drink.

"You say that, but the travelling troupe were a superstitious bunch who knew all about the power of supernatural curses. You wouldn't catch them quoting from the Scottish play before a first night."

"Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble," Daphne chanted cynically.

"Break a leg, Daph," Algae mooted, to remove the jinx.

"What can possibly happen to me?" she mused, with some bravado. "I won't be back on stage again until the Christmas panto season."

"As an ugly sister?" Ralph teased.

"No, Cinderella, of course."

"With your feet?"

"What's wrong with my feet?" Daphne scowled indignantly, slipping off a shoe and resting a bare foot on the altar in a high-kick position.

"Better ask Algae. He's the medical student. He probably knows a thing or two about chiropody."

Algae obliged by placing a monocle over his eye and stepping forward to examine the foot. "Hmm. You've got an ingrown toenail developing there, and a nasty fungal nail infection - and a verruca," he advised her, adopting the sort of monotonal voice some doctors use when talking to their patients. "This rash looks like athlete's foot. And your instep looks a bit too high to fit snugly into a glass slipper."

"You just don't want me to marry a handsome prince!" she protested. "These feet got me into the Royal Ballet!"

Daphne began to arabesque, using the edge of the altar as a barre, and a solid foot to the chest sent Algae flying into the clutches of the suit of armour.

"So why didn't you stay there?" Ralph inquired. "It's better than being a secretary or a teacher - the only jobs they'll let you do now that the war is over."

"My weight ballooned to over nine stone and I wasn't

meeting enough straight men. There are still plenty of other jobs I can do when I graduate - like actress and whore."

"Can we please get back to the story," Jenny implored them. "You haven't explained the prophesy yet."

Ralph resumed the flashback narrative. "When it became clear that the few surviving members of the clan were in no immediate position to avenge Luca's death, or even to give him a decent funeral, they vengefully cursed all future generations of the Wulfmarsh family. They claimed that the spirit of Luca would stalk the Hall on the anniversary of his death to reclaim his gold - until there were no more *femme fatales* left in the Wulfmarsh line, liable to corrupt and deprave socially-excluded young men from lower socio-economic groups and lead them to disaster."

"That means you, Algae," Jenny pointed out.

"Just because I was born poor and blame my parents for all my sociopathic tendencies doesn't mean that I was socially-excluded!" Algae protested.

"But Daphne is definitely the last of the Wulfmarsh *femme fatales*," Ralph confirmed. "She has no siblings or offspring to perpetuate the lineage; so if anything happens to her that's it. *De facto - fait accompli*. The end of the family tree."

"They've been threatening to top me for years now but no one has ever had the guts to try," Daphne growled. "They know if they came anywhere near me, Father would fill them so full of buckshot they'd go home peeing like a sieve."

"That old woman got close to you tonight. She must have believed in a supernatural curse, or she would have used a knife or a gun to do you in right there and then."

"That old woman was on her way home from the pub and just happened to run into us by coincidence. Tomorrow night, she'll be telling her barfly mates she scared a bunch of toffs shitless."

"Daphne!" Jenny chided her.

"I meant witless. Everyone who lives around here knows the story of Luca and Lavinia well enough - it's local history."

"Even so, a number of Wulfmarsh debutantes have met

with some pretty spectacular ends down the years,” Ralph disclosed from his research. “How do you explain those?”

“What sort of ends?” asked Jenny.

“Accidents mainly, just accidents,” Daphne insisted.

“What about the ones who died in their sleep? Are you going to say they died of fright?” Ralph queried, with raised eyebrows. “Or did the Angel of Death pass over them quietly and steal their souls on the feast of Passover?”

“Don’t be silly, we’re not even Jewish,” Daphne retorted dismissively.

“Neither were the victims of the Biblical Passover,” Algae recalled.

“Things happen - a cat could sit on your face, or you could smother under your pillow like the princes in the tower.”

“They were murdered!”

“Cot death,” Daphne countered. “Science has proved it.”

“Exactly when is this anniversary, when the ghost of Luca stalks the Hall seeking revenge?” asked Jenny.

“October the thirty-first,” Ralph replied, with an evil grin. “All Hallows’ Eve.”

“Hallowe’en? B-but that’s tomorrow night!”

The old grandfather clock suddenly and ominously struck a single chime on the hour of one.

“You’ve been following the plot,” Ralph observed wryly. “Actually it’s tonight, strange things will start to happen after the sun goes down. According to that old hag, Daphne has less than twenty-three hours left on this earth. I hope she’s made plans to live a bit in that time. Algae’s here - I’m sure he’d be willing to give her a good send-off.”

“It’s not funny,” Daphne murmured, seeming concerned for the first time. “I don’t understand why Father would send for me this weekend. He usually sends me away for Hallowe’en just in case.”

“Don’t worry, Daphne,” Algae sought to reassure her. “I’ll protect you from the hooded-claw; keep the vampires from your door, when the chips are down I’ll be around ...”

“Thank you, Ralph,” she replied, taking his arm and gaug-

ing the circumference of a well defined bicep with both hands. “I feel much safer knowing you’re here.”

CHAPTER THREE

Jenny peered into the gloomy chamber and shuddered like a child who, having eagerly imbibed a scary story earlier in the evening, was now vehemently regretting her prurient interest in the macabre as bedtime approached. She ventured through the dim veil of light cast from the hallway into the room, and tripped over something soft and furry. Whatever it was cried out in pain and anguish. A histrionic squeal, without deference to Jenny's slender figure, combined with a slight touch of melodrama as it shot out of the door in a huff; indignant at the treatment meted out to a permanent resident by a mere slip of a guest.

"Oh my God!" Jenny exclaimed profanely.

Daphne, following immediately behind, witnessed the incident with a wry smile and a shake of her head.

"Actually that was Satan," she remarked. "Our resident black cat, complete with wicked green eyes and sharp claws. He likes to get under people's feet, especially on staircases, then make them feel foolish for going arse over tit and breaking a leg. He has to be quick off the mark with Father about though; or he'll be bagged, stuffed, and put on display as the Beast of the Fen."

"It's a bit dark in here," Jenny complained, rubbing the scratches on her shapely ankle. "Ouch! I hope he hasn't left a scar. I'm modelling a new collection of bathing costumes next week for the Cambridge University Fashion Design Society."

"Is that old club for dykes and queers still up and running?"

"Not all fashion designers are queer," Jenny remonstrated. "Just the men."

"So what's the problem? Your ankles won't be showing, will they?"

"Of course they will, it's swimwear."

"How vulgar!" Daphne snorted. "Do your parents know you do that sort of thing?"

"Lighten up, Daphne, this is the Jazz Age. Women have been showing their ankles for years now - and their knees too!"

"Not in the shire counties, they haven't," Daphne declared righteously, as she deftly struck a match with her thumbnail. A dramatic little flame lit up the room in all its ghastly glory. "You know me, Jenny darling - I'm just an old-fashioned frump heading for the shelf, the chocolates, the daytime wireless shows on women's issues, and the romance novels," she conceded, with modest, self-effacing affectation. "But if you want the world of men to exploit you for your knees - go right ahead."

"I like my knees - and I like wearing clothes that show them off," Jenny revealed shamelessly.

"With morals like that, you'll end up in a straight-jacket," warned Daphne.

"Can you switch the lights on?" Jenny implored her host, whilst rubbing her temples with her finger tips to relieve the pressure of a headache. "I can't cope with too much darkness too quickly this time of year. It onsets my seasonally adjusted depression."

"We need a lightbulb," Daphne noted, flicking a switch on the wall - but to no avail.

Jenny glanced up at the ceiling. The hanging socket was empty. "Can't you fit one?"

"I don't have a spare. They're expensive luxuries to have in rooms that are hardly ever used now. O'Flaherty has probably pinched as many as he can for the servants' quarters."

"There's one out in the hallway."

"You'll need that one to find the loo. Besides, it takes at

least three female undergraduates to change a lightbulb - one to run the bath, one to pour the drinks, and one to call the hunky electrician. You'll just have to alleviate your symptoms with medicinal cocktail mixes." Daphne walked to the bedside and lit a candle. "There are plenty more of these in the drawer - but please be careful. Father is notorious for letting his fire insurance lapse."

Daphne floated around the room with arms outstretched, clutching a pair of flaming candles like a mad ballet dancer, alluding to the flammability of the curtains and the gaudy wall tapestry as she hummed a disco inferno. She tossed a match into the fireplace to ignite the kindling, soaked in paraffin and methylated spirit. Yellow and blue flames leapt out instantly to join in the party and banish the autumnal chill.

Jenny turned her back on the provocateur and faced a twin pair of four-poster beds about six feet apart. She recognised her suitcase, left on the far bed by O'Flaherty; but in the gloom she failed to notice a huge cobweb, strewn between the inner corner posts of the two beds like a diaphanous screen, and walked straight into it. She felt something crawling on her cheek and brushed it off with a panic-stricken slap of her palm. A huge, fat, hairy spider, with glowing red eyes, fell to the floorboards with an audible thump and scurried away under the bed, scratching the laminated wood with its hairy legs as it went. Jenny screamed in abject terror.

"For goodness sake, girl, chill out," advised Daphne. "I'm sure it's much more scared of you than you are of it."

"Somehow, I doubt that very much. You know how much I hate spiders. Where did you get that thing from? It looked like it stowed away on a banana boat."

"Don't be silly. It's just an ordinary little house spider from an English country garden."

"Daphne, I don't think I can go to sleep in here," Jenny confided, tentatively sitting down on the edge of the bed next to her suitcase. She pulled her knees up under her chin to keep her feet off the floor and looked around nervously. "It just doesn't feel right. It's creepy and scary, the cat hates me,

there isn't much light, and there's a spider under the bed that belongs in a zoo."

"The boys' room is a lot worse," Daphne assured her, as she brushed Jenny's fringe aside in a fond sisterly manner. "Besides, you won't have any trouble sleeping tonight, I can promise you that."

"It has been a long day," the other girl yawned.

"It's not over yet. You should read this," Daphne urged, taking a loose sheet from a pile of papers and handing it to Jenny before tossing the rest on the fire.

"What is it?" she asked.

Daphne glanced at the paper and read the title. "*Marianne's Dream* (1817) by P.B. Shelley. Marianne was the wife of James Leigh Hunt, a radical journalist imprisoned by the Press Complaints Commission for daring to criticise the Prince Regent. Shelley must have left it here when he brought her to stay for a weekend. Read it to me - you can read, can't you?"

"I'm a Cambridge undergraduate," Jenny reminded her.

"Media studies doesn't really count."

Jenny obligingly read the poem aloud:

A pale dream came to a lady fair,
And said, A boon, a boon, I pray!
I know the secrets of the air,
And things are lost in the glare of day,
Which I can make the sleeping see,
If they will put their trust in me.

And thou shalt know of things unknown,
If thou wilt let me rest between
The veiny lids, whose fringe is thrown
Over thine eyes so dark and sheen:
And half in hope and half in fright,
The Lady closed her eyes so bright ...

"A bit old fashioned, isn't it?" Jenny complained, turning her nose up at the vulgar rhyme. "Haven't you got anything

more modern - like T.S. Eliot?"

"Where you're going tonight, modernism hasn't even been conceived yet."

"Where I'm going? What's that supposed to mean? You said I was spending the night in here?"

"I spiked your drink with an amazingly powerful hallucinogenic sleeping powder I got from a groovy chemistry professor who needs more than he gets from tenure to pay for his lavish lifestyle."

"What? I don't believe you," Jenny snapped, taking a soft pillow and clutching it tightly against her chest like a shield.

"Suit yourself. I just wanted to help you dream about all the weird and wonderful things you've been exposed to this evening. It should be quite a trip. You can tell me all about it in the morning. Just don't die of fright. If they slice up your liver and test it for drugs, and the papers find out, then I'll get into trouble."

"Daphne, how dare you!" Jenny shrieked, standing up to confront her and throwing the pillow aside. "That's it! I shan't go to sleep at all now!"

"I think you'll go out like a snuffed candle flame at any moment and wake up like a spring lamb with plenty to talk about at future dinner parties. I would have taken one myself, but someone has to sleep lightly in case Ralph comes tiptoeing down the corridor in his loud, star-spangled American beach-thong."

"I suppose you're going to send him away if he does?"

"Of course, what else would I do? Young women need protecting from buccaneers like Ralph."

"What about Algae? He might try his luck too," she suggested, momentarily forgetting her peril as she giggled at the thought.

"Algae's not like that, thank God. He'll stay in his home port and fiddle with his sails."

"That doesn't sound very adventurous."

"He's boring, if that's what you mean. But he's a friend of Ralph, so I have to put up with him."

"Ralph won't try anything tonight, he respects me too much," Jenny insisted, sitting down again and stifling another yawn as her eyelids began to droop.

"Don't you believe it. You're far too trusting by half. He's only after one thing, but we're not going to let him have it, are we?"

"We? What have 'we' got to do with it?" Jenny queried, smugly stretching out on the bed. "It's my life, my body - remember?"

"I thought we shared everything?" Daphne entreated, like a twin sister affecting hurt at Jenny's selfishness. "Well, if that's the way you feel, don't blame me if I'm not there for you when something terrible happens."

"Something terrible?" Jenny asked naively. "Like what?"

Daphne evaded the question. "You've certainly got to hand it to O'Flaherty. Not only is the sly old devil efficient and quick, he actually put the right suitcases in the right bedrooms. He must have rummaged through them and guessed from the underwear. Father doesn't have any female servants left though, so you'll just have to undress yourself - unless you want O'Flaherty to do it for you."

"What did you mean by something terrible?" she asked, sitting on the edge of the bed again.

"I saw the way you were looking at him."

"Who? Ralph?"

"No, O'Flaherty. It's a fairly common condition in dysfunctional young women. No need to be ashamed of it, Jenny, I've known for some time."

"Known what?" Jenny inquired, rising to the bait. "Daphne, what on earth are you talking about?"

"It gives you a sense of security, I suppose, if you can put up with the flaps and the wrinkles?"

"What does?"

"Gerontophilia."

"You're contemptible!" she declared, standing up with her back to Daphne; shaking her head and folding her arms in a huff. "That's it, I don't want to hear another word from you

until the morning.”

“If you say so,” Daphne conceded.

The gracious hostess began unpacking her case on the other bed, leaving Jenny to continue exploring the elaborate recesses of the mystic chamber with some clearly visible apprehension.

The bedroom door was closed now and the only light came from the candle flames and the coals that were beginning to glow in the fireplace. Jenny’s attention soon turned to a swarthy statuette, resembling a grotesque and outrageous ventriloquist’s dummy. The statuette was about three feet tall; though its modest stature was boosted by its stance on a low plinth about knee high. Carved from teak, it stood naked except for a flimsy little silk waistcoat that did nothing to conceal a fine physique and a rippling stomach. The statuette posed, fists on hips, like Sinbad the Sailor; with piercing little red eyes and face twisted into a mischievous grin. But this was no mere human representation; it more closely resembled a satyr; with goat’s legs, cloven hooves, a chin beard and two nobbly horns on its head. Jenny stepped nearer, the aesthete within her being drawn to its alluring masculine ugliness.

“I hope you don’t mind sharing with me,” Daphne prattled on, disregarding her agreement to be silent and oblivious to the spell being cast in her midst over Jenny. “I don’t snore or anything. It’s simply more convenient this way and I can keep an eye on you in case anything does happen in the middle of the night. It seems that we’ve been given the most appropriate guest room in the house, considering your slightly morbid interest in our violent family history.”

“That’s alright, I don’t mind. I think I’m beginning to like it here. You can almost taste the blood of centuries past,” Jenny replied dreamily, caught by the hypnotic stare of the nefarious little devil that was making her feel quite horny.

“Really?” Daphne sniffed the air. “I thought everything had been well scrubbed since then.” At first she failed to notice where Jenny’s entranced attention was taking her - but then she finally realised what was happening. “Don’t touch that!”

she cried out.

Too late. Jenny's long fingers were already on the bulbous member; which seemed to extend, quiver, and elevate by its own volition under her touch. Daphne's warning broke the spell and she instinctively drew back as the metamorphosis began; the reflex of a baby monkey encountering her first snake.

The essential contact had been made though, and part of a side wall began to move quite unexpectedly; rasping and groaning as a wooden panel slid back to reveal a gaping black hole in the ugly stonework. Jenny expected something to jump out and bite her, and this slightly more rational cause for alarm sent her scurrying back to the perceived security of Auntie Daphne's bosom like a chick to a mother hen.

"What is it?" Jenny asked timidly.

"A secret passage of course, you silly young thing. The statuette is connected to the mechanism in the wall, that's why it's got a cable sticking out of its arse."

Jenny ignored the profanity on this occasion. The natural prurience that dogs share with men and women gave her the courage to step around the statuette and view it from behind. Sure enough, an inch thick black cable trailed from its anal socket to a box on the wall.

"I did try to warn you against pulling the knobs in the Hall tonight. Maybe now you'll listen to me."

"Can't you just push it back into place?"

"Of course not!" Daphne frowned. "It'll go down by itself in a minute or so if you just keep your hands away. It works on a hydraulic system which is sensitive to the touch. An amazing feat of engineering, don't you think?"

Daphne flung herself on the bed and rolled over several times like a playful kitten, whilst laughing gleefully at the charming innocence of her guest.

"You obviously do!" Jenny snapped testily, as she quickly recovered from the shock. Gingerly, she edged nearer to the secret passage entrance, just as the phallic lever began relaxing into its former equilibrium position and the panel started to

slide back into place. The shifting panel very nearly tweaked the tip of her inquisitive nose as it modestly covered the gash in the wall.

"Where does it lead?" she asked.

"Down," Daphne answered.

"Down where?"

"Are you sure you want to know? Ignorance might be bliss - at least until sunrise."

"Tell me," Jenny insisted, compelled by curiosity that rebelled against her own better judgment.

"To the old dungeon."

"What?"

"No need to worry," Daphne assured her. "There's no one down there now. At least, no one left alive. There's just the museum pieces, and some old bones and a fine collection of whips and chains. I'll show you around in the morning if you like."

"Bones?" Jenny gulped. "Er, no, I don't think I like the sound of that. Call me ungracious - but there are some places in your family home that I'd rather not see."

"Please yourself. Most normal people seem fascinated by the darker chapters of our family history. Whenever the doors are opened to the public, that's the place the punters flock to first."

CHAPTER FOUR

"This is preposterous," Ralph complained rudely, despite the restraint of his English upbringing, while sitting on the edge of a perfectly ordinary looking bed in the centre of a large but somewhat spartan-looking room, where the floor seemed to be sloping at a very curious angle. "Is it just an optical illusion or is the floor really beginning to tilt like the deck of a stricken ship?"

"I'm just in the process of trying to work that out," Algae replied, as he performed an experiment on the floor with his wrist watch, a steel protractor, a piece of string, and a spirit level in a fountain pen.

"Warping floorboards are a tell-tale sign of dampness - they could at least have lit the fire for us," Ralph continued to grumble, whilst glancing at a fireplace bulging with explosively combustible incendiary material, eager to mate with a nubile naked flame. "Tomorrow is Hallowe'en, not Christmas. It's not as if we're expecting anyone to scorch their arse sliding down the chimney. Deserve 'em right if they did."

"I think we're supposed to light the fire ourselves," Algae presumed, tossing a lighted match into the fireplace. The volatile mixture ignited instantly and a violent flashfire engulfed the entire room for a brief second; long enough to singe their eyebrows and blacken their faces; before the exuberant flames retreated back to their rightful place beneath the coals placed on cradles of kindling and bundles of rolled up newspaper; and began the slow, gentle process of licking the lumps of black fossil fuel until their atoms became excited

and began to emit photons with frequencies in the yellow and red bands of the visible spectrum; and others with even longer wavelengths, invisible to the human eye but detectable by human skin.

"Anything else, M'Lud?" Algae inquired wryly.

"Yeah, American students double-up," griped Ralph. "In England, we're supposed to have separate rooms to stop us bugging each other when the lights go out."

The room was certainly double-sized, by any stretch of the imagination. The creaky wooden floorboards were bare and made slippery by shiny polish; the washhand basin was chipped and cracked; the leaky taps dripped at random intervals to torment anyone with a weak bladder; and the door of one old wardrobe was hanging off its hinges. Like the girls' room, this chamber was sparsely lit by a single candle planted in a holder on a sloping bedside table which left the far corners in creepy darkness. But most disconcerting of all, there was just one slightly battered old bedframe, built of wood, and anchored centre-stage like a small boat to prevent it from sliding down hill.

"I went to a grammar school," Algae remarked, without looking up from his apparatus. "That traditional presumption of homosexuality only applies to boys from England's most prestigious public schools, where the unspoken neoclassical, homoerotic, male-love cult underpins the ethos and the curriculum in the arts, humanities, and PE departments. That's what they're famous for the world over - it's certainly not their grades, grammar schools do better in the league tables."

"But we produce more prime ministers and captains of industry," boasted Ralph. "Two perfectly fit, thoroughbred fillies stabled just down the corridor and I've got to ride the course with you tonight on this broken down piece of old junk."

The bed groaned loudly in protest beneath his cruiser-weight frame, so he bounced up and down on it a few more times like a vindictive bully.

Algae was still gainfully employed trying to estimate the

time derivative of the gradient of the floor as the room continued to list; though he couldn't help but notice Ralph's cruelty towards a poor dumb bedframe. "Er, I wouldn't do that if I were you," he advised, as the bed continued to object strongly to this unwarranted treatment.

"Why not?" Ralph replied. "If it can survive being hammered all these years by Daph's degenerate family, then it can put up with a bit of playful bouncy bouncy from me."

As if begging to differ, one leg of the bed suddenly collapsed under the strain, sending Ralph sprawling down the incline of the floor like a circus clown. Then, by some unseen, but ingenious, system of pulleys and levers, it righted itself to the horizontal again.

"Somehow, I don't think anyone is going to be riding the course with anyone else on this particular bed tonight," Algae predicted. "Either that, or it just doesn't like you. I think you ought to settle for the floor. Five-point-seven degrees, that's a gradient of about 1 in 10," he concluded smugly. "When we first walked in, it was only about 1 in 20. The floor is definitely tilting for some reason. Let's hope the walls don't start closing in as well or we're doomed."

Ralph sat up angrily and scratched his head. "How did you work that out without tables?"

"I memorised them."

"You memorised the trigonometric tables?"

"Not all of them, just a periodic sample, enough so that I can interpolate in my head."

"I knew people like you in the sixth form," Ralph had to admit. "They didn't get invited to many parties. Tomorrow, I'm going to get an axe from the woodshed and turn this 'bed' into kindling. And don't think being a family heirloom is going to save you!" he warned the bed.

"Don't take it so personally, it's just an old chastity bed," Algae explained. "A valuable antique."

"A chastity bed? I've never heard of one of those."

"The Tudor aristocracy would install them in their daughters' bedrooms to keep them chaste for Henry VIII to marry."

Whenever some likely lad from a rival family came climbing up the drainpipe for a clandestine workout, the bed would collapse with a loud bang and alert the footguards to their hanky panky. One like this kept Elizabeth and Mary out of the club until they became Queen."

"That wouldn't have been too difficult - they both pretty ugly - and needed fertility treatment," Ralph recalled, from his unfashionable lessons in Tudor history. "What about young Edward's bedroom?" he pondered, with some sympathy for the ordeal of the long-dead boy-king. "A fine trigger on one of those things could seriously inhibit your emotional development. You'd have to start fiddling on the floor."

"You'd get splinters in your buttocks sliding down this angled floor," cautioned Algae.

Ralph suddenly started to hum a tune. "Didee didee dum dum, di-didee didee didee didee didee didee didee dum ..."

"What are you doing?"

"You've just given me an idea for a Broadway musical - Fiddler on the Floor."

"Has anyone ever accused you of lacking moral fibre?" Algae mooted, sitting on the edge of the bed and patting it reassuringly, as if it were a family pet.

"Not me, I'm regular as clockwork," Ralph boasted, with well-raised vulgarity, while massaging a bum still smarting from rejection by the bed. "What would a corrupt and depraved bunch of turnip rearing inbreds like Daphne's family want with a chastity bed anyway? They probably can't even spell abstinence, never mind practise it."

"Don't say that, you're talking about the family of the girl I'm going to marry."

"That's your funeral. But I reckon the potato-heads have got there first. I'll bet they used to shin up the drainpipe after her all the time. There isn't much else to do around here except throw stones at the dungheaps."

"You're totally wrong about her," Algae insisted, finding a thin mattress, a sheet, and a quilt, folded in a pile; and making up the bed with them. "She acts tough, but underneath it all,

she's just a frightened little girl who needs a secure relationship."

"Oh yeah? So why do they keep hold of this bed and make their guests sleep in it?"

Algae shrugged his shoulders. "Old long-forgotten things turn up in unexpected places - like the Colosseum at the start of the Renaissance."

He began to undress as he pondered the question of the bed more thoroughly; removing his shirt to expose a slim, but well-toned, body created by the pursuit of sport and regular fitness training. With this bonding ritual, a queer proposition loomed in his mind which he immediately gave voice to.

"A more pertinent question might be - why is this bed in our room? You don't think Daphne suspects something, do you?"

"What, us?" Ralph burst out laughing as he removed his shirt to reveal the fuller definition of an aspiring body builder. "Don't be ridiculous, she knows you're not my type. You're not tall enough."

"I thought only women said things like that," Algae moaned. "I'm five foot nine - and a half."

"But you know the modelling agency standard. Nothing under five foot ten in stocking soles - and that's just the women. If I had a body like yours, Algae, I'd give up trying to work-out, get myself some shapely breast implants - not too large - and take up glamour modelling - they don't care much about your height."

"If I worked-out as much you, I wouldn't need the implants - just an enlargement to restore my penis," Algae replied, climbing carefully into the bed and pulling the sheet up over his nipples.

Ralph glanced at him in surprise. "That's a myth," he insisted, putting his hand down the front of his underpants and pulling out a groin shield. He threw it to one side, then bent his legs and rubbed his inner thighs. "That's better. Why don't they make those things more comfortable to wear?"

"So that's why you walk like a cowboy. How long has it

been in there for?" gasped Algae.

"Since the start of the Rugby season."

"You sleep downwind of me tonight!"

"Don't worry, it gets well scrubbed with carbolic soap in the team bath every week."

"Doesn't Jenny freak out when she sees it?"

"She hasn't seen it yet."

Ralph gingerly climbed into the other side of the bed. This was, predictably, the high side, and he immediately slid down under gravity until resting cheek-to-cheek against a disconcerted Algae. Ralph put out his arm to grab the edge of the wooden bedframe and pulled himself back up to his side, but as soon as he let go he slid back down into Algae's personal space.

Cursing loudly, he hauled himself back up the slope again and jumped out of the bed. He stripped the belt from his cavalry breeches, doubled it up, and snapped it loudly, as if testing the leather; much to Algae's consternation.

"We didn't have corporal punishment at my school either," Algae disclosed, thinking it apposite. "If you didn't behave yourself, you went to the sink-school down the road, where the other pupils were allowed to beat you up and steal your pocket money, in between counselling sessions, to reduce their sense of social exclusion and boost their self-esteem."

Ralph laid down again and used the belt to strap his waist to the bed frame like an American sailor in his bunk in stormy weather. "Old sniper's trick," he explained.

"Going a bit slow with Jenny, aren't you?" presumed Algae. "What's delaying the big push?"

"There's something unusual about her that I can't quite figure out," he had to admit. "She's almost too good to be true."

"You could go on a trench-raid tonight and find out."

"Not tonight, I'm far too tired," he groaned. "Those near misses on the road have left me completely shattered. Daph's driving is a likely cause of post-traumatic stress disorder. What about you? Have you got the nerve to risk it?"

"I was sitting in the front seat," Algae reminded him, lifting a hand to observe the involuntary trembling of his fingers. "The truth is, I don't want any fireworks this weekend. If I ignore her, then maybe she'll come to me."

"What makes you think that a predatory nymphobitch like Daphne, who knows the price of prime beef better than any auctioneer, is ever going to take any notice of you, Algae? You should think of her as an expensive car that you just can't afford yet. Wait till you set up practice in Harley Street."

"Maybe she won't let me in the driving seat; but with Daphne, you can never be sure what's around the next bend."

"Usually it's some poor hedgehog on the road," Ralph recalled ruefully.

"Unusual things seem to happen with her, like that old witch popping out of the darkness tonight. Most other girls are slightly dull in comparison."

"I don't think we need to look any further than Daphne for an Angel of Death - she'll be the death of us one day," Ralph predicted grimly. "I should have drowned her in the showers when I had the chance. She was a good prep-school hooker when she was eleven, but as a girl, she was never really my type. She acts too much like a boy."

"Have you ever known anyone who really was your type?" Algae inquired sceptically. "You've never been in love with anyone - that's for sure."

"Of course I have," Ralph replied.

"In that case, tell me what went through your mind when you saw them face to face?"

"I dunno, things like, should I shave any closer or should I squeeze that pimple first. Sometimes it's difficult to see when the mirror gets misted up."

"But did you get a feeling like a tingle up and down your spine when you looked into their eyes?"

"Only when the electric shaver wasn't earthed properly."

"And did you ever find yourself tongue-tied and not knowing what to say to them?"

Ralph sat up suddenly and looked at him in alarm. "I don't

talk to myself - that's the first sign of madness!"

"You're not mad, just a bit narcissistic," Algae mused. "All I know is that if Daphne needs me this weekend, I'll be there to catch her when she falls."

"But you've already tried that, for all the good it's done you. What about the time you rescued her from that huge hungry python?"

"Her hair was a bit of a mess that day," he recalled, by way of a rational explanation. "Hair is very important to women - it defines their perception of themselves."

"It's important to me too," Ralph admitted, curling his lower lip and blowing air to make his fringe rise.

"The shock of a bad-hair-day can cause selective memory loss. Freud wrote a paper on it."

"Are you sure Freud knows what he's talking about?"

"Are you saying Freud got it wrong?"

"Has he ever had a patient like Daphne?"

"You don't get many aloof English women in the Austro-Hungarian Empire - unless they're touring with an orchestra."

"Musicians - they're neurotic - he must see plenty of those in Vienna," Ralph presumed.

"Daphne's not neurotic - she's maniacal."

"Whatever. In the rugby club, if we want a leg-over from a girl we've just saved from an argument with her boyfriend in the bar, we say: Give me your heart, make it real - or just forget about it."

Algae blew out the candle on the bedside table and was about to nod off with Ralph's lyrics and a guitar accompaniment playing in his ear when he noticed an attractive pair of glowing white eyes staring at him from the far wall. At first he thought this must be an illusion, perhaps a symptom of the sort of sexual paranoia exhibited by Jenny; but after a blink and a stare the eyes stubbornly remained in view, constant and beguiling, like a pair of stars in the night sky.

Algae fumbled for the box of matches on the bedside table, lit the candle, and got out of the bed to investigate this strange optical phenomenon. Unfortunately, the eyes were perched in

the highest corner of the angled floor, with a gradient now approaching 1 in 5, and Algae had to secure each step on the shiny floor with his bare feet like an intrepid mountaineer.

Finally he got there, and the candle light illuminated the confluence of the walls to reveal a broad, rich canvass, mounted high in the shadows: a naked young woman with long limbs and fair hair, tastefully inclined on a sumptuous sofa in a classical pose, with her provocative eyes staring straight out at the viewer.

"It's Daphne!" Algae exclaimed in surprise. "She's got no clothes on!"

Ralph unstrapped himself and got out of the bed to view the painting. "Your lucky night, Algae! Not only do you get to sleep with me, but you get an idealised view of your beloved in her birthday suit," he chuckled, giving his temporary room mate a slap on the back.

Algae was already unbalanced, and the blow floored him. He slid downhill on his derriere like a tobogganist and was only halted by the obstacle posed by the bed.

Ralph shook his head as he maintained his footing at the summit with poise and dignity, like a more experienced mountaineer. "We could make a print of the painting using my camera," he proposed. "It might look a bit anaemic though, in this age of black and white photography. If I were you, I'd smuggle it out under a raincoat and hang it in my study room as a trophy - beats hell out of a traffic cone any day."

Algae got to his feet, having gallantly preserved the candle flame, and trekked back up the awkward slope again. "Art theft from an Earl's house carries a heavy penalty - I don't fancy breaking rocks for the rest of the roaring twenties."

"Daphne wouldn't dare rat on us," Ralph insisted confidently. "She needs us to keep her out of trouble till she graduates and gets married."

"Maybe not, but her father probably plays golf with the Chief-Constable and a gaggle of magistrates. This could be a test of our integrity - why else would Daphne hang a naked

portrait of herself in a guest room?"

"She's an actress - you know what they're like."

Algae scanned the painting with a keen eye until he spotted a scrawled signature in a lower corner. "It could be James Thornhill," he speculated.

"Sir James Thornhill was one of the earliest artists of the English school," Ralph recalled. "His daughter married William Hogarth. But Thornhill died in 1734, so he couldn't possibly have painted Daphne unless he was a ghost."

"Did he paint nudes when he was alive?" Algae wondered, gazing luridly at the canvass.

"No one did back then. William Etty (1787 - 1849) was one of the first British painters to paint nudes, for which he was viewed with suspicion," Ralph recalled, from a book he'd read about the story of art, throwing further doubt on the likelihood of this painting's authenticity. "Etty's work was often considered lush and indecent, but even he wouldn't have dared to paint a woman staring straight back at the viewer like a sassy French tart - that would have caused a moral panic."

"Maybe this is a lost work, kept hidden away from the police and the major-generals in the Home Office for all these years," Algae speculated. "But how did Sir James manage to paint Daphne nearly two hundred years before she was born?"

"This must be Lavinia," Ralph gasped. "I think we may have discovered something here to shake up the art world and make those art historians add a new footnote to their coffee table textbooks. A genuine baroque nude painted by an Englishman!"

CHAPTER III

The awakening was cold and sudden, quite unlike the casual transition to consciousness brought about by the teasing caress of a civilised morning. This was a dark awakening, a peremptory summons, the call of the night. A slightly disconcerted Jenny imbibed the unfamiliar surroundings of the room with her wide eyes until a vague cognizance began to relieve her mild anxiety.

Despite vowing to remain vigilant, Daphne was now lying on her back, snoring like an old bush pig; and yet no sound was emanating from the heaving chest and fibrillating lips. Jenny realised, without undue alarm, that the bedroom was in the grip of an eerie silence and bathed by autumn moonlight streaming in through the window pane. Someone had spread the curtains apart after she had fallen asleep.

Jenny tried to sit up but felt unusually weak and drowsy, presumably affected by the powerful drug of the sleeping powder placed in her drink. As her head slowly cleared, she thought about waking the snoring culprit as an act of spiteful revenge, but then a sense of magnanimous grace and a sudden feeling of intimacy with the night stayed her hand.

She slipped out of the large bed wearing a thin cotton nightshirt; and without disturbing her room mate, she faithfully responded to the call as any mother might when her infant cried. This particular infant, more precocious than a Hollywood brat, was standing erect on his low plinth, with the arrogant demeanour of a young Olympian. The cheesy grin and glowing eyes were familiar enough, but the mercurial

mien seemed more lifelike than ever, and the cheeks flushed red as if possessed. Once again, with sexual ambivalence, she was drawn to its bidding.

Still, the foreboding weighed heavily on her slender limbs; each step agonisingly slow in its deliberation, as if weighed to discourage or prevent her from attaining an ill-defined objective. Wilful and determined, she overcame the surreal objections to confront the strange little nightmare that was seeking to manipulate a subliminal cocktail of risqué hyperbolae and elliptical desires.

She could hear the bonds of inhibition snapping like dried twigs as she reached out to explore the features of the exotic creature - the broad nose, the rounded cheeks, the thick lips, the well-developed pectoral muscles. She slowly traced a path down its chest and belly until her fingertip encountered the expatiating appendage. Her fingers enveloped the lever, her grip tightening to solicit a response. The panel began to slide, releasing a violent wind trapped in the bowels of the old English house by centuries of repression to blow out through the room, wreaking havoc on its contents.

Jenny was caught in the flow and thrown to the floor in disarray, where she lay gasping for breath, waiting for the pressure to equalise and the gust to subside. The wind gradually died away; airborne objects descended to earth, and calm was restored. Dishevelled; she tentatively rose to her feet, brushed her hair aside, and began to experience a sense of relaxed euphoria as the endorphine flowed through her brain and the mundane constraints of society seemed to fall away like discarded garments. Her limbs felt light and strong once more, her spirit indomitable, her ego imbued with a new poetic impulse. Prospero lay in slumber as before, seemingly undisturbed by the tempest; but for Miranda, a gateway beckoned to another world.

An ethereal orange glow flickered and danced through the white mist that leisurely rolled up from the netherland below; probing the portal to the mortal world with wispy dendrites. Committing herself to this nocturnal quest, Jenny entered the

gnostic labyrinth with no apparent hesitation and began her descent into Hades; her hand guided by a thick pedestrian rope connected to the wall of the gently curving stairway.

The old stone steps led steeply down into an unfathomable vista, away from the comparative security of the bed chamber from whence she had just come. At first, the stone steps felt cold beneath the soles of her bare feet; but seemed to warm gradually with the descent, absorbing heat from the glowing coals of fiery braziers fixed to the walls that lit the way ahead.

She became aware of faint, distant cries; though could not be certain whether they were emanating from an objective reality or were being conjured from within her head. The temperature continued to rise as she descended, the heat taking a physical toll on her strength. Conscious of her profuse perspiration and the cotton nightshirt clinging to her smooth skin, accentuating the lean figure of her youth, she pushed on regardless; descending like a modern Dante into the unknown.

Isolated pockets of white mist became detached from the larger convoluting clouds and paused to swirl around her feet in the clearings. These curious familiars seemed to study the intruder in their midst with intense curiosity; though her determined descent soon left them trailing in her wake like swarms of summer midges on an evening trail.

The quest continued until she found her pathway blocked by a tangled curtain of silk. Recognising the threat to her hair, she warily put out a hand and disturbed the translucent screen. Dozens of small spiders, each about the size of a threepenny bit, scattered to escape the invading hand of the ruthless giant, demolishing their commune.

Jenny felt some remorse for the destruction she had just caused, even though she drew back and shuddered in disgust at the sight of the eight-legged freaks. But driven by overwhelming curiosity and fervent desire to make progress on the journey, she quickly overcame her loathing of the web and put out a hand again to tear great swathes of silk from the curtain. More of the spiders scattered as their fragile bivouac

was destroyed, and she felt dozens of the hairy little bodies running over her bare feet or being squashed underfoot as they sought to escape. Setting aside her revulsion, she continued creating a hole big enough to step through without getting too many silk fibres tangled in her hair.

The odyssey continued - and it seemed as if there would be no end to this spiralling descent into the world of forbidden dreams. At some point, she realised, she'd have to turn back; and in response to this thought, a timely concession was made. The steps suddenly gave way to a smooth landing, cast in concrete; and a huge Gothic arch filled by a single heavy door panel lying a mere six inches ajar. The door was made of solid oak and nearly a foot thick. A massive structure, perhaps crafted by giants for the duplicitous gods, which now barred her view of the way ahead.

The source of the white mist lay behind the door and wispy hands seemed to claw at the wood in a vain attempt to widen the gap. Voices cried out in strange dialects, like disparate peoples trying to make good their escape from a tyrant, as the wood held back the diaspora and stood as an intractable barrier against their aspirations to breathe freely. Large blood red letters were carved into a plaque nailed to the wall beside the doorway.

**ABANDON HOPE,
ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE:**

Jenny paused before the iconic warning, possessed now by a more reasonable sense of caution. To turn back would be simple enough. The steps would lead straight back up to the bedroom and to the world from whence she had come. To Daphne - and her world of affectation and facile innuendo. An arbitrary world of contradictory mores and vested interests which dismayed and confused her. But Daphne's views held no sway down here in this twilight world of the subconscious and the surreal; and Jenny knew that her own reign might also come to an end on passing through the portal.

Something brushed against her foot. Something warm, damp, and pliable; whose spiky fur pricked her naked skin. She looked down to see a sewer rat sitting on its haunches, fastidiously cleaning its face with its forepaws, as if amusing itself whilst waiting patiently for an audience with the young woman. The fur of the rat had a very strange hue, which seemed luminescent and glowed blue in the subdued light.

Instinctively, Jenny recoiled from the ugly little creature, and suppressed an irrational shudder at its best attempts to appear presentable. But then, she noticed that the features of its face resembled Ralph, in a curious sort of way. Ralph with a long nose and whiskers.

“Go back, you stupid bitch! Can’t you read?” it squeaked condescendingly as it sat back on its haunches, folded its arms, shook its head and tapped its foot.

Another rat appeared and sat beside the first. This one had the features of Algae and glowed green. “Better think carefully about what you are doing,” it advised her soberly. “You may want to get married some day. What are you going to tell your in-laws?”

A third rat, glowing scarlet, and looking for all the world like Daphne, joined in the chorus. “What are you waiting for?” it squeaked, hopping up and down excitedly, and pointing to the doorway. “Keep going! Don’t listen to them! They are just men - what do they know? It’s a rat-trap, honey, and you’ve be conned!”

The three rats lined up on the third stone step and began a synchronised soft-shoe shuffle, while singing a leisurely ditty:

D: I saw a mouse ...

R: Where?

D: There on the stair!

A: Where on the stair?

D: Right there! A little mouse with clogs on ...

R: Well I declare,

D: Going clip-clippety-clop on the stair ...

A: Oh yeah ...

R: Oh yeah ...

A creature like an owl, with the hideous face of the old witch, suddenly hooted and swooped overhead, causing all three rats to squeal in unison and scatter. The witch-owl shrieked with maniacal laughter and the panic-stricken Ralph and Algae rats ran back up the steps towards the bedroom; while the more adventurous Daphne rat skipped through the gap in the doorway.

Spurred on by an inquisitive desire, Jenny attempted to follow her rodent-sister through the gap - but was impeded by the obstacle of the massive door. The narrow opening was fine for a rat, but a busty young woman like Jenny needed more than six inches to get by.

She tried peering through the gap to see what lay beyond, though her view was severely restricted by the angle and she could only see the bland stone of a side wall. She pulled at the door to widen the gap betwixt wood and frame; but could not overcome the inertia of the solid oak panel, or the obstinacy of the rusty old hinges that held it in place.

Determined not to be thwarted in her exploratory quest by an obstacle which seemed no more formidable than a badly hung door, Jenny put a foot on the frame and seized the edge of the panel with both hands, risking her fingers. She prayed to the gods, invoking the strength of Heracles in her bid to widen the gap. Eventually, the hinges relented with a creaking, groaning protest, and the door panel shifted ever so slightly; permitting her to squeeze through into the world on the other side.

The Daphne rat was now nowhere to be seen, and the courageous knight-errant found herself alone on an elevated, concrete platform in a vast underground chamber; looking down into a layer of white mist. The rectangular platform was bounded on two perpendicular flanks by stone walls, but shearing away vertically at the opposite edge of greater length into a large pit of indeterminate depth. A stout wooden barricade of three horizontal joists, fixed to vertical posts, had

been erected along this edge; as if to corral parties of tourists and prevent them from falling over the concrete cliff like lemmings.

Jenny crossed the platform and put her hands on the upper joist; about level with the nipples of her breasts, which were protruding through the thin damp cotton of her nightshirt. She cautiously peered down into the abyss in a vain attempt to determine what lay below. The floor of the pit was hidden by a blanket of thick mist; which arced and sizzled with electrical discharges like a primeval storm cloud on a newly-formed planet.

She quickly realised that her only option, if she wished to progress any further, lay at the fourth edge of the platform. From there, a flight of wooden steps led down into the white vapour and the unknown contained therein.

Jenny hesitated once more, and looked back at the doorway through which she had come; still faced with the choice of advance or retreat. As she turned to face the steps again before deciding whether to continue onward, she felt a draught on her cheek and spun round to see the door swing shut with an ominous and deafening crash.

She dashed back and frantically pulled on the wrought iron ring; but the intractable door refused to yield this time, denying her the option of retreat.

Partially blinded by the mist, she could barely see her own feet as she descended; and probed each step for surety before entrusting it with her full weight. The strange, piercing cries, more animal-like than human, were much louder now; as if the imaginary creatures of Lewis or Tolkien were hiding in the swirling clouds of vapour; waiting for the opportunity to pounce and tear at her soft vulnerable flesh with their sharp teeth and claws.

The thirteen steps gave way to a level stone floor. She advanced cautiously, accompanied by the light hues in the mist and the strange cries, suspecting that the chamber would extend for some considerable distance though unable to ascertain what it contained or what decor surrounded her.

The shimmering waves of heat from the braziers continued to draw beads of sweat from her face and cleavage as she delved further into the mist.

Something overhead brushed through her hair like a blind man's claw. She flinched and ducked down, expecting just another cobweb; but when she looked up, she saw instead a rough coil of rope straddling a heavy beam. Jenny gasped, slightly alarmed by the associations it inspired.

She looked around for further hints, clues, or artifacts that might shed light on the mystery and meaning of this world, but could see nothing. Instead, her ear detected a faint lyrical sound; a harmonious melody from a flute or a reed which induced a frisson and filled her with an intoxicating desire.

Then, through a clearing in a patch of the swirling mist, there loomed a human form of such striking stature that the pit of her stomach began to tingle as a deeply sensual wave spread up through her body.

He was watching her intently as he played his windpipes, like a cat with his eye on a mouse, waiting patiently for it to come within reach of his paw.

The swarthy statuette had come to life. Man-sized life, including the amazing limp phallus. The face had altered, as if the features had matured and become more refined; losing the adolescent sour-faced scowl of the delinquent and developing into a broad, dark, handsome countenance. The thick black hair, buoyant and shiny, flowed onto his shoulders like an advert for shampoo. He stood before her with muscular arms folded across an expansive chest and abdominal muscles rippling like a pattern of sand at low-tide. As he observed her, his eyes retained the same unnatural, penetrating glare to which she had previously succumbed.

This demonic male creature, enveloped by the ethereal silver glow of a pagan god, grinned lewdly at the sight of the mortal woman in a clinging slip of cotton. The amps surged through the glowing red eyes and he flashed a full set of brilliant white teeth. But then, a low growl suddenly filled Jenny with alarm. Something inhuman lurked unseen in the

shadows behind the anthropomorphic figure. The pat of paws and scratch of claws on stone heralded its approach into the dim light. A huge wolf with eyes as wide as saucers, salivating through a beaver tail tongue, came to stand obediently beside its master.

Panic stricken, Jenny turned to run, but her legs felt like lead and she moved slowly; far too slowly to escape a swift canine. Looking over her shoulder rather than straight ahead, she ran blindly into a diaphanous barrier of intertwined elastic threads. With the way ahead impeded, she tried to retreat, but this was no ordinary web. Her spreadeagled limbs were held fast by an instant adhesive on the silken net.

Jenny struggled violently for a few seconds before perceiving the nature of the trap. This perception led to a terrible association forming in her mind's eye and she ceased the struggles that could be transmitting prey signals along the fine wires to the imagined host - a Jungian archetype and a Darwinian nightmare.

Forced to balance awkwardly on one foot, as if maintaining a difficult and demanding modern-dance pose, she hung limply from the strands and peered up into a dark corner of the web in dread anticipation of what might be lurking there. But her eyes could not delve into the forbidding gloom to unlock its fearful secrets.

She remembered the wolf and the man, her fellow warm-blooded mammals; and looked over her shoulder again, in desperate longing for salvation; but could see nothing to give her hope through the swirling mists.

Her gaze returned to the dark confluence of the web with the wall and a beam overhead, and she waited fearfully. Thro' her hand, she felt a faint vibration playing along one of the strands, as if someone were strumming it like a guitar string. A dark hairy digit appeared, about the thickness of a man's finger, and twanged the string as if for amusement. But this was no human finger, as became apparent when it so loathsomely began to extend towards her mouth, generating a nightmarish image in her mind.

Jenny's eyes were fixed firmly on the digit when she noticed a viscous globule of scarlet fluid sliding down the strand towards her arm. She struggled to pull the arm away from the danger, but it was held firmly in place. The foul-smelling digestive juice met her flesh and sizzled corrosively, causing her to writhe and scream in pain.

The creature emerged very slowly; beginning with the one hairy leg, then another, and a third, and a fourth. The legs were segmented and supported the front of a dark, spherical body with eight red eyes that glared at her eagerly; like psychotic voyeurs. The dagger-like fangs were even more terrible to behold; dripping the burning poison from their sacs onto the web as they extended and retracted in rhythmic motion.

Jenny screamed in final desperation for a saviour, any saviour, be he ne'er so vile; and continued to scream as the monstrous arachnid closed to within inches of her arm.

Just before the shiny black needles reached her flesh, she felt something press against her back and turned her head sufficiently to see the wolf standing on its hind legs with its paws on her shoulders; its jaws just inches from her neck; its rancid breath on her cheek. It growled fiercely at the spider and displayed its gleaming white fangs to challenge a rival carnivore for the prey. The spider backed away from the wolf's jaws and reared up, displaying its own fangs in response to the threat.

Jenny became mute with terror as she awaited the outcome of the standoff; praying that the wolf, with the skill of the wild, would deftly pluck the spider from the web and tear it apart on the floor. However much she feared the man and the wolf; they were both, biologically speaking, members of her class. Mammalian beings with seven cervical vertebrae. The monstrous form of the spider struck a chord of terror so deep in her phobia-ridden psyche that it transcended her more rational dread of wolves and men. But then, the wolf decided that though she looked and smelled quite tasty, she probably wasn't worth fighting over, and dropped away; leaving her to

face the spider, alone and terrified once more.

The ravenous arachnid approached her arm and prepared to plunge its fangs into her flesh. She thought the toxins might kill her quickly, or digest her internally, or cause her heart to fail and her lungs to collapse; or they might simply paralyse her muscles and leave her conscious while she was devoured.

She struggled wildly with such thoughts in a last, desperate attempt to escape such a terrible end, but could not prevent the twin needles from finding a prominent vein. She looked away and closed her eyes, not wishing to see the sight. Surprisingly, there was very little pain from the injections; merely the slight prick of a tetanus jab.

She began to think of her God, and of going to heaven, or to hell; and was struck by sadness and melancholy at leaving this life so early, with so much left undone. These appeals to Providence brought the timely wrath of a *Deus Regnator* down on the heathen head of her tormentor. A loud crack rent the air and the spider's whole body seemed to explode in a bright phosphorescent fireball.

Jenny was dazzled, but otherwise unhurt by the blast that tore through a portion of the fabric of the web, releasing one of her arms from its bind. She hung limply from the other arm and heard a second sonic crack as the tip of a bullwhip sliced through the part of the web still holding her. Freed from restraint, she collapsed onto the stone floor, vaguely aware of the man standing over her before losing consciousness.

Regaining her senses in what seemed like no more than a fleeting moment, she realised that her arms were being drawn up above her head. Confused, she looked up and realised why. Her wrists were bound to one end of a rope slung over the beam. A rope with which some invisible force was slowly pulling her up; first onto her knees, then her feet, and then tiptoes; stretching out every muscle in her lithe body like a torturous warm-up to a physical exercise. She felt the lash on her back, but the pain was not unbearable and sent ripples of

pleasure through her body. Half a dozen strokes carried her to the brink of an orgasm with the thought - hit me baby, one more time.

She twisted and struggled to escape, feeling the light touch of something stroking her back. An arm enveloped her slim waist, the hand coming to rest on her hip. A second hand was planted on her belly, and in tandem they gently worked their way up and down her sensitive curves; tearing away the tattered remnants of the nightshirt to reveal the sweating flesh beneath. In spite of her ordeal, Jenny began to respond to the supernatural caresses; writhing with pleasure at the attention and groaning in expectation of the deity to whom she had fallen prey in this unearthly place.

She felt herself spinning round until dizzy. Then the motion stopped and he was facing her, the grin wider than ever, judging that the time had come for her to receive his blessing. He put his hands on her hips and drew her to him. Her eyes closed as her lips parted and she wrapped her legs around him, eager for the entry; sensing the deity's surprise at the demands of a mere mortal. The rope suddenly gave way under the strain of her passion. She gripped his shoulders and threw back her head as the ripples of orgasm began to wash over her like an incoming tide.

CHAPTER SIX

Jenny opened her eyes to the glimmer of morning seeping through the bedroom curtains, which were now closed again; and found herself staring straight into a familiar, though less than entirely welcome, set of features looking down from a head attached to an athletic body wearing a sparkling white tennis-dress. Daphne was kneeling astride the prostrate girl and casually strumming the strings of her tennis racket as if it were a western guitar.

"Daphne, what are you doing?" she asked, more than slightly perturbed by the other woman's familiar proximity to her face. She struggled to get up on her elbows, but was pinned under Daphne's weight.

"Waiting for you to finish your dream. I hate it when someone intrudes into mine. They always butt in just as it starts to get interesting. But you're wide awake now, so get up and get dressed. They're waiting for us to double up down on the tennis courts. Bags you get Algae."

Daphne got off the bed and ripped the curtains apart to allow the uncensored autumn sunshine to pour into the room through the window and dazzle the sleepy girl.

"Oh no, I hate mixed doubles," Jenny moaned, her thoughts still reeling from the rollercoaster of the dream. "Why don't you play without me?" she pleaded, needing time to herself for analysis and debrief before the memory faded away and was lost forever.

Daphne was not so easily put off. "We could, but I doubt whether O'Flaherty would fit into your tennis dress," she

chuckled, as she began rehearsing her serve with theatrical flamboyance; pretending to throw a ball into the air and going through the motion of a huge swing that would have taken out the lightbulb, had there been one there to take out. "You have brought tennis wear, haven't you?"

"Yes, but ..." Jenny paused and frowned as she studied the attire of her likely opponent, "... it's only nine o'clock in the morning," she observed, glancing at a travelling clock on the bedside table.

"This isn't a lecture-call you can just sleep through. It's a last chance to tan those lovely legs before winter starts to nip and your blotches start to show."

"What blotches?" Jenny asked in alarm, projecting a shapely calf from under the sheet.

"These!" quipped Daphne, dropping her tennis racket to grab Jenny's ankle with one hand and sadistically pinch her thigh with the fingers of the other.

Jenny squealed and tried to pull the leg back under the sanctuary of the covers; but Daphne kept hold of her ankle and tugged with both hands. Jenny slipped off the edge of the bed and landed with a bump on the floor. Fortunately, a sumptuous rug covering the landing zone was sufficiently thick to cushion her fall. For modesty's sake, she dragged the top bed sheet with her, for she was completely naked.

"Ouch! That hurt!" she complained anyway, rubbing her mildly smarting posterior.

"Helps to have something to land on when you fall," Daphne smirked, smugly patting her own, slightly larger, behind.

"What happened to my nightshirt!" Jenny exclaimed, suddenly realising that she was naked beneath the sheet.

"Oh, that sweaty old thing is in the laundry basket. I undressed you last night before putting you to bed. I thought you'd be more comfortable that way, given the heat in here."

"It's autumn," Jenny reminded her.

"Indian summer," Daphne explained. "We often get them in this part of the world. The methane from muck-spreading

in the fields has a greenhouse effect on the microclimate.”

“Not just in the fields,” Jenny frowned, indignant from her experience and deeply suspicion now of all Daphne’s fulsome machinations. Claws out, she turned her attention to an obvious target - Daphne’s eye-catching and highly-revealing tennis-dress. “I hope you don’t expect me to wear anything quite so vulgar as that in front of Ralph!” she protested, appalled at the sight of Daphne’s aristocratic thighs exposed to all and sundry.

“Don’t you like it?” asked Daphne, doing a little catwalk twirl for her critic.

“It’s outrageous! An offence to public decency. How dare you criticise me for modelling bathing costumes when you wear something like that?”

“You forget, my dear Jenny, that this is England - the land of the hypocrite. I bought this dress in sunny California. They take their sportswear very seriously out there. Maybe that’s why they win so many tournaments. I did have a few problems getting it through British Customs though. I had to promise never to wear it - not even in the privacy of my own home.”

“What will people think when they see you?” Jenny scowled, folding her arms and fixing her disapproving glare on the daring dress - like a father seeing his teenage daughter about to go out in hotpants.

“We’ll soon find out. I think I’ll start by asking Ralph. No point in asking Algae, he’d love me in anything; even a maternity dress. There’s something terribly unnatural about that young man.”

“I don’t like it,” Jenny grumbled, slowly rising to her feet whilst keeping the sheet wrapped around her body like a holy shroud. “If you wear things like that, I’ll have to start wearing things like that, and there’s no telling where it’ll end up.”

“You better get used to it,” Daphne advised. “It’s a natural consequence of social-Darwinism in a secular society.”

“I’m a Creationist,” Jenny reminded her.

“So was Eve, the world-famous fig leaf designer, cursed

with period pains for breaking God's laws. Like it or not, the inexorable march of fashion has begun, as women aspire to outdo each other on the catwalk of life in their frantic efforts to turn the heads of the men they affect to despise," Daphne lectured, like a disillusioned feminist.

Jenny climbed back onto the bed and thoughtfully pulled the sheet up to her chin as she contemplated the wider ramifications of Daphne's prophetic words. "You make it sound like an arms race," she decided.

"We're all in competition with each other. States, cities, corporations, religions, and women. But you can turn your back on the world and go back to sleep if you want. I just wanted your opinion on this dress, knowing you know so much about fashion. Ralph can help me work on my serve, or we might have a cozy game of singles together. Algae can go play with the guillotine in the dungeon. We've had the blade sharpened especially for him."

Daphne swaggered out of the room with the racket slung over her shoulder; scratching her Nietzschean cheek as she went and revealing a daring absence of panties.

From her vantage point, Jenny timidly viewed a seemingly different set to that which had confronted her the previous evening. Daylight had transformed the bed chamber, removing the menace and gloom of night to reveal a quaint aspect of homely comfort. Even the horny little devil seemed more friendly and amiable to the casual observer.

She slowly emerged from the bed, deftly retaining the white cotton shroud around her body as protection against hidden eyes, and opened a window to air the room. The morning view beyond the window pane was surprisingly agreeable and filled her with some optimism for the coming day.

The room was higher than she had imagined, and looked down on the oak tree standing by the courtyard. Beyond lay a scene of rustic tranquillity, extending as far as the eye could see. But despite such a pleasant distraction, Jenny was still seething at the antics of her savvy rival and roommate, and was fairly certain that there would be more to come before

the weekend was over. Daphne was on home turf, but Jenny was determined to make use of her own particular assets to offset the advantage of terrain.

She wondered what on earth she could wear to compete on the tennis court with an adversary so well prepared and ruthlessly immodest. She rummaged through the mountains of clothes, as yet unpacked in her case, essential to any weekend, in the vain hope of finding something bequeathed by a fairy godmother. She had options for just about everything except tennis in California.

With her entire wardrobe spread across the bed, she turned in desperation to the dressing table drawers, in the hope of finding a forgotten cast-off from a previous summer that just might serve as a stylish retrospective; or at least look fashionable again. The first two were empty, except for a dead field mouse and a mouldy old cheese sandwich, and she slammed both shut in frustration. The third yielded more promising fare. She lifted an old pair of cricket flannels, an American baseball cap, and a thick beige string-vest t-shirt. Hidden beneath the garments, she also discovered a large strap-on phallus; a handsome mask of a saturnine devil - complete with horns and a chin-beard; a toy bullwhip, a joke-shop spider on an elastic string, and a tin of petroleum jelly. Then she noticed the faint red bands on both her wrists and recalled the dream.

"Daphne!" she howled in a rage.

But Daphne was well out of earshot by now, and Jenny could only deal with one crisis at a time; so she composed herself again and threw the party pieces back in the drawer. However, she retained the flannels, the string-vest t-shirt, and the baseball cap and laid them on the bed.

With a pair of dress-making scissors taken from her suitcase, she attacked the fabric of the flannels; then restored the garment with needle and thread - minus the legs. She put on underwear before letting the sheet fall to the ground and slipping into a short pleated skirt, a string-vest t-shirt with a high waistband that exposed her navel, and a pair of tennis

shoes without socks. She tied her hair into a ponytail and fitted the baseball cap with her hair trailing out the gap in the back. With hands on hips, and cotton sweatbands on her wrists, she stood before a full-length mirror and twisted one way, then the other, to check her profile. Smugly self-satisfied, she turned to the leering little voyeur, whose meaty appendage seemed larger than ever.

“In yer dreams, guv’ner,” she whispered, blowing him a kiss before modestly draping the bedsheet over his head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Algae stood behind the baseline of the grass court in his crumpled old tennis-shorts and Fred Perry style shirt. A tight cotton sweatband around his forehead held up his floppy fringe. He adjusted the strings of the racket before serving; though this was merely a mannerism acquired from observing the players of the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, since no amount of tampering with the strings could ever improve the performance of the old wooden racket Daphne had kindly provided. The frame was bent and buckled, as if it had been run over by a steamroller; and a number of strings were missing, leaving him with barely enough crossed pairs to hit the ball with.

Ralph crouched well behind the opposite baseline, ready to receive a serve he had faced many times in the past and knew so well. Ralph's racket, which Daphne had also provided, was black and shiny; with an enormous head to match his ego. It was made of a revolutionary new lightweight material and had been smuggled back from California in the same diplomatic bag which had contained Daphne's skirt.

The morning sun was shining directly into Algae's eyes as he focussed on the net. He gripped the racket with his right hand and bounced the ball several times with his left, then tossed it high into the air. He rose up on his toes to meet the falling ball and struck it with the athletic poise of an accomplished county circuit player. The stroke was firm and full-bodied, despite the lack of strings, with just a hint of slice; so that when the ball bounced in front of Ralph, it spun off to

his left, wrong-footing him. The serve was good, better than good it was an ace, since Ralph failed to make any contact at all. Unfortunately, for the sake of fair play, Daphne was doing the umpiring.

"Net!" she ruled, standing at one of the net posts and rubbing her finger along the wire to imply that she'd detected the impact of the ball. "First service."

Algae looked surprised, but knew better than to argue with the umpire. He served again, and this time Ralph did manage a return at full stretch. The rally continued for several more shots - until the ball passed straight through one of the big holes in Algae's racket face.

Daphne started jumping up and down in a funny little dance routine, waving a couple of pom-poms in the air and shouting, "Ra-Ra-Ralph! Ra-Ra-Ralph!" like an over-excited cheerleader in a small- American town who was eyeing up her future husband. "Give me an R, give me an A, give me an L-P-H!" She leapt in the air, spread her legs, and landed on the grass in a splits position, while still waving the pom-poms in the air.

Algae grimaced. Ralph was accustomed to this sort of adoration from women and smiled as if bemused. Daphne got up and composed herself; smoothing her skirt, brushing her hair, and resuming the icy persona of a well bred young English woman - devoid of all emotion except disdain. Then she calmly announced the score.

"Love fifteen."

Algae served again, another ace.

"Net! Out!" she cried out in a quick, unhesitating succession. "Second service."

Algae delivered another perfectly good serve.

"Out! Love thirty."

"You cannot be serious!" Algae barked, voicing his unsportsman-like dissent.

"Don't argue with the umpire," she warned.

"The ball was in!" Algae insisted, striking the ground with his racket in frustration.

"Penalty point!" Daphne adjudicated sternly.

"What the hell for?"

"Racket abuse."

"Call this a racket? I've seen more strings on a Sopwith Camel! I want the referee."

"We don't have a referee," Daphne pointed out. "But we do have a slow handclap for spoiled brats with no breeding who won't obey the rules."

She pressed a remote control button and the intimidating sound of slow clapping began to emanate from speakers on masts set around the edge of the court.

"I'll be the referee!" a female voice announced from a vantage point on a grassy mound behind Daphne.

They turned their heads to see Jenny standing with hands on hips and feet slightly apart; in a pose that mixed glamour with authority. Ralph couldn't resist a wolf whistle to express his delight.

"What a nerve!" Daphne complained, turning off the hand clap. "You should have stayed in bed."

"Don't you like it?" asked Jenny, feigning surprise. She swung her hips elegantly, as if on a catwalk, as she descended from the mound with graceful poise to join them on the court. "I thought you were into progressive fashion statements. You provoked an arms race this weekend and now you're facing a fashion gap."

"This is just the opening shot," Daphne warned her belligerently. "Wait till you see what I wheel out this evening. I'm going to bury you."

"Can we please get back to the scoring?" Algae pleaded.

"The ball was definitely in - I saw it clearly from up there," Jenny declared, countermanding Daphne's dubious call.

This higher judgment was challenged by a shrill, shrieking Doppler sound; like the whistle from a passing train; as if the gods themselves were taking an interest in the game.

Jenny looked up in confusion, whilst both men promptly hit the deck, contracted into tiny foetal positions, and covered their heads with their hands. Daphne and Jenny remained

unperturbed as a shell passed overhead and impacted with a loud bang about four hundred yards away, on the treacherous narrow lane they had driven up the previous night.

"What on earth are they doing?" asked Jenny. "Digging up the roads again?"

Daphne chided the cowardly pair, still crouching on the ground. "Get up, you silly boys! It's just Father shooting hares."

The two men continued to hug mother earth like infants, with a strain of cautious disbelief strewn across their anxious faces, expressively seeking an assurance that they were not the intended target.

"With an eighteen pounder?" cried Ralph. "That's not very sporting."

"It's more sporting than using a shotgun. You're much further away. O'Flaherty must be spotting for him somewhere nearby."

Daphne studied the surrounding vantage points until she spotted the turf move on a gently sloping hillside about two hundred yards away.

"There he is!" She pointed to a head in a tin hat, covered in camouflage branches, which was poking out of a foxhole and scanning the target zone with field glasses before relaying the corrections to firecontrol via a battlefield telephone line.

A string of concatenated bursts, each a few seconds apart, impacted in a creeping barrage along the road which would have been murderous for an armoured column approaching the Hall by that route.

"Why is he shelling the road?" asked Jenny, with a hint of consternation. "That's a private road, you'll have to replace the tarmac yourself. And we could be trapped here now until someone turns up with metal detectors and a bulldozer."

"O'Flaherty is supplying the coordinates to Father so he'll get the blame. Maybe he spotted the handsome young gamekeeper I sent for this morning, racing up the lane in his groovy sunglasses and open topped MG, and decided he didn't want him on his turf. He's just saying 'Keep Off the

Grass! Servants are very territorial - like tomcats."

From their vantage, they observed in the distance an open topped sports car; which braked suddenly, reversed into a field gate, and sped off in the direction it had come.

"But he's spraying his territory with high-explosive shells!" Jenny exclaimed in alarm. "You should think about having him neutered."

"At his age, the shock would probably kill him and we'd have to pay compensation to the agency."

"Use an anesthetic."

"O'Flaherty did say it was dangerous to travel on the road this time of year," Algae recalled, unravelling from his crouching position.

"You've got to admit, he is incredibly devious for an old butler," Daphne marvelled, as if she admired people for their less-than-reputable qualities. "Perhaps he doesn't want any competition for the keyholes this weekend."

Ralph was just beginning to feel foolish for lying at the feet of two women in a barrage when a shell burst on the mound, perilously close by. The earth and spent shrapnel rained down on his head like confetti, triggering a reflex which caused him to duck down again. He shut his eyes and clenched the sphincter below his bladder which, for some reason the army's learned psychiatrists had been unable to determine, became embarrassingly slack around loud noises.

Daphne was totally unperturbed under fire - like a messianic American brigade commander with a domineering mother. "Father likes to pretend they're Germans," she explained. "O'Flagerty used to catch them in cages and put little spiked helmets on their heads before releasing them into a field to more accurately simulate the progress of a modern battle."

Another shell shrieked overhead and struck the mound, inducing a squad of camouflaged and well-concealed leverets in spiked helmets to scatter in all directions.

"Well, we can't play tennis here anymore, not with those things going off. They'll put me off my stroke and make me piss my pants," Ralph complained, rising to his feet, dusting

himself down, and pointing to an embarrassing little wet spot spreading near his crotch.

"I thought you said you played football against the Germans in no man's land, with bullets and shells going off all over the place?" Daphne recalled.

"That was different. I was a teenager then - with the brain of a sponge. I didn't know any better."

"But you do remember what an eighteen pounder sounds like," she noted. "What's it like to get your hands on a really big weapon like that?"

Jenny started to giggle at this.

"Did I say something funny?" Daphne inquired, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

"Oh, Daphne, don't be so coy," Jenny admonished her. "We know you've handled lots of big weapons. You're the secretary of the Cambridge University Women's Pistol and Rifle Society."

"Yes, but women aren't allowed to play with the field guns," she replied. "We could be suffragettes - with plans to shell the all-male colleges."

"Maybe that's why they put Girton College so far out of town," Jenny surmised.

"Not far enough. The eighteen pounder has a range of at least four miles," Ralph recalled. "You could easily hit any of the male colleges from the grounds of Girton."

"And Newnham College could be used to provide enfilading fire," Algae suggested.

"No chance of that - Newnham is for nice young ladies with modest aspirations," Daphne explained. "Girton takes all the thrusting bitches like me who think they can pass the exams set for men."

The next round burst even closer and directly overhead, showering the tennis players in more shrapnel; though miraculously sparing them from injury.

"Do you think O'Flaherty knows how to correct fire correctly?" asked Algae. "He looks a bit old to have served in the last war and we're in a very exposed position."

Another shell exploded overhead, this time even closer.

"He's definitely got the deflection wrong," Algae concluded. "Unless he's deliberately shifting target to us."

"Hmm, he's not in his foxhole anymore," Daphne noted, scanning the field again. "Perhaps we should move out of range - he may be trying to bag us before we can bag him."

The little party prudently left the grass court to reassemble elsewhere. O'Flaherty appeared in their wake, dressed as a groundsman; perhaps with class-revolution on his mind, but for now dutifully dragging an all weather protection cover over the hallowed turf as two more aimless shells burst overhead and the steel splinters rained down like an autumn shower.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Daphne took her friends from the tennis court to the conservatory adjoining the west wing; from where they could look out over a long, thin, man-made lake, stocked with trout; which could be seen, every now and again, breaking the surface to gulp air, or leaping free of the water just for the hell of it like a pod of breaching whales. The lake separated Wulfmarsh Hall from the remnant of ancient deciduous forest that lay further west, and which was just begging to be cut down and replaced by yet another bland and ecologically dubious plantation of money making Christmas trees.

Fortunately, this area of woodland was owned by the Crown; and King George V was a progressive naval officer, who was also steeped in the traditions of Nelson's navy - rum, sodomy, and the lash - even to the extent that he liked to conserve oak trees for his navy in anticipation of a future oil crisis and a return to sail. It was no longer an ear lopping offence for Saxons to walk through the King's forest, or even to hunt the King's deer, but the Wulfmarsh clan were liable to lose parts of their titular anatomy if caught felling the King's navy's oak trees.

The midday sun shone brightly through the glass of the conservatory; maintaining a pleasantly subtropical microclimate in which the four friends languished with their usual industrious vigour as they sipped mid-morning tea laced with brandy and gin.

"This racket is really cool, Daph! It's so light you could play badminton with it," Ralph declared, waving the shiny black

racket around like a samurai sword. "You could even swat flies with it. What's it made of?"

"Carbon fibre," she replied.

"Isn't that what Americans put in their breakfast cereal to compensate for their lack of breeding?"

"Damned un-English," Algae chuckled.

"It'll catch on here soon enough," Daphne warned. "It's a lot more healthy than bacon and eggs - unless you've got rickets, like Lowry's matchstalk men and matchstalk cats and dogs."

"I meant the application of science to sport," Algae explained. "No British player will ever win Wimbledon again."

Ralph was tracking a huge horsefly that seemed intent on taking a bite out of his nose. "Even I could win it with one of these," he insisted, bringing the intruder down with a terrific overhead smash.

"You couldn't even win the women's tournament," jibed Algae.

"You wouldn't even qualify for the women's tournament. Your arms are too skinny," retorted Ralph.

"So I'd lose all my matches. But the women's game is not really about tennis - it's about who gets their picture taken the most."

"You'd have to shave your legs first," Jenny advised. "No one likes pictures of hairy legs."

"No problem - so long as I don't have to wax."

"Some very beautiful players go out in the first round. There's tough competition for the modelling contracts. It's probably easier just to win the tennis matches."

"Maybe - but you don't make as much money that way - and you have to spend a lot of time practising."

The amiable backbiting banter soon shifted back to the subject of ghosts and Ralph's ambitious plans to photograph one over the weekend.

"Why don't you tell us how you are going to do it?" Algae challenged him.

"Do what?" Ralph responded coyly.

"Catch a ghost on film."

"Yes, Ralph, how are you going to do it?" Jenny asked eagerly. "He's not like a mouse you can tempt into a trap with a piece of cheese."

"Not cheese, perhaps," Ralph conceded, tucking a finger under her chin to raise her face into a delicate pout. "But there are other morsels on the delicatessen counter that might appeal to him."

"Boiled ham?" Algae quipped inanely. "Actor? Get it?"

"I think we can all guess what Luca used to eat," Ralph chuckled, licking his lips with his tongue. "Tastes like chicken."

"Do you have to be so vulgar," Daphne complained loudly. "We're not rolling spliffs behind the prep school bikesheds now - this is my family home. And don't forget, we reserve copyright on all photographic material pertaining to Wulf-marsh Hall, and all other items contained thereof and therein," she informed him litigiously.

"That's something our lawyers can discuss at the appropriate time," the fearless ghostbuster hedged. "Assuming that whatever turns up is worth the extortion of a legal tussle."

"So, Daphne, you think Ralph may be onto something after all?" Jenny surmised gleefully. "We were beginning to think that you didn't believe in ghosts, curses, or anything supernatural connected with your family past?"

"He could be on to something," she confirmed. "But it won't be a ghost. He's more likely to get some pictures of a sweet, young, mortal thing wandering around the dungeon late at night in her underwear. We can certainly use that sort of stuff to spice up the cover of the tourist brochure. We'll say she's the ghost of Lady Lavinia, lamenting the loss of her swarthy lover."

"What's all this about a dungeon?" Algae queried.

"You had better ask Jenny. I was trying to be discrete about the whole affair. You know how we girlies like to keep our secrets from the boys. What on earth were you doing down there last night, you strange little nocturne? Sleepwalking? Or

did you just lose the way to the loo?"

Jenny recalled her dream and blushed. "I don't remember - I must have been sleepwalking, unless ..." she paused to frown and project an accusing stare at the prime subject of foul play. "Daphne, I found some very dodgy things in your dresser drawers this morning."

"Oh? What sort of things?"

Jenny became flustered. "I'd rather not say."

"They say you shouldn't try to wake sleepwalkers, so I just took you by the hand and led you gently back up to the bed-chamber."

"Is that when you ripped off my nightshirt?"

"Wow! Sounds like we were in the wrong room last night," Ralph suggested to Algae. "What happened next, Daph? A bit of girl-on-girl?"

"You were damp with perspiration," Daphne let slip. "You must have exerted yourself severely, whatever it was you were doing down there."

"But how did you know I was down there in the first place?" Jenny countered fiercely.

"I was awakened by a draught in the middle of the night and you were gone. It didn't take a biplane scientist to work out what was going on."

"There was nothing going on!" she insisted, concerned that her virtue was being called into question. "I got lost, that's all."

"How would you know if you don't remember?" Daphne teased her.

"Why would anyone want to build a dungeon in a respectable English stately home?" Algae interjected. "Dungeons are medieval, this house belongs to the Enlightenment."

"The impact of the Enlightenment is vastly overrated," she mused. "They were nowhere near as enlightened as those history professors would have you believe. A bunch of froggy mathematicians in a salon invented Madam Guillotine and the metre ruler."

"It can get very boring waiting for a haircut," Algae had to

admit. "Clever people need something to occupy their minds."

"You haven't explained why you have a medieval dungeon in your home," Jenny reminded Daphne.

"Algae is right for once," she conceded. "Our dungeon is far older than the modern Hall, built in the old crypt of the original building. Back in the sixteenth century, all my family were good Catholics, and they needed a dungeon for the inquisition and the *autos-da-fe* that would follow the counter-reformation. But then, the Spanish Armada got blown off course, Guy Fawkes failed to light the blue touch paper in time, the Glorious Revolution saw us invaded by Dutchmen, and the Jacobites were about as much use as the Scotland football team. So the existence of the dungeon was hushed up and quietly forgotten about until the twentieth century, when we turned it into a tourist attraction."

"So where exactly are you hiding it?" Algae had to ask.

CHAPTER NINE

Daphne led the expedition up the grand stairway: the archetypal, ice cold, platinum-blond leading lady who has more fun. A proto-quasi-liberated woman in a slinky tennis-dress, whose surname would be hyphenated if she ever stooped to getting married. The others followed in single file, still wearing their subtropical tennis outfits. First Ralph, the great white ghost hunter; carrying his portable tripod-mounted movie-camera across his broad shoulders as if it were a loaded rifle. Then Jenny, the vulnerable white female of the troop; in a pensive mood, with her face partially hidden by the peak of her cap and her arms folded protectively across her chest like a lactating baboon. Then finally, Algae, acting as a bearer on Equity rates; carrying a heavy box of Ralph's photography club gadgets on his skinny shoulders and nearly collapsing with each step. To compensate for fourth billing, he decided to remind them all of his pivotal role in a prequel adventure in the jungle.

"Does anyone remember the time when we were chasing elephant poachers in the Belgian Congo, and I rescued Daphne from the mud pool of a hungry python?" he called out cheerfully.

No one answered, but Daphne leaned back against Ralph's chest and whispered, "This reminds me of the time when we were poaching elephants in the Belgian Congo and you stripped me and threw me into a mud pool to watch me wrestle that hungry python."

Ralph grinned as he watched the memory flash up on his

screen.

Unfortunately, Jenny overheard part of this. "Did you say you used to poach elephants?" she queried sternly.

"Not exactly. Algae's a vegan, he wouldn't even poach an egg," Ralph explained. "Daphne is all for selling ivory tusks to Chinamen with small dicks, but Algae's a nature-loving freak who spiked her gun to protect the wildlife."

"Wasn't that a dangerous thing to do?"

"Dangerous for Algae," Ralph admitted. "Not even Daphne is stupid enough to fire a rifle with a bent barrel."

"I suppose the bullet would travel round in a circle until it hit someone."

"We had Ginny with us back then," Ralph recalled. "But she turned out to be a bit of a bad egg."

"You mean she smelled?" Jenny surmised, wrinkling her cute button nose.

"No more than anyone else would, staying in a sweaty mud hut for a weekend and getting closer to nature with a bucket and spade. I meant that she betrayed us. Sold us out to some real poachers and nearly got us all killed."

"So then what happened?" asked Jenny, intrigued by the adventurous sounding story. "Did the police catch up with her?"

"Oh yes, but she was far too good looking to go to jail."

"Oh? Better looking than me?"

"No one is better looking than you," Ralph conceded. "But Ginny came close. She was often mistaken for Mary Pickford around Cambridge. The Belgian governor pardoned her so that she could marry his son and help manage the successful family business."

"Not ivory poaching, I hope?"

"Slave trading," Ralph disclosed wryly.

"Slave trading? But that went out with the eighteenth century."

"So did stockings for men, but you can still see some fashionable Belgians wearing them."

"Not around London, you don't. All men wear trousers

now - except the transvestites, and the Jocks from the kilted regiments."

"That's because they'd be arrested and made to sit on a police truncheon down in the cells of Scotland Yard. The boys in blue don't like men wearing tights in this country."

"So why didn't they drag Nijinsky off the stage in Drury Lane? The *Daily Mail* called it 'horrific'."

"The *Daily Mail* would," he scoffed.

"But the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police must have read all about it. Why didn't he send men round to lean on Diaghilev and dissuade him from producing any future performances of his obscene art?"

"The Met don't go to the ballet much, they're not allowed to. They might cause a diplomatic incident and upset the *entente cordiale*."

To Jenny, it seemed that Ralph knew everything. She tried to imagine what it would have been like trekking through the jungle by his side, and mud-wrestling with a huge python, before being rescued and gathered up in his strong arms. The daydream abruptly ended when they arrived at a door and Daphne led them into the girls' bedchamber.

The boys looked around the room in some surprise at the unexpected journey's end. This wasn't at all what they had imagined. They were expecting a medieval dungeon, not an untidy boudoir.

"Daphne, you old bushpig, I always thought dungeons were located deep underground; in the damp, musty bowels of the castle; with squeaking rats and flaming torches," Ralph protested vigorously.

"Indulge me, Ralph," she proposed.

"What, right now, here in front of everyone?"

"Keep your eye on the ball, there's a good boy. I wouldn't want you to miss a crucial catch."

"There's nothing wrong with my fielding. They don't call me 'Stumper' for nothing," he boasted.

"Actually, that's 'Stumpie'," Algae corrected him. "Though I'm not entirely sure why? Something to do with those heavy

weights you lift?"

Ralph raised his eyebrows in feigned surprise and chose his words carefully in female company. "I told you, that's a myth. Body building doesn't affect your performance in other sports."

"But you have been out for a duck a few times lately, haven't you?" Daphne reminded him.

"Only on a sticky wicket ..."

"What did I say about cricket?" Jenny complained aloud. "You'll have plenty of chances to watch it in purgatory."

"The reason for being here, so far above ground, is that this is the route the visitors take on open days," Daphne explained, assuming an elegant tour-guide persona for the occasion. "Through the main entrance into the foyer; then along the hall of shame, past the dining room, up the magnificent stairway to the old master bedroom, down the secret passage into the dungeon, and then out into the sunshine and the gardens for ice cream and opium sold at extortionate rates from tony vans controlled by the Fenland Mafia. That's the way we show people about in the summer. It's all set out in the colour brochure. You're getting it for free, but I expect you all to make a substantial donation towards the preservation of our national heritage on your way out."

Daphne struck a match with her thumbnail and lit a candle in anticipation of the darkness to come, then looked around for the lever to open the secret passage.

"Where's that thing gone now?" she mused. "Ah, there it is!" She flashed a smile at Jenny and whipped off the sheet to reveal the statuette in all its glory. "We don't usually cover him up unless we have nuns or Home Office ministers staying."

"What the hell is that?" Ralph exclaimed, stepping back and feeling threatened by a set of manly proportions which deviated from the golden ratio usually employed by artists.

"A Luca doll, of course. Merchandising is very important these days," she explained.

"But this is your home, not an association football club."

"We all labour under the heavy burden of taxation."

Ralph stepped forward gingerly for a closer examination of the menacing little fiend. "It looks fairly old, almost Georgian I'd say."

"Japanese actually."

"Really? Which dynasty?"

"Showa. We get a shipment every spring from the Tokyo Toy Company, made to our own very specific requirements, which we then sell to the punters for ten shillings a piece - but only if they sign an indemnity on receipt of purchase."

"An indemnity against what?" asked Jenny.

"The curse of Luca, of course." Daphne grinned and winked at Ralph. "The power of suggestion has been known to affect young women with imbalanced hormones - which I'm beginning to think is most of those who don't play mixed hockey. If only they had gone to a boys' prep school like me, they'd eat like gannets and wouldn't be scared to pick up snakes or spiders."

Jenny had a flashback to her dream and blanched at the mention of spiders.

"I don't think the national grid could bear the overload," declared Ralph, wincing from the painful memory. "And then there are all the problems of penis envy it would cause. Daph would be much happier with meat and two veg."

"This can't be Luca - it's a satyr," Algae protested.

"Don't you believe in satyrs?"

"In Ancient Greece, not in Georgian England. They would have been exterminated quicker than the wolves by angry Christian mobs. Can you imagine the reaction of the Church to men with horns on their heads?"

"The same way they react to men with horns in their pants," Daphne supposed. "Luca was a very versatile actor who travelled all over Mediterranean Europe, hence the classically inspired costume. This was him as Puck in a 1720 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

Algae gave the statuette a firm rap on the forehead with his knuckles. "He's made of wood - like the marionette in *Le*

avventure di Pinocchio (1883). Does his nose grow if he tells a lie?"

"It never fails to amaze me what those children's writers get away with," Daphne sighed casually, as she reached out to pull the knob that seemed to quiver slightly in welcome anticipation of her grasp. The door slid open to reveal the secret passage of the previous evening.

"Do we have to go down there again? I don't like it," Jenny moaned, rubbing herself against Ralph's torso to solicit his support for her cause.

"How would you know? You were sleepwalking," Daphne reminded her.

"It was like an extremely vivid dream," Jenny confessed.

"Sounds more like hallucination," Algae surmised.

"It was drug induced - thanks to Daphne's illicit cocktail mix. If she were a man, she'd be locked up for spiking my drink and taking advantage of me."

"If Daph were a man, she'd be locked up for a lot more than that," Ralph grimaced painfully.

"I may have supplied the drugs, but everything else was entirely down to your fervid imagination," Daphne insisted. "However, if the memories are too disturbing, and more than you can bear, then you had better wait here and dwell on them rather than risk therapy through exposure to the cause of your anxiety," she proposed clinically. "But please don't ruin the tour for everyone else."

"Are you suggesting that I should wait here by myself?"

"No, of course not. I'm sure that cute, cuddly little spider is still around here somewhere just waiting to keep you company," Daphne ventured, scanning the walls and the floor for the dark hairy monster with blood red markings that could so easily have been mistaken for a roaming carpet slipper.

Jenny yelped and sat down on the bed, pulling her legs up off the floor. "There's no way I'm staying here by myself."

Daphne moved to lay claim to Ralph by attaching herself to him like a limpet. "Algae, you better stay here with Jenny - she doesn't like spiders. Come on, Ralph, let us go forth and

investigate those remarkable aspects of the Wulfmarsh family history which seem to fascinate so many people," she teased, smiling smugly at the apparently successful fait accompli.

"Not on your life!" Jenny barked, jumping off the bed. She dislodged the pretender to her crown as the alpha female with the dexterity of a tree surgeon and resumed her former place, posing at Ralph's hip.

Daphne raised her claws and hissed like a snake about to strike. A catfight looked certain, which Ralph would have enjoyed immensely; but Algae put a timely restraining arm around Daphne's waist and pulled her back so that Jenny was just out of reach. Daphne regained her composure with a rasping sigh and casually unwrapped the tentacle from around her waist with some disdain.

"Oh well, it looks like Algae will just have to wait here by himself," she conceded, leading the way through the portal into the darkness.

"Wait everyone!" cried Jenny, stretching out her arms like a Christian martyr to halt Ralph and Algae just as the secret panel began sliding back into place, interring Daphne on the other side of the wall. "If we all go in together, how do we get out again?"

In answer to this apposite question, the panel slid open, then closed, then open again as if by its own volition; to reveal the magician's happy smiling face.

"There's a pressure plate under the floor on this side," Daphne explained. "Like they have in the big department stores in Cambridge. All you have to do is stand in the right place and say 'open sesame' and the door slides back."

"So why don't you have one on this side as well?" asked Algae. "Save you having to commit acts of gross indecency."

"Where's the fun in that?" Daphne moaned. "Are you sure you went to a grammar school, Algae? They didn't teach you very much about girls."

"It was a grammar school for boys. But there were plenty of illustrations in the biology textbooks to show us how a girl works."

"I'll bet you tore out the pages and studied all night."

Darkness reigned inside the secret passageway, until Daphne took a torch from the wall - wrapped in cloth and pitch, and doused in a flammable spirit - and lit it with a match. She led the descent down the spiralling stairway, pausing every now and again to turn on a gas tap and ignite a brazier fixed to the wall.

"Isn't it amazing how gas fires look so real these days," she commented, as one quickly fired up and glowed smugly for the benefit of mankind.

"Last night, these braziers were already lit," Jenny disclosed, in a whisper to Ralph. "In my dream, that is," she emphasised for clarity.

"Was I in this dream by any chance?" he probed warily.

"Oh yes," she lied wistfully. "You were incredibly brave. You rescued me from the terrible creatures down there and carried me up these steps in your arms."

"That's funny, I don't usually do mindless heroics just to get the girl. Are you sure it wasn't a loser like Algae?"

"No, it was definitely you," she insisted.

"Hmm. I must be losing my moody, selfish, adolescent ego-centrism," he grumbled. "A sure sign of ageing. I hope my hair doesn't start falling out soon."

The way down seemed interminable, and Ralph began to regret his criticism of less traditional, but more easily accessible, upper floor dungeons. With the heavy tripod on one shoulder, and Jenny clinging on to his other arm like a slinky nine-stone ten-pound leech, it was quite a struggle just to keep his balance. The torches that Daphne lit provided just sufficient light to illuminate the steps ahead and cast a series of eerie shadows on the curving walls, which stalked them as they passed.

"Why is there a passageway from your bedroom leading all the way down here, Daphne?" Algae inquired. "A strange feature to build in the days before the robber barons started letting the public into their castles, don't you think?"

"Blame the architect. Maybe he was thinking of the revenue

we'd get from American tourists and the strong dollar. You know how much they like to see distorted versions of history."

"But this was built long before the invention of Hollywood, or the American tourist, or the strong dollar. How was he to know what sort of history they'd want to see?"

"Maybe he was a man of vision."

"Even so, there must be another way in. I don't believe Lord Helmet would have allowed smelly prisoners to traipse through his house with muddy feet."

"Didn't you see the mat laid outside the front door?" she replied truculently. "It said: WIPE YOUR FEET!"

"But when was the first WIPE YOUR FEET! mat invented?" Algae continued to argue pedantically. "It's just the sort of sugary-twee-domestic-thing those nice respectable middle-class Victorians would have designed for their parlours. Like HOME, SWEET HOME or NO DOGS, NO BLACKS, NO IRISH."

Daphne sighed, as if tiring of the banter. "Algae, if you really love me, you'll go upstairs now, find my pet spider, and put him back in his fish tank," she suggested patiently. "But please be gentle with him, he's still got all eight legs and that's the way I like him. And mind he doesn't bite you - we don't want him getting food poisoning. There's only one lecturer in the university vet school who knows how to treat arachnids and I haven't slept with him yet."

"Maybe later. First I want to see what you've got in this dungeon," Algae insisted, as the stone steps terminated and they found themselves on a flat, concrete floor.

The way ahead was blocked by a single heavy oak panel in an arched doorway. Not as large as Jenny remembered from her dream, but still formidable in appearance nonetheless.

"This is all much smaller than it seemed last night," she recalled, somewhat puzzled by the transformation in scale. "I felt like a Lilliputian then from Dean Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)."

"You're just like *Oliver Twist* (1838) when he grew older and

returned to the orphanage,” observed Daphne, as if charmed by such nostalgia. “A similar thing happened to me when I went back to visit my old prep school. My bum must have spread enormously, it just wouldn’t fit in the classroom chairs anymore.”

On a plaque fixed to the wall beside the portal, a series of letters inscribed in blood red paint read:

**ABANDON HOPE,
ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE:**

“That was there last night,” Jenny recalled. “But do you really think it should end in a colon?”

“Why not? It’s referring to what follows,” Daphne stipulated.

“But there’s no more text.”

“There’s the unknown. The uncertainty of entering into the dark and treacherous domain beyond the door.”

“You’re good, Daphne,” Ralph chuckled. “Really scary. You could find work in summer camps and theme parks.”

“I hate children. Having to put up with Algae’s retarded ego is enough for me,” she scowled.

“If you hate children so much, why do you audition for pantomimes every festive season?”

“Because no one ever asked me to play Ophelia at that time of year.”

“Is it safe to go in?” Algae pondered meekly, as if put off by the implications of the sign. “The old place seems to be cursed.”

“Like in *Eyes of the Mummy* (1918),” Ralph, the keen amateur film critic, recalled with some enthusiasm. “Those cursed mummy tombs are usually guarded by a big fellow in bandages, who’s been dead for over three thousand years; but who creeps out of his sarcophagus at night and chases the archaeologists through the woods for daring to disturb him.”

“I didn’t realise they had any woods in Egypt. It’s all camels, desert, and pyramids in the postcards.”

"They get chased after they bring the sarcophagus home to a museum in Europe or America."

"But after three thousand years in the same position, he'd be a bit stiff. You wouldn't think he could run fast enough to catch an archaeologist; or even the nubile young assistant who keeps falling over and just lies there screaming helplessly until she gets grabbed and groped. How does he avoid snagging his bandages or tripping over the tree roots?"

"There's no such thing as a walking mummy," the ever sceptical Daphne assured them.

"Tell that to Howard Carter. He's out there now, digging up the desert in search of King Tut," Ralph disclosed.

"He won't find anything, not after all this time. Tomb raiders will have taken it all."

"But what if he does? Someone ought to warn him about the grisly fates suffered by previous tomb robbers down the ages. It's all in the hieroglyphs."

"He's an Egyptologist, he can read the hieroglyphs for himself," Daphne stated bluntly. "Those other tomb robbers breathed some foul-smelling Egyptian air, hermetically sealed in a tomb for centuries. We keep this place well ventilated, and we have flush toilets you can put the paper down."

"Then why put a warning sign up there?" queried Algae.

"To titillate the more gullible visitors into thinking they're getting their money's worth. You disappoint me, Algae. You can't act, you can't sing, you can't even stage manage. What can you do?"

"I can write a folio of romantic prescriptions for designer drugs," he proposed. "At least, I will be able to in three and a half years time."

"Romance is dead, this is the age of modernity. Women want men with visions for the twentieth century - men who can build skyscrapers and ocean liners."

"Daphne's into phallic symbols," Ralph smirked. "She sees them everywhere."

"Can you build a skyscraper, Algae?"

"Not all by myself," he confessed meekly.

"No wonder you haven't got a girlfriend."

"I haven't got a girlfriend because you won't have me," he protested.

"Don't try putting the blame on me. Women don't like to feel bad about themselves."

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad - I just don't want there to be any misunderstandings or regrets when we look back at memories - of the times we left behind - misty, watercoloured memories of the way we were."

"Women like misunderstandings - that's why we never tell you what we want, what we really really want - until we change our minds and get you in court."

"Then how am I supposed to know?"

"I'll let you know when you've made some money and I've slept with the right lawyer," she teased, clearly amused by his confusion. "In the meantime, you'll just have to be patient and exercise extreme caution around me. Don't forget - stalking's a crime. You're in life's most treacherous minefield and you can't afford to put a foot wrong - unless you want to lose your right to liberty, career, and life thereafter, through my cleverly calculated manipulation of the criminal justice system."

"Don't listen to her - she's just a girl. You should probe around with your bayonet and set off a few loud bangs!" Ralph urged devilishly.

"And risk being litigiously, judicially, or otherwise emasculated?" gulped Algae, daunted by the many risks attached to Ralph's cavalier philosophy.

"If you can't stand the heat, Algae, you can always become a eunuch - and lift that sinful curse God has put on your skin," Daphne suggested. "It's a very straight-forward operation and you'll wake up with no interest in me whatsoever. I'll just be one more stupid girl who thinks with her tits. And in court, you'll have the perfect alibi."

"You don't mean that much to me," he assured her. "My car and my furry dice come first."

"I can see the attraction of the car, but what good are those

dangly things to you? You never get a chance to use them.”

“They’re my closest companions,” he insisted passionately. “We’ve grown up together.”

“You make them sound like children,” sniggered Daph.

“They’re much more important than children!” Ralph vouched earnestly. “Childless couples can always adopt, but you can’t take on another man’s *cajones*. Not yet anyway.”

Daphne twisted and pulled a rusty old iron ring on the heavy door. The hinges creaked and groaned in protest at first, but then the wood began to move; slowly widening, as did their eyes, with the anticipation of greedy tomb raiders.

They walked through the portal into the forbidding tomb in search of a sarcophagus of gold and a dose of Egyptian flu. The reality was somewhat more spectacular. Standing on the same elevated platform which Jenny had encountered in her dream, they gazed down on what looked like a ghastly set of exhibits from a black museum, set out at intervals on a large floor space below.

Daphne led them down the wooden scaffold steps and began to conduct a tour, using the light from her burning torch to illuminate key aspects of each exhibit in turn. She began with a wax figure of a young woman standing on brushwood, chained to a stake, serenely clutching a candle and looking skyward as if to heaven.

“So who do you think this could be?” she prompted them, like a teacher on a visit with her delinquent primary school class.

“No Smoking?” Jenny proposed, reading a caption at the feet of the unfortunate maid.

“Jeanne d’Arc [1412-1431],” Ralph answered smugly, like a girlie swat. “French terrorist and religious fanatic.”

“Very good,” Daphne conceded, in a mildly patronising tone. “Moving on, we have Marie Antoinette, not looking her best for Madam Guillotine.”

The torch lit up the body of a grey haired woman in a tattered white dress and humble shawl, strapped to a guillotine bench, her neck trapped by a split board with the

blade ready to drop.

"This is what'll happen to us when Algae's Fabian friends get into power," Ralph joked.

"Algae doesn't have any friends," she pointed out. "Fabian or otherwise."

"He's got us," Ralph insisted charitably.

"That's only because we're kind and take pity on him, like benevolent benefactors giving shelter to an orphan in a storm. He's just not made of the right stuff for an elite institution like Cambridge. He should have gone to a redbrick university with the other tradesmen's sons."

"Joe Chamberlain did once offer me a scholarship to study medicine at Brum," Algae revealed, as if reflecting on his choice to stay at Cambridge with some regret. "I was thinking of transferring, but then the Angel Gabriel appeared to me and said that God had a purpose for Daphne. He said I should stick by her and await developments, even though I thought she was a slut who'd been with other men."

Ralph and Daphne exchanged a serenely earnest glance. She grabbed Marie Antoinette's shawl and used it as a chaste biblical headscarf draped over her hair. Ralph put a protective hand over her womb, which she clasped tightly like a prospective mother posing for a Dutch Master.

"You don't mean - immaculate conception?" she gasped.

Algae shrugged. "The Lord moves in mysterious ways."

"Joseph Chamberlain has been dead for six years," Jenny butted-in.

"Sounds like Algae's been telling fibs," Daphne concluded, pulling the scarf from her head like a weary air-raid warden after the all-clear had been sounded.

"Not exactly. I saw it all happen in my sleep," he confessed. "Strange dreams occur when you're in love with the wrong woman. Conflict leads to neurosis - everyone knows that."

"Thank God that's all it was," she sighed. "I haven't had a fright like that since the first time they told me I'll burn in hell for being such an evil child. If there's one thing that appeals to me even less than motherhood - or burning in hell - it's

virginal motherhood."

"She doesn't want children," Ralph whispered to Algae. "Better factor it into the plan."

"What plan?" he wondered.

"The monogamy thing you're working on. I couldn't stand it myself - sex with the same woman for the next forty years - I think I'd rather join a monastery."

"Over here, we have a genuine gibbet that last saw a gig at Tyburn," Daphne announced, moving them away from the subject of the human life-cycle and on to the next ghastly exhibit. "*The black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death*; as graphically described by Dickens, the former crime reporter, in his first novel; and which jolly John Winthrop's *Citty upon a Hill* prescribed for thieves, liars, and fornicators - long before the advent and demise of the American liberal. But we couldn't decide on a really deserving historical victim that everyone would recognise and appreciate, so we turned to popular literature instead."

A peasant girl in a medieval gown hung from the gibbet, while a grotesque and deformed character in a liripipe crouched on one knee before her. His head was turned so that his accusing gaze projected over his shoulder at those who were intruding upon his grief.

Jenny was disturbed by the intense stare that bored into her eyes and she took Ralph's arm for reassurance. "Why are all the victims female?" she asked, as if piqued by such a blatant exercise in sexual exploitation.

"And French?" Algae noted in surprise. "What was wrong with Dick Turpin? He robbed people at gun point - and he must have rode past here on his way to York."

Daphne shrugged. "Father's preferred choices. Women like them too. We all fantasise about being a tragic French heroine in a novel or a play."

"These wax dummies are similar to the ones they have at Madame Tussauds in London," Algae noted.

"We don't just have wax dummies down here," Daphne declared, glancing tendentiously at Algae as she led them

along the tour route.

"What else do you have?" asked Jenny, eyes wide as if disturbed by the exhibits. "I didn't see any of this last night - it was all too misty and foggy."

"You'll find out."

"Oh my God!" Ralph cried, suddenly finding himself face to face with a grinning, semi-decomposed, mummified man in an iron mask; with bloodshot eyes staring eagerly through the bars of an iron cage suspended from the ceiling as though still yearning to breathe free. "Who's this fellow here? A Jehovah's witness who refused to go home?"

"I'm not sure about him, he must be new," the tour-guide presumed, circling the exhibit for some clues to its origin. "He hasn't got a caption yet - he could be Alexander Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1846)."

She pulled a high tension lever on the wall and the air was immediately rent with the sound of electric sizzle. The three intrepid weekend guests wisely stepped back from a shower of inductive sparks that threatened to set their hair on fire. But these were merely the transitory effects of bad wiring, and within a few seconds the dungeon was bathed in sterile white light, like an operating theatre.

"There, that's better. Now we can all see what we are doing," Daphne announced to her class.

"It's too bright!" Jenny complained, shielding her eyes from the floodlights.

"It does spoil the ambience a bit," Algae professed. "Now it's all slightly immodest. Surely most visitors prefer the shadows to skulk around in."

"The engineers need bright light to carry out essential maintenance," Daphne explained.

"Engineers?" queried Jenny.

"Maintenance?" queried Algae.

"There are some very complex and delicate pieces of kit down here," she revealed, gesturing to a few of the rusty old contraptions. "Take the iron maiden, for instance. If the hinges aren't kept well-oiled, the door might stick rather than

snap tight shut. Or the electric chair could short-circuit and give you a nasty shock if it's not earthed properly. Then there's the guillotine, which has to be kept sharp for a close shave or someone might cut themselves. And as for the rack; there are over two dozen moving parts there that need to pass annual inspection by the Ministry."

"Ministry? What Ministry?" asked Jenny.

"H.M. Ministry of Fairground Inspection. We can't let the public ride on this stuff if it's not safe."

"Ride on it?" Jenny exclaimed in horror. "This isn't a fair-ground, it's a black museum! A terrible testament to man's inhumanity to man!"

"Fashions may change, but people are basically the same sadistic torturers in the workplace that they've always been."

"But it's all so hideously old - from the dark times in human history, before the age of reason."

"Actually, some of it is quite modern. One of my canny ancestors rode with the Scarlet Pimpernel and stole this guillotine from under the Gallic nose of Robespierre."

"*The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) was a class-biased work of propagandist fiction by Baroness Orczy," Algae pointed out. "You don't think those radical French revolutionaries would have been that stupid in real life? They had Laplace and Fourier working for them."

"Historical fiction is based on fact. Emmusca Orczy got the idea after spending a weekend here, where she heard all about the exploits of drunken twit Sir Percy Wulfmarch, who secretly spent his weekends rescuing aristocrats from the blade."

"Curious choice of subject for a novel by a woman in 1905," Jenny mused. "She must be fairly unique in the anthology of English literature - if you don't count Mary Shelley."

"There's Daphne du Maurier," cited Algae. "She can be creepy and macabre at times - just like our Daph."

"She doesn't count - she's a dike."

"What about Virginia Woolf? She scares the fellows at Cambridge."

"She's a mad dike."

"Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" scoffed Ralph.

"You wouldn't say that if she were here now," Jenny assured him.

Daphne continued to brief them on the ghastly creations of the modern era in her collection. "Father acquired the electric chair from Sing Sing prison in a cash and carry deal during the war. It was shipped over on the *Lusitania* in May 1915."

With a sceptical hand, Jenny touch one of the solid arms of the chair, rubbing her fingers along the smooth grain of the blackened wood while doubting its authenticity. "That can't be right either. *Lusitania* was sunk off the coast of Ireland in May 1915."

"So it was," Daphne confirmed. "But Old Sparky was washed ashore with the flotsam and the invoice still pinned to the seat. The beachcombing pikeys who were out robbing the dead had no use for it; so they had it delivered it to us - for an extra shipping fee, of course. They say its timbers are possessed by the angry spirits of men - bad men - fried to a crisp using the Mayor of New York's very own special zero-tolerance recipe, giving the wood an unnatural buoyancy in sea water. I'll bet Algae can even write out an equation for the chemical reaction - and balance it too. Something I could never do, my tits always got in the way."

"Daphne!" Jenny chided.

"What about the fried spirits of the innocent men?" asked Algae, his heart bleeding for the miscarriages of justice.

"They're angry too - for being framed by the New York Police Department."

Jenny lifted her hand from the arm of the chair in alarm, fearful of forming a psychic link with the angry spirits of the bad men, dwelling deep within the old timber.

"It has a very unusual smell," Daphne proposed, leaning forward to sniff the air above the seat. "Like pork scratchings."

"If this place is so well maintained for the public, why does it have so many cobwebs and creaky door hinges?" asked

Algae, with his usual pedantic scepticism.

"Algae, has anyone ever told you that you have the dramatic flair of an amoeba?" Daphne sighed. "No wonder nobody wants you in their shows."

"What's wrong with amoebas?" Algae retorted, with hurt pride. "They're protean and mercurial - just like the actors I read about in all the best revues."

"Yes, but they haven't got the brains to build a set," Daphne declared, lifting a spray can from a shelf and covering him in a fake cobweb. "Make-believe. What theatre is all about. At least it was before the current craze for agitprop and epic theatre. God, I hate didactic writers! You should become a critic, Algae. You've got just about the right amount of imagination."

"Steady on, Daphne - this time you're going a bit too far," Ralph warned. "Algae would be a terrible critic."

"What about him?" Jenny scowled, directing their attention back to the corpse in the cage.

"He'd be a good critic," Ralph presumed, looking closely at the stiff, unsmiling features. "He's brain-dead. You can tell that just by looking him."

"I meant what toy shop did he come from?" Jenny demanded to know. "He looks like the real thing."

Daphne gave a nonchalant shrug. "He must have got locked in last month. The season ends in September when the school term begins. Anyone left down here after that would have to wait until we opened up again in the spring."

"You mean this is like *The Premature Burial* (1850)?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Jenny had a vision of herself in peril yet again. This time being lowered into the ground in a coffin whilst beating frantically on the lid and screaming "I'm alive!" - all to no avail - the sound of her pummelling fists drowned out by a sombre elegiac hymn being chanted by dark, satanic monks in black hoods. She swooned at the prospect of such a macabre fate. Fortunately, Ralph had just put his camera down to give his arms a rest, and was in a position to catch her from

behind.

"Won't he be missed?" asked Ralph, as he held Jenny up by the armpits.

"Who'd think to look for him down here in the dungeon of a respectable family home?"

"Shouldn't you at least give him a decent burial?"

"Can't do that, he's part of the collection now."

"Collection? What collection? Don't tell me you keep things in jars!"

"Look behind you."

Ralph warily shuffled round on his heels while still supporting Jenny. Unfortunately, she began to regain consciousness at that precise moment and opened her eyes to see a dozen or so bleached skeletons chained up to posts, walls, and each other, in various imaginative configurations. The sight was just too much for her fragile constitution and she promptly slumped into oblivion again.

"Daphne, this is outrageous!" Ralph declared, genuinely shocked by the sight of a skeletal pair locked together in a compromising embrace.

"Oh? I think it's all rather sweet," she confessed. "Haven't you read the ending to *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831)? How would you spend your last hours on earth?"

"As a historical novel, *Notre Dame* was judged to be far too melodramatic by contemporary critics," Algae informed them sagely.

"Which is why it became a bestseller," Daphne affirmed, giving Esmeralda a spiteful shove to set her swinging like the pendulum of a macabre clock, and earning instant reproof from Quasimodo's dagger stare. "Never underestimate public taste. The tragic ending may resonate here, in real life, when that old witch unleashes her terrible curse on our frail mortal coils later this evening."

"You said she was just an old crank," Algae recalled.

"So she is - but the power of suggestion carries great influence in primitive societies and may even affect superior people like us in an electrifying sort of away," Daphne hinted,

relieving Ralph of the unconscious Jenny and strapping her into the chair. "If I were you, Algae, I'd be taking copious notes and observing events very carefully for my end of term research paper. You'll never get the chance to repeat an experiment like this. Not even with a bunch of loony hippy film-students in California."

"What's a hippy?"

"Hypocrite - remember?"

"Oh yeah - man."

"But what if they're recognised in the spring? Last acts are no excuse for lax morals," Ralph pontificated, over the skeletal amours. "Think of the scandal. What will their families say?"

"I can take a bit of moralising from the Pope; but coming from a brigand like you, Ralph, it sounds a bit rich," Daphne complained. "You've got all the makings of a tabloid editor."

"Is that worse than being a politician or a theatre critic?" he wondered.

"A lot worse. *There are lies, damned lies, and [circulation] statistics.*"

Algae took a step forward for a closer look at the offending couple. "Judging from the state of these bones, I'd say the families are long passed caring about anything," he observed, with a forensic frown.

"There you go again," groaned Daphne. "Spoiling everything. Your mother must have really hated Christmas, Algae. What's the point of having children who don't believe in Santa Claus?"

"My mother is Jewish," Algae revealed.

"Your heathen upbringing has got a lot to answer for," she decided. "Ralph, if you want to film a ghost, this is probably the best place to do it. But strangely enough, Luca's spirit has never actually been seen down here. He only seems to visit the bedrooms of hysterical young women on erotic flights of fancy, fuelled by gushing hormones that burst the dam walls in their sleep after reading *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and juxtaposing the plot, in their subconscious, with the story of

Luca and Lavinia. You've no idea how terribly repressed those well-bred young women of the nineteenth century were before Freud, the phonograph, and moving pictures."

Ralph recoiled slightly at the thought of filming in these creepy mausoleum-like surrounds. "It's all rather ghoulish down here. I'm not so sure about the ethics of photography in a place like this."

"Wot!?" Daphne exclaimed haughtily. "You have no ethical misgivings about filming the spiritual image of a dead person, i.e. a ghost. But you have qualms about filming in a place where the remains of dead people lie because of the presence of those mortal remains."

"Something like that," Ralph conceded.

"Well, well," she grinned, like a supercilious trial lawyer who was trying to show the jury how clever she could be. "How do you reconcile that?"

"A subconscious belief that ghosts are not really dead, whereas we all know that the bones are," Algae suggested.

"In other words, you're seeking the comfort of an afterlife through photographic evidence; like those mystic people who go to church on Sunday mornings when they could stay in bed nursing a hangover, or get up and go fishing?"

"What if I am?" Ralph countered. "You should learn to respect the religious beliefs of other people, Daphne; no matter how ridiculous they may seem to you."

"Does that include the one where they string me up in the market square for acts incompatible with chastity, or beat the soles of my feet for not wearing a veil?"

"Precisely!" Ralph concurred. "Some women look better covered up anyway. In fact, as a proportion of the whole population, most women do. That's why they spend so much money on make-up. In medieval theocratic dictatorships, they can't afford the cosmetics bill so they choose the veil instead."

"But not all of us. Especially not the tanned, athletic, five foot nine inch 18-25s who are only just slightly overweight for the Royal Ballet on account of our breasts. Admit it, Ralph, you're a nonconformist, just like me. We're two of a kind."

You wouldn't last five minutes outside the protection of a secular state. You'd be hung from a crane or burnt at the stake for a blasphemous slip of the quill. Tramps like us, baby we were born to run. As for making movies - forget it. They're idolatrous."

"I still don't like the idea of filming in here."

"Historical film collections are full of dead people. What's more important? A set of old bones or the future of your art? If you succeed in photographing a real and verifiable ghost, the US Library of Congress will buy and preserve your film, and pay top dollar for it too - and you're a Cambridge man so you'll be made a member of the Royal Society straight away. And like all great artists - you'll be rich and famous long after you're dead."

"I'd rather be rich and famous now - when I can still spend the money," Ralph confessed bluntly.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way, unless ..."
Daphne paused to cogitate while examining one side of his handsome profile then the other.

"Unless what?" asked Ralph, his curiosity pricked.

"Have you ever thought about being in the movies yourself? The way you look could be in vogue," she hummed.

"Photography isn't art," Algae scoffed. "It isn't even a craft. All you do is point, shoot and wait for the thing to come. You can do that in a brothel."

"But not quite in that order," Jenny advised, as she came round again, then immediately blushed at the worldly observation she had just made. She tried to get up but was held in the chair by wrist and ankle straps.

"Watch this," Daphne chuckled, throwing a high tension lever.

Jenny arched her back and opened her mouth in a stifled scream as her body and limbs convulsed in violent spasms. Smoke began streaming out through the ventilation holes in her trendy baseball cap and the smell of burning hair filled the air.

"See what the power of suggestion can do. She's getting no

more juice than she would from a medium-powered cattle prod.”

Algae and Ralph glanced at each other in alarm at this gratuitous, senseless violence which was entirely unnecessary to the plot and would never get have got passed the script censor had Ralph known in advance and sought Home Office permission to film it. Algae reached out to pull Daphne’s hand away from the lever, allowing Ralph to safely release the stunned Jenny and help her up onto a very unsteady pair of feet.

“That was incredibly dangerous!” Algae chided.

“Psychiatrists do it all the time,” she protested.

“This chair is designed to execute people, not cure them of a personality disorder.”

“It’s only dangerous if you use AC. Haven’t you seen the film of Thomas Edison zapping Topsy the elephant on Coney Island with AC from the power station?”

“That’s not as sickening as what they did to Mary the elephant in Tennessee,” Ralph recalled ruefully. “Americans are almost as cruel to elephants as they are to black people.”

“Unlike us, we’re using the much safer DC system here,” she explained, holding up a sinister-looking black box with cables leading in and out.

“Photography is not as simple as everyone thinks,” Ralph calmly remarked to Algae, as a stunned Jenny groaned and rubbed her temples whilst leaning against him for much-needed physical and emotional support after the dreadful shock of an electric current surging through the perspiring skin which covered her lithe, conductive body. “You’ve got to consider light, texture, composition, and some other things. There are more than just three words to learn on a photography course.”

Daphne took one of Ralph’s muscular arms and stroked his cheek, together with his ego. “I hate negative people,” she whispered in his ear. “I think you’re a great artist. You could be a great movie star as well - what the French would call *un auteur*.”

Jenny soon recovered her wits and realised what was going on, or rather, what was taking place. She immediately fastened herself onto Ralph's other arm and began bidding for his attention.

"Ralph, I'm feeling tired and need to lie down for a while. I think my hair has turned frizzy, which won't be fashionable for decades," she scowled, raising her cap and pulling the crooked strands of her fringe to try and straighten them out. "Would you take me back up to my room?"

"In a moment, Jenny. Daphne was just saying some interesting things about my art."

"Now!" She insisted urgently.

"But I haven't set up my equipment yet."

"Now!!" she demanded, giving the arm a possessive tug to enforce the point. "All art is quite useless," she pouted aggressively in Daphne's face.

"That's pure affectation," Daphne replied.

"I like what you're saying, Daphne. We can talk some more when I get back," Ralph assured her.

Algae's investigative spirit, meanwhile, had drawn him away from the other three; but he was still within earshot of developments. He spoke to them from the remote shadowy corner he'd wandered into.

"You can't leave me alone down here with Daphne - she could accuse me of anything - get me expelled from university, destroy my future career, and have me sent to jail to be brutalised by men with learning difficulties."

"Algae, you're paranoid," Jenny diagnosed astutely. "Don't you know that women are much more scared of you than you are of them?"

"I know they pretend to be - it's a form of insult, like handing out white feathers in *The Four Feathers* (1902)."

"I thought you enjoyed *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782)," Ralph joked, disengaging an arm from one clinging feline before taking that of a slinkier one and turning to depart. "You've spent plenty of time alone with her before."

"When both our lives were imperilled. There's no mutual

threat at the moment to draw her fire away from me.”

“There’s the curse of the old witch.”

“She doesn’t believe in curses - she thinks everything that happens is just a coincidence. Suppose we swap? I’ll go with Jenny and you can stay here with Daphne. Americans call it swinging.”

“I’m not a swinger!” Jenny barked, as if familiar with the practice and all its pitfalls. “Sorry, Algae - you’d have to be a ten for me to even consider it.”

“If you can’t take a bit of female heat, Algae, you shouldn’t be in life’s kitchen,” Ralph advised. “Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Don’t do anything I would do either. Think of her as a dangerous snake that needs handling with care. Just keep her charmed for twenty minutes, that’s all I ask. Twenty minutes, Algae! Don’t forget - I’m depending on you.”

Ralph winked surreptitiously at the shadowy corner where his friend was hiding before walking away up the stairs, leaving the vulnerable Algae to his fate at the hands of an irate mink with razor sharp teeth and nothing to sink them into.

“Daphne, what is this over here?” Algae inquired from his seclusion, as if he had suddenly made a remarkable discovery. “It looks like another door.”

“That could be because it is another door,” she confirmed, with surprising forbearance, her manic expression fixed on the departing couple as they vanished from sight; leaving her like a marooned sailor on a beach, watching a sail dipping below the horizon.

“What is it for?” asked Algae.

“Doors let people walk through walls without banging into the bricks. What the hell do you think it’s for, you idiot?”

Algae manfully ignored the sharp retort and persisted stoically. “But where does it lead?”

“Up to the courtyard and out to the gardens,” she revealed, turning to face him with head tilted slightly and clenched fists held defiantly at her sides, as if he had already made an improper suggestion. “But if you think I’m going for an afternoon stroll among the roses with you, think again. I’m not

that sort of a girl."

"I thought that was part of the tour?"

"You shouldn't think, Algae, you're just a fungus. When did you start to think about anything?"

"I had to think about my eleven plus exam to get into grammar school, but then I was only ten. And then there were the scholarship tests for Cambridge. I had to think quite a lot about those. But most of the time, I just think about you," he confessed. "Even in my sleep."

"That's interesting," she remarked, raising her eyebrows and wandering towards him, as if he had just pricked her vanity. "Are you saying that you've dreamt about me more than once?"

"Yes. And not just as the Virgin Mary. You're different when I'm asleep. More personable and approachable - a real human being, rather than a cruel and spiteful mannequin. We talk and discuss things for hours, like friends who share a common set of interests."

"Hmm. I thought dreams were only supposed to last a few minutes," she grunted. "You should talk to Jenny, she dreams about people too. Unfortunately, I never think about you at all, Algae, unless someone holds decomposing pond weed under my nose."

"You remind me of Estella from *Great Expectations* (1861)," he revealed. "She wasn't really a bad person, it was just the way she was brought up."

"Then you must know that Pip never got his leg over."

"Actually, the ending was a bit ambiguous," Algae decided, with considerable optimism. "There was the hint of a future relationship. But everyone knows that novel was about aspiration rather than achievement."

"How can any woman love a man who reads such girlie books?" she scoffed. "Women want strong providers with a stiff rod and a good gene pool; not pipsqueaks and delusional dreamers who can't even get through a decent crime thriller."

"How can you be so sure you know what other women want?" asked Algae, curious about the extent of homogeneity

in the female psyche.

"A lifestyle bitch on the wireless told me."

"She must have studied you a lot longer than I have."

"Or maybe she's just a better researcher. You have to be good to get a job with the BBC - good looking, that is."

Algae was more concerned with trying to open the door he had discovered to the secret garden than worrying too much about Daphne's poor opinion of his research abilities, or his taste in literature, or his feeble gene pool. He gripped hold of the iron ring which served as a handle, twisted it, and gave it a good hard tug. When the door wouldn't budge, he tried heaving with both hands, thinking the genes in his arms had just not evolved sufficiently for the task.

"That's a shame, it won't move," he finally conceded, after giving it his best effort.

"That's hardly surprising. It's been locked since the summer season ended," Daphne revealed.

"Why didn't you say so - and save me from a rupture?" he groaned, turning his back on her and slipping his fingers down his trousers to massage a groin strain.

"I better go and join the others before they realise they've left me alone down here with you and start to worry."

"Ralph won't be worried. He knows I did snake handling in a zoo to get work experience," Algae revealed, bending over with his hands on his knees and sucking in air through his front teeth to ease the acute discomfort. "That's why he used the metaphor - he's not usually so imaginative."

"It's not you he'll be worried about," she growled. "You're not the woman feeling threatened by a strange man."

Algae straightened up as Daphne marched away. "I'm not a stranger!" he called out after her. "We've known each other for years."

This halted her briefly. "I didn't say you were a stranger - I said you were strange! Your eyes give you away."

Algae looked cross-eyed down his nose for a brief second, then stared ahead in a futile attempt to straighten out his deviant expression.

“Before you go,” he called out again, desperate to detain her for Ralph’s sake, “I just want to say that I think you are amazingly intelligent and incredibly good looking; and that I’m in love with you - and have been almost since the day we first met.”

This startling revelation gave Daphne pause for thought. “That’s so sweet of you, Algae. But Ralph did say you should keep me charmed for at least twenty minutes - so what are you going to do for the next nineteen?”

Algae wasn’t sure what else to say as Daphne smiled mischievously, walked over to a workbench, and began untwirling a well-oiled vice with her finger.

“Why don’t you prove your love for me?”

CHAPTER TEN

Ascending the stone steps seemed to exhaust Jenny's gentle constitution. So much so that she collapsed in Ralph's arms and was content to be carried over the threshold into the bedroom like a newlywed. He stood over the bed, which was beautifully bathed in sunshine; but rather than lay her down gently, as a tender prince would, he let her drop from about two feet above the mattress. Jenny bounced on impact and squealed indignantly.

"Sorry, my back gave way," he insisted, arching his spine and rubbing his lumbar vertebrae; though the apology seemed lacking in sincerity and so was not entirely convincing.

Unperturbed, she undid the top button of her skirt, complaining that the garment was too tight; then laid on her side, head propped up on one elbow, with her legs extended and ankles crossed. She provocatively teased down the zipper, granting him a glimpse of her white silk panties and the tanned flesh of her thigh.

Ralph put one knee on the edge of the bed and leaned forward, as if enticed by the bait. But just as their lips should have touched, and arced, and sizzled passionately; he suddenly drew back, stood up, folded his arms and frowned like a disapproving pedagogue.

"What's wrong with you today?" he motioned sternly. "Daphne has been a wonderful hostess so far this weekend and all you can do is act like a spoilt little girl who thinks that someone else is trying to steal the limelight on her birthday."

"Wonderful hostess, my fanny!" Jenny countered. "She

can't keep her hands off you!"

"It's not what you think," he insisted, reaching for some well-founded Jazz Age psychology to support his partial interpretation of events. "Daphne has had a very unusual upbringing for a girl. She thinks she's one of the boys and likes to do all the things that men do."

"So why can't she be one of the boys with Algae? He's a boy too, isn't he?"

"Algae is a fine fellow, but he's blinded by romantic delusions about women. He hasn't woken up to what they're really like yet, and he's definitely not ready for a manipulative bitch like Daphne. Talk about fishing for mackerel and hooking a marlin. He's just a yearling trying to tame a wild mustang."

"I thought Algae didn't like horses?"

"Which is why he doesn't know how to handle Daphne's reins. He's never been to a riding school. Where he comes from, the only horse for miles around belongs to the local rag-and-bone man."

"And you have, I suppose?"

"I spent a month in a cavalry regiment before it mechanized and the horses were shipped off to a French canning factory. Those army instructors teach you a thing or two about breaking in a wilful mare."

"A month doesn't sound like very much time to me," she noted, with some scepticism.

"Long enough for all the young nags to have PMT," he insisted. "Daphne's had a hard time living up to the macho expectations of her father; and so naturally she's drawn to a rough, tough, 'give-em-a-good-slap' sort of bastard like me."

"Crap!" Jenny retorted angrily. "My old man used to send me out barefoot to sell matches on cobble streets too, y'know, but it didn't turn me into a man-hungry tart."

"More's the pity," Ralph murmured.

"What did you say?"

"Face it, Jenny, there's something about you that just isn't quite right," he insisted, like a detective pondering over the

facts of a difficult case.

"Oh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, but at least Daphne's got spunk and balls."

"Spunk and balls?" Jenny cried out in disgust, leaping up to check one side of her gorgeous figure in a full length mirror and then the other.

"You're just too perfect," he proposed, taking her wrist and raising the arm to reveal a smooth, clean-shaven arm-pit. "I'll bet Daphne's hairy as a monkey there. She was already starting to sprout when she was ten."

"You've spent far too much time on the Continent," Jenny surmised in disgust. "So has Daphne if she hasn't learned to use a razor."

"Those hairy Parisian women kept us warm on many a cold winter's night on leave," he sighed wistfully. "If I'd had one of those at Eton I wouldn't have had to snuggle up to Anthony Eden when they turned off the heating."

"So it's true what they've been saying all these years about lights-out in the public-school dormitories," she deduced in dismay, sitting down on the edge of the bed and folding her arms defensively.

"Of course it's not true. Our house master expected us to be upstanding for him at all times or our buttocks were soundly whipped with boot laces."

"That's what I was afraid of," she groaned. "And Algae? Was he upstanding too?"

Ralph laughed. "Algae didn't go to Eton, he went to a state-run grammar-school. He managed to sneak his way into Cambridge on a scholarship, but he's got no character or breeding. You can tell that just by looking at him."

"I can't," she replied bluntly, lying down on the bed and resting her forlorn cheek on a pillow. "I'm not that superficial."

"There you go again, revelling in your ignorance of the real world as if it were a virtue. You're just a goldfish, swimming in a choppy sea of hungry sharks."

"A goldfish?" she scowled, puffing her cheeks angrily and

sitting up to reach for a handheld mirror.

"Daphne, on the other hand, is more like a deadly, silver-flashing barracuda; with an endless gleaming row of brilliant, dazzling-white, razor-sharp teeth," he added, with a tactless hint of admiration.

"There's nothing wrong with my teeth," Jenny insisted, flashing a pearly smile. "I go to the best American dentist in London. Now get out of my room, you bastard!" she yelled, and began throwing anything at hand in his direction. First the mirror, then the pillows, and finally she reached up to a bookshelf for some original and rare Old English chronicles; handwritten and handsewn by a monastic bunch of Daphne's Anglo-Saxon ancestors; which had simply gathered dust and gone unnoticed among the crime thrillers for the past twelve centuries.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You pig!" she screamed. "If that's what you think - go to her! I'm never going to speak to you again, d'ya hear?"

Ralph covered his head with a chair until she ran out of ammunition and the bombardment ceased. One of the musty old tomes fell open under his nose. Ralph momentarily forgot that he was engaged in a violent domestic squabble and reached down for the book. He picked it up, sniffed it, weighed it in his hands, and glanced at the title and frontis pages like any good scholar would; even a sociologist. Inside, he found a few fragments of a poem scribbled on an old piece of parchment.

"What are you going to do with that?" she asked warily.

"Read it of course," he replied, slightly surprised by the question.

"In Old English?"

"I'll have to translate it first. This poem is about a fight at a place called Finnsburh," he deduced, glancing at the weathered sheet. "Or I could just flog it to the Chadwicks for the price of a pint and a ploughman's lunch. They're suckers for old poems from the Heroic Age - even scrappy fragments you could roll up into a spliff."

"Get out!" she ordered, pointing resolutely to the door.

“Get out! Get out! Get out!”

“Alright, I’m going,” he conceded, tucking the old book under his shirt. “But not that way - I’ve still got to set up my camera equipment in the dungeon. You’ll feel better after dinner and a sip of sherry. What have you got against goldfish anyway? My pet piranha loves them.”

Ralph was about to confront the obstacle of the secret door panel when Jenny decided that Daphne’s pleasure at seeing him again so soon was more galling than the loss of a little virtue that might be needed to detain him just long enough to spike her rival’s day. She called him back with a seductive whisper of his name.

“Ralph, please, wait a moment. There’s something else I have to say.”

“What is it now?” he asked.

“Come and sit here,” she urged, patting the edge of the bed by her side.

Ralph smiled with bemusement and sat down on the edge of the bed. “I thought you said you were never going to speak to me again? Not even my Italian whore makes up this quickly.”

“I’m not trying to make up, but please, don’t go back down there just yet,” she pleaded, running her fingers through his floppy fringe. “Stay a while longer.”

“I’d love to,” he assured her tenderly. “But Daphne needs me. She’s all alone down there, and at risk with Algae.”

“So it’s true,” she sighed, opening the tap of a tear duct so that a single tear could trickle down her cheek, then skilfully closing it again. “She means so much more to you than I do.”

“Of course not. You mean more to me than anyone else in the world,” he insisted, scooping the tear with his fingernail and testing the salt of its sincerity on the tip of his tongue.

“Anyone?” she queried.

“Anyone.”

“Even your pet piranha?”

“Even him.”

“Then you’ll stay with me?”

"I can't. They're expecting me to return soon and set up the camera equipment to photograph Luca's ghost; and hence prove to a sceptical world, and Daphne, that sociology research is more than just scribbles on toilet paper," he explained earnestly, rising to his feet again.

"Why can't you leave the technical stuff to Algae?"

"Algae's a fine fellow, but he doesn't know how to handle my camera."

"I suppose you're going to tell me that it was made by a rough, tough manufacturer, and now it needs a real man with firm hands to operate it?"

"Don't be silly, this is England. We leave all that Freudian stuff to the Americans and their expensive analysts."

"What about passion? What use is a stiff upper lip without passion?" Jenny implored him, getting on all fours to purr and rub her cheek against his thigh like an affectionate tabby cat.

Ralph seemed shocked by the idea. "We leave that to the French," he insisted, loosening his collar. "And the Italians. Haven't you heard of the Lord Chamberlain's Office? We can't even put on a play without his permission and we're supposed to keep at least one foot on the bedroom floor at all times."

"You make it sound like a game of billiards," she groaned.

"There are certain similarities," he had to admit, thinking of cues, balls, and pockets in a whole new light. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go. I think I can hear her calling."

"Who? Daphne?" she asked, in a piqued tone.

"No, my camera."

"A few sweet words and I might give you a softer focus," she teased, clutching his wrist to delay him and pressing the palm of his hand against her chest. "Don't you know what it feels like to have a heart beating fiercely in your breast?"

"Oh yes, I used to hate doing cross country; especially on cold, frosty mornings in my vest and pants with the icy water splashing up my legs."

"Be serious, Ralph. I worry about you going back into that creepy old place."

Jenny laid back and stared up at the ceiling; as if playing an earnest part in a French philosophical drama, or an avant-garde English play about kitchen sinks. She lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply as she meditated.

"You worry about me? Daphne said you were strolling around down there in your undies last night," Ralph reminded her.

"That's a girly thing - I don't want to talk about it," she declared, pulling a sheet up to her chin and chicly blowing circles of smoke towards the ceiling.

"I didn't know you smoked," he frowned.

"I don't," she insisted, taking another deep drag then exhaling like an old chimney before realising what she was doing. "I mean, I didn't used to," she insisted, waving the cigarette about as if it were suddenly an embarrassment. "My stress levels are not usually this high."

"Well, don't set fire to the bed when I go back down there or we'll be trapped up here in a towering inferno," he warned.

"You know what they say," she proposed, propping herself up on one elbow so that her steely eyes stared straight into his; her eyebrows suddenly dark, demonic, and meeting in the middle as she tapped the cigarette, dropping glowing ash onto the sumptuous rug and setting it ablaze. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. In Paris, they'd call it a crime of passion."

"Here, they'd call it arson and sentence you to a lifetime of counselling," Ralph advised, extinguishing the flames with a handy black CO2 cylinder which filled the room with an eerie mist of the sort Jenny had encountered in her dream. He suppressed a shudder and made a mental note never to marry one of the treacherous creatures. "I'll be back soon," he assured her, with a playful right hook to the chin. "Then we can talk about this insane and obsessive jealousy of yours."

"Wait!" she pleaded, reaching out to grasp his shorts. "Don't go just yet."

"Why ever not?"

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?" he asked tenderly.

Jenny glanced around the room, searching for someone or something to blame. She immediately spotted a likely suspect standing quietly in the corner, observing the young couple with a wise old head and a bemused smile.

"Him!" she declared, pointing at the voyeuristic Luca statuette; whose leering red eyes seem to glow even brighter, and whose cheesy grin seemed to spread wider than ever, like a family pet becoming the subject of attention once again.

"Hmm." Ralph rubbed his chin while appraising the conduct of the horny little devil. "But it's just a wooden dummy, remember? Not even a genuine antique. Daphne's father ships them over by the gross from Yoshihito's Japan to sell to the America tourists."

"I don't believe it. There's something lewd and unnatural about him. He keeps giving me funny looks."

"That's what Daphne keeps saying about Algae. All girls say it about someone - even me, I expect. It's almost like a rite of passage - if you don't have a stalker, you must be fat and ugly."

"I'm not imagining it. He's staring at me now!"

On this occasion, Jenny had the weight of evidence on her side. The statuette was standing - or rather posing provocatively with fists on hips - and staring straight at her with wide eyes and a lecherous grin.

"Alright, I can do something about that," Ralph decided, whipping the sheet away from Jenny, reaching into her skirt and tearing off her silk panties.

She squealed as the moment imparted to her body rolled her over onto her stomach. She quickly spun back and covered her body again with the sheet, though Ralph was much less concerned with her modesty than with the statuette.

"At school, we used to call that a wedgie," he explained. "These are a bit skimpy, but they'll have to do." He wrapped the delicate garment around the head of the doll as a blindfold, covering its eyes. "Is that better? Or do you still feel threatened by something else?" he inquired tendentiously,

wrapping a handy pillow case around its waist like a skirt to conceal the lever, and fixing it with a safety pin he had gripped between his teeth like an East End tailor. "Sorry, old chap, it makes you look like a girl, but we haven't got any trousers in your size," he chuckled, patting the statuette on the head.

Jenny decided it was time to play a wildcard.

"Take me, Ralph," she whispered coyly, flinging the sheet aside and spreading herself on the bed.

"What?"

"Take me!" she insisted, reaching out to him with closed eyes and puckered lips.

"Take you where?" he asked, eyebrows raised in perplexed confusion. "We only just got here last night."

"Do it now," she urged, opening her eyes to stare straight into his with her passionate demand.

"Do what now?"

"Whatever it is they do."

"Oh that!" Ralph exclaimed excitedly. "So the gold fish is in a feeding mood at last and ready to suck on the bait?"

Jenny stretched out her long arms, closed her eyes again, and thought of England's green and pleasant land. "I don't care if it hurts, I don't care if I don't like it, I don't even care if they don't come up the steps and see us doing it - go ahead, Ralph, kiss me!"

"Kiss you? Is that all?" Ralph groaned, evidently disappointed. "I think I'd rather go play with my camera."

"Oh Ralph, slow down, we've only known each other for half a term. No one goes all the way in the first half-term."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Even fungi have some feeling in their extremities, and Algae had no intention of exposing his most sensitive attributes to the more extravagant whims of Daphne's sadistic nature. So the pair just sat around on opposite sides of the dungeon, making the smallest talk possible between two people for whom it was just never going to happen.

"What's taking him so long?" Daphne complained loudly. "Doesn't he know it's rude to keep his host waiting like this?"

"He's only been gone for twenty minutes," Algae noted, as he shook his wristwatch and wound up the spring to make it go faster.

"He said he'd be back in twenty minutes. I'm going to find out what those two are up to. He may be in some sort of trouble."

"He took Jenny back to her room. What sort of trouble can he possibly get into up there?"

"You haven't had much experience with women, Algae. You don't know the danger he faces from a conniving little minx like her. But then, I don't suppose that's something you'll ever have to worry about."

"Jenny's not a minx, she's a muse. Her manners are perfect. You could take her anywhere, without the slightest worry."

"Anywhere?" Daphne queried doubtfully. "She'd probably make a scene if you took her to a burlesque club."

"You wouldn't take a woman like Jenny to a burlesque club."

"So where would you take her, Algae? Home to meet your

parents?"

"I was thinking that Ralph could take her to the premiere of his first feature film - when he finally gets round to making one - maybe next year if we go to L.A. It's very important to present the right image and Jenny fits the bill perfectly."

"Anyone with a private dentist and a decent figure can turn up outside a cinema wearing next to nothing and smile at the flashing cameras with the wind blowing up their skirt."

"There's more to it than just glamorous appearance - you have to project your personality in a positive way."

"Are you saying I'd show him up?"

"I just don't think you're being fair to Jenny, that's all."

"What you really mean, Algae, is that I'm not being fair to you."

Algae ignored this likely proposition and tactlessly continued to extol Jenny's finer virtues. "You must have noticed how gracious and elegant she is under fire. Your best aimed insults just seem to bounce off."

"It's definitely not natural," she concurred. "That's why I'm so worried about Ralph. Women aren't usually built like tanks - unless they teach PE."

"He'll be back soon enough," Algae predicted. "We've still got all this camera equipment to set up before it gets dark."

"It's always dark down here - unless we leave the lights on. What difference does it make when you set it up?"

"None, I suppose," he conceded. "But ghosts only come out at night and we want to be ready by then."

"Don't tell me you believe in Ralph's haunted house story? I thought you were a rational scientist?"

"In this old place - anything is possible," he murmured, glancing round at the weird exhibits.

"Anything, but not everything," she assured him, slapping his cheek with a condescending palm. "Don't forget that - next time you dream about me."

"*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,*" he sighed, "*or what's a heaven for?*"

"God, I hate cheerful optimists. Why can't everyone be an

impermeable cynic like me?"

"Would you be happier if we were?" Algae inquired, probing the emotional frigidity of her psyche for a way in.

Daphne yawned, stretched her arms, and gave Esmeralda another shove to make her swing again. "Hurry up, Ralph, what's taking you so long? Algae is trying to violate me with his mind games."

"You'll just have to be patient."

"I'm not playing doctors and nurses with you," she replied indignantly.

"It'll make the time pass more quickly," he urged, lifting her wrist and monitoring her pulse with his watch. "Forlorn heartbeat - that means you're not getting enough exercise."

"How would you know?" she snapped, irritated by her failure to puncture and deflate his ego with relentless salvos of armour piercing comments.

"I follow you around, taking photographs for the walls of my study room," he revealed candidly.

"That's just vulgar," she snorted. "A really obsessive stalker would paint an idealised oil canvas of me lying naked on the island of Naxos, with a sailing ship in the background."

"But you cover up on the beach when I'm around."

"Use your brain, Algae. If you're stalking me properly, then I won't know you're there."

"That painting is symbolic of uncertainty in the genesis of a new nation. Why would an aristocratic bitch from Old Europe picture herself as Ariadne, marooned in the New World?"

"I've had enough of this," she decided, with a deep yawn.

"I'd say you're bored with our climate, but you're too afraid of the uncertainties to uproot."

"It's time I uprooted away from you."

Daphne wandered out of sight behind the exhibits, leaving Algae by himself; only to reappear moments later with a pasty-faced female mannequin, wearing a brown wig, tied back in a ponytail, and a somewhat drab Victorian dress. She plonked the adjustable mannequin down in a chair in front of Algae and arranged it in a prim seating position, with legs

together and hands clasped.

"Algae, this is Anna. Anna, meet Algae. You two can stay here and talk while I go get a life and catch up with the well-adjusted people."

"Have a heart, Daphne," Algae urged, stepping warily around the seated dummy, as if to avoid becoming embroiled in what could be an awkward conversation. "They just want some time alone together. They haven't had any since we left Cambridge on Friday."

"But that was only yesterday!" she scowled. "What are they? Sex junkies?"

"Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Are you stuck in a permanent heart-idiom mode today?"

"Parapraxis," he confessed.

"Well, not in my family home it doesn't. If they want to grow fonder, they can do it wearing silly hats, punting up and down the River Cam like everyone else," she declared, striding away.

"Daphne, please, don't do this!" he remonstrated, desperately trying to dissuade her from going.

The impassioned plea caused her to halt for a moment, as if struck by some anomalous thought pattern that just had to be resolved at that particular instant or lost to humanity forever.

"Algae? Why should a fungus concern itself with the things we humans do?"

Algae blushed momentarily behind a diffident smile before he shrugged off the effects of the blow, like a prize-fighter staggered but not yet floored.

"Gotcha!" she thought to herself, and smirked with some bemusement. But then, much to her chagrin, he seemed to recover almost immediately.

"It hurts to see you make a fool of yourself over a philanderer like Ralph," he revealed. "Can't you see that he's attracted to Jenny because of her demure and delicate demeanour. There's something about Jenny, some rare and precious thing - that ignites a poetic impulse or an artistic obsession. If Ralph were Michelangelo, she'd be his Sistine

Chapel.”

“I thought he was a fudge packer,” she snorted.

“Alright then, his David.”

“Is that what he told you? I don’t believe it. You’re just trying to help Jenny come between us.”

“Face it, Daphne. You’ve got no chance with Ralph - you are too easy to catch. They say fishing for you is like dipping a worm in a trout farm.”

“Who does?”

“The Cambridge University Coarse Angling Society.”

“What do those maggot suckers know about women?”

“They only do that in the winter - to warm the little fellas up and make them wriggle in the cold water. The coarse season ends in March, then they go back to their wives and their girlfriends.”

“I didn’t know you were a maggot sucker too,” she sneered. “What do your anti-blood-sports comrades think about that?”

“They’d set their dogs on me if they knew,” he predicted ruefully.

“Deserves you right, you hypocrite.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that Ralph doesn’t like aggressive, domineering women. They threaten his sense of masculine ascendancy and self-esteem.”

“Me domineering? Don’t be ridiculous,” Daphne replied, grabbing a bullwhip from the handy selection on the wall rack and skilfully cracking the cord in the air. Algae ducked and shielded his eyes to avoid the vicious tip.

“What are you going to do with that?” he asked, almost at the point of complete exasperation.

“Something I should have done yesterday,” she insisted vehemently, seeming determined to separate the intimate couple by armed intervention. “It’s time Jenny had an instructive lesson in the Teutonic school of Social Darwinism.”

“Haven’t you listened to a word I’ve said?” Algae called out after her, as she began marching up the steps like a Prussian on her way to Belgium. Algae shook his head in dismay.

“You’ll never win him over like that,” he advised. “Why don’t you try a more feminine approach? Like shedding floods of girlie tears or mildly overdosing on paracetamol.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ralph was about to reap the benefit of half a term's hard work and patient planning - not to mention two minutes of very impatient foreplay - when the secret panel suddenly began to slide open again to usher in a draught and reveal the gaping black mouth of the dark, secret passage.

"Oh no!" he groaned, expecting Daphne and Algae to come piling into the room like gatecrashers at a very exclusive party. Instead, there was the sound of a scuffle and a muffled scream in the secret passage, then silence, before the panel slid back into place.

"What was that?" Jenny gasped, pushing him away and quickly grabbing hold of a sheet to cover her naked modesty, leaving the poor fellow swinging in the wind.

"I don't know," Ralph answered bluntly. He was about to blame the scuffling sound on rats, but thought better of it. In her perilous state of undress, Jenny was liable to freak out at the mere mention of rodents. "Just the foundations crumbling into a tarn beneath the old house," he proposed, still hoping to finish what he'd started.

Fat chance. The convent school raver had suddenly lost all her sense of adventure and had regressed back to reassume her goldfish demeanour. "Algae and Daphne are coming!" she explained, as she hurriedly dressed under the sheet. "Some other time perhaps."

"Damn Algae! Why couldn't he keep her occupied for a measly twenty minutes?" Ralph cursed, collecting his shorts, shirt, and tennis shoes; and quickly dressing to make himself

at least appear more modestly presentable. "He needs to learn a few simple rules about teamwork. If it were me, I'd tie the bitch to a stout post and gag her with the butt of a bullwhip to keep her quiet. There's plenty of them down there to choose from."

"Where are you going?" asked Jenny, as he got off the bed.

"To save Daphne from a well-deserved fate. Algae is probably boring her to death with Keats or Byron as we speak. I just hope he hasn't touched my camera."

"What about me? You said you'd stay here! If you go down there now, she'll think we've had a row."

"Oh, no, don't start that again," he groaned, confronting the obstacle posed by the panel. He tried to slide it back with his sweaty palms, but it just wouldn't move.

Jenny giggled in anticipation of what was to come. "You may have a slight problem there," she advised him coyly.

Ralph looked at the cheeky doll, which seemed to be grinning wider than ever despite the blindfold, and found himself facing up to a distinctly uncomfortable conundrum. "Maybe you could do it for me - please?" he asked meekly. "It was designed for a munitions worker to operate."

"I could, but I'm not going to. It's down to you, big boy. Pretend you're groping around for the soap in the team bath after rucking with your mates."

Ralph put one hand over his eyes, then gingerly reached out with the other until he located the grinning mouth. He peeped out and pulled his hand back, half expecting the mouth to snap like a turtle and sever his fingers with those gleaming white teeth. He reached out again, lower this time, locating the chest, and tracing a path down passed the navel to the pillow case. With great reluctance, he knelt down and put his hand under the pillow case. His other hand, which he held over his eyes, kept him in denial of an act which broke God's laws in several places.

"What are you, a man or a mouse?" Jenny taunted him. "I'll bet you wouldn't be taking this long if it was a real skirt."

Ralph located the lever and swallowed a throatful of rising

bile as he took a firm grip of the spongy appendage. He shuddered and braced himself for the worst whilst waiting for the unmentionable to happen. But like so many of life's preconceptions, it just didn't match up to reality. He stroked and squeezed expertly to encourage the flaccid member, but still nothing happened. He stood up, stepped back from the statuette, scratched his head, and appeared totally perplexed by the lack of a positive response to his touch.

"Don't tell me you've never milked a cow before?" Jenny chortled, wiping the hysterical tears from her eyes.

"I don't understand - it works perfectly well on me," he insisted, flexing his hand.

"There's still one trick you haven't tried. One you can't do all by yourself, unless you've got a very supple spine."

"I couldn't," he insisted, recoiling in horror. "Not even at a rugby club dinner."

"Why not? It'll put you in touch with your feminine side. Do you know what it feels like for a girl in this world? What's that I hear? Could it be your camera calling? That evil Algae has her in his wicked clutches. He's gleefully rubbing his vile hands all over her. She struggles and screams but can't escape. Only you can help her, Ralph! Before it's too late! Save her, Ralph, save her!"

Spurred on, Ralph took a deep breath and thought about all those New Zealanders he'd met in the war with a motherland fixation who'd do anything for King George. He undid the safety pin and removed the pillow case.

"Just like taking a drink from a fountain," he muttered to himself for reassurance; then knelt down, opened wide, closed his eyes, and took up sword swallowing like one of his tuppenny ha'penny tarts.

He nearly gagged on the swelling sausage - and didn't like the salty taste much either. But to his disquiet, he felt a perverse sense of pride when the panel obligingly slid apart, inviting him to enter and descend through the tenebrous gloom into the stygian abyss. He was now a member of an exclusive club. If he could do that, he thought to himself, he

could do anything. The world was his oyster - so long as the tabloids never found out.

"Not a word about this to anyone," he warned.

"Better hurry or you'll have to do it all again," Jenny chuckled. "You can let me know if it's easier second time round. I've never done it more than once with the same man - I'm not that much of a slut."

Ralph wasted no more time arguing before slipping through the portal. He had expected to find Daphne and Algae giggling on the stone steps like a pair of childish adolescents, having glimpsed his undulating buttocks. Ralph, by contrast, was a man of the world; who had seen and done just about everything by now, including fellatio with a dummy. But after descending through two dozen steps or more there was still no sign of les enfants, and no place where they could be hiding. Wondering where they could be, Ralph continued his descent, guided by the flaming torches that would continue to burn so long as Daphne's father remembered to pay his gas bill.

Ralph paused before passing through the final portal and reflected on the significance of the message on the plaque beside the open door. He wondered how long these curse things could incubate for before taking effect. He didn't want to pick up something in his youth that would come back to haunt him in his thirties. In his forties, he wouldn't mind so much. People in their forties - bald, fat, wrinkly old things - were as good as dead anyway. But he was still two decades away from that tragedy and wanted to stay beautiful, in a rugged, square-jawed sort of way, for as long as possible.

A sudden noise, like a muffled cry, intruded on his meditation and overcame his caution. He dashed forward onto the concrete platform to survey the scene below; and despite his war experience in which he actually witnessed a live and uncensored performance of several thousand young men being put through the mincing machine of industrial war in a devastated landscape, his English sensibilities were shocked and appalled by what his eyes now beheld.

Daphne had been gagged with a white silk handkerchief and was tied to a post. She was struggling furiously. Algae, meanwhile, was standing nearby with a bullwhip in his hand, as if he were about to commit further acts of violence against women. War-and-violence was a glorious genre for aspiring young film-makers to exploit, so long as it was tastefully done; but sex-and-violence was strictly taboo.

Ralph had no time to waste and decided to make use of a convenient rope tethered to the guard rail on the side of the platform. He grabbed it and prepared to swing down and rescue Daphne in dramatic swashbuckling style.

He launched himself into the air like a human bob on a giant plumb-line that would accelerate under the force of gravity and knock Algae off his feet before he could strike Daphne with the whip. Unfortunately for Ralph, Algae turned slightly just before the collision and instinctively raised the butt of the bullwhip in a move to protect himself; pointing it precisely in Ralph's direction so that it was aiming straight for his wide open mouth. The bruising impact left both men sprawled on the stone floor.

Algae got to his feet first, merely winded and dazed. "What the hell are you trying to do? Play a game of human conkers? You could have killed us both?" he yelled out angrily. "We were lucky. Don't you know that most collisions are fatal at thirty miles per hour? That's just 13.3 metres per second - v -squared equals $2gh$ in SI units; which means if you swung from ten metres up, you'd be doing over 14 metres per second by the time you hit me, not allowing for air resistance - work it out for yourself!"

All Ralph could say was "argh, aarrgh, aaarrrrgh!" as he squatted on his hindquarters and struggled to get the butt of the bullwhip out of his mouth. The mathematics was totally beyond him.

"This isn't a Hollywood set, you idiot, and you're not Douglas Fairbanks," Algae declared in disgust. "You're not even Charlie Chaplin. More like Fatty Arbuckle."

Ralph finally freed the bullwhip from his mouth and ans-

wered truculently. "Oh yeah? Then what was that rope doing up there - just waiting for me to swing down on like Doug Fairbanks in *The Mark of Zorro* (1920)?"

Algae was slightly perplexed by the presence of the swinging rope, which could have had no other purpose than to facilitate a dashing rescue. "That's not the point," he prevaricated. "You can't always blame your behaviour on the influence of film. Take some responsibility for your own actions! I thought you didn't do mindless heroics just to impress women?"

"Daphne's not a woman to me, she's an old friend. I know she can be an excruciating pain in the arse at times, but that doesn't give you the right to give her a taste of the lash whenever you feel like it. Some things are just not done. You don't have to work for the BBC to have a sense of taste and decency. *All that is necessary for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing.*"

"So now you're as virtuous as Edmund Burke?" Algae surmised. "Anti-French, pro-American, closet-Puritan. I'm not evil and I wasn't going to give her a taste of the lash," he insisted.

"No? Then maybe you'd like to explain what you were doing with this?" Ralph held up the bullwhip as an exhibit. "Playing cowboys and Indians with Daphne as the roped-up squaw?"

"We weren't playing cowboys and Indians either," Algae protested, even more vehemently. "I took the whip away from her because she was going to ..." he paused suddenly, wondering what to say. He didn't want to admit that Daphne was in a jealous rage and on her way to give Jenny a good thrashing.

"Going to what?" Ralph demanded to know. "Give Jenny a good thrashing?"

Algae had to think of a way to protect Daphne from Ralph's wrath and Ralph from Daphne's demoniacal affections. "You keep saying that I'm just not interesting enough to be at Cambridge. So Daphne and I have come up with a

cabaret act for the college circuit.”

“A cabaret act?” Ralph iterated doubtfully.

“Cabaret is all the rage in Berlin - singing, dancing, and outrageous entertainment - like a variety show for grown-ups.”

“Go on then, let me see a song and dance from a cabaret.”

Algae performed a quick shoe-shuffle and hummed a few bars as if introducing a show. “We haven’t actually decided on which song and dance to use yet,” he admitted.

“So you tie Daphne to a post. Then what?”

“I balance a lighted candle on the tip of her nose, and snip out the flame with a well-aimed crack of a bullwhip.”

“Is that right?” Ralph queried, turning to Daphne for verification. Her muffled screams and continuing struggles suggested otherwise. “She doesn’t seem so sure.”

“Oh, that’s just emotional memory,” Algae insisted. “Daphne’s deeply into Stanislavsky’s new system - even when we’re just rehearsing.”

“You think the Lord Chamberlain will let you get away with this?”

“I don’t see why not. Magicians on stage saw women in half all the time and he doesn’t say anything to them. The rules for live performance are not as strict as they are for film that you can watch - and rewatch - on a projector in your own home.”

“I don’t see any candle,” Ralph noted, still not convinced by the explanation.

Algae hastily looked around for a candle. He grabbed one from Joan of Arc and lit it with a match. “Don’t move, or you’ll make the wax drip,” he whispered to Daphne, as he stuck it on her nose.

Cross-eyed and mortified, she kept perfectly still, balancing the candle on her nose like a performing seal.

“Alright, let’s see you do it then,” Ralph urged, holding out the whip.

“Do what?”

“Snip out the candle with the bullwhip. You can’t keep the audience in suspense forever. You’ve got to give ’em what

they pay to see.”

“Er, we haven’t actually got to that bit either. We were just practising,” he tried to explain.

“Algae, you’re a terrible liar. Maybe I should just remove the gag from Daphne and get her side of the story.”

Daphne made muted little appeals to support this motion, which merely gave impetus to further action on Algae’s part. He took the whip from Ralph and gripped the butt tightly; letting the dark, sinewy tail trail on the floor.

“Alright then, here we go,” the charismatic cabaret performer decided, gritting his teeth and cracking the whip in the air impressively like an experienced lion-tamer, as he focussed on the target.

Ralph prudently stepped back until well clear of the danger zone; whilst Daphne closed her eyes tightly and braced herself for alterations to her aristocratic nose - the feature that she had always been the most proud of. But then, a stay of surgical execution was served on the proceedings by *deus ex machina* when a silky-soft angelic voice called out from the steps above.

“What’s going on down there?”

Two heads turned to see Jenny standing demurely on the stone platform looking down on them; her saintly expression one of severe disapproval. The third was still balancing a lighted candle on her nose and dared not move.

“What are you doing to Daphne?” she demanded to know, raising the pitch of her voice in outrage as she scurried down the stone steps to save the poor girl from further male brutality.

With salvation close at hand, Daphne hollered through the gag as best she could, bringing a wrathful Jenny swinging into the affray in no uncertain terms.

“Bastard!” she yelled, punching Ralph in the groin as she passed him en route to rescue her sister in distress.

“But it wasn’t me,” Ralph protested, feeling like a vigilante victim as he clutched his bruised testicles and doubled over with the pain.

"Ralph's telling the truth," Daphne confirmed, after Jenny had removed the candle from her nose and the gag from her mouth. "It was all Algae's doing. He just attacked and falsely imprisoned me for no good reason - other than to satisfy his disgusting libido and perverted lust."

"B-but you were going to ..."

"Going to what?" a po-faced Daphne demanded to know.

Algae suddenly recognised the impasse, fell silent, and conceded defeat.

"I was going to tell them all about the indecent proposals you were making to me and how I desperately tried to get away from you," she revealed, in a recollection that was partially true.

Algae bowed his head with a sigh and manfully decided to take the rap rather than answer the invidious charge with the damning truth about Daphne's designs on Ralph and her plans for Jenny.

"You're evil, Algae!" Jenny declared, as she began pummeling him with her fists. "You belong in a cage, you fiend!"

"Wait a minute, let's not get carried away," Ralph advised, smelling a rat and suspecting that something, somewhere, wasn't adding up to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He put an arm around Jenny's waist and pulled her away. "The evidence is all a bit circumstantial."

"Circumstantial? You can't tie and gag yourself to a post like that - Algae must have done it."

"Yes, but Algae would never risk tying up a real woman unless he had to save the world or something."

"Oh Ralph, I'm so glad I can trust you," Jenny declared, embracing him and resting a cheek on his broad chest with a foundling's innocence. "You're so sweet and kind and gentle - not at all devious like Algae."

"That's hardly fair," Ralph protested, concerned for his roguish reputation. "I have my moments too, you know."

"No, Jenny, it isn't fair. It wasn't just Algae," Daphne revealed, blatantly changing her testimony at the last second for maximum effect as she shed the last coil of the restraining

rope. "It was both of them. They were in it together."

"But you just said it was Algae," Jenny stated, looking at Daphne and Ralph in abject confusion.

"It was Algae who tied me up, but then Ralph helped him to brutalise me with a candle!"

"Ralph! How could you?" Jenny cried out, angry and disgusted by his complicity. She slapped his face, leaving a red swelling on his cheek, then turned away to exit angrily up the steps. "Come on, Daphne! We should leave them to play their nasty games all by themselves, that'll teach 'em."

"Er, be with you in a minute, Jenny dear. First I really ought to give them a piece of my mind too. Then I'll leave them to stew in a pot of contrition - tormented by the terrible feelings of shame and guilt they should be enduring by now. You go ahead, I'll catch up," Daphne procrastinated cheerily.

She waited for Jenny to get beyond earshot before strolling over to Ralph and traitorously putting her lips to his inflamed cheek. "Why bother with her? She's no good for you, she's just a silly little girl. She doesn't understand you like I do."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Daphne left the boys to nurse their bruised egos and testes - and to play with their camera equipment - while she went off in search of Jenny, expecting to find her face down on a pillow in the bedroom, sobbing hormones like a burst drain in a cattle-feed factory. To her surprise, she found that both beds had been neatly made, despite an absence of maids, and Jenny was nowhere to be seen.

"Damn that silly slip of a girl, where is she now?" Daphne muttered, checking in the wardrobe and under Jenny's bed; disturbing the banana-boat spider, which scuttled across the floor to seek sanctuary under the other bed with a dead rat in its jaws.

An incongruous speck registered in her peripheral vision as she passed the window, drawing her attention to the expanse of glorious Cambridgeshire countryside. There was something romantically inspiring about the muddy fields of a potato plantation languishing beneath the autumnal sunlight.

The speck which had caught her eye was fairly near, human in form, and instantly recognisable; lying on its back with a foot on one knee, on the grass beneath the spreading branches of the old oak tree.

"What is she doing down there?" Daphne wondered aloud, still talking to herself; one of the many signs of madness that she was prone to exhibit. "Painting her toenails again?"

To get from the bedroom to the tree in short order was no mean feat given the unorthodox architectural layout of Wulf-marsh Hall, in which long lost guests from seasons past would

miraculously emerge from Narnia each year. Fortunately, Daphne knew the layout of the building better than a rat knows a sewer; and quickly navigated her way along the corridors and down the flights of stairs until she, too, was out of the musty old house and breathing fresh air again.

Rather than portent her approach by adopting the direct route, which would involve crunching straight across the gravel forecourt, she crept stealthily onto the lawn; flanking the building and ducking down behind the flower beds; slowly circling her prey like a stalking cat - well fed, but with playful mischief on its mind.

Jenny didn't seem to be doing anything except looking smug as she painted her toenails. She wore a light cotton rowing smock over her tennis vest, with sleeves pulled up at the wrists; and her delicate head rested on a small pillow, appropriated from the bedroom. As she painted her nails, she would occasionally glance up into the branches of the tree.

As Daphne closed in, she wondered what was up there to merit so much attention from Jenny. A red squirrel perhaps? She couldn't see anything except the bark of bare branches, which had already shed most of their leaves by the middle of Autumn. Tip-toeing undetected for the last few yards before suddenly pouncing, Daphne landed squarely on top of the unsuspecting girl and pinned her shoulders to the ground like a wrestler going for a fall.

"Daphne!" the victim squealed, spilling the pink nail varnish onto the front of her smock and creating a splatter pattern. She rolled away, stood up, took off the smock and held it out in disgust. "Look what you've done. It's ruined!"

"Not at all," Daphne tried to persuade her. "This is pure serendipity. Before, it was simply plain, but now it's kitsch. This pattern is both abstract and expressionist, if such a thing were credible in the art world. We may have just invented a new movement."

"This isn't art," Jenny protested. "Dadaists and five year olds do this all the time."

"Are you saying Dada isn't art?"

Jenny needed time to think about the thorny question of what constitutes art. A remote cry suddenly rent the air that startled her before she could arrive at a definitive conclusion. A howl that could almost have been human.

"What was that?" she asked, looking for the source. "Is there a baby creche around here?"

"Sounds like the baying hounds," Daphne speculated, from a sitting position on the grass, where she leaned back on her palms and admired her outstretched legs as she pointed her toes. "It must be nearly feeding time. I hope O'Flaherty remembers to feed them something wholesome. They were a vicious pack to start with and they'll become all the more ravenous if they miss lunch."

"What do you usually feed them on?" she asked naively.

"Turnips and potato-mash mixed with pigs' blood. It gives them plenty of iron and a taste for flesh and blood on the hunt."

"Do you still hunt foxes on the estate?"

"Foxes - or anything else that poses a problem," Daphne mused. "Jenny, what are you doing out here all by yourself without a chaperone? Don't you know a man could walk by this way and see you?"

"We all need time to ourselves," she insisted.

"To watch out for squirrels, I suppose? Observing their habits for one of those silly little children's books of yours. I don't know why you waste your time. What's the point of a talking squirrel with a tufty tail? The idea is preposterous - even for children - especially for children."

"The best ones always are," Jenny mused. "Brer Rabbit has sold millions. A tufty squirrel could become just as famous for teaching children about road-safety."

"But children these days like pace and action and moral ambivalence; where Johnny makes a wad, shags the girl - or girls, wastes his enemies, and gets away with it in an SE5 with all guns blazing. They don't want breezy country tales from Beatrix Potter, or racist nursery stories from Enid Blyton, or folklore about niggers and coons from Uncle Remus. What if

Tufty smuggled a million dollars worth of cocaine and a Tommy gun through customs in his tail? Now that would be something to make the little monsters sit up and read."

"It wouldn't be very well received in schools," she predicted reasonably.

"Sounds like a good reason for doing it," Daphne scoffed. "*The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass.* Algae and Ralph were saying that vice is now a virtue in most state-sector schools. Lying, cheating, bullying - and that's just among the staff."

"How realistic is it to have a squirrel walk through customs with drugs and a submachine gun hidden in its tail?" Jenny chided her.

"About as realistic as playing out the Russian Revolution with farm animals," Daphne conceded.

"Precisely!"

"Or using weeds to represent traitors in the garden of a deposed queen."

"No - that's already been done," Jenny recalled. "It's called allegory."

"So it has," Daphne conceded, with a wry smile. "Maybe pigs could form a government after all."

Daphne's remark gave Jenny some pause for thought as she sat down again next to the other girl.

"You make some very subversive comments for a woman," she observed cautiously, putting her hand on Daphne's breast and giving it a squeeze to see if it was real. "A consequence of going to that all-boys prep school, perhaps. Are you really a ...?"

Daphne's lips met Jenny's full-on in a girl-on-girl experiment which both women seemed to enjoy - or at least, they probed each other with their tongues and groped each others' bodies for a good minute or two to find out for sure - much to the voyeuristic pleasure of O'Flaherty, who was hiding in the bushes and watching the action with a box camera.

"... socialist?" Jenny finally got to ask, when they came up for air.

"God, no, I've got too many pairs of shoes and no more money for stealth taxes," Daphne murmured, rolling on to her back and shading her eyes from the sun as she peered up into the canopy. "So where is this squirrel? You're lucky to see one at all around here, red or grey, despite all the trees we plant. O'Flagerty used to shoot them for his supper and I can't imagine O'Flaherty being any different, unless he's a vegetarian freak like Algae. It can't be much fun having to eat turnips and potatoes everyday - even with the rancid pigs' blood sauce we serve to the dogs."

"There's no squirrel up there," Jenny answered calmly, as she rubbed her lips and reflected on the disturbing extent of her bisexuality. Being a woman was so confusing these days. "I was just watching the clouds gather as they roll across the sky. There's a violent thunder storm moving in from the west that should reach us by this evening."

"Really? How can you tell?"

"You can smell it in the air."

"Oh that? I didn't want to say anything, but you didn't shower after playing tennis," Daphne pointed out tactfully, pinching her nose between thumb and forefinger.

"I didn't play tennis," Jenny reminded her.

"But you sweated profusely when walking past those braziers last night."

Jenny was learning to ignore Daphne's more provocative remarks. She laid on her back next to the other woman; their heads sharing the pillow; their hair entwined for an easy exchange of headlice.

"Look at the way the clouds are being swelled by the up-draught of warm air from the ground," Jenny proposed, pointing to the sky. "Growing higher and higher like gigantic white mushrooms. A sure sign of a thunder storm developing."

"All I can see is wood - and phallic symbols."

"That's because you look, but you don't see. Forget, for a moment, that you're an emasculated feminist, full of hate and penis-envy. Try peering through the twigs, leaves, and

branches; and juxtapose what lies beyond. Imagine the cloud becoming entangled in the branches like a grazing sheep falling prey to a monstrous hydra."

Daphne laughed at the childish notion and stuck a piece of grass in her mouth for rustic effect. "Jenny, if you were my daughter, I swear I'd send you to one of those new-fangled Swiss mind-doctors. Where do you get such sordid and disturbing ideas from?"

"Homer," she admitted tersely. "And Simpson."

"Those old pervs. Did they say why the Ancient Greeks had such small penises?"

"Daphne!" Jenny exclaimed in shock, then offered a more studied explanation. "Classical sculptors were simply more modest than our shameless modern artists."

"If you say so. I thought it was because of all the fish they ate. It grows brains at the expense of other parts. The Greeks may have been good at Euclidean geometry, but they were never quite sure which round hole to put their pegs into."

"Daphne, you're incorrigible at times! How do you ever expect to find a respectable husband?"

"Well, if I can't find anyone else, I can always fall back on Algae - so long as he doesn't go into gynaecology or general practice."

"What's wrong with general practice?"

"I couldn't live on his pay."

"But you're the heir to this huge estate."

"If I married Algae - Father would have to admit to siring a girl in his father's-speech."

"So he should!" Jenny exclaimed indignantly. "It's about time he faced up to his parental responsibilities."

"Father believes in male primogeniture - so after the wedding he'd probably adopt some orphan boy and disown me."

"But that's awful," Jenny complained. "What if you really were in love and desperate to marry?"

"Love? That's for women!" she snorted. "Do you see that branch up there?" Daphne pointed to a low-lying bough, extending like the outstretched arm of a muscular giant. "You

can guess what that was used for, can't you?"

Jenny sat up and nodded apprehensively as she recalled the Luca story from the previous evening, and a sinister note struck in her head. "I don't believe a word of it," she posited firmly. "Besides, even if it were true, you couldn't possibly tell which branch was used after all these years. There are at least half a dozen I can see that would have done just as well."

Daphne sat up behind Jenny and began stroking her hair, forming it into sisterly plaits with her fingers. "But that one is different," she revealed.

"Different? In what way?" asked Jenny, curiosity getting the better of her.

"It still bares the scar."

"What scar?"

"You'll see."

"But I don't really want to see. Your family history is beginning to bore me."

"Yes, you do," Daphne ventured, jumping up and pulling Jenny to her feet. "Come on, put your shoes on and let me show you what's up there. I promise, you'll be truly amazed. You may even be proselytised into the family faith."

"What about your white tennis dress?" she motioned, admiring the gleaming fabric and not wishing to see it ruined. "You'll never get the marks out - no matter what it says on the stain-remover packet."

Daphne flicked the straps of her dress from her shoulders and let the delicate garment fall to her feet. Fortunately, for modesty's sake, she was wearing a vest underneath the dress and had acquired a pair of panties since waking Jenny in the bedchamber that morning.

Jenny, reluctant but also slightly curious in spite of herself, slipped on her tennis shoes and followed Daphne to the trunk of the tree where she was instructed in the rugged art of tree-climbing.

"Put your foot here, grab that branch there, and pull yourself up. As a young boy, father encouraged me to climb trees all the time."

“A young boy?”

“A tomboy. There was a time when I was more nimble than a baby orangutan. Tree-climbing is good for muscle tone and gives you a head for heights - which you need if you want to be a female director these days in the boardrooms of those phallic towers that are popping-up everywhere in the twentieth century.”

The first foothold was easy, since there was a large hollow in the lower trunk of the tree to provide a step. But to pull oneself up onto the first branch required a certain amount of upper body strength which most of the half-starved, round-shouldered young women of the 1920s were deemed not to possess.

“No, Daphne, I can’t!” Jenny moaned effeminately, despite having broad shoulders and great posture. “I’m no good at boy things, I’m a girl.”

“Don’t be so wet,” Daphne cajoled, pushing her up by the behind. “Get up there now before I slap your bum.”

“Daphne!” she squealed, as Daphne warmed her cheeks with a firm hand.

A few minutes later, despite all the protests and negative thinking, they were both sitting astride the broad bough like a pair of young baboons, feet dangling precariously about ten feet from the ground.

“You see - the mark of the rope,” Daphne announced, as she traced a groove, scored in the bark, with her finger. “Touch it if you don’t believe me, oh ye of little faith. It’s a miracle. Sap bleeds from the groove on this same day every year without fail.”

Jenny was sitting on the other side of the long notch that scarred the branch and divided her from Daphne. She delicately touched the wound, then rubbed her fingertips together with the lubricant. She put a finger to her mouth, compelled by instinct and curiosity to touch the tip of her tongue and taste the sticky fluid.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"The trip-wire is attached to a switch on the camera," Ralph explained to Algae, whilst pointing to a long, thin, shiny wire; pulled taught just inches above the stone floor. "The moment Luca sweeps past, he'll trip the wire and zap! The camera will start to roll and we'll have his happy smiling face here on film." Ralph tapped the case of his camera with the flashy gold fraternity ring on his finger and smiled confidently at the fool-proof plan.

Throughout this flawless demonstration, Daphne had been standing to one side in a purely decorative role. Before rejoining the boys, the urban sophisticate had changed out of her West-Coast-cutie tennis dress and into something more appropriate for her part as a simple, honest, dirt-farm country girl from an East Anglian prairie; who really ought to have been thinking about running away from the grapes of wrath and getting herself a movie contract and a personal supplier; but who was content, for now, to be growing up far away from the corrupting liberal influence of any ocean. Daphne was a phlegmatic observer, silent for once, perhaps in deference to Ralph's masculine ingenuity and a patriarchal society's modest expectations of her.

Ralph noticed the significant change in her demeanour, as well as her change of costume, and goaded her to get a reaction; like an uncouth youth poking a lethargic lizard with a stick. "Why are you so quiet, Daph? Period pains getting to you at last?"

"I was just watching the genius of English empiricism with

such awe and amazement that I was utterly speechless," she murmured, with unsubtle affectation, whilst staring dreamily into space; as if in spirit she were really elsewhere on the astral plain. "No wonder the Empire controls twenty-five percent of the known world."

"Where have you been for the last hour?" he probed warily.

"Somewhere, over the rainbow - but there's no place like home, unless you live in a third-world country." She blinked and turned her face to smile at a slightly perplexed Ralph.

"What do you call those?" he inquired brusquely, referring to the unusual-looking blue trousers she wore in conjunction with a cotton lumberjack-shirt.

"Denim working men's trousers. An entirely original nineteenth century design by Levi Strauss, for wearing on the long wagon train journeys, way out west. They needed something that wouldn't wear out the seat of their pants too quickly when sitting on a wooden buckboard for three thousand miles on a rocky trail. They were tough in those days - so were their arses."

"Another American import," Algae observed, with some bemusement. "I don't know why she doesn't just emigrate. Shopping would be so much easier - and cheaper."

"I'd miss you too much, Algae," she revealed, still smiling sweetly. Her fresh cheeks glowed rosy red to compliment her fair-haired pigtails, as if her usually acerbic personality had been subsumed by that of a nice friendly girl-next-door. "I'd have to catch a White Star liner every weekend just to get home and see you again, and we all know how risky that can be when the growlers start to melt in the spring - unless you were on board with me; in which case it could be a great adventure, with you holding me as I lean out over the bow and spread my arms in flight."

Algae shot puzzled glances at both Daphne and Ralph. "This is Hallowe'en, not April 1st," he reminded them both.

"It's got nothing to do with me," Ralph insisted, shaking his head in bemusement.

Daphne asserted her patriotism by delivering an improvised

rendition of a popular song by Gilbert and Sullivan: "In spite of all temptations, to join with other nations, she'll remain an Englishman ..." Ralph and Algae felt compelled, as troupers, to echo the chorus, having both served on stage in *HMS Pinafore*.

"I thought you said you'd be willing to join up with the next despotic invader just to save your seat in the House of Lords?" Algae queried in confusion.

"That won't be for at least another ten years, according to the Imperial General Staff rule. In the meantime, there's no reason for me to become an American. We don't own any estates out there and the colonials have already grabbed all the best Indian land. The frontier has gone; you've got to buy a place to live now, you don't just get given one by the King for putting down a few rebels."

"Those working-men's trousers don't look as if they'd be much good for working in to me," Ralph observed, shifting the subject back to Daphne's wardrobe.

"I suppose it depends on the nature of the work."

"But they're hugging your bum like a second skin. If you had to bend over to pick something up, they'd probably split right down the middle."

Daphne turned her back on him, spread her legs apart like a giraffe about to drink, and bent forward, whilst rubbing her hands over her smooth behind to test this theory. The material seemed fine, so she reached down until her palms were wrestling on the floor. The material held for a few seconds more under the strain of her bulging behind, but then the seam suddenly gave way and a tortured tearing sound ensued.

Daphne stood upright and peeped over her right shoulder to survey the damage. The split revealed a startling glimpse of her white underwear to anyone standing behind her.

"You're right - but now they're really cool," she decided, with a cheeky smile.

"Where's Jenny?" Ralph inquired tersely. "She may want to see how this works."

"Well-bred young women are not in the least bit interested in how mechanical things work. So long as it starts, goes from nought to 60 in under eight seconds, and looks cute or affectionately ugly, they're quite happy to let a fit-looking grease monkey change the spark plugs and the oil."

"She's not driving my car, is she?" asked Algae, his voice etched with concern.

"She's still out in the garden, pondering the miracle of a stigmatic tree," Daphne informed them both casually.

"She's what?" Ralph queried.

"She's exploring her faith, in a girlie sort of way."

"She better not decide she wants to become a nun," Ralph growled. "I haven't finished with her yet."

"Think how sexy she'll look in a cassock."

"I don't want her in a cassock. She dresses fine the way she is."

"Too late, the papal genie is out of his bottle and casting an apostolic spell over the sweet young neophyte. She'll be his by nightfall."

"It won't work," Algae ventured boldly.

"What won't?" Ralph snapped, somewhat defensively.

"Your apparatus to photograph a ghost."

"Why not?"

"Because ghosts don't trip over wires."

"Says who?"

"Everyone knows they float through the air leaving material objects undisturbed. How else do they appear on high battlements and walk through walls?"

"Oh yeah? What about poltergeists? They move things, don't they? They wreak havoc with the crockery."

"But no one has ever seen a poltergeist, they're invisible. So there's no point setting up a tripwire to try and photograph one."

"If they're invisible - how do you know you haven't seen one?" Ralph countered speciously.

Algae scratched his head. "How can you see something that's invisible?"

"They could be invisible when they're on the rag and throwing things about and normal visible ghosts the rest of the time," Ralph proposed, in a vain effort to salvage some credibility for the experiment.

"But normal visible ghosts that you can photograph don't go around tripping over wires," Algae reiterated, seeking to close the circular argument.

"Maybe not - but they still disturb the light-carrying ether as they sweep past," claimed Ralph, invoking a well known canon of classical physics that persisted into the twentieth century. "That's why people feel chills and draughts in their presence and the hair on the back of their head stands on end."

"People feel chills if there's no draught insulation," Algae pointed out prosaically. "And your hair stands up so your parents can grab it and whisk you away from under the paws of a ravenous cave bear. It's an evolutionary atavism from the Palaeolithic era."

"You've been reading Freud and Darwin again, haven't you?" Ralph snorted in disgust. "You were warned about inappropriate use of library resources by the University authorities. If they find out, they'll take your card away."

"Not just Freud and Darwin - Einstein as well," Algae confessed. "What you really need is a coherent beam of monochromatic light, and an appropriate sensor to measure fluctuations in amplitude, phase, and modulation due to changes in the refractive index of the ether caused by ectoplasmic emissions."

"Well, it just so happens that I forgot to bring one with me," Ralph admitted wryly.

"And another thing. It'll be dark down here, far too dark for conventional film. You're going to need something with a much greater photosensitive response to low light conditions. Like a charge-coupled device."

"What's got into you?" Ralph demanded to know, with an audible gasp of furious exasperation. "This isn't the Royal Society Christmas Lecture."

He looked around, trying to discern the likely reason. Then Daphne came into focus and the penny dropped.

"Oh, I get it. Algae is trying to impress someone. Now who could that be? Oh, Daphne, you're here! Well, fancy that."

Ralph smiled cynically and winked at the spectator to enlist her support against Algae. But much to Ralph's amazement, Daphne failed to display any emotion beyond raising a bemused eyebrow. For once, she seemed willing to pass up the chance of delivering a bruising blow to Algae's egotisticals.

"I was simply trying to help," Algae insisted, keeping a wary eye on Daphne's tongue and instinctively covering his tackle as if facing a free kick. "This has got nothing to do with my love for Daphne."

"Oh, yes it has," Ralph countered.

"Oh, no it hasn't."

"Oh, yes it has."

"Oh, no it ..."

"Alright boys, that's enough," Daphne interceded quickly. "Christmas comes early these days, but we're not into the pantomime season just yet, thank God. Algae, Ralph is absolutely right," she adjudicated wisely.

"You don't say?" a somewhat piqued Algae retorted. "How could he ever be wrong?"

"You're always trying to impress me - but it just won't work. I have the complete self-confidence of an accomplished prick-teaser, whereas you are about as accomplished as a virgin on his wedding night."

"Face it, Algae, you try to hard," Ralph sniggered.

"Be quiet, Ralph. I haven't finished yet." she decreed sternly.

Algae braced himself for yet another onslaught, but this one never came. As if to confuse the issue even further, Daphne shifted target to Ralph.

"Making fun of the flaws and defects in Algae's character won't overcome the limitations of your crude set-up, Ralph. Algae is also right. Your equipment just isn't sensitive enough for the job."

"Women have been telling him that for years," Algae smirked.

"Er, Daphne, I thought there were some things we agreed never to talk about," blushed Ralph.

"Whatever you say, Ralphie darling."

"In fact, stay out of the conversation altogether. This is mans' talk," he commanded her.

"You mean man's talk," she corrected him.

"That's what I said," he insisted.

"That is what he said," Algae concurred.

"No, he said mans', meaning the possessive plural form of man. There's no such word," she stipulated clearly. "He should really have used the plural man, in conjunction with the noun talk; or the possessive plural men's."

"And she calls me pedantic!" Algae moaned.

"Stick to fashion, there's a good girl," Ralph advised.

"If you say so, Ralphie darling," she sighed passively.

"And stop calling me Ralphie. It's bad manners in front of Algae."

"Sorry Algae, I was trying to help too - just like you," she insisted; her apology sounding genuine, contrite, and sincere to his ear, as if she might actually have meant it. "We both know that all Ralph is going to get from his camera is a foggy, underexposed negative; certainly not a discernible image - unless the ghost comes complete with his own battery pack for illumination. Explain to him that he's come fishing with the wrong tackle."

"This is a tried and tested system," Ralph insisted adamantly. "Swedish scientists used it to snap the Loch Ness monster's diamond flipper in thirty feet of murky water. Do you suggest I dump it and drive all the way back to Cambridge for a joke shop novelty that Algae read about in a science fiction comic?"

"Two things you won't find anywhere in Cambridge are a joke shop and a decent nightclub - by order of the burger meisters who run the city council," Daphne revealed tersely. "Oxford is much more fun. But I do have a simple solution to

your problem. Why don't you just leave the lights on? Father never comes down here so he won't know anything about it until he gets the electricity bill, and by then we'll be back at university."

Ralph and Algae exchanged patronising glances and burst out laughing together.

Daphne frowned and spoke out sternly to quell the juvenile outburst. "I hope that whatever disease of the nervous system you two are afflicted by is strictly confined to adolescent males and doesn't spread to the wider community - I'd hate to catch it myself."

"No ghost is ever going to appear in this much glare. It's far too bright. The ambience just isn't right," Ralph explained. "And besides that, he'll be able to see the trip wire and step over it."

"I thought you said everyone wanted to be in the movies?" Daphne reminded him. "He's not going to miss out on his big chance to be a star."

She casually strolled over to a wall and removed a panel to reveal an array of switches and levers. She adjusted one and the bright light immediately began to dim.

"Hey, that's really cool. How did you do that?" Ralph asked in amazement.

"A dimmer switch, of course. You can't have a dungeon set without lighting effects. The punters wouldn't go for it any more than your ghost would."

Daphne slid a few more switches and bathed the vault in eerie reds and greens; with intensities masked and filtered to please ghosts and photographers alike.

"And do you think he'd like some clanking chains and some ghostly shrieks and wails to make him feel at home?" she suggested.

A deafening cacophony of howling screams from a thousand demented banshees reverberated off the stone walls to assault the auditory senses of the two men as if they had been caught in a bell tower.

"And vampire bats ..."

A panel slid aside high on the wall; and a flock of bats the size of crows escaped on cue to flood the air with their wing beats and to nip at the necks of the two guests with their sharp teeth.

“And wolves and demons!” she cried; maniacally pulling the levers like a mad phantom playing a Bach fugue with his organ pipes.

The two stooges were forced to duck beneath the low-flying bats and cowered in fright as smoke machines began producing copious quantities of suffocating green and purple party mist. The whole place seemed to come alive with flashing lights; and mythical creatures of the night began emerging from concealment in the walls to mock and cajole the terrified guests.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hallowe'en festivities started getting into full swing soon after the sun had set over the grim Gothic outline of Wulfmarsh Hall on this fateful Saturday evening. The window of the bedroom which the two women were sharing was ajar, and the curtains pulled wide apart, so that the faint hum of witches could be heard, revving up their broomsticks in the night sky over the commercial pine woods and potato fields of the historic county of Cambridgeshire.

Jenny appeared from the bathroom across the corridor with a luxurious bathtowel covering her body and a smaller handtowel wrapped around her head. Illumination came from the electric bulb in the corridor and a dozen lighted candles placed around the room. She stepped in front of the window to close the curtains, unaware that she was being observed by ominous prying eyes, peering up from behind a bush in the garden.

The gorgeous guest sat before the antique dressing table and began massaging her auburn hair with the towel, pausing only to admire the decorative visage reflected by the beautifully crafted, ornate mirror. The high cheeks, full cherry lips, pouting nose, cat like eyes, and damp shiny mane were enough to make her hot at the sight of herself - in a narcissistic sort of way. The bedroom window was still ajar so that she could feel the gentle, balmy breeze on her cheek and hear the distant, hungry cries of the children of the night.

Daphne walked into the room already dressed for dinner. She wore a golden, sleeveless, knee-length dress, with plung-

ing neckline and matching heels - and she glowed a healthy auburn, like a forest in an autumn gale. A striking achievement for one with fair hair and combination skin.

"What happened to your hair?" asked Jenny, seemingly aghast at the transformation of her rival into a being of remarkably similar appearance; as if she were trying to parody her guest - or even steal her identity.

"I washed, dyed, and conditioned it using one of those three-in-one products you buy from the cosmetics counter of a department store. Amazing, don't you think? It really does what they say it does in the magazine advert."

"You didn't have to do that. Your hair was lovely the way it was," Jenny insisted, with sickly affectation. Daphne's hair had always been fairly dull and lifeless; looking bleached and lacking essential lustre until now. Somehow, she had found a way of restoring its natural bouncy zest.

"Not as lovely as yours though," Daphne conceded graciously, lifting a few strands of Jenny's fine natural hair with her envious fingers. "I've always wanted shiny, bouncy, auburn hair like yours - and now I've almost got it."

"You've been under a sunlamp, haven't you?" Jenny noted tersely.

"Just a few minutes to give a bronze tint to my tincture. What do you think? Nothing like a little tan to give a healthy shine to one's veneer and avoid being mistaken for an office worker."

Jenny frowned and continued brushing her own hair without immediate comment. She hated clashes of appearance; especially those she hadn't planned for.

"Has this got anything to do with your desire to seduce Ralph?" she asked, recalling the day's events with ill-concealed suspicion.

"Don't be silly, Jenny, you really are too possessive. Try being a little more relaxed. Take a tip from an old poacher - men are like rabbits in more ways than one. They don't like to feel trapped and snared."

"We're going to look like an odd pair of twins at dinner this

evening," Jenny chided, shaking her head in dismay.

"Not necessarily. I know how much store you put on looking chic and nonpareil on every occasion. So I brought along this!" Daphne produced an old matted wig from behind her back and held it up for Jenny to see.

"Oh, no, not blonde, it makes me look so dumb!" Jenny protested loudly. "Is this what you meant by burying me to close the fashion gap?"

"That comes later," Daphne let slip.

"What?"

"Just kidding. Come on, Jenny, where's your sense of adventure? It'll be fun - like an end of term masquerade ball. We'll confuse everyone. From almost any angle, they'll think that I'm you and you're me."

"But who are 'they'?" she asked, with some justifiable suspicion.

"Ralph and Algae, of course."

"I'm not wearing that mangy old rug. It looks like something discarded by a flea-bitten yak after a hard winter. Besides, why would anyone want to look like you when they can look like me?"

"Think of it as a challenge. You're one of those people who looks great whatever you wear. At least try it on," Daphne urged, placing the wig over Jenny's head and making some tucks, in spite of all the vehement protests.

"It looks awful," Jenny judged, with a disgruntled scowl, whilst making the final tucks herself. "Like Marie Antoinette before she lost her head. I hate restoration comedy worse than cricket."

"Marie Antoinette was never a subject for restoration comedy. Not that losing your head isn't funny - but it was the wrong century."

"You mean they carried on wearing those stupid wigs for another hundred years?"

"Fashion hasn't always changed so rapidly," Daphne stipulated sagely. "Glossy magazines and empty-headed journalists are inventions of the twentieth century."

"Thank God for progress. Imagine having to wear the same outfit twice."

"Come down to the dining hall when you're ready. But don't take too long! Dinner is served at seven thirty. I'm going down there now to make sure that everything is set out correctly before Father appears. Otherwise, he'll find a way of blaming us for disrupting his daily routine. You know what parents are like. They moan when you stay away too long, but then they can't wait to get rid of you when you come home."

"I can't imagine why!" Jenny murmured, shaking her head in bemusement as Daphne left.

She removed the wig, combed and pinned back her hair, then applied foundation and blusher to her cheeks to mimic Daphne's aristocratic tincture. Satisfied with the paint job, she stood up and let the towel fall before slipping into her silk underwear. She sat down, took a deep breath, and placed the wig on her head; then fiddled with her own hair until the last strand of her former identity had obligingly slipped from sight.

Jenny rose to her feet and turned to inspect the revealing sleeveless blue party-dress with slits and silver sequins, waiting patiently on the bed. But as she looked down at the dress, she was confronted again by the room as it sought to embrace her with its sinister ambience. The realisation of being alone in the gloom, with no more than a set of candle flames for light, suddenly seemed to encroach upon her rational thoughts like the tide rising about a low lying island, threatening to submerge it beneath a sea of panic.

She tried to dismiss the childish thoughts as she stepped into the dress, but they persisted. She zipped up the back of the gown with supple dexterity, and then fitted a pair of blue stiletto heels to her feet, before sitting down at the dressing-table mirror again and thoughtfully stroking the locks of the wig with a brush, whilst waiting for something sinister to occur.

But then, to her horror, she noticed that the rats' tails in her hands had split ends. Jenny, the fashion perfectionist, took

out her dressmaking scissors and began trimming them into better shape while humming to herself. Inspired in her work, she removed the wig from her head to give it a more comprehensive trim. She became engrossed in the task and kept on trimming until all the scraggy bits were cut away and the wig was transformed. She carried it into the bathroom across the corridor and scrubbed it with shampoo and hot water, then returned and combed out the remaining curls with a brush, while drying it with an electric hairdryer. The end result provided her with a fashionable coiffure that closely resembled Daphne on a good hair-day.

The familiar sound of the shifting panel came just as she finished fitting the wig back on her head. Jenny stopped humming and turned to face the gaping hole in the wall; standing with her back pressed against the dresser and her heart pounding, as if expecting someone or something to emerge and abduct her at any moment. She did not scream, however, or take the logical action of sprinting for the open bedroom door. Instead, she waited patiently for events to unfold as imperilled women do; half expecting a full-size physical manifestation of Luca to appear and sweep her away.

A minute passed without sound or movement in the room other than Jenny's heaving chest and thumping heartbeat. She tried to think rationally about the situation. Something had caused the panel to slide open. The ugly statuette was grinning lustily as ever, but it was well out of reach, and the blindfold over its eyes ruled out the sight of her body as a cause of any physical excitement.

She considered it probable that the heat from her body, or the provocative sweep of her hand, had inadvertently stimulated some other inanimate object in the room; but she could not decide which object it could be. Curiosity soon got the better of her and she approached the secret passage; portal to the musty old museum by day, but spellbinding gateway to exotic and alarming fantasies by night. Jenny wondered whether the day was lingering or night had truly come. Either way, she began to suspect that someone was standing just out

of sight on the pressure pad, keeping the panel from sliding closed.

“Daphne? Come out, Daphne, I know it’s you,” she whispered, as if excluded from a conspiracy that she wanted to be part of. “Come out and stop playing silly games. There’s no way I’m coming in there after you. I’ll just leave you there feeling foolish and go down to dinner with the boys. Wait till I tell them about this. I may even tell them what you keep in your drawers. They’ll laugh at the idea of you trying the same old thing twice and expecting me to fall for it. My wig may be blonde but my brain certainly isn’t.”

Unable to see anything in the shadows, she beat a tactical retreat back to the dressing-table and lifted a lighted candlestick before returning to resume the investigation. Holding up the flame to the darkness, she observed the stone steps descending down into the abyss. The brazier flames had been turned off to save gas.

Jenny wasn’t really a dumb blonde and she wasn’t about to go exploring the gloomy stairway on her own, at least not before bedtime. Daphne could supply a rational explanation for the incident with the sliding panel when she next appeared. As Jenny turned away, something moved in the shadows. She caught only a fleeting glance, but poked her nose forward for a fatal second before thinking better of it. Too late, a black tentacle shot out as she twisted to escape; its gloved hand covering her face and muffling her scream as it pulled her down into the dark maw of the old building. The panel slid back into place like an accomplice aiding the perpetrator, and restored a calm state of normalcy to the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The magnificent dining hall had once been a venue for the good, the bad, and the ugly; and a great many other important people during the reigns of Victoria; her uncles, George IV and William IV; and her grandfather, George III. Princes, statesmen, and the noble conquering heroes of the ruling families - whose grand alliances controlled Europe and the Empire before the Great War - were lavishly entertained in the days when there had been a Teutonic flavour to the language at royal dinners.

The birth of the new century witnessed the death of the old Hanoverian queen, and the penurious decline of the Wulmarsh estate; but much evidence of its former splendour still remained, such as the grisly collection of trophies decorating the walls. The heads of these unfortunate animals produced a sickly sweet smell in the summer; an odour of decay which was simply irresistible to the swarms of flies that seemed to hatch out of the rotting timbers in the high ceiling each year. A mass of cobwebs on the ceiling was evidence of a thriving spider sanctuary that formed part of the well-balanced indoor ecological system.

This part of the house did at least have electrical power, and the bright cascading quanta were scattered by a collection of sparkling crystal chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling. The traditional open fire had been lit to banish any autumnal chills and the sizzling flames on damp wood spat, hissed, sizzled and cackled with temperamental life; just like

the hammy old English teachers who play the Macbeth witches every year in school productions up and down the country. A long, polished mahogany dining table took centre stage, vastly underemployed, with only five places carefully laid out with silver cutlery and serviettes.

Daphne entered alone, having just come from the deserted study. Seeing no one else present, she paced around for a few minutes with her hands behind her back like an impatient imperial despot. She was about to leave and check the study again when Ralph suddenly appeared at the doorway, smartly dressed in a dinner jacket. She turned her back, pretending not to have seen him.

"Jenny?" he inquired hesitantly, momentarily fooled by the hair.

'Jenny' made no reply.

Ralph entered the dining hall with an understandably quizzical expression on his face and approached her warily for a closer look - like a naturalist thinking he'd discovered a new species of porcupine.

She turned, suddenly and deliberately, to face him. "Do me a favour - do I look like a brainless mannequin?" she volleyed brusquely.

"Actually - yes," he confirmed, taken aback by her unexpected manner and appearance; which seemed contradictory, or at least failed to match any of his stored mental profiles of Jenny.

"Where have you been?"

"Walking about the garden, watching out for witches on their broomsticks flying across the moon - this is Halloween."

"I don't need reminding," she informed him sharply.

"Daphne, what happened to your hair? It almost makes you look attractive."

"Thank you, Ralph." Daphne glowed for a brief moment, savouring this compliment and coyly stroking her hair, before getting back to the serious business of hosting the evening. "Where's Algae?"

"I left him in the study with his nose in a book. He's going

to love you in that dress.”

Daphne was unmoved by this likely prospect. “He wasn’t there a moment ago. He knows he should be here by now.”

“Shall I go and look for him? He may be sticking wet toilet paper on a shaving cut. It’s easy to take the head off one of those pimples and once they start bleeding ...”

“No, not yet,” she decided, softening her tone. “Now that you’re here, there’s something we have to discuss.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Ralph asked warily, watching her stroll over to the double doors and close them quietly.

“Us!” she proposed, returning to his side and stroking his velvet lapel. She fluttered her pretty eyelashes seductively and gazed up into his eyes.

“Us?” he snorted. “What about us?”

Daphne launched herself at her prey like a leopard. He fell back onto the table with her claws pressing down on his chest as she forced a kiss upon him.

“Daphne, what are you doing?” he protested vehemently, as if genuinely shocked and surprised; which, knowing Daphne as he did, he most certainly should not have been. He continued objecting as strongly as any man could under the circumstances.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she replied. “You just said you found me attractive.”

“I said almost,” Ralph prevaricated. “That’s not the same thing. We don’t always want what we fantasise about - don’t you read the agony aunt section of the *Daily Mail*?”

“What does that old cow know about fantasy? Her idea of fantasy is stuffing her face with chocolate,” Daphne judged cruelly, like a spiteful teenager with no regard for the curse of old age that rounds the mortal temples of every female columnist, scoffing at her state and grinning at her pomp. She unzipped his fly and began feeling around for signs of life. “No need to be bashful. We used to take cold showers together, remember?”

“That was when we were in prep school. If you were a man, you’d be a danger to women!” he protested angrily.

"You're just jealous," she teased him. "I can do things you'd get arrested for."

"I know, I've seen you sneak into the gents cubicles in nightclubs enough times."

"You'd do the same if you had to stand cross-legged in the queue for the ladies."

"You wouldn't have that problem if you laid off the pints. Too many women think they're men these days and try to drink like them."

"Blame the munitions industry. It was thirsty work driving all those bankers to business lunches every day."

Ralph sat up and grabbed the wrist of the hand that was still fisting his fly. "Before you go any further, Daphne, there's something you ought to know."

This candid revelation came just a moment too late. Daphne's perplexed expression confirmed that her probing had already detected an anomaly; like a child suddenly discovering a broken toy in the toy box.

"That's a bit odd," she frowned. "It wasn't like that before."

Her furrowed brow testified to the rapid deductive processes taking place within her brain; like a computer struggling to complete an arduous calculation. But then she smiled broadly, as the answer suddenly popped into place.

"The war?" she surmised. "I know you weren't born that way."

"It affected people in different ways," he explained.

"It feels like you stopped a bayonet charge. You must have been quite a hero. Pity you weren't able to fraternise with the pretty nurses during the long convalescence," she chuckled. "I wonder where they pinned the medal?"

"It's not funny," he blushed. "I was circumcised by shrapnel from a whizzbang."

"Your rabbi will be proud of you."

"I'm not Jewish."

"Maybe not, but Jesus loves you now. Have you noticed any loss of sensitivity?" she inquired, as she went down on

him to carry out a more thorough clinical examination.

He winced and groaned beneath the thick lips and the coiled grip of a dexterous tongue. "Aa-aah ... I still manage."

"I'll bet you do - with such malleable anatomy."

"You're not doing too badly either. They don't call you the amphibian for nothing."

Daphne raised her head in surprise. "Who does?"

"The boys in the Herpetology Society."

"How would they know? The bug-eyed little creeps!" she hissed, licking the air with her forked tongue before diving in again to wrap it around Ralph's circumcised stump.

"That's enough, Daphne," Ralph insisted, deciding it wasn't worth the risk. "We can't do this, we've known each other for too long. It's indecent, we're almost brother and sister."

"Pretend you're Caligula."

"This is Jazz Age England, not Ancient Rome."

"People in England marry their cousins all the time, which is nearly the same thing - genetically speaking. Don't you read the Bronte sisters?"

"Men don't read the Bronte sisters," grunted Ralph indignantly, then asked, "What about Algae?"

"Algae reads the Bronte sisters - he told me himself."

"That's for his psychology courses; to help him fully understand hysteresis of the womb. I meant what about him and us?"

"What about us?"

"He'd be terribly hurt and betrayed if he found out."

"If he wants you as a friend and me as a girlfriend, hurt and betrayed are things he better get used to."

"Alright, but what about your father? He could turn up here at any time and find his only daughter helping herself to a *hors d'oeuvre*. What's he going to think? I don't want to end up as dog-food or a wall trophy."

"Don't worry about Father. He's always very punctual at the dinner table," she assured him. "He'll arrive at 19.30 on the dot."

Ralph glanced at his watch. "It's 19.29:03!"

In a moral panic, he came at 19.29:04, to the sound of approaching footsteps; but still managed to catch the flesh of his cauliflower pecker in his zip, just three seconds before the door opened slightly and Algae poked his head through the gap to see what was going on - all the while oblivious to the pandemonium he had just caused.

"Where have you been?" Daphne quizzed the late arrival, as she wiped the corner of her mouth with a serviette.

"Fixing my bowtie," Algae replied, stepping into the dining hall wearing a dinner jacket and closing the door behind him. "Daphne, is that you?"

"Of course it's me, who else could it be?"

"You look a bit like Jenny," he commented, then noticed that Ralph was clutching his groin and hopping up and down on his heels with tears in his eyes. "What's the matter with him?"

"Oh nothing, just the tired old prostate playing up again," Ralph managed to answer through gritted teeth.

"At your age?"

"It can occur at any age," Ralph insisted grimly; managing to extricate himself without the use of pliers, before standing up straight with hands by his sides and a stiff upper-lip over his mouth to mask his discomfort.

"He caught himself in his zip," Daphne disclosed brazenly, crushing the serviette and throwing it onto the fire.

"A zipped penis? Is that all?" Algae chuckled. "I thought you public school boys were immune to genital pain."

"That's easy to say if you've never experienced any."

"Funny thing to happen in the dining hall."

"I was flying low, wasn't I, Daphne?" growled Ralph.

"And servicing your undercarriage - with a little help from the ground crew," she added.

"Don't tell me you two were ..."

"It's not what you think," Ralph insisted, shaking his head in weary denial.

"Where is that wretched girl?" Daphne demanded to know, before Algae could give voice to any more of his lewd and

unreasonable suspicions. "She should be here by now. Wasn't she with you in the study?"

"I haven't seen her since she stormed out of the dungeon this afternoon," Algae replied. "I thought she would be with Ralph."

"Maybe she went out for a walk in the garden by herself," Ralph suggested. "She may have got lost in the dark. Why don't you ask O'Flaherty to go and look for her?"

"No!" Daphne insisted adamantly. "O'Flaherty is busy preparing dinner. If Jenny has got lost, she'll just have to stay lost until after dessert. Father will be making his entrance any second now and he's not going to like being upstaged by a silly debutante in a blonde mop."

"A blonde what?" Ralph queried.

"Nothing."

"I thought you said a blonde ..."

Ralph was cut short by the crashing sound of a heavy door slamming shut in some remote corner of the old building; immediately followed by the growing clamour of approaching footsteps, or rather heels clicking on tiles; slowly building in volume, each strike a sonorous portent to the forthcoming encounter with their host. The dining room party exchanged anxious glances but wasted no more words.

"Too late now," Daphne muttered, resigned to the will of Providence. "Quickly, sit down Algae, and try not to embarrass me too much."

The beat of the slow march grew to a cacophony - until it seemed as if the solid oak doors would be no impediment to the imperious onslaught. Then, just as the wooden panels should have burst asunder beneath the weight of character bearing down on them, there was silence. The pause was brief - though drawn out by expectation. Three pairs of watchful eyes became transfixed as the handles turned slowly, but deliberately, and the doors swung inward.

A large, burly man stood in the archway, dressed in the red tunic and black trousers of his regiment; with ruddy complexion, grey hair parted in the centre, and a thin moustache; as if

the painting had indeed come to life. The face resembled the portrait down to the last whisker; with demonic piercing eyes and dark pointed eyebrows. He strode purposely towards the seated trio wearing a severe expression and took up position at the head of the table. Remaining on his feet, he dominated the scene with his hands behind his back, as if concealing dirty fingernails.

Ralph and Algae rose manfully to their feet and bowed their heads respectfully in his presence. Daphne remained seated according to etiquette, which she usually liked to flout, but not in the presence of her father.

"Good evening, Father," she greeted him boldly.

"Daphne, what's the meaning of all this?" Daphne's father demanded to know; his rasping voice low and menacing, like an underworld Godfather.

"The meaning of all what, Father? You know I was never any good at science or religious education."

"Who are these strange fellows here?"

As her father spoke, he brought his hands into view. They contained a huge, black service revolver, with a ridiculously long barrel. An ugly, but deadly, colonial anachronism from the previous century.

"Put that thing away, Father. These are not angry natives, they're full-blooded Englishmen who'd pass the cricket test. These are the dear friends of mine from school and university that I wrote to tell you about. This is Ralph - tall, fair, handsome, intelligent, athletic. And this is Algae."

"Hmm. He does look a bit green," her father noticed, sizing up Algae and forming a distinctly unfavourable first impression, which did not augur well for the young Fabian who sought an unholy pact with the old devil's daughter. "Well, no point standing there like Prussians on a parade ground," the old soldier advised. "Sit down - gentlemen."

The Prussians wilted into their chairs, while Daphne's father remained standing at the head of the table as if about to deliver an after dinner speech.

"O'Flagerty used to read your letters to me, Daphne, but

they've piled up a bit since he bought it," her father revealed, without sounding very contrite.

"Are you dyslexic? Why can't you read them for yourself?" the impulsive Algae couldn't help but ask; and for his pain he received a swift kick under the table from Daphne sitting opposite. He winced quietly.

"Algae's studying to be a doctor. He likes to show off with big words from the medical dictionary," she explained.

"I could read them myself," the old man grunted. "But it's a bit difficult to see without my reading glasses."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise you'd lost your glasses," Algae apologised meekly.

"I haven't lost them. But with O'Flagerty gone, there's no one left to clean the lenses for me."

"Why don't you clean them yourself!" Algae piped up again, and received another kick under the table for speaking out of turn.

"There's always O'Flaherty," Daphne suggested, scowling at Algae for his bare-faced cheek. "He seems alright for a servant. Last night, he gave me the most incredible slow, comfortable screw against the wall."

"He did what?" her father growled.

"That's a cocktail of alcoholic drinks," Ralph quickly pointed out.

"Oh? It meant something else when I was a young officer stationed at Kensington barracks. Well, he may be able to mix cocktails, but he's no good for anything else; the fellow's hardly ever here. He likes being by the sea - spends a lot of time checking out the surfing conditions in the Wash. At his age, I suppose those are the biggest waves he can handle."

"You shouldn't have shot O'Flagerty, Father," Daphne sighed, shaking her head. "He was your last surviving servant. To shoot one servant is unfortunate, to shoot them all is carelessness."

"O'Flagerty wasn't even my bag," the old man admitted candidly.

"That's awful, Father. Taking credit for someone else's

kill!”

“But if you didn’t shoot him, who did?” Algae inquired forensically, like a keenly observing guest at a mystery weekend.

“Someone in the woods - a poacher perhaps. The point is, what are you doing back here tonight, Daphne? Don’t you know what day this is?”

“Saturday?” she proposed, with raised eyebrows, as if unconcerned by the lessons of history.

“I’ve always made a point of sending you far away for Hallowe’en in the past, and on the one occasion when you are safely away, you’re foolish enough to come back here with a pair of useless-looking stooges in tow. I’m beginning to think that educating you beyond the age of puberty was a complete waste of money.”

“Oh, Father, don’t be like that. Why can’t we just forget about those silly superstitions and enjoy this Hallowe’en together like any normal happy family?”

“Because the greaseballs out there won’t forgive and don’t forget. They just don’t know when they’ve been beaten. I blame the socialists and the anarchists for stirring them up. We should bring back hanging for vagrancy. That’ll solve the beggar problem and reduce the waiting list for council houses in a single stroke.”

“It’s been nearly eighty years since anyone in Britain was hanged for being homeless. Not even a true-blue, Britannia-led Tory government could bring back the noose for tramps now,” Algae predicted confidently.

“Maybe not, but she could tax the bastards for breathing our community air and jail ’em if they don’t pay up,” Daphne’s father ventured stridently. “That’ll get ’em off the streets. One old hag has been seen very close to the Hall lately. I tried to ride her down on horseback the other night, but it was dark, and she just slipped away into the trees. You should have seen her move. Incredibly fast for a hideous old wench. Must be the greasy food she eats.”

“Maybe it’s the same one we saw last ... aarghh!” Algae

ended the imprudent sentence by crying out in pain.

"What's that?" Daphne's father queried.

"Daphne kicked me under the table again," Algae revealed shamelessly, as he rubbed his swelling ankle.

"Speak up, man!" he ordered, rubbing the barrel of the gun under Algae's nose like an ugly black panatella. "You can't let a woman rule your tongue. What did you see last night?"

Algae pushed his chair away from the table, well out of range of Daphne's foot, before opening his mouth to speak; but he was cut short by Daphne's own interjection. "A big, fat, old female wandered out onto the road in front of us and waved us down for a chat," she disclosed, while yawning casually as if weary of the story.

"Oh? What did she want?" her father asked sternly.

"The usual sort of thing. My head on a silver platter before the cock crows in the morning. You'd think these people would come up with something more original after two centuries of organisation and planning. They're worse than Cambridge City Council."

"Inbreds!" her father declared dismissively.

Algae and Ralph glanced at a chronological line of family portraits on the wall behind him. The first few were quite distinguished in appearance; but then the line gradually seemed to degenerate into something resembling a witless village idiot - and after that a turnip with two little eyes, no mouth, and a tuft of hair.

"I told O'Flaherty to set out a few bear traps in the woods to see if we could bag some of them that way, but the wily old devils seemed to know exactly where they were and carried them off in the night, without leaving us with so much as a severed big-toe for all our trouble. I don't know who they sell them on to - possession is illegal - Sandringham perhaps."

Algae was aghast. "Bear traps? But they can take a man's leg clean off."

"It'll heal if you cauterise the stump with a burning flame," the old soldier mused grimly. "Daphne, what have you done to your hair?" He raised his eyebrows in paternal disapproval

at the dramatic transformation into something unusually chic and stylish.

"Father, you noticed!" she exclaimed gleefully. "Don't you like it? It's Jazz Age fashion. Everyone at Cambridge wants to look like Louise Brooks or Lillian Gish."

"Who?"

"Movie stars," Ralph explained.

"Whores, you mean. They're not even stage actors. Your hair looks like the colour of horse-manure to me," he decided, sniffing her hair. "And it's grown considerably. When you left home in the summer, you had a short-back-and-sides."

"Young ladies with a short-back-and-sides risk getting collared by the police in Cambridge," Ralph disclosed. "To check they're not nancy-boys."

Daphne stopped smiling and adopted a puzzled frown. She looked about the dining hall with paranoid suspicion, as if suddenly aware of something amiss.

"What's up Daph? Someone just given your lightbulb an extra twist?" Ralph chuckled, then immediately had cause to regret his impertinence when he attracted the attention of her father's pistol.

"Father, if you're so concerned for my safety this Halloween, why did you send for me?" she asked.

"I didn't send for you," he replied.

"I know we're not supposed to contradict our Edwardian parents, not ever, but you definitely did send me a telegram urgently requesting my presence this weekend."

"I did no such thing!" Daphne's father stated forcefully; his face turning purple with Victorian father apoplexy.

"Not only that, you specifically stated that I should bring along some readily disposable friends - just in case we go grouse shooting," she added, with a wink and a wry smile; which discomfited Algae, who was ill-disposed towards any form of bloodsport except angling; and Ralph, who was ill-disposed towards getting shot.

"How dare you argue with me; you evil, wicked, monstrous child!" he declared, ranting like an angry little Corsican. "I

should have you beaten and starved! Sent up the chimneys and down the mines!"

Algae thought that in his rage he might shoot her and rose a few inches from his seat to be in a position to grab the bullet. Ralph put a hand on his shoulder to pull him down and whispered in his ear. "Don't worry, he's always like this. He won't actually shoot her, she's his son and heir."

"Ivan the Terrible killed his son and heir," Algae recalled anxiously, with concern for the lessons of history.

"This is Imperial England, not Imperial Russia. *Magna Carta* (1215) put an end to the abuse of arbitrary power here."

"It didn't stop Tsar Richard hanging all those peasants in 1381."

"They were revolting."

"Or Tsar Henry hanging all those peasants in 1537."

"They objected to his divorce."

"Or Tsar James hanging all those papists in 1606."

"They were caught playing with fireworks."

"Well, someone certainly did," Daphne insisted calmly, no more impressed by her father's ranting and raving than she had been by the threats of the old witch. "I have the telegram in my suitcase and O'Flaherty must have known we were coming since he had the guest rooms prepared for us in advance."

"We'll see about this when O'Flaherty serves dinner," Daphne's father decided, dropping the horse iron noisily onto the table and striding over to the ornate bell cord. "Where is he? I'm starving," he grumbled, yanking it hard for service.

"He can't serve dinner yet - we're still waiting for a guest," Daphne disclosed.

"Another one? How many grouse shoots are you expecting me to lay on?"

"Just the three. Her name is Jennifer. You'll definitely like her, Father, all men do; even the ginger fashion-designers. She's adorable. She's got strong legs and a mouth like a horse."

"Steady on, Daphne," Ralph protested. "Jenny may be a bit

equine, with great fetlocks and a beautiful mane, but that doesn't mean she looks like a horse."

"Don't you think horses are beautiful animals too?" the old cavalry trooper inquired of Ralph.

"Yes, but they don't bear comparison with a woman like Jenny."

"Wait till you get a bit older," he advised, shaking his head wearily. "The distinction begins to blur."

Ralph took this under advice as O'Flaherty suddenly rushed in through the service entrance from the kitchen, seeming very short of breath and in a bit of a fluster.

"Not yet, we're still waiting for a filly," Daphne's father barked, thinking that dinner was about to be served. "Where is she, Daphne? Still being groomed in the stable? I hope she's not lying drunk or stoned in some corner, like the brat of a politician."

"Er, yer Lordshit," O'Flaherty tried to interject.

Daphne's father instantly rebuked him for speaking out of turn. "Don't speak until you're spoken to! Didn't you read the Wulfmarsh servants handbook in your induction week?"

"Er, wasn't t'at t'e week we ran out o' toilet paper?" the old butler seemed to recall.

"We don't know where Jenny is. We've lost her," Daphne admitted contritely.

"How do you lose a guest before dinner?" he chided her, shaking his head in despair. "Young people these days have no sense of propriety."

"She was in our bedchamber earlier this evening, sitting at the dressing table and doing her make-up."

"That usually takes a few hours - she's probably still up there now, shaving her touche and laying it on with a trowel," the old man observed.

"Shaving her what?" Algae whispered.

"Her moustache, I think," a puzzled Ralph replied.

"I told her to come down before seven-thirty. She knows the way - she just hasn't made an entrance yet," Daphne explained.

"Sorry to interrupt yer Lordshit, but t'ere's somet'ing in t'e courtyard I really t'ink ye ought to see straight away," O'Flaherty insisted urgently.

"Has that old hag shown up again?" Daphne's father surmised, twirling his pistol around a finger in eager anticipation of a shoot-out.

"Oh no, she might scratch my car with those long, sharp, dirty fingernails," Algae gulped.

"T'e car is just fine, I waxed it myself t'is morning," O'Flaherty assured him. "But I t'ink someone is playing a practical joke on us at Lady Daphne's expense. I caught sight o' it from t'e kitchen window and was about to go out and investigate when ye rang. So I t'ought it best to come here and inform ye so t'at we could all go take a look toget'er."

"Good man!" Daphne's father cheered. "Always check with the duty officer first."

"You'd think he'd have the initiative to at least go and look for himself," Algae queried. "It may be nothing at all."

"Why take risks on Equity rates?" reasoned Ralph.

The old soldier rallied his troops. "Come on then, boys, let's go see what's out there. Daphne, you wait here until we sort this out."

"Not on your life," Daphne whined. "You're not leaving me here on my own."

Daphne's father eyed up the other three men, two of whom were still seated at the table, and made a choice on the basis of likely scenarios. "Algae, you stay here with Daphne."

"Nooo!!!" Daphne screeched loudly, like a tabby getting gang-banged by tomcats in a dark alley.

"I don't think that would be a very good idea, sir," Ralph advised tactfully. "You see, they were left by themselves earlier today - with unfortunate consequences."

"What consequences?" Daphne's father asked, his ruddy cheeks puffing up with concern. "She's not pregnant, is she?"

"No, sir. At least, I don't think so ..." Ralph paused for a moment to glance at Algae with raised eyebrows.

Algae shook his head in vigorous denial.

"... suffice to say a terrible row ensued."

"Is that right, Daphne?"

"Yes, Father," she confirmed. "Algae harbours futile and utterly ridiculous designs on my virtue."

"Does he? Well, we can soon rid him of those - surgically, if necessary."

"Daddies, I hate them worse than death," Algae cursed under his breath; then yelped aloud as Daphne kicked him under the table again.

"What was that, laddie?" her father growled.

"I said diddies - I hate them worse than death," Algae groaned.

"Didicoi is a Yiddish word for gypsy," Ralph explained, trying to maintain an *entente cordiale* between Algae and his future father-in-law.

"Is it now? Funny, I was stationed in Palestine for a good many years and never heard it used once. Very well, Ralph, you stay here with Daphne. I'm sure she won't object to that."

Daphne rose and walked around the table, where she stood behind Ralph and began massaging his shoulders while purring like a cat on the scent of tuna.

"This is not a good idea either," Ralph protested, with a vexed conscience. "Algae's a fine fellow, but you may need me out there if things get rough." The wing half rose to his full athletic height and flexed a bicep through his dinner jacket. "As you can see - there's no substitute for the right stuff."

Daphne's father sighed and turned to O'Flaherty in desperation. "How about you? Any objections to keeping my daughter company? Or would you rather return to the fields and assist with the potato crop?"

O'Flaherty hesitated a second too long before answering and Daphne's father stuck his pistol up the shirker's nose.

"There's more than one way a body can assist with the potato crop," he pointed out persuasively.

"Certainly, no objections whatsoever, yer Lordshit," O'Flaherty confirmed, scratching his head in confusion. "Is t'at

Lady Daphne? I t'ought it was Miss Jenny. She's a tine looking woman wit' good hips'n'all, to be sure she is t'at, even t'e Pope would be proud o' her, but ..."

"But what?"

"... but if I'm in here, who's going to show ye where to look out t'ere?"

Daphne slammed the table with her fist.

"I've had enough of this chauvinistic crap!" she announced, with an indignant sense of ire. "What do you think this is? *A Doll's House* (1879)?"

"Daphne!" her father scowled. "You know we don't talk about those modern plays in England. The Lord Chamberlain is a personal friend of mine."

"Really? Most of the Literature faculty at Cambridge think that the Lord Chamberlain is an idiot - and an imbecile - and a moron - and a censor - but what do they know about drama?"

"The Lord Chamberlain is no slouch, he went to Cambridge too - but now he's trying to forestall the sort of social revolution that will lead to men with long hair and dole queues of unemployed barbers," Daphne's father explained, with the sort of foresight that comes from the wisdom of years.

"Do you mean a sexual revolution, Father?"

Algae, Ralph, and O'Flaherty all gasped at the nerve of the girl who dared to use the s-word in front of her father and they ducked behind the chairs to avoid any stray bullets. But the old man seemed to lack the energy to fight against the indefatigable devils of modernity and youth and simply shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't know anything about sex, we never had a word for it," he conceded. "We had a word for men with long hair though ..."

"Cavaliers?" Ralph suggested to Algae.

"That's if you're circumcised," Algae replied.

"Isn't that a roundhead?"

"I'm going outside to look for myself," Daphne suddenly

announced, taking charge of the situation. "You can all either come with me or stay here, hold hands, and swap war stories. Lead the way, O'Flaherty."

"I'm wit' you, ma'am, all t'e way," O'Flaherty replied, with a glint of admiration in his eye. "In all t'e good and lean years, and t'rough all t'e in between years, come what may. Who knows were t'e road may lead us, only a tool would say ..."

"That's my boy!" her father noted proudly, sticking his pistol in his pocket, thrusting out his chest, and folding his arms as she marched off behind the butler.

Algae looked at Ralph and grinned, as if her strident militancy pleased him. Ralph shook his head in disgust as he followed them out of the dining hall and along the hallway; past the wall-mounted crests and armour; accompanied by intrigue and surveilled by the attentive gaze of the family ancestors.

O'Flaherty stepped ahead at the last moment and courteously pushed the huge oak doors of Wulfmarsh Hall apart to reveal a forecourt dimly lit by floodlights.

"Well, where is it?" Daphne's father asked gruffly. "I can't see a thing without my glasses."

"T'at's because yer not looking in t'e right place," O'Flaherty informed him, with even more than his usual hint of impertinence. "It's oder t'ere - behind t'e tree!"

He pointed to the old oak tree, loitering in the penumbra between light and shadow, though they still could not make out anything unusual from their position; so they approached cautiously; keeping close to each other for mutual assurance; still uncertain of what they were being lead into on this heathenly night. Ralph clenched his fists tightly; while Daphne's father gripped the butt of the pistol in his pocket, ready to draw it out again in the event of an ambush.

As they drew nearer to the trunk, Algae made a telling comment. "It looks like someone has hung a mannequin from a branch of that tree. The blonde wig makes it look like Daphne. Someone's hung you in effigy, Daphne."

"That doesn't surprise me. There are some very strange

people around here," she remarked wryly.

The fair-haired mannequin swayed patiently in the breeze like a strip of sail; suspended by the neck with a rope fastened to the same infamous branch that Daphne and Jenny had climbed onto earlier in the day. With its back to the approaching party, the mannequin modelled a dazzling blue, sleeveless party-dress; with a plunging neckline, and slits, sequins, and tassels extending just below the knee. It wore no shoes, and thus exposed a remarkably detailed set of painted toe-nails on mud-splattered feet that were almost a metre clear of the ground.

"I didn't realise mannequins had such life-like feet," Ralph observed on closer inspection. "And that's a very expensive-looking dress for a dummy to wear hanging from a tree. If you weren't standing beside me at this moment, Daphne, I'd be starting to get worried."

"Would you, Ralph? How sweet," Daphne smiled, taking his arm again.

Algae patted one of the mannequin's buttocks, imparting a moment that caused it to swing round and face them, just as Newtonian mechanics would have predicted; but the wig falling to the floor, releasing a mop of auburn hair to flop down over the mannequin's ears, was more like an act of God, and they found themselves staring up at a familiar face.

"My God, it's Jenny!" Ralph exclaimed in horror.

Her head was slumped to one side and her eyes were closed as if in eternal sleep. A sheet of paper was pinned to her chest. The paper read:

**YOU SHOULD BE SO LUCKY, DAPHNE
WULFMARSH!
SIGNED
THE SONS OF LUCA!!!**

The stunned little group gathered to mourn at her feet like the gathering beneath the cross. All except Algae, the incorrigible medical student, who had the temerity to reach up and

take the note from Jenny's breast. He briefly pondered its significance as the others stood silent in prayer.

"What do you think they mean by this?" he wondered aloud. "You should be so lucky?"

Ralph was in no mood for an inquest into the semantics of the note, but the empirically minded Algae was sufficiently encouraged to take a closer look at the victim. He produced a small glass phial from his jacket pocket, removed the screw-cap and reached up high to hold it under her nose.

The restorative vapour drifted up into her olfactory system and Jenny began to make moaning sounds like a well-bred young woman suddenly exposed to moderate discomfort. The little party of mourners took another shock to their system as they imbibed the miracle. The last thing they were expecting was a resurrection before three days were up. Jenny opened her eyes and gazed down serenely on the gathering with messianic grace. Then, as her wits returned, she started writhing and screaming in panic. Her desperate entreats brought the stunned onlookers back to life as well.

"She's not dead. Quickly, go get a knife from the kitchen, Algae," urged Ralph, as he put his arms around her thighs to support the weight.

"What are you waiting for, O'Flaherty? Get up that tree and cut her down with your potato peeler," Daphne's father ordered briskly.

Poor old O'Flaherty, despite his advancing years, dutifully shinned up the trunk like a champion coconut picker; then worked his way along the branch to where the rope was tied and picked the knot apart with his potato peeler just as Algae returned with a knife.

Ralph caught the limp Jenny in his strong arms and carried her into Wulfmarsh Hall, followed closely by the others, leaving poor old O'Flaherty still stuck up the tree. As any leopard knows, climbing up is much easier than climbing down, and the old butler cried out in alarm as he fell out of the tree just as the party of guests vanished from sight.

"Take her through to the study and stoke her up with a few

measures of brandy,” Daphne’s father ordered, as they entered the foyer. “The best cure for shock there is.”

Ralph nodded in agreement and walked off with Jenny still unconscious in his arms, and Daphne by his side; pretending to be concerned for her guest, just rescued from the tree, and leaving her father to confer with Algae.

“I’ll use the telephone to call Constable Jenkins and tell him what’s going on. He’ll round up some local boys from the village, and in the morning we’ll beat those woods and have ourselves a hag shoot.”

“Are you sure that’s legal?” Algae asked doubtfully. “They may not be in season.”

“Anything chasing after Daphne is in season,” the old warrior declared, taking his pistol from his belt and waving it under Algae’s nose.

“So they should be,” Algae concurred, swallowing a big anxious lump in his throat.

Daphne’s father put a friendly arm around Algae’s shoulders and lowered his voice. “In the meantime, now that we’ve got a moment together, maybe we should discuss our own dispositions in more detail.”

“I beg your pardon?” Algae queried in alarm. “Isn’t that getting a bit personal? You may be Daphne’s father but we hardly know each other - we’ve only just met.”

“Forces, laddie, forces! We need to decide how to deploy our limited resources against another incursion. What did you do in the war?”

“I wish people would stop asking me that,” Algae declared irately, leaving Daphne’s father to make his phone call and heading back towards the study.

The telephone was attached to the wall in the foyer near the main entrance that opened onto the courtyard. The small, drum-shaped ear piece sat on a clip and was connected to the ugly black contraption by a thin cable. The mouthpiece, which callers had to speak into, was fixed to the casing. A more impressive cable ran along the wall and up towards the ceiling, where it snaked its way outside to the external telephone line.

Daphne's father rested his gun on top of the casing, lifted the ear piece, and gave the dial a spin with his finger to connect with the operator in the Delhi call centre.

"Constable Jenkins!" he barked into the mouth-piece, and waited impatiently for the connection to go through.

As he stood by the phone, he thought he heard a sound of hurried footsteps coming from one of the narrow corridors that fed into the foyer. Then the light from the chandelier, high overhead, suddenly began to grow dim as if by a supernatural hand - or the work of a clever electrician. Daphne's father looked up to see the last of the light fade away, but was distracted by a weary voice on the phone.

"Jenkins? Get on your bicycle and come over to Wulf-marsh Hall right away - and don't forget to bring your note book with you. There are some very strange things going on around here tonight ... yes, I know it's Hallowe'en and half-term but ..." his words were cut short by the scything sound of an axe blade slicing through the air, severing the earpiece cord and biting into the oak panelling of the wall within inches of the old soldier's head.

"Remember me?" a voice hissed from the shadow. "Jack's back!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jenny was lying on the couch with the back of a hand draped melodramatically across her forehead, whilst holding a fine crystal goblet in the other. Ralph was sitting on the arm of the couch, pouring dark claret from a decanter into his own goblet.

"Where's Daphne?" asked Algae, noting her highly conspicuous absence the moment he entered the old chapel - converted to a study. He was still clutching the carving knife he had requisitioned from the kitchen.

"Gone to change again," Ralph informed him.

"But that'll be her fifth outfit since we left Cambridge just twenty-four hours ago." Algae tapped his watch with the knife blade like a time keeper. "The rest of us have only had three."

"I've had four and a half, if you include last night," Jenny interjected. "I was wearing a kitsch smock over my vest this afternoon when I was painting my nails in the garden - just before I made out with Daphne under a tree."

Algae's mouth dropped open, but Ralph just shook his head dismissively. "She's in a disinhibited state of shock. She doesn't know what she's saying - the poor, repressed thing," he explained, cupping her forehead and stroking her hair.

"I'm not joking. I really did wear a smock," Jenny insisted, with a complete lack of inhibition. "But I had to take it off - or the spilt nail-varnish would have stained Daphne's white dress when she was licking my tits."

"Women always get more outfits to wear - it's in their contract. But don't let Daphne know that you're counting or

she'll accuse you of eyeing her up again," Ralph advised Algae.

"Why did you let her go on her own?" Algae ventured accusingly.

"Women do like their privacy for that sort of thing, especially when you're around," Ralph reminded him.

"Not when they're at risk of being abducted and murdered, they don't," he replied, embedding the carving knife in the coffee table to make the point with menace. "Besides, Daph's no girlie prude, she does it just to spite me. She's always stripping off in front of other men. She's an exhibitionist, that's why she plays all those revealing parts on stage that respectable actresses refuse to do."

"She says that only happens when the director tricks her," chuckled Ralph. "You should be flattered, Algae. She must think you're more virtuous than the rest of us 'men' - the way Mary Magdalene thought about Jesus."

"I'm going to look for her," Algae decided.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, virtuous or not, she'll accuse you of being a peeping-Tom; and for another ..." Ralph gestured with a nod of his head to something behind Algae, "... she just walked in."

Algae turned round warily. Daphne was standing directly behind him wearing army boots, camouflage trousers, and a khaki t-shirt. She had a towel over her shoulders and her hair was soaking wet - and mousy blonde again. She clutched a rolled-up bundle of similar clothing and a spare pair of boots under one arm.

"Daphne, why are you wearing those paramilitary-style army clothes?" Algae inquired, with a stern voice and a heavy hint of disapproval.

"I'm not going to ruin my dress in a counter-insurgency war against the natives. Luckily, an ex-boyfriend was a Black and Tan who left his spare kit with me on leave and never came back for it. They say the Fenians got him one night

drinking undercover in a Kilburn pub.”

“But your family are Catholic,” Algae reminded her. “Why would they play host to a Black and Tan?”

Daphne shrugged in a bemused Franco-Irish sort of way. “They say there’s an old painting hanging in Stormont Castle of Pope Innocent XI blessing Billy Orange and his boys before the Battle of the Boyne. Jenny, these are for you. If your dress takes any more of a beating, the shop won’t take it back on Monday.”

Daphne generously dropped the second bundle on the sofa at Jenny’s feet; tacitly hinting that she, too, should change; then resumed drying her hair with the towel.

Jenny glanced suspiciously at the camouflage material, then looked at Daphne and sniffed the air haughtily. “I don’t think so. Look what happened the last time I took your wardrobe advice. Once bitten, twice shy,” she decided, kicking the bundle off the couch and onto the floor with the swipe of a shapely ankle.

“Lightening never strikes twice,” Daphne insisted, picking up the bundle and throwing it back onto the couch. “You’ll be alright this time. And you need something to cover your feet - they’re filthy.”

“What happened to your shoes?” asked Algae.

“I don’t know,” she confessed, stretching out her shapely, mud-splattered feet for everyone to see. “Maybe whoever abducted me has still got them.”

“A fetishist,” Ralph suggested, lifting up one of Jenny’s feet and sucking the mud from her toes.

“I still smell a rat,” Jenny complained, maintaining an accusatory eye on Daphne; even as she modestly pulled her foot from Ralph’s mouth and put on the boots.

“You should never look a gift horse in the mouth,” Daphne advised her.

“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” she retorted.

“Actually, I’m a young Turk,” Daphne revealed, raising her arms and performing a quick belly-dance. “Father was our military attache in Istanbul when I was born.”

Algae took the notice from his pocket which had been pinned to Jenny's chest and handed it to Ralph, together with the wig and the stage harness used to hang Jenny from the tree. "What do you think is really going on here?"

"It's fairly obvious," Ralph decided, weighing the firm evidence in his hands. "These Sons of Luca grabbed Jenny, thinking that she was Daphne because she was wearing this blonde wig. Then they discovered their mistake and strung her up with this harness in a symbolic gesture of defiance; together with the note warning Daphne that she wouldn't be so lucky if she fell into their hands. Great special effect - I've never seen it done so convincingly in the movies."

Daphne took the note from Ralph with a stiff sigh and began to run the words tunefully over her tongue in a melody. "I should be so lucky - lucky, lucky, lucky ..."

"Hmm, sounds plausible," Algae concurred. "It was fairly decent of them not to harm Jenny when they realised their mistake. Maybe they're not all bad after all."

"Not all bad!" Daphne snorted. "They've just tried to kill me - and they didn't even have the decency to wait until after dinner."

She spat into the fire in disgust, causing a flame to flare up violently.

"Is that what happened?" Ralph asked Jenny, sitting behind her and gently massaging her bruised neck and shoulders as she lay on the couch.

"I really don't know what happened," she confessed, slowly shaking her head in confusion.

"But you're the only witness. Didn't you get a good look at their faces?"

"The last thing I remember is the panel in the bedroom wall sliding back and a strong medicinal odour drifting out - like my gynaecologist uses."

"Chloroform," Algae proposed.

"Whatever it was knocked me out cold. The next thing I remember is looking down on you all like an angel of grace."

"She does that all the time," Daphne jibed.

"It was really weird," Jenny insisted. "A mystical out-of-body experience."

"None of us heard or saw anything," Ralph confirmed. "So how did they manage to sneak in, grab Jenny, and sneak out again undetected?"

"Through the dungeon," suggested Algae. "There's a tunnel leading from the dungeon up into the garden, isn't there, Daphne?"

Daphne coyly turned away from them, seeming reluctant to confirm or deny the existence of a tunnel.

"Well, Daphne?" Ralph inquired sternly. "Is there a tunnel? You did say there was an ice cream and opium route for the tourists."

"That dungeon door is kept securely locked and Father has the only key," she replied.

"Maybe someone picked the lock," Algae posited.

"Or stole the key!" Ralph surmised.

"My God, that means they could get in here and grab us at any time," Jenny gasped.

"What have you got to worry about? They had you and threw you back like a worthless sprat. I'm the big fish they really want to fry," Daphne scowled.

"That's something I don't understand," Ralph had to admit, rubbing his chin meditatively. "The old witch on the road threatened to kill us all. But when she had a perfectly good opportunity to finish off Jenny, she didn't take it. Why did she change her mind?"

"I said at the time, she was just drunk and gobbing off," Daphne reminded them. "Now do you believe me?"

"Maybe the old witch had nothing to do with it," Algae suggested. "The encounter on the road was simply another coincidence - a red herring. There could be another agency at work here inside Wulfmarsh Hall. Someone we haven't thought of yet. This note is written in the same creepy font as the warning beside the door of the dungeon."

"Maybe they still teach people to write this way in Fenland schools," ventured Ralph. "It's unlikely to be anyone else."

You can have too much of a coincidence, even Daphne would have to admit that."

"I'm admitting nothing," Daphne replied cagily. "Coincidences happen all the time, that's how the Titanic went down."

"I thought she hit a growler?"

"But the chances of hitting one in all that ocean and then sinking were pretty remote."

"Maybe they spared me because I'm entirely innocent and blameless of anything?" Jenny twittered sweetly.

"Oh? And I suppose I'm not?" Daphne snorted, folding her arms and shrugging her shoulders indignantly. "That's your problem, Jenny. You always think you're so much better than the rest of us."

"Not better - just more photogenic," she confessed, with an angelic smile.

"You'll be alright, Daphne," Algae tried to assure her, making the big mistake of putting a hand on her shoulder.

"And who's going to protect me from your slimy fronds, Algae?" she replied, pulling open the drawer of a writing desk and taking out another piece from the Wulfmarsh collection of long-barrelled colonial revolvers.

Daphne held up the weapon with one finger on the trigger and the others squeezing the thick rubbery grip. Algae immediately took two steps back, threatened more by the phallic symbolism than the prospect of a violent death.

"Don't worry, it's not loaded yet," she taunted him, while stroking the barrel with her other hand in a grossly indecent fashion. She flipped open the breech and began to load expertly from a box of loose shells taken from the drawer. "Father loves guns," she explained. "You can find them all over the house in all sorts of unlikely places. But he was causing structural damage to the inside of the building so O'Flagerty and I started hiding his bullets and giving him blanks to play with. We break out the live ammo when there's an external threat to deal with. We must be the only stately home in Cambridgeshire that's never been burgled without at

least one burglar getting shot in the back as he tried to run.”

Daphne took aim in the direction of her three guests and fired. A priceless vase shattered behind them before anyone could protest.

“There, that’s better,” she purred, licking the barrel with feline satisfaction and slipping the box of shells into a side pocket of her camouflage trousers.

“Don’t you read *Barrels and Bullets*?” Algae stormed furiously.

Daphne’s eyes lit up in amazement. “Yes, Algae, it just so happens that I do. I have a lifetime subscription. Don’t tell me we have something in common after all?”

“Not exactly. Someone left a trade magazine for gun-totting psychopaths on the table in the dentist’s waiting room once,” he recalled. “Boredom numbs the pain of toothache, so I had a quick flick through the pages, and it definitely warned that you should never point guns at people - not even for a joke!”

“Unless, of course, you intend to shoot them,” she cited, twirling the gun by its trigger guard and then pointing it straight at Algae’s heart. “We’re not in the safe, secure citadel of Cambridge University library now. This is bandit country and there are hostiles all around. Think of it as a state of emergency; with the necessary imposition of special measures to protect the public, as well as the sons and daughters of the Cabinet and their friends.”

“Aren’t you overreacting a bit?” Algae challenged her. “Not even the Cabinet would kneejerk this quickly into removing our civil liberties on such a tenuous pretext. Why don’t we just call the police, have a few more drinks, and wait for them to arrive with flashing blue lights on their handlebars? Then they can sort this out using correct police procedures.”

“You mean dodgy notes and false confessions?” quipped Ralph.

“Oh Algae, no wonder I don’t love you. You’re so boring you could enter politics,” Daphne slandered him.

An apparition suddenly appeared at the door resembling a

creature from a black lagoon. Jenny sat up and screamed as it staggered into the study, dripping slimy mud all over the clean floor, with arms outstretched as if to grab her.

"Stay back!" Daphne warned, levelling the gun at the monstrous thing.

"Don't shoot, yer Ladyshit! It's me!" O'Flaherty cried out in alarm, fearing he was about to go the way of a burglar and raising his hands in abject surrender.

"Good God!" Daphne exclaimed. "You look like you've been in a ruck. Did they try to drown you in the mud?"

"I tell out o' t'e tree after rescuing Miss Jenny."

"You're not hurt are you?" asked Jenny, her sweet dulcet voice loaded with blameless innocence. "It's all my fault," she sobbed. "If I hadn't been so stupid as to let myself be taken, then none of this would have happened."

"Bless ye, lassie, no, I'm not hurt at all," he assured her, with a casual wink. "I landed in a pool o' horseshit and it broke my fall."

Daphne sniffed the air and giggled. "So that's what the smell is - I thought Algae had just guffed."

"Have I yer permission to retire in good order for half an hour in order to bathe and change out o' t'ese soiled old clothes?" O'Flaherty pleaded.

"You'd better ask Father. He may want you for something else first."

"Yeah, like a dummy for bayonet practice," Ralph hinted wryly.

"I've already looked for him, ma'am. But I can't find him anywhere."

"He's phoning the police," Algae informed them.

"We don't need the police, this is family business," Daphne declared, twirling the gun again like Calamity Jane.

"We do have to report this though," advised Ralph. "A crime has been committed."

"Two crimes," Daphne insisted. "Don't forget, Algae abducted and falsely imprisoned me earlier today."

"The jury might be inclined to believe that you were com-

plicit in that one. How did he manage to tie you up so easily?"

"He's very strong - for a weakling," she insisted. "It's a moot point. The Home Office expressly forbids acts of bondage - consensual or otherwise."

"Hollywood directors get away with it all the time - they're always tying up women in their films," railed Jenny.

"In non-sexual contexts," Daphne mitigated. "Otherwise it's censored. It makes sense if you think about it. Women will always be at risk from the brutish men they marry - until they achieve financial independence - then they'll start discovering things about themselves that their mothers never told them."

"So what was the context between you two?" Ralph queried. "I thought you were rehearsing for a cabaret act."

"Well, I certainly was," Daphne assured him. "But Algae's real motivation is anyone's guess. This is all purely academic, we're not inviting those nosey 'talking to God' nippleheads across the threshold to sift through my family photo album."

"Think of it as sending for the cavalry in a western like *The Adventures of Buffalo Bill* (1917). They won't get here straight away; they might not even arrive until it's too late, but we can circle the wagons and make a gallant last stand until then."

"O'Flaherty, how did you know we were coming this weekend?" Daphne probed, with an inquisitorial edge to her tone.

"I didn't," he replied, taken aback by the question. "T'was a complete surprise to me when ye showed up at t'e door claiming to be Lady Daphne. What happened to t'e sideburns in yer family picture?"

"I shaved them off - it's easier to pull men without them," she revealed. "Straight men - that is. I don't go much for the ginger types. When they find out I'm a woman, they expect me to wear a false moustache and a strap-on phallus."

"I was told not to expect ye until Christmas - when ye'd come home for half a day to collect yer presents and raid t'e drinks cabinet," O'Flaherty continued to explain.

"Then why were the beds in our rooms made up and the fireplaces prepared for us?"

"I always keep spare rooms ready for unexpected guests," he insisted. "In case someone breaks down outside t'e front door and wants to risk spending t'e night in a spooky old mansion full o' ghosts, ghouls, and psychopaths. It happens all t'e time in books, tilms, and musicals."

"But this isn't fiction, and we're miles from the main road," Algae pointed out.

"People get lost - especially around here where t'e council are too tight to pay for new road signs."

"Alright O'Flaherty, if you can't find Father, phone the police yourself and tell them what's happened, then have your bath," she conceded with a sigh. "I think we can rely on a slow response time from the rozzers until we shoot an intruder - then they'll turn up *en masse*."

"Sorry, ma'am, I can't do t'at," he replied bluntly. His tone was defiant and a faint shadow of rebellion seemed to fall across his murky face.

"Why not?" Daphne inquired sternly.

"T'e telephone line has been cut and t'ere's no way t'e Post Office will send an engineer out here at t'is time o' t'e night."

"What's it got to do with the Post Office?" Algae wondered. "Why didn't you choose a phone company with a twenty-four-hour emergency-service-agreement?"

"T'e Post Office is our phone company," a bemused O'Flaherty explained. "It's everyone's phone company. It's British government policy to maintain strict political control oder all media and telecommunications to keep us all safe."

"Safe from what?" inquired Algae

"I don't know," O'Flaherty had to admit, scratching his head. "Tis one o' t'ose strange euphemisms British politicians and journalists use about t'ings t'at embarrass t'em. T'e Post Office is a state run monopoly, so t'ey're under no obligation, and have no incentive, to provide technical assistance in a hurry. Not only t'at, t'ey're on strike again."

"Not only that, what's the point of trying to phone an emergency service if the phone's not working?" Daphne frowned, shaking her head. "The Fabians want to abolish the

House of Lords - but how can we entrust the future of the Empire to plebs like Algae who lack any common sense?"

"*Common Sense* (1776) lost us a large part of the Empire," Ralph smirked.

"You could always borrow a neighbour's phone - if you had any friendly neighbours within a five mile radius," Algae replied, in rebuttal.

"Algae's right, we should leave new technologies to private enterprise," Ralph concurred.

"Yer Majesty's loyal ministers are all deeply afraid o' any innovations in t'e way people communicate wit' each o'er," O'Flaherty observed shrewdly. "T'ey'll never forget what mischievous treason Tom Paine got up to wit' t'e printing press; and now t'e Marconi-assisted Russian Revolution has got t'em even jumpier t'an eder. And t'e little-Englanders wit' t'e vote t'ink t'ey're going to be murdered in t'eir beds above t'eir grocer shops by mad-crazed-sex-murderers coming out o' t'e pictures after a subversive European cinema night. Sure, if it wasn't for t'e strictest film censor in t'e whole Western World to keep t'em all happy, t'ere'd be no such t'ing as a reel o' film in a tin can in t'is country, unless it twas smuggled in t'rough customs, never mind a boring film industry."

"There's no film industry to speak of anyway. As soon as I graduate, I'm off to Hollywood for a bit of artistic freedom," Ralph announced, punching the air and extending his arms as he broke into animated song. "Hooray for Hollywood! ... California, here I come..."

"But don't ye t'ink it better to stay and tight for t'e right to party - and t'e freedom to make films in yer own country, rat'er t'an running away like an economic migrant and seeking asylum in a country wit' a more liberal view of t'e arts?"

"It could take decades for our censors-of-the-undead to be laid in their graves and staked through the heart. If I hang around here that long, I'll lose my chance to be a great artist on a point of principle. A bit like biting your nose off to spite your face."

"T'ere's a new medium being developed called television,

where you can beam films directly into homes from yer neighbours wit' friendlier people, more civilised drinking cultures, and better behaved children, like t'e Netherlands and Denmark," O'Flaherty revealed presciently. "T'ere's no way t'e government can censor it. Men and women wit' t'e education o' police officers don't know how to isolate t'e parts o' t'e electromagnetic field t'ey consider to be degenerate from t'e rest. Quanta are virtual particles - t'ey don't sit still long enough, according to t'e uncertainty principle, or t'e momentum uncertainty goes to infinity. T'at's a t'eoretical prediction o' quantum mechanics, t'e most accurate description o' God's universe yet devised by man - better eden t'an t'e Holy Bible - but t'e great British censors don't like t'e deviant uncertainty o' modern physics any more t'an t'ey like t'e modern plays."

"A simple prediction of theoretical physics like the uncertainty principle won't stop the Home Office from banning European directors without Hollywood clout," Ralph predicted grimly. "The electromagnetic spectrum is a public place and will be policed by the Met, just like the theatres and art galleries."

"Well, in t'at case," O'Flaherty sighed, "ye may as well take up painting. T'e ministers are not so strict on painting - especially if ye make it Biblical and allegorical - but just be aware of t'e laws against blasphemy and republicanism; and for crissakes don't paint any druids being sodomized by Roman soldiers or ye'll end up slopping out in Pentonville Jail."

"State control of the growing media and communications sectors is a surefire route to class division, poor labour relations, and economic decline," envisaged Algae. "Ask any political scientist about rational choice."

"We don't have political scientists in this country yet, never mind rational choice," Ralph posited gloomily. "Choice is strictly rationed - just like the wireless stations."

"Then there's no one to save us from becoming a backward, inefficient, narrow-minded, parochial little island race; a nanny-state, hopelessly in debt to the United States and run from gentlemen's clubs in Soho by Sir Apparatchik, Lord

Quango, and a bunch of clueless politicians in waistcoats; with falling productivity; smug satire; dreadful, dreary television; horrendously ugly car designs; and no resistance to British diseases like the winter of discontent and the three day week."

"Ye could always drill for oil under t'e Nort' Sea," O'Flaherty suggested. "A strike there would help pay off all t'ose American loans from t'e war by about 2007."

"A three day week sounds great," Ralph pitched in. "Who wants to work more than that?"

Algae was less optimistic about the future. "The legacy of all this repression; when we're finally liberated from the Jack 'boots' in the Home Office; will be a loutish, selfish, drunken, violent, litigious population; like unruly teenagers coming of age and mindlessly rebelling against once strict parents; with no deference or respect for anything or anyone - except footballers, singers, and gangsters."

"And movie stars," quipped Ralph.

"Ye can't blame all o' Britain's pending economic and social problems o' t'e twentieth century on t'e negative social effects o' tilm and t'eatre censorship," O'Flaherty reasoned. "T'at's like t'e politicians blaming Von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* (1919) for t'e rising divorce rates."

"They say life imitates art," ventured Ralph. "They could be right about *Blind Husbands*, but is that sufficient reason to ban it?"

"Nobody cares about tilm-makers' rights - it's t'e economy, stoopid! - and fundamentalist religion," O'Flaherty sensibly pointed out. "Ye can't be challenging and creative wit' yer movie camera, or enjoy civic freedom, when yer kids are starvin', the factory gates are locked, yer on t'e dole wit' negative equity, and ye can't meet t'e mortgage repayments on yer £200 semi."

"But art censorship in a democracy is an obvious symptom of a flawed society - shot through with acute psychosociological anxieties about sex," diagnosed Algae.

"You mean Freud got it right for once," quipped Ralph.

"In a more enlightened society of educated people it just

wouldn't be deemed necessary."

"Who'd pay £200 for a semi?" baulked Ralph. "That's nearly double the average annual wage."

"Foreign investors and people who buy to let don't mind t'e house prices," O'Flaherty noted. "T'e shop-keeper class are moving into property in a big way. Soon, ye'll be a nation o' tenants again, wit' everyone on a six-mont' lease and beholden to t'e agents o' t'e new property barons - just like in Ireland before t'e potato famine forced everyone to move to London."

"When my father was homeless, he got on his bike and looked for a house," Ralph recalled proudly, anticipating the advice of ministers.

"What if yer bike gets a puncture?"

"Well, then, pretend it's your son's bike and get a child tax credit benefit to have it fixed. But I'm not concerned about dole queues. Demand for escapism goes up in periods of depression and more stage actors are willing to debase themselves in ground-breaking movies. I'll get richer, whilst everyone else gets poorer - like Charlie Chaplin in the war."

"But yer gonna be t'e sick man o' Europe and get yer arses kicked by t'e ubermenschen o' t'e German economic miracle every time it comes to penalties."

"Why is it that he can say 'arse' without attracting a storm of protest?" Daphne whispered to Jenny.

"He's a man," Jenny explained.

"That is a bit worrying," Ralph was forced to admit. "What is the point of winning a world war if we can't win the World Cup afterwards?"

"How can you worry about football at a time like this?" moaned Jenny. "We're cut off from civilisation! Now we're really for it. They'll pick us off one by one, like they do in those cheap, nasty, novella nasties on the Home Office banned-list."

"How would you know what's on the banned-list?" Algae wondered in surprise.

"It was published in the *Daily Mail* - so people can inform

on booksellers and literary critics who try to order copies."

"But that's just a list of titles. How do you know whether or not the literature really is nasty? It's a very patronising adjective; not one I'd use myself, unless I was talking to children or people who read tabloid newspapers."

"Algae's got a point, a novel is only nasty if a policeman says it is," Ralph concurred. "*There's no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are either well written, or badly written. That is all.*"

"The *Daily Mail* serialised one - abridged and censored, of course," Jenny revealed.

"Was it as nasty as they say?" asked Algae.

"Horrific. A gratuitous stream of consciousness."

"I love literary nasties," Daphne purred, whilst stroking the barrel of her gun with a hand, as if to insult every man in the room. "This is going to be even better than I thought. Don't just stand there, O'Flaherty, there's no time to lose. Go have your bath - and see if you can find a weapon."

"Yes, ma'am. I t'ink I know where I can lay my hands on one," he proposed, with a smutty smile, as he departed.

"I like him, he's got spirit for a servant," Daphne observed. "I just hope Father doesn't bag him until this is all over. We may need him if the numbers are stacked-up against us. You three stay here, I'm going to look for Father."

"Aren't you going to leave a weapon here for us?" Algae protested.

"Algae, you wouldn't know how to use anything more deadly than a jar of vaseline and a syringe. But there are plenty of swords on the wall over there. Just don't cut yourself and bleed on the carpet. This is a priceless old rug that Father stole from the Taj Mahal."

"What about me? I can shoot. I was an officer in the war," Ralph reminded her.

"How could I forget," she hissed, flashing her tongue for an instant like a hungry lizard.

Jenny frowned at the hint of a revelation, but said nothing. Algae, likewise, took note.

"I'll think about it," Daphne informed him. "In the mean time, stay here until I find Father and we write out an action plan with a ridiculous number of aims, objectives, and bullet points to achieve our targets."

"We don't need bullet points - we don't have any targets," Ralph dissented.

"Is there a difference between aims and objectives?" Jenny asked naively.

"We're not even employed in the public sector," protested Algae.

"You will be - when Father conscripts you into the *posse comitatus* and sends you out to bag those Sons of Luca. And woe betide anyone who fails to read his bullet points. In the meantime, you're all subject to a youth restraining order and a curfew to keep you indoors." She gestured to the study doors with the barrel of the gun. "These doors, to be precise."

"But what if we want to go to the loo?" Jenny squealed in alarm, crossing her legs and covering her crotch with her hands.

"You'll just have to endure - or improvise."

"But we're not teenagers anymore - this infringes our human rights," Algae testified.

"You should read Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867)," Daphne advised. "The leader of the party with a majority in the House of Commons is invited by the Sovereign to form a committee, known as the Cabinet, which controls Parliament through a corrupt and venal system of patronage. Hence, the leader of this committee is an elected dictator for up to five years, without having to worry about any clever little up-start with a law degree, who spent a year in America, telling him about the division of powers and the Bill of Rights. This is England - we have history enough of our own! If the leader wants to expel the Jews, or make them wear little yellow badges - like the anti-Semitic Edward I did between bouts of hammering the Scots - he can, with the full connivance of the fox-hunting judiciary; so long as he has a simple majority of arse-licking crony MPs hoping for a ministerial job or seeking

a favour.”

“Daphne!” Jenny squealed, her sense of taste and decency offended again by bad language.

“If you’re going to swear all the time, you may as well do stand-up and make money out of it,” Ralph advised.

Daphne shrugged and continued with her civics lecture. “The leader can do anything - except ban fox-hunting - because the peers have a built-in majority in the House of Lords. That’s why they call it the House of Lords. You don’t have any human rights under the present constitutional set-up, Algae; and even if you did, you’d have no mechanism to challenge the whims of a sovereign Parliament. Don’t forget, our founding fathers were the Plantagenets; a family not noted for their liberal values. You’ve heard of the English Inquisition, haven’t you? Feared throughout Catholic Europe. Ask anyone from Madrid who’s worked in London.”

“Don’t you mean the Spanish Inquisition?” Jenny presumed.

“The Spanish Inquisition merely sought to suppress religious heresy - the English Inquisition stamped out flirting in the office.”

“Just a minute - there are three of us here and only one of you,” Algae pointed out persuasively, after a quickly taken exit poll with zero margin of error. “That means you constitute the minority and we should be in power.”

“Actually, I have four votes - mine; O’Flaherty’s, which I control because we belong to the same medieval anti-pluralist religion; and Father’s, which I control because we’re family.”

“But that’s only three!”

“And I have a business vote,” she added, waving the gun in the air to enforce the law of the shop-keeper. “You’ll just have to trust me to protect your civil rights and do the best thing for the estate until the next election. Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. No freedom of speech, but no pogroms either - that’s the middle way. We’ve got to be tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime. That means I’ll shoot first and serve the asbos afterwards, understand?”

“But if we’re stuck in here, who’s going to save you when you get into trouble out there?” Algae mused. “You’ll be no good as Giselle if you get caught in a bear trap - unless you have a really good doctor who specialises in reconstructive bone surgery.”

Daphne was unimpressed by this wise, cautionary advice. “I’ve worked with bear traps all my life. As a youth, I used to help Father catch poachers for pocket money. So be warned, Algae. If you try to save me this time, you could end up singing like a castrato long after your spots have cleared; and the only way to reconstruct you would be to make the world’s first bionic man,” she proposed, pushing the pistol into his groin to make the point.

“Will that make him better than he was before?” Ralph wondered. “Better, stronger, faster?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The servants quarters were located in the lower west wing of the stately home. A curious adjunct extending into the maw of the adjacent woods, seen from the air like an arm gripped behind the back of Wulfmarsh Hall; as if the elegant structure were held hostage by the gnarled and twisted trees that were crowding in on the western flank like a besieging army.

This dimly lit annex, kept hidden from respectable view, could be accessed via the kitchen; which had in the past required a large number of underlings to keep the toffs well fed and suitably amused. Two parallel pathways, partitioned by a firewall, ran from the kitchen to the separate male and female sleeping quarters. In the racy days of bygone opulence, male and female servants were not allowed to become intimately acquainted by squeezing past each other in the same corridor or, heaven forbid, by entering each other's living quarters; and so, as is common in repressed societies, they wasted inordinate amounts of time and energy - which could have been devoted to scientific study - devising ingenious, yet ultimately facile, ways in which to nudge the boundaries and strictures of the law.

O'Flaherty had arrived on the scene after all the other servants had gone, and so had no one to be intimate with but himself, at least for the time being; which to him was no great shame since, perhaps a little surprisingly given his age, stoop, and wizened appearance, there was no one he loved better than himself.

The male servants' washroom had been designed as a com-

munal centre for ablutions along the lines of an army barracks, with a row of washhand basins and shaving mirrors fixed to one wall and half a dozen bathtubs lined up perpendicular to the opposite one. An exposed pedestal, without the luxury of a wooden seat, squatted between each tub, with its cistern tank screwed to the wall high overhead. Personal privacy was not normally an option for servants; unless, of course, you were the last one in residence.

By candlelight - servants were not given lightbulbs to play with - O'Flaherty plugged the nearest bathtub and turned on the hot and cold taps to draw twin cascades of water from the pipes. Steaming hot and icy cold mingled in courtship over the chips and cracks of the old enamel coating of the tub. Cheap bath salts provided a catalyst, adding effervescent sparkle to the mix. Vapour rose from the torrid coalescence to cover the plain bath tiles on the wall with a moist, thin layer. Surface tension pulled the condensation into droplets, and gravity drew the droplets into trickling little rivulets that ran down the smooth surface of the tiles.

The bathroom was situated just across the corridor from O'Flaherty's spartan, but spacious, sleeping quarters; also precariously lit by candles. The room was originally laid out for half a dozen single beds and cheap wardrobes, though he had moved all but one of the beds and wardrobes into an adjacent room to give himself more floor space.

The remaining bed was decisively unmade and the wardrobe lay wide open to the world. A dressing table with a stool and triptych mirrors occupied one corner; while an unusual collection of clothes lay scattered, unfolded, and in a generally untidy disarray on the linoleum floor; suggesting that O'Flaherty's room had either been ransacked recently, or used by a great actor without his dresser to pick up his costumes. Either way, it wasn't what one might have expected of a fastidious and dedicated domestic servant.

O'Flaherty paused before a fine-grained, monochromatic poster of a semi-naked young man on a surfboard, adhering to the wall opposite his bed. A Californian single malt stood

on a small table by the bedside, and he poured a liberal measure into a glass to help restore his circulation, while savouring the image of the god-like creature riding a wave in some tropical beach paradise.

He grinned to himself and turned to a full-length mirror nearby to study the reflection of an old man in wet muddy clothes - now standing remarkably straight, as if blessed by a sudden and miraculous cure for his lumbago. His body heat was causing steam to rise from the wet mud on his broad shoulders as he stripped out of the soiled garments and stood naked before his own reflection. A smooth, tanned physique of admirable proportions had been sculpted over a fine bone structure. Still, the tired old hair was grey and the wrinkled face entirely out of keeping with such a fit, lean body that rippled with so much highly toned muscle.

He sat down at the dressing table and removed the wig to reveal a dark glossy mane, gelled back over his scalp. The wig found its way onto a convenient wig stand sitting on the dressing table - a wax sculpture of a head mounted on a spike that bore some resemblance to Douglas Haig - the educated soldier.

O'Flaherty peeled off the putty on his nose, then squirted baby lotion from a man-sized plastic bottle onto cotton wool and began to scrub his face. The make-up quickly dissolved - and so did the warts and the wrinkles. He wiped his face with a towel and brushed his teeth to restore a set of gleaming white gnashers before looking into the mirror once more with a broad smile to remind himself of his true identity.

"Hi there, handsome. Welcome back to Wulfmarsh Hall, you wily old dingo!" His self-greeting came with more antipodean arrogance than Irish blarney. "Just wait till those drongos get a look at you. They're goin' to get the shock of their tiny lives," he prophesied.

O'Flaherty liked music. Loud music - in your face, so to speak. And he wasn't adverse to sharing his culture with the neighbours. Mainly jazz, remixed in curious ways that few of his contemporaries would have appreciated at the time. He

did everything to music, even played with his toy battleship in the bath. An activity made possible by an extension lead which plugged into a socket in his bedroom and snaked out across the corridor to the steamy bathroom. The cable powered a gramophone player, perched precariously on the thick butt-lip of the tub and just waiting for an earth tremor to happen.

Fortunately, despite his Catholic name, acts of God were of no concern to O'Flaherty who, in any case, was reassured by all the geological assessments of Britain's tectonic stability. This was a safe and secure place to build a house - if you could find a plot and get planning permission. He was less convinced, however, about the mental stability of the glamorous heir to the Wulfmarsh estate; although this unexpected development could, he thought, be usefully turned to his advantage.

He climbed into the ionic soup that was his bath water and settled down for a brief period of rest and relaxation, whilst the wheels of his brain began to turn and conspire with the energy and zeal of an ambitious courtier.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The captive'd trio in the study read prayer books, drank gin, played snooker, and took turns on the couch as they waited for their hostess to return. But they soon grew impatient, and more than slightly irritated by the strain on their nerves imposed by the incessant ticking of the clock. They were like three prisoners in a condemned cell waiting for the dawn; or three stressed rats in a cage, soon to start gnawing at each other's tails.

"Do you know any trick shots?" Algae asked Jenny - offering her the polished cue ball.

"Yes, but I don't give public performances," she replied, with a teasing smile. "Go play by yourself, Algae, there's a good boy. I'm going to change behind the projector screen."

"I thought you didn't trust Daphne to choose your wardrobe anymore?"

"I don't, but now that she's a plain mousy blonde again, and I'm back to fiery auburn, there shouldn't be any more cases of mistaken identity. It's about time for outfit number five and a half. I'm getting tired of wearing this dress, I've had it on for nearly two hours now and it doesn't really go with these army boots," she decided, looking down at the formidable footwear that graced her feet. "It's about time I signalled a change from girlie victim to arse-kicking avenger."

"Well, you've certainly got the boots for it," Algae concurred. "And you're getting the vocabulary."

"You've all seen enough of my legs, now I need a costume with trousers and a top that projects my tits more aggressive-

ly," she proposed, examining the bundle and looking down at her feet again, as if matching up the two in her mind. "Do you think military-style boots will ever become fashionable for women?"

Algae shrugged. "With fashion, anything is possible given enough time. Women began wearing trousers fifteen hundred years after Englishmen invented them."

"That's only because men wouldn't allow us to wear them until after they'd marched off with their pals to play soldiers in the first full-scale industrial war in European history and left us to do all the essential work in the factories and on the farms," she responded militantly.

"Men don't dictate female fashion, women do," argued Algae. "You can blame men for everything else - but the only reason that women didn't wear trousers before the war was fear of what other women might think of them."

Jenny sought to challenge this. "If women dictate fashion - why are all the top designers men?"

"Because they're more willing to take risks. But no one ever wears their ridiculous designs, except the highly-paid models on the catwalk. If you did, you'd all be walking around in polythene and moccasins, with brightly-coloured bird feathers stuck in your hair."

"Those top designers are all a bit ginger," Jenny concluded. "That's why their designs for women are so confused. One day, you'll see me strutting along the high street with hair down to my waist; wearing high-heeled boots, a tight sweater, and a skirt that looks like a belt."

"That would be amazing to see," Algae confessed, as he played the moving image in a loop before his mind's eye.

"But don't hold your breath, I'll be sixty-eight years old by then."

"You just spoiled it!" he groaned, as the long-haired figure in the street turned to reveal a wrinkly old face and a gumsy smile.

Jenny pulled the chord to bring the screen down from the cylindrical case that was rigged to an overhead beam in front

of the altar. The edge was about two feet clear of the floor and Algae, still a bit queasy at the thought of Jenny's beauty ravaged by age, watched as she pulled the boots off her feet before slipping out of the dress. Only Jesus, from his supreme heavenly vantage point, could see her upperworks now.

Algae could see Jesus peering down in her direction and thought he saw the wooden head move ever so slightly for a better look, but he piously dismissed the idea as a trick of the light. Why would Jesus want to look at Jenny's tits?

Algae removed his jacket and broke up the pack of reds with just enough carelessness to leave himself an easy first pot into a middle pocket; but he wasn't thinking about snooker now. He paused, clutching the cue between his thighs and gripping it with a hand as he leaned back against the table and peered at the opaque screen, as if he had x-ray vision.

All he could see were her calves, until the dress dropped to reveal bare flesh above the knee. He licked his lips like a big cat eyeing a nearby antelope that was strolling past his den. He would have reconstructed the rest of Jenny in his mind's eye had not the screen obligingly shot back up into its spring-loaded roll with a loud thwack! His heart jumped with great expectation - although by then, Jenny was already wearing the t-shirt that fell down to cover her thighs. She casually slipped into the combat trousers and sat on the couch next to Ralph to lace up the boots, apparently oblivious to the coarse machinations of Algae's fecund imagination.

"We can't just sit around here, dumbstruck like Algae in a brothel," Ralph proclaimed from the couch, where he was smoking a reefer. "This leather upholstery and my woollen undies are making my piles itch."

"How did you get in the army with piles? That's the first place those army doctors look," Algae recalled, concentrating on his game again to pot a black after his first red.

"I didn't have them when I joined up - but all that sitting around on the wet Belgian grass did it for me."

"You don't get piles from sitting on wet grass anymore than you can get crabs from a wooden toilet seat," scoffed

Jenny.

"No? Then where do piles come from?" Ralph demanded to know.

"I'd rather not go into anatomical details," she professed. "I quickly run out of euphemisms."

"I know where you can get crabs," Algae mused, as he potted his second black. "And it's not from the seaside."

"You can't blame everything on original sin anymore than you can blame it on the movies," ventured Ralph.

"Talking of original sex, when we were on leave in Paris, why did they always give you ten percent off and a cardboard *crois de guerre* cut out of an old condom pack?"

Ralph shifted uncomfortably on his piles.

"Daphne's right, you live in the past. You should stop worrying about me and start worrying about that psychotic bitch out there whom you seem fatally attracted to. She probably cut the telephone line herself when she went to change her clothes."

"Why would she do that?"

"So she could play the action woman like a Sloane Ranger in the Territorials and order us about."

"From what I've heard, Algae's not the only one around here with an interest in high-kicking, gun-toting action-women," Jenny interjected sternly.

"You think I'd risk sharing a nest with Algae?" Ralph laughed. "No chance of that. How many times do I have to tell you - Daphne and I are just good friends."

"She even helped Ralph zip-up in the dining hall this evening," Algae let slip.

A flash of guilt made Ralph's cheeks flush. "It's not what you think," he protested. "She caught me by surprise and forced herself upon me. She's incredibly strong for a woman - it's all that Guinness she drinks."

"We'll see about that when she comes back," Jenny decided.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Oh, just compare a few notes the way we girlies do. We

never keep secrets from each other for very long."

"I better go and make sure she's alright," Ralph announced, hoping to find Daphne and warn her against saying anything about the incident in the dining hall. He jumped to his feet and walked towards the door.

"It won't do any good," Jenny warned him. "We always tell each other everything - eventually."

"You can't go out there," Algae insisted, moving swiftly to bar Ralph's way with the snooker cue.

Ralph laughed. "Why's that, Algae? Are you going to tie me to a post and balance a candle on my nose?"

"I'm on for a one-four-seven." Algae gestured to the six remaining colours, set out favourably on their spots. All the reds but one had gone. "I need a witness for my first Billiards Society max-break badge."

"Jenny's here. She can do it for you."

"It has to be a man or it's classed as unconfirmed. Women aren't considered reliable enough witnesses by the committee."

"Why not?" Jenny asked indignantly.

"Something to do with menstruation," Algae hedged carefully.

"That's not fair! It's not even my time of the month."

"And I'm more concerned about my piles than your position on the highest break ladder," Ralph insisted. "I'm going to ask Daphne where her dad keeps the haemorrhoid cream."

"Daphne said we should stay here," Algae reminded him, slamming in the last red to make the point.

"For God's sake, what does she know about anything? Take some advice from her father. She's just a silly slip of a girl who needs a good spanking," argued Ralph.

"And you're just the man to do it, I suppose?" Jenny ventured, seizing on the remark.

"What? No!!"

"Daphne is more than just a girl," Algae mused. "She drives fast and knows how to handle a gun."

"But you said you hated her driving! And guns! What a hypocrite! All that complaining as she drove us up here and all the time you were nursing a secret stiffy under the dash board."

"I do not get a stiffy when Daphne drives," Algae protested loudly. "I get anxiety, palpitations, and nervous eczema. Look at my skin."

"I thought they were pimples," Ralph replied. "But it's completely unnatural the way you fancy her. She's unnatural - a hyena in petticoats - like Mary Wollstonecraft."

"Daphne doesn't wear petticoats."

"How would you know?"

"I undress her with my eyes," he confessed.

"Algae!" Jenny squealed, in disgust. "You perv!"

"There's nothing wrong with a bit of scopophilia. That's what I go to skool for," Ralph announced, as he recalled some of the choice sluts he'd eyed up in his otherwise dull sociology lectures.

"Algae's a medical student. He could be a gynaecologist one day - a position of trust."

"No chance of that," Algae scoffed. "I don't like getting my hands dirty - not even working on my car."

"You're supposed to wear rubber gloves," Jenny scowled.

"I'm much more interested in psychiatry. It's far more romantic - and there's less puss to mop up with a swab. You won't find any handsome, decadent, latently-heroic gynaecologists; with beautiful, schizophrenic wives; sleeping with movie stars on the French Riviera in literary fiction."

"Well, there's definitely something going on in your head that's beyond me!" Ralph exclaimed. "Maybe it's a surrogate mother fixation. Real men like nice, quiet, submissive women who know their place and live to please their men," he insisted, sitting down next to Jenny and putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Ralph, what's a breech loader?" she inquired, with a nice, sweet, submissive smile; slapping a hand on his thigh and rubbing it up and down to please him.

"It's a type of field gun, of course."

"The type with a hole in the back end where they stick the shell?"

"Yes, that's right, why do you ask?"

"Because you can go fuck one before I let you put a hand on me again!" she declared angrily, punching him in the groin and jumping to her feet.

"Christ! Do you have to keep doing that?" cried Ralph, clutching his bruised and tender testes. "It's not funny, it's dangerous! You've no idea what it feels like."

"Then stop putting me down the whole time!" she barked angrily; walking over to the cocktail bar, pouring herself a drink, and then standing conspicuously close to Algae as he bent over the table for his next shot; as if siding with him in protest at Ralph's unacceptable chauvinism.

"What the hell is going on?" Ralph preached in confusion. "There must be something around here that turns all the women into mad cows."

"Maybe those corned-beef sandwiches you ate last night contained prions," Algae suggested, as he lined up the blue in the centre pocket. "Studies of cannibals in New Guinea have revealed the dangers of eating higher mammals."

"We're not mad," Jenny replied. "You are! You're completely lacking in sensitivity and compassion. Why can't you be more thoughtful and gentle - like Algae?"

"Why haven't you told me this before?" he asked, as if visibly stung by the remark.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Well, now you have - suggesting that I should be more like Algae. That's a terrible thing to say to any man - no offence, Algae."

"Sorry," she conceded. "But you should also know that you lack the emotional maturity essential to any lasting and worthwhile relationship, and that's saying nothing about your lack of imagination."

"Imagination? Algae used his imagination this morning to save you from Daphne's bullwhip - and nearly got lynched by

the white knights of sisterly virtue.”

Jenny was momentarily backfooted. “Is this true, Algae?”

Algae merely nodded as he sank the pink.

“Men tell each other things too, you know,” Ralph insisted stubbornly; thoroughly sick of hearing about the superior virtues of women.

“I need a cigarette,” Jenny announced, irritated by the exchange that had gone some way to convince her of the impossibility of relationships.

She lifted an ornate wooden cigarette box with a silver-crafted lighter on the lid from the coffee table by the sofa. As she opened the lid, a hungry bat flew out and uttered a high pitched screech before setting about trying to catch a moth which was still entangled in her hair from the time she’d spent hanging around outside, exposed to all the flying creepie-crawlies of the Hallowe’en night air.

Thinking that she was being attacked, Jenny screamed and fought off the bat with her fists. The cigarette box fell from her hands, hit the floor, and scattered its contents at her feet.

“Why do so many weird things happen in this creepy old house?” she howled in a rage, eyeing the bat warily as it circled overhead.

“Daphne’s family is highly dysfunctional,” Algae explained, with some sympathy and understanding, as he studied the black. It seemed like a straightforward pot into the corner pocket. “It sets up a strange ambience in the home, and those creepy old paintings from the past don’t help.”

The face in the painting of Lord Helmut seemed to move slightly and smirk.

“What’s wrong with you now?” Ralph butted-in bluntly. “It’s only a cute little mouse with flapping wings and a taste for insects. It’s not going to fly up your skirt, you’re not even wearing one. Women! Just because a few pikeys pretend to string her up she decides to bleed early this month.”

Jenny glared at him as she bent down to pick up one of the metal objects that had spilled out of the cigarette box and rolled across the floor. She held it up contemptuously. A one

inch long .45 calibre shiny metal cylinder; pinched between thumb and forefinger.

"Look familiar, anyone?" she sneered.

"Bitch!" was the only word he could think of to express his deep felt sense of betrayal.

Algae delayed potting the final black to exam the telling little object in her hand with a prurient smile. "It's got no head," he observed.

"Precisely," she confirmed, fixing Ralph in a withering stare that made him blush.

"I always wondered why you were the first in the bath at the end of every game this season. Did you catch a blighty before the final whistle?"

"It's not the sort of thing a man likes to talk about," Ralph grunted.

"Now who's feeling sorry for themselves?" Jenny teased. "Help me gather up some more of these bullets - then all we need is a gun and we can go looking for Daphne instead of sitting around here like a bunch of impotents."

Ralph and Algae exchanged worldly glances and patronising smiles and shook their heads at the naive remark.

"What now?" she groaned. "Oh, for heaven's sake, it was only an expression. Why do men always take everything so personally?"

The only thing Algae was taking personally at that precise moment was his attempt to compile his first ever maximum break and earn a much coveted badge. He struck the cue ball cleanly; but was victim of a mysterious and inexplicable kick, as if a ghostly finger had chosen to deny him the last easy black and everlasting glory.

"That's still a one-forty, Algae. Your highest ever break!" Ralph congratulated him.

Algae frowned at the foul play he'd just witnessed and glanced at the grinning portrait of Lord Helmut to confirm his suspicion. He calmly chalked his cue, then stepped closer to the oil painting and pressed the tip against the aristocratic nose of the portrait, marking it blue. "When I'm master of

this house, you're going to be exorcised with prayer and restored with holy water," he promised the wicked former earl.

"Be careful, Algae, those haunted paintings of evil historical men are not so easy to exorcise," Ralph warned. "Haven't you read Bram Stoker's *The Judge's House* (1914)? You risk being hounded to the grave by his devilish spirit - in which case you'll never make a maximum break. People who see you shouting and punching the air in the street will think you're a schizophrenic old tramp - how are they supposed to know you married into the madness of Wulfmarsh Hall?"

Algae's eyes widened maniacally for a split second and his lips drew back to reveal a nefarious grin as if possessed; but then he took Ralph's advice onboard with a nonchalant shrug, replaced the cue in the rack, and put his jacket on, before holding up one of the capped cartridges to make a medical point.

"We're not impotent," he explained to Jenny. "But with these things we can only shoot blanks."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Daphne wandered through the house like a foundling in search of her absent father. There was no sign of him in any of his usual places, or even in his unusual ones. He seemed to have simply run away and left her at home alone with O'Flaherty and co. Daphne was not yet twenty-one, and so legally still a child; and had they known, Cambridgeshire County Council's social services department would have immediately advertised in *Creme de la Creme* and recruited more executive staff to discuss the case over lunch in the various attractive pubs and restaurants in the city.

A trail of muddy footprints on the polished floorboards led to the bulky, black telephone device, fixed to the wall in the entrance foyer, once more lit by the chandelier. This crude device used to be part of a battlefield communications experiment in Thetford Forest; until the pikeys acquired it one night for Daphne's father, together with a grey mare, and half a dozen bantams.

This telephone was an early example of the technology which was to have a major effect on modes of communication in business, and make tax fortunes for British governments to squander on white elephants. Its primary function, however, was to allow young people to chat and gossip whilst letting their parents pay the bill. Daphne's old man was a bit tight-fisted and firmly stuck in the age of the telegram; but as a teenager, she'd come to understand the new technology well and was an expert in its application; and she always seemed well versed in the doctrine of plausible deniability, acquired

whilst on loan to MI6 during the war, whenever the bill arrived.

Daphne lifted the little drum to her ear before giving the dialling gadget a good spin. But when she listened for the magical voice of the operator, she heard nothing but silence.

"Hello, Operator, are you in there?" Daphne sang loudly, thinking perhaps the old cow might have fallen asleep at her post, or was having a sherry with the postmaster. But there was no reply; not even the usual irritating static noise, or the clicking of relay switches at the exchange; or even the sound of someone taking a drag from a fagbutt or swigging from a bottle of gin.

Daphne inspected the equipment, starting with the earpiece cord, which should have been connected to the casing on the wall, but instead trailed uselessly on the floor. She pulled up the slack cord with a grunt and a sigh, and examined the loose end. O'Flaherty was clearly mistaken, the telephone line had not been cut, but the cord to the earpiece had been cleanly severed with a sharp blade.

Daphne was in a forgiving mood for once. How was the old fart supposed to know the difference? When he was at school, semaphore was state of the art communications technology. To all intents and purposes it made very little difference; the phone had been effectively sabotaged and there would be no hopeless assistance from the Post Office engineers until after Christmas - or whenever the latest strike was over - whichever was the later.

But who would do such a thing? She glanced around as if suspicious of an unseen surveillance. There was no obvious suspect in sight, but a splattering of tomato ketchup on the wall suggested foul play with a squeeze bottle. The trail of muddy footprints lead back towards the study, and Daphne decided to return there and check on her guests in the hope of finding her father waiting.

The route back to the study took her passed the entrance to the dining hall. The lights in the dining hall were out and the doors were neither fully open nor closed, but slightly ajar,

beckoning passers by to stick their noses in. The trail of muddy footprints led in and out again, as if O'Flaherty had checked the dining hall before joining them in the study to request a bath. A trail of ketchup drops also led into the dining room, but not out again.

Daphne paused by the gap between the doors, suspicious of the circumstances and listening intently for any activity inside. Above the doors, the wolf's head trophy looked down upon her and grinned lasciviously, as if eager to run the slab of its tongue up and down the back of her neck before seizing her by the throat and giving her a good shake like a lurcher with a hare in its mouth. The dining hall was deathly quiet at first, but then she heard a very faint groaning sound emanating from inside that could have been caused by a draught, or the settling of the old foundations.

Daphne gave one of the door panels a gentle push. It floated inward on the sort of creaky hinges favoured by the interior designer and fitted to all doors in Wulfmarsh Hall. The wider gap allowed more light from the corridor to illuminate a swathe of the polished floor as far as the leading edge of the long dining table.

She could see the surface of the table in penumbra, still laid out for dinner, as it had been before all the excitement of the evening had taken precedence over the mundane business of eating. All else lay still and in shadow. Daphne felt her stomach rumble from nervous anticipation, and for the dinner that was never served, all because Jenny was too girlie to take care of herself and keep out of trouble. Naturally, she began to wonder if perhaps her own ruminations might have been the source of the reverberation.

Then she heard it again; the distinct and disturbing sound of a trapped animal in the last stages of its extinction. Daphne ventured into the dining hall and felt for the light switch she knew to be positioned conveniently on the wall just inside the door. She flicked on the switch, expecting light to illuminate the entire dining hall, but the chandelier failed to sparkle.

"Who's there?" Daphne demanded to know. "Show your-

self. This is the only chance you're going to get to surrender - unless your name begins with an A - in which case I won't be taking prisoners!"

She raised the pistol and stepped boldly into the darkness, immediately sensing something unusual underfoot, as if the grip of her boots were sticking to the laminated floorboards. A soft glitching sound accompanied each step as her sole tore away from the grasp of the adhesive. She bent down and touched the floor with her fingers. In the darkness she could feel a thin layer of viscous goo which, when she raised her fingers to her nose, had the disconcerting smell of fresh blood.

Daphne glanced up at the chandelier that was reflecting the faint light from the corridor, and carefully avoided walking directly underneath it. She'd read enough mystery thrillers to know what would happen if she did. The dining hall seemed completely devoid of life, but her keen senses warned otherwise. She felt as if she were being observed closely by something lurking like a leopard in the shadows. Something waiting to pounce.

"Daphne!" A low voice rasped from a spot in the gloom high above her head.

Daphne spun round sharply and took steady aim in the direction of the source. Stabbing flames issued from the muzzle of the barrel as she discharged five rapid rounds into the darkness.

She paused, waiting for a response, expecting to see the creature stagger out of the shadowy corner and fall at her feet like a mortally wounded sniper. But the only response was a stunned silence that filled the dining hall.

Daphne flipped open the chamber, allowing the empty shellcases to cascade down onto the floorboards where they bounced and rolled on impact before coming to rest. She quickly reloaded whilst waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom.

Slowly and gradually, she acquired the night vision with which to see into the twilight. As she stepped forward to

investigate, the source of the voice seemed to materialise gently as if lit by a finely-gauzed spot.

Aghast at the sight, her hands fell limply by her sides and her head tilted slightly as compassion and pity softened her expression. She popped a chair against the wall and stood up on it to speak with a dishevelled human head, mounted on a bloody shield between the moose and the wild boar.

"Oh Father, what are you doing up there, you silly old thing?"

"Bad show, Daphne, I've been bagged," her father mumbled feebly, clearly feeling sorry for himself.

"I can see that," she nodded tearfully, tugging the specs of dried blood from his fringe with her fingers. "But who would do such a terrible thing?"

"There's something you should know. Something we should have told you a long time ago," he rasped. "There's madness in our family."

"What family, Father? There were only two of us left and now that you've been bagged that leaves only me. Losing your head has affected your brain."

"No, Daphne, there is another. You have a brother."

"A brother?" she frowned. "I thought I was an only child."

"Before you were born, your mother bore me a son. We called him Jack. But from an early age, it was clear that he wasn't made of the right stuff. He was a nature lover who liked saving hedgehogs from the roads and fox cubs from the hounds."

"He sounds like a bit of a conservationist," she noted in dismay. "Why wasn't I told about this before?"

"We wanted to spare you the shame. When you were born, he was ten years old, and showing no signs of improvement. So we disowned him and packed him off on a boat to Australia with a travelling vaudeville act, thinking he'd soon take up with a tribe of Aborigines or be eaten by a pack of dingoes. But that was twenty years ago and now he's back - repatriated by the Aussies for organising animal rights demonstrations."

"Where is he? I want to meet my brother," she insisted, eager as an only-child can be.

"Somewhere in this building."

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know - I didn't get a good look at his face. He announced himself from the shadows and then bagged me with an axe before I could shoot him. He's the thieving bastard who's been stealing all the lightbulbs to cover his tracks. Toilet rolls too, probably. We should have got that plastic stuff they use in schools and factories."

"The telephone has been sabotaged. Did you get a message to Constable Jenkins?"

"Oh yes, I got him out of bed by the sound of it. He'll be over as soon as he gets his jockstrap on over his long-johns and fits a flashing blue light to his handlebars."

"He could be hours away, especially if he has to mend a puncture on the road. What should I do until then?"

"Trust no one. My guess is that Jack is masquerading as someone in Wulfmarsh Hall tonight."

"Could it be O'Flaherty? He's been acting very strangely at times for a servant."

"No, he's much too old. More likely it's one of your guests. It could be that fellow, Algae."

"Hmm. Algae's into conservation," she recalled. "He saved a hedgehog on the drive up here."

"I don't like the way his eyebrows meet in the middle either. A definite sign of a wrong 'un."

"But Algae can't be my brother. He's short and skinny and doesn't look anything like me."

"There's something else I never told you - your mother was a bit of a slut. I'm glad you don't take after her. Jack's actually your half-brother. And those vaudeville people know how to use make-up in clever disguises. Algae must be Jack - why else would he pretend to be so interested in you?"

Daphne frowned. "Some people find me attractive, Father."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

O'Flaherty watched his turgid battleship turn over and slowly begin to sink beneath the soapy waves to the sound of country jazz playing on the gramophone. That good old boy was drinking whiskey and rye singing, "This'll be the day that I die." Not that he had any intention of dying just yet with so much still to do. Nor was he drinking rye whiskey. A bottle of champagne, pilfered from the cellar, stood in a bucket of ice, within easy reach beside the bathtub. He poured some bubbly into a blue, stiletto-heeled shoe, then lifted *la chaussure* to his lips and drank deeply - like a priest taking a last communion whilst awaiting his fate in the cathedral.

Refreshed, and now relaxed, he dropped the shoe, closed his eyes, and laid his head back in the bath to dream of things a servant could never afford; not even a public servant with a local authority pension, funded by limitless property tax increases. A moot point, since he was a long way from retirement age; but after a month at Wulfmarsh Hall, he was planning to take his own early retirement option fairly soon, which would provide for all his needs in perpetuity. For now though, he could barely afford the time to dream.

Through the noise from the gramophone, his sharp ear detected a low thudding sound, then another, and three others. He cocked his head and listened carefully, but heard no more and thought little of it. He could guess what was happening. Her Ladyship was throwing a girlie tantrum and taking it out on her guests. Firearms were a major hazard in and around Wulfmarsh Hall, as his unfortunate predecessors had discov-

ered to their cost. The whole estate could do with an injection of liberal politics and a good, strong dose of gun control.

He knew he was expected back soon, suitably armed, and didn't want to be late. Not that he gave a toss about the penalties for being absent without leave. He wasn't planning on asking for references when he left, but he was anxious to keep an eye on the eccentric activities of Daphne and her oddball friends. Especially the one they called Jenny. His half-hour was nearly up and there was still the matter of redoing all that make-up. He felt like a nancy-boy wearing foundation, blusher, and eye-liner; but unlike the girls, he could layer it on in a few minutes. He calculated that all his teenage years spent in Aussie vaudeville, just to buy a new surfboard, were about to pay a handsome dividend.

As he reached for the sides of the tub, a lewd thought suddenly flashed through his coarse antipodean mind. She looked so sweet and she didn't smell too bad either - like apple blossom in the spring. The phantom scent of her exquisite perfume would remain with him always. And that body! Their brief encounters were simply not enough - he wanted more. Jenny was a class A drug; a narcotic as intoxicating as opium but much harder to get hold of. The thought of her spending time with those two English drongos, both useless as eunuchs in a harem, made him wanna go wrestling crocs in a boolabong. She needed a real man to show her a good time. The sort who could tie me kangaroo down, sport, and shear six sheep a minute. If everything went to plan, he thought he could be that man; equal in wealth and title, superior in intellect and physique to any other. One of a new breed of Aussie *ubermenschen* planning a hostile takeover of Great Britain plc, like Oedipus returning to the motherland.

He leaned back in the bath again and closed his eyes to encompass the delightful scenario; deciding to waste a few more precious minutes dreaming of things to come when all his careful planning came together, unconcerned that in this crazy old mansion they might be his last. The bow of his battleship suddenly popped up through the soapy surface like

a rising submarine. A pocket of trapped air gave the vessel temporary buoyancy before it rolled over and sank again.

The servants' quarters were his turf. There were no wench-
es left to grope so Daphne's old man had no reason to come
down here anymore, and those supercilious guests wouldn't
be seen dead on the lowerdeck. But by missing out on a clas-
sical education, O'Flaherty had not learned from Caesar the
importance of fortifying one's own camp at night. He had
only a digger's knowledge of tactics and fieldcraft, and had no
reason to expect an assault on his citadel. He also made the
classic Aussie error of blasély underestimating the English
opposition. He was just a babe in this court of intrigue, and
not fully versed in the way of the stiletto, or its long history.

The sound of music blaring in his ears masked the approa-
ch of footsteps which were, in any case, as stealthy as a cat
called Satan's - the insurgent tasked with infiltrating his unsec-
ured domain. This Angel of Death finally gave its presence
away by interceding between eye and candlelight, and casting
a dark shadow over its victim.

O'Flaherty opened his eyes immediately and his face folded
into panic as he watched the agile feline leap onto his noisy
instrument of pleasure and begin rubbing itself against the
sound horn. The imbalance of weight caused the instrument
to teeter on the edge of the bath - like the scales of divine
judgment determining the fate of his soul - before toppling
over and falling, ever so slowly, towards the ionised soup in
which he was immersed. Satan had the sense to leap for drier
ground and scurry away before the platform struck the water
with a splash. The music died with a violent screech as the
needle tore across vinyl and his finely toned body began its
macabre dance of convulsive jerks. He had only a few sec-
onds to review his life and to consider an old adage from
Robert Burns: *The best laid plans o' mice'n'men gang aft a-gley.*

Half a minute later he lay perfectly still, staring straight
ahead at nothing in particular, as if the final thought was one
of shock at having been taken so swiftly and so suddenly,
such are the vicissitudes of life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

There are places in every big old house, devoid of parlour maids and chamber maids, which become neglected over the years. Cobwebs accumulate, and lay undisturbed for years, in these dark, forbidding corners; until some hapless fool smears his face by walking straight into them. This was the inevitable experience of Daphne's three intrepid guests as they wandered aimlessly through the nameless, gloomy nervures; like catacombs without the bones (only because they were entombed, out of sight, within the massive walls); that formed the bowels of the stately home. From the study, they had made their way to the kitchen and then, like reckless thrill-seeking potholers on a rainy day, they had been drawn down into a labyrinth of treacherous passages and tunnels in their quest for answers.

"I definitely heard gunshots," claimed Algae.

"How would you know a gunshot from a bad case of flatulence? You were in the medical corps," Ralph reminded him.

"We still heard plenty of guns go off - mostly in my ear," he complained, pushing a finger against his eardrum in a very unwise attempt to dislodge an irritating piece of wax which was acting as a lowpass filter. "I think the government still owes me some money for tinnitus."

"You and about three million others."

"Algae's right, there were five shots," Jenny confirmed. "The same number of bullets Daphne had left in her gun."

"Yeah, but she had plenty more stashed in the pockets of those action-girl trousers," Ralph proposed. "If it was Daphne she would have loaded-up and carried on shooting, even if the

old witch and all the Sons of Luca were lying stone-dead at her feet."

"What if it wasn't the Sons of Luca or the old witch she was firing at?"

"Who else could it have been? We're all here."

"O'Flaherty - or her father."

"She wouldn't shoot her own father."

"She might - by mistake - thinking he was Algae."

Ralph shook his head in disgust. "There should be a law against women carrying guns."

"I think there already is," Algae vouched. "To save me from getting shot waiting for a bus in Drummer Street."

"That's not much help to us out here - the bus doesn't come by this way. The government really needs to improve public transport links in rural areas."

"This must be the servants' quarters," Jenny presumed, flicking the light switch off and on repeatedly to no avail. "No electricity."

"Servants don't need electricity," Ralph explained. "They can see in the dark better than rats."

"Some parts of the house probably aren't wired to the mains yet. There must be a stock of candles around here somewhere."

They continued edging nervously along the dark, forbidding corridor; until Jenny suddenly paused in her tracks and moved her head slightly to catch a fleeting sound. "Listen!" she urged. "I just heard something. There could be someone moving up ahead."

All three huddled together and listened intently. In the distance, they clearly heard the sound of hurried footsteps, as if someone were running along the corridor to get away from them.

"Hello!" Algae called out breezily. "Is there anyone there?"

"What do you think you're doing?" Ralph rasped, in a low voice.

"Letting them know we're here, of course."

"No need to sound off like a Swiss yodeller in a tight crack.

You'll give our position away."

"For a rugby player, you've got an incredibly vivid imagination," Algae replied. "This is Daphne's home and we're her guests for the weekend. We don't have to skulk around in the shadows like that old witch."

"But it might be her!" Ralph insisted.

"Who? The old witch?"

"No, Daphne! Don't forget, she said she'd shoot your balls off if you tried to help her. You're taking a hell of a risk just by being here."

"Those shots we heard were a long way off," Algae reasoned.

"Otherwise you'd have to ask yourself - did she fire five shots, or was it six? Well, punk? You feelin' lucky?"

"I'm always lucky around Daphne - I have to be," Algae replied confidently. "We counted five shots, plus the one she fired at the vase makes six."

"It's probably just O'Flaherty wandering around in a pair of last century's long-johns," Jenny suggested, striking a match against a wall and dramatically illuminating the edgy faces of her fellow conspirators. "Maybe he heard us and was running to put on some trousers."

"Put that out! Haven't you heard of three men on a match?" groaned Ralph.

"Come on, let's go and find out who it is," Jenny ventured, moving forward boldly, with the match held high, followed closely by Algae, leaving Ralph to his fate - swallowed by the hungry darkness.

Braving the perils of sniper Daphne and O'Flaherty's long-johns, Jenny led the way until she, too, disappeared into the gloom ahead.

Algae halted, having lost sight of her. "Jenny! Jenny, where are you?" he whispered, only to be shunted up the rear by Ralph, who was following blind in his eagerness not to be left behind in the darkness. Both men emitted strange little cries of angst, like urban foxes beneath an Autumn moon. "What the hell are you doing?" Algae protested loudly. "Sometimes I

think that libido of yours should be surgically removed."

"Don't flatter yourself, I can't see a friggin' thing," Ralph cursed. "If you're that precious about your behind, you should wear a reflector badge like those Cambridge cyclists I keep nudging into with my bumper. Where's Jenny gone?"

"I don't know," Algae replied. He tried calling out again in a muffled whisper. "Jenny? Jenny, where are you? Damn it, we've lost Jenny! Now what are we going to do?"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders indecisively. "Keep moving - we'll catch up with her eventually."

"What if she doubles back by another route to look for us?"

"Then she definitely won't find us."

"We ought to just stay here and wait for a while," Algae decided prudently.

"Algae, you should know by now that women like you to chase after them - they don't like having to come looking for you. It damages their self-esteem."

"Then why do they threaten to sue me for sexual harassment every time I suggest coffee in the refectory?"

Ralph shrugged. "Successful litigation builds self-esteem. If you want to avoid being a loser in the refectory, you've got to learn to read spotform and pick the right horses."

"Well, this isn't about the rules of the racetrack or courtship in the refectory, it's about correct survival procedure," Algae insisted. "You should stay put in your last known position until they find you - and there's also the whereabouts of those missing bear traps to consider."

"How much longer do we have to wait here for?"

"Till Jenny comes back."

"I was afraid of that. You see I'm a bit cross-legged at the moment," Ralph confessed, grimly clutching his tackle. "I need a pee."

"You should have gone before we left Cambridge."

"I did, but all this suspense is tickling my bladder. Not to mention all the Dutch courage I took on board this evening."

"Well, you won't find any decent plumbing here in the

servants' wing. Better look for a bucket or a plant pot," Algae advised. "There's bound to be one around here somewhere. Just make sure it isn't a cactus or you'll end up speared like a cocktail sausage."

Ralph gingerly began feeling his way around in the dark of the corridor, taking care to avoid groping a cactus or stepping in a career-crunching bear trap. Moments later, he encountered something that felt quite promising.

"I think I've found one!" he called out in triumph. "It's not a jagged old cactus either. It's a tall, slim plant, with a smooth stem and not too many branches. Hey, Algae, it's got a gorgeous pair of buds and I like the feel of its behind. I wonder if we can get one of these from the local garden centre. I always thought gardening was boring - I didn't realise what I was missing. Now I know why those old farts spend so much time down at their allotments."

Ralph's eulogy for his new found passion was rudely interrupted by a sharp report, like a slap across the face.

"Ouch!!!" he cried.

The sounds of altercation reverberated down the corridor to Algae, who assumed that the neo-horticulturist must have stood on a garden rake. "Ralph? Are you alright?" he whispered urgently.

There was a short pause, then a weary reply. "Yeah, I'm alright. It's only Jenny."

"Don't you ever take time off?" she scowled, lighting up another match to reveal his red cheek.

"Most of the time, unfortunately, but this weekend no one would ever believe me," he groaned.

"Jenny, where did you get to?" Algae reproached her, as she emerged from the gloom.

"We were lost and helpless without you," Ralph added, with a sarcastic sniff. "We just didn't know what to do with ourselves."

"Is that why you were helping yourself to my buds and behind?"

"I honestly thought you were a species of rubber plant,"

Ralph professed. "Scientists are cross-breeding all sorts of strange things these days."

"But I'm not wearing any rubber."

"Alright - cotton. I like to use my imagination in the dark."

"Daphne is right, I shouldn't believe a word you say," she concluded. "I found these candles in that room. Here, take one each before I drop the match. We wouldn't want to cause a premature conflagration before the House of Usher really goes up at the end of the weekend, eh boys?"

The two stooges raised their eyebrows together in surprise and alarm at the prospect as she purposefully provided each of them with a candle and a light.

"Jenny's more useful than she looks," Algae whispered to Ralph.

"She always looked pretty useful to me," Ralph had to admit. "That's why I brought her along. She's supposed to be our tethered goat, staked out for a good shot at the ghost of Luca."

"So why isn't she down in the dungeon, chained-up in front of the camera like Andromeda waiting for Cetus?"

"That plan was overtaken by events."

"I meant, she's clever and resourceful for a woman; though she obviously never read Poe's story or she would know that the house doesn't burn down in the end, it collapses into a tarn."

"Women don't read Poe, they read the Bronte sisters," Ralph reminded him.

"Maybe she saw a film version," Algae proposed. "A burning house would be a better cinematic spectacle."

"There haven't been any film versions yet," Ralph stipulated, with some authority on the subject. "No one has worked out how to adapt Poe to the silent silver screen and make money out of it. You really need the colour crimson, a crafty producer who knows how to make a hundred movies in Hollywood without losing a dime, and the sound of screaming to pack the teenagers into the drive-ins."

"Drive-ins? What are they?" Algae queried.

"A futuristic form of cinema. You set up a huge screen in a car park and people drive in through a tollgate to watch the film."

"But then, how will the usher keep an eye on the canoodling couples?"

"He won't be able to - great idea, don't you think?"

"Except for one thing - our climate again - drive-in movies will never get past the censor."

"We can set them up in hot countries."

"I think you should let Jenny take those driving lessons. Save you having to drive when you've drunk too much."

"Women on the rag are a far greater danger to other road-users than me after a couple of pints and half a bottle of rum."

"Shut up and follow me," Jenny ordered, like a youth leader on a team-building exercise. "I've had more than enough of your juvenile behaviour, and as for your chauvinistic comments - I'm beginning to think that some of them might be actionable."

"Oh yeah? Under what law?" Ralph sneered.

"I'm sure there's one in the statute book about not being politically correct."

"Politically correct? What's that?" he asked Algae.

"Dunno, but you better cover-your-arse just in case," Algae advised his client.

"No jury would ever convict," Ralph boasted, convinced that he could charm his way out of anything.

"An all-female one might - when I tell them how you tried to seduce me this afternoon ..."

"But you asked me to!" Ralph protested.

"... and then thought you could betray me the same day for a rubber plant."

"You can't have all-female juries," Algae pointed out. "It would be too divisive."

"Like having female-only car parks," mused Ralph, "and gender quotas to up the pass-rate in the driving test."

"I saw plenty of female ambulance drivers doing a vital job

in the war," Algae mitigated, on Jenny's behalf.

"That was in France. They don't police the roads with quite the same enthusiasm over there - unless you have GB plates."

"Why is there never a real man about when you need one?" Jenny sighed. "I could use one right now."

"There's always Algae," Ralph proposed, with a mischievous grin, daring her to compromise.

"Hmm, yes, I was just thinking that," she replied, eyeing him from head to foot like a horse-trader at an auction. "I was impressed by his steady cue-action in the study."

"She must be suffering from post-traumatic stress after that pikey lynching," diagnosed Ralph.

"The condition doesn't exist," Algae stated bluntly. "British army psychiatrists proved it by administering electric shocks to patients until they were screaming to get back to the front."

"The only antidote to mental torture is physical pain," Ralph pointed out. "There must be a few crypto-Marxists in the army medical corps."

"Can you prove that something doesn't exist?" Jenny asked doubtfully.

"See what I mean?" Ralph pounced. "That's just the sort of cleverly astute, but totally irrelevant, question only Daphne would ask."

"Daphne or Bertha Phillpotts," Algae added.

"Whatever the reason, all this wandering around a mysterious old house by naked candle flame is giving me the quivers," Jenny confessed. "I feel all hot and flushed."

"Maybe the thermostat is set too high," Algae suggested. "We could always turn it down if we can find it."

"What thermostat?" scoffed Ralph. "There's no gas central-heating around here, just blazing coal fires."

"These steam pipes are connected to back-boilers," Algae observed, tapping an old pipe that ran up a wall. The asbestos coating began to flake off, releasing a cloud of fine dust into the air for them to breathe.

Jenny shook her head. "No time for that, O'Flaherty should be around here somewhere. Try that room up ahead -

someone has left the door open and the candles burning.”

“We might run into Daphne - or a big fat spider waiting to suck our brains out,” an obstinate Ralph chuckled. “I know which one I’d rather meet in a dark alley. How about you, Jenny? More scared of Daphne - or spiders?”

Jenny had a flashback to her dream peril and blanched with a shudder, though fortunately this sign of weakness went unnoticed in male company, thanks to the pale candlelight.

“Wait here, I’ll do it myself,” she replied wearily, disappearing through the open doorway and leaving the reluctant heroes with more time to brood.

“She’s taking over,” Ralph advised, like a mischievous little devil whispering in Algae’s ear. “You need to re-establish control. Slap her down and put her in her place like those grizzled old sawbones teach you to do in a theatre full of chattering nurses when you’re trying to take out some poor old tramp’s gall bladder.”

“Why me? She’s your girlfriend.”

“Not for much longer. There’s plenty of hot totty in the bus queue right now, so I’m going to dump her on Monday and pick up a different model.”

“I think she’s doing a good job leading us through the impenetrable darkness. She seems to know where she’s going better than we do. And if she steps in a bear trap, she can still make a living modelling prosthetics in her underwear. Why do you want to trade her in? She’s got a wonderful chassis, and I’ll bet there’s plenty of poke under the bonnet. What more could any man ask for?”

“A bit less of the poke. Men poke, women pull, that’s the way God made us. I hate arse-kicking girls worse than female peelers. It’s all Daphne’s fault, thinking she’s Wild Bill Hickok. Now Jenny’s trying to act just like her. How would you like it if Cambridge University were full of gobby bitches who drank too much and treated men like shit?”

“I wouldn’t mind, they treat me like shit anyway,” Algae mused. “You’re stuck with Jenny, at least until Monday. You never know - an arse-kicking girl might prove useful before

then."

"Not likely," he predicted. "They may look good in the movies - but in real life they're all mouth and no trousers."

"This isn't a movie and she still looks great in those tight huggin' trousers."

The two stooges agreed to differ on Jenny in trousers and bravely followed her into what appeared to be a very untidy bedroom, lit by half a dozen well-placed candles, where they immediately had to step over a muddy penguin suit lying crumpled on the floor.

"This must be O'Flaherty's room," Algae surmised, putting his candle aside and picking up the trousers to fold them over his arm. He found a clothes hangar and neatly hung the trousers in the wardrobe. Then he spotted an unusual looking whisky bottle on the table beside the bed. "Californian single malt?" he queried, reading the label with a degree of mirth. "Where do you think this came from? A joke shop?"

"Daphne's diplomatic bag, probably. We know she likes to engage in a bit of smuggling to spite the Chancellor and the killjoy customs officials."

"I thought we were supposed to smuggle it to the Yanks, not the other way round. They're not allowed to make the stuff anymore. There's a strict prohibition on the manufacture, transportation, and sale, remember?"

"Prohibition never works. How can you have a dry state full of Catholics, grapes, and movie directors? It's an oxymoron," Ralph decided, taking the bottle and savouring a drop of El Dorado. "It's the real thing!" he sang out approvingly. "Smooth taste - not like that rye mash whiskey they drink back East."

"Do you think Daphne knows that O'Flaherty is drinking her Californian whisky?"

"No, and I don't think we should tell her either," Ralph decided, tasting more of the exotic malt. "Maybe it was a gift she brought home for her dad and O'Flaherty came across when he was clearing up."

"I don't think O'Flaherty does much clearing up," Algae

commented, looking round at the mess.

Jenny was standing with her back to them, viewing something on the far wall. She seemed transfixed by a revelatory experience. Ralph joined her with the bottle; and from a wholly different perspective, he too became fascinated by the image. He held his candle up high to throw more light on it.

"I've never seen a life-size poster of a muscular young man in bathing trunks on a surfboard, riding a huge wave before," she confessed humbly, enraptured by the pristine image of a gelled god whose hair was untarnished by the salty spray.

"Neither have I," admitted Ralph, as he put a sensitive arm around her shoulders before letting a hand drop to her bum. "This is so much better than anything the Cambridge University Photography Society could ever produce. How did they manage to maintain the resolution on such a large print of a moving subject?" he wondered, awed by the quantum leap in technology.

To Algae, it seemed as if they were discovering a common interest in photographic art, and would rather be left alone to admire the exhibit like suitors in a gallery. Examining other aspects of the room, he discovered the dressing table with assorted tubes of stage make-up, baby lotion, towels, cotton wool, and a wig on a mannequin's head. A power cable, plugged into a wall socket, trailed out into the corridor like a dark serpent. Curiosity compelled him to follow it, leaving the happy couple to discuss nuances in tone and composition.

"There's something very familiar about that body. I'm sure I've seen it somewhere before," Jenny insisted.

"Yeah, in your dreams," Ralph quipped.

She recalled, in a flash, her bizarre dream from the previous night and gave him a startled glance of cognition, which he mistook for admonition.

"Just kidding," he insisted, holding up his roving hand in meek surrender before dropping it to find her behind again.

"Actually, you're right for once," she confirmed, "All women dream of suntanned men on surfboards. It's an archetype of our collective unconscious - and a powerful motif for

clever advertising executives to exploit. We ought to ask O'Flaherty where he got it from. If he's the only servant left at Wulfmarsh Hall, then this must be his room." She looked around at the unruly mess of clothes on the floor. "Strange old bloke, to leave it in such a mess."

"You mean, strange old fellow," Ralph proposed, correcting her diction. "We don't say bloke. Only working class people and Australians say bloke."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. Strange old fellow, what a state to leave it in. Doesn't he know how to use a clothes hanger?"

"He's a butler," Ralph observed, with a tinge of irony.

"What do you make of these?" she asked, holding up a pair of navy flannel shorts.

"Maybe he was an Oxford blue."

"But why would an Oxford graduate become a butler?"

"Maybe he only got a 2.2."

"But that would have been about fifty years ago. These are almost new, they've hardly ever been worn," she deduced, burying her face in the crotch and giving it a good sniff.

"Maybe he was a mature student."

"And an Oxford blue?"

"Maybe he likes to keep fit," Ralph suggested, never one to be short of an implausible answer.

"I should say so. Look at these." Jenny held up a bright orange pair of striped, high-tech track shoes, gleaming with ineffable gaudiness.

Ralph examined them with his athletic eye. "Cushioned sole and enhanced grip, combining speed with comfort," he noted admiringly. "This wasn't made in backward old Britain, and it definitely wasn't made in Ireland either. O'Flaherty must have done some serious travelling in his time."

"And look at all this!" Jenny exclaimed, standing in front of the dressing table with make-up tubes and cotton wool strewn across it.

"This can't be O'Flaherty's room. Men don't wear this much make-up - not even in the movies."

Jenny lifted the wig from the mannequin head and tried it

on as if in a boutique, giving herself the appearance of a shaggy old man - with gorgeous eyes and a cute button nose.

"I thought you'd have a serious aversion to trying on wigs in this place by now," Ralph commented wryly.

"It's a girlie thing. We like to dress-up and experiment at every opportunity. Is this Douglas Haig or Daphne's Dad?" she posed aloud.

"Who? You or the wig-holder?"

"The wig-holder, of course." Jenny removed the wig and placed it on the holder before giving the head a familiar pat. "Generals don't have long hair."

"Napoleon has long hair in his paintings."

"That was in the Romantic era - before men wore boiler suits and operated machinery. But why would O'Flaherty have a woman's dressing table in his room and a wig-holder that looks like his boss?"

"Maybe he was an actor - or a cross-dresser. There are lots of queer folk in the theatre."

Algae suddenly dashed back into the room in a very determined manner, showing no interest in the make-up or sporting goods sections as he pushed through Ralph and Jenny in his eagerness to look at the poster.

"Christ!" he exclaimed liturgically.

"Pretty good, eh?" Ralph concurred. "It must have been produced by an American research laboratory - Berkeley or Princeton. You know what they say - it takes thirty years for stuff over there to reach us over here."

Algae held up his candle to throw more light on the object of discern, as if still doubting the evidence of his own screwed up eyes.

"No, I meant Christ! He looks like the stiff in the bathtub."

Ralph and Jenny exchanged the usual glances of consternation and confusion.

"Algae, what are you talking about?" Jenny asked patiently.

"He's through there!" Algae pointed to the corridor. "Go left, then take the first door on the right. But don't touch anything, he might still be live."

"Make up your mind, Algae. You just said he was dead," Ralph reminded him. "What sort of doctor are you? That's how people get buried alive. When my time comes, I want to be cremated."

Algae opened his mouth again, but then decided against wasting any more breath on ambiguous explanations. "Come and see for yourself," he advised, leading them through to the bathroom.

O'Flaherty lay wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, as if waiting patiently for a gaggle of medical students to misdiagnose his fatal condition. Only the incongruous horn from a gramophone player, protruding from the surface of the water between his legs, suggested that his demise could be a consequence of unnatural causes. His head was slumped to one side and one arm trailed over the side of the bathtub.

"It's the Marat dummy from Madam Tussauds!" Ralph exclaimed.

"Marat had a tea-towel round his head," Algae recalled.

"Maybe he took it off. Stupid thing for a man to wear in the bath anyway. It makes him look like a girl."

"Look at the face," Algae urged. "It's him! The man in the poster."

"Hmm, yes, it does look a bit like him." Ralph concurred, rubbing his chin.

"Oh Ralph, it's horrible!" Jenny moaned, burying her face in his chest like a silver screen heroine witnessing a tragedy.

"It's alright, you don't have to look at him," Ralph assured her with a comforting embrace. He gently stroked the back of her head as if sympathetic to her needs for once.

"Not him, them!" Jenny pointed to the exposed pedestals between the bathtubs. "It's barbaric. How could they have used such things with other people about? They don't even have toilet seats. Anal retention must have been rife."

"It's not that bad," Ralph countered. "This looks quite good for servants' quarters. They usually have to slop-out with a bucket in the morning. In the army, we used to squat in a line with our arses hanging over a ditch, worrying about

how high the rats could jump while waiting for the command."

"Since when did British officers defecate with their men?" Algae queried sceptically. "That sort of familiarity would soon breed contempt. In the medical corps, we had to dig a separate ditch just for the contents of the officer-patients' bed pans."

"We had our own ditch too. But the Colonel expected all his junior officers to line up for ablutions just before stand-to each morning to build up a healthy spirit of competition."

"I just couldn't," Jenny shuddered. "Not with other people around - making those horrible noises."

"Oh yes you could," Algae assured her. "Especially if you were expecting an attack in which you might get bayoneted. Bowel movements before a battle are an old army tradition - like the navy putting on clean underwear. It reduces the chance of infection."

"This is the men's room," Ralph observed. "Can't you smell the rose petals?"

"No," she answered bluntly.

"Precisely. There aren't any. The women's bathroom will be much more civilised. They probably have pretty little curtains you can draw around the pedestals so you won't know who's making all the noise."

Jenny bravely ventured forward to take a closer look at the body. "Why would he take a bath with a gramophone player over his crotch?" she inquired. "Is this another bizarre aspect of male sexuality that magazines for prurient young women still don't know about yet?"

"Dunno, I haven't read magazines for young women since I was a teenager and my big sister left home," Ralph confessed. "Maybe it was an accident. What do you think, Algae? Did he jump or was he pushed?"

"It looks like an accident to me, but in this creepy old house you never can tell," Algae decided, lifting the chilled bottle of champagne from the bucket and examining the label. "What do you think he had to celebrate?"

"Maybe he had a drink problem," Ralph suggested, taking the bottle from Algae and swigging from it before chasing the sweet champagne down with another jolt of the Californian single malt.

"He could have been poisoned," Jenny observed sharply. "And now you're drinking the evidence."

"Don't worry, I'll leave some for the inquest. Can't you see the family resemblance? Look at the eyes, the chin, and the jaw line. This fellow could be a close relative of O'Flaherty's."

"You mean he may have been," Algae corrected him pedantically. "He's nobody's relative now."

"Whatever. They could have been grandfather and grandson. Maybe the old man can shed some light on the situation when he turns up."

"He certainly has got some explaining to do," Jenny concurred. "Daphne and her father are a bit trigger-happy with strangers at the moment. They certainly won't appreciate finding stowaway guests in the Hall, even in the no-stars servants' quarters."

"We won't get anything from O'Flaherty now," Algae predicted, shaking his head sadly. "He won't be talking to us after this."

"Why not?" Jenny asked. "He can't blame us. We had nothing to do with this young man's death. It was almost certainly a tragic accident."

"The reason he won't be talking to us is that this young man is O'Flaherty," Algae revealed daringly.

"He can't be, it's not possible!" Jenny paused to study the face again. "Where are his wrinkles?"

"Maybe the electric shock rejuvenated him in some way," Ralph proposed. "ECT put a stop to my old uncle Ebenezer's drug-induced senility."

Jenny bent over the languid corpse for a closer look and asked, "Did it also make his hair grow back?"

"No, actually the shock made the rest of it fall out. But once he recovered his wits, he successfully sued the Electricity Board for the price of a toupee."

"We live in a very litigious age," she commented wryly, reaching out a hand to stroke the dead man's hair as if lamenting his passing.

"Don't touch!" Algae barked, grabbing her wrist. "When I said he might be live - I meant that he could still be wired to the mains." Algae pointed to the power lead trailing away towards the bedroom like a perfidious snake.

"But how is that possible? This part of the house has no electricity," Jenny reminded them.

"This part of the house has no lightbulbs," Algae corrected her, glancing up at an empty bulb socket hanging from the ceiling. "I think Daphne's father is a miserable old git who's too tight to buy any," he stated boldly, lifting the cable and giving it a tug in an effort to dislodge the plug from the mains.

"You wouldn't dare say that if she were here now," Jenny challenged him.

"Oh wouldn't I?" Algae retorted, breathing deeply to puff up his chest as he considered the thought of standing up to Daphne and giving it to her straight - preferably against a brick wall in a dark alley.

Meanwhile, the plug in the next room seem to offer more resistance than might normally have been expected; refusing to be divorced from its socket until more force was applied. Determined to master it, Algae leaned back to take the strain, like the anchor in a one man tug-of-war team.

"Be careful, Algae, it might be snagged on something," warned Ralph.

Too late. The cable gave way unexpectedly and Algae reeled back against the side of the bathtub, where he toppled into the water on top of the dead man and thrashed around like an eel as the other two looked on helplessly. After ten or twenty animated seconds he lay wide-eyed and still, just like his bath partner.

"Oh my God, now Algae is dead too!" Jenny cried out despairingly, burying her face in Ralph's chest. "Take me home, Ralph. This is turning into a weekend from hell."

"Weekend in hell, more like," Ralph concurred sadly. "That

was bad luck. Algae dodged bullets in France, spears in the Congo, and lectures in Cambridge, only to end up dead in a tub of dirty bathwater. It just goes to show - you never can tell when the Reaper will call."

Ralph put a comforting arm around Jenny's shoulders and took another drink to salute his fallen comrade. But in Algae's case, that call turned out to be a wrong number. After the generous eulogy, his face quickly crumpled into a grin as he raised a fist and waved the slack lead about his head like a flag in a victory parade.

"Oh Algae, you're alive!" Jenny observed.

"It's all perfectly safe now," he assured them. "You can do what you want with him, but first help me get out of this thing. Bath night isn't till Sunday."

Ralph put the bottles down to lend him a strong arm as Jenny rolled up her sleeve to perform a thorough physical examination. With Algae clear, she plunged her prurient hand into the water over the dead man's midriff.

"Such a waste of vigour," she bemoaned. "He is incredibly well built, unless ..." she pulled her hand clear of the water clutching a plastic bathtoy, "... it's just his battleship," she sighed, throwing the toy over her shoulder and plunging in again.

"Jenny, what are you doing?" asked Ralph, slightly perturbed by her action. "Have you no respect for the dead?"

The dead man seemed a little perturbed as well. Ralph had never seen such an intense frown on the face of a corpse before, as if he had died trying to concentrate on boring things.

"Just a routine check for signs of life. Something I learned as a navy nurse during the war," Jenny explained.

"You didn't tell me you were a nurse!"

"You didn't ask."

"Have you still got the uniform?" he inquired hopefully.

"Remember what I said about taking time off," she reminded him, as she proceeded with the examination. "He's still warm, you don't suppose he could still be alive, do you?"

"Can you feel any sort of pulse?" asked Algae, putting his fingers over the carotid artery in the patient's neck.

"No, nothing down here," she affirmed. "But he is becoming very stiff. Rigor mortis must be setting in."

"I can't feel anything either," Algae concurred, stepping back from the dead man. He rubbed his fingertips together and sniffed them forensically. "Take a look at this!" he urged, holding his fingers up for the others to see. Each fingertip was covered in a creamy coloured paint. "Electricity may have rejuvenated your Uncle Ebenezer, Ralph, but O'Flaherty here shed forty odd years by simply washing off his theatrical make-up. That's what he used the dressing table for."

"The crafty git!" Ralph exclaimed.

"But why would O'Flaherty pretend to be so old?" Jenny asked pertinently. "Most people these days want to look young. And why would a surfing fanatic come to a flat, boring county in East Anglia to work as a butler in a starched collar?"

"At least he died in his bath tub. You won't find bigger waves anywhere else on the east coast," Ralph observed.

"There'll have to be an inquest," Algae declared, picking the plastic battleship up off the floor and examining it like a modelling expert. "There is definitely something fishy going on here. It's a very strange way to take a bath."

"Maybe he was a prospective parliamentary candidate with ministerial potential," Ralph suggested lewdly. "Every one knows what they're like."

"There'll be an inquest for us if we don't get help soon," Jenny predicted grimly. "Why don't I take the car, drive to the nearest town and contact the police. You two can find Daphne and tell her what's happened here."

"I don't like it," Algae murmured. "We don't know what's lurking out there around the next bend. One of us should go instead. It'll be difficult to navigate around those shell holes in the road at night."

Jenny had to think quickly to circumvent this gender impasse. She suddenly noticed an object on the floor and bent

down to pick it up. "This is my shoe!" she exclaimed. "What's it doing here?"

Algae took the shoe and held it close to his nose. "Smells a bit funny," he noted, taking a few quick sniffs.

"Girls can have foot odour too," smirked Ralph.

Indignant at this, Jenny took the shoe back from Algae and sniffed it. "Smells like Champagne. He must have been drinking out of it."

"But where did he get it from?"

"He is the butler. He must have the keys to the wine cellar," she presumed.

"Not the Champagne - the shoe! The pervy old git must be one of the Sons of Luca!" Ralph deduced excitedly.

"Is your camera still down in the dungeon?"

"Hey, I'd forgotten all about that!" Ralph confessed. "If that was the route he used to abduct you, and he tripped the wire, then we might have some evidence of it on film."

"If only there was a darkroom in the house," Algae observed ruefully, as if trying to obfuscate the plan to let Jenny go.

"But there is," Jenny insisted. "There are lots of them. Someone is going around pinching all the lightbulbs."

"No, I meant a proper photographic darkroom with a red lightbulb and some modern, state-of-the-art processing equipment. Daphne's father doesn't allow photography so he's hardly likely to keep a darkroom in working order."

"Who needs processing equipment?" posed Ralph. "I packed the necessary chemicals in my case. We're developing a negative, not producing a print, so all we need is a couple of bowls and a pocket watch."

"What about a home movie projector?"

"There's one in the study. And a screen, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Algae recalled. "Army boots will never look the same again."

"Algae, that's sweet of you to say," Jenny fawned, hoping to butter him up and win him over so he'd allow her to take the car. "I don't mind if you undress me - with your eyes, that is."

"We still need a room with a red light or else we won't be able to see what we're doing," he insisted firmly. "I'm still not convinced that letting Jenny take my car is a good idea."

Jenny held up a red lightbulb for their cause. "Anything else?" she inquired sprightly.

"Where did that come from?" an astonished Algae demanded to know. "I haven't seen one of those since we left Paris. I didn't know you could buy them in this country. I thought they were banned by the Home Office along with French postcards and uncertified foreign films."

Jenny shrugged her shoulders. "I never leave home without one - just in case I lose my traveller's cheques. Now, Ralph, all you need is Algae's technical assistance which, being a girl, I couldn't possibly provide."

"I still don't like it," Algae protested. "A lone woman leaving the house without a mobile wireless-telegraphy device to wave about in the air and pretend to make phone calls on is just not done. Think of the risk!"

"Nonsense. Home Office crime statistics show that women are much more at risk when they're with the men they know."

"Those statisticians never spent a weekend in Wulfmarsh Hall."

"She'll be alright, if she remembers to release the handbrake - and doesn't burn out the clutch before she gets to the nearest town - assuming that she doesn't get lost and run out of petrol first," Ralph chuckled.

"Don't listen to him," Algae advised her. "Just be careful - I don't want any dents or scratches in the bodywork."

"Before you go, Jenny - you better show us the way out of here," Ralph advised. "Algae's lost."

Jenny glanced at Algae, expecting a robust denial.

"It would save some time," he confirmed. "I lost my bearings when Ralph shunted me up the arse in the dark."

"You too? I think we should have him neutered," Jenny proposed. "I've heard the Cambridge University Vet School do it cheaply if you show them an SU card."

"Do what cheaply?" Ralph interjected.

"Snip off the dog's bollocks!" she snapped, before heading off into the darkness again.

"Have you noticed a slight change in her vernacular since we arrived?" Ralph inquired with a frown. "She can't have got that from Daphne."

"It happened when she changed her costume," Algae recalled.

Jenny led them silently back down the narrow male servants' corridor, but not out through the kitchen as they had come in. Instead, she took an unexpected detour through an obscure side door.

"This should lead us directly up to the bedroom I share with Daphne," she explained.

"This isn't the way we came," Ralph whispered to Algae.

"She must know a short cut," Algae presumed. "Less walking will be easier on your bladder."

They followed her to a narrow set of ascending steps that seemed to transcend three floors before delivering them once more into a world of electric light. For some reason, the lightbulb snatcher had not yet struck in the corridor servicing the bedrooms.

"Keep hold of your candles, boys, you're going to need them when you lose the remaining lightbulbs," Jenny cautioned, leading them right up to the door of the chamber she shared with Daphne. She pushed the door inward like a dutiful servant. "Anything else, guv'ner? Or will that be all for this evening?"

"Er, yes, there is one other thing," Ralph proposed, taking her hand and leading her into the bedroom. "I couldn't do it again, not in front of Algae."

Jenny illuminated the lever with her candle and gave it an accomplished squeeze. The secret panel immediately and obligingly began to slide aside. "You'd better be quick," she warned. "You've only got about thirty seconds before it closes again."

"Thanks babe," grinned Ralph, planting a boyish smacker on her cheek as he dashed passed to catch the bus.

"I was only joking about the paintwork," Algae confessed, shaking her hand coily and handing over the car keys. "Don't worry about the car - just take care of yourself and come back safely."

"Wait a minute, Algae!" she whispered, slipping the keys into her pocket as he was turning to go.

"Yes?"

Jenny put her arms around his neck and engaged his lips full on, whilst keeping one eye on Ralph to make sure he was watching. Ralph hovered in the portal and shook his head in disgust at the cheap shot which so easily overwhelmed Algae's inadequate defences.

"Ten seconds, Algae!" he growled. "Unless you'd rather stay behind and play netball with the girls."

"Good luck, Algae," she purred.

Speechless, Algae staggered drunkenly through the portal and was gone. The panel slid back into place, leaving Jenny alone and vulnerable once again.

She glanced round the room, then returned to the illusion of security provided by the light in the corridor. She made her way back to the great stairway which overlooked the entrance hall, still brilliantly lit by high chandeliers. Any thief would require a very tall stepladder, or spiderman suction pads, to steal those particular bulbs.

Jenny paused on the top landing within sight of her objective - the huge oak doors that would bar her escape, and stood like a reflective climber posing meditatively in the shadow of the summit before making the final assault. A big mistake under the circumstances. The bright electric light from the high chandeliers began to dim; as if by the will of a supernatural agent, or a mortal hand on a dimmer switch; threatening to flood the enclosed space with stifling darkness.

Confused by her failing vision, Jenny dallied on the first step like a thorn rabbit, until perilously close to being entombed by the gloom. Suddenly and belatedly imbued with an overriding sense of danger, she began to run down the stairway, only to trip over something furry and tumble arse

over tit down the remaining steps. She bounced a couple of times before landing heavily on the floor.

Jenny lay stunned for a few seconds, but then quickly regained her wits and found her feet again. The darkness and the disorientating impact left her without a bearing, so that the hurried choice of flight took her down the hallway flanking the stairs; away from the exit and into the maw of the old mansion where the spirits of the evil dead dwelt.

There were no light sources, and yet she could see the faint green faces of the portraits on the walls looking down on her as if luminescent; and she could feel the burning white phosphorescent glow of their lascivious eyes as they sought to pick her apart like schoolboys with an insect.

The sound of heavy breathing, coming from just up ahead, persuaded her to halt and reappraise the situation. The breathing altered, becoming deeper and more menacing; the low growl of a previous nightmare.

She turned like a sheep being herded by a dog and ran in a blind panic, this time towards the front of the mansion and the main entrance to the courtyard; guided by the ghostly moonlight beaming through a gap in the gathering clouds and spilling in through high windows at a steep angle to strike the polished floor at regular geometric intervals.

A deranged howl rang out in pursuit of the fleeing woman, invoking in her mind's eye the Fenris-wolf on the wall above the dining hall with its gleaming eyes and terrible fangs. The beast was coming to life, reembodied with its massive shoulders and swift legs, as the theriomorphic spirit broke free of the wall to leap down and join in the hunt for its prey.

Jenny wasn't an ex-schoolgirl sprinting champion for nothing. She covered the fifty yards or so in a personal best time, only to slam against the formidable double doors that fortified Wulfmarsh Hall from the outside world of sanity and reason, and kept those within imprisoned in the asylum.

Fearing the threat of the predator about to strike, she struggled furiously with the iron bolt and the ring-shaped handle while bracing herself for the anticipated lunging im-

pack against her back and the sharp teeth that would pierce the exposed flesh of her neck. She wondered whether the end would be sudden or whether the fiend would delay its assault to torment her with its hot breath and salivating tongue as she lay trapped under its heavy paws.

She managed to draw back the bolt, but was entombed by the unchivalrous wrought iron ring. She twisted it with all her panicked strength, but still it would not budge.

Jenny resigned herself to a traumatic early death in this bleak mausoleum, only for the ring to turn and the doors to part unexpectedly at the last second; as if by the will of a gentlemanly supernatural hand, which also shoved her out through the gap - ejecting her like a bad penny.

Jenny stumbled out to face a wild evening. The elemental fingers of a sou'westerly gale, so typical of autumn in the British Isles, immediately dishevelled her hair. The trees were swaying to and fro, and the tepid wind was whipping up the brown leaves of the courtyard, which swirled in the turbulent vortices like the garments of a troupe of dancing devils.

Physically and mentally exhausted by the terrifying ordeal, and gasping for breath; she embraced one of the pillars in lieu of a rescuing hero. Beads of sweat on her forehead matted her fringe as she glanced back through the gaping orifice into the black pit of damnation that was Wulfmarsh Hall. The eyes of the stalking beast were large and white; emerging slowly from the gloom that perfectly camouflaged a dark and terrible form.

Not waiting to see whether the beast would leave its lair to pursue her, Jenny jumped down onto the gravel courtyard and fled headlong towards the gallows tree where Algae's faithful steed of steel stood waiting to spirit her away. Had she delayed a moment longer she would have seen Satan, the unwitting cause of her terror, emerge from the house full of bemused conceit; purring and rubbing himself up and down against the door frame.

The staccato of her running feet, crunching loudly on the gravel, sang out to a high vantage point in the house; were a

curtain moved aside and a malevolent pair of eyes tracked the escape across the courtyard.

Jenny jumped into the car and inserted the key in the ignition. She adjusted her fringe and make-up in the rear view mirror, and added a dab of rouge to her lips, before frantically pulling open the choke and turning the key to start the engine.

The engine turned over but failed to start. She could smell petrol and paused for a few anxious moments, fearing that it might be flooding. A shadow moved across the backseat, cast by a branch swaying in the breeze, though enough to instil fresh urgency into her efforts to escape from this eerie domain.

She turned the key again and the engine fired up and roared into life. Forgetting to engage the clutch, she crunched first gear and stalled. After starting up again, she engaged first with the clutch, but the engine laboured against the handbrake and stalled. Third time lucky. She engaged the clutch, found first, released the handbrake, slowly disengaged the clutch and shot off in a wide circle like a demented kangaroo; shooting gravel - like bullets - into the Wulfmarsh windows and leaving a cloud of burning rubber in her wake.

She travelled fifty yards before slamming on the brakes. The reason - a sudden thought, a nagging doubt too great to be ignored whatever the immediate peril. Indeed, the suspicion was an ameliorating influence on her panic.

"So that's it!" she surmised, slamming her palm on the steering wheel as a piece of the jigsaw fell into place.

Jenny reversed back to the parking spot and got out of the car, suddenly feeling relaxed and calm, but leaving the door open and the engine running for a quick escape. She walked over to the trunk of the tree - only now suspecting the hollow to be significant beyond the first step in a climbing exercise.

She stuck her nose into the dark enclave and leaned inward. The whole of her upper body disappeared into the hollow as she groped around in the darkness; leaving her shapely rear briefly exposed and vulnerable to a lecherous assault from behind. This was a calculated risk. She reemerged soon after,

clutching an old swing-tyre and a long length of rope which had recently cut a fresh groove into the branch overhead, causing the sap to bleed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Daphne paused before entering the study and listened intently. There was a definite clamour of industry emanating from behind the closed door which, in England, most people associated with the mercantile, rather than the landed classes; since the latter clung to the idyllic pastoral notion of an economy based on sheep-clearances and fox-hunting. And in Daphne's fraught mind, aside from posing a grave threat to wealth and title, mercantile activity this weekend could mean only one thing - Algae.

Somewhat irate at the thought of him using her home for the base purposes of research and development, she swiftly opened the door to investigate; and discovered Ralph and Algae loading a reel onto the projector and threading the film, having crudely managed to develop the negative. In these critical circumstances, amateurish urgency had necessarily overridden all finesse, though the ending still had to be tested on an audience.

"What are you doing with that?" she demanded to know, confronting them as if they were schoolboys caught in the act of looting the headmaster's study. Daphne was now dressed, appropriately, like a very daring prefect - in black stockings, short pleated skirt, a white blouse with her collar turned up and a loose stripey tie around her neck.

"We retrieved the camera from the dungeon. Something tripped the wire so we've processed the film to see what's on it," Algae explained, looking up her skirt from his crouching position with a disapproving frown. "Daphne, why are you

wearing that old school uniform? Don't you know it encourages paedophiles?"

"I'll dress any way I like," she replied frankly. "I can't help it if you have a sick mind."

"I once read the *Daily Mail*," Algae admitted shamefully. "Sick minds have become the norm in society, and so, *a posteriori*, the really sick minds belong to the rational minority who are left."

"*A posteriori*? What's that - an Italian dish?"

"You're just in time for the premiere of *Phantom of the Dungeon* (1920)," Ralph announced proudly, without giving Daphne a second glance. "Ralph and Algae's first ever collaborative project."

"This is the director's cut," Algae added. "We haven't had time to censor it yet, so there shouldn't be any ridiculous continuity errors."

"Motion picture history in the making," Ralph continued to enthuse. "We could be the next Lumiere brothers."

Daphne was not entirely impressed. "Marx brothers, more like."

"Marx brothers? I've never heard of them."

"They're Jewish clowns who wear silly hats and grease-paint moustaches."

"Do they make movies?"

"Not yet. But when they do, they'll probably end up being about as famous as you two," she predicted tersely.

"Don't be so cynical, Daph. When we're famous, we'll make you our favourite leading lady."

"You left the study without my permission?" she deduced, unmoved by the glittering promise.

"Well, naturally. We couldn't very well get hold of the film to process by just sitting here smoking spliffs and drinking gin."

"We thought you'd be pleased," ventured Algae. "This film might reveal the identity of those who abducted Jenny. You do want to know who did it, don't you?"

"I told you to wait here for me. Instead, you go crawling

around out there on your own."

"We're men, Daph!" exclaimed Ralph. "We don't take orders from mutton dressed as lamb."

"That's all very commendable," she conceded, moderating her tone. "But it just isn't safe out there. There are dangers in this house that can strike men as well as women."

"Like taking a bath, for instance?" he proposed wryly.

An indignant Daphne sniffed her armpit. "I showered before dinner. What's that supposed to mean?"

"We found O'Flaherty dead in his bathtub," Algae explained. "He could be another victim of foul play. This film may contain evidence that could explain what's really going on here this weekend, so we decided we'd better have a look at it before anyone else does."

Daphne glanced round the study with a furrowed brow and raised eyebrows. "Talking of anyone else - where's Jenny?"

"Gone to the village for help."

"That's a long walk in the dark, for an attractive young woman without a mobile telegraphy device, in our climate of suspicion and fear."

"She took my car - the heater works if you pull the hood down."

"I didn't think she could drive."

"She can't," Ralph confirmed. "She'll just have to find first gear and bump along the road like an American tourist who doesn't know how to work a stick."

"Who said she could leave the house?"

"Er, we're your guests, Daphne, not your prisoners," Algae advised her. "If we want to leave, we can. Anytime we like."

"Don't be so sure," Daphne informed him, pulling back the hammer of the gun with her thumb. "This is a state of emergency and we're under martial law. There is such a thing as the suspension of *habeas corpus*."

"Why wouldn't you want Jenny to go for help?" asked Ralph, surprised by Daphne's surly reaction. "We thought you'd be proud of her selfless bravery. We think she deserves a medal - that road has got some very sharp bends in it, not to

mention the shell craters.”

“I told you before, this is family business. We don’t want a bunch of nosey nippleheads snooping around the Hall,” Daphne scowled.

“O’Flaherty wasn’t a member of your family,” Ralph pointed out. “And we merely said that we found him dead in his bathtub. We didn’t say how he died.”

“So?” she queried, sensing a trap.

“So aren’t you at all interested in knowing how he died?”

“Not really. He was old enough to croak at any time,” she replied, with complete disdain, before expedience persuaded her to relent and play the game. “Alright, Ralph, how did he die? No, let me guess; either he had a heart attack, or he slipped on a bar of soap and fractured his skull, or he was electrocuted by a gramophone player that fell into the water over his crotch. I’d say it was number three.”

“How on earth did you know that?” Ralph gasped in amazement.

“A wild guess,” she insisted.

“Not only that, he looked forty years younger for the experience,” Ralph recounted. “How would you account for his restored youth?”

“Either a salubrious effect of the electric shock smoothed away his wrinkles and stimulated his follicles - or he was wearing a grey wig and stage make-up all along,” she proposed. “Number two.”

“That was brilliant deduction, Daphne!” Ralph continued to applaud. “You should come round and play Cluedo with the boys sometime.”

“I thought that’s what I was doing,” she remarked wryly.

“Just a moment, Miss Scarlett,” Algae interjected, with steely scepticism, like council for the prosecution taking his turn to cross-examine the witness. “We know how he died, and we know how he aged, but we don’t know why he was prancing around Wulfmarsh Hall in make-up and a wig in the first place.”

“Servants are always lying about their age. He probably

thought he'd get more money as a senior butler when he applied for the job. How was he to know we pay Equity rates to all staff - even those required to do dodgy Oirish accents."

"Alright, let's see what we've got here," Ralph proposed, pulling down the screen. "Take a seat, Daphne. It's not every Saturday night you're invited to a premiere."

"Hold it!" Algae cried, just as Ralph was about to flick the switch on the projector.

"Forget it, Algae. No time for popcorn."

"Not popcorn - music! We can't watch a silent movie without some action music. Daphne, will you play the piano?"

Daphne glowered at him with a withering stare.

"Come on, Daphne, it's showtime!" Algae cajoled her. "There's no business, like showbusiness, like no business I know ..."

Daphne smiled sweetly, as she was curiously inclined to do at unpredictable moments. She put the gun down on the coffee table, sat at the upright piano, interlocked her fingers, and stretched her palms like a trooper. "Roll the pictures, Ralph. It's showtime!"

Ralph switched off the lights. Seconds later, the screen flickered into life with a dramatic ten to one countdown, then the moving picture show began. Ralph, the pioneering cinematographer, had judged the ambient light setting well; and the ugly old witch-woman appeared in the first few frames, perfectly illuminated after tripping the wire. She approached the camera as if intrigued by the strange object; pausing and bending over to stare straight into the lens; her monstrous visage made all the more grotesque by the negative print.

"First rule of film acting," Daphne tutted, as she struck a few jangly notes. "Never look into the camera lens."

"This is documentary," Ralph reminded her. "I should really intercut with posing shots of me every thirty seconds to make me part of the story."

Daphne racked up the suspense with a hair-raising score worthy of vaudeville villainy as Ralph tried to keep the blurry

images in focus. The witch-woman appeared again, a few seconds later; this time with a bundle on her shoulder that resembled Jenny in a wig; gagged and bound, hand and foot. Once again, she stared into the camera lens - as if to ensure that there could be no mistake - then vanished into the shadows with her captive. The film reel came to an abrupt end with a loud clatter and Ralph switched off the power to the whirling projector.

"So it was the old witch-woman after all," Algae concluded, switching on the lights. "She must be the mother of the Sons of Luca."

"Don't you think it curious that the Sons of Luca should cut the phone line but leave the car completely intact and ready to go?" Daphne mused. "They've probably cut the brake cables to make it look like an accident. I doubt whether an experienced male driver would get passed the first bend in that deathtrap, never mind an L-plate virgin like Jenny. Then there are all those gaping shell holes in the road. Just think of the damage she could do to your front fender if she drives into one."

"She'll be alright," Ralph insisted, with remarkable nonchalance. "Still, Algae should have thought of that before he let her go."

"She's your girlfriend," Algae remonstrated.

"It's your car," Ralph replied. "How can you afford a car like that on a Cambridge scholarship for boys from deprived socio-economic backgrounds?"

"I hire it out for weddings and funerals."

"In British-racing-green?"

"Some people like a sporty send-off."

"You mean we drove up here in a hearse?"

"No, of course not. The bodies don't ride in it, just the guests."

"Then how do you explain the smell of formaldehyde?"

"I thought that was your aftershave."

"I wasn't wearing any. It must have been Jenny's perfume."

"Your lack of any outward sign of affection or concern for

Jenny is beginning to worry me, Ralph. Remember, you're supposed to be one of the good guys this weekend. Wulf-marsh Hall is turning you into a bit of a misogynist."

"Backlash," Ralph proposed. "Anyway, who says you can't be a good guy and a misogynist? Don't you think there are secret-service agents out there who know how to give their girlfriends a good slap and still find time to save the world for democracy?"

"Those good guy misogynists might act tough, but remember, they always save the girl in the end," Algae stipulated, from his scant knowledge of the racy underground detective fiction of the period.

"The best-looking girl," Ralph stressed. "Sometimes they lose a few of the lesser sluts along the way."

"Let's just hope it's still Daphne and her father they're after and not Jenny or my car."

"By the way, Daphne, where is your old man? We haven't seen him for a while."

"He's dead," she replied casually, as if just asked about the state of the weather.

"What?" gasped Ralph.

"When?" asked Algae.

"How?" probed Ralph.

"It's hard to tell without seeing the body, but he said he was bagged with an axe."

Algae and Ralph exchanged perplexed glances.

"When did you last speak to him?" Ralph queried.

"About an hour ago."

"Where was he?"

"His head was mounted on the wall in the dining hall between the stag and the wild boar."

"Is he there now?" asked Algae.

"No, he's in a hatbox for safekeeping."

"Can we see him? He might give us some clue as to what's going on."

"He doesn't want to see anyone at the moment."

The boys were puzzled by this disclosure.

"Why doesn't he want to see anyone?" Ralph inquired carefully, as one might when questioning a child in trauma.

"How would you feel if you had just been beheaded?"

"Depends on the state of my hair," Ralph replied, brushing his fringe aside. "Daphne, have you been eating toadstools again?" He raised her eyelids with his thumbs and peered closely into her eyes for the tell-tale signs.

"Don't be silly, they're out of season." Daphne stepped back from him and cocked her ear as if listening for something in the air, then smiled sweetly and grabbed her gun. "I've got to go now," she informed them, skipping off towards the open door like Alice in Wonderland.

"Go where?" Algae called out.

"Daddy's calling me. You know what a dreadful burden they become in their decapitated years."

Daphne vanished through the door, leaving the two young men looking more perplexed than ever.

"She's crazy," Ralph declared. "I've been saying it for years, but she's definitely getting worse."

"I know - but we've still got to look after her," Algae insisted. "We owe it to society. Think of it as care in the community."

"Yeah, right. Society owes us more like," Ralph grumbled. "When we get back to Cambridge, I'm going to introduce you to the captain of the mixed hockey team. She'll teach you how to Sumo wrestle - that'll take your mind off Daphne."

They had barely made it to the door when the lights went out in the study and a veil of darkness swamped their visual senses.

"Oi!" Algae shouted, as Ralph inadvertently shunted into him from behind again. "Will you stop doing that, we're not in the army now!"

"Sorry, Algae, I can't see a friggin' thing. The lightbulb snatcher must have found the fusebox. Where did you put those candles?"

"Never mind the candles, you'll just have to grope your way along the corridors. It shouldn't be too difficult after all

the practice you've had today."

"Grove along what corridors?" he queried. "I'm not going out there without a light."

"You'll need to look in the servants quarters," Algae insisted. "Daphne may have gone down there to examine O'Flaherty's body."

"Me go back to that place all by myself? You've got to be joking?"

"Would you rather search for the fusebox in the dungeon?"

"I'd rather stay here, finish a bottle of brandy, and wait for the sun to rise and banish all the ghouls except my hangover."

"So would I. But first we have to save Daphne from whatever's out there. Don't forget, this is Hallowe'en, and there's a curse hanging over her head."

"We'll end up saving whatever's out there from Daphne. She's likely to cause someone a serious injury under her guise of diminished responsibility."

"That's why we also have to locate the fusebox and restore some semblance of light to the shadows of Wulfmarsh Hall as soon as possible - to prevent accidents and insurance claims."

"What's the point of that with no lightbulbs?" Ralph remonstrated.

Algae wasn't listening. He'd already slipped out of the open doorway, leaving Ralph to grope around by himself. He soon discovered the brandy flask and took a deep swallow, then carried on the hunt until he found a candle, which he promptly lit and stuck on a saucer, providing himself with a meagre bubble of light with which to fend off the creatures of the night.

He raised the brandy flask to the bemused portrait of Lord Helmut, who smirked sympathetically at his predicament.

"This is all your fault," Ralph lectured him. "If you hadn't be so uptight about who your daughter fancied, the whole history of Wulfmarsh Hall would have been different and I wouldn't be standing here now, talking to myself in the dark."

"That's counterfactual," Lord Helmut pointed out. "We weren't allowed to make counterfactual statements when I

was a student at Cambridge.”

“You studied history?”

“Of course - my father was a minister of the Crown.”

“Which Crown was that?”

“James II.”

“They wouldn’t let me read history at Cambridge,” Ralph disclosed ruefully. “You have to go back four generations to find anyone in my family who served in the Cabinet. But the sociology department questions the arbitrary nature of everything - even the taboo of counterfactual history.”

“I wish I was a student again. I miss the great debates over Church and State. Can you still pick up a whore for a ha’penny on Kings Parade?”

“They’re two for a ha’penny now - on student nights.”

“Well, make the most of it, young man. *Remember above all things that nothing passes away so rapidly as youth.*

Ralph took this onboard and polished off the contents of the brandy flask; then reluctantly left the study and made his way through the gloomy old Hall to the kitchen, and hence along the maze of creepy corridors that lead to the servants quarters.

“Daphne? Daphne, where are you?” he called out recklessly. “It’s me, Ralph. Why don’t you come out? You’re always trying to corner me, so now here’s your chance. I think we’re alone now - there doesn’t seem to be anyone around. Come on, Daph, I’m up for it this time. I’ll go all the way. I’m fully codified, like a middle-class American girl on her third date.”

There was no reply. Deathly silence seemed to reign over Wulfmarsh Hall at this late hour; an eerie graveyard shift of deathwatch beetles and flatulent corpses.

Ralph drifted into O’Flaherty’s room through an open door. Nothing seemed to have changed since his previous visit. The poster still hung from the wall and the clothes were still scattered on the floor. Just across the corridor, the door to the bathroom was also wide open and Ralph suddenly remembered that he badly needed a sprinkle; so badly that by

now he was dying for one. Walking around a dark old house, with an indeterminate number of homicidal maniacs on the loose, made him nervous, very nervous. Wasn't it true that criminals always revisited the scene of their crimes? That anxiety itched his bladder as much as his piles. Unfortunately for Ralph, this was the servants quarters. The toilets were servants' toilets and there was a strict rule against Peterhouse men using them.

But he was desperate enough for anything by now, even the sweet-smelling ladies, and there was no one else about. At least, no one alive to tell, and dead men don't wear plaid. No one in this life would ever know, and so he reluctantly entered the servants' washroom, which was now a makeshift morgue containing O'Flaherty's body.

Ralph looked distinctly sheepish as he staggered, cross-legged, across the tiled floor, clutching his tackle. A stiff upper lip was out of the question under the circumstances.

O'Flaherty lay almost as he had before, like the victim of a Royalist fanatic, but without the teatowel around his head, and with a noticeably thicker arm draped over one side of the tub than the weedy Jacobin.

Ralph thought the body pose had altered slightly, and the expression had changed on the face; but chided himself; judging that such things were simply the result of his feverish imagination, or even just tricks of the light.

The facial features had been a register of surprise, but were now in a curious state of bemusement. Ralph gave the face a long, hard glare of suspicion; daring it to register some emotion from beyond the grave. A stream of bubbles disturbed the surface of the calm water as if the corpse had decided on a flatulent response to the challenge, and Ralph stepped back in alarm; afraid that a serpent might suddenly rise up out of the depths and seize his head in its jaws.

The dead man's features seemed to relax even more as Ralph chose the furthest pedestal from the corpse for a bit of privacy. But then, the dead man's head managed to loll side ways under its weight, as if to get a better view of the pro-

ceedings. From its vantage, its lifeless eyes could see every thing.

Ralph scowled in annoyance at the movement of the head, though tried not to think about the peeper as he unzipped his fly and gingerly tugged at his flat-headed pecker. Ralph was a fine cricketer, but wasn't known as Stumpy for his wicket-keeping skills alone; and the nagging temptation to look across overwhelmed him.

To his astonishment, the judgmental expression of the corpse had changed again; the shade was subtle, from bemusement to a silent snigger, but still he couldn't be sure. It defied all rational explanation - it just didn't seem possible. He looked away and tried to turn his back on the infernal thing; but to his horror, the grinning features showed up in a mirror on the opposite wall.

He faced the other wall, clenched his teeth, closed his eyes and roared with frustration; but despite the weight of water hammering at the dam wall, the sluice-gates were jammed tight-shut.

"Fuck it!" he cursed, zipping-up and turning to glare at the provocateur.

By now, the incorrigible death mask had taken on a very contemptible smirk. Ralph grabbed his candle and fled self-consciously into the welcoming darkness as the sound of approaching thunder rumbled across the autumn sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Algae had managed to acquire a full candelabrum en route to his unenviable destination on this disconcerting Hallowe'en night, and was using it to illuminate the gloomy passages and corridors of Wulfmarsh Hall. As he walked passed the entrance to the dining hall, the doors swung inward, as if a ghostly footman was inviting him, belatedly, to partake of the dinner which he'd missed. He entered the room cautiously, holding the candelabrum high to cast its light as far as possible over the proceedings.

There was an empty shield on the far wall, between the stag and the wild boar, precisely where Daphne had claimed she'd found her father's head. He stood up on a chair and examined the steel spike, on which a human head could conceivably have been mounted by a homicidal maniac, for any trace of blood. There was none, but a strong smell of bleach from the shield suggested that it had been cleaned recently. Bullet holes peppered the wall beneath the shield. Algae counted five, in a very neat grouping, as if fired by someone practised in marksmanship. He produced a Swiss Army knife from his pocket and dug out a flattened slug, which he examined by candlelight, then placed in a plastic evidence bag for safe-keeping.

Algae stepped down from the chair and was walking around the table when his foot slid forward. He fell on his backside with a loud thump. The amateur sleuth felt something sharp penetrate the material of his trousers and he let out an expletive as he clutched his right buttock. His fingers located and dislodged a sharp object from his flesh. A spent

cartridge case from a service revolver - more evidence that gun-totting Daphne, or her father, had been here.

He put his hands down on the floor to rise again and the reason for the mishap became apparent. A patch on the floor was damp and gave off an odour of bleach, as if someone had recently made use of a bucket and mop. It seemed like an odd time for the cleaning lady to come round - and there was no yellow sign put out to warn of a slippery floor.

Algae was just getting to his feet again when a sound overhead alerted him to danger. Exaggerated reflexes and nervous tics acquired whilst dodging whizzbangs in the trenches were something of an embarrassment to young men like Algae when in polite company, but could become life-saving assets when crawling around Wulfmarsh Hall at the weekend. He began moving before he even saw the chandelier falling towards his head, with the result that it crashed to earth just inches from his foot and showered him in shattered glass. He thought he heard someone laughing and looked up to see the doors move. A second later, he registered the echo of ghostly footsteps as someone ran off down the corridor.

Algae rose to his feet and collected the candles dislodged in the fall. He quickly fitted them back on the candelabrum and relit their flames; then surveyed the dining hall with their light until satisfied that there was no more evidence to be garnered in this place. He departed warily, heading towards the grand staircase that led up to the girls' bedchamber; braving the admonition of Daphne's relatives peering down on him condescendingly from their portraits.

The door to the bedchamber was now firmly closed, despite Algae remembering that he'd left it open after retrieving the film from the dungeon. Someone had come this way in the meantime. Perhaps Daphne, after changing into her sixth outfit; or more likely, whoever it was he had heard lurking outside the dining hall minutes earlier. The same shadowy figure could now be waiting for him on the other side of the door.

He reached for the brass door knob, lit tentatively by the

five flickering flames. Suspecting a booby trap, he turned and pushed with the slow, careful determination of one defusing a bomb. The door swung inward silently, to reveal a now familiar room with a lingering scent of perfume in the air; and sitting directly in his path, eagerly awaiting a victim, lay a bear trap with its sharp serrated jaws wide apart like a huge and hungry carnivorous plant ready to chomp off his leg.

Algae stepped gingerly around the trap and looked about for any other signs of danger. To his relief, it seemed there were no other trolls to thwart him in his quest, except perhaps the bizarre Luca-doll, still blindfolded by Jenny's knickers. The devil-doll would be dealt with in due course. First, the bear trap had to be rendered safe.

He found a handy walking stick resting in the corner of the room and poked the spring plate of the trap with it to eliminate this major threat to public safety. The heavy steel contraption, energised by its spring, leapt into the air like a playful terrier. Its jaws snapped shut around the stick and shattered it into splinters.

Algae then turned his attention to the obstinate statuette. He removed the delicate garment from the eyes of the monstrous little pervert and threw it aside, repressing the thought of Jenny playing tennis in a short skirt on a windy day without them; then faced the abomination that would bar his way like St George confronting a dragon.

It grinned lustily at him as it had at Ralph, laying down the challenge. Inviting him to try his luck, to resume the ancient contest between the virtuous Christian knight and the depraved satanic Devil - as they were transported back in time to face each other through a duststorm in a primeval Iraqi desert where it had all began - or at least, that's how the scene would have played out, had the event not been spoiled by Algae's semitic pragmatism.

He knew that he would have to make the secret panel slide in order to get down to the fuse box in the dungeon. For that to happen, he would need to solicit the cooperation of the horny little devil in front of him; something Ralph had only

achieved through an act of gross indecency.

Algae was less tactile than Ralph, but a lot more cerebral; and after giving the matter some thought, he got down on his knees in a prayer position in front of the grinning little satyr. He licked his lips, that were cracked and dry, and took a deep breath for courage.

The evil grin broadened as the horned-god gazed down on yet another victim who was about to be torn from the decency of the national bosom, despite all attempts by the police to protect him from obscene literature and graven images. Poor Algae, lacking the presbyterian will of a chief constable, was just another helpless subject to corrupt and deprave.

But the lecherous grin vanished when Algae took a pair of pliers from his jacket pocket and held them open for the swarthy statuette to see. He tweaked its nose with the steel jaws of the versatile instrument, then slowly ran them down its chest towards the lever. The expression on the doll's face became one of acute angst as Algae let the tool drop to the lever itself; and he had barely taken the essential cogs in the pliers' grip when the panel slid back like a rifle bolt.

"No hard feelings," Algae chuckled, giving the devil a friendly slap on the cheek before grabbing his candelabrum and plunging through the portal into the forbidding darkness.

The torches and braziers that sometimes lit the way were all extinguished on this occasion and Algae relied on the dim light cast by the candles as he followed the curvature of the wall with one hand and jogged down the long flight of steps to meet his destiny. He descended without incident to the now familiar lower archway and its ominous plaque.

Algae paused, reluctant to proceed through the portal by himself at night on Hallowe'en, but knowing that he had no other choice for the sake of the plot. He pulled open the heavy door and felt his groin-strain playing up again, but manfully ignored the pain. The hinges creaked and groaned louder than ever in the deathly silence of the night; but Algae, like John Bunyan's pilgrim, was not to be discouraged, and

passed through the forbidding gap he had created.

The dungeon took on a completely different character by night - not that it wasn't intimidating enough by day. But now, the hollow black sockets seem to stare out mendaciously from the assorted skulls, whilst the wretched man in the iron mask displayed a nightmarish mien, as if plotting vengeance against the living from beyond the grave.

Algae suppressed a shudder and tried to convince himself that this was illusory. After all, there never was any daylight down in this subterranean cavern, and none of the wretches owned a wristwatch, so how were they to know whether it was night or day outside? But being alone in the gloom and cut off from the rest of humanity, Algae was not entirely convinced by his own rational counselling, and was grateful to reach the high tension lever which had provided Daphne with so much illumination earlier in the day.

He pulled down the lever just as Daphne had done, but on this occasion the action was in vain. No power surged through the circuit, no sparks flew to ignite his hair, and no sterile white light bathed the dungeon to aid him in his quest.

By candlelight, he could see that there was a tripswitch and a fuse box mounted higher up on the wall, but it lay just beyond his reach. He looked for something to stand on. The only suitable object in sight was a steel bucket, lying in lieu of a basket at the foot of the guillotine, as if eagerly waiting for a catch.

Marie Antoinette had gone, presumably removed for a trip to the salon, leaving the bench without a victim; though the blade had fallen recently and was covered in blood. The viscous red fluid had not yet congealed and ran along the edge of the angled blade to the lower tip, from whence the occasional drop would drip into the bucket.

Algae approached the apparatus of death with the utmost caution and looked down at the bucket by his feet. It was filled almost to the brim with red liquid, concealing whatever lay beneath the surface. Algae braced himself for a grim task. He lifted the laden bucket and carefully tipped it over,

pouring the crimson fluid over the floor to spread out in all directions. As the fluid level in the bucket dropped, he noticed the tip of someone's nose appear at the surface, followed by a chin and all the features of a face.

Algae recoiled in horror as Daphne's father stared up at him from his snug fit in the bottom of the vessel. He dropped the bucket and slipped in the pool of blood that swirled around his feet. The bucket toppled over and the head rolled out with a scowl on its face, as if frowning at this indignity. Despite his year in the medical corps on the Western Front, and two years in medical school at Cambridge University, Algae was still a bit squeamish about handling decapitated heads.

He bent down to examine it more closely, though with considerable caution, like a naturalist investigating the back end of a new species of porcupine. The lack of tendons and spinal cord trailing from the neck suggested that it wasn't real. Very gingerly, he reached out with blood covered hands and picked it up. The flesh was cold and smooth, and much to his relief seemed to be made out of wax. He turned it upside down to examine the base, like an expert examining an antique vase, and concluded that it was the Douglas Haig wig-holder from O'Flaherty's room. He sniffed the blood that now covered the front of his white shirt and immediately felt light headed from inhaling industrial alcohol fumes.

Though relieved that the head was not real, Algae was more than a bit disconcerted to discover the object in a bucket of fake blood beneath the guillotine blade. He assumed that either he was paranoid, and there was a perfectly simple, logical explanation for all of this - or an evil trickster was on the loose and playing games to unnerve him. But which was it, and why?

He gazed around the silent chamber, wishing for once that he was packing an iron penis-extension, like the ones Daphne and her father used to poke their guests with. The temptation to run from the dungeon threatened to overwhelm him; but he refused to be diverted from his evangelical mission to

restore light to the Hall.

Algae put the head down gently and carried the bucket across the stone floor to the fuse box wall, where he placed it upside down to provide a step-up so that he could reach the tripswitch. He pushed the lever to the 'on' position, but to no avail, the darkness refused to yield; so he unscrewed the lid of the fusebox using the screwdriver from his handy Swiss Army knife, took out the first fuse and inspected it by candlelight. The fine wire had been cut. He pulled out another, and another; all had been sabotaged, and then tidily replaced. He angrily slammed the last fuse back in its slot and turned to face the audience of skeletons that were mocking and taunting him with their macabre, grinning skulls.

"What are you laughing at?" he growled, stepping down from the bucket and picking one up by the throat to give it a good shake. To his surprise, these bones didn't rattle and roll like bones should. He grabbed the femur and twisted it, dislocating it from the hip joint, then dropped the rest of the skeleton in a heap like dirty washing. He detached the tibia and fibula from the patella and discarded these too, so that he was left clutching the femur in both hands like a thick cane. To his surprise, the bone was flexible, bending like a rubber truncheon. He smashed the pile of bones with it, and then released it under tension and watched the thing go spinning slowly through the air like an orbiting space station, as the opening to Strauss' *Zarathustra* played in his ear.

His curiosity aroused, Algae approached the cage where the grinning wretch sat in a state of partial decomposition and patiently stared out from behind the bars. Holding up the candles for a better look, Algae noticed that the heat from the flames seemed to melt his brow.

Algae put a finger through the bars of the cage and pressed the forehead. To his surprise, the finger indented half an inch into the flesh and he jumped back in shock when a bloodshot eyeball popped from its socket through the visor to the cold stone floor. Rather than go 'splat!' as one might expect of a delicate, fluid-encasing membrane, it bounced high in the air

like a rubber moonball. Algae caught it in his hand as it returned to earth.

A sound of movement occurred behind him; as if someone, or something, were scurrying across the floor. Algae turned and peered into the darkness, holding up his candelabrum to see who it was, but there was no one in sight.

"Who's there!" he called out tersely, issuing a stern challenge to whoever was skulking in the shadows to show themselves.

To his relief, no one emerged or replied; but then, to his horror, green mist began billowing from the walls and the dungeon seemed to come alive with ghostly shrieks and apparitions. Algae rubbed his eyes in disbelief at the sight of a headless figure in a red regimental tunic that loomed into view waving a cavalry sabre.

The headless horseman advanced menacingly towards the astounded guest, slashing and stabbing the air with his sword. Algae ducked behind the electric chair as the flashing blade came down and bit into one of the timber arms to release some spirits of bad-fried-men with an angry sizzle; then the horseman retreated to pick up the wax head before disappearing back into the mist from whence he had come.

Algae swallowed a lump in his throat and with considerable courage - some may think foolhardiness - chased after it; only to find himself confronted by a bare and impenetrable wall. In the best traditions of a cursed and haunted stately home, the apparition had simply vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ralph was still dying for a piss when he got back to the study; and to make matters worse, his candle flame died as he walked through the door; finally drowning to extinction in a pool of molten wax. Peering through the gloom for a convenient potted plant to water with an intoxicating solution of alcohol and nitrate, his leg brushed against something soft and furry. Or rather, something furry brushed against him and began to purr in an unsolicited display of affection.

"Get off me!" Ralph barked, warding off the attentions of this strange creature with a good solid kick, as he would any drunken slut he didn't fancy in the college bar.

Poor old Satan was sent flying through the air; screeching and howling furiously, as tomcats with monstrous, but fragile, egos are apt to do when their advances are spurned. Ralph ignored him and continued his search for a suitable receptacle.

Lightning from the gathering storm forked to earth; and for a brief second, the stain-glass windows of the former chapel were lit up brilliantly. Bright light poured in thro' the beautifully ornate transparencies to reflect off every shiny metal artifact in the study, including a large silver chalice occupying a prominent position on the high altar. The accompanying thunder was still some distance away and Ralph was not discomfited by its gentle growl.

"Perfect!" he muttered to himself on spying the silver chalice.

As the lightning receded, the darkness reassumed its hege-

mony, ready to aid and abet his anti-social behaviour. But still, Ralph looked around the vestibule with some paranoid circumspection, not wishing to be compromised by a prurient witness with keen night-vision and even keener moral standards. It seemed, though, that the only sentinel was a rusty old suit of armour; standing guard for public decency and ready to punish transgressors with its spear.

Satisfied that no one else was present - and the suit of armour was just an empty vessel in a kilt, devoid of an Anglican soul, or even a pair of trousers - he steered for the chalice on the altar, grabbed it greedily, and blessed it with a gush of holy water from his natural spring; all the while alert to the threat of discovery, social disgrace, and eternal damnation for his human frailty.

Ralph transferred the contents of his bulging bladder into the chalice as quickly as possible; relieving himself of a tremendous discomfort. Relieved, also, that the threat of discovery had passed; he zipped up and replaced the exquisite piece on the altar with the reverence of a pontiff on a Sunday.

Before he could decide what to do with the damning evidence - evaporation would take weeks - there came the distinct and alarming sound of movement, betraying the presence of someone nearby. Someone who could barely have failed to witness the knavish deed. Ralph turned around slowly; with a hapless grin on his face and his hands in the air in a gesture of political resignation.

"Sorry Daph. I don't usually go around desecrating the vessels of the church, but you know how it is. When you've gotta go, you've gotta go. Not even a movie star can go all night without a piss - that's why films only last two hours. I'll wash it out thoroughly tomorrow, I promise. No priest will ever taste the difference."

Through the gloom, he thought he saw the suit of armour in a kilt take a creaky step towards him, as if possessed by the spirit of a long dead Highlander from Drummossie Muir, looking for a supercilious young Englishman to wreak vengeance upon - and finding Ralph.

"Daphne? Is that you in there? You're looking good as ever. But then, I always did say you could get away with wearing anything - unlike Jenny. She's so skinny the clothes just seem to hang off her."

The suit of armour seemed unimpressed by this obsequious flattery. The joints creaked again as an arm was raised menacingly - the one carrying the spear - and seemed to take careful aim at the figure dressed in a dinner jacket.

"Daphne, put the spear down," Ralph pleaded. "Algae knows some friendly avant-garde Swiss and Austrian medical students who are testing out free association in the bar. They're just dying to meet you and dissect your mind over a couple of pints and a packet of crisps. Well, not literally dying - it's just a figure of speech. No one is dying, right Daph?"

The appeal proved worthless. The arm shot forward, and in the gloom Ralph could not see clearly enough to time his duck. The deadly javelin hurtled through the air with pinpoint accuracy and struck his chest a firing-squad bullseye, just offcentre, as the heavens were split by a thundering crescendo and a cascade of hail and rain struck the glass windows in protest at such gratuitous violence. Ralph collapsed with the spear embedded in his chest.

The storm, which had been threatening to break all evening, had finally arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The door to the study lay slightly ajar. A four inch wide strip of uncertainty, confirming that nothing but more stifling darkness lay beyond the wooden panel. Naturally suspicious of everything and everyone by now, Algae cautiously pressed one hand against the door, while maintaining a firm grip on the guiding candelabrum with his other.

The door swung inward slowly on its creaking hinges, and he stretched out his arm, allowing the five diminutive flames to reconnoitre for his eyes. The candlelight had a very limited range, requiring him to take each tentative step forward into the forbidding domain with sinews tightened and muscles knotted, ready to contract reflexively at the slightest sign of danger.

Outside the building, the storm was in full swing; with deafening thunder threatening to shatter the sky and staccato flashes of light eagerly flooding in through the orifices of the Hall at phenomenal speed; to fill the rooms and illuminate their dark spaces, before withdrawing again like a supernatural tide.

A concatenation of flashes revealed a male body, handsomely dressed for dinner, lying on its back, barely more than two or three yards from Algae's feet. The unfortunate fellow clutched a long thin shaft of wood, protruding from his chest, as if reenacting a frontier massacre at the Khyber Pass.

Algae stepped towards the body and knelt down on one knee for a closer look. Only then did he recognise the face. He stood up abruptly and stepped back in alarm. This was no

wax dummy, but the real flesh and blood of a close friend. The victim was Ralph, his co-adventurer through so many outlandish weekends. It seemed unfortunate to have lost him here, in a languid English shire county, on a weekend when nothing was supposed to happen; except maybe an illicit affair of the sort that used to shock and titillate the proletariat when they read about such things in their newspapers.

Algae might well have retreated to the front door and run for help all the way to the nearest village; but he was apprehended before he could reach the doorway by the sharp voice of a woman emanating from a position of concealment somewhere in the shadows.

"Stop right there or I'll blow your head off! And don't think I'm offering you oral sex," she warned. "Not that you'd know anything about that, Algae. Put your hands on your head and turn around slowly."

Algae obediently put one hand on his head as he turned slowly and raised the candelabrum with the other for a better view.

Daphne was sitting calmly on the altar and peering at him over a fetching pair of silver-framed spectacles balanced on the tip of her nose. She'd pinned back her hair and was wearing a dark-grey skirt with matching jacket, unbuttoned at the front to reveal a light-blue blouse. Now she sat with one leg crossed casually over the other; like an ambitious, thrusting female executive, ready to render service to the board. But the silver pistol levelled at Algae's heart reminded him that she was still the *femme fatale* from hell.

"D-Daphne? Is that you?" he stammered. "You've changed your clothes again - and your hair!"

"One thing I like about you, Algae, is the way in which you always notice changes to my hair," she revealed, with a sweet, pleasant smile. "You seem to understand how important it is to me. It defines my perception of myself."

"I know - Freud wrote a paper on it, and he doesn't get it wrong every time. That suit makes you look powerful," he remarked, hoping to curry some more favour and persuade

her to put the gun down.

"It's designed to."

"When did you start wearing glasses?"

"When the part called for it. The war is over and I'm back in civvies now to investigate crimes against humanity. My multiple personalities like me to dress for every occasion and I always get the feeling that Ralph doesn't like me in uniform - even school uniform."

"But Ralph's been murdered!" he revealed, stepping away to reveal the body. "With a spear!"

Daphne gazed down impassively for a moment. "You don't say? One of the reasons you're so boring, Algae, is that you keep stating the obvious. Poor old Ralph. But then, he who lives by the spear dies by the spear - at least he'd appreciate the irony of it."

"What irony?" he exclaimed in horror. "Why do you Anglicans always equate sex with victims and violence?"

"I'm a Catholic," she reminded him.

"They're just as bad."

"There you go again!" she sighed, shaking her head. "When are you ever going to grow up? Twenty two years old and you still don't understand the politico-religious forces which combine to create an Englishman. You should have read *Totem and Taboo* (1913) when you had the chance. If you had - and if you'd understood enough of it as Freud intended, which is by no means certain - you probably wouldn't be in your present predicament here tonight."

"That's like saying if your granny had balls she'd be your grandad," Algae protested.

"That's true, isn't it?"

"Right now, I'm more concerned with finding Ralph's killer than discussing anthropology," he replied, while trying to remain calm. "And getting out of here alive. After that, I'm all yours."

"Well, I can help you with the first point, but not the second, and definitely not the third. There are only three possible suspects left in Wulfmarsh Hall, so working out the

identity of the murdering little weasel with acne shouldn't be too difficult. Now put those candles down and get your hands up before I start shooting the heads off those pimples!"

Algae did not need a second telling. He certainly didn't want to expose his blooming complexion to her radical skin care correction treatment before the advent of antibiotics. He put the candelabrum down on the altar and clasped his hands firmly on his head like a prisoner of war. Unfortunately, his hands and the front of his shirt were still covered in stage blood. A point of evidence which Daphne noted with grim satisfaction.

"You said there are three possible suspects," Algae noted cautiously. "Who's the third?"

"Father, of course."

Algae was uncomfortably aware of an object in the shadow by her side. A spherical object about the size of a football, covered by a tea towel as if to keep the flies away.

"Where is your father?" he asked quietly, partly to instigate conversation in this hostage situation, but also to confirm his morbid suspicion.

"He's here," she announced cheerfully, whisking the covering teatowel away to reveal a decollate head, wearing the white wig of a Crown Court judge.

Daphne jumped down from the altar and landed on her flat heels with perfect poise and the agility of a cat, whilst maintaining a credible aim with the deadly old horse iron. Candlelight now shone on the ghastly third man in all his defunct glory, sitting on a silver tray like Salome's prize.

"Let's start with Father," she decreed, pushing the stylish specs higher up the bridge of her nose. "As members of the jury can plainly see, he lacks the necessary accoutrements, i.e. hands, to commit such an atrocity. Therefore, Algae, would you not agree that Father is totally incapable of such a fiendish act?"

Daphne smiled, or rather smirked, as ambitious, headline-grabbing politicians often do early in their careers, when presenting dubious facts with specious logic to try and make a

name for themselves. The detached reality in her vacant eyes and the steely tone of her voice sent shivers down his spine.

"Y-yes," he stammered without conviction, slightly confused by the structure of the sentence.

"You don't sound very sure," Daphne growled, as if deeply dissatisfied with the response; her eyebrows dipped in disapproval at the point where they met between her eyes. "Final answer?"

"I meant no!" he blurted out, hurriedly correcting himself to what he thought she wanted to hear. "I was never any good at semantics. You're absolutely right, he couldn't have done it."

"That's better," she smiled urbanely, then turned to address the head. "We wouldn't want Algae to perjure himself, would we Father?"

Father's reply, as with all his recent communication, was direct to Daphne via telepathy for the insane; from which Algae was glad to be excluded. The head remained perched on its truncated neck like a judge presiding over a grotesque medieval parody of justice.

"Father says that perjury is very serious and we only have the one sentence to fit all crimes - like in the good old days when Home Secretaries were really tough." She twirled the pistol to hint at what the sentence might be. "So you agree that Father can be eliminated from our inquiries?"

Algae was reluctant to answer, preferring to nod grimly rather than risk perjuring himself again.

"We can't hear you!" Daphne sang out, as she wandered around the study as if playing to a courtroom gallery.

"Yes!" he confirmed loudly.

"Good. No need to shout. Suspect number two is, naturally enough, myself." She glanced at the head, as if it had spoken again, then strode towards it and put her ear to the disembodied lips as if they were whispering something quietly.

The surreal circumstances began playing tricks on poor old Algae's senses, and he actually thought he saw the lips move. Whispered mutterings seemed to emanate from them that

were lost in the random noise of his tinnitus.

"W-what did he say?" asked Algae, in spite of his disdain for the proceedings.

Daphne continued conferring with the head. "No, Father, it wouldn't be right to leave me out of the proceedings just because I'm a girl. It's important that we give Algae a fair trial before we shoot him. We wouldn't want to lose on appeal - we'd have to find his bones in the yard and send him home in a box with a posthumous pardon pinned to the lid."

"Shoot me? Daphne, have you gone mad?" Algae exclaimed.

Asking such an apposite question carried certain risks. She stared at him through dark, soulless eyes; without any hint of compassion or remorse; and stretched her thin lips into a wry smile, like a shark getting ready to bite.

Algae thought the game was up for good. He saw his short innings flash before him and reflected on his life's gamble and subsequent failure. Ralph had warned that she'd be the death of them both and, barring a miracle, it looked as if he would be right.

"Don't be facetious, Algae, or we'll add contempt to the list of charges," she warned, deciding on reflection not to shoot him until the sentence had been passed. "I was in the house when the crime was committed and so I must be a suspect like everyone else. But, as Father pointed out, I am just a girl, so that lets me off the hook; and Jenny is even more girlie than me so she couldn't have done it even if she were here. So who else is there, Algae? Just you. You must have killed Ralph. Your own best friend! There's no other logical explanation for it. You should feel flattered that I'm treating you like a man for once. You can have the privilege of dying young and brave like one of *Kingsley's Heroes* (1856)."

"I'd rather stay alive and grow old as a coward."

"Have you no honour or shame?"

"Honour and shame lead to silly arguments that get people killed, like in the Great War, or the siege of Troy in c.1210 BC."

"And Ralph tonight!" she deduced, with grim satisfaction. "Are you claiming that it was an honour killing?"

"Why would I want to kill Ralph?"

"Jealousy. You knew that Ralph and I were having an affair."

"What affair?" Algae scoffed. "He told me exactly what happened between you two in the dining hall this evening. I'm very disappointed in you, Daphne. I didn't think you were that much of a slut."

"Why does the woman always get the blame? You two are worse than men," she grumbled, raising the pistol and taking very careful aim. "Any last words before sentence is carried out?"

"I wasn't even here when it happened. I was down in the dungeon checking the fuse box!" he insisted adamantly. "I've only just come back up."

"Got any witnesses to corroborate that?"

"No, of course not, there's no one else down there."

"No one else alive, you mean. Why are you covered in blood? Ralph's blood!"

"It's stage blood. You can tell it's not real, it smells like paint!" he insisted, pinching the shirt with two fingers and pulling it up towards his nose.

"Ralph was always a heavy drinker. Now get your hands up!" she barked, circling him menacingly with the gun levelled at his midrift.

"They're all made of wax and rubber down there," Algae continued to plead. "The whole set up is a fake." He took the rubber ball from his pocket. "Look at this. It's not an eyeball, it's a moonball, with almost unitary coefficient of restitution."

Algae bounced the rubber ball on the hard stone floor and watched as it bounced up into the vaulted ceiling. Daphne also tracked the trajectory of the ball as it rose and Algae saw his chance. He lunged forward to grab the gun; but Daphne anticipated the move, took a step back, and deftly cocked the hammer with her thumb.

"No, you don't," she warned. "Keep your hands on your

head.” The ball bounced several times more before Daphne reached out and caught it. “Hmm, so it bounces high,” she murmured, as she examined it, whilst keeping one eye on the accused. “Where did you get this from? One of those unlicensed Cambridge joke shops?”

“The man in the iron mask. Believe me, Daphne, I’ve never killed anyone - except maybe by accident in the medical corps. And as for chucking spears - I wouldn’t know one end from the other.”

“Don’t lie to me, Algae. That spear you threw in Africa saved me from marrying that well-endowed tribal chief.”

“That was a fluke,” he confessed. “More’s the pity.”

“Don’t you wish you’d let me get married now?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t want to see you pushing a pram - that would be nauseating.”

Unmoved, Daphne continued with the investigation like a probing magistrate. “If you were down in the dungeon, why didn’t you throw the tripswitch and restore the lights?”

“All the fuses were cut.”

“A likely story.”

“Go see for yourself!” he implored her.

“Cut by you, no doubt, to aid your murdering spree. Father warned me about you and he was dead right. Father is always right, aren’t you, Father?”

She walked back over to the head and patted its wig. The ruddy complexion seemed to glow from this attention like an enormous overripe tomato.

“How can he be right about anything? He’s been decapitated!” Algae protested loudly. “He’s got no blood left in his brain, it’s all over the dining hall floor.”

“Oh? How would you know that? I cleaned the floor with a bucket of bleach over an hour ago.”

“You left a slippery patch,” he replied, rubbing his behind. “You should have put out one of those ‘wet floor’ signs. I really ought to sue. You know what they say - if it’s not your fault ...”

“Then who’s fault is it, Algae? Who spilt blood on the floor

in the first place? Or should I call you Jack?"

"Jack?" Algae queried. "Who the hell is Jack?"

"My very own half-brother Jack, back from Australia to steal my inheritance. It's hardly surprising you turned out to be no good after living out there with all those convicts and sheep-shaggers."

"Me? Your brother?" Algae laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, Daphne. You said yourself, I undress you with my eyes."

"More evidence of your vile and perverted nature. At first I thought O'Flaherty must be Jack, but you skilfully planted him in here ahead of us as a servant to aid your plan. With O'Flaherty dead, you still had to dispose of Ralph before you got to me; then you could blame it all on the Sons of Luca."

"What about Jenny?" Algae queried desperately, hoping to find a flaw in Daphne's logic. "Why would I let her go if I didn't want to leave any witnesses?"

"You'll need someone to corroborate your story. Jenny thinks there's a mad old witch on the loose and that's what she'll tell the police."

"But there is a mad old witch on the loose. We've seen her by the roadside and on film."

"There never was a genuine witch. That was just O'Flaherty in drag. Our cross-dressing butler was paid to lay a false trail and divert suspicion away from you."

"You've thought of everything," Algae conceded, with a sad shrug of his shoulders; but then had the idea of playing on Daphne's questionable grasp of reality. "I do have one eye witness though."

"Who?"

"Him!" Algae pointed an accusing finger at the head. "He was down there in the dungeon with me - stuck in the guillotine bucket."

"Father?" Daphne paused and nodded her head repeatedly, as if listening to an explanation from the head, then turning to Algae again. "Father says he's been with me the whole time."

"Not him exactly, but a waxwork copy," Algae tried to explain.

"Father never had a likeness made of himself."

"Maybe someone else did it for him. O'Flaherty used it for a wigstand; but now someone is playing games with it. They left it down there in a bucket of stage blood, then sneaked in and stole it back while I was trying to fix the lights."

"Who did?"

"The headless corpse in a red tunic - I saw it walk through a wall."

"We don't accept pleas of insanity in capital cases, Algae. This is a Tory constituency."

"There's more going on here than you think," Algae argued earnestly, hoping that a reasonable doubt would dissuade her from shooting him - at least for a while. "If we don't help each other, neither of us are going to get out of here alive."

Daphne lowered the gun and her hard features suddenly began to melt into something more gentle and feminine, as if suddenly struck by a compassionate thought. "Oh Algae, I love you really, this is such a horrid business. But you know how it is these days - personal security is very important."

"Thank God for that," he gasped, with some relief, thinking he'd been reprieved and leaning against the altar for support. "I need a drink, Daphne. Being around you is like hanging on to a tiger's tail."

"Relationships are like that these days. At least we don't have to put up with a chaperone any more. Here, have some of this altar wine." In what seemed like a charitable act she handed him a silver chalice.

Algae took the holy cup and drank like a thirsty parishioner attending Sunday mass before the pubs open; then promptly slammed the chalice down again and spewed the liquid from his mouth. "It tastes like piss! If you're going to shoot me, shoot me! You don't have to poison me as well. I think I'm going to be sick," he announced, before bending over and retching the contents of his stomach onto the priceless antique rug.

"That drink was your milkshake and fried chicken, Algae," she declared indignantly, dismayed by his ingratitude. "Say

your prayers - it's time to meet the angels."

"How can you do this, Daphne? It's cold-blooded murder. I always knew you were a ruthless bitch, that's part of your appeal, but there are limits to role play. This is going much too far."

"I know what you're trying to do, Algae, but it won't work," she insisted, shaking her head resolutely. "I'm not going to feel bad about myself this time, do you hear?"

All Algae heard was the deafening report of a discharging gun that hammered off the walls of the study and escaped through the open door to echo down the corridors of Wulmarsh Hall; awakening its litany of sleeping ghosts and alerting them to the imminent arrival of yet another spirit, violently dispossessed of its body.

He spun round and impacted heavily with the altar behind him. His shirt left a bloody trail on the white surface and his fingers clawed at the ornate patterns carved in its face as he fell to the floor; eyes wide and mouth open, as if prevented by death from articulating his last words.

"It's all over, Father," Daphne informed the head. "Now all we have to do is wait for the police to arrive. They'll understand when I tell them that Algae bagged you and Ralph, and would have got me too if I hadn't shot him first. I think I'll have a drink now. A decent drink, not that cheap altar wine someone left out for a joke. Even Algae can tell it was a poor year. Would you like a wee dram? I suppose not, your drinking days are over. You haven't got the stomach for it anymore," she chuckled to herself. "But then, I always said it was bad for your health. Voltaire was right - *all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.*"

Daphne stepped over the two bodies to get to the sofa, where she dropped the gun on a cushion and removed her jacket - carefully smoothing and laying the garment over the back of the couch. The power suit, like the evening dress, had to go back on Monday for a refund. But with her back turned, she failed to notice the movement of a shadowy figure on the beam high overhead. A harlequin was hovering over the last

surviving protagonist of the evening.

Daphne skipped over the prostrate bodies again, like a filly over cavaletti, as she returned to the altar bar, where she found a clean tumbler and filled it with ice; then selected a single malt from the optics set against the wall. She walked round to the front of the altar to face her father's head, growing ever more complacent as she sipped the intoxicating liquor and reflected on the momentous recent events.

"I never would have believed it if the evidence hadn't been so compelling," she revealed to her father, as she removed her spectacles and pulled the pin from her hair so that the fair locks flopped down around her shoulders. "Who would have thought that someone so wet and weedy as Algae would have turned out to be a ruthless killer - and my half-brother too. I don't know which is the harder to believe. It makes my skin crawl thinking about all the times he tried to kiss me," she declared with a shudder, rubbing her mouth with the back of her hand in disgust at the thought.

But then she began to view the deception from a different perspective. "You've got to give him some credit though, he had me fooled for over two years," she had to admit, with growing admiration. "I really thought he was just a complete loser the whole time. He must have been a great actor to pull it off - like me. Evil genius runs in the family."

Meanwhile, high overhead, the sinister entity was peering down on the eccentric young woman and listening to her rambling conversation with some bemusement. It began creeping stealthily along the beam, a lasso of hemp in its grip, like a two-legged spider stalking its prey.

"I felt absolutely sure that O'Flaherty was Jack," Daphne continued babbling to her decollate father. "So sure, in fact, that I arranged his accident with the help of Satan. But it was really Algae who was to blame for trying to be so clever. Still, an accomplice is just as guilty as the ringleader so he had to go. An iron fist in a velvet glove is the traditional British response to a challenge from the lower social orders. A pity though, he looked really fit without his make-up on; and was

quite a good servant when he wasn't being so impertinent; and he was a wonder when it came to shaking those cock-tails," she recalled, with a blush and a smile. "Now you're left without any servants at a time when you really need one. That'll teach you not to shoot them all in such a hurry. You know I can't stay here and look after you, that would mean neglecting my studies. I have to go back to Cambridge and sleep with more men. Oh Daddy dear, you know you're still number one, but girls just wanna have fun. The local authority will just have to provide you with a good home-help - you should be entitled to one, you've paid enough taxes over the years."

The ever-present ticking clock suddenly chimed the third quarter before midnight, making her jump and reach nervously for the gun that was no longer there. She shrugged her shoulders and composed herself again.

"That's odd. I don't usually jump when that thing goes off. I must be losing moral fibre," she confessed to her father. "But that drunken old witch would see the irony in her prediction if she really existed. So much for gypsy curses. They'll never spook me into buying clothes-pegs again. It's nearly time for the chimes at midnight, the bad guys have all been bagged, and I'm still living and kicking."

The lasso dropped down, slipped over her head and drew taut, lifting her feet onto a handy foot stool. Daphne squealed as the old witch secured the rope to the beam and cried out in triumph. "Not for much longer, daughter of Wulfmarsh! I've got you at last!"

With remarkable athleticism for an overweight old witch, the old witch leapt down from the beam onto the altar; squatting on all fours like a chimp, then bounded onto the floor to face her captive.

"You again!" The younger witch swung a fist wildly and with considerable venom for one whose life would be in serious jeopardy if she lost her balance. "Who are you?"

"Can't you guess, daughter of Wulfmarsh?"

"You have me at a disadvantage, you old hag!" Daphne

shrieked, reaching out to claw at her face. "We don't drink from the same grog bucket."

Daphne's hand reached out again and this time her sharp nails dug deep into the rubbery skin of her captor. She ripped off a latex mask to reveal the facade of a wrinkly old man beneath the features of the hideous old hag. "O'Flaherty?" she gasped in surprise.

"T'ink again, M'Lady."

Daphne ripped off another latex mask to reveal the smooth skin and flawless make-up of a saturnine matinee idol in his early thirties.

"Actually, my name is Jack - Jack Wulfmarsh," he revealed modestly, removing the straggly wig to expose his dark hair.

The sex change transformation continued as he pulled off the pair of latex gloves which formed the bony, wrinkled hands of the old witch and tore open his blouse. A football fell from his huge granny bosom to bounce on the carpet. He hooked it up with his toe and juggled it on his forehead for a few bounces before letting it drop and volleying it skilfully away through one of the stained glass windows with a loud, irreverent crash.

"Pretty good eh? We'll win the soccer world cup one day when we get enough good players, but for now I'm just glad to get that thing off my chest. You can't play Aussie rules with balls like those."

"I don't care how good at sport you are. No brother of mine would ever wear a skirt," she declared, with utmost disdain.

"Sometimes the part calls for it," he mitigated, ripping off the skirt to reveal black tights and a meaty crotch. "Is that better?"

"Now you look like a ballet dancer."

"Some of my best friends are ballet dancers. All that leapin' around gives 'em great legs. They should build an opera house for 'em on the Sydney waterfront."

From his other breast, he produced a spherical object in brown paper, which he unwrapped and placed on the altar

next to Daphne's model. The two heads looked identical, leaving Daphne somewhat perplexed.

"I don't understand? Father may have been a bit of an ogre at times, but he didn't have two heads!"

"This one is actually Douglas Haig from Madam Tussauds. He's the spittin' image of Dad, so I swiped the head near closin' time on a visit there recently. He made a good wig stand, and I was hopin' a headless zombie and a fake head in a bucket of blood would scare off that limp-wristed boyfriend of yours. Instead, he came up here and let you shoot him, which is even better. I love it when a good plan comes together."

"But you're dead!" she cried out, as if he were cheating in an otherwise respectable game. "You got two hundred and forty volts through your bathwater - AC, the dangerous stuff they used to zap Topsy."

"Do I look dead?"

"You look brain dead. But then, most Aussie men do. It's the way they talk."

"It was a good idea, Sis, and totally unexpected. The cat took me completely by surprise. Luckily for me, the three amp fuse in the plug was blown the instant the gramophone hit the water. But your bold attempt on my life gave me a great opportunity to throw your friends off the scent and have O'Flaherty slip beyond suspicion for a short while as things unfolded."

"But they examined you carefully. You were definitely dead!" she insisted adamantly.

"The bath water provided a cover for my body warmth; and as an expert practitioner of yoga, I was able to slow my heartbeat and hold my breath when I heard your friends comin'. Easy when you know how. Although it got a bit tricky tryin' to keep a straight face when the gorgeous Jenny started feelin' around in the suds for a pulse."

"What sort of doctors are Cambridge University turning out if they can't even tell a stiff from a live one? That's what you get for widening the intake to include candidates from

state schools.”

“Algae just dropped out of medical school,” Jack reminded her. “You killed him, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” she shrugged. “Well, that’s one less for the board of the medical council to worry about.”

Jack put his hand down his tights and retrieved a crumpled packet of cigarettes from his crotch; putting one between his lips before lifting the ornate cigarette box, with a silver lighter mounted on the lid, from the coffee table. He took a moment to examine the exquisite piece with an appreciative eye before lighting up.

“I’ll say one thing for the old man, he kept some tasty swag in perpetuity for me. All this fancy cobba should fetch a good price, even at the knock-down rates I’ll be arskin’ when the estate is auctioned off.”

“But you’ve been disowned and banished!”

“Richard II banished Henry Bolingbroke and stole his birth right,” Jack recalled. “But ol’ Bullenbrook weren’t standin’ for that, so he came right back and made himself King. Great fight scene in Act V - if it’s done right. We’re part of the same old feudal tradition, Sis.”

Daphne begged to differ. “Actually, we’re Saxons; they were just a bunch of Norman thugs. The Saxons were a far more cultured and civilised people who wrote Beowulf and believed in the rule of law.”

“In that case - think of this as your trial by ordeal. If God saves you, we’ll split the estate fifty-fifty.”

“You’ll get nothing, you bastard!” she insisted. “Father left it all to me.”

“But it’s no good to you now, Sis. You’re dead,” the loving brother insisted, giving the stool a gentle nudge with his toe. “It was to be at the hands of that fanatical old witch-woman who all your friends witnessed makin’ death threats against you. But then you started showin’ some murderous impulses of your own. We’re chips off the same old block. There must be somethin’ wicked in the gene pool after all. Now it’ll just have to look like suicide after you killed all your friends. It’ll

make sense when the cops learn about the madness in our family."

"But Father said you were always soft, kind and gentle."

"Strewth, Sis, you make me sound like a bottle of shampoo."

"I meant to nature - not your hair."

"Yeah, and look were it got me. Disowned by my family and dumped among the trash cans on the Sydney waterfront. That was lesson number one."

"But you must still care about people - people who love people - are the luckiest people in the world. After all, we're just animals made in the likeness of Almighty God, with immortal souls."

"I wouldn't know about that, I don't go to church much. And I'm not interested in animal welfare now either; not after a good Aussie upbringing' in the suburbs of Sydney. I learned to machine gun whole families of kangaroos and to cut down acres of eucalyptus trees with those cute little koala bears clingin' on for dear life. And the things we do to aboes and dingoes you just don't wanna know about."

"You're right, natural history bores me," she confessed. "But if you're not into animal welfare, why were you deported for organising demonstrations?"

"Cheapest way to get a boat back to the motherland. But they'll let me back into Oz now that I'm Lord Jack Wulfmarsh from the English House of Lords; born to sit in the legislature and lord it over the English commoners; and able to buy a few crates of beer for the blokes in the immigration office at the Sydney quayside."

"Don't you think someone at the inquest will notice that you bear a close resemblance to O'Flaherty - who mysteriously vanished this weekend?"

"Oh, I won't be comin' back to England for a long while. The climate sucks and the snooty sheilas blow - except maybe Jenny."

"What is it with men and Jenny? Can't you see she's just an airheaded bimbo?"

Jack shrugged. "There's something about Jenny, some rare and precious thing - that ignites a poetic impulse or an artistic obsession... If I were Michelangelo ..."

"She'd be your Sistine Chapel. I know, I've heard it all before," Daphne sighed. "Men are all the same - only interested in one thing!"

"Our compulsions are very important to us," Jack insisted. "They drive us to investigate prime numbers. Sheilas just don't understand; the only things they want to investigate are babies. If Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say; she'd have played with dolls until she was old enough to follow a dazzling executive career lobbying the government for more tax concessions to help wealthy professional couples pay for nannies. But there's a lot more to life than reproduction, Sis, even snails can do that - in fact, they're pretty good at it. Our beautiful planet is covered in snails and people defecating in the rivers."

Jack's eyes misted over, as if regressing to his gentler past - a time before he was bitten by the harsh conceit of humanity. "I see trees of green, red roses too, I see them bloom, for me and you, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world."

"Just get on with your pommie bashing," Daphne interjected.

"Alright - the only warm thing about your country is the beer, which is nearly as flat as the surf out there in the Wash. Call those waves? I've made bigger waves in my bathtub pretendin' to be electrocuted."

"You should try Newquay in the West Country," she suggested.

"Like I said - give me an Aussie sheila any day."

"No, New-Kee. It's a good place for surfing. You're wasting your time with the Wash, it's basically just a tidal lake. Let me down from here and I'll dig out the tourist brochures for you."

"Thanks for the kind offer, Sis. But I'll be back on Bondi Beach soon, surfin' those big 'uns, toppin' up on the tan, and waitin' for calls from my agent and the King. Now that I'm a

toff and Dad's dead, he may wanna make me one of those privy counsellors."

"No chance of that - you sound like an Aussie stockman. If you want to make it in royal circles you need received pronunciation. I can introduce you to a good voice coach in Cambridge - he does me for free - but I'm sure he'll do you too if I ask him nicely."

"No need, Sis. Voices are my speciality," he boasted. "I have this method where I research for a role so thoroughly that I can do the job for real. It works too! I had you all believin' that I was a pikey witch and an Irish butler at the same time!"

"Bondi Beach can be dangerous," she warned him sombrely. "Less chance of skin cancer in Britain, and no man-eating sharks."

"Maybe not in the water, but there's plenty of snakes on the land. I'll just let my legal representatives dispose of the estate and post a fat cheque through to my beach hut when it's all been settled."

"You can't do that! What about us?" she cried, glancing down at her father. "We'll be destitute and homeless!"

"Don't worry, you'll be well taken care of. All Dad needs now is a hatbox and a flower bed. And the local council will stump up a crate for you in the municipal dump. Pity your friends won't be there, they'll have their own funerals to attend - and I'll be too busy on my surfboard - but I'll send a wreath to express my sorrow, together with a heart-warmin' epitaph. Anythin' in particular you'd like me to write?"

"How about a remorseful confession of your guilt?" she suggested wryly.

"Do I look that dumb?"

"Do Aussies shear sheep?"

"We're about to part company for the last time, Sis. Let's not argue over those little cultural differences that divide us. After all, I am still your brother. We have the same inbred psychotic tendencies; the same conceit and disdain for others. We even have the same aristocratic nose for lookin' down at

other people. You do it much better than me though, I always go cross-eyed,” he admitted, turning cross-eyed trying to look down his nose. “Well, it’s been nice meetin’ you after all these years, but now I’ve got an Imperial flyin’ boat to catch. I’ll look out for you up there strummin’ a harp on a cloud, but I reckon you’re more likely to end up shovellin’ hot coals for the other fella, God help him. Bon voyage!”

Jack raised his boot to kick away the stool.

“Wait!” Daphne screamed desperately, then resorted to speaking in a calmer voice to try and save the situation. “For old times sake, since we are brother and sister and share the same bloodline, how about granting your little sister one last request?”

“Of course!” Jack conceded generously. “No one ever said we Aussies aren’t gents with the ladies.”

“Er, maybe could we debate that at some length? I was very good in school.”

“You haven’t got time, Sis, you’ve got an appointment with the Devil.”

“You said I had until midnight,” she reminded him, with a nod towards the clock.

“That clock is slow - you’ve had just about all the time you’re goin’ to get.”

“Alright, I want a last cigarette.”

“You’ve got balls, Sis, no doubt about that,” he conceded. “Maybe they’re even bigger than mine.”

He thrust his hands into his tights again, pulled out the crumpled packet of cigarettes, and thrust one between her lips; then raised the cigarette box to light it.

Daphne reached out and put her hand over the ornament, preventing the lighter cap from moving.

“Please, let me do it,” she pleaded coyly. “This is the last time I’ll ever have the pleasure. I’d like to savour the experience of lighting up one more time.”

Jack’s grip on the base of the lighter tightened and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. “I dunno, I don’t trust you,” he professed, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “We’re from the same

devious stock, remember? If I were you, I'd have a sneaky plan to foil me. One last desperate gamble to escape. What are you goin' to do? Throw it at me? Or use it like a flame thrower to burn through the rope?"

"Oh, Jack, I give you my word - I wouldn't lie to you. You can trust me, I'm your own flesh and blood."

"Yeah, like I'd trust a dingo in a baby ward. What's this thing do? Turn into a handgrenade?"

"Something like that," she confirmed, smiling ever so sweetly and grabbing the lighter in both hands. She boldly let the noose take her weight and brought up both feet to kick him soundly in the stomach.

Jack fell back with a grunt, tripping over Ralph's body, while Daphne recovered her balance on the stool and expertly disassembled the lighter. By the time Jack had flipped back onto his feet, like an acrobat in a fight scene by the RSC, she was clutching a small but deadly Derringer pistol which had been concealed in the hollow base of the ornament.

"More than just a tasty piece of swag," she noted, discarding the cigarette box while aiming the pistol at his chest.

"No, Daphne, don't do it!" Jack pleaded. "You can have the estate. You can have it all. You're right, the old man never wanted me to have any of it. It's all yours, all of it. I was just kiddin' around, honest. You know what jokers we Aussies are. Sense of humour to die for."

"I'm glad you see the funny side of it," she noted wryly. "Now get down on your knees with your hands on your head."

"I was just pommie bashin'," he tried to explain, as he sank to his knees. "I never really wanted any of it. Killin' me'll just complicate things. You know what British cops are like, no such thing as self-defence. They catch more victims than crooks - that's how they meet their clear-up targets. Let me go back to Oz. You'll never see me again, I swear!"

"Do you really mean that?" she inquired sceptically. "You'll never come back?"

"Fairdinkum - I'll never come back!"

"And you'll never bash another pom again?"

"I dunno about that," Jack frowned. "Sounds like a bit of a tall order with a test match comin' up."

Daphne raised the pistol ever so slightly to make him reconsider.

"Alright, alright! Cross my heart ..."

"And hope to die?"

"I swear by God!"

"You should never swear by God, it's blasphemy. Father gets very worked up over other people's blasphemy."

"I'll go to confession and say I'm sorry," he insisted contritely. "I'll even do penance. Two Our Fathers and a Hail Mary ought to fix it."

Daphne took a moment to consult with the two heads. "Too late," she informed him. "Father says you're beyond redemption. I'm really disappointed in you, Bro. You, of all people, should know that you never take your eye off the tiger in her cage."

"Tazzie tigers are extinct," he pointed out lamely. "I never met a real one till now."

"Too bad you didn't save a few when you had the chance."

Daphne raised the deadly little toy, took careful aim and fired, so that the eighth gunshot of the evening raised the rafters - a slow night for Wulfmarsh Hall.

Shock and awe seized Jack's twisted features as he clutched his chest in a desperate struggle for life; his eyes fixed disbelievingly on the smoke discharging from the barrel of the deadly little weapon. But then, his hands dropped casually to his sides; he relaxed, smiled, and shrugged his shoulders apologetically, as if impervious to the bullet. The smile became a chuckle, and the chuckle grew into uproarious laughter as he rose up from the floor like a creature of the undead.

"You sheep-sucking bastard!" Daphne screamed, throwing the gun at his face.

Jack ducked to avoid the ungainly projectile. As he straightened up again, he picked the cigarette box off the floor and scooped a handful of blanks from it.

"O'Flaherty's job was to polish that particular piece every-day," he explained. "Anyone who leaves a loaded firearm around you deserves to be shot, Sis. Though I think you did the right thing by shootin' that weedy little creep, Algae. If I cared a fig about the family honour, I'd have done it myself."

"Maybe you'll get a second chance," a voice from behind Jack casually informed him.

Jack spun round to see Algae standing by the snooker table, holding the gun which Daphne had dropped on the couch.

"Algae!" Daphne cried out in delight. "Algae?" she queried with some concern about the feasibility of events, no matter how welcome they might be to a damsel in distress.

"Sorry mate, I thought you were dead!" Jack exclaimed. "This is gettin' to be an easy mistake to make around here. How'd you manage it?"

"I swapped Daphne's bullets for blanks when she came back here to watch the film of you abducting Jenny," Algae explained. "I knew Daphne would shoot me given half a chance, and if we pretended to be dead, we'd soon find out what was really going on here this weekend."

"We?" Jack queried.

"I'm not dead either," Ralph announced, rising to his feet and pulling the spear from his chest. "Algae knew that when he checked my pulse. Like Freud, he doesn't get it wrong every time. I decided to play along with his charade to see who would crawl out of the woodwork once they thought we were both out of the picture."

"Call me dumb as my sister if you like. I knew she'd take care of Algae, but I went to a lot of trouble gettin' rid of you," moaned Jack. "That suit of armour ain't the most comfortable thing to wear without yer pants on. Reminds me of the time I played Henry V one hot summer in Alice Springs."

"It was a good shot," Ralph admitted. "The spear struck me in the chest with a lot of force and knocked me on my back where I hit my head and was rendered unconscious for a while. Fortunately, I keep my wallet well stuffed for emergencies and the point of the spear failed to penetrate through six

packs of double rubber.” He took a bulging leather wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket, complete with a spear hole, and held it up for all to see.

“So nobody has died after all!” Daphne exclaimed with delight.

“That’s not exactly true, Sis,” Jack confessed, shaking his head sadly. “You see, I had to remove O’Flagerty in order to take his place. So I shot him from the woods with a sniper’s rifle and let Dad take the credit.

“O’Flagerty doesn’t count, he wasn’t even a Star-Trek extra,” Daphne declared.

“Star-Trek what?” Ralph frowned.

“It’s an avant garde media term for characters without lines who are killed off early in a production. The key players here - Jenny, Jack, Ralph, myself, and even Algae - have all survived incredible brushes with calamity. What about you, Father? How do you manage to look so detached all the time? Transcendental decapitation?”

Ralph and Algae exchanged uneasy glances; half expecting a trunk to appear in the doorway and collect its head. Fortunately for the sake of their sanities, if not for Daphne’s, the age of miracles had long since passed.

“Forget it, Sis. The axe may have been a bit blunt, but I made sure of him. He’s deader than a pregnant wombat in a pickle jar,” Jack pronounced gleefully.

“Oedipus complex,” Algae whispered to Ralph.

“If Mum was still about, I’d have given her a good rogerin’ too,” Jack admitted. “We don’t get much chance to do classical Greek theatre in Oz.”

“What about the body?” asked Algae. “The least you can do is to give him up for a decent burial - for Daphne’s sake.”

“You mean like in *Antigone* (c. 442 BC)?”

“Er, yes,” Algae concurred, trying to remember the plot.

“Er, no!” Daphne corrected him, having played the part recently in an open-air production on Midsummer Common and still balancing precariously on the stool with a noose around her neck.

"Too late, he's dog meat," Jack replied gleefully. "And crab meat. I was goin' to dump his bones in the Wash next time I go surfin' so I could say:

Full fathom five, thy Father lies;
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell: ..."

The clock obligingly paid its respects with some sympathetic chimes.

"I know, Ariel's a girl's part; but I get bored playin' Caliban the whole time - there's no artistry in that."

"Do you get coral in the Wash?" Ralph queried.

"It's not five fathoms deep in many places either," Algae pointed out. "You'd have to take a boat quite a way out - to the Boston or the Lynn Deepes."

"Poetic licence," Jack explained. "Everyone takes liberties with Shakespeare's settin's. One day, they might even set Romeo and Juliet in modern L.A."

"No, he can't be!" Daphne cried out mournfully, reminding them all that this was still a tragedy.

"Waste not, want not," Jack quipped. "Those hell hounds hadn't been fed steak since O'Flagerty bought it. Dad's gnawed ribs and long bones are still out in the yard if you want somethin' to polish up and stow away in a box. I only kept the head and put it on display so I wouldn't have to wait years for a death certificate."

"But why put a false head in the guillotine bucket down in the dungeon?" Algae wanted to know.

"I thought the sight of blood, and a headless old cavalry trooper wavin' a sword about, would make you split and run, leavin' just Ralph here to protect Daphne. Playin' a headless zombie in a red tunic isn't easy, I can tell you. You can't see

where you're goin'."

"Why did you think I'd run?" asked Algae, taken aback by the implication that he lacked moral fibre.

"That's what Ichabod Crane did in *The legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820)."

"Ichabod Crane was just a teacher. Doctors are not so easily pushed around."

"You're supposed to be the smart member of the gang. You'd have to be pretty dumb to stick around after seein' a zombie collect its head and knowin' there's a psycho-witch on the loose, settin' out bear traps for the guests. But instead of gettin' out when you had the chance, you let Daphne shoot you. Now that was a stupid thing to do."

"But I knew her bullets were blanks."

"It still took guts, Algae," Ralph judged admiringly. "She could have swapped them back without you knowing."

"Yeah, things would have turned out just fine for me if only my half-witted sister had had the good sense to check the state of her ammo before a live firing exercise."

"Don't blame me for the weakness in your planning!" Daphne retorted. "You should have made contingencies to deal with Algae's devious nature."

Jack seemed to move an inch in her direction at this provocation - enough to elicit a sharp response from Algae, who was standing with his legs apart and head tilted slightly like an American G-man. "Don't move or it'll be the last thing you ever do," he warned, drawing back the hammer of the gun.

"Get me down from here," Daphne moaned, still wobbling precariously on the stool.

"What are you goin' to use for bullets?" asked Jack. "The blanks my sister used on you?"

"I loaded up on live rounds while you were playing out your death scene," Algae informed him.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Algae obligingly held up a live round and tossed it in the air for Jack to catch and examine.

"So what did you think of my death scene?" he asked, after

glancing at the lethal round.

"Wildly over the top. Mine was much better - more subtle and understated - except for the bit where I was sick on the priceless rug. I'll bet my electrocution scene in the bathtub was better too."

"I wasn't aimin' for Chekovian realism. More like a hammy Henry IV dyin' in part 2. You've gotta be larger than life if you wanna get noticed on stage. It's different to film acting - there's no such thing as a subtle close-up."

"Aussies can't do Shakespeare - on stage or film," scoffed Algae.

"Maybe not, but we look better in suntan and dungarees, shoutin' *Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war ...*"

"You don't wear dungarees for that - you wear a toga," Algae pointed out in disgust.

"You wear what you like touring cattle stations," Jack insisted. "So what do we do now, pom-boy? Stand around and trade insults for the rest of the scene?"

"We're waiting for the police. Jenny has gone to get help from the village. She should be back soon."

"What makes you think she got as far as the village?" the villain posed ominously. "What makes you think she even got past the first bend? I laid a barrage down on that road to scare off Lady Daphne's lover."

"Daphne, were you having an affair with that posing game-keeper?" Algae queried, in a hurt tone.

"I never got the chance - which is a shame, because I was gagging for a bit of rough in the great outdoors this week-end," she sighed, evidently disappointed at having missed the opportunity.

"And some of those shells didn't go off," Jack revealed. "In fact, some of them contained cluster bomblets. Now they're just waitin' for some goat herders to walk over 'em in bare feet."

"It's not the first bend, or the cluster munitions, we should be worried about," Ralph revealed calmly. "It's the straight bit with no lines in the middle and ditches on either side. That's

where she'll take her eyes off the road trying to find second gear."

"Never mind her! What about me? Get me down from here!" Daphne whined.

"Well, I can put your mind at ease there, sport. She never made it to the straight bit," Jack revealed.

"What have you done?" growled Ralph.

"He's just trying to wind you up," Algae advised. "Jenny will be just fine, she goes like a gazelle in my car."

"It's the car I'm concerned about," Ralph insisted, before latching onto Algae's curious last comment. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What's what supposed to mean?"

"Goes like a gazelle?"

"Just a figure of speech."

"More like a Freudian slip," Jack smirked.

"I meant she drives fast," Algae tried to explain.

"How would you know?" Ralph probed.

"I'll tell you later."

"No time like the present," Jack interjected. "Don't you know friends shouldn't keep secrets from each other. I'd say he was givin' her drivin' lessons."

"Would you shut up!" Algae snapped angrily.

"Have you been giving my girlfriend driving lessons behind my back?" Ralph demanded to know.

"She asked me not to tell you. She wanted it to be a surprise when she passed her test."

"And what about that kiss she gave you upstairs in the bedroom before we parted?" he recalled. "Was that an expression of gratitude - or part of the hourly rate?"

"I've got to admit, I wasn't expecting that," Algae had to admit.

"What kiss?" Daphne snarled. "You tart, Algae! I thought you were different - you're just like all the rest!"

"But it's all beginning to make perfect sense now," Algae professed, with a cynical realisation that her motive may have been more machiavellian than he thought.

"Algae kissed your girl and you just stand there?" Jack sneered. "Where I come from, blokes wouldn't put up with that. Not if they were real blokes."

"Don't listen to him," Algae advised. "Can't you see what he's trying to do? Forget about me and Jenny and stay focused on the ball. You said you were giving her the heave-ho on Monday anyway, so what does it matter?"

"It matters because we're supposed to be friends," Ralph frowned. "And because this is only Saturday and I thought I'd get one more good stretch out of her before the end of the weekend."

"Good attitude, mate," Jack remarked. "You should come to Oz. We need more blokes like you. Real blokes who know how to ride horses, rope cattle, and shear sheep."

Algae had to think of a reasonable explanation that might go some way to alleviate Ralph's paranoid suspicions, which were being cleverly manipulated by Jack. "When she kissed me, I'll bet she was looking straight at you?" he proposed. "So either she was trying to make you jealous ..."

"Make him jealous? That's a joke," Jack butted in, with his big Aussie mouth again - just a little bit too quickly and eagerly this time.

"... or she was deliberately trying to divide the home team and conquer on the orders of the High Command. Working behind the lines to split the coalition, that was her mission all along, right Jack?"

"It's pretty obvious who studies the hard subjects around here," Jack conceded, with a nod and a competitive Aussie grin. "Algae's right, Jenny does go like a gazelle. I used to debrief her on Sunday mornin's when you thought she was attendin' church service. But she doesn't give a monkey's fig about either of you two. She thinks Ralph is a poser with a flat-headed dick."

"But what does she really think about Algae?" Ralph demanded to know, as if this were his overriding concern.

"Oh, Algae's just a geek ..." Jack chortled.

Ralph seemed, in part, placated by this conventional assess-

ment of Algae; as if the old world he knew and loved had not entirely passed away in a weekend. However, the *agent provocateur* was not finished yet.

"... but she said she'd do him if none of her friends found out."

"Really?" Algae's eyes lit up and his cheeks flushed in delight.

"Oh yeah, she loved those lessons in your car - racin' down country lanes around Cambridge with the wind in her hair and her hand on your stick, scarin' the shit out of the riders from the local hunt."

The point of Algae's pistol rose with this flattery, and the glorious memories, until almost pointing at the ceiling, before he recovered his wits and levelled it at the miscreant again. "Alright Jack, you've had your fun, but the game's over now."

"There's more. You want the complete picture, don't you? Jenny was never really Ralph's girlfriend. She's been workin' for me the whole time. You don't believe anyone could be so sweet and innocent in this day and age with so much depravity on our cinema screens?"

"Not on our screens," Ralph pointed out wryly. "How long have you been in this country? We've got the best censors in the world - the democratic world, that is. The new Soviet government is almost as good."

"You're right, mate, I haven't had the chance to check out a movie for a while, I've been too busy plannin' all this. But I know Jenny hasn't gone for the police. She'll have parked up out of sight and sneaked back into the Hall to help me out when the need arises - like right now."

Algae glanced anxiously over his shoulder for a fraction of a second, but resumed his vigilant guard with a nod and a wry smile before Jack could make a move.

"I've heard enough of this Aussie crap," Ralph decided, removing his jacket like a well dressed street brawler working the door of a nightclub. "Let me take him outside and give him a good pasting before the police arrive. We'll say he resisted arrest."

"No!" Algae decided sternly. "That's just what he wants. He'll end up decking you and legging it into the woods. Nice try, Jack. What's plan B?"

"I still don't believe him," Daphne interjected, still balancing precariously on the stool. "Even if Jenny is on his side, she thinks he's dead, remember?"

"That's right, she checked your pulse," Algae recalled.

"Believe me, guys, a sheila finds more than just a pulse when she starts gropin' around in my bath suds," Jack revealed modestly.

"Maybe you impress those freckly-faced cowgirls with arses like saddle-leather back at the sheep station. But Jenny comes from a good family. She wouldn't have anything to do with the likes of you," Ralph insisted.

"Have any of you ever actually met Jenny's parents?" Jack wondered, raising his eyebrows. "You may have some trouble findin' her old man, he could be anywhere by now - anywhere that sells the hard stuff - but her mum lies buried near the Old Kent Road."

Daphne gasped. "You mean ...?"

"I mean, Jenny was an orphan from the workhouse and a cockney flower seller. I pulled her off the street, trained her up on etiquette and elocution, and taught her to play the part of a lady. She could play anything now, even a navy nurse in a war," he grinned.

"She said she was a nurse in the war," Ralph recalled.

"So she was - in a little East End musical I staged to make some money. We called it *South Atlantic* and set it on the sunny Falkland Islands during the battle of 1914. Maybe you read the notices? Then I bankrolled her into Cambridge in October to infiltrate your clique and spy on Daphne."

"How could you afford to produce musicals, or even pay Jenny's top-up fees? You said you got yourself deported just to avoid having to pay for a passage home?" Algae queried, in skilful cross-examination.

"Career development loan. When I outlined my plans to inherit the estate by murderin' my family, the bank manager

wasn't very impressed at first. But when I explained that I'd become Lord Jack and join his local golf club, he broke out the brandy and the cigars."

"It's not what you know, it's who you know," Ralph concurred.

"He recognised a good investment when he saw one. A few dozen girls like Jenny workin' for me and I could take over the world - the theatre world, that is. The West End and Broadway'll just roll over to the sights and sounds of the Wulfmarsch Follies. There is nothing like a dame, nothing in the world, there is nothing you can name, that is anything like a dame ..."

"But you can't just train someone up like that - even if they went to RADA," Ralph snorted in derision. "What about inherited traits like character, breeding, and haemophilia?"

"Oh yes you can. It's all in *Pygmalion* (1913)," Daphne recalled in alarm.

"But he's not Professor Higgins; and there's no way you can just turn up and infiltrate a Cambridge university clique," Ralph insisted aghast. "Otherwise it wouldn't be very cliqué, would it?"

"I guess yours still needs workin' on," Jack noted wryly.

"But if she's an actor, how did she manage to get into Cambridge University?" asked Algae.

"How did you lot manage it?" Jack wondered, with a degree of bemusement.

"I passed the entrance exams easily enough, but it took some affirmative action to get Daphne into Girton."

"And what about blondie here?"

"Ralph took the Prince of Wales route. He's not very bright by Cambridge standards, but he knows all the right people."

"Are these the right people?" Jack proposed, flicking half a dozen black-and-white six-by-four prints into the air.

One landed at Ralph's feet.

He picked it up and studied it closely. "It's Professor Llanfair-Pwllgwyngyll...!" he exclaimed in amazement.

"Regius Professor of Welsh language and culture," Algae

confirmed, without taking his eyes off the prisoner. "What's he been up to lately?"

"I'm not absolutely sure, but I didn't realise he kept livestock in his garage," Ralph confessed in surprise, turning the picture upside down for a better look.

"Neither did he," Jack grinned. "Actually that's his wife. I played around a bit with the image in the darkroom."

"You mean the photograph is a lie?"

"Not exactly. Mrs Llanfair-Pwllgwyngyll... really does look like a jumbuck when she's on her hands and knees and wearin' nothin' but a thick woolly sweater, though she's not usually so affectionate."

"I don't understand," Algae confessed. "If what you are saying about Jenny is actually true, then why would you blow her cover before she makes her move?"

"It's only fair to warn you, sport, that Jenny looks really hot in khaki."

"We know that, we saw her change," Algae admitted, with a puzzled frown.

"And she's standin' right behind you with a flamethrower."

Ralph and Algae glanced warily at each other without either actually turning round.

"You don't think we're going to fall for that old one," Ralph chuckled. "Never take your eye off the tiger in its cage, remember?"

"Er, boys, I think this time there might be two tigers in the cage," Daphne advised, from her vantage point on the stool.

"Alright Jenny, if they won't take our good advice, turn 'em into toast," Jack ordered calmly.

"Posies! Get yer luvverly posies! Ten for ha'penny, gents! Gor-blimey, Lor' luv ya, guv'ner!" sang out the unwelcome voice of the cockney flower seller. "All I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air, with one enormous chair, oh, wouldn't it be luvverly ..."

Ralph and Algae turned slowly in dismay to confront a female warrior with a fuel tank strapped to her back. She wore black gloves, and held a tube with a flickering pilot light

at the end, which pointed straight at them.

"Oh no, not again," Ralph groaned. "Algae, you're so gullible when it comes to women. How could you let her fool you this time?"

"Me gullible? One of these days your libido is going to get us into serious trouble. Why can't you find a nice girl like Daphne to slap around?"

"Nice girl like Daphne? She just tried to kill you."

"With a gun, not a flamethrower."

"What's the difference?"

"Flamethrowers were banned by the Geneva Convention."

"Alrite, boys, that's enuff o' yore stewpid rabbit," cockney Jenny cut in.

"Is that something you eat?" Ralph asked in bewilderment.

"I think she means Welsh rarebit," Algae suggested.

"I said leave it out, you two. Wot you got the 'ump for?"

"Now she's calling you a camel," Ralph surmised.

"Put the gun down, Algae, or I'll roast Ralphie's chestnuts like it was Christmas!" she threatened.

"Any ideas?" Ralph whispered, raising his hands in a show of surrender to buy time.

"It's your move - they're your chestnuts," Algae advised.

"Mind if I have a drink first?" Ralph asked his captor, reaching for the chalice on the altar and putting it to his lips.

"Not that stuff, it tastes like piss," Algae warned.

"I know, I distilled it myself," Ralph revealed. "This should put her fire out."

He hurled the contents of the chalice in Jenny's direction. The offensive fluid did indeed cascade onto the pilot flame of Jenny's crude incendiary device; but rather than extinguish it, the fluid itself ignited and a sheet of flame ran up the long barrel towards her gloved hands. She screamed and fought to disconnect the tube before the fire reached the tank on her back.

"I must have been on the meths last night!" Ralph exclaimed in wonder. "Sorry, babe, no time to take prisoners." He punched Jenny on the chin and caught her limp form in his

arms.

"Do something before it blows up!" Algae urged, keeping the gun pointed at Jack.

Ralph hurriedly wrapped his jacket around the barrel to smother the flames and disconnected the pipe before removing the tank from the unconscious girl's back.

"Come over here and sit down with your hands behind your head," Algae ordered Jack.

"Sorry mate, the big wave waits for no man," Jack answered back cheerfully. "*There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads to fortune* - you should remember that from your Bogey's Notes."

He seized a rapier from the nearby wall in a swift, dastardly movement, and ducked behind Daphne's lithe form, still poised on the stool, to discourage Algae from firing. He emerged again to negotiate with the point of the bendy blade pressing into her midriff.

"Drop the gun or I'll skewer your lovely fiancée like a pig on a spit," he threatened.

"She's not my fiancée, the engagement's off," Algae announced to all present.

"What engagement?" Daphne scowled.

"Go ahead, why should I bother? The bitch tried to kill me," Algae declared heartlessly.

"Algae!" she screamed, disgusted by his sudden lack of chivalry.

"Steady on, Algae, that sort of reverse psychology doesn't always work," Ralph warned. "He might think you're serious and actually do it."

"I am serious," Algae insisted. "Love moves in mysterious ways."

"This won't go down well with the women's groups in the student union. I get away with misogyny cos I'm in the rugby club, but they'll make your life hell. You'll be wanker of the week until you graduate, and for you that's another three and a half years."

"Who's going to tell them?" Algae argued scornfully.

"Secrets are hard to keep in a student community."

"Of course, I'll shoot you if you do," he insisted, keeping the gun levelled at Jack.

"Well, if you feel that strongly about it, I suppose I could try to keep my mouth shut," Ralph conceded.

"Not you, you idiot, him!" Algae declared, pointing the gun at Jack. "Then the entire estate will go to the family cat and other well-deserving animal charities."

This prospect was clearly anathema to Jack's long-held ambition of inheriting everything, and his disdain for animal-welfare since the misfortune of his compassionate youth.

"Looks like stalemate," he conceded, taking a conciliatory step towards Algae. "You've got somethin' I want. I've got somethin' you want. But violence against women just causes problems with the censor, so why don't we consider more acceptable ways of resolvin' this scene in line with Home Office guidelines."

"How about a game of tennis?" Algae proposed.

"Tennis? That's a woofa's game! Shakespeare would have ended with a good old-fashioned sword fight!"

"What do you really know about Shakespeare?" Algae laughed breezily.

"Not much," Jack confessed, with uncharacteristic modesty. "I played Hamlet for a season in Sydney once, but it didn't go down too well."

"It's a difficult part to play," Algae admitted.

"I played it perfectly!" Jack insisted. "But blokes in Sydney don't think much of blokes who feel sorry for themselves."

Jack moved so quickly that he seemed to melt into a blur. Lunging with pin-point accuracy, he pierced the muzzle of Algae's gun with the rapier tip; rendering it harmless, if not downright dangerous to fire. Transfixed by speed, Algae was relieved of his impotent weapon by the flick of a powerful wrist that sent it flying through a window.

"Look out, Algae!" Ralph yelled, as the flashing blade swiped through the air. Algae ducked, but then Jack lunged forward to prick his left ear with the sharp point, which left a

hole for a stud.

"Ouch!" Algae cried, stepping well back and covering his ear with a handkerchief to stem the blood.

"You can put a ring in your ear now and look like a mean old pirate - or a limp-wristed queer," Jack laughed, his grim humour relentless and merciless; honed to grind down lesser men and squeeze out their weaknesses like puss from a boil. "A tattoo parlour would have charged good money for that, but I did it for free, seein' as you're nearly part of the family."

"Don't you know how dangerous it can be to do this sort of thing yourself?" Algae scowled. "You can cause infection and secondary blood poisoning - look what happened to Brookie on Skyros."

"A little ol' mosquito bite'll be nothin' compared to your duellin' scars," Jack warned. "You're goin' to look like you tried to rescue *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894)."

Not willing to be outdone in the noble art of sword fighting by a digger in tights pretending to be Rupert of Hentzau, Ralph grabbed a couple of rapiers from the wall. "No time for first aid now, Algae. Take this!" he cried, throwing one in Algae's direction. "You've got to fight for what you want, for all that you believe ..."

Algae skilfully plucked the slender foil from the air by its hilt and gripped it between his teeth as he slipped out of his dinner jacket. A battle then ensued between the three men, with Jack occasionally using Daphne as a shield. The dynamic duo lunged and parried for several frantic minutes against the skilful fury of a tenacious foe who seemed extremely adept at slashing their white shirts with the tip of his rapier.

"You could be the same evil Jack who ripped up all those women in Whitechapel!" Ralph presumed, in the fierce war of words that accompanied the clash of steel.

"You callin' me a misogynist?" Jack retorted angrily.

"No, I'm a misogynist. You're a sword-wielding psychopath."

"Strewth, mate. I may be thirty-somethin', but I'm not that old," Jack protested. "Try countin' back to 1888 on your

fingers - while you still can." Jack deftly nicked one of Ralph's fingers with the point of his rapier.

"Ouch!" Ralph cried, swapping hands and sucking on his finger to stem the trickle of blood.

"The sort o' slashin' I do isn't real - it's just fantasy on the silver screen," Jack insisted, carving a neat letter Z over Ralph's heart. "If you can't tell the difference - there's a job waitin' for you as a British film censor. If you're a really dim-witted numskull who secretly gets-off on the ego trip, like those *apparatchiks* who worked for the Kaiser and the Tsar, they'll make you Director of the Board in no time."

To Ralph, the wannabe film-maker, censors were anathema to free expression and sinecures of dick[sic]tatorial governments, and so he was naturally piqued by the insult. "I've done a lot of bad things in my time, but I've never censored someone else's film," he protested, hacking at Jack with renewed vigour. All to no avail - Jack was just too good at this type of swordplay.

"Where did you learn to fence like that?" Algae gasped, amazed at the virtuoso skill of his opponent.

"Stage School," Jack replied. "There's a lot of work doin' sword-fights in films these days. I doubled for Doug Fairbanks in *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) and they want me back in Hollywood next year for *The Three Musketeers* and all those other literary classics they haven't got round to changin' the endin's for yet. They're gonna film all those costume dramas before the roarin' twenties fizzle out and social realism kicks in to document the great depression."

"What makes you think we're heading for a depression?" Algae queried, with a puzzled frown. "Now that we're off the gold standard - world trade is booming."

"It's like surfin', you can't have a big wave without a trough behind it," Jack explained. "Otherwise there'd be anomalies in the continuity equations."

"Are you suggesting we model the world's economies using fluid mechanics?"

"Why not? Money flows, dunnit? Flows right out of my

hands faster'n I can spend it. You've no idea how much it costs to put on a show these days."

"Give up, Jack, before you get hurt!" urged Ralph, as the weight of numbers began to tell and it seemed as if the English pair might be getting the upper hand, despite the disgraceful state of their shirts. "Suppose I offer you the lead in my first feature film. It's about a mother-fixated psychopath with a split personality who runs a motel and wears dresses ..."

"No one'll pay to see that!" Jack laughed contemptuously. "Sounds too arty."

"... and murders his girlfriends in the shower."

"Sounds more interestin', but I don't do student films. I've got an agent to consider."

"A real actor would be grateful for anything," Ralph mooted in disgust.

"There'll be plenty o' work for me, playin' old farts on Aussie TV, once they figure out how to stop the sheep knockin' over the transmission masts."

"Face it, Jack, you're not a real swordsman like me," Ralph boasted. "I learned to fence on the playing fields of Eton when you were throwing sticks at the kangaroos in the Snatch-agooli Desert."

"Don't knock the Snatchagooli Desert," counselled Jack. "It teaches you how to survive. You learn a few tricks goin' walk about over there that film-makers would never dream of usin' over here."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

The old grandfather clock suddenly began to strike as if part of a predetermined plan and hostilities ceased for the duration of the twelve chimes. The two breathless heroes looked at each other in a brief consultation, neither able to anticipate the rascal's next move. They glanced up at Daphne in her precarious state before their attention returned to the evil malefactor.

Jack waited for the reverberations of the last chime to die away, then courageously let a long dramatic pause strain the

tension to breaking point before making the pronouncement, "Like this!"

In a last, desperate gamble, he spitefully kicked the stool from beneath Daphne's feet, leaving them to save the debutante from her dance with the Devil in the appropriate setting of a chapel.

The dastardly villain, meanwhile, used the time he'd bought with Daphne's peril to jump up onto the altar, raise his arms, and roar with crazy laughter like a demented clown.

Algae grabbed a scimitar from the collection and wielded it with two hands. "Stand back!" he ordered, giving Ralph barely enough time to duck before he severed the rope with a tremendous upwards swipe of the curved blade - and deftly caught the former object of his desire in his arms as she fell. Algae gently lowered her to the ground with prophetic chivalry as Ralph looked on, shaking his head.

"Algae, you mug! You caught her again, just like you said you would," he noted in disgust. "You should have let her land on her snotty backside to teach her a lesson."

"Sorry about your hair, Ralph," was Algae's contrite reply. "At least it was sacrificed in a good cause."

"What!?" Ralph put his hands on his head and felt his crown. "Shit! I've been tonsured! I can live without my foreskin, but not my hair! What are people going to think?"

"There's a fancy dress party this Thursday to celebrate the burning of Guy Fawkes. You can go as the Pope. Women lust after priests they think they can't have - like Rasputin, the mad monk."

"Look what happened to him," Ralph reflected gloomily.

"Best o' luck with my sister, sport, you're goin' to need it!" Jack advised, from his vantage point on the altar. "Keep her away from the kitchen drawer - and look out for me if you should end up in California on your honeymoon. Bye Dad! Or should I say Doug? Either way, there'll be a few thousand Anzac blokes waitin' for you in hell! I wouldn't wanna be you when you get there!"

Jack grinned maniacally and booted the heads like footballs

on a training ground. Daphne's father crashed through one of the windows, whilst the wax head struck Ralph's long-suffering groin.

"I'll speak to my agent about your offer to play the psycho in a shower scene. Hollywood needs a sadistic British director, with an emotionally-retarded ego, to develop the suspense thriller. You could fit the bill perfectly - if you fatten-up a bit and lose the rest of that hair!"

Jack launched himself into the air like a daredevil acrobat, seized the end of the severed rope still attached to the beam, and swung with swashbuckling style straight through a stained glass window and was gone; leaving only the outline impression of his daring escape in a bizarre tableau of night sky set in the patterned glass.

As Algae helped Daphne to her feet, the sound of an approaching siren could be heard in the distance. Someone had clearly raised the alarm. "The police!" he deduced brilliantly. "But if Jenny didn't go for help, who did?"

"Father," Daphne announced proudly, lifting Haig up off the floor by mistake, straightening his hair, and lovingly putting him back on the altar. "He made the call to Constable Jenkins before Jack bagged him."

"He won't get far," Ralph predicted confidently, picking up the Derringer and expertly loading a live round into the breech before snapping it shut. "I'm going after him. He's probably heading for your car if Jenny left it outside for a quick getaway. You look after the girls, Algae. Shame about the way she turned out after all that - just a cockney actor from the Old Kent Road. What do you think will happen to her now?"

"She's an accomplice to murder and flamethrowers are banned by the Home Office. I expect she'll go the way of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891)."

"She's too good-looking for that. Couldn't we just stick her in a priest hole until the police have cleared-off to update their intelligence on us?"

"You've got to be joking!" Daphne squealed. "She took

part in a plot to steal my birthright. There's only one way to deal with a traitor on our island - the William Wallace way."

"Edward I was a bit of a psychopath - even by the standards of the fourteenth century," Ralph mitigated.

"So's Daphne," Algae chuckled.

"Maybe Jenny thought it was all just an acting job and didn't know how ruthless Jack really was," Ralph pleaded on Jenny's behalf, as if he had a chivalrous side to his nature after all. "Don't forget, Daph, you should be facing a charge of attempted murder for shooting Algae. People in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones."

"Why are men so easily bewitched by Jenny?" she frowned. "The Bible teaches us, *thou shalt not suffer a witch to live* (Exodus 22:18) so let's take her out and burn her like King James would have wanted."

"She is beguiling," Ralph had to admit. "Although that Billingsgate accent jarred a bit at the end."

"She probably hasn't even got an Equity card."

"Shouldn't we let a jury decide?" Algae mediated.

"Would you trust the criminal justice system with your girlfriend's neck? There could be middle-aged divorcees on the jury whose husbands have recently left them for younger women. You know how bitchy they can be. They'll top a looker like Jenny for sure."

"Alright, we'll cut the scene with the flamethrower," Algae decided, with the casting vote.

"No!!" Daphne squealed.

"There'll be no slow comfortable screws in Holloway Jail - unless they're from the lesbian warders," Ralph warned. "Can you go ten years without a drink or a man inside you?"

Daphne fell silent as she conducted an audit of the potential consequences if she refused to accept the group decision.

Algae reached out and took the Derringer from Ralph, broke open the breech, and tipped up the lethal little firearm, allowing the cartridge to fall and bounce on the stone floor.

"What are you doing now?" Ralph queried, with some

astonishment.

"Loading it with a blank," he answered, taking one of the harmless shells from his pocket and slotting it into place. "No one is playing Biggles with real bullets around my car!"

"Thanks pal. Nice to know where we stand in the order of your affections."

"Call it the aesthetic love of inanimate beauty," Algae suggested poetically.

"More like a fetish."

"She's a reliable ride - the only one I have at the moment - and I want her to stay that way," Algae explained, with a smutty smirk, as he snapped the barrel back into place and held out the piece.

Ralph shook his head in bemusement as he took the gun and dashed out of the chapel doorway, leaving Algae alone with the two young women.

He took Daphne's hands in his and peered into her eyes, which were melting like those of an obsessive, lovestruck schoolgirl. The sound of the siren outside reached a crescendo then fell silent. Muffled shouts could be heard through the broken glass pane and a flashing blue light began licking the remaining windows of the study, bathing the prospective lovers in artificial starlight.

"Oh, Algae, you weren't Jack after all," Daphne sighed with psychotic bliss. "And you saved me. You deserve a reward," she decided, tilting her head back slightly, puckering her lips and closing her eyes. "Go ahead, kiss me," she gasped. "I can always rinse out with antiseptic mouthwash later."

A still silence descended on the scene; but the long awaited clinch was interrupted by the loud report of more than one firearm discharging outside in the courtyard, as if a gun battle were taking place, followed by a resounding crash of glass.

Daphne opened her eyes and frowned in frustration. Algae had vanished, leaving the dying swing of a rope as the only sign of his recent presence and a second impression of escape through the window.

"Algae? Algae!!" she cried, stamping her foot petulantly.

"Oh well, don't think you'll ever get another chance like that again, no matter how many times you save me."

A pitiless, sighing wind, seemingly from nowhere, suddenly blew through the old chapel, extinguishing all the candles. Daphne rubbed her arms meditatively and massaged her shoulders to fend off the chill it induced, like the touch of an unwanted suitor. She suddenly felt very cold and alone, until she heard a voice; rich, deep and mellow in its tone - projecting itself from the shadows to address her.

"Daughter of Wulfmarsh, do you know what day this is?"

Daphne replied immediately, as if on cue, without even turning around. "Of course I do, you old warthog, it's ... just a minute, we've already had these lines."

She spun round to confront a ghostly figure, in a dark hooded cloak, emerging from the gloom to stand before her. The figure was exceptionally tall and carried a two-handed scythe with an enormous blade. The facial features were tanned and strikingly handsome, but the ethereal silver glow from the cloak suggested that this was no mere basketball player in fancy dress.

"It's you!" she exclaimed quietly. "So you really do exist after all?"

"Of course. We've met before, don't you remember?"

"No," she replied blankly.

"When you were young, I was your imaginary friend."

"Teddy the bear was my imaginary friend."

"But who do you think was inside Teddy, pinching your bum and chasing you round the nursery?"

"So it was you all the time," she groaned, as if learning that she'd been the victim of a subterfuge after all these years. "Why didn't you spirit my soul away then - in a spiteful act of vengeance against my family?"

"You were so young and innocent," he recalled, with fond nostalgia. "I had to let you grow up and become besmirched with the devious cunning of your kind. My remit only extends to young women who are liable to corrupt and deprave."

"It's notoriously difficult to get a conviction these days,"

she pointed out. "Liable to offend religious bigots yields far better results in the summary justice of a magistrates' court."

"I am the presiding magistrate here - I judge the innocent from the guilty, the living from the dead, as our Lord will on judgment day," the spectre decreed gravely.

"Oh, God, not another one," Daphne groaned. "*Don't you know it will soon be impossible for an intelligent, educated man or woman to believe in a god, as it is now to believe that the earth is flat?* But I've been good this weekend," she hedged anyway, against the remote possibility of eternal damnation. "Algae won't take no for an answer, and Ralph is completely beyond any moral or spiritual redemption so he doesn't count."

"You tried to seduce Algae a moment ago, and would have succeeded if he hadn't been so concerned about guns firing near his car."

"Seduce Algae? That's a joke. After all the dreadful sins I've committed in the dark alleys of Cambridge over the last two years, you're telling me he's the one I've got to fry for?"

"All the others were outside my jurisdiction. Your father had more brains than the average Household Cavalry officer, or the average Household Cavalry horse for that matter, and would send you away every Hallowe'en once you reached a certain age; but now, finally, everything has fallen into place. The prophesy will be fulfilled this night and I will find eternal peace."

"You're too late - *we have heard the chimes at midnight* - you'll just have to wait until next year," Daphne sighed. "Though I don't think Ralph and Algae will want to go through all this again."

"Actually - it's still only 11.13 p.m. GMT. You forgot to put the clocks back," the spectre chuckled, drawing a circle in the air with a ghostly finger that wound the hands on the clock-face back an hour.

Daphne glanced at the clock, a sudden look of panic on her face. She knew she'd have to think fast to get out of this one. "Where's Algae when you need him?" she muttered to herself, then clasped a strand of hair and put it to her lips in a coy and

provocative manner. "Don't you think I look like Lavinia - before childbirth ruined her figure, and she grew old, and wrinkly, and died, and decomposed in a pool of yuk in a lead coffin?"

"How would you know what Lavinia looked like?" the spectre mooted sternly.

"She posed nude for Sir James Thornhill. It was all very tastefully done, but it still caused a scandal at the time in the English school and the painting was hidden away from the prurient eyes of the uptight art critics. You can view it upstairs in the boys' bedroom."

"Hmm, I have a slight problem with stairs now," the spectre revealed. "I tend to go through them rather than up them. I'm bound to earth for all my mortal sins until the prophesy is fulfilled, and the nearest I can get to heaven is the hangman's noose." The spectre levitated and hovered a few feet in the air to illustrate the point before descending to ground level again.

"Not much point being a vengeful ghost if you can't prowl the crenellated battlements like the dead king from Hamlet."

"Oh, I can do that," he admitted. "But no where else - it's part of my terms and conditions."

"Then how did you manage to haunt the bedrooms of my ancestors?" Daphne queried.

"That wasn't me. Those were just erotic flights of fancy, fuelled by gushing hormones that burst the dam walls in their sleep after reading *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and juxtaposing the plot, in their subconscious, with the story of Luca and Lavinia. You have no idea how terribly repressed those well-bred young women of the nineteenth century were before Freud, the phonograph, and moving pictures."

"I quite agree," Daphne mused sympathetically. "But how does the new technology help you? After all, you've been out of the crotch-rubbing business for quite a while now."

"I'm in the retribution business," he reminded her. "I steal the souls of bad-girls who drink and dance on Sundays."

"Jenny's a bad-girl. She gave Algae a French kiss in our

bedroom. Why don't you steal her soul?"

"I would - but ...," the spectre paused to look down at the unconscious woman with a sigh, "... she has such amazing dreams. Nothing like those Bronte Sisters. I haven't seen such dramatic flair in a woman since Baroness Orczy came to stay."

"Drugs!" Daphne snorted. "That's all it was. A twentieth century mind stimulant I got from a chemistry professor."

"Whatever it was brought out her latent creativity. There's something about Jenny, some rare and precious thing ..."

"That ignites a poetic impulse or an artistic obsession," Daphne yawned. "If you were Michelangelo, I suppose she'd be your Sistine Chapel?"

"You have the power to read minds!" gasped the spectre.

"It's not hard to do in this day and age," Daphne sighed. "We know men are all the same - we read about them in the papers. But I get these peculiar urges in male company - like the 'trophy hunter' urge, which means I like standing beside tall men with big scythes; and the 'judge character by appearance' urge, which tells me that good guys have nice eyes," she disclosed, sidling up to him flirtatiously. "You have nice eyes. You were an artist once - a stage actor. Don't you miss the genuine warmth and appreciation of a live audience? When was the last time you played Romeo?"

"Two hundred years to the day, thanks to your philistine ancestor," the spectre recalled ruefully. "But I did get to play an incubus last night in Jenny's dream."

"Two hundred years is a long time for any actor to go without Shakespeare. If I were you, I wouldn't be so eager for eternal rest just yet; not until I'd delivered one more virtuoso performance with a beautiful and talented actress who looks just like my beloved Lavinia."

"What are you suggesting?" the spectre inquired.

"That we come to an arrangement - we can indulge in your art in exchange for my soul."

"There's not much of an audience here," the spectre sniffed, looking around doubtfully.

"Jenny'll wake up in a moment. She was trained in method-acting by my evil Aussie half-brother."

"Two hundred years is a long time, I'd be a bit rusty. I'm not sure whether I can even remember the lines," he confessed.

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle with you."

The spectre dropped his scythe with a clatter, put his hands on her hips and lifted her as if she were weightless; placing her on the altar, where she sat with her legs slightly apart. The spectre stepped back into the shadows and cleared his throat.

Luc. But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief,

That thou her maid art more fair than she ...

Daph. O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

Luc. [Aside.] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

Daph. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;

Thou art thyself though, not a Montague ...

Luc. I take thee at thy word.

Call me but love and I'll be new baptiz'd;

Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Daph. What man art thou, that, thus bescreen'd in night,

So stumblest on my counsel?

"The man your ancestors turned into dog meat," Luca reminded her bitterly.

"That was when you were real - now you're just a figment of my imagination - like Teddy the abusive bear."

"If you say so," grunted Luca.

Jenny was lying nearby and began to stir. All was dark and silent when she regained consciousness, except for a faint

murmur of subdued female passion and the eerie glow outlining a transparent figure in a hooded cloak with its back to her. The figure was engaged in a reciprocal motion and the intensity of its glow was oscillating rhythmically in response to this low frequency driver. Through the figure, illuminated by its ethereal light, she could see a young woman sitting on the altar; wearing a short skirt and an unbuttoned blouse, with her legs apart, her head back, and her hands on the shoulders of the hooded figure, as if in the act of coitus.

Whilst the spectral body was humping away, the head of the hooded figure slowly began to turn until sideways on; then continued turning through a seemingly impossible one hundred and eighty degrees until looking down at Jenny through dark, hollow eye sockets that lit up like a pair of tiny red beacons. The lower jawbone dropped in a skeletal grin, and Jenny, forgetting that it was Hallowe'en in Wulfmarsh Hall, screamed in abject terror at the sight.
