

THE VICAR OF MORBING VYLE

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Part One:



LOOKING FOR MORBING VYLE

CHAPTER 1

Morbing Vyle. Morbing Vyle . The name alone sends a shudder down my spine. Even after all these years. I used to think that the memory would drain away like a bad dream. For fifteen years I haven't told a single soul about it. But the horror still lurks at the bottom of my mind. I write out the name - and it's as though a shadow falls instantly across the world, dark and chill and terrible.

Yet it was the name itself that originally appealed to me. I can't explain why. Of course it was an odd-sounding name - but there was something more than that as well. It fascinated me right from the start.

It's true I was in a strange sort of mood at the time. For a start, I was very lonely. I'm Australian, born and bred in Sydney - and somehow I couldn't adjust to living in England. Or no, not exactly England - I liked England and the English people - it was Cambridge I couldn't get on with. The University was such a cliquey clubby place, not at all welcoming. The dons and postgraduates and even the undergraduates seemed very aloof and superior, as though they'd all gone to the same private schools together. I felt like a total outsider.

I was in Cambridge for six months on a special study grant, to do research for my Ph.D. I was writing a historical thesis on 'Responses to Darwinism'. I wanted to examine the hysteria and bigotry of the Christian establishment - how they denied the evidence, made personal attacks upon Darwin, stirred up emotion and ignorance - anything to close their eyes to the scientific truth. In a controversial conclusion, I also wanted to show the same forms of irrationality persisting in the arguments of the present-day Creationists.

It seemed like an interesting topic when I started. But I hadn't reckoned with the quantity of material to be covered. So many pamphlets and books and essays and letters - the resources of the University Library were endless. The more I read, the more I discovered that still needed reading. And gradually I began to lose interest in what I was trying to argue. The sheer silliness of the anti-Darwinians was depressing - what was the point of bringing them back to life? Better to leave them in the oblivion they deserved!

But still I kept going through the motions. Still I kept collecting material for a thesis that I knew, deep down, I would never actually write. Off to the University Library day after day, ploughing through volume after volume. My life was like an empty void, waiting for something to happen. And then I came across the name of Morbing Vyle.

It was in a very old issue of The Spectator, the issue for March of 1889. The controversy over the theory of evolution appeared in the Editorial and also in a number of Letters to the Editor. In one letter, the Reverend Sims from Deddington roundly condemned the "self-serving motives" of the scientific community. But at the same time he qualified his argument with the phrase "without wishing to go so far as our friend from Morbing Vyle . . ." The name jumped right up off the page at me. Morbing Vyle! How could anywhere - even in England - go under a name like that? Perhaps Vyle was a misprint for Vale?

I looked back through the Spectators for February and March of 1889, then all the way back through 1888. It seemed obvious that the Rev. Sims was referring to a letter published in an earlier issue. But the letter wasn't there - unless it had appeared in the issue for December of 1888. Someone had ripped half a dozen pages out of that issue, and the whole Letters to the Editor section was missing.

So that was that. I was curious about the name, but not about the writer of the letter. Probably just another outraged and offended Christian - I already had a thousand examples of the kind. I went on with my research. But the name of Morbing Vyle still stuck at the back of my mind. I kept on repeating it to myself at odd random moments. And then, a week or so later, I came across it again.

This time there was no possible doubt. The place really existed: not Vale but Vyle. I discovered it by accident in the correspondence of Sir James Russell. Russell was one of the strongest of the pro-Darwinians, and I was intending to skim through his correspondence only for the sake of references to the theory of evolution. But I got distracted by his account - in letters to his sister - of a walking-trip that he made through the Breckland region of East Anglia in 1874. In flowery old-fashioned language he described the architectural and scenic beauties of the towns and villages through which he passed. Idly browsing, I followed him from Honington to Thetford, then Lynford, then Mundford - and then, suddenly, Morbing Vyle! There it was again! A village in the Brecklands!

Sir James was evidently very impressed by the old-fashioned charm of Morbing Vyle. His description went on for almost a whole page. I read about its many thatched cottages, its church and half-timbered public house. It sounded incredibly picturesque.

I sat there for a long time in the library, thinking and musing. I began to toy with the idea of visiting this Morbing Vyle. I'd made sightseeing trips to places like London and Lincoln and Norwich and York. But the quiet peace of a picturesque country village - wasn't that the true spirit of old England? Perhaps I could take a few days off from my work . . . ?

But I didn't, not straight away. A sense of guilt kept me grinding away at my research, though I found it harder and harder to concentrate. Yet I couldn't escape from the name of Morbing Vyle. It was as though it was haunting me. Just a few days later, I came across it yet again in a book on nineteenth-century ecclesiastical history. I was only looking for some background information on the distinctions between Church and Chapel, the different forms of belief held by the anti-Darwinians. But the book fell open almost immediately at a full-page photographic illustration. The caption to the illustration said: 'Easter Processional at the Church of Morbing Vyle'.

The illustration was reproduced from an old photograph - a very old photograph. The men wore waistcoats and hats and high starched Victorian collars, the women wore full length skirts and shawls and bonnets. They marched all in a line behind the upheld Cross, passing between the tombstones of a grassy green churchyard. In the background was the church itself, every bit as picturesque as Russell had described it. It had a knobbly little tower and conical spire. Close by the church was a red-brick building three quarters covered in ivy - presumably the vicarage.

I searched through the text for further details. But there was no mention of Morbing Vyle in particular, only a general account of changes and developments in Anglican ritual during the nineteenth century. I gave up reading and gazed at the photo instead. I must have gazed at it for half an hour or more. By the time I had finished gazing, my mind was made up. I would take a holiday, I would pay a visit to this village of Morbing Vyle! As soon as possible! Tomorrow!

I don't know why I was in such a hurry. Perhaps I just wanted to escape from Cambridge and my studies - or perhaps it was something else. Anyway, I hurried home from the library, back to my dismal lodgings in Huntingdon Road. I packed a travelling bag with clothes enough for the next three days.

Only then did I look up Morbing Vyle in my Touring Atlas of the British Isles. First I looked it up in the Index at the back of the book - but it wasn't there. So I turned to the map page for the Breckland, and scanned the area inch by inch. Thetford I discovered straight away, then Lynford, Mundford, and the various villages described by Russell. But no Morbing Vyle. It didn't appear on the map at all.

Another name did appear though: the name of New Morbing. New Morbing was situated between Mundford and Feltwell, roughly on the route where Russell had passed through Morbing Vyle. Yet Russell hadn't even mentioned New Morbing . . .

I scratched my head. What had happened? Had Morbing Vyle been outgrown by a more successful neighbour, shrinking in size until it was no longer large enough to feature on the map? Or was New Morbing actually the same as Morbing Vyle? The reference in *The Spectator* and

Russell's letters to his sister and the photo all dated from the nineteenth century. Perhaps the inhabitants had since decided to give their village a change of name?

It was a mystery. But I didn't worry over it too much. After all, the idea was to stay at a quiet country village, and there were plenty of quiet country villages in the Breckland. Morbing Vyle wasn't the only possibility. At least, that's what I said to myself. But it wasn't really true. It was Morbing Vyle and Morbing Vyle alone that fascinated me. The element of mystery only added to the fascination.

CHAPTER 2

Not having a car, I had to travel by train and bus. Thetford is the only train stop for the Breckland region - a journey of about twenty-five miles from Cambridge. I caught the morning train and arrived in Thetford around ten o'clock.

There was a bus stop on the street directly outside the train station. I went up and studied the bus timetables. The 203 went to Mildenhall, the 206 went to East Wretham, and the 207 went to Feltwell - by way of Lynford, Mundford and New Morbing.

I was disappointed but not altogether surprised. There were even smaller stops than Mundford and New Morbing on the route - stops like Evelyn Hall and Pearce's Corner. But no stop by the name of Morbing Vyle. I was still studying the timetable when a voice spoke over my shoulder.

"Looking for somewhere? Need any help?"

It was a big cheery-faced woman in a yellow headscarf. She was one of half a dozen people already waiting at the bus stop.

"Yes. I'm looking for a place called Morbing Vyle."

"Morbing Vyle? Never heard of it? What kind of a name is that?"

"I know, very odd. But there used to be a village of Morbing Vyle somewhere around here."

"Not that I ever heard of." She turned interrogatively to the other people at the bus stop. They shook their heads.

"Doesn't exist."

"No such place."

"Got hold of the wrong name, I reckon."

"Sounds like a mistake for New Morbing."

I was going to disagree, but the cheery-faced woman spoke first.

"That'll be it," she said, nodding and smiling as over a problem solved. "New Morbing's the place you're looking for. Has to be. You catch the 207 bus - we're all waiting for it here. Should've been along five minutes ago."

Even as she spoke, the 207 bus appeared, trundling around a corner.

"Here we are," she said. "Ticket to New Morbing costs you one and ten. I'll let you know where to get off."

I shrugged to myself. New Morbing was in the right direction anyhow. The mystery of Morbing Vyle could wait. I'd try asking around when I got to New Morbing.

I bought a ticket and sat down by the window. The cheery-faced woman took the seat in front of me. Soon we were rattling out of Thetford along a winding country road. We left the town behind and entered the woods of the Breckland.

It's a strange region, the Breckland - quite different to the usual rich East Anglian farming land. For an area of about fifty square miles, the woods take over and the villages are few and far between. It's because of the extremely sandy soil, impossible to cultivate. Looking out through the bus window, I could see endless gloomy trees overhanging the road on either side. I could almost imagine I was going back into the time when England was covered with forests, before human beings ever appeared on the scene.

We passed through Lynford, then Mundford. When we came to New Morbing, the cheery-faced woman turned round and said, "Here it is. This is your stop." I thanked her and got off.

New Morbing was a large village, almost a small town. There was a single main street lined with shops. With Christmas only three weeks away, the shop windows were already decorated with artificial snow, artificial holly and glittering MERRY XMAS banners. Along the pavements people hurried this way and that, faces lowered, laden with shopping bags. Everyone seemed very busy and preoccupied.

I stood pondering my next move. I didn't like the idea of just halting someone in the street to ask about Morbing Vyle. Then I noticed a prefabricated building of glass and wood, set back a little from the shops in a trim green square of lawn. The sign at the front said NEW MORBING COUNCIL LIBRARY. I could ask for information there.

I walked across and entered through the glass door. The librarian was behind the counter. He was an extremely old gentleman with heavy white eyebrows like an Old Testament prophet. He was fixing little coded stickers on the spines of new books. The books had titles like:

100 More Recipes for Healthy Living

The Third World in Facts and Figures

Make It Yourself: Rockeries and Fish Ponds

When I asked my question his face went suddenly rigid.

"Morbing Vyle? What do you want to know about Morbing Vyle for?"

"Just curious."

"What made you curious?"

"What made me curious? I found a description in an old book. It sounded very picturesque.

And a photo of a church and -"

"Church!?" He glared at me. "Is that what you've come for!?"

For a moment I thought he wasn't going to utter another word. But then:

"Where've you come from? You've got an accent!"

"Australian."

"You've come all the way here from Australia _ !?" His face turned an apoplectic shade of red.

"Of course not. I'm at Cambridge. I thought I'd spend a few days in a small country village."

"Small country village!" he snorted. "A few days!"

I was trying not to lose my temper. "That's right," I said. "Now are you going to tell me about Morbing Vyle or not?"

"No."

"What?"

"There's nothing to tell. Morbing Vyle doesn't exist."

"But you said -"

"You misunderstood me. I've never heard of the place."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care what you believe." He turned back to his books and stickers. But when I didn't go away, he jumped up suddenly and marched out from behind his counter.

"Look here!" he shouted. "Look!"

He pointed to a large map pinned up on the wall. It was an Ordnance Survey map for the district.

"Where is it then?" he demanded. "You find it if you think you can."

I studied the map in vain. The map showed every detail, every street and stream and wood - there were a great many woods. But no sign of Morbing Vyle.

"Seems I'll be staying somewhere else then," I said.

The librarian went back behind his counter, back to his books and stickers. I could feel the weight of his silent hostility. But he didn't deign to reply.

I walked out of the library defeated - and yet elated. Map or no map, I still didn't believe him. He did know something about Morbing Vyle, he had heard the name before - I was quite sure of it. Only for some reason he didn't want to tell me what he knew. The mystery was getting more mysterious.

My next move was to try the Council Chambers. The Council Chambers were in a grey two-storey building directly behind the Library. I entered and found the Town Clerk in his office. When I asked if he could spare a few minutes, he recognised my accent immediately.

"We've got a sister town in Australia," he said. "Blainey." He gestured towards a stack of correspondence on one side of his desk. "Along with Oberon in Canada and Gladsach in West Germany and Reusel in the Netherlands. You ever know a place collect so many sister towns? Waste of time if you ask me. Greetings here and notifications there and none of it worth the paper it's written on."

I recognised his accent too. He was a Londoner. When I asked him about Morbing Vyle, I could see that he at least had never heard of the name before.

"Can't help you on that one, I'm afraid. I've only been living in this area for a couple of months. Maybe there are villages I haven't come across yet."

"Between Mundford and Feltwell?"

"Between Mundford and Feltwell? I think I'd know about anything that close."

"OK, so it doesn't exist in the present. But what about the past?"

"The past?"

"Everything I read about Morbing Vyle was pre-twentieth century. Old letters, old photo. What if it changed its name?"

"Changed to what?"

"New Morbing."

"Impossible."

"Do you have the town records?"

"I haven't gone through them, if that's what you mean. But I know when they begin. 1903."

"Nothing before 1903?"

"Nope."

"Well then! What if all the earlier records were destroyed? All the records from the time when they still called it Morbing Vyle?"

"Why would anyone destroy town records?"

"I don't know. But why else would they only go back to 1903."

"Ah, I see." He shook his head. "No, you're barking up the wrong tree there. I dare say you haven't had much of a look around New Morbing yet? Right?"

"Only between here and the bus stop."

"I'll tell you then. New Morbing really is new. There isn't a single building from before the twentieth century. Not one."

"Oh."

"Oh indeed. This town didn't exist in the time you say your Morbing Vyle was around."

"Just sprang up suddenly in the twentieth century?"

"Yes. It's an oddity in these parts. All the other villages go back for centuries and centuries. Mundford, Lynford, Feltwell . . . Only New Morbing is different. It isn't even as if it's grown up around a new industrial development or anything."

"So how do you explain the difference?"

"I don't. But let me tell you something else. You say you saw this photo of a church in Morbing Vyle. Well, New Morbing doesn't have a church. You get me? Not even a modern church. Not Anglican, Methodist, Congregational - nothing. Pretty unusual for a town of twelve hundred inhabitants don't you think?"

"Must be a very irreligious lot."

"I don't know what they are. But I'll say this, they're not very easy to get on with. Talk about unfriendly! I get the feeling that I'd still be an outsider in this place if I lived here for another fifty years. Which, incidentally, I don't intend to do."

We talked on a little longer before I left. The Clerk couldn't think of anyone whom I could ask for information. "They're all as close as clams," he said. It was only by sheer accident that I finally stumbled upon a real revelation.

CHAPTER 3

I walked back to the main street. The sky overhead was darkening with clouds. There was a storm approaching. I was glad that I had my raincoat on.

The shop windows were like illuminated Aladdin's caves. Inside were green plastic Xmas trees with flashing lights and plate-glass stands festooned in gold and silver streamers. All very merry and seasonal. But the people going in and out of the shops and climbing in and out of their

cars didn't look very merry at all. They looked tired and harassed and sullen. The gift-wrapped parcels under their arms were the only bright thing about them.

I walked on past a chemists and a newsagents. a butchers and a homeware store. I could see now what the Town Clerk meant about the newness of New Morbing. The buildings weren't modern in the glass-and-concrete kind of way, but they weren't old either. Most of them were red or pink brick, very solid and block-like. And set out very orderly too - as though the whole street had been planned and built in a single go. There was nothing quaint or higgledy-piggledy about New Morbing.

By now I was starting to feel hungry. It was over three hours since I'd had breakfast. So when I came to a small supermarket - Moles' Mini-Mart it was called - I turned and went in.

Inside was a hubbub of voices and a racket of metal trolleys being wheeled up and down. The place was packed. I didn't take a trolley myself, but walked around the aisles until I found what I wanted: a packet of peanuts and a Mars bar.

There were two checkouts operating. Fancy red and white banners were strung across overhead: 'A Very Merry Xmas To All Our Customers!!!' A notice of a different kind was taped to the front of the cash registers: 'We Reserve The Right To Inspect All Bags And Handbags'.

The girl on my checkout was very young, about fourteen or fifteen. She gave me change for my peanuts and Mars bar, then she pointed at my travelling bag.

"See inside your bag sir?"

I opened it up and she glanced at the contents: spare shirt, jumper, socks, briefs, pyjamas. She grinned.

"You on a visit are you?"

"That's right."

"Don't get many visitors to New Morbing. What you here for?"

She said it so naturally and pleasantly that I answered without thinking:

"I've been trying to find out about a place called Morbing Vyle."

For a split second everything went absolutely quiet and still. No voices, no rattling trolleys, no rustling packets being taken from the shelves. For a split second the whole supermarket was as silent and hollow and resonant as a cathedral.

But the moment I turned around, everything came suddenly unfrozen again. The shoppers were so busy with their shopping, it was as though they'd never stopped. I could almost have believed I'd imagined it.

Yet there was a strange expression on the face of the checkout girl. When I turned back, her eyes were wide and surprised-looking. She wasn't going to tell me anything though. Immediately she dropped her eyes and gave a tiny negative shake with her head.

I left Moles' Mini-Mart and wandered along the street until I came to a Council Car Park. It was tidy and well-regulated, like everything else in New Morbing, with clean white lines painted on the asphalt between the cars. Here and there were saplings planted and growing inside wire cages. I went and sat down on a low concrete wall, just off the main street. I fished the peanuts out of my pocket and started on my elevenses.

I took my time. I had plenty to think about. People stared at me as they got into their cars. I stared back. I was beginning to see sinister hostile behaviour everywhere.

I finished the peanuts and started on the Mars bar. The black clouds loomed lower and heavier than ever, and the air had turned very chill. I had just taken my first bite when a voice called out:

"Hi!"

It was the young girl with the pointy face, calling across from the street. Now she was wearing a scruffy blue duffel coat over her checkout-girl clothes. She turned and came towards me.

"I just knocked off work. Lucky I saw you. I've got something to tell you about that - what you said - Morbing Vyle."

CHAPTER 4

She sat down beside me on the concrete wall. I offered to break off a piece of Mars bar but she waved it away.

"So you do know something?" I said.

"Maybe." She gave an awkward half-ashamed grin. "Not in real life though. In dreams."

"Ah, in dreams." I must have sounded disappointed, because she shrugged and made to stand up.

"No, don't go. Anything you can tell me . . ."

She hunched back down again. She stared at the ground with her chin on her hands.

"I never told the whole thing to anyone before. It's this nightmare I used to have. Mum and Dad didn't want to hear. They said it was better to not even think about it. I don't have it hardly at all now."

"It's a recurring dream is it?"

"I suppose. Sort of the same and sort of different. I'm different people in it. Sometimes one of those, you know, maidservants. And sometimes a mother with children. Wearing old-fashioned clothes, full-length skirts and stuff. Or sometimes one of the children. It's always me being someone else."

"As if it happened long ago in the past?"

"Right. Everything's really weird, like in history. You'd laugh, it's so weird. Only it's sort of as if I know it too. Rooms with flowery wallpaper and smelling of leather. I can smell smells in the dream just as if I was there. And the furniture is all made of carved wood. The table legs are like great big claws. I see them when we have to hide under the table."

"You hide under the table?"

"Yes. That's part of it. We hide under the table and wait for the sounds to go past. All of us together, everyone in the house. Sometimes it's in the middle of the night and we have to get up in a hurry and come downstairs to hide. We grab the cushions off the chairs and build a sort of wall around the table legs, so we can bop down behind. Except it won't do us any good if he comes for us. It's like trying to hide although all the time we know it's no good really."

"What do you mean, if 'he' comes? Who's 'he'?"

"I don't know. It's just this fear. We have to wait for him to go past. There's wheels, we hear them first, coming up the other end of the street. And horse's hooves on the stone. They're coming closer and closer. Then we hold on to each other under the table. We're crouching down on all fours, and we sort of put our hands on each others' hands. We're making a wish together, for him to go past. It's the only thing in the world, for him to go past. And the wheels and the hooves are getting louder and louder, like thunder rumbling, and getting slower too, that's how it sounds, slower and slower and coming to a stop. And we're wishing harder and harder but we daren't look out. Only there's this patch of light on the floor near the table coming through the window and it gets darker and darker. Until the shadow blots it out altogether, and we know he's outside right in front of our house. We can hear the horses breathing and hissing and snorting like they're just on the other side of the window looking in. And then he goes past. The sound of the wheels keeps on turning and thundering and he goes past. He wasn't stopping for us after all. It's someone else this time he's going to stop for. So we're safe this time after all."

"Phew! What a nightmare!" The way she'd told it, she'd got me scared too. "But what does it have to do with Morbing - ?"

"There's another part of the same dream." She hadn't even heard my question. "In the daytime in the street. Everyone is standing around. Wearing those full-length skirts again, and the

men in long black coats. I might be a one of the women or one of the children. It's in a village with little thatched roof cottages. We walk down the street all together, to the outskirts of the village, where the street turns into a dirt lane. And there's something up ahead, something dreadful. The men go up and form a circle around it. They don't want me to see. And all the time everyone is moaning and wailing. Sometimes I see this one woman pulling out her hair, really pulling it out in whole handfuls. Then I start moving forward, to see what it is. They're all trying to stop me, but they're sort of trembling and shivering too much, they can't take a grip on me. Like their hands are freezing cold, although it's a sunny day. And I keep pushing forward, I can't help it. I don't want to do it, I want to collapse on my knees, anything just to stop, but I can't stop. I know I'm going to see something so awful and horrible that -"

She ran suddenly out of breath in mid-sentence. Her mouth was wide open and her eyes were terrified. She took a great gulp of air and went on in a whisper:

"But I never get to see it. I always wake up first. Sometimes it's so bad I'm screaming out loud. Then Mum and Dad come in and tell me not to think about it any more . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She was holding her head between her hands now. I couldn't think of anything to say. We sat there in silence for a couple of minutes. Then she roused and shook her head.

"Anyway, that's all it is. I don't want to think about it any more."

She stood up, not looking at me at all.

"Are you OK?"

"Course I'm OK. It's only a dream. I don't even have it much any more." She seemed completely changed. Her voice was tight and abrupt. "I'm off now."

"Don't go." I grabbed my bag and jumped up too. I followed as she crossed the car park back to the street. "You still haven't told me. Where does the name come in?"

"The name?"

"Morbing Vyle."

"Oh, that. That's what it is. The whole thing."

We were walking along the street now. She was hurrying so fast I could hardly keep up with her.

"How do you mean, 'the whole thing'?"

"I don't know. Perhaps someone says it in the dream. I don't remember. I just know that's what it is. You wouldn't understand."

We had come to an intersection. She stepped suddenly off the pavement and darted across the road.

"I live this way," she called out over her shoulder. "Bye."

"Bye," I said automatically. "No wait -"

But it was too late. She turned up a different street, away from the main street. I was left stranded on the corner on the wrong side of the intersection. I watched her hurrying off with never a backward glance.

I cursed to myself. If I had been curious about Morbing Vyle before, I was now totally fascinated. A dark unhealthy fascination. But I had less and less idea of what I was really looking for - or how to go about finding it.

I stood there at the intersection with my bag in one hand and my Mars bar in the other. After a while I raised the Mars bar to my mouth. I nibbled and pondered, pondered and nibbled . . .

Then I became aware that I was standing beside a tall white wooden signpost. It was planted right there on the corner, pointing out the directions at the intersection. And there was something different about it - different to everything else in New Morbing. It was old .

My heart skipped a beat. I had a sudden premonition, a sense of inevitability. I studied the lettering on the arms.

The arm that pointed back along the street where I'd come said '4 miles. MUNDFORD'. The arm that pointed on down the street in the opposite direction said '3 miles. FELTWELL'. And the arm that pointed in the direction where the girl had just disappeared said '7 miles. BRANDON'.

But there was another arm too - or rather, the stump of an arm. It had been burnt off. It pointed down a narrow slit of a lane between the buildings on my side of the main street.

The wood of the stump was blackened and the lettering was gone. But I knew what to do. I swallowed the rest of my Mars bar, dropped my bag and reached up. With one finger I felt for the grooves where the letters had been.

It was exactly as I had thought. I traced out the last letter of the name: an E. And in front of the E, yes, an L. And in front of the L, where the stump had been charred away to a stub - in front of the L, I could just make out a faint diagonal line of the kind that might belong to a Y. YLE! It was enough! I had found the name I was looking for! MORBING VYLE!

I glanced around. The intersection was quite deserted. The people of New Morbing were all at a distance, further down the street. None of them seemed to be looking my way. I picked up my bag and turned into the lane, following the direction pointed by the stump.

CHAPTER 5

The lane had no pavements or gutters, just a flat surface of asphalt about six feet wide. On either side the buildings were double storeyed, windowless on the ground level, with only a couple of tiny windows higher up. It was like walking down a canyon of blank red brick. And even after the buildings, the walls continued as backyard walls, still about ten feet high. I remember one dark wooden gate set into the brick, massive and heavily padlocked.

Then came a change. The walls ended and were replaced by hedges of evergreen privet. Tall dense hedges, that had obviously not been trimmed for a very long time. When I pulled the leaves aside and tried to peer through, I could make out what seemed to be vegetable patches and back gardens. There were houses too, but much further away, facing out towards some other road. I kept on walking.

The hedges ran unbroken for a hundred yards or so, then stopped. Suddenly I was out in the open country. All ahead were grassy paddocks, flat and wide. The air was full of the smell of soft churned earth and cowdung. I was surprised to have come out of the town so quickly.

Now the lane was edged with ditches and banks. Electric fences ran along the tops of the banks. There were small metal boxes on the fence posts, giving off a click-click sound. Notices hung from the topmost strand of the wire: DANGER - 150 VOLTS.

But there were no cows or other animals around, so far as I could see. It was an empty, dreary-looking scene. And even drearier under the gathering black clouds. I wondered how much further I could get before the rain began.

As I walked on, the banks rose gradually higher and higher. The ditches vanished and the lane ran along at the bottom of a deep channel. It was like sinking down into the earth. Soon I could no longer see out across the paddocks. The banks were covered with thick green nettles.

Then I saw something up ahead. Across my route lay a solid brick wall. At first I thought there must be a gap in the banks where the lane made a sudden turn to left or right. But there was no gap and no turn. The wall was built like a dam, blocking the channel from bank to bank. The lane ran right up to it and then was suddenly cut off.

It was very strange and senseless. I couldn't work it out at all. I went up and stood by the wall. It came about as high as my chin. The bricks were carrotty-red and crumbly, and the mortar white and powdery. On the other side, a tangled thicket of bushes and trees filled up the space from bank to bank.

I put down my bag and, standing on tiptoe, looked over the top. And then I saw that it wasn't a complete dead end after all. There on the other side I could just make out the line of a track,

running through the middle of the thicket. There was a continuation of the lane - only now in the form of a mere dirt path.

I didn't hesitate. I tossed my bag over the wall and clambered over after it. I felt more certain than ever that I was on the right route for Morbing Vyle.

It was dark and gloomy on the other side, in amongst the trees and bushes. I picked up my bag and pushed forward. It was hard going. Although the dirt track was visible on the ground, there were branches and twigs sticking out everywhere across it. I stooped down low under the bigger branches, but the smaller branches still whipped and scratched at me.

Soon my hands were bleeding in numerous tiny places. Many of the bushes were armed with thorns and prickles. Again and again I had to stop and unsnag myself. A couple of times I stumbled and fell to my knees.

But gradually the banks on either side fell away, lower and lower. I began to notice a curious smell in the air, like stale smoke. And then there was light up ahead - the light of open space. At last the trees and bushes were thinning out.

I lifted my bag as a shield in front of my face and barged my way out through the last of the thicket. Suddenly I was standing on a slope of green grass, with a winding stream in front of me. On the other side of the stream was a burned-out forest.

CHAPTER 6

Now I understood the reason for the stale smoky smell. There must have been a great fire here. The blackened trees curved away to left and right as far as the eye could see. On my side of the stream the grass was fresh and green. But on the other side, not a single speck of colour. The trees were like charcoal and the ground was pale with ash.

The strange thing was that the forest seemed so intact. There were mighty branches bowed and buckled, huge cleft trunks and hollow shells gaping with holes. Yet still the trees were all standing. Though some leant over at impossible angles, though some held up only with the support of their neighbours - yet not one single tree lay fallen on the ground. Even the twigs on the branches seemed perfectly preserved. It was as though the whole forest had been instantly, magically carbonized.

I didn't much like the idea of going into it. But that was the way I had to go, if I wanted to keep following the track. For there across the stream in front of me was a double line of stones:

obviously the remains of an old causeway. And beyond the causeway, a kind of avenue into the forest, where the trees stood further apart and an arched space opened up under the branches. No doubt about it: this was the track to Morbing Vyle.

Balancing cautiously, I made my way across from stone to stone. The stream was slow-moving and shallow. When I stepped off on the other side, my shoes sank deep into the fine white ash. I gritted my teeth and went forward in amongst the trees.

It was deathly quiet. Nothing moved or stirred. The only sound was the soft padding of my footsteps - that, and the beating of my heart. I tried to whistle a tune but the notes seemed to die in the air. I gave up and went on in silence.

The forest was quite beautiful in its weird petrified state. It was not only the twigs that were well preserved; here and there were skeletal clusters of leaves, burnt away to lace-like imitations of themselves. And grass blades too, poking up through the carpet of ash, crisp and brittle and grey. It seemed incredible that such fragile delicacy could survive. I advanced further and further along the avenue between the trees.

Then all at once the silence was broken by a rushing sweeping noise. RRRRRRRSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHH!!! It seemed to be rushing towards me from behind.

I panicked and ran. An image came instantly into my mind: the image of a great black carriage, open at the top, with furious spinning wheels and gleaming brass lamps. I didn't even turn to look, yet it was as vivid as if I saw it right in front of my eyes. And it was hurtling towards me, closer and closer -

But then I felt the wind on the nape of my neck and the wet spots of rain on my skin. I halted and turned around. There was nothing behind me at all.

I laughed at myself. The sound I had heard was the sound of the rain, advancing through the trees on a gust of wind. The storm had finally begun.

I pulled my coat tighter, turned up my collar, and continued on at a walking pace. Of course, it was the checkout girl's nightmare that had made me think of a carriage. Her story must have affected me more deeply than I'd realized.

Soon the rain was pelting down. It crashed through the branches overhead and fell to the ground with tiny white explosions in the ash. So many explosions that the ground seemed to be stirring like vapour, writhing and rising in snaky white tendrils. When I cast a glance behind, my footsteps were vanishing even as I walked.

Then I noticed something else. The smell in the air was growing smokier and there was a strange noise over and above the noise of the rain. It was a sort of hissing. It seemed to come from the trees themselves.

I veered to the side of the track to inspect more closely. I stood by one particular tree, a cracked old shell of an oak. The rainwater trickled and glistened down its black burned bark. And out of the cracks - I could swear that there was steam coming out.

I pressed my hand against the bark. Nothing. Or was there? After a while I seemed to feel a faint creeping warmth. I poked my fingers into one of the cracks. No doubt about it! The inside of the tree was hot.

I was surprised. Somehow I hadn't thought of the fire as being that recent. But I supposed there was no reason why not . . .

I looked around. From every tree came the same hissing noise. The same deep heat must be smouldering in every one of them. I was surrounded by a thousand separate voices. Suddenly the trees didn't seem so dead after all.

I hurried on down the middle of the track. Of course it was only my imagination playing tricks - but now I saw the blasted trunks and twisted branches as black-robed mourners, reaching up with wild tortured arms. And the hissing noise - to me it was like a sighing and sobbing, a bitter deep-down weeping. The forest was full of torment and pain and anguish.

Faster and faster I hurried. When would I ever get out from these terrible trees? The whole place seemed charged with an unbearable intensity of emotion, weighing down, suffocating me. For the moment I had forgotten all about my quest for Morbing Vyle.

Then suddenly the trees were behind. The forest ended as abruptly as it had begun. Suddenly I was standing out in the open, with the rain like a grey murk all around. I couldn't see a thing.

CHAPTER 7

Only now did I realize just how heavy the rain really was. In the forest I had been under a kind of canopy. But out in the open the deluge hit me with its full force. I was getting drenched.

I walked forward into the nothingness. I lifted up my bag and held it over my head for some small protection. The ground beneath my feet was bare soft clay, rapidly turning into mud. There was no longer any kind of a track to follow.

It was lucky that I was looking down at the ground. Suddenly a great gaping hole opened up in front of me. At first I thought it was a newly-dug grave. It was about four feet wide and six feet deep, with a mound of raw excavated earth heaped up on the far side. But then I realized it was too

long to be a grave. I couldn't even see where it ended: to left and right it extended out of sight, vanishing into the rain. It was a trench.

I didn't fancy jumping over it, especially into the mound of earth. So I walked along by the edge a little way. Soon I came to a place where a plank had been laid across as a bridge. I crossed over and went on.

Then I became aware of something ahead of me. It loomed out of the rain in a vague grey silhouette: a silhouette in the shape of an arch. Immediately I headed towards it.

I had to make a detour around yet another trench before I could come up close. It turned out much larger than I'd supposed - about thirty feet high. It was a Gothic arch like the arch in a church. Only here there was no church. This arch reared up all by itself in the middle of nowhere.

Then I remembered Morbing Vyle. Was this strange arch an answer to my quest? Perhaps if the village had been abandoned, if it had fallen into ruin . . . Could this arch be a last surviving remnant from the church I had seen in the photograph?

But my hypothesis was soon overthrown. For now I observed that the stonework of the arch was surrounded by a framework of timber. Scaffolding! I whistled in amazement. So the arch was not the remnant of some ruined building, but the start of a new one! It was under construction !

Then I thought of the trenches I had crossed over, and the bare earth all around. Of course - it all fitted together! The entire area was a building site! And the trenches were the excavations being dug out for foundations!

I stood under the arch and inspected the stonework. It was a curious hodgepodge of different kinds of masonry all cemented into a single mass. There were even a few bricks incorporated amongst the stone. The scaffolding was similarly ramshackle, lashed together with cords and ropes.

I was completely baffled. Who were the builders? And what was it for? Why on earth would anyone be building a Gothic-style church in the late 20th Century? Mystery upon mystery!

But I didn't stay worrying about it for long. By now I had more important worries: my own wetness and discomfort. The rain had soaked right through my coat, and there was a cold clamminess against my skin. I had to find shelter - and quickly.

I trudged on in the murk. The trenches were everywhere, crisscrossing this way and that. Some were small and shallow, others wide and deep. They were filled at the bottom with puddles of brown water and thick quaggy mud. I was forced to take so many turnings that I soon lost all sense of direction.

Then I saw another silhouette looming through the rain. It looked like a low squat building. But when I came up close, I discovered only a pile of building materials. There were bricks and stones and slates and tiles, all stacked up ready for use. I shrugged and went on.

On and on and on. I gave up carrying my bag over my head; the rainwater was trickling down my upheld arms and into my shirt. As for my shoes, they were so thick and caked with clay, it was like dragging two immense puddings over the ground. My feet squelched in my socks with every step.

And still there was no shelter. I headed towards one phantom shape after another. It was always the same: fragmentary bits of unfinished construction. I found a half-built wall a couple of feet high, and the beginnings of a stone pier set upon a massive pedestal. I found some stone steps and a semi-circular platform, a great ramp of earth and a section of new paving. But never a single complete building.

I felt as if I had been walking forever. I don't know how long it was in real time. I trudged along mechanically, head lowered and shoulders hunched. I kept on walking only because it was as easy as standing still. But I came to a sudden halt when I discovered the chairs.

CHAPTER 8

There were five of them: plain upright chairs with slatted backs and wooden seats. One of the seats bore a plush but soggy cushion. They stood all by themselves in a torrential rainstorm, arranged side by side in a row.

I dropped my bag to the ground and sat down on one of the seats. But not for long. There was something else just visible through the murk, about twenty feet away. It was a massive lectern of carved wood. It seemed to be facing towards the chairs.

This I had to examine! I stood up and went to take a closer look. But even as I approached the lectern, I caught sight of something even more bizarre. Another twenty feet beyond the lectern was a large white shape, sort of square and flat at the top. It looked at first like a table covered with a white tablecloth.

Immediately I thought of shelter. If I could crawl in underneath the table . . . I marched on past the lectern and headed towards this new discovery.

But my hope was soon dashed. It wasn't a table at all. The shape was solid: an oblong block of panelled marble. The white cloth that covered it had a decorative gold border and hung down half way to the ground. It reminded me of an altar in a church - a marble altar with a gold-and-white altar cloth.

On top of the block, in the centre of the cloth, lay a silver box. It was about twenty inches long by ten inches wide, engraved all over with a fine scrolled pattern. I could see at once that it was a work of remarkable craftsmanship. At the sides of the box were two tiny clasps.

I unhooked the clasps and opened the lid. Inside the box was a bed of green velvet, moulded into snug cavities. Three chisels nestled in the cavities, along with a fretsaw, a file, an auger and a small hammer. The heads of the tools were gleaming steel, the handles were smooth black ebony.

I let the lid fall. I was beyond being surprised any more. Nothing made sense, nothing at all. It was like living in a dream. The only real thing was the cold wet rain on my skin.

And then I had a lucky break. Just as I was about to turn away, I noticed that one of the marble panels was different. Whereas the others were creamy in colour, this one was a dark porphyry red. I'd assumed that the marble was a single solid mass all the way through. But what if it was hollow?

I went down on my knees and took a close look. Yes, the red porphyry panel was quite separate, divided by thin cracks from the panels on either side. There was some dry blobby substance in the cracks, like sealing wax.

I lifted up the white-and-gold cloth. Better and better! At the top of the red porphyry panel were two brass hinges. The panel must be a kind of door, a hatch leading into the hollow interior.

There was no handle. I scrabbled with my fingers at the bottom of the panel and scraped away the wax until I could get a hold. Then I prised the panel slowly outwards and upwards. Once I had squeezed my whole hand in under the edge, it came up easily enough.

Shelter at last! I didn't waste time wondering whether I might be committing blasphemy or sacrilege or whatever. Even if it was an altar - I wasn't superstitious about that sort of thing. Holding the hatch open with one hand, I wriggled my way inside.

CHAPTER 9

Inside it was dark and close and stuffy. I groped around blindly, unable to see in front of my nose. The air smelt very stale, as though it had been sealed up for centuries.

But at least the place was dry. And there was even some kind of padding on the ground. It felt like a big soft leather-covered bean-bag.

I didn't think too much about it. I was just happy to be in out of the rain. I rolled over into a sitting position and settled myself comfortably on the bean-bag. I had my knees under my chin and

my arms around my knees. But I still kept one foot wedged against the hatch, propping it open. I didn't want to lose sight of the daylight.

I don't know how long I was there before I heard the sounds. Perhaps five minutes, perhaps ten. Long enough to get a little warmth back into my body anyway. Huddled up in the fuggy dark, I felt my sodden clothes beginning to lose their chill. And then I heard the sounds.

They were very faint at first, almost ghostly, coming and going in the drifts and gusts of rain. Sounds of sloshing and slopping, like people walking in the mud. I pricked up my ears and listened.

It was people. Suddenly I could hear their voices. I couldn't make out what they were saying, they were still too far away. But they were coming steadily closer.

I felt strangely reluctant to move. I can't explain why. I should have crawled out into the open and shouted for help. But I didn't. Perhaps it was just that I was finally starting to feel warm. I didn't want to go out in the rain - not even to be rescued.

So I stayed huddled up and listening. The voices had fallen silent again, but the sloshing slopping sounds were very close. They seemed to be heading towards the row of chairs. I remembered that I had left my bag there. I waited for a sudden cry of discovery. Then I would have to do something. Any minute now . . .

But something else happened instead. How can I describe it? Suddenly I became aware that the bean-bag had moved. A sort of surreptitious sliding movement beneath me. Like a muscle flexing inside the leather!

Instinctively I sprang up. But the marble roof was only inches above my head. I banged the top of my skull and collapsed back down onto the bag.

Again the bag moved, and again. Now it was starting to fold itself round me. It was trying to envelop and hold on to me! I lashed at it with my arms and legs. In sheer terror I yelled out at the top of my voice:

"HELP!! HELP!!!"

I flung myself free from that leathery embrace and dived out through the hatch. I hardly knew what I was doing. For a second I lay sprawled in the mud, out in the open in the grey rainy murk. Then I jumped to my feet and fled.

I think I was still yelling for help. Running, stumbling, looking back over my shoulder. I was about twenty paces away when a trench suddenly opened up in the ground in front of me. I tried to stop. Too late! My feet stopped but my body didn't. I plummeted forward over the edge.

The trench was about ten feet deep. Headfirst I fell, all the way down to the liquid mud at the bottom. There was a loud GLOPP!! as I hit the mud. My head was submerged and my arms were stuck. I couldn't breath! In a state of wild panic I kicked out with my feet.

It was the very worst thing I could have done. My kicking caved in the wall of the trench and brought down a whole heap of earth on top of me. A great soft weight settled over my body.

Now I was buried as well as submerged. I felt as if I had been completely encased in wet plaster. My legs were clamped and my arms were pinioned. I was aware of the folds and creases of my clothes pressing and moulding against my skin, like folds and creases in the earth itself.

Slowly the mud invaded my mouth and eyes and ears. It was a thick glutinous syrup. When I opened my eyes, all I could see was a liquid film of sepia brown. The clogging wad in my mouth tasted gritty and dark. When I tried to close my mouth, long dribbling clots ran up inside my nostrils and down the back of my throat. I felt my gorge rising. I wanted to vomit.

Then I heard feet approaching. Or not exactly heard - not in the ordinary way. What I heard were vibrations travelling through the ground. I felt them with my bones.

I tried to lie still and be calm. It must be those people again, the ones who had been moving around near the chairs. They were coming to rescue me!

But now I was beginning to black out from lack of oxygen. My lungs felt thick and lumpish, and there was a pain in my chest. The earth seemed to be pressing down on me tighter and tighter all the time. I felt as if I was turning into a kind of earth myself. Like peat, like a subterranean seam of coal. I felt my heartbeat growing sluggish, the circulations of my body congealing to a halt. A strange transformation was creeping over me.

Then there were more vibrations. Bump-bump-bump! It must be those people jumping down into the trench . . . I could recognise the vibrations of their different voices, rising and falling as they shouted to one another. But what were they shouting about?

Everything was starting to seem very remote. Even the voices sounded a thousand miles away. Why didn't they pull me out? What were they waiting for? Didn't they realise how close to death I was?

I think I must have lapsed into unconsciousness just at the moment when they finally pulled me out.

Part Two:



IN THE VICARAGE

CHAPTER 10

I stayed blanked out for a very long time. I remember there was a fiery pain in my chest. I seemed to be crawling along some endless tunnel, desperately trying to leave something behind . . .

Then gradually the pain diminished. Occasionally I rose to a sort of half-consciousness. I became aware of lying between clean linen sheets, with a faint dry smell of lavender. I was wearing my own blue-and-white striped pyjamas. My head rested on soft pillows and there was a floral patterned bedspread in front of my eyes. Overhead was another pattern - a pattern of interlocking wire and springs, like the underside of a bed.

I didn't understand any of it. I was just thankful to be alive, smelling smells and seeing colours. Vaguely I traced the pattern of the bedspread and the pattern of the wire, and soon sank back asleep again.

For a long long time I hovered between dream and reality. But finally I came fully awake. I opened my eyes and took stock of my surroundings.

I was lying in the lower berth of a double bunk. Close by was a massive square chest, with brass handles. On top of the chest stood a glass of water. It seemed to have been set there for me to drink. My bag was there too, and all my clothes laid out neatly across the lid of the chest. My coat had been hung up on a hook at the side of the bunk.

The room itself had an old-fashioned appearance, everything slightly faded and dim and dingy. The wallpaper was dark blue and buff, with a pattern of flying birds. There were black timber beams running across a low sloping ceiling, and a single small window divided into six tiny panes. On one side of the room was a fireplace, with paper, wood and coal laid in the grate. It looked as though the fire hadn't been lit for ages.

As for the furnishings, they were all made of wood. As well as the chest and bunk there was a child's playpen and a desk. The desk was painted pale green. It had a bench-seat attached and a hole for an inkwell. The playpen was painted pink and ornamented with fancy carving. There was no child in it, only a heap of toys: crayons, alphabet building blocks, a stuffed felt animal, some picture books, a bucket and spade. But nothing plastic, not like modern toys.

I considered it all carefully, moving my eyes without moving my head. I was still very weak. The playpen and desk and wallpaper suggested a child's room, an old-fashioned nursery. I was still considering it when the door creaked open. Four figures came in from the corridor outside.

CHAPTER 11

There were two men and two women. They came in on tiptoe, very cautiously. One long thin man followed by one tiny little woman, followed by one big tall woman followed by one short fat man. When they saw that my eyes were open they halted. The tiny little woman clapped her hands.

"Look at his eyes!"

"He's awake!"

They turned to one another and whispered together for a moment. I could catch only a few phrases:

"Give him time . . ."

". . . still new here . . ."

". . . find out for himself . . ."

"No-one to rush . . ."

The whispering finished with nods all around. Then they turned and advanced once more towards me. They lined up side by side a few feet away from the bunk.

They were an odd collection. Let me try to describe them as I saw them at the time.

The long thin man looked to be in his sixties. He wore a tweed jacket with leather elbow-patches. When he moved he was amazingly angular and bony, like a stick-insect. His face reminded me of a horse.

The tiny little woman was equally old, and very frail in appearance. Her white hair was done up in elaborately crimped curls. She had on a lilac-coloured two-piece suit, and matching lilac high-heeled shoes. She seemed to be wearing a great deal of make-up.

The big tall woman was much younger. She was built like an Amazon, with whacking arms and thighs, and a particularly massive bust. She carried herself very upright, head high and shoulders back. She wore a low-cut dress of ballooning brown velvet, like an old-fashioned ballroom dress.

As for the short fat man, he was striking because of his bright red hair. It hung down in a fiery rim all around his smooth bald crown. He wore a quilted waistcoat and a silk cravat. The

cravat looked slightly soiled and greasy - in fact everything about him looked slightly soiled and greasy.

The bony man bent forward to address me:

"Are you feeling better?"

I tried to speak. But my chest was still painful and my throat still dry and contracted. A funny croaking "Yes" was all I could produce.

"He speaks!" the big tall woman proclaimed portentously. "Praise the Lord!"

The bony man raised his hand for silence. He seemed to take the lead over the other three.

"We must introduce ourselves," he said.

He angled a forefinger towards his own cadaverous chest. "I am Mr Caulkiss!" he announced. His voice was loud and nasal, trumpeting out of his long bony nose.

Then he pointed towards the red-haired man. "Mr Quode!"

Mr Quode smoothed himself down with both hands and performed an unctuous bow.

Then the little white-haired woman. "My wife, Craylene!"

She bobbed and ducked, and cocked her head this way and that like a tiny bird. "Craylene Caulkiss, pleased to meet you!" she chirruped.

Then the big tall woman. "Melestrina Quode!"

Melestrina Quode made a dramatic gesture of welcome. She opened her arms and flung forth her bosom - then froze. Like a human statue, she stood there motionless in a welcoming pose.

"And you -" The bony forefinger turned in my direction. I opened my mouth and tried to speak. But Mr Caulkiss spoke first. "You are Mr. Martin Smythe."

"Sm-y-y-the," echoed Mr Quode, savouring the sound on his tongue.

"We looked through your wallet!" twittered Craylene brightly. "We hope you don't mind!"

I smiled to show that I didn't mind. Immediately they all smiled back. I almost shrank at the sight of the bony man's teeth, hugely exposed and yellowy.

"Look at him smile!" cried Craylene, twinkling towards me.

"Isn't he nice !" said Mr Quode. "Tres gentil !"

They seemed enormously pleased. Mr Quode was almost hugging himself with delight. His underpants were showing out above the top of his trousers.

"We are honoured to make your acquaintance Mr Smythe," said Mr Caulkiss. "Welcome to Morbing Vyle."

The name of Morbing Vyle rang a bell in my head.

"Is this -?"

Melestrina Quode abandoned her welcoming pose and stepped forward with a sweep of the hand. "This is !" she cried. "Morbing Vyle!"

"You came here through the forest," said Mr Caulkiss. "You were lost in the rain."

I shook my head. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" Mr Quode rolled his eyes. "Don't you remember how you fell into a trench? You were all buried in mud."

"Then we heard your shout! We pulled you out!" cried Craylene. "We saved you!"

Again I shook my head.

"Ah," said Mr Quode. "He seems to have lost his memory."

They came to the very edge of my bed, stooping their heads in under the upper bunk, all four of them bending down over me. I stared straight up into the twin caverns of Mr Caulkiss's nostrils. There were great black tufts of hair sprouting inside.

"We had come to bring the chairs in out of the rain," he explained.

"You were so lucky!" cried Craylene. "We just happened to -"

"No! No!" Mr Caulkiss raised his hand. "Do not speak of luck. It was meant to be!"

"Ah, Fate!" boomed Melestrina. Her voice was deafening in the enclosed space. "Ah, fateful Fate! Indeed!"

"And now we shall be able to look after you," said Mr Quode, cutting in as Melestrina paused for breath. "Praise the Lord!"

"Praise the Lord!" repeated Craylene and Mr Caulkiss.

"Praise the Lord!" thundered Melestrina. "O praise the Lord!"

They stayed a while longer, but I don't remember much else of what they said. Craylene, as I recall, kept patting the blankets down around me and endlessly straightening and unstraightening the sheets. Mr Quode wanted to be helpful too: he drew out a white porcelain chamber pot from under my bed, and started waving it about in front of me. I think he was trying to explain the proper way to use it.

As for Melestrina Quode and Mr Caulkiss, they turned away to the wall. With loud thumps on the floor they went down on their knees to pray. I could hear the ongoing rumble of their voices, Mr Caulkiss's bass and Melestrina's baritone, but I couldn't distinguish the words. They sounded very fervent.

Finally Mr Caulkiss finished his prayer and stood up. He looked at me for a moment, pulling thoughtfully on his nose. Then he addressed the other three:

"I think Mr Smythe is tired now. We must leave him to rest. He needs to recover his strength."

There was a strange noise from Mr Quode, a sort of strangled snigger. Mr Caulkiss cleared his throat.

"Goodbye, Mr Smythe. Sleep well."

The other three rose up and followed Mr Caulkiss towards the door. I managed a last smile in response to their goodbyes. Then they were gone.

CHAPTER 12

It was true what Mr Quode had said. I really did seem to have lost my memory. I lay for a while thinking about everything they had told me. About how I had come through a forest in the rain, how I had fallen into a trench and been rescued. I believed them, naturally. But I couldn't remember any of it.

So this was what it was like to have amnesia! I racked my brains. I could recall coming to New Morbing and talking to the librarian, the town clerk, the checkout girl. I could recall as far as the signpost, with its charred stump of an arm bearing the last letters of the name of MORBING VYLE. That was all perfectly clear, as clear as if it had happened an hour ago. But after the signpost - nothing. It was as though the time between leaving New Morbing and waking up in the bunk had simply never existed. It was as though I had been under anaesthetic.

It was frightening in a way. But I told myself not to worry. No doubt the missing memories would come back in their own good time. Wasn't that what usually happened in cases of amnesia? No use trying to force myself to remember . . . I relaxed and drifted off to sleep again.

When I awoke it was evening. I could hear voices talking outside in the corridor. The room was dark but there was a thin outline of light around the door.

Then the door swung open and the same four figures trooped in. Craylene and Melestrina were carrying candles. Melestrina held hers aloft like a picture of Florence Nightingale inspecting the sick. The flickering yellow flames cast long shadows around the nursery.

They came right up beside my bunk. Their faces looked odder than ever. Somehow the candlelight brought out their most prominent features. Mr Caulkiss was all nose and Melestrina all chin. And Mr Quode's fat cheeks positively gleamed with oily reflection.

I felt much better than before. My voice was better too.

"Hullo," I said. "What time it it?"

They gazed down at me with a sort of loving expression on their faces.

"It's seven o'clock."

"Time for dinner."

"Look what we've brought you."

Mr Quode held out what he was carrying: a small white bowl and a silver teaspoon. The bowl contained a pinky-coloured stuff, very soft and pulpy.

"What is it?" I asked.

But Mr Quode shook his head.

"He does not like to reveal his recipes," explained Melestrina.

Mr Caulkiss bent down over me. He snuffed in a deep nostril-quivering breath. Then he hooked his long bony hands over my shoulders and lifted me up off my pillows. I swear I could hear his arms creak.

Then Craylene rearranged my pillows. She accompanied her movements with curious little tsk-tsk noises of tongue against teeth. When Mr Caulkiss released me once more, my head was propped up at a suitable angle for feeding.

Mr Quode dipped the spoon into the pinkish stuff and held it up to my lips.

"Voila !" he murmured. "Into the mouth and down the throat. It will slide down so easily you won't even notice."

I didn't want to offend. I opened my mouth. It was exactly as he said: the stuff was so slippery and soft and tasteless, I could hardly even feel it go down.

I took another spoonful, and another, and another. Four faces watched me with approval. Then I decided I'd done my duty.

"Thank you," I said. "That's enough."

I had to shut my mouth immediately, because Mr Quode was still pressing the spoon towards my lips. He didn't want to stop. He tipped the spoon until the stuff started trickling down my chin.

"That's enough ," said Mr Caulkiss.

Reluctantly Mr Quode withdrew.

"It was very pleasant," I said politely. "Very, er, smooth ."

Craylene Caulkiss pulled a tiny white handkerchief out of her sleeve. With little dabbing movements she mopped over my face and chin. The handkerchief smelt of perfume, overpoweringly sweet. When she had finished, Mr Caulkiss said:

"Now. You must have many questions to ask."

"Yes." I tried to think. I didn't know where to begin.

"Very well," said Mr Caulkiss. "First of all, of course, you want to know where you are?"

"In Morbing Vyle?"

"Yes. In the vicarage of Morbing Vyle."

"I see." I took a guess. "Are you the vicar here?"

"No, no!" Mr Caulkiss uttered a loud braying sound. "I'm the deacon."

"And I'm the verger," put in Mr Quode.

"I'm the deacon's wife," added Craylene.

"And I believe in the Lord!" cried Melestrina, irrelevantly. She raised her eyes to the ceiling and clasped her hands across her mighty bosom.

"I think I saw a photo of the vicarage in a book," I said. "A red-brick vicarage all overgrown with ivy? Is that where I am?"

"Yes indeed."

"And isn't there a little church close by, with a tower and spire?"

"Not any more. That was the old church."

"We're building a new church."

"It's under construction. You came through it in the rain. Don't you remember?"

I shook my head. My memory of that time was as blank as ever. I remembered only what I had learnt about Morbing Vyle in the University library.

"How about the thatched cottages?" I asked. "And the pub? Is the village still as pretty as it used to be?"

"There is no village."

I didn't understand.

"The village had to be pulled down," explained Mr Caulkiss. "To make way for our new church. The stones and bricks from the old cottages now serve as our building materials."

"So only the vicarage is still standing?"

"Only the vicarage. For us to live in."

"But what about the villagers? What happened to them?"

"The village was deserted eighty years ago. We are the only inhabitants of Morbing Vyle."

"Ah." I was struggling to take it all in. Morbing Vyle sounded like a very strange place indeed. "You must lead a bit of an isolated life then?"

"Of course. Completely isolated!"

"We have turned our backs on the outside world."

"Turned your backs? How do you mean?"

"We despise the false materialists!"

"We reject the secular society!"

"We want nothing to do with the timeservers and compromisers!"

"We are the true believers!"

They had become suddenly very fervent. Mr Caulkiss was bellowing, Craylene was flapping her arms, Mr Quode was going red in the face, and Melestrina was absolutely heaving with emotion.

"But you aren't totally cut off?"

"Yes we are!"

"But you must -"

"No we don't!"

"We live on our own!"

"We never see anyone else at all!"

"Unless they come here to us!"

"As you have done, Mr Smythe!"

"O praise the Lord!"

"Praise the Lord!"

"PRAISE THE LORD!!!"

CHAPTER 13

I couldn't believe it, of course. Not when they told me the first time. A tiny community living all on its own in the middle of modern England! It seemed impossible.

And yet it fitted with the facts. The fact that there was no electricity in the vicarage, only candles. The fact that every item of household furnishing was pre-twentieth century. And the fact that the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle knew nothing at all about what was happening in the outside world. In the end, I had to believe it.

They visited me several times a day over the next few days. They fed me, and changed my sheets, and Mr Quode emptied my chamber pot. They were very kindly, but very bizarre. Sometimes I wondered if I was still in a dream and hadn't yet woken up to proper reality.

They told me that they grew their own vegetables for food. They also kept and slaughtered their own animals. They had a well for drawing water, and tools and implements of every kind. Everything they needed was either already in the vicarage, or could be reconstructed out of existing articles.

They were even managing to build the new church entirely on their own. Working on the church seemed to be their main occupation during the day. They told me that the construction had been begun by their predecessors in the vicarage, eighty years ago. They themselves had come to Morbing Vyle at different times over the past forty years.

Mr Caulkiss and his wife had arrived in 1939, just before the start of the Second World War. Mr Caulkiss had been a brilliant young scientist - at least, that's what he said. Apparently he had developed new theories in fundamental physics, dealing with motion and energy. But he had become disillusioned with the directions that his fellow-physicists were taking. "Materialist-minded morons!" he trumpeted contemptuously. "Phhh! Phhhh! Couldn't see what was in front of their noses!"

He stomped up and down the nursery floor, reeling off incomprehensible mathematical formulae. He was obviously conducting some sort of scientific proof. Then suddenly he stopped and demanded in a fierce voice:

"And how did I discover all this? Eh?"

I wasn't sure if he was addressing me or not. "I don't know," I murmured.

"I do!" Craylene piped up brightly. "I remember how! It was in that book you brought home!"

"Exactly!" Mr Caulkiss raised his bony fist in a gesture of triumph. "A single treatise published in 1899. He was on the right track before any of us were born! All the essential principles laid down even then! He was so far ahead of his time that his work was totally ignored!"

"Who is this person you're talking about?" I asked innocently.

The answer came from all four of them simultaneously, as if with a single voice. "The vicar of Morbing Vyle."

There was a moment's silence. Then Craylene continued the story.

"That was when we knew we had to come here! I wanted to come too. I was the one who found the route. I led us to Morbing Vyle."

"And did you meet this - vicar?"

"Of course not." Mr Caulkiss huffed through his nose. "But I was able to inspect his manuscripts. And use his laboratory. I have followed on with the great work that he began."

But when I wanted to know what kind of work it was, Mr Caulkiss wouldn't answer. He just showed his teeth in a horsey smile. "Later," he said. "Later."

Mr Quode told me his story too. It seemed that he had been a chef in a top-class London restaurant. But a single recipe had changed his life, a recipe in an old handwritten book of recipes -

for Pate a la Morbing Vyle. The mere memory made Mr Quode go wet and dribbly at the lips. He kissed the tips of his fingers. "Mmmmmmah!! Quelle delice!!"

After Pate a la Morbing Vyle, he had tried out other similar recipes from the same book: Quiche Morbing and Vol-au-Vyle. All equally exquisite. But who had invented them? He had inherited the book from a distant aunt. Who had she copied them down from?

Once again, all four voices breathed the answer in unison: "The vicar of Morbing Vyle."

I looked round at their intent faces, almost glittering at me.

"The same as the other one?" I asked. "The same vicar?"

They nodded.

"He must have been very talented," I remarked. "In such different areas."

Mr Caulkiss guffawed and Craylene tittered and Melestrina raised her mighty eyebrows.

"The greatest chef the world has ever known," said Mr Quode, pressing his hand over his heart. "Compared to him, I am but a lowly worm crawling along in his footsteps."

And that was how Mr Quode had been drawn to Morbing Vyle. He had found his way to the place in 1949. He had married Melestrina when she arrived, two years later.

As for Melestrina, I could almost have guessed her previous life. She had been an actress. She had travelled around with a small repertory company, playing Shakespeare and the classics. One time they had come to do 'Macbeth' at the New Morbing Town Hall. Melestrina had taken the role of Lady Macbeth.

"Ah, my greatest public performance ever," she sighed. "That night I was inspired. Such depth! Such power! Such darkness! My own life simply ceased to exist! I became Lady Macbeth!"

She spread her arms and lifted her chin and throbbingly declaimed:

"The raven himself is hoarse

That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan

Under my battlements. Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full

Of direst cruelty!"

But the audience hadn't appreciated her acting at all. They refused to applaud. And afterwards a note had been slipped in under the door of her changing room. Melestrina wouldn't repeat the whole of what it said, but it told her to 'Get out of New Morbing!' and "Go back to your vicar!", and it called her 'a daughter of Morbing Vyle'.

And then she had felt the pull. Growing out of the mere name of 'Morbings Vyle', the mere mention of 'the vicar'. She had succumbed to an overwhelming fascination.

"I was called!" she cried, in dramatic rapture. "Through the forest I came! Nothing could stop me!"

I must admit, I didn't like the sound of this overwhelming fascination. It was uncomfortably similar to my own experience. We had all been drawn to Morbing Vyle by some inexplicable irrational attraction. I felt distinctly reluctant to tell them my own story.

But there was no way out of it. I had heard their stories and now they wanted to hear mine. So I told them about life in Australia, then about Cambridge and the University. Mr Caulkiss sniffed disapprovingly when I mentioned the topic of my postgraduate research. But generally they just listened and nodded politely. It was only when I described how I had discovered the name of 'Morbing Vyle' that their eyes lit up. And when they heard how I had come to New Morbing and found the signpost, they were absolutely delighted.

"It's the same!"

"The same as us!"

"He was called!"

"He felt the pull!"

They couldn't do enough for me then. Mr Caulkiss shook my hand. Melestrina embraced me upon her mighty bosom. Craylene fussed and pattered and patted all over me. And Mr Quode stood stroking my coat where it hung on the bunk, quite melting with pleasure. I was like a long-lost son come home to them.

And yet they didn't altogether trust me. In spite of the warmth and friendliness, they took care to keep me under constant surveillance. I discovered how it was done just a day or so later.

CHAPTER 14

It was on the morning of the fourth day since I had first woken up. I was getting tired of being an invalid. I decided that I felt strong enough to go across and take a look out of the window. I was all alone in the nursery, as I supposed.

I swung my legs out over the side of the bunk. The air was nippy, and cold draughts blew up through the cracks between the floorboards. I pulled the floral bedspread from my bunk and wrapped it around my shoulders.

I wasn't as strong as I'd thought. I crossed to the window by way of the chest and desk and playpen, making sure that I had something to catch hold of every few steps. I was thankful when I reached the window and was able to lean against the sill.

There were metal bars across the window, fixed in the bricks outside. I peered through the glass. The nursery was on the upstairs floor and I had a wide panorama, looking down from above.

Directly below was a sort of courtyard. It was enclosed by a long low building running parallel to the back of the vicarage. Beyond the long low building was a stretch of bare earth. And beyond the bare earth was a forest.

A forest! I guessed at once that this must be the very same forest which the Caulkisses and Quodes had mentioned. The forest through which I had passed on my way to Morbing Vyle. I studied it carefully, hoping that the sight might jog my memory.

A dreary and dismal sight it was. A forest of dead trees, all burned by some terrible fire. I gazed out over black charcoal branches and gaunt shells of trunks and white ash on the ground . . . The dead trees curved round to right and left as far as the eye could see.

It gave me a sinking feeling just looking at it. But still no memory stirred in my head. The forest was as strange and new as if I had never seen it before.

Then suddenly my attention was distracted. Something had moved behind me, something on the nursery floor! I whirled around and stared in amazement.

There on the floor lay a pair of my underpants. Motionless now - but strangely humped and bulging! How could they have got there? I could have sworn they hadn't been there a moment ago.

And then I almost jumped out of my skin. All at once the fly parted and two small blue eyes appeared in the opening. Something was watching me out of my own underpants!

"Get out of there!" I yelled. I took a couple of lurching steps and tried to make a grab for whatever it was. But my underpants took off in a flash. They scuttled away across the floor. They came to a halt on the other side of the nursery, resting up against the chest with brass handles.

I was too weak for rapid pursuit. I decided to use strategy instead. I pretended to lose interest. I pretended that all I wanted to do was to go back to bed.

The chest was actually quite close to my bunk. But I deliberately went round by the opposite direction. I made a great show of moving very slowly. When I came up to the bunk I slid the bedspread from my shoulders and spread it out over the bed.

Still no movement from the thing in my underpants. I sat down on the edge of the bed and lifted the sheets - as if to swing up my legs and climb in. But I didn't. Instead I stretched out my legs and swung suddenly the other way. Success! I brought my feet down hard on top of my underpants, pinning them to the floor.

There was a tiny squeak. Then the bulge started to struggle. It wriggled and twisted and squirmed between my feet. It was as active as an eel. I reached forward to take hold of it with my hands. I thought I had it trapped.

But I was wrong. All at once my underpants were empty and a small pink shape went streaking across the nursery floor. It moved like lightning, a convulsive blur of head and legs. Before I had time for a proper look, it had climbed up and over the railings into the playpen.

There was a brief flurry as it disappeared down amongst the toys in the playpen. Books and crayons and furry animals pitched and tossed wildly this way and that. Then the flurry ended, and everything settled down in a quiet heap once more. But at the bottom of the heap were two small blue eyes, peering out at me, steady and unwinking.

I was too exhausted for any further attempts. I had a burning sensation in my lungs, and my legs were trembling. I crawled back into bed and pulled the sheets up over me.

But I couldn't relax. I lay at an angle facing the playpen. For the whole morning, I kept watch on the eyes that were watching back at me. I didn't dare go to sleep.

CHAPTER 15

"There's something in this room! It's been hiding in the playpen!"

The Caulkisses and Quodes clustered around my bunk.

"No!"

"Oh!"

"Oh no!"

They had shocked expressions on their faces. Melestrina clasped her hand dramatically across her brow.

"How horrible!"

"Dear, dear, dear!"

"You poor thing!"

Mr Caulkiss tut-tutted and Mr Quode was full of sympathy. Craylene fluttered and patted so vigorously that she dislodged her make-up and sent a cloud of powder into the air.

"It keeps watching me," I complained. "It was running around in my underpants."

Mr Quode scooped up my underpants from the floor. He squeezed and fondled and felt them all over.

"Nothing there now!" He shook his head. His cheeks had gone quite flushed.

"Nothing to worry about," said Mr Caulkiss.

"Relax and be comforted!"

"There there there!"

"How can I relax?" I was beginning to get angry. "I'm telling you, it's still there in the playpen!"

"What is?"

"I don't know! You have to investigate! I want you to catch it!"

Still they hovered and dithered.

"Quickly!" I shouted.

Melestrina took her hand from her brow. "So be it!" she declared. "I go!"

And she went.

"Right at the bottom!"

Melestrina leaned forward into the playpen. Her massive bosom dropped over the railings and swung heavily back and forth. She dug down into the heap of toys and books and playthings.

"Hah!" There was something at the very bottom of the heap. "What find is this?"

It was a toy bucket. She held it aloft in both hands. I could see tiny pink toes and fingers poking up from within, wriggling and weaving.

"What is it?"

"This," cried Melestrina, "is my only son!"

"Our only son," added Mr Quode.

Melestrina clutched the bucket to her bosom.

"Panker!" she cried.

"We call him Panker," added Mr Quode.

"Show me!" I demanded.

She came across and tilted the bucket so that I could see. Inside was a small fat baby, completely naked, like a mollusc in its shell. As the bucket tilted towards me, the tiny toes and fingers whizzed about faster than ever. And there in the soft creased flesh were two blue eyes, staring and unwinking.

"I see." I tried to sound calm and rational. "And why is he like that?"

"Like what?"

"Hiding inside a bucket."

"He likes hiding inside things."

"Such is his inclination."

"Let every man be free to follow his own inclination!"

"Praise the Lord!"

"O praise Him!"

There was a shrill squeak from baby Panker. Melestrina lifted the bucket to her ear and listened. A whole series of little squeaks poured forth.

"What is it?" I asked. "What's he doing now?"

"Baby talk," said Mr Quode.

"What's he saying?"

Melestrina finished listening. She lowered the bucket to the ground.

"He says he owes you an apology. He's very sorry for having frightened you."

There was another diminutive squeak. Melestrina turned the bucket upside down on the floor. Immediately it scuttled away at top speed, across to the far side of the nursery.

"He also thinks that you're much better and stronger now. He suggests that you might be ready to get up for a while."

"Ah!" Mr Caulkiss nodded. "A good idea! How would you like to get up?"

"Today? Now?"

"Yes indeed. You can sit in the parlour."

"Okay."

Mr Caulkiss trumpeted through his nose. "He agrees!"

"O body well recovered!" cried Melestrina. "O health aright!"

"Isn't he strong !" exclaimed Mr Quode.

And Craylene clapped her hands until she disappeared completely behind a cloud of powder.

Then Mr Caulkiss gave them each their orders. Melestrina was sent off to light a fire in the parlour. Craylene carried my glass of water downstairs. And Mr Quode hurried away to find a dressing gown for me to wear.

"You can have one of my very best !" he promised.

CHAPTER 16

So they took me downstairs. I shuffled along in Mr Quode's mauve silk dressing gown and best leather slippers. My legs were no longer so weak, but I was very giddy in the head. Mr Caulkiss supported me on one side and Mr Quode on the other.

Outside the nursery was a dark corridor. The walls were panelled with old stained wood, almost black with age. Along the floor ran a strip of grey linoleum, cracked like crazy paving.

We moved slowly down the corridor. We passed one closed door on the left and one closed door on the right. I didn't like to lean too heavily on Mr Quode: there was a soft yielding quality about him that I didn't exactly trust. But I didn't exactly trust Mr Caulkiss either: he was so stiff and angular, he seemed ready to buckle and collapse at any moment.

We came to a landing at the top of a steep staircase. Mr Caulkiss and Mr Quode yoked my arms over their shoulders. Then we went down, one step at a time. Mr Quode quivered and giggled and pressed closely against me. Mr Caulkiss clung to the wooden banister and lowered his bony frame as if descending a mountainside.

But I had firmer support from the rear. Melestrina followed one step behind, holding on to my dressing gown collar with a single powerful hand. Whenever Mr Caulkiss or Mr Quode weakened, she hoiked me immediately upright again. Her hoik was so powerful that one time my feet actually left the ground.

Meanwhile Craylene went on ahead, calling out:

"Bear up!"

"Over to the left !"

"Careful!"

"Steady!"

Halfway down the staircase was an old framed photo hanging on the wall. It depicted a small quaint church and an ivy-covered vicarage. The very same photo that I had seen in the book on ecclesiastical history! I stared at it as we passed, but I didn't say anything.

We continued on down to the foot of the stairs. Now we were in the hall. It was the old-fashioned type of hall with a high moulded ceiling and a black-and-white tiled floor. There was a front door surmounted by a stained glass window, which cast deep glowing colours of red and purple light. Beside the door stood a glossy-leaved aspidistra in an ornate urn. It was all very Victorian.

At the other end of the hall was an arched niche occupied by a hat and coat stand. Here the passage took a sudden ninety degree turn to the left. There was also an opening to the right, where a set of stone steps disappeared down into the dark. Presumably they led to an underground basement or cellar.

I had time for only a glance. Then Craylene threw open a door on the other side of the hall. We trooped forward and went in.

"Here it is!" she announced breathlessly. "The parlour!"

It was a dark richly-upholstered room, very cloistered and still and stagnant. From the ceiling hung a chandelier laden with fat creamy candles. The wallpaper was crimson with a satiny sheen, the carpet like thick green velvet. There was a single tall window with black drapes drawn and gathered at the sides. Between the drapes, a white muslin under-curtain veiled the view. It seemed the kind of room that had never known sun or fresh air.

The furniture was appropriately heavy and luxurious. There were two plush easy chairs with high backs and wings, and a long low sofa padded with plump cushions. A lace-covered table occupied the centre of the room, surrounded by half a dozen upright chairs. I couldn't help staring at the table-decoration: an arrangement of wax fruit and leaves under a glass dome. There was also a massive polished black piano with bulbous legs and a matching stool.

Mr Caulkiss and Mr Quode headed me towards one of the easy chairs in front of the fire. The fireplace was at the far end of the parlour facing away from the window. It had a fancy surround of green tiles and a large gilt-framed mirror above the mantelpiece. The flames were leaping up merrily from the logs in the grate.

I was thankful when I could finally unwrap my arms from the shoulders of Mr Caulkiss and Mr Quode. With a sigh of relief I sank down comfortably into the soft deep plush.

"There now," said Mr Quode. "Isn't that nice?"

He bent forward and adjusted the dressing gown over my chest. Then he bent lower and adjusted the angle of my legs and the position of my feet. He seemed to feel that my limbs ought to be as close to one another as possible. I stared down in surprise at the bald crown of his head. There was a highly distinctive, slightly rancid smell about him.

Mr Caulkiss put a stop to any further attentions. "Desist, Quode!" he said.

Mr Quode looked up with a smooth soft-soaping expression on his face. But Mr Caulkiss only snorted. Reluctantly Mr Quode rose to his feet and stood with the others. They formed a semi-circle around my chair.

"I'm very grateful to you all," I said. "For looking after me like this."

"Our pleasure, our pleasure," twittered Craylene.

"It's very kind of you. A total stranger."

"No no!" protested Mr Quode. "We're getting to be such good friends now!"

"How long have I been here?"

"Eight days," answered Mr Caulkiss.

"Eight days?" I was amazed.

"You were four days asleep after we rescued you."

"I see. Then I ought to let someone know what's happened to me. People will be worried."

"Who?"

I tried to think who would be worried. "My landlady in Cambridge. She'll start calling the police. My landlady and . . . and . . . and other people."

The truth was that probably no-one else would notice my disappearance - not for a while anyway. That's how isolated my life had become. Even my landlady didn't know exactly when to expect me back.

"So what do you want to do Mr Smythe?"

"I don't know. Phone? Write a letter?"

"We have no telephones at Morbing Vyle. We don't believe in them. Nor postboxes."

"What if I wrote a letter and one of you - " There was no response. They just stood looking at me with smiling shining eyes. "But then you never go outside of Morbing Vyle, do you?"

"Never."

"Not even to post a letter?"

"Not for any reason."

"Ah well." I could see that there was nothing to do but accept the situation gracefully. "I shall have to wait until I'm strong enough myself, won't I?"

"You will! You will!"

"Praise the Lord!" cried Melestrina.

With one accord, they lifted their hands in attitudes of prayer.

"O Lord, we pray for our brother Mr Smythe!"

"Help him and save him!"

"Redeem and enlighten him!"

"Lead him away from the paths of materialism!"

"Inspire his soul with a true inclination!"

"And gather him into they fold!"

"We ask this for thy name's sake!"

"Amen!"

"Amen!"

They lowered their hands again. Mr Caulkiss made a sort of harumphing noise through his nose.

"And now we must return to our great building work, Mr Smythe," he said. "We shall have to leave you alone for a while. But never fear! Our thoughts will be with you."

They marched out of the parlour and down the hall. I could hear them taking their hats and coats from the hat and coat stand. Then they marched back along the hall. There was the sound of the front door opening and the front door slammed. I was left in the parlour all by myself.

Or was I? I peered out around the wings of my chair and surveyed the room. I didn't have to look very far. A strange unnatural hump had appeared in the lace tablecloth, just behind the wax fruit arrangement. Something small and round had crawled up onto the table and was hiding underneath the cloth. Even without seeing the eyes, I could tell that it was looking in my direction.

I shrugged and turned back to the fire. It was what I'd expected. Baby Panker had followed me downstairs and was still keeping me under surveillance.

CHAPTER 17

They returned at the end of the afternoon and assisted me back to my bunk in the nursery. The next morning they brought me downstairs again. That was the pattern for a whole week. I spent my nights in the nursery and my days sitting in the parlour in the easy chair. Much of the time I was left alone, while the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle went out to do the 'great building work' on their church. But Panker was always somewhere around, hiding and watching.

I was no longer so sleepy now. I gazed at the flames in the fire and drifted from thought to thought. I had a great deal to think about.

One thing was obvious. I had fallen in with a community of religious eccentrics - and they wanted me to join them. They hoped to win me over to their way of thinking. Indeed, they seemed almost to take it for granted. They expected me to stay forever in Morbing Vyle, as they themselves had done. I had the impression that no-one who arrived in Morbing Vyle had ever gone back to the ordinary world afterwards.

I suppose I could have been frightened. Perhaps I should have been. But I never doubted that I could leave Morbing Vyle whenever I felt like it. And for the time being, I was happy to stay. Morbing Vyle had aroused my curiosity.

Let me explain. It was like a historian's dream come true. For so long I had been studying books and researching in libraries - boring old stuff. But what I had stumbled upon here was living history! A time capsule! A bizarre religious sect that no-one had ever discovered before, surviving in the heart of present-day England! I even began to contemplate the possibility of making a new thesis out of it.

I could already guess how the sect had originated - with that mysterious vicar of Morbing Vyle. Why else did they hold him in such reverence? He must have lived around the turn of the century if he had been writing articles in 1899 - the date mentioned by Mr Caulkiss. That was consistent with the time when the village of Morbing Vyle had disappeared off the map.

What were his teachings though? I suspected that the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle followed some form of extreme Protestant Fundamentalism. I had heard of the Amish and similar sects in America - sects which typically turned their backs on the twentieth century, rejecting the materialism of the modern world. The inhabitants of Morning Vyle seemed to have done the same.

But apart from their anti-materialism, the inhabitants didn't seem to follow any single set of teachings. The only belief they shared, so far as I could see, was a belief in cultivating ones own special interest - or 'inclination' as they called it. "Let every man be free to follow his own inclination." The more I got to know them, the more I realised how very different they were. Each of them had his or her own peculiar interest - and very peculiar too! Mr Quode's interest was the first that I found out about.

CHAPTER 18

Unlike Mr Caulkiss and Craylene and Melestrina, Mr Quode didn't spend his whole day out on the building site. He came back at various hours to take care of the cooking in the kitchen. And from time to time he slipped in to pay me little visits in the parlour.

Usually he came bearing some small dish or bowl. He was always trying to tempt me with his special food preparations. 'Invalid cuisine' he called it. I ate what I could, though I really preferred a plain glass of milk. It was always something soft and bland and slippery, like a savoury blancmange or a vegetable custard or a fruit mousse with dumplings. As soft and bland and slippery as Mr Quode himself.

He was particularly reluctant to give up baby-feeding me. "I love to watch it go down," he said. He peered into my mouth after every spoonful like a dentist. But the unctuous hairless intimacy of his face was more than I could stand. In the end I had to wrest the spoon out of his hand and insist on feeding myself.

Flattery was his typical mode of conversation. He was always going into ecstasies over things I said or did.

"Oh, how well you say that!"

"Oooh, you're so strong and powerful!" (that was when I took the spoon from him).

"Ah, what a nice smile you have!"

It was his habit of making remarks about my physical appearance that I most disliked.

"Isn't your hair thick !"

"What fresh young skin you have!"

"Oh, isn't it extraordinary to have such muscular legs!"

And as he spoke, he lowered his voice and gave me a look of mutual understanding, as though these were secrets shared just between the two of us. Yet it was somehow very difficult to take offence. Whenever I tried, my words seemed to have the very opposite effect to what I'd intended.

"Oh, I agree ! We shouldn't even mention such personal things!"

"Mmmm, I know what you mean! There's something especially private about legs, isn't there!"

Then his voice went even lower and he looked so understanding that his eyes were almost oozing out of his head.

People's bodies were Mr Quode's peculiar interest. He was fascinated by them - and by his own body too. But his fascination was conditioned by a religious notion of temptation and sin. One time he pulled up the second easy chair in front of the fire and sat down facing me.

"I don't know how you do it!" he exclaimed. "I don't know how you resist!"

"Resist what?"

"Everything! And beyond everything! So many possibilities! With such a long large body!"

"I don't understand."

"Ah, perhaps you haven't started feeling them yet? You're still recovering perhaps?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Desires, Mr Smythe! Sin-ful desires!" He had a way of uttering the word 'sin' that made it sound peculiarly drawn-out and loathsome. "The urge to sin with the body! Using the parts of the body! Unspeakable unthinkable desires!"

"You mean sexual desires?"

"Oh oh!" He licked his lips. "You have started to feel them then! The little urges and hankerings! Tingling all over! Wanting to do something - but you don't know what! Building up and up and up!"

"You make it sound very disgusting."

"Disgusting! Oh yes! Acts of carnality! Intolerable abominations! Monstrous corrupt obscenities! Sensations in every organ and cavity of the body!"

He wallowed in his chair with a constant wriggling motion, sinking lower and lower into the velvet plush.

"I see you take a very moralistic view of sex," I said.

"Sex? No, not sex, Mr Smythe! Sex is for animals. I'm talking about sexuality. What human beings do!"

"I don't see the difference. We're animals too, aren't we?"

"Oh no! Animals are just biological. They can't do anything outside of nature. They only have an instinct of reproduction. But we have the consciousness of moral choice!"

"That sounds like a religious claim. Isn't that the kind of thing that Protestant Fundamentalists say?"

"Religion draws the boundary for us, Mr Smythe. Between what's allowed and what's forbidden. Between what's wholesome and what's unclean."

"Just one single boundary? As simple as that? But you don't know what the modern social sciences have shown, Mr Quode. Every culture draws different boundaries. Even Western Christian culture has drawn different boundaries in different historical periods. If you knew anything about anthropology and history you couldn't possibly believe in a single absolute boundary."

"But I don't, I don't!" Mr Quode leaned forward in his chair, with glowing eyes and gleaming cheeks. "I believe in lots of boundaries! Lots and lots of boundaries! And sexual desire keeps wanting to transgress them all! Transgression after transgression! Sin upon sin!"

"Sin upon sin?"

"That's right! Because human sexuality is insatiable! Incontinent! It never knows when to stop! Oh, you see it so well Mr Smythe!"

"No I don't!"

Mr Quode opened and closed his mouth like a gulping fish. "You don't?"

"No I don't. It all sounds very old-fashioned to me. I don't accept the religious point of view. If you condemn the sexual instinct as sinful, you end up making everyone feel bad. That's what sociologists call a guilt culture."

Mr Quode flopped back into the depths of his chair, more boneless than ever. By now he had wriggled his underpants right out above the top of his trousers.

"Oh how stern you are!" he gasped. "Quelle feroce ! You're so angry and determined with me!"

"No, no. I'm interested to hear what you think. I'm just putting a more modern point of view."

Mr Quode pulled out a flap of his shirt and wiped it over his moist gleaming face.

"Now you've made me ashamed!" he cried. "I don't know how you can put up with me! It's too much! Isn't it? I don't know how you can even bear me sitting up close to you!"

"Don't take it personally. I've got nothing against you as a person."

"As a person! Me as a person!" He wallowed even deeper down in his chair, slithering around in a sort of frictional ecstasy. "Oh you're so wonderful! With your muscular legs and fresh young skin! You've got nothing against me as a person! Even though I'm low and vile and disgusting and low and -"

He broke off suddenly. He sat bolt upright, his face very red and pouring with sweat.

"Oh," he murmured breathlessly. "Excuse me. I've got to go."

He rose unsteadily to his feet. His eyes had gone quite glassy. He stood for a moment tucking in his shirt and readjusting his underpants.

"I've got to go to my kitchen," he said. "Oh."

He hurried across and out through the parlour door. I heard him making strange noises as he shuffled along the hall towards the back of the house.

Actually it wasn't true that I had nothing against Mr Quode as a person. I found him somehow unwholesome and repellent. But it wasn't in my interest to offend him.

So he kept on paying me little visits from time to time. And we had several similar conversations about sin and desire. Sometimes I listened and sometimes I argued. After a while I knew it all by heart.

In fact I thought I had Mr Quode fairly well worked out. On the one hand he vilified sex as sinful and wicked; on the other hand he was totally fascinated by what he vilified. By repressing and denying the body he had ended up making it into a source of endless fascination. By not acting out his impulses he had condemned himself to be always thinking about them. At least that was my explanation at the time. There were still a great many things I didn't understand.

CHAPTER 19

After about three days I was allowed to stay downstairs later into the evenings, until after dinner-time. Not that the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle dined in front of me. They had their meal in the kitchen while I still ate my 'invalid cuisine' from a tray on my lap in front of the fire. But they came into the parlour after dinner, to sit and have long talks with me.

It was now that I learned about Mr Caulkiss's interest. He was the main talker, delivering endless rambling monologues. On his own favourite topic, he was every bit as obsessive as Mr Quode.

His favourite topic was bio-physics. He had tremendous abstract ideas about the universe and the principles of its functioning. Not scientific ideas though - or if they were, it was the strangest sort of science I'd ever heard.

"Never believe," he said, "that the world is mere solid matter! No! Even quantum physics has gone beyond that pathetic naivety! Photons and quanta and wavicles! Solidity is only a fallacy of perception! But quantum physics doesn't go far enough! I ask you! What are these photons and quanta and wavicles?"

He strode furiously up and down as he spoke. He was always knocking his bones against the furniture. He flailed his arms and stamped his feet. "They are energy !" he proclaimed. "Unappeasable energy! The principle of the universe! Energy everywhere urging forward and moving on and leaving behind. Endlessly exploding outwards, endlessly flying apart! Perpetual motion! Illimitable transcurion! Energy beyond all knowledge and all containment!"

I attempted a protest. "That sounds more like religion than science."

"Precisely!" Mr Caulkiss sawed the air with his hand, like a stick insect latching on to its prey. "Science into religion and religion into science! Break down the old fixed boundaries and categories of thought! That's what they never dared to do - Schrodinger and De Broglie, Dirac and Heisenberg! So close to the truth! But they could never take the final step. Their minds were still locked into the safe old assumptions of Classical mechanics! The objectivity of science therefore the objectivity of objects ! Blindness! Lumpishness! They couldn't think energy without falling back onto objects !"

It was very difficult to disagree with Mr Caulkiss. He just stepped right over every objection, leaving me floundering and feeling rather foolish. Everything I said turned out to be based upon assumptions he'd already considered and left behind long ago. He was relentless in his questioning of what other people took for granted. Especially naive were the assumptions of 'obvious' common sense and 'the perceptual fallacy'. For ordinary solid reality he had only the purest contempt.

I could see how far he'd transcended such naiveties in his own thinking when he showed me his various manuscripts and monographs. The pages were filled with abstract mathematical hieroglyphics. It was a kind of mathematics I'd never come across before, with all sorts of new symbols and almost none of the old. 'Post-Mathematics' he called it. Apparently the old symbols had tended to trap and stabilize the very energy he wanted to set flowing.

He seemed to think that it was all perfectly clear as soon as he explained it. In fact, his explanations were just as abstract and rarified as the hieroglyphics itself. Still he insisted on leaving me his manuscripts to read through during the day, so that he could talk about them the following evening. Fortunately he never listened long enough to realize the depths of my incomprehension.

"There! You see what I've demonstrated? The same flow of energy running throughout the entire universe. But with different degrees of intensity. Lowest energy in what we call inanimate matter, higher energy in the vegetable organism, higher again in the animal organism, and highest of all in the human organism. See how the different degrees are separately tabulated on the Post-Mathematical scale?"

Most of the manuscripts I was supposed to read dealt specifically with the human organism. Mr Caulkiss leaned over the back of my chair and jabbed his bony forefinger at the symbols on the page.

"Now that's a crucial piece of deduction! Why does the human organism seem to act differently to the rest of the world? Because of its higher energy intensity! Because it moves more strongly than the lower intensities surrounding it! Spreading out and flowing against their relative weaknesses! All perfectly explicable and calculable! No need for free will or volition or such simplistic concepts! It's all in the blood - the human bloodstream!"

It was always the blood that he kept coming back to. He seemed to regard it as the ultimate example of energy. The circulation of the bloodstream was to him a kind of wonderful perpetual motion. He had yet another argument against ordinary 'common sense' views on the subject.

"I know, I know. People think that the heart pumps the blood and makes it move. But tell me this: what makes the heart pump? What makes its muscles expand and contract? Exactly! Blood through the muscles! Pushing and urging through the walls of the heart! The blood pumps the heart! The blood pumps the blood! It is the source and principle!"

He halted in the middle of the room. He seemed to be haranguing an invisible audience. With glittering eyes he glared at the chairs, the curtains, the arrangement of wax fruit on the table.

"So why do the fools deny that simple truth? I'll tell you why. Because they're afraid of the concept of energy! They're afraid of losing control. The idea of the heart gives them a feeling of mastery. Regulating and governing the circulation. They'll believe anything rather than admit to the independent energy of the blood. Hah! Mere cardiocentricity I call it! Cardiocentric cowardice! Phuhh! Phuhh! Phuhh!"

He hooted through his nose contemptuously.

"There," he said, thrusting another manuscript upon me. "Read that! See how I refute the cardiocentrics! First point: I crush them! Second point: I tear them to pieces! Third point: I annihilate the torn-up pieces! O Lord smite down the fools!"

He strode up and down in a state of self-delight, convulsed with secret laughter, whacking his hands against his thighs.

"Sheer logic!" he cried. "Every argument requires a brain to think it. But no brain functions without blood to flow through it. So therefore let them try arguing against me after they've had strokes or cerebral haemorrhages! Then we'll soon see what is the mightiest principle in the universe!"

He shook his fist triumphantly in every direction. He was completely carried away. But he soon exhausted himself. The breath snorted in and out of his nostrils and his Adam's apple bobbed painfully up and down. He staggered and clung to the back of my chair. For someone who believed so much in energy, his own body seemed sadly depleted.

"But of course they can't be persuaded by logic," he said at last, resuming in a lower voice. "That's why I'm working on another kind of proof, Mr Smythe. A practical proof they can see with their own eyes."

He snapped his fingers and nodded towards Melestrina on the other side of the room. She went out into the hall, then came back a moment later carrying a large scroll of paper.

"These are the design plans," said Mr Caulkiss. "You see how it works?"

Melestrina unrolled the paper and pinned it up on the wall beside the fireplace. It was a labyrinth of blue lines, sprinkled with various Post-Mathematical symbols.

"That'll show them! Once and for all! Now they'll have to bow down before the truth! Now they'll admit their error - or else!"

"Is this something you're constructing?"

"Something I've already constructed, Mr Smythe. It's in my laboratory. I've done everything except a few final adjustments. But I need your help. Will you make a contribution towards the greatest scientific achievement of the century?"

"Me? How?"

"I'll show you how later. When you're fully recovered in health. All I need for now is your promise."

"You mean, my promise to help?"

"Exactly."

"Oh yes. I'll do what I can."

"Hah!" Mr Caulkiss looked around with glittering eyes, at Melestrina and Craylene and Mr Quode. "I have his promise!"

Then he set off again, striding back and forth, refuting some scientist here, challenging some fallacy there. He was interminable. I'm sure he would have gone on all night, if the others hadn't finally reminded him about my bedtime.

As for the design plans on the wall, I never did manage to make sense of them. They seemed to represent a machine of some kind - but what it was or how it worked I couldn't begin to guess. And how could a machine prove anything about Mr Caulkiss's bizarre theories?

But I didn't worry too much about it. Nor did I worry about the promise I had made to help Mr Caulkiss. I imagined that he wanted me to help him in his laboratory, like a lab assistant. I had no idea of what I'd really let myself in for.

CHAPTER 20

Though Craylene and Melestrina came into the parlour after dinner, they didn't talk very much. No-one could talk very much as long as Mr Caulkiss was delivering his monologues. Sometimes Melestrina burst out with strange loud exclamations, but they seemed to be more for dramatic effect than any communication of meaning.

"Prithee, good heart, speak on!" she would cry, when Mr Caulkiss paused momentarily for breath. Or, when he had triumphantly out-argued his enemies:

"Why then, I see the right of it!"

Or sometimes:

"By heaven, this thing shall be!"

She accompanied these exclamations with dramatic poses, modelled and held for up to ten minutes at a time. There was her pose of wide-eyed interest, goggling towards Mr Caulkiss, mouth rounded in an 'O', bosom lifted and beseeching. There was her pose of sheer contempt, like an amplification of Mr Caulkiss's own contempt, lip curled, head thrown back and hands on hips. And then there was her pose of massive determination, arms folded, one leg forward, bosom jutting and eyebrows lowered. Determination was the pose she did best. But I couldn't help thinking she must have been a very hammy actress.

As for Craylene, she said very little in the evenings. Sometimes she just got up and quietly left the parlour. Then I could hear her footsteps pattering along the hall and descending the steps down into the cellar. The others paid no attention. It was evidently a regular routine.

But one time Craylene was in the parlour while the other three were absent. It was an evening when Mr Caulkiss had been seized by a revolutionary new idea in mid-speech and had to hurry away to his laboratory to get it worked out. Then Melestrina decided to take Mr Quode off upstairs, leading him by the hand and declaiming in a deep hoarse voice:

"The time demands and chamber calls: upstairs! Let pleasuring be taken now between the male and female!"

So Craylene and I were left alone. She was sitting on the piano stool, very dainty and upright and smiling at nothing in particular.

"Do you play the piano?" I asked, by way of polite conversation.

"Oh no!" She jumped up from the piano stool as if stung. "Mr Quode does that, for Melestrina's performances. I only -"

She broke off with a titter.

"Yes? What do you do?" I thought she might tell me about her trips to the cellar.

Another tiny titter. Then she fluttered across the room towards me. With her came an overpowering smell of sweet perfume, like sugared roses. She stood in front of the fireplace. She was so small that the top of her head rose barely to the level of the mantelpiece.

"You're asking me what do I do?!" She batted her eyelashes at me - jerking the whole front of her face up and down at the same time. "Really you shouldn't, you know. I don't ask you !"

"But there's nothing to ask about me. I just sit here all day getting bored."

She tut-tutted and tsk-tsked. I could see her little pink pointy tongue flicking in and out between her pursed lips. "Getting bored! That's not right! You ought to have a commitment!"

"What sort of a commitment?"

"Like mine."

"What's yours?"

"Ah, now you're asking again! Naughty !"

She fluffed up in a kind of playful outrage. She marched off, made a complete tour of the parlour, and returned to her original place again.

"Don't you know how to have a commitment?" she cried. "What did you ever do before?"

"Before when?"

"Before you came here to us!"

"I was writing a Ph.D. I told you. About nineteenth century responses to Darwinism."

"Yes, but was it really important to you?"

"Important? I don't know. I know I was getting very bored with all the reading and research."

"Thought so! Thought so!" She nod-nodded her head. "You were lost and aimless. No purpose in life. I was exactly the same."

"You?"

"Before I came to Morbing Vyle. I was bored with everything. I didn't know how to have a commitment. I didn't know -"

"What?"

"How to give ! I clung to my self all the time! I couldn't let go! I didn't know how to love and care!"

"Ah, love and care! Is that what you believe in?"

"Oh yes! I love! I care! I have such tender feelings!"

"Who for?"

"For the Little Ones!"

"The Little Ones?"

"Suffer the Little Ones to come unto thee!"

"Do you mean Panker?"

"Ah! Ah!" She performed a tiny hop, sending out clouds of perfume and face powder.

"That's asking! Naughty again!"

"But you can tell me! Who are -?"

But my questioning was suddenly cut short. Mr Caulkiss strode back into the room, talking at the top of his voice. He had finished working out his new idea, further revolutionizing his own revolution. His triumphant monologue drowned out all other conversation.

So that was as much as I learnt about Craylene's beliefs. Whenever I tried to talk to her afterwards, there was always someone else present in the parlour. All I got from Craylene was a coquettish smile and a lot of fluttering. Once when I tried a direct question about the 'Little Ones' she fluttered right up off her chair and out of the room.

It was very frustrating. Of course, Craylene's beliefs sounded less strange than Mr Quode's or Mr Caulkiss's: 'love' and 'care' and 'giving' - more like the ordinary modern version of Christianity. But I still had the impression that she was holding back on something very important.

It wasn't just Craylene either. I had the same feeling with all of the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle. They wanted to convert me to their brand of religion, but they didn't want to come right out and tell me what it was. Odd and erratic as they seemed, yet they were all very consistent in that

respect. More and more, I sensed that their brand of religion had some special ingredient. And then finally I was given a clue.

CHAPTER 21

The revelation was made on a Sunday evening. Sunday evening was different to the other evenings of the week. For a start, their dinner in the kitchen went on much longer than usual. I could hear them singing hymns out there, though I couldn't catch the words. When they came into the parlour it was already after 8 o'clock.

They closed the door as they came in. Craylene carried a dainty teacup in her dainty hand, Mr Caulkiss and Mr Quode held glasses of some deep green liqueur. They were in a distinctly elevated mood. Even Mr Caulkiss had a faint ruddiness on his cheeks, even Craylene had a certain boldness of manner. As for Melestrina, she was at her most emphatically dramatic.

Mr Quode pulled up a chair by the fire and stirred the embers in the grate with a long black poker. Craylene went across to draw the curtains. Mr Caulkiss started to light the candles in the chandelier.

"Let there be light!" cried Melestrina.

Soon the whole room was bathed in brightness. Reflections sprang up in the gilt-edged mirror and danced on all the polished surfaces of wood.

"I don't think I've ever seen a real chandelier lit up before," I remarked conversationally. "It's very attractive."

"Ah," said Mr Quode, "you are accustomed to elec-triss-ity ?" The word came out with a sort of hiss.

"Yes, of course. No-one uses anything else nowadays."

Mr Caulkiss finished lighting the candles. He came across and stood by the mantelpiece.

"Tell us, Mr Smythe," he said. "Tell us about the modern world. What new advances have been made? What are the latest technological developments?"

"That's a big question," I said. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"Start from 1951" boomed Melestrina. She was leaning heavily against one end of the table. "That glorious year when I, Melestrina Quode, came here to Morbing Vyle. Since 1951 we have received no news of the outside world."

"1951." I considered. "You wouldn't know about the exploration of space then?"

Craylene clapped her hands. She was perched on the arm of Mr Quode's chair. "Tell us, tell us!"

"It's done with huge rockets, launching satellites and probes. The probes go out into deepest space and send back pictures of all the planets. The satellites circle the earth and give us pictures of the weather looking down from above." I saved the best till last. "And in 1969, they actually landed a man on the moon."

The reaction wasn't what I'd expected. They didn't seem at all impressed. They giggled and sniggered as though I'd said something ridiculous.

"Don't you believe me?"

"But yes!" Melestrina thumped her bosom resoundingly with both hands. "Landing on the moon! A very modern thing to do!"

"Well, maybe it doesn't have much practical benefit," I admitted. I considered again. "But there are other things. What about improvements in medicine? Transplants, for instance. Nowadays they can transplant organs from one human being to another. That's certainly an advance."

"Organs?" Mr Caulkiss was interested. "What sort of organs?"

"Kidneys. Livers. Even hearts. Suppose there's someone whose heart isn't working properly. They can give that person a new heart from the body of someone else who's just died."

"Phh-hhh-hhh!" hooted Mr Caulkiss. "Hearts! Organs! Lumpishness!"

They all burst into open laughter. Melestrina made the whole room vibrate with her mighty "Ho! Ho! Ho!" I looked around in surprise.

"Perhaps I don't explain it very well," I said, when the noise finally died down. "But there's no need to . . ."

"Oh, you explain it perfectly," said Mr Quode. "Don't take offence, Mr Smythe. Tell us some more."

"I can't think of any more."

"Yes you can! Whatever you like!"

"Hmm." I shrugged. "Okay then. How about TV?"

"Tee Vee!" Renewed gales of laughter. "Hee! Hee! Tee! Vee!"

"What's so funny about that?" I was getting irritated. "You don't even know what it is you're laughing at."

"What is it then, Mr Smythe? Tee Vee?"

"It's like having movies in your own home. Almost everyone has a TV set nowadays. You can tune in to different channels for news or entertainment or whatever. You watch the pictures on a screen."

"Watching pictures!" gurgled Mr Quode. "But what about the feel ? What about the smell ?"

"Oh, you're not even trying to understand!"

"But we understand completely, Mr Smythe." Mr Caulkiss brought his fist down on the table with a crash. "We understand that the world is exactly the same as when we left it. In our time it was radio and motorcars and antibiotics - now it's Tee Vee and space exploration and heart transplants. Just as secularized and materialistic as ever. No belief in anything - except personal comfort and physical well-being."

"No commitment!" Craylene piped up.

"No sense of the sacred!" added Mr Quode.

"The modern world has no true religion!" thundered Melestrina. "Only we have true religion! Here in Morbing Vyle!"

"What religion is that?" I asked innocently.

"True religion!"

"I mean, what do you believe in?"

"We believe in the Great Return!" Melestrina flung her head and made her hair fly out around in a wild black halo. "When the Lord will return! And walk once more! In human form! Upon the earth!"

She was as if inspired. But all the others had fallen suddenly silent.

"You mean a Second Coming?" I suggested. "You believe that-"

"Wonder! Awe! Worship!" Arms raised in the air, legs massively braced, she stood in the centre of the room and bellowed towards the ceiling. "I shall enact a dramatic representation before your very eyes!"

But the other three rose suddenly against her.

"That's enough!"

"Hush!"

"It's not time!"

Still Melestrina wanted to continue. She projected her bosom forward in a pose of determination.

"I am an actress and I must act!"

But Mr Caulkiss quelled her, showing his great horsey teeth in a very threatening manner.

"Desist!" he said.

Melestrina desisted. She changed from a pose of determination to a pose of despair. Her head sank down, her bosom drooped, she clapped her hands to her forehead. Then she went and sat down by the table.

The topic was closed. I could see it was no use asking any further questions. It was just as I suspected: they were deliberately holding something back from me. There was a long period of silence.

I scanned around and took a good long look at each of them. Craylene was sitting like a doll, with her make-up fixed in a perpetual smile. Mr Quode fondled his glass of liqueur, licking at it exquisitely with the tip of his tongue. Melestrina had immobilised herself in a gesture of clasped hands and raised eyes, the perfect sculptural expression of martyrdom. And Mr Caulkiss was staring off into space, having already forgotten about his liqueur and Melestrina and everything else in the room. I could see that he was going to deliver another disquisition on energy and the bloodstream. Any minute now.

But I had been given my clue. 'The Lord will return and walk once more in human form . . .'

The Great Return was their term for the Second Coming. A common enough belief amongst Fundamentalists. They believed that Christ would be reborn upon the earth, inaugurating an era of justice and righteousness. So that must be what the vicar had taught! I felt that I was getting somewhere at last.

CHAPTER 22

The next morning I decided to do some exploring. I felt stronger now, strong enough to walk about on my own. I decided to have a look around the vicarage while the inhabitants were out at the building site.

There was only one problem: Panker. I didn't like the idea of him sneaking along after me, reporting my every move. So I laid a trap. When everyone had left and the vicarage was quiet, I stretched in my chair and said in a loud voice:

"Phew, I'm hot today. I think I'll have to take something off."

I took off my pyjama pants. Mr Quode's dressing-gown still kept me decently covered. I dropped the pants on the floor beside my chair, so that they fell in a loose sort of heap. Just the sort of heap to appeal to a hiding spying baby . . .

Then I lay back in my chair and pretended to be reading Mr Caulkiss's manuscripts and monographs. I had four hefty folders piled up on my lap. Ten minutes passed . . . then fifteen . . . twenty . . .

At last my patience was rewarded. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a sudden movement. A bulge had appeared in my pyjama pants. It wriggled slowly forward, probing and burrowing down one of the legs. I waited until it was half way down.

Then I moved fast. I leaned over the pyjama leg and dropped two of the folders across the bottom, two across the top. Triumph! The bulge squirmed furiously back and forth. The folders shook but they didn't shift. Baby Panker was trapped in the middle.

"Ho hum," I said in a loud voice, "I'm tired of reading. I think I'll just lie back and have a little snooze."

But I didn't. Instead I rose to my feet and tiptoed soundlessly away across the parlour. My first stop was the parlour window.

Because of the veiling muslin under-curtain, I had never yet been able to see out through the window. But now I pulled aside the under-curtain and contemplated the view. The window looked out from the front of the vicarage, over the building site.

Of course, it was the same building site through which I had come when I first arrived at Morbing Vyle. Not that I remembered any of it. I gazed at trenches and mounds, at partly-constructed walls, at fragments of piers and pillars. The site occupied a vast clearing, at least one mile long by half a mile wide. The burned-out forest lay in the distance, surrounding the clearing on all sides.

I started to trace out the pattern of the trenches in my mind. I could see how the lines joined together in the cruciform shape of a church. I could recognise where the choir was to be erected, and the transepts. The outer walls of the church went right out to the very edges of the clearing . . .

That was when I realised the incredible dimensions of the thing. The church they were building was planned to be bigger than St. Peters, bigger than Milan, bigger than any cathedral in the world. One mile long by half a mile wide! It was awesome - and at the same time ludicrous. Because the resources of the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle were obviously not on the same scale as their ambitions. So far - in eighty years! - they had hardly got beyond the stage of digging the foundations.

For a while I stood there gazing. Then baby Panker started squirming more furiously than ever. I let the muslin curtain drop and moved towards the parlour door. Time to press on with my explorations.

It was cold and draughty out in the hall, away from the warmth of the fire. I had Mr Quode's slippers on my feet, but my legs were bare below the dressing-gown. I could feel my skin goose-bumping all over.

I stood for a moment considering where to start. Upstairs, presumably, were the bedrooms. But I was more interested in the opening at the end of the hall, where the steps led down to Craylene's secret cellar. Yes, that was the mystery I wanted to solve first.

But I didn't get to solve it - not then. When I came to the opening and peered down the steps, there was a great wooden door at the bottom. And the door was shut and bolted. I could see a massive padlock clamped over the bolt.

I decided to follow the continuation of the hall, where the passage swung sharply to the left. Here it was less of a hall and more of a corridor, narrow and dark with a low ceiling. The black-and-white tiled floor gave way to brown linoleum. After the sharp turn to the left came an equally sharp turn to the right.

Now I could see two doorways ahead, facing each other across the passage. One door was open, the other closed. The closed one carried a notice stencilled on cardboard in big red letters:

LABORATORY

KNOCK FIRST

DO NOT ENTER WITHOUT PERMISSION

I smiled to myself. So! I had found Mr Caulkiss's laboratory. I reached down and turned the doorknob.

But again I was thwarted. The knob rotated but the door wouldn't budge. It must be locked. I gave it an angry shove and a rattle - no use.

"Ooh la la!" Suddenly a voice sang out from the room on the other side of the passage. "Is that somebody there?"

With small soundless steps I sped on down the corridor. It was Mr Quode's voice. He must have come back to the vicarage to do some cooking. No doubt the room on the other side of the passage was his kitchen.

At the end of the corridor was the back door. I shrank against the wall, wondering if the shadows would hide me. But I needn't have worried. Mr Quode didn't even come out to investigate. After a while I heard his voice start up in a different tone, repeating the words of some recipe to himself. I breathed a sigh of relief. He was busy with his cooking again.

I considered my next move. I could retrace my steps and search upstairs for any unlocked rooms. Or I could go out through the back door and take a look outside. I decided to try the back door. Very carefully and quietly, I turned the knob. The door swung open.

CHAPTER 23

I came out into a courtyard, the same courtyard that I'd seen from the nursery window. On the far side of the courtyard was the long low building. Instead of windows it had wide wooden doors like a barn or stable. It was built of red brick with a grey slate roof. The vicarage behind me was also of red brick, heavily overgrown with ivy. Pebblestone walls ran between the vicarage and the long low building, closing the courtyard off at the sides. Against one of the walls stood a trellis carrying runner beans and other climbing vines.

In fact the whole yard was a kind of vegetable patch. A network of paths divided the area into twenty or thirty small plots. There was a plot of brussels and a plot of beetroot, a plot of onions and a plot of mint and parsley. The majority of the plots were naturally bare at this time of year. But every plot had a marker to indicate its own particular crop. 'MARROWS', 'POTATOES', 'PEAS', 'CABBAGES' I read, along with a great many more unfamiliar names: 'BUTTER-LETTUCES', 'CELERIAC', 'PINARETTE', 'YELLOW PEPPER'. Some of the plots were protected with mounted frames and panes of glass.

I stepped forward into the sunshine. It was one of those winter days when the sky is perfectly blue and cloudless, the air very crisp but the sunlight bright and penetrating. I could feel the warmth seeping into my bones.

I passed between parsnips and roses and redcurrant bushes, between plots labelled 'CAULIFLOWERS' and 'STRAWBERRIES' and 'IRISH BARLEYGRASS'. Under my feet the path was soft and velvety, carpeted with dark green moss. I looked back at the vicarage, wondering if Mr Quode's kitchen had a window that opened onto the courtyard. But the two ground-floor windows were both curtained over with the same white muslin as the window of the parlour. I felt reasonably safe from detection.

In the centre of the courtyard was a small square area covered with flagstones. And in the centre of the flagstones was an old-fashioned well. It had a low circular wall, only a couple of feet high, and there was no roof. A bucket and rope lay on the ground close by.

I came up and peered down into the well. I could just make out the glimmer of the water, far far below. Then suddenly my heart skipped a beat.

HEUGH! HEUGH! HEUGH!

It was a horrible rasping catarrhal sound - the sound of someone coughing. It came not from the well but from right underneath my feet. I looked down.

I found that I was standing on top of a small metal grate, set into the ground like a drain. There was something there beneath the bars. A face was looking up at me.

HEUGH! HEUGH! HEUGH!

My first impulse was to run. But my second impulse was to investigate. Yet another mysterious inhabitant of Morbing Vyle! And a very foul-smelling one too. There was a ripe rotten whiff rising up from the grate. I bent down closer to investigate.

HEUGH! HEUGH! A-HEUGH-HEUGH-HUKKKK!!!

I moved my head just in time, as a great green gob of catarrh shot up through the bars. High in the air it sailed, hovered for a moment, then back down splattering onto the grate.

"Arrrrggh!" said the face. "That's better !"

It was a revolting old man's face, diseased and sickly. Just looking at it made my stomach turn. The pockmarked cheeks, the hairless scalp, the tiny pustules all over the skin. And then the two red boils swelling up on the chin, the dry cracked lips crusted over with sores. And the eyes! - worst of all, the huge bloodshot eyes oozing at the corners with a gummy white liquid. They stared up at me like the slow unwavering eyes of some deep-sea creature.

"Arrggh! And who be you then?"

The breath from his mouth befouled the air. I clamped my hand tightly over my nose.

"I'm Martin Smythe."

"Newcomer, is it? Come to join us here in Morbing Vyle?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Good, good. We need new people. Many a year since our last one joined. That actress woman - what was her name now?"

"Melestrina."

"Ay, Melestrina. She was the last."

He nodded to himself. The tip of his nose and his forehead scraped against the underside of the bars.

"And who," I asked, "are you?"

"Me? I'm Scrab, Mr Scrab. Have they not told you about Mr Scrab?"

"No."

"Pah!" He spat. I saw it coming and dodged the spray. "Not tell you about me! The oldest inhabitant in Morbing Vyle!"

"You were here before the Caulkisses?"

"Dang the Caulkisses! I've lived here for ninety eight years! I was here in the time of the vicar himself!"

"The vicar -?"

"The vicar of Morbing Vyle! With these two eyes I saw him! How about that!"

"Remarkable," I murmured.

"Yes, I was a follower in the early days. There were more of us then. 'Course, I was still only a boy at the time. But I tell you this. I was one of the ones was with him when - when . . ."

He broke off in mid-sentence. Suddenly his face flushed a bright red colour. The sweat started to pour from his skin. I could feel a wave of heat rising up through the bars.

"Here it comes," he muttered. He screwed up his eyes and clenched his jaws. "Mmmrrr!"

With a sudden loud POP! one of his two boils exploded. Yellow pus splattered over his face and neck and over the underside of the grate. The smell was worse than ever.

"Enough of these bloated boils," he gritted through his teeth. "I feel a change coming on."

Again his face took on a straining pained expression. There was another loud POP! The second boil vanished in a second pus-splattering explosion.

"Filth! Slime! Infection!" he cried, opening his eyes again.

"Are you all right?" I asked. I didn't like to see the putrid yellow matter just lying there on his face and neck.

"Of course I'm not!" he yelled. "Look!"

I looked. A succession of gruesome dark patches were appearing above his eyebrows. Wider and wider they grew, like blots of ink. In a matter of moments, right before my eyes, a new form of disease had spread across his entire forehead.

"What's happening?" I was really alarmed. "Is it some kind of fever?"

"Anthrosis Perichondritis." He poked out his tongue as he spoke. His tongue had swollen and turned a livid shade of brown.

"Is it serious? It's not fatal, is it?"

"Everything I catch is serious," said Mr Scrab. Now his voice was thick and slurry. "I am the breeding-ground!"

"What's that? What do you mean? The breeding-ground?"

I bent down low over the grate to catch his reply. But I never got to hear it. Suddenly my attention was caught by a strange sort of heap lying on the flagstones just behind me. I swung around. It was the bulged-up heap of my own pyrama pants. Panker! Somehow he must have managed to dislodge the folders. Once again he was spying on me!

CHAPTER 24

I stood there staring. My pyjama pants stared back. I couldn't actually see the tiny blue eyes, but I knew they were staring back. I darted forward and made a wild lunge.

But Panker was too quick. He shot away like a blue-and-white striped rabbit. One bulging pyjama leg scurried off in front, the other empty leg trailed out behind. I gave chase.

Down one path we raced, then another, then another. We switched direction until I was dizzy. All I needed was to catch up with the trailing pyjama leg. But Panker was always ten feet ahead. I was still no match for him.

I puffed to a halt beside a plot of 'POLISH CUCUMBERS'. But Panker kept on going. We had come quite close to the long low building. I watched as my pyjama pants bustled up towards one of the blank wooden doors. What was he going to do now?

He jumped. Suddenly the blue-and-white bundle seemed to take off vertically, climbing the front of the door. Half way up, it attached itself to a kind of wooden crossbar - obviously the latch that held the door shut. As I watched the bar slowly tilted and swivelled, unlatching the door.

There was a great muffled noise from within. It was a barn. I could hear animals moving and snorting and stirring and stamping. Then the door swung open.

They emerged in military formation. At the front was a hen, flanked by several ducks. Behind the ducks were half a dozen sheep, followed by pigs, goats and cows. They took up positions like a well-trained army unit, spreading out to form a semi-circle. A semi-circle deployed against me !

I took a step forward and waved my arms.

"Shoo!" I shouted. "Shoooo! Clear off!"

But they didn't clear off. The leading hen rose up on her legs and flapped her wings. Then slowly and silently the whole formation began to advance.

I was transfixed with amazement. Their eyes were fixed upon me with a sort of deadly intelligence. And yet they were only farmyard animals! What could they possibly do?

A moment later I found out what they could do. The leading hen made a sudden flying rush. She flung herself at me with her beak wide open. Inside her beak were two rows of glittering metallic needle-sharp teeth.

I tried to fend off the attack with my arm. The hen clamped her beak over the cuff of my dressing-gown. There was a loud rip and a strip of material came away in her teeth. Neck arched and chest puffed, she turned to display the trophy to the troops.

"CARK!!" she cried. "CARK!! CARK!! CARK!!!"

It was like a signal. Now all the other animals started up with their own noises - baaing and mooing and grunting and quacking. And as they opened their mouths, I could see that every single one of them was equipped with those same ferocious metal dentures.

I didn't dare take my eyes off them. Step by step I backpedalled down one of the paths. Step by step they followed me.

"BAAAAAAA - AAAAA!!!"

"OINK! OINK! OINK!!!"

"BLEHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

"QUACKERQUACKERQUACKERQUACK!!!"

The noise swelled to an ear-splitting din. The pigs drooled, the sheep slavered, the ducks were gnashing their teeth. There was a hot red bloodlust in every eye.

Faster and faster I retreated. Faster and faster they came after me. The goats and cows moved forward at the sides to hem me in. I realised that they were forcing me back against the wall of the vicarage. I was trapped.

But then a voice called out behind me.

"This way, Mr Smythe!"

Still backpedalling frantically, I glanced round over my shoulder. It was Mr Quode. The noise must have roused him. He had opened his kitchen window and was leaning out watching me.

I was never so glad to see him as then. I spun on my heel and ran. Behind me the animals charged. Hooves pounded, wings beat, teeth reached out . . . Desperately I dived for the open window.

"Do come in, Mr Smythe!" cried Mr Quode, with a Quode-ish smile and a beckoning gesture. He stood to one side and lifted the muslin curtain up high out of the way.

I barely made it. Even as I flung myself over the sill, there was a stabbing pain in my left buttock. Agony! I could feel the teethmarks like so many separate needles. But I hurtled across the sill to safety. I slid from the sill, rolled over a kind of counter, and tumbled down onto the floor.

Outside, the animals were raving and bellowing in a frenzy of frustration. Mr Quode stuck his head out of the window and addressed them in a soft soothing voice.

"Margus! Phelia! Carodin! Calm down now! Quieten yourselves!"

I lay where I had fallen, temporarily exhausted. I had arrived in Mr Quode's kitchen.

CHAPTER 25

I surveyed the kitchen from my position on the floor. It was a very cluttered room, with tables, shelves, cupboards and glass-fronted cabinets. All around lay bowls and pots and dishes, mostly unwashed and greasy-looking. Ladles and graters and basting-irons too - every conceivable item of old-fashioned cooking equipment, hanging from hooks or stacked up on shelves. And inside the cabinets, rows and rows of preservative jars, each with its own handwritten label.

Then I heard the slam of Mr Quode shutting the window. A moment later, and he was lying on the floor beside me. He wore an apron over his usual clothes - an apron that must once have been white but was now bedaubed with all sorts of smears and messes. His face gleamed with pleasure just inches away from my own.

"Ah, Mr Smythe! What a narrow escape for you!"

He spoke in a whisper. Involuntarily I whispered back. With his face so close it was impossible to talk in an ordinary voice.

"Panker set those animals onto me!"

He smiled. I had never before realized just how juicy his lips were, like the halves of a split red cherry.

"Why do they all have teeth?" I asked.

"Because Mr Caulkiss fits them with dentures."

"But what do they need teeth for?"

"To make them wild. To encourage their mettle and vital energies." He licked his tongue over his lips. "It makes their meat more tasty. L'essence de vie! Gourmandise de la chasse! Tame animals never have the full intensity of flavour."

"But they're dangerous! One of them really bit me!"

"Bit you where?"

"On the behind."

"Can I see?"

"No!" I clamped my hand protectively over the bitten part. "It doesn't matter."

"Oh but it does! Was it a big bite? Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't matter."

But Mr Quode was already wriggling around on the floor, inspecting me. And inspecting, in particular, my bare pyjama-less legs. I cursed myself for ever mentioning the bite. Of course I had to give him some excuse for why I was wearing no pyjama pants. But I couldn't think of anything.

"Ah dear!" he murmured. "What blatancy! What flaunting of flesh! What leggishness !"

He seemed completely fascinated. I felt more and more embarrassed. Finally I said:

"I took my pyjama pants off because I was hot."

He loosened the cravat from around his neck, and used one end of it to wipe his forehead.

He stared and wiped, and wiped and stared.

"I mean, my legs were hot. Sitting by the fire. And then I sort of - er - forgot to get dressed again . . . afterwards."

He turned his face towards me. His eyes were very soft and moist and slithery.

"No need to explain," he whispered. "I quite understand."

"You do?"

"I always knew it would happen. When you got over your illness and recovered your strength. Only -" he lowered his voice to an even more intimate whisper "- I didn't know that it would be your legs."

"You didn't know -?" I was completely out of my depth.

"No! But I should have guessed! It's perfectly obvious. Such large legs you have! So firm and muscular ! And very hairy! They were bound to be the first to feel it!"

"Feel what?"

"The urge to transgression!"

"The urge to transgression? I don't know about that. They were just hot."

"Of course they were! And they wanted to be out in the open! To have the cool air wafting around them! And look at them now!"

I looked. I was relieved that the dressing-gown was still well pulled down over my thighs.

"What about them?"

"Touching the floor! The sensation of cool kitchen tiles! Even cooler than the air! What extremity of feeling! Oh, I can't resist! I'm going to try it too!"

He rolled up the cuffs of his trousers, exposing his legs to the knee. His legs were very pale and naked and blubbery-looking. He flopped out flat on his back with his calves touching against the tiles.

"Ooooh! Yes! Ooooooh!"

In a moment he was quivering and thrilling all over. His eyelashes fluttered as though he was about to faint.

"Stop it, that's enough," I said sharply.

"Oh, more than enough!" He sat up and wiped his brow. "Too much! Much too much! But I know what'll be even colder!"

Before I could stop him he was up on his knees and shuffling away across the kitchen.

"Don't move!" he called out over his shoulder. "Stay where you are!"

I watched him reach up onto the tables and into the cupboards and shelves. When he came back he was carrying a whole collection of bowls and implements. He settled down beside me again, and spread the things out on the floor.

"Now! Where shall we begin? What about this? Let's start with the coldness of metal!"

He picked up a meat-cleaver with a broad blade of shining steel. He pressed the flat of the blade against the skin of his leg.

"Ahhh!" he gasped. "Mmmmmmm!" he moaned. "Oh, unspeakable! Unutterable!"

He looked as if he was about to faint again. But suddenly he rolled over, lifted the cleaver from his own bare leg, and pressed it against mine instead.

"Yow! That's freezing!"

"Yes, yes! Feel it! Feel it!"

"No! Take it off!"

But he kept on pressing. He was horribly excited. I was half afraid that he would turn the edge of the blade against me. I reached forward and pushed back his arm, moving the cleaver safely away. He yielded without resistance.

"Didn't you like that?" he asked, oozingly. "Was it too hard ? Wait! Here's something soft !"

He dipped his hand into one of the bowls he had brought and fished out something soft and pale. It was spongy and cellular and dripping with liquid.

"Let's try this! It's been standing in ice! You can have first go!"

The thing wobbled disgustingly in the hollow of his hand. I realized that he was about to press it against the skin of my leg. I jumped back and scrambled to my feet. I had had as much as I could take.

"Oh, don't go!" He gave a little cry of disappointment. "Are you offended? Do you think it's sinful? But you don't believe in sin!"

He wriggled around like a slug on the floor. Even as he spoke his arm was moving, as if of its own volition, carrying the thing in his hand towards his leg. When it made contact, his eyes took on a sudden inward look.

"Ooh la la!" he murmured to himself. "The little tinglings! Le frisson nouveau !"

"Goodbye," I said. "I'm going back to the parlour now."

There was no reply. I stepped right over him on the floor. He was wriggling and writhing in voluptuous bliss. In no time at all I was out of the kitchen and back in front of the parlour fire again.

And that was where I stayed for the rest of the day. I didn't feel like making any further explorations. I sat in my chair with one of Mr Caulkiss's manuscripts spread out on my lap, pretending to be absorbed in what I was reading. When Mr Quode looked in on me a little later, he went away again without a word.

I was thankful to have escaped from his bizarre attentions, at any rate. But I wondered what would happen when he and Panker reported to the others. I still felt aggrieved over being attacked by the animals. But I decided not to complain. It wasn't in my interest to get on the wrong side of the inhabitants.

CHAPTER 26

They didn't come into the parlour until after dinner. Before dinner I could hear them talking and arguing in the kitchen. It was after seven o'clock when they all trooped in. They looked very solemn. Melestrina nursed my bundled-up pyjama pants against her bosom.

"I see you've brought my pyjama pants!" I said brightly. "Is that Panker still inside them?"

"It is," said Mr Caulkiss.

"I left them behind, you know. When I went for a little walk today."

"We know. You talked to Mr Scrab."

"Ah yes, Mr Scrab. I hope he's all right?"

"All right?"

"He seemed to be coming down with some disease."

"Mr Scrab is always coming down with some disease."

"Really? But then why does he lie out there in the open? Is he imprisoned there?"

"No. He can leave whenever he wants. He likes to lie out there. It is his inclination."

"But it must be terribly damp and chilly. And he's so old! He was telling me -"

"What?"

"How old he was."

"Anything else?"

"And how he saw the vicar of Morbing Vyle."

"What about the vicar of Morbing Vyle?"

"Nothing. That was when the disease came over him."

Mr Caulkiss revealed his teeth in a monumental display of yellow ivory.

"You shouldn't talk to him, Mr Smythe."

"No?"

"No ."

There was a long silence. Mr Caulkiss made a gesture to Melestrina. She stepped forward bearing the blue-and-white bundle of Panker-filled pyjama pants.

Then she started to squeeze. With both hands she worked away at the bulge in the pants. Panker was being extruded like toothpaste from a toothpaste tube. Soon a tiny whir of toes and fingers appeared at the bottom of one pyjama leg.

She gave a final squeeze. Panker popped out like a bullet from a gun. He flew halfway across the room before he landed. Then he began whizzing around on the floor. There was a pink blur of baby and a series of high-pitched squeaks. Finally he disappeared behind the black curtaining drapes by the window.

Melestrina held the now-emptied pyjama pants out towards me as though making a grand ceremonial presentation.

"Thanks," I murmured awkwardly. I took the pants and put them on. I slid them up under Mr Quode's dressing-gown and fastened the cord around my waist.

Then suddenly Mr Caulkiss clapped his hands. I looked up and discovered that he was smiling.

"And now, the Lord be praised!" he cried. "For your recovery, Mr Smythe! A pleasure to see you up and walking!"

"And doing it so well !" added Mr Quode.

"Thanks be, and gratefulness!" boomed Melestrina Quode.

The mood had changed. Now they were all smiling.

"Yes," said Mr Caulkiss. "And since you're better, you can come with us tomorrow. No need to go wandering around on your own. We 'll show you what there is to be seen. Starting with our great building work on the Church of Morbing Vyle."

"Er, thank you."

"We shall all go. You can meet Gambels too."

"Gambels? Is this some other person I haven't seen yet?"

"You'll meet him tomorrow. And then in the evening we shall have a special banquet here in the parlour, to celebrate your recovery. No more eating on your own, Mr Smythe!"

"Formidable !" cried Mr Quode in French, kissing the tips of his fingers. "I shall create my finest recipes!"

"And I," cried Melestrina, "shall provide dramatic entertainment!"

"Won't it be good!" cried Craylene, fluttering her hands and dancing around. "Good! Good! Good!"

I smiled politely and said yes. Inwardly I wasn't so sure. But I could see I didn't have much choice in the matter.

Part Three:



THE BANQUET

CHAPTER 27

By the following morning the weather had taken a turn for the worse. It was much colder, with only a pale wan glow of sun from behind a haze of clouds. The ground was white with a sparkle of hoarfrost. Everything seemed crisp and brittle, every sound rang in the air like metal. Our breath came out in long steaming plumes.

For the first time in two weeks I wore my own clothes, my own shirt and socks and briefs, my own trousers, jumper and coat. But not only my own clothes. The inhabitants of Morbing Vyle were determined to see me warmly wrapped up. So from Mr Caulkiss I had a long string spenser; from Craylene a fox-fur stole; from Melestrina a black velvet cape; and from Mr Quode, a cravat and a cummerbund. Clad in many thicknesses of clothing, I accompanied them out through the front door.

Gambels was asleep in a kennel outside the front door.

"Here he is," announced Mr Caulkiss proudly.

I don't know how to speak of Gambels - as an animal or as a human being. At first I could see only his head sticking out, encased entirely in a grey woollen balaclava. It was a human-looking head but it rested on the ground like the head of a dog. His hands stuck out alongside, curled up like paws. There was a collar around his neck and a chain attached.

Mr Caulkiss stooped down towards the sleeping form. Over his arm he carried a complicated harness of metal clips and leather straps. Now I could see what it was for. In two swift movements, he unhooked the chain from Gambels' collar and slipped the harness over his head.

Gambels sprang into action. He sprang to the left and sprang to the right, bashing his head successively on either side of the kennel door. The rest of his body rebounded around inside the kennel like an india rubber ball.

"Waff! Waff! Waffem!" he cried, in a strange meaningless voice. It sounded like the cry of a young boy.

He was dressed like a young boy too. Mr Caulkiss hauled on the harness and dragged him out of the kennel. He wore a frayed old jacket with a school badge on the breast pocket, a striped blue-and-green tie, and a pair of grey flannel shorts. A complete school uniform, with wellington boots on his feet. But he stayed down on all fours like a dog.

"Stand back!" warned Mr Caulkiss.

Then Gambels turned into a kind of tornado. Back and forth, back and forth, he rushed crazily in every direction. His legs and arms kicked at the air, kicked at the ground, even kicked at himself. Several times his limbs got into such a tangle that he ploughed to a halt with his head rammed violently into the ground.

"Oing-a-boing!" he cried in his strange meaningless voice. "Hubbsa-hubbsa-hubbsa!"

But he was still on the end of the harness. And gradually Mr Caulkiss reined him in. The harness worked by means of tiny spurs which dug in at the sides of Gambels' neck. Mr Caulkiss worked the spurs by pulling on different straps. And gradually Gambels' wild gyrations evened out to a regular motion, round and round in a circle.

"Now!" cried Mr Caulkiss. "Forward to the South Transept! Off we go!"

And off we went. With another pull on one of the straps, Mr Caulkiss directed Gambels forward in a straight line. Immediately Gambels raced ahead at frantic speed - or tried to. But Mr Caulkiss leaned back on his heels, and Gambels' bare hands and booted feet skidded ineffectually on the ground. There was a tremendous spray of dirt and stones. Gambels' whole body rippled and twanged with muscular exertion. But still he could move no faster than Mr Caulkiss's walking pace.

"Ungalung! Galung-galung!"

Out across the building site we went. We came to the lines of the trenches and crossed over them one by one. Our route was marked by a succession of plank bridges. All around were fragments of wall and bits of stonework and mounds of earth.

"Isn't he a bundle of energy," said Mr Caulkiss admiringly, pointing at Gambels.

"Yes." I nodded. "But why does he act so strangely? What is he?"

"What is he? He's my son."

"Your son?" I could hardly believe my ears. "But you treat him like an animal!"

"Phuhhhh! Not at all. What animal has that sort of energy? That is the energy of human blood!"

"But what about those spurs on his neck! How could you do that to your own son?"

"Ah, it wasn't easy. I had to design the whole thing myself. Very ingenious, don't you think?"

"But why?"

"Why? Because of the wildness of his energy. Too wild for his own good,. See there?" He used the spurs to readjust Gambels' head to the side. "See that hollow on the side of his skull?"

"Yes."

"That's from the time he tried battering his head against the front doorstep. And see the scar running across behind his right knee?"

"Yes."

"That's from when he almost managed to chop off his leg on the edge of a spade."

"But why on earth would he want to do that?"

"Ah, just boyish high spirits. He's always breaking his bones or fracturing his neck."

"You mean, he'd destroy himself if he wasn't controlled?"

"Pity, isn't it?" Mr Caulkiss tugged thoughtfully at his nose. "It's the energy of youthful blood. Panker is similar. Tremendous energy but difficult to harness. Hah! Old blood is much more manageable. But then there's the opposite problem. Very old blood has so little energy that the circulation is always liable to seize up altogether. That's when the human body suffers from heart attacks. According to my calculations, the best blood is that of a young adult, between about twenty and thirty years old. Preferably male. That's why - ah!"

He stopped suddenly in mid-speech. We had arrived at our destination. It was a row of unfinished pillars, stumpy cylinders built up only a few feet off the ground. They were linked by a line of stones and bricks. Mr Caulkiss reined Gambels to a halt.

"This," he announced, "is the South Transept of our church. Now you shall watch us build."

CHAPTER 28

And that's what I did for the rest of the morning - just stood and watched them build. When I offered to help they wouldn't hear of it.

"No, no! Not yet! You'll be ready soon enough!"

Each had a different task. Mr Quode mixed cement in a long trough. Mr Caulkiss controlled Gambels. Gambels dragged a wooden sled back and forth, bringing bricks and stones from a nearby pile. Melestrina unloaded the sled and cemented the bricks and stones into place. And Craylene fluttered around with a cloth and a brush, dusting off the building materials.

It was a slow and boring business. Only Melestrina was good at her job. With her massive chest and arms she could lift hunks of stone and stacks of bricks that would have floored a navvy. But Gambels was more trouble than he was worth, managing to overturn the sled on every second journey. And Mr Quode was so obsessed with mixing his cement to a state of absolute perfection that it was never ready for use when it was wanted. I soon lost interest in their farcical activities.

As the morning wore on the temperature sank lower and lower. A brisk wind sprang up, blowing icy and cold across the wide open space of the site. I had to stamp my feet and swing my

arms. Even with all my layers of clothing I could hardly keep warm. There were heavy dark clouds too, rolling in from the east. Cold enough for snow, I thought to myself. Miserable weather!

I drifted off into memories of Australia. Back home now, it would be almost the height of summer. Hot sun, blue skies, temperatures up in the thirties. Just the weather for going down to the beach. Swimming and bodysurfing . . .

Around the middle of the day Mr Quode went off to the vicarage. He had some more cooking to do for the banquet. He returned about an hour later, carrying our lunch in a small wickerwork hamper. Then Craylene and Melestrina downed tools, and Mr Caulkiss tied Gambels to the base of one of the piers. We all sat down around the hamper.

"Not too much eating now!" warned Mr Quode. "We must save ourselves up for tonight!"

There wasn't much to eat anyway. We had a couple of home-made scones each, accompanied by a cup of tea. The scones were spread with a sort of bitter black jam and the tea tasted like an infusion of straw.

"This is to cleanse our taste-buds," explained Mr Quode. "To tone up the palate for cuisine a la Quode !"

I forced the scones down because I was hungry and drank the tea because it warmed me up. Nobody spoke. In the end I broke the silence myself.

"I've been wondering," I said. "What's the date today?"

"The date?"

"It was eight days before I came downstairs, and a week since then. It must be nearly Christmas."

"It is December the 23rd."

"The 23rd! Then the day after tomorrow is Christmas Day!"

The Caulkisses and Quodes said nothing.

"It'll be the first Christmas I've ever spent away from home," I mused. "I'll miss it. We've always had a traditional family Christmas. Roast dinner on even the hottest day."

Still there was no response from the Caulkisses and Quodes.

"What do you do here for Christmas?" I asked.

"Nothing," said Mr Caulkiss.

"Nothing? But you must have Christmas presents and Christmas dinner and - "

"We don't believe in celebrating Christmas."

"Oh."

Mr Quode reached across to pat my hand. "Of course, if you like Christmas celebrations, Mr Smythe, I'm sure we can manage quelquechose . Just to make you feel at home."

I pulled my hand away. "No, whatever you do . . . I don't want to impose."

We continued eating in silence. Here was another mystery to ponder. What kind of Christianity didn't celebrate Christmas? Was it because of their hatred of modern materialism? Perhaps they had rejected Christmas because of the way it had been commercialized?

When lunch was over, Mr Quode packed the crockery back in the hamper. Then everyone rose to their feet. I could see that they were about to resume work. But I'd had enough of standing around getting cold.

"I've got a request," I said. "I'd like to take a walk."

"A walk? Where?"

"Anywhere. I'm freezing to death. A walk will warm me up."

Mr Caulkiss looked down his nose and nodded thoughtfully. "Cold are you? Well then, a walk is a good idea. I think we can spare my wife for a while. She can take you on a tour and explain the architecture of our Church."

CHAPTER 29

And so we set off, Craylene Caulkiss and I. We passed alongside trenches and over plank bridges. We viewed ramps of earth and bits of paving and stacks of building material. Craylene tried to do her duty as a guide, explaining about a porch here and an aisle there, a chapel here and an ambulatory there. But I soon gave up listening. It was too difficult to follow her rambling twittering voice.

I paid attention, though, when she suddenly asked: "Would you like to see the trench where you fell down, Mr Smythe? Would you? Where we rescued you?"

I nodded eagerly. I was still trying to recover my missing memory. Perhaps the sight of the place would remind me.

"It's at the far end of the choir," she said. "Near the High Altar."

We picked our way across the foundations of the choir. The choir alone was a quarter of a mile long. As we approached the far end, I saw a row of chairs and a lectern and a sort of oblong block covered with a white cloth.

"What's that block thing?"

"That's the High Altar," said Craylene. Her voice dropped to a reverential hush. "Mr Caulkiss conducts the services there. We sit on the chairs."

"I see. And are those the chairs you were coming to collect when - ?"

"When we heard your cry of help! Yes! Yes!"

As we came closer I could see the gold border on the white cloth, and a flat silvery box sitting on top of the block. I began to have a vague feeling of familiarity. A vague feeling that I had seen these things some time before. But when or where I couldn't remember.

"What's that on top?" I asked.

"That," breathed Craylene, "is the Box of Tools."

"A box of tools ? What's a box of tools doing on top of an altar? That's not very respectful!"

"Oh but it is, Mr Smythe! It is!"

"I don't understand."

"Of course not! Not yet! But you will!"

She bob-bobbed her head towards the Altar, and murmured the words of a prayer to herself. She finished with a loud "Amen!" Then we continued around by the side of the Altar. About fifteen yards further on we came to a deep curving trench.

"Is this it?"

"Yes!" She moved forward to the exact place. "Here!"

I looked down into the trench. I had high hopes. Surely this would jog my memory. But I was disappointed.

"See the pile of earth that fell down onto you?" cried Craylene. "See where the trench caved in at the side?"

I stared and racked my brains in vain. I could even see the marks where my feet had skidded over the soft edge of earth at the top. But it meant nothing to me. The blankness in my mind remained as blank as ever.

"This is where we found you, Mr Smythe." Craylene's patter went on and on. "So close to the High Altar! Wasn't that a good omen? To be found so close to the High Altar! Mr Caulkiss said it was a very good omen!"

I turned away. And then suddenly a corner of the blankness lifted. It wasn't the trench or anything to do with the trench. It was a faint smoky smell in the air. I remembered that smell! The smell of the forest!

I looked up. The burned-out trees circled around this end of the choir a mere thirty yards away. I gazed with a new sense of recognition. All at once I remembered my very first sight of the forest.

The memory was as vivid as if I were actually reliving the scene. I had just pushed my way through a thicket of bushes, I had just come out into the open - and there on the other side of a

stream were the gaunt and blackened trunks, the canopy of charcoal branches, the white ash on the ground! The same as I was looking at now! The smell of the smoke recreated the whole scene in my mind.

Without exactly thinking about it, I set off walking. I crossed the trench by a convenient plank bridge and headed towards the forest. I wanted to see the trees close up. I hardly even noticed that Craylene was calling out. I was totally absorbed in trying to remember the past.

So what happened after that very first sight of the forest? I must've crossed the stream and walked in amongst the trees. Yes, yes, the avenue of trees! Now it came back - my feet padding along in the ash, everything so still and silent. Until - what was it? Of course! The rain began!

I was getting more and more excited I walked faster and faster. But Craylene caught up. Her diminutive legs twinkled as she ran. She came running up alongside, hopping and fluttering and waving her arms about. There was a frightened tremor in her voice.

"Where are you going, Mr Smythe? Come back! Turn round!"

"Don't distract nme," I answered curtly.

I was trying to hang on to the thread of my thoughts. What happened after the rain began? Something had happened . . . If only Craylene would be quiet! Now she was plucking at my sleeve with tiny white hands.

"Mr Smythe! It's dangerous! You mustn't disturb them! You mustn't, you mustn't, you mustn't!"

I brushed her hands aside. But she grabbed hold of the tails of my coat. Her eyes were wide with fear and panic. I didn't bother to detach her. She was so frail, she had no weight to throw against me. I just kept on walking and dragged her along in my wake. She soon gave up and let go.

I came to the edge of the white carpeting ash. Another three strides and I was in under the canopy of branches. The air seemed suddenly full of gloom and shadows. There was no avenue here, just a maze of black jagged trunks and hollow shells. I stared and studied and concentrated . . .

And then I remembered what had happened after the rain began. The sounds, the hissing sounds! The voices coming from the trees! That was it! The sounds of the rainwater making contact with the deep smouldering heat inside the trees!

On a sudden impulse I stepped up to the nearest tree. It was cleft with a great fissure down the middle. I plunged my hand inside and felt for the interior wood. I reached in with my whole arm right up to the elbow.

Then Craylene started to scream.

[illegible]

"Back to the vicarage at once! You need a wash."

"Or a bath," interposed Mr Quode. "Let him have a bath. I'll take him back and run the water for him."

So it was agreed. Mr Quode escorted me across the building site, back towards the vicarage. At first we walked in silence. I had many things to think about. And the more I thought about them, the more puzzling they seemed.

For instance: the heat inside the trees. How long could the trees continue smouldering after a fire? It was two weeks since I had first passed through the forest, two weeks since I had first felt the heat inside the trees. Surely the wood ought to have cooled down by now?

That question brought up another one. How long before I arrived had the fire occurred? The continuing heat suggested a very recent fire. But if it was very recent, why had the Caulkisses and Quodes never even mentioned it? It must have been a tremendous holocaust, a truly terrifying experience for anyone living in Morbing Vyle. So how could they have failed to mention it?

And then there was Craylene's strange behaviour when I went up close to the trees. "It's dangerous," she had said. And even more mysterious: "You mustn't disturb them!" What did she mean by that?

I wondered if I could get the truth out of Mr Quode. I turned to address him. His eyes were already looking back at me, eagerly, willingly, the whites bulging out like hard-boiled eggs.

"Tell me about the forest," I said.

"The forest. Mmmmm." He sucked in and out with his mouth as if the forest was a flavour to be tasted. He didn't seem to like the flavour much.

"What happened to it? When did it catch fire?"

"Oh, a while ago."

"How long ago?"

"It didn't exactly catch fire. It was set on fire."

"By whom?"

"We don't talk about it very much in Morbing Vyle, Mr Smythe."

"Why not? Why don't you talk about it?"

"Oh la! How probing you are! Quelle impatience !"

"I think you're all afraid of it."

"Why should we be afraid of it?"

"Craylene - Mrs Caulkiss - was afraid of it."

"No, no! She was only trying to look after you."

"I don't believe that."

Mr Quode smiled and wrung his hands and said nothing.

"Why should she need to look after me?"

"You ought not to go near the trees, Mr Smythe."

"No? But I walked right through a couple of weeks ago."

"Ah, but that was on the way in !"

"What do you mean, on the way in ?"

"Nothing."

"You mean it's different on the way in to the way out ? That doesn't make sense!"

"Ah, you're so wonderful and logical, Mr Smythe! Le raisonnement superieur ! You prostrate me with your manly intelligence!"

"But it doesn't make sense!"

"If you say so, Mr Smythe. Who am I to pit my feeble mind against yours? Je ne suis qu'un larve, un insecte, un limaçon !"

He was so excessively obsequious that it was almost like a mockery. I had never really noticed it before; but there was something behind Mr Quode's bland softness that wasn't bland and soft at all. Something gloating and vaguely jeering . . .

I let the conversation drop. It was obviously no use quizzing him further. We walked the rest of the way back to the vicarage in silence. Mr Quode tucked his hands under his shirt and down into the top of his trousers. I assumed he was trying to keep them warm.

CHAPTER 31

The bathroom was on the upstairs floor. It was very old-fashioned and grand. The floor was tiled with green veined marble and the walls were lined with mirrors. There was no light from outside: Mr Quode had drawn the blinds over the window. The only illumination came from a single candle burning away in a bracket by the door.

The room contained a washbasin, a toilet and a bath. The toilet was raised on a kind of plinth like a throne, with a series of three steps leading up to it. Purple velvet covered the toilet-seat, and the china cistern above was supported on miniature Greek columns of white marble. Similar columns supported the washbasin.

As for the bath itself, it was an enormous tub. Enamel on the inside and iron on the outside, it stood on four massive claw-footed legs. A slatted board lay across the top, carrying an array of soaps and brushes and sponges. Nearby was a wooden rack laden with towels.

I felt lazy and luxurious, stretched out in the tub. The water was warm and soothing, the air was steamy, the whole bathroom smelt pleasant and balmy. I finished soaping and rinsing, then lay back and relaxed.

Suddenly there was a creak and the bathroom door swung open. It was Mr Quode. He poked his gleaming red-fringed head around the door.

"Is the bathwater nice? Would you like a little more hot?"

"No, it's fine thanks."

"Or a little more cold?"

"No thankyou ."

I waited for him to go away. But instead he stepped forward right into the room.

"Are you clean now?" he purred. "Lovely and clean all over? What about washing your back?"

"I've done it."

"You might've missed some dirty bits."

"No."

"You're sure you don't want me to inspect?"

"Quite sure."

"That's all right then."

But still he didn't go away. On the contrary. He closed the bathroom door behind him.

"Do you know whose bath you're lying in?" he asked. "That's the original bath of our vicar of Morbing Vyle. His original bath in his original bathroom. We try to keep everything exactly the way that it was in his time."

I said nothing.

"He was always lovely and clean, you know. He took a bath sometimes two or three times a day. It's said that he never went out without first taking a bath."

At any other time I'd have been eager to hear about the vicar of Morbing Vyle. But not now. I refused to be drawn. Mr Quode grew more insinuating than ever.

"There's something so intimate about a bath, isn't there! To be touching the same enamel where someone else has touched! Where even the vicar himself has touched! Isn't that extraordinary to think about?"

I retreated more deeply into the bathwater. "I'd prefer to think about it with you out of the room," I said pointedly.

"Oh very good, very good!" cried Mr Quode, as though I had just coined some great witticism. "How well you say that! Quelle plaisanterie !"

He was absolutely convulsed with delight. He wriggled and squirmed as though someone were tickling his insides with a feather. By the time the tickling stopped, his trousers were all askew, his shirt was hanging out, and his cravat had worked its way round to the back of his neck.

"Oh dear," he murmured, wiping his brow. "I think I shall have to go and do something."

"Yes," I agreed, thinking he was about to depart at last. "The sooner the better."

But Mr Quode lifted the candle from its bracket and advanced towards the toilet. I goggled in amazement as he mounted the three steps and raised the velvet-covered toilet-seat.

"What are you doing?" My voice came out in a strangled whisper.

"I'm going to do something." He smiled and gestured. "I'm going to pay a visit !"

"No! You can't go to the toilet while I'm having a bath!"

"An urge is upon me!"

"Control it!"

"Too powerful!"

"This is disgusting!"

"Oh no! You should think of it as natural , Mr Smythe. Aren't you the one who believes in accepting the animal side of human nature?"

"It's not natural for me to have to watch you doing it."

"You don't want to watch?"

"No!"

"Ah, in that case -"

He smiled again and snuffed out the candle.

There was nothing I could do. Unsavoury episode! I had to lie there in the dark and listen to the soft swish of clothes being lowered to the ground, and the squeak of a seat being sat upon. I could hear everything with horrible clarity.

Then the other sounds began.

"Mmmmm-ummmmm-ummmmm-ah!!!"

"Gnnnnnn!!! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Ooooo-whooooooooo-uph!!!!"

At first I splashed around in the water, trying to drown out the noise. But Mr Quode was a particularly expressive toilet-goer. Again and again he uttered loud cries and long fervent sighs of

delight. He panted and heaved and groaned and moaned with unrestrained enthusiasm. There was no ignoring him.

I gave up splashing and lay there waiting for him to finish. It was a very long visit. But finally I heard the sounds that announced the completion of the deed. The usual sounds, that is - followed by something peculiar to Mr Quode. I couldn't hear exactly, but he seemed to be murmuring a kind of prayer. Then there was a final 'Amen!', and he pulled the chain.

He shuffled down the steps. For one nervous moment I thought he was heading in my direction. But no, he went across to the washbasin and washed his hands. Then back to the door, where he paused for a moment.

"I've finished now," he called out.

"Not before time," I said, trying to keep my voice firm and composed.

There was a scratchy sputter and the flare of a match. Mr Quode lit the candle and placed it back in its bracket. I kept my eyes averted. Somehow I couldn't bear to look him in the face.

"Goodbye for now, Mr Smythe," he said. "I shall go and prepare more specialities for your banquet. Such a banquet! You'll be surprised!"

CHAPTER 32

I sat in my usual chair in the parlour, warming myself up in front of the fire. Mr Caulkiss and Melestrina and Craylene had returned from the building site. Melestrina and Craylene were laying the parlour table ready for the banquet.

There were place mats and serviettes and four differently shaped glasses for each setting, along with a whole array of silver forks and knives and spoons. In the centre of the table, beside the wax fruit arrangement, stood half a dozen decanters containing variously coloured liquids. Everything shone and glinted with reflections under the bright light of the chandelier.

Mr Caulkiss was in the parlour too. He seemed preoccupied. He paced in a regular triangle between the curtains and the piano and the door. With his hands behind his back he looked like an old hunched condor. At every corner of the triangle, his eyes turned in my direction. Here comes another pseudo-scientific argument, I thought to myself.

"Mr Smythe," he said abruptly. His Adam's apple dived to the bottom of his throat, then leaped back up again. "I need your contribution."

I gazed at him blankly. At first I didn't know what he meant. But Melestrina and Craylene did.

"This is too soon!" cried Melestrina, raising her hands.

"Getting in ahead!" cried Craylene, stamping her tiny foot.

"Be quiet, women!"

"But it's not fair!"

"Not yet! Not yet!"

"Yes now! Now!" Mr Caulkiss advanced towards my chair, trumpeting mightily through his nose. "NOW!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "My contribution?"

"You remember! The greatest scientific achievement of the century!" He pointed towards the design plans, still pinned up on the wall. "You promised to contribute."

"Oh yes." Now I remembered. I had promised to help him in his laboratory. There was some kind of machine he had constructed in order to demonstrate his theories.

"It is time. Come."

"Does it have to be now?" I felt very reluctant to leave the warmth of the fire.

"Yes."

I shrugged and stood up. Melestrina was frowning and Craylene was tsk-tsking under her breath.

I followed Mr Caulkiss out into the hallway and down the corridor. When we came to the door of his laboratory, he dug into his trouser pocket and produced a key.

"Wait here," he said.

"Here? Don't I come inside with you?"

"No. You can make your contribution right here. Lean against the wall."

I didn't understand.

"Here !" He indicated a precise place for me to stand. "Over a bit more. Now lean back. That's it."

He unlocked the door and disappeared into his laboratory. The door closed behind him before I could get even the least peek inside.

I was completely baffled. It seemed that I wasn't going to play the role of lab assistant after all. So what was to be my contribution?

I listened to Mr Caulkiss moving about on the other side of the wall. There were clicks and clinks and sounds of moving metal, followed by a low throb-thrbbing noise.

Then Mr Caulkiss reappeared. Again he closed the door behind him - only this time it stayed a tiny crack ajar. In one hand he carried a kind of syringe. It had a glass chamber encased in a metal pod, with a long shiny needle protruding from the end of the pod. The needle was almost a foot long.

"Roll up your sleeve."

I had a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. Suddenly it all fitted together. Now I knew what my contribution was to be.

"You want to take some of my blood?"

"Exactly."

"What for?"

"For my machine."

"Your machine?"

"My machine in the laboratory."

"But why does your machine need blood?"

"Come, come, Mr Smythe. You've read the manuscripts. You've seen the design plans. My machine runs on blood."

"Blood? But that's impossible! Blood isn't a fuel!"

"Yes it is. Didn't I prove it Post-Mathematically? Now my machine will demonstrate it in practice."

"I never understood your Post-Mathematics."

"Never understood? But it's so simple. Human Blood equals Human Energy. $B(h)^2 = E(h)^2$ "

"I still don't understand. And I don't want to contribute my blood. I'm not strong enough yet anyway."

"Yes you are. You're completely recovered. I can tell. Your blood is charged with energy."

"No."

"Just a small contribution." He showed me the size of the syringe. "See? You can spare that much. This is the culmination of my whole life's work. Your body will soon make more blood again."

"My body wants to keep the blood it's already got."

"But that's very selfish, Mr Smythe. Very possessive. What gives you the right to lay claim to so much blood? Sheer cardiocentricity!"

"It's my blood."

"Your blood! Phhh!" He snorted contemptuously. "You, Mr Smythe, are merely the vessel. And a most unworthy vessel. So are we all. The human body is not worthy of the blood that it

contains. All those tiny veins and capillaries! How can the blood realize its energy in such narrow constricting pipes? And all those intricate twists and turns! Slowing the blood down, compelling it to turn corners, frustrating its true velocity! Of course the blood can't push through at maximum force! It needs properly designed channels to flow in! It needs to be set free!"

"Set free?"

"Yes! Set your blood free, Mr Smythe! Don't hold it back! Don't keep it in an artificial state of repression! Look at me!"

"You?"

"I have liberated vast quantities of my blood. Freely given, year after year. The machine in my laboratory contains nearly twenty gallons of it. Twenty times more than there is in my own body. Look!"

He flung open his tweed jacket, displaying his chest. I could see what he meant. There wasn't an ounce of ordinary flesh upon him. His body was like a loose sack hung over a frame of sticks. Now I understood why he was so extremely thin and gaunt. No wonder - with all that blood drained out of him!

"Unfortunately, my blood is growing old," he went on, pulling his jacket closed again. "No longer so full of energy. What I need - what my machine needs - is the blood of a young adult, preferably male. Your blood, Mr Smythe. Only a little! Don't begrudge it!"

"But wait a minute! You said gallons and gallons!"

"Oh no. Relax now. Roll up your sleeve and lean back against the wall."

It was just as well I didn't trust him. I took a closer look at the syringe that he held in his hand. There was a tube coming out at the rear end of it. A tube that he was keeping tucked in under his arm, almost but not quite out of sight. I looked further and saw where it reappeared around the other side of his back. It hung in a long loop down to the floor, then snaked its way into the laboratory. It was because of the tube that the laboratory door was still ajar.

"Hah! Only a little? What's that then?"

"What?"

"That tube there! It's not just the syringe you want to fill. You want to suck out all of my blood through that tube!"

"Not all of your blood, Mr Smythe. I know exactly how much you can afford to lose. I've calculated it Post-Mathematically."

"No!"

"But you promised!"

"I didn't know what you meant!"

"Mr Smythe! In the name of Science! I call upon you to fulfill your promise!"

He was showing his teeth and his eyes were glittering with a kind of hypnotic intensity. I wanted to back away but I was strangely helpless. Then suddenly a shout rang out from around the corner in the hall.

"Dinner-time!" It was Mr Quode.

"The banquet is beginning!" Melestrina's voice joined in.

The spell was broken. I moved away from the wall.

"We've got to go back to the parlour now," I said. "I'll think about my contribution later. Perhaps there's some other way . . ."

I turned on my heel and walked off down the corridor. It cost me all my willpower to walk calmly and naturally. I was half afraid that he would rush up and stick the needle into my back. But he didn't. I entered the parlour. The banquet was ready.

CHAPTER 33

There were plates and bowls laid out for every setting. In the centre of the table was an ornate silver dishcover on top of an ornate silver dish. Craylene had already taken her seat. She was more heavily made up than ever. She had red spots painted on her cheeks, pink paper streamers draped over her shoulders, and a sort of sparkling tinsel dust sprinkled on her hair. She looked like something out of a toyshop.

"Here you are!" she called out brightly. "You're sitting opposite me!"

I sat down where she pointed, facing her across the width of the table. I was still trembling from my encounter with Mr Caulkiss. Meanwhile Melestrina moved around pouring drinks. She was wearing an extravagant purple gown with puffed sleeves and a plunging neckline. She filled each of the four glasses at each setting, pouring from four different decanters in turn. We got one glass of yellowy-green liquid, one glass of brown-black liquid, one glass of ruby-red liquid, and one glass of creamy-white liquid.

While she was still busy pouring, Mr Quode came in pushing a trolley. He was dressed in a frilled shirt and bow tie like a waiter, with tight black trousers that rolled up in creases over his fatty thighs. There were three oval dishes on the upper deck of the trolley, and a large soup tureen below. Mr Quode took a long-handled spoon and began serving out food from the dishes.

"Ici le hors d'oeuvre ," he announced, smiling unctuously in my direction.

Then Mr Caulkiss made his entry. He had put on a dinner jacket. He sat down at the head of the table. Melestrina finished pouring the drinks and sat down at the foot of the table. Mr Quode finished serving the hors d'oeuvre and sat down right next to me.

The banquet began with a brief prayer, intoned by Mr Caulkiss:

"Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts,
Which of thy bounty we are about to receive,
Amen."

Then they picked up their forks and started eating. I picked up my fork too. But when I saw what was on my plate I suddenly didn't feel hungry any more.

There were three round objects like large soft marbles, mainly white but veined with red. Also something in the shape of a horseshoe, a sort of coral colour. And then a pile of sliced-up greyish-black stuff, similar to sliced mushrooms. I didn't know what any of it was, but my gorge rose at the mere thought of eating it.

"Specialities of the house," whispered Mr Quode in my ear. "Why not begin with the oeillades au piquante ? This is how to eat them."

He picked up one of the soft marbles on his fork.

"First run it around inside your mouth," he said, running it around inside his mouth. "Savour the texture. Especially against the upper palate. Mmmm! Let it become warm and slippery in juices of the salivary glands. Then position it between the teeth and -"

His jaws made a sudden movement. There was a horrible bursting POP! He sat there in a state of ecstatic appreciation, head tilted and eyes closed. For a few moments he gargled whatever it was at the back of his throat. Then he bent forward and dribbled it out onto his plate as a soggy reddish-white mess.

"Oh! Ah!" he murmured, inhaling deeply. "Smell the bouquet!"

Then he picked up one of his four glasses, the one containing the yellowy-green liquid.

"This is the drink that accompanies the first course," he said, taking a sip.

I reached for my own glass and took a sip too. Anything rather than eat that food! The yellowy-green liquid turned out to be some kind of alcoholic infusion. It had an indescribable but not unpleasant taste, very voluptuous and mellow.

"Now for the dentelles Florentine ," said Mr Quode, spearing the coral-coloured horseshoe-shaped thing on the end of his fork.

"What does that mean?" I asked. "Can you translate?"

"Ah, en anglais ! Quelle dommage !" He bit off a small portion and chewed at it with succulent relish.

"The dentelle ," he said at last, "is from the mouths of young pigs. Je pense que vous l'appellerez the gum. Extracted whole and softened in a marinade of fennel, capers, and their own mother's milk."

He bent forward and dribbled the residue once more onto his plate.

"As for these," he added, indicating the greyish-black things like sliced mushrooms, "these are the tender muzzles of young calves, sauteed in butter and herbs. Or, as we prefer to say, les almeches a la Mirabeau . Try them! Essayez !"

"Er, in a minute. I'm still enjoying my drink first."

I sipped at my drink with a great show of enjoyment, trying to make it last. I waited until Mr Quode was once more absorbed in the inward intensities of his gastronomic experience, too much absorbed to notice what I was doing. Then I took my fork and quietly mashed the stuff on my plate, reducing it to little piles of slop. By the time I had finished it looked quite similar to the little regurgitated piles on Mr Quode's own plate.

Only Craylene noticed what I was doing. She noticed because she wasn't eating either. She had pushed her plate to one side as soon as the food was served. Now she kept catching my eye, then glancing coyly away again. She was like a sixty-year old schoolgirl. Finally she leaned across the table towards me, and said in a whisper:

"I'm a vegetarian! I don't believe in eating meat!"

I smiled and nodded, as if I were a vegetarian too.

After the hors d'oeuvre came the soup course. Mr Quode served it out from the tureen on the trolley, using an enormous ladle. It was a hot thick green soup, quite ordinary-looking at first. But when I dipped into it with my spoon, I discovered hordes of tiny live worm-like things swimming about just under the surface. They were black and shiny and very squirmy.

I played around with my spoon in my soup, and drank from my second glass. It was the brownish-black liquid this time, with a curiously pungent spicy flavour. I sipped at it slowly, again trying to disguise my loss of appetite. But I couldn't repeat my previous trick. My Caulkiss looked down from the top of the table and saw that my bowl was still full.

"Mr Smythe," he said, smiling and showing his teeth. "You must eat up. Make yourself strong. Remember your promise! You need lots of good red blood."

"Mais oui !" Mr Quode took a quick look at my bowl and joined in too. "Swallow them while they're still active, Mr Smythe! Otherwise you'll miss the full effect!"

I could see the full effect demonstrated by Mr Quode himself, even as he spoke. There seemed to be a million tiny sensations going on inside of him. He wriggled and jiggled, he shivered

and churned, he twitched and clutched and hiccupped. He was enjoying himself so much that his eyeballs rolled up until only the whites were showing.

Reluctantly I supped my soup. But I made sure that none of the little black worms got into my spoon. I left them all in a heaving mass at the bottom of my bowl. As for the flavour of the soup - I never even tasted it. My taste buds had gone numb.

Finally I finished and pushed my bowl away. Across on the other side of the table, I saw that Craylene had done exactly the same. The liquid part of her soup was gone, but the little black worms had been left at the bottom of the bowl. She batted her eyelashes at me and gave a sort of conspiratorial titter.

Then it was time for the main course. Mr Quode went out with the trolley to fetch it from the kitchen. Everyone else began drinking from the next glass, the glass of ruby-red liquid. They were getting quite intoxicated by now, with flushed cheeks and swaying heads and woozy eyes. I felt quite intoxicated myself.

When Mr Quode wheeled in the main course, I almost vomited at the sight. It was piled up in an open dish on top of the trolley: hot steaming purply-red coils, smothered in a sauce of greenish slime. The smell was unspeakable, a sort of rich ripe rottenness.

"Ma piece de resistance !" Mr Quode proclaimed proudly.

He moved around the table and served it out with tongs. He lifted it up in three-foot-long sausages, then deposited it with a great flourish onto our plates. The greenish slime fell off in spots and clots all over the lace tablecloth.

"Ah!" cried Mr Caulkiss. "We haven't had this for over four years!"

"And with a new sauce too!" added Mr Quode.

When he had finished serving, he sat down once more beside me. His frilled shirt and black trousers were now spattered with food stains. He picked up one end of a sausagey thing, and bit off the top with his teeth. Inside was a sort of thick stodgy mash, mottled with little white lumps.

"This is the chopped nuts with oatmeal and chives," he said, holding it up for me to inspect. "See? Only partially digested!"

He popped the end of the thing into his mouth and began to suck. The stuffing moved slowly up the tube. When he had drawn off a whole mouthful, he stopped for a while and swallowed. Then he took the thing out of his mouth and again held it up. Now there was a new kind of stuffing visible inside the opening, yellow and soft and paste-like.

"This," he said, "is from the previous day's ingestion. Cabbage and honey and artichoke. It's the cabbage that makes the yellow colour. But much more fully digested. You'd hardly know it was cabbage at all, would you!"

He started sucking again. I sipped at my drink. I found that the smell of the ruby-red liquid at least covered up that other foul smell. But not for long. Soon Mr Quode had sucked his way through to yet another kind of stuffing. Once more he held it up for me to inspect. A thin fluent ooze this time, brownish-grey and smelling worse than ever.

"Half way through now," he explained. "Chopped mince and onion and cheese. See? That's the diet I fed them on Friday last week."

I couldn't keep quiet any longer. I had to know.

"What do you mean, fed them ? What are these things?"

"What are they? Oh, didn't I say? These are moncelles d'agneau en daube a la Provencale . Or in translation if you must, the upper intestinal tracts of specially-fed sheep. Voila !"

"Sheep's guts?!"

"Moncelles d'agneau . Six different flavours, each in a different stage of digestion. It's taken twelve days to prepare the animals for this dish, you know!"

"Eat up, Mr Smythe," Mr Caulkiss called out from the top of the table. "Offal is particularly good for the blood!"

Luckily, though, neither Mr Caulkiss nor Mr Quode kept a close watch on me. I stirred the sausagey things around on my plate for a while. Then I slid my plate to the edge of the table and with a sudden movement tipped it right off. The whole foul mess of intestines fell to the floor.

"Oh! Mr Smythe! Your moncelles are tombes !" Mr Quode emerged with a start from his inward gourmet raptures. He studied the steaming green and brown pile on the carpet. "Shall I put them back on your plate?"

"No! I can't eat them now."

"Quelle dommage ! Would you perhaps like to share from my plate?"

"No thanks. I've already eaten half of my own anyway."

"You're sure?"

"I'm absolutely full. Couldn't eat another thing!"

"Ah, but you must have some dessert!"

"Must I?"

"I made it specially for you."

"I'm having some!" Craylene piped up suddenly from the other side of the table. "No meat in the dessert!"

I noticed that her main course plate was perfectly clean and bare. Evidently Mr Quode had not even bothered to serve her his moncelles d'agneau .

So we came at last to the dessert. It wasn't like the other courses - not obviously repellent and disgusting. But I got a great shock when Mr Quode wheeled it in.

It was a decorated cake made in the shape of a face. My face. There was no mistaking it. Mr Quode had portrayed me in coloured icing, with pink and brown and black for mouth and eyes and hair. It was a work of art.

There was a general round of applause.

"Magnificent!" cried Mr Caulkiss.

"Welcome to Morbing Vyle, Mr Smythe!" cried Melestrina.

"Wonderful to have you!" Mr Caulkiss raised his glass, the one containing the creamy-white liquid. "Your health!"

Then Mr Quode divided up the cake and passed it around. They took a piece each, with much laughter and merriment.

"I've got your forehead, Mr Smythe!"

"Here's your chin!"

"Your eyebrows! I'm going to nibble your eyebrows!"

My own piece of cake came from the side of my face, one cheek and one ear. I drank my drink and nibbled away with the rest of them. The creamy-white liquid was very alcoholic indeed. Soon I didn't much care what I ate - as long as nobody actually told me the ingredients. The cake was very sweet, with multiple layers, melting in the mouth.

"Mmmmmah!" Mr Quode finished his cake and drink, and slumped back in his chair. He eased his hands in under his shirt, and rubbed and pressed all over his stomach. He seemed to be encouraging his digestion with gentle massage. His stomach gave forth a long effusive gargle.

Melestrina relaxed too, and Mr Caulkiss. Melestrina loosened her corset with a mighty twang, and immediately underwent a kind of overall expansion of thighs, hips, and bosom in every direction. Mr Caulkiss balanced his chin on his hands and his elbows on the table. He seemed to be contemplating his own nose.

Only Craylene was still watching me. She kept casting little simpering glances across the table. Finally she leaned right over and said in a whisper:

"Mr Smythe! I'd like to show you my Little Ones now! Come and I'll show you!"

"Your Little Ones?" I repeated fuzzily. I was having difficulty focussing my mind. I stared back into Craylene's pink-and-white face. "You'll show me?"

"Yes, if you come down to the cellar -"

"WHAT IS THIS!?" Down at the end of the table, Melestrina flung back her head and pointed accusingly. "It is not your turn, Craylene Caulkiss! It is I who will now provide the entertain-ment!"

"Oui ! Oui !" Mr Quode slithered upright in his chair and clapped his hands. "My wife will perform!"

"Entertainment by Melestrina Quode," announced Mr Caulkiss.

Melestrina lumbered to her feet. "I shall present my tableaux!"

CHAPTER 34

She crossed to the far side of the parlour and vanished behind the long black curtains. There was a great deal of bulging and billowing, followed by sounds of pinging elastic and fasteners being unpopped. Then various items of clothing were kicked out one by one from under the curtains: gown, petticoat, corset, stockings.

Mr Quode, meanwhile, had left his chair and gone out of the room. He returned a few moments later dragging a huge tea-chest. On the side were the stencilled words: COSTUMES & PROPERTIES. He rummaged around and selected for himself a silver trumpet. Then he propelled the tea-chest in behind the curtain to Melestrina.

There was more bulging and billowing. Melestrina called out:

"I need my theatrical assistant! Where is he? Let him come!"

Mr Caulkiss reached for the ornate silver dishcover that had been lying on the table since the start of the banquet. He lifted it high in the air and revealed underneath the small chubby form of a naked baby. It was Panker, curled-up in the silver dish. He was motionless for only a fraction of a second. Then with a WHOOOSH! and a pink blur of speed he took off across the table. He bounded to the floor, flew twice around the room and vanished behind the curtains. There was the tiny squeak of a baby that had found its mother.

More bulging and billowing. Then a hand appeared, holding a large placard:

OUR WORLD OF WONDER!

SCENES OF HISTORY AND IMAGINATION

PRESENTED BY

MELESTRINA QUODE

The hand waited until we had all had time to read. Then it withdrew, and reappeared a moment later with a slightly smaller placard:

NO.1

THE CORPSE OF HANNIBAL DEVOURED BY RATS

Another pause. Then Mr Quode raised his trumpet and blew a long flatulent note. The curtains parted and Melestrina stepped forth. Her toga was a voluminous white nightie, and she wore an upturned metal basin for a helmet on her head. She stood in front of us and lowered herself to the floor. Slowly, grandly, she subsided into a state of outstretched immobility.

Then Panker appeared. He was bundled up in an old grey scarf. One end of the scarf trailed out behind him like a tail. Obviously he was playing the part of the rats. He darted up and started to devour the mountain of flesh which represented the corpse of Hannibal.

What he actually did was to make small nudges against Melestrina's arms and legs. Melestrina showed that she was being devoured by appropriate jerks and twitches. Finally Panker scampered all over her stomach and thighs and bosom, uttering a series of high-pitched squeaks. By the time Melestrina stood up to take her bow, it was clear that the rats had eaten the entire corpse of Hannibal from top to toe.

There was great applause. Melestrina and Panker vanished once more behind the curtain. Then another placard came out to announce:

NO.2

FALLING DOWN A 500 FOOT CLIFF

WITH HANDBAG AND POODLE

This time Mr Quode not only blew a note on his trumpet, he also passed amongst us with a length of tarred rope, waving it under our noses.

"It's a cliff by the sea," he explained. "This will give you the smell of the sea."

Then he arranged one of the dining-table chairs in front of the curtains. Melestrina appeared, dressed in a straw hat and a bright summer frock. She carried a handbag in one hand, and Panker in the other. He was still bundled up in the old grey scarf, only this time without the tail. It seemed that he was to represent the poodle.

Melestrina stepped up onto the chair. For a long minute she looked around at her audience, while Mr Quode struggled and heaved to hold her steady. Then suddenly she raised her arms and jumped. The floorboards shuddered with seismic quakes and after-quakes.

But that was merely her leap from the top of the cliff; now came the 500 foot descent. Still with her arms uplifted, holding handbag and poodle out at the sides, she stood as if transfixed by the

speed of her fall. Only her face moved. Mouth agape, eyebrows hoisted, eyes wide, she stared in mounting terror at the carpet below.

And then the impact. She buckled all over and collapsed suddenly in a heap. Again the floorboards shuddered. Handbag and poodle flew through the air and landed on the other side of the room. She lay on the floor in sprawling disarray, bursting forth from her frock in every direction. I could see her giant naked legs exposed to the thighs, and her bosom like twin plump pillows spread out on the carpet. It was a spectacularly inelegant sight. But Melestrina, true to her art, remained exactly as she had fallen. She waited until everyone had had a good long look. Then she rose, readjusted herself, and received her applause.

"Remarkable! Incontestable!" cried Mr Caulkiss, clapping on his dry bony knees with his dry bony hands. "Don't you think so, Mr Smythe? Have some more to drink!"

He pushed one of the decanters down the table. This one contained yet another kind of liquid, deep violet in colour. Under Mr Caulkiss's watchful eye, I poured myself a glass and took a small sip. It nearly burned the roof of my mouth off. For a moment the room seemed to be spinning around in circles.

Meanwhile the tableaux continued. There were so many, I can't remember them all. But I remember:

NO.5

STRANGLING AN ESKIMO WITH GUITAR STRINGS

(Panker played the eskimo)

and

NO.8

THE MAGNIFICENT SCREAM OF ENNIUS INCONTABULUS

(a five minute mime in total silence)

and

NO. 12

BATTERING THE BELOVED BY MOONLIGHT:

AN INTERLUDE

(Mr Quode accompanied the action with a trumpet serenade)

Those were just some of the ones that I could understand. There were also many more where I couldn't even begin to guess who was who or what was supposed to be happening. For example:

NO.11

LOST IN THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

(Melestrina appeared to be playing several parts simultaneously in this one)

and

NO.22

AL AHMEG'S FAMOUS GLUE TORTURE

(Melestrina wore a sort of striped rug, Arabian-style)

and

NO.24

QUEEN BOADICEA AWAKENED BY AN EXTREMELY
LOUD NOISE

(Here Melestrina made highly suggestive movements with her legs that seemed quite unrelated to loud noises or awakening)

So it went on. I was partly bored and partly disgusted. Several of the tableaux were actually very crude and sexually explicit. I'd never thought of myself as narrow-minded, but often I had to look away in sheer embarrassment. There was:

NO.20

PRIMITIVE SEX-MURDER IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

(Melestrina bounced her bosom violently against the floor)

and

NO.26

THE PYTHON'S REVENGE

(Here Melestrina did unspeakable things with Mr Quode's tarred length of rope)

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" twittered Craylene across the table. "Isn't it blatant! Isn't it shameless!"

But I had the impression that she didn't really mind. Her tiny doll-like eyes were lit up with excitement. And Mr Quode and Mr Caulkiss were equally excited, calling aloud for their favourite performances.

"Do NO.29!"

"Let's have NO.31!"

"No! No! NO.29!"

In fact, it was NO.29 that brought the show to an end. According to the placard, NO.29 was to be a representation of:

MATING RITUALS OF THE AMAZONIAN
TREE-MONKEY

Melestrina wore a long fur coat that came down to her knees. Panker came out hidden beneath an orangey-brown tea-cosy, bearing the label LARGE RIPE FRUIT.

Meanwhile Mr Quode was setting the atmosphere by walking around with a squashy overripe banana on a plate.

"To give us the scent of the tropical jungle," he explained.

But then the accident occurred. Ecstatically inhaling the scent of the tropics, Mr Quode failed to notice when the banana fell off the plate. A moment later he trod down onto it.

SHLOOOOOOOP!

His feet skidded in all directions and his pudgy form went cartwheeling through the air. With a mighty thump he landed right on top of the tea-cosy. Panker was flattened.

There was a pained and quivering squeak. Then Panker shot out from under Mr Quode's left buttock. He had changed colour, no longer a streak of pink but a streak of purpley-blue. He darted up between Melestrina's legs, under the fur coat.

Melestrina's eyes grew dramatically round.

"No!" she cried. "This May Not Be!"

And she began beating furiously with both hands, as if trying to put out a bushfire between her thighs.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Craylene. "Panker is trying to return to the womb!"

"It's his insecurity complex," explained Mr Caulkiss. "He's still very young, you know!"

Melestrina floundered about with her legs pressed tightly together. Still pounding and wallopping, she fell to the floor. She rolled across the carpet, she overturned a chair, she knocked against the table and sent the crockery flying.

"Ah, what wonderful energy that child has!" said Mr Caulkiss, as Panker, expelled at last, whizzed frantically around the parlour, up over the walls, across the ceiling, and finally out through the door.

I blinked and tried to clear my head. I had had about as much as I could take. It was all too grotesque! Suddenly something in me snapped. I must have been very drunk. I forgot about trying to keep on the right side of the inhabitants. Suddenly I said at the top of my voice:

"I think you're all completely crazy !"

CHAPTER 35

Their response was not what I expected. They looked at me in mild surprise. Craylene and Mr Caulkiss were still seated at the table. Melestrina and Mr Quode lay on the floor. Melestrina was

under the piano, spreadeagled en masse like a stranded whale. Mr Quode had discovered the fallen pile of moncelles d'agneau , and was nuzzling very softly against it with his face and cheeks.

"Crazy!" I repeated. "Crazy! Crazy! Crazy!"

If I thought they would get angry I was mistaken. Instead they laughed. Craylene put up her hand to cover her mouth and started to titter. Mr Caulkiss threw back his head and guffawed. I realised that they were all completely drunk - even more drunk than I was.

"What do you mean when you say 'crazy'?" cried Mr Caulkiss. "How do you define 'craziness'?"

"I mean . . . the opposite to normal!"

"But how do you decide what's normal? Who counts as normal?"

"The majority of people. Everyone outside of Morbing Vyle. Or nearly everyone. Most people don't behave like this."

"But they will!" boomed Melestrina from her place on the floor. "They will!"

"Behaviour can change!" added Mr Caulkiss. He was swaying in his chair even as he spoke. "Behaviour will change! The time will come when we shall set the standards!"

"What, you ? Some hopes! Four adults - and a baby - and a diseased old man - and a - a - a - " I couldn't even think how to describe Gambels. "You're just cut off from the real world! You don't even realise how weird you are!"

"Cut off we may be!" replied Mr Caulkiss. "But we are the future! We are the centre of the world!"

He swung his arm and knocked a plate off the table.

"Centre of the world?" I sniffed derisively. "Because of your tinpot little religious cult? No-one even knows you exist!"

"Ph-hh-hh-hh-hh!" Mr Caulkiss whinnied through his nose. "Not now they don't! But when He returns - !"

"Hallelujah!" cried Melestrina. "The Great Return!"

This time nobody shushed her. They were all too drunk to care.

"He will be reborn!"

"He will walk the earth!"

"He will lead us out!"

I tried to be sarcastic. "So you're all waiting around for a Second Coming, are you? You're waiting for the Lord to be reborn?"

"Yes!" Mr Caulkiss was impervious to sarcasm. "He has promised! He will be reborn right here in Morbing Vyle!"

I shook my head pityingly. "Right here in Morbing Vyle? You're even more ridiculous than I thought. Why Morbing Vyle?"

"Because we have His remains!"

"His remains? What remains?"

"Of His mortal body! We are the guardians!"

"You mean, remains like religious relics? Like saints' relics? Bits of bone or fingernail or stuff?"

"No, no!" Now it was Craylene who piped up. "We have His whole body Mr Smythe!"

"But that's impossible." I felt that I was getting out of my depth. "I don't know much about religion, but -"

"No, you don't! You don't!" There was a general gale of hilarity. Even Mr Quode raised his smeary face and joined in with a snigger. I took a deep breath.

"Well, what exactly do you believe then? How was His body preserved? How did it happen to get brought to England? What's your version?"

"He gave the orders on how to preserve His body!"

"With special embalming herbs."

"Then it was sealed up in a leather bag."

"And put inside our Altar. You saw our High Altar, Mr Smythe!"

"That's why we are the centre of the world. Our church contains the Altar and the Altar contains the bag and the bag contains the body of our Lord!"

I felt suddenly faint. "A bag?" I whispered. "Did you say a leather bag?"

CHAPTER 36

It was all starting to come back to me. Completely out of the blue, the mention of the bag had jogged my memory. The leather bag inside the Altar!

Now I remembered what had happened after my journey through the forest. I remembered looking for shelter in the pouring rain . . . I remembered finding the chairs and lectern and the square marble block of the Altar . . . then prising open the panel . . . and climbing inside and sitting down . . . yes, I had sat down on the very bag they were talking about . . .

When I came out of my reverie, I discovered that Craylene and Mr Caulkiss were no longer in their seats, and Melestrina and Mr Quode were no longer on the floor. I twisted around. Silently, as if by magic, they had gathered in a group behind the back of my chair.

"What do you know about the bag, Mr Smythe?" demanded Mr Caulkiss.

I wasn't sure how to answer. Had I committed some forbidden sacrilege? They came up closer and stood over me. They seemed suddenly quite different - no longer ridiculous or farcical. Their drunkenness had vanished as if it had never existed.

"Tell us what you know," said Mr Caulkiss in a quiet menacing voice.

I shrugged. "I just thought of something. When I first arrived in Morbing Vyle. I was wandering in the rain and I came across the Altar. I discovered that panel in the Altar you could open up."

"You opened the panel? You broke the wax ?"

"I didn't realise. I didn't even know it was an Altar then. I was drenched through. All I wanted was somewhere to shelter from the rain."

"Shelter? You sheltered inside the Altar ? You climbed in there with the - the -"

Mr Caulkiss seemed to have got the word stuck in his throat.

"With the bag, yes. I sat on it."

Mr Quode gasped. Melestrina clasped her hands violently in a gesture of prayer. Mr Caulkiss brought his face down very close to mine.

"And then?"

"What?"

"What happened next? After you - sat on it?"

"I - er -"

I quailed before his wild and glittering eyes. I began to wish I had never remembered about the bag. They were like vultures hovering over me.

The curious thing was that I really couldn't remember what had happened next. There was still one final area of blockage in my mind. All I knew was that what had happened next was something utterly horrible and impossible. Something that my mind refused to accept. Something I didn't even want to remember.

"We found you in a trench," said Mr Caulkiss. He spoke very slowly and deliberately, in a kind of strangled whisper. "How did you get from the Altar to the trench?"

"I'm not sure."

"Think, Mr Smythe!"

"GLORY!!! GLORY!!! GLORY!!!"

I watched in awe. Now Craylene started frisking about like a spring lamb. Melestrina bellowed and Mr Caulkiss howled like a wolf. Tears of joy were streaming down their faces.

"No, listen!" I cried. "It can't be what you think! It's impossible! There must be some other explanation!"

But they paid no attention to me.

"THE GREAT RETURN IS AT HAND!!!"

"IEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE - !!!"

"MATERIALISM WILL BE DEFEATED!!!"

"IEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE - !!"

"THE SPIRIT WILL CONQUER!!!"

"IEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE - !!!"

"GLORY!!! GLORY!!! GLORY!!!"

"But listen!" I made another attempt. "Maybe I imagined it! I only said it was like it was trying to take hold of me!"

But they seemed to have forgotten that I was in the room. They were in a state of extraordinary religious exaltation. Their eyes were like huge lanterns, blazing with a terrible fervour.

Then Mr Quode jumped up from the floor. His tight black trousers had split wide open at the seams. He snatched up the silver trumpet and blew a mighty flourish.

"We must march forth!" he cried. "To see this miracle!"

Mr Caulkiss stopped whirling around and headed towards the parlour door.

"I go! To put on my holy vestments! March forth! March forth!"

The others formed up in a kind of procession. With Mr Quode at the head, they paraded around the room in a circle.

"FORWARD TO THE CHURCH!!!"

"FORWARD TO THE ALTAR!!!"

"FORWARD TO OUR LORD!!!"

Melestrina snatched up the silver dishcover and banged away on it with a spoon. Three times they circled around the room. Then they headed towards the parlour door.

"OUR LORD IS THE GREAT LORD!!!"

"THE FIERCEST LORD!!!"

"THE MIGHTIEST LORD!!!"

All of a sudden, something clicked in my brain. It had been a long time coming. I had been so sure that they were Protestant Fundamentalists. But now, all of a sudden -

"Wait a minute!" I called out. "Wait!"

But they were already disappearing out through the door.

"Don't go! I want to know -!"

I jumped up from my chair and ran after them. Craylene was the last in line. I caught her by the shoulder just before she went out.

"I want to know!" I shouted. "Who is this Lord of yours?"

Craylene turned for a moment. "Who is He?"

"Yes, who is He? I don't believe you're talking about Jesus Christ at all?"

"Jesus Christ? That namby-pamby! Of course not!"

"Then who?"

Craylene showed her tiny teeth in a smile. "Our Lord is the Vicar of Morbing Vyle."

CHAPTER 38

Then she was gone. The procession marched down the hall and out of the house. I heard the front door open, and a sudden blast of cold air blew through the parlour.

For a long moment I just stood there thunderstruck. Then I crossed to the window and slipped in behind the drapes, alongside Melestrina's box of props. I drew back the muslin undercurtain and looked out.

It was pitch dark, with no moon at all. The three figures were visible only in silhouette. I could just make out Mr Quode prancing and curvetting in his split black trousers, Melestrina in her long fur coat, Craylene with her streamers billowing in the breeze. They didn't seem to feel the cold.

There was one additional figure too - the bounding bouncing four-legged figure of Gambels. Melestrina guided him along on the end of his reins. Craylene had taken over the role of percussionist, banging away with the spoon on the dishcover.

I watched the procession move off into the distance. Trench by trench they negotiated a route across the clearing. The Altar was away to my right at the far end of the Church. Soon they were all swallowed up in the darkness. Now there was only the fading sound of banging and trumpeting, cheering and chanting, and Gambel's strange cries of "Worraffa! Worraffa!"

Then I heard a different sound: the slam of the front door shutting. A moment later, and Mr Caulkiss strode into view. He carried a lamp in his hand, a large black lamp like a carriage lamp.

Over his clothes he wore a voluminous black ankle-length cassock. The cassock flapped and the lamp swung as he hurried along after the others.

I let the curtain drop and turned away. The house was in total silence. I went across and stood in front of the fire. I was trembling all over.

So their Lord was the Vicar of Morbing Vyle. Not only were they not Protestant Fundamentalists - they weren't even Christians! I had got it so wrong. When they said 'Praise the Lord!' they meant 'Praise the Vicar of Morbing Vyle!' He was the one whose body was preserved in the bag inside the Altar. He was the one who was going to come back to life. Perhaps already was coming back to life . . .

I shook my head. I refused to believe it. I decided to calm myself with a drink. I picked up the decanter of violet liquid and poured myself a whole glassful. That was my big mistake. I'd forgotten how powerful the stuff could be. I swigged it all down in a gulp.

Immediately my mouth caught fire and my head seemed to explode. The walls of the room leaped out at me a couple of times, then started rotating around and around. My body turned violently hot and cold.

For a moment I thought I was going to vomit. But I didn't. I passed out instead. With graceful declension I sank to the floor, and everything went blank.

Part Four:



CHRISTMAS EVE

CHAPTER 39

I slept on and on in a state of oblivion. It was late in the morning when I finally awoke. I was lying on the floor near the table. Close by my feet was the foul-smelling pile of moncelles d'agneau . Bits of smashed crockery lay scattered over the carpet.

I looked around. There was something strange about the parlour this morning. A strange sort of hush and calm - as though the world had been wrapped in cotton wool. There was also a strange quality about the light coming in through the parlour window. Very pure and white and cool. I couldn't work out what it was.

I rose swiftly to my feet - and immediately wished I hadn't. A blinding pain burst in my head like a hammer-blow. I had a monster hangover. My stomach churned and my mouth felt like old socks.

But I had to investigate. Feeling very fragile, I walked across to the window. I pulled back the drape and lifted the muslin undercurtain. A soft pad of whiteness was lodged at the bottom of every pane. It was snowing!

I tried to look out, but the outside world had vanished. There was nothing to see beyond the white flakes flocking and falling, slanting now one way, now the other. Gentle, unhurried, but very very thick. It was a total white-out.

I watched for a while. I wondered what had happened to the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle. I remembered how they had marched off to the Altar last night. Where were they now?

I discovered the answer soon enough. I crossed to the parlour door and found them all outside in the hall. They were lying flat out on the tiles, fast asleep and snoring. They looked like survivors from a shipwreck. The light from the stained glass window played over them in colours of red and purple and blue.

They must have flopped to the ground the moment they came in. Craylene lay face down with her paper streamers tattered and torn. Mr Caulkiss lay on his back with his mouth open. Dirty yellow stains covered his cassock. Mr Quode's clothes were even dirtier, and he seemed to be wearing most of them back to front. He had one arm completely out of his shirt, and his bow tie appeared at the back of his neck. As for Melestrina, she lay in her fur coat like a fallen avalanche. Her hair was matted and there were dark circles under her eyes.

God only knows what they had been doing during the night. But they had radiant expressions on their faces. Even as they slept and snored, I could see their beatific smiles.

What did it mean? I didn't aim to stay and find out. I tiptoed very cautiously around their prostrate bodies. I was heading for the front door.

But it wasn't so easy to leave the vicarage. When I opened the door, the frozen air took my breath away. The falling snow was like a hanging screen. And then there was Gambels.

"YAFFY-YAFFY-YAFF!!"

His kennel was right beside the front doorstep. I could just distinguish the shape of his balaclava-clad head sticking out. He went into action the moment I opened the door. He jerked and bounced around so violently that his whole kennel jerked and bounced around too.

"YAFFY-YAFFY-YAFF!!"

I retreated and shut the door. The Caulkisses and Quodes were starting to stretch and stir, roused by the cold air or the noise. I took one look and made for the staircase. I didn't want to talk to them. After last night I didn't want to have anything more to do with them.

I sped upstairs and back to my bedroom. I don't know if they came fully awake - but if they did, they soon went back to sleep again. I moved quietly along the upstairs corridor and closed the bedroom door behind me.

CHAPTER 40

I spent the rest of the day lying in bed. I didn't feel well. My skull was pounding and my stomach was in revolt. I lay snuggled between the sheets, still fully dressed with only my shoes removed. Even trying to think gave me a headache. I buried my splitting head in the pillow and lay very very still. Sometimes I drowsed and dozed.

Outside the window, the snow kept falling. It fell with a soft swishing hush, casting a moving mottled light on the nursery walls. I imagined that the nursery was at the bottom of a deep white sea,.

Towards the end of the afternoon, the light started to fade. Then I began to hear sounds in the house. People moving, voices talking, water running into a bath. It seemed that the Caulkisses and Quodes had slept off the excesses of the night before. Now they were cleaning themselves up.

I felt a bit better myself. My stomach was still queasy but the worst of my headache had gone. Yet still I stayed snuggled between the sheets. I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Then I heard a tiny tap-tap-tap at the nursery door. A moment later and the knob started to turn. Slowly the door creaked open and a head peered in. It was the balding oily red-fringed head of Mr Quode.

"Ah Mr Smythe!" He addressed me in a loud whisper. "Wonderful wonderful Mr Smythe! Have you had a lovely long sleep?"

I turned my face away. "I'm still having it," I said.

"You're so special to us now, Mr Smythe." He smiled caressively. "We're more fond of you than ever. You told us! Mr Caulkiss calls you the Bearer of Good Tidings."

"Told you?"

"Mr Caulkiss felt the bag, you know. He reached inside the Altar. It was moving, just like you said. Such a great part you have played!"

"Didn't you look inside the bag?"

"Mais non ! Of course not! Our Lord will emerge when he is ready! The Bursting of the Bag! Mr Caulkiss expects it any day now. O triumph! O ecstasy!"

"O phooey," I murmured under my breath.

"Would you like to come downstairs and celebrate with us, Mr Smythe? We want to be so nice to you! We want you to join in everything now!"

"I don't feel well enough. I've got a hangover."

"A hangover? Oh, quelle dommage ! What can we do to help?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Nothing? Oh la, there must be something! We don't want you feeling left out! No trouble is too much!"

"Just leave me alone."

He made a little moue of disappointment. "I'm sure I can think of something."

I refused to respond. He stood hovering in the doorway.

"I'll leave you alone then, shall I?"

Still I refused to respond. After a while he closed the door quietly and went away.

But he didn't stay gone for long. Half an hour later he was back. By now the daylight was almost gone. His gleaming head appeared like a pale moon around the door.

"I've had an idea, Mr Smythe! Magnifique ! Incroyable ! Do you want to hear my idea?"

I gave a groan and buried my head deeper into the pillows.

"I'm going to give you a Christmas present! I've got such an exciting present for you!"

I came out from the pillows. "I thought you didn't believe in Christmas?"

"Not for us. But this is for you. To make you feel better. You said you liked Christmas presents!"

"But it's not time yet. Christmas Day is tomorrow."

"Oh I know. This is something to look forward to. It won't arrive until the middle of the night. Naturellement !"

He seemed absolutely delighted with his idea. He was rubbing himself ecstatically up and down against the side of the door.

"I can wait," I said dryly.

I pulled the sheets up over my head, preventing any further conversation. The rubbing sounds continued for a while. Then there was a soft little sigh and the door closed shut again.

But still that wasn't the end of him. Half an hour later he stuck his head once more around the door. By now it was completely dark. He was carrying a candle.

"It's not time yet," I told him.

"No, no, this isn't your present," he said soothingly. "I just came to say we're about to have dinner. Are you sure you won't join us?"

"Quite sure, thank you."

"It's cuisine a la Quode ." He was trying to tempt me. Did he really still believe that I enjoyed his disgusting food? "An original recipe. Boutons d'oreille a la Nicoise . Mmmmmm!"

I shook my head. The mere thought made my stomach turn. I remembered last night's recipes - the sheep's guts and pigs' gums and wriggling worms in the soup. I felt my gorge rising.

"Shall I bring you some up on a tray? I can feed you with a spoon - like we used to do!"

"Go 'way!" I muttered desperately. I knew I was going to be sick. I clasped my hand over my mouth. If only he would go -

He went. Just in time. As soon as the door closed behind him, I threw off the bedclothes and pulled the chamber pot out from under my bunk.

BLGGGHHHHHH!!!

I vomited. And again:

BLGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!!!

My last night's meal lay slopped in the chamber pot. I sat on the side of the bed, breathing slowly. After a few minutes I felt better - much better. My stomach must have been wanting to get rid of that meal all day.

I stood up and walked around the room. There were draughts rising from the cracks between the floorboards. The cool air was invigorating. I felt like a new man.

I nodded to myself. I had wasted the whole day doing nothing. But now at last I was ready for action. I had to make my escape while I still had the chance.

I listened to the sounds from below. The Caulkisses and Quodes were chanting a solemn chant, ending with a loud 'Amen'. They must be saying Grace. They were all in the parlour having their dinner. It was the perfect opportunity!

CHAPTER 41

First I made my preparations. I put on my shoes and as many warm clothes as I could find. It was going to be cold in the snow outside. I fumbled around for several minutes, dressing myself in the dark.

Then I slipped out through the nursery door. I had to feel my way along the corridor, groping against the walls. But there was a faint glow of light at the top of the stairs.

I came to the landing and looked down the stairs. The glow was coming from the chandelier in the parlour. The light streamed out through the open door, across the hall. I could hear the tinkle of cutlery and voices raised in excited conversation. But I couldn't quite catch the words.

I crept cautiously downstairs. I peered through the railings of the banister, keeping my eye on the open door. Now I could see the piano stool and the legs of the table. Lower and lower I descended, trying not to creak on the wooden boards. About ten steps from the bottom Craylene's tiny high-heeled shoes came into view, and the legs of Mr Quode.

" . . . I believe we should start on the Methodists and Baptists." That was Mr Caulkiss making a pronouncement. I could hear what they were saying now.

"O rather convert the Catholics!" boomed Melestrina Quode. "Forthwith to Ireland!"

"No, no!" chirruped Craylene Caulkiss. "The Church of England! We must make sure of England first!"

"Bien entendu !" Now the unctuous tones of Mr Quode. "But then over to Europe. I want to conquer Paris!"

"I say the Scandinavians!"

"Eastwards to Russia! We must crush the Bolsheviks!"

"What about the Muslims!"

"America!"

"Russia!"

"Paris!"

"Be quiet!!!" roared Mr Caulkiss, thumping on the table. "He will decide!"

"Oh of course. We can only advise."

"He will lead and we shall follow."

"Of course."

"I'd still like to conquer Paris," murmured Mr Quode.

I grimaced. What delusions of grandeur! They were so unrealistic, it was ridiculous. But I didn't feel like laughing any more.

I considered my plan of escape. The front door was the easiest way out - but Gambels would be there. He would certainly give the alarm. No, it had to be the back door. Out into the courtyard and over the courtyard walls.

I crept down the last few steps and along the hall to the parlour door. I halted just out of sight at the side of the door. They had gone back to eating their dinner. I listened to the sounds of cutlery clinking and jaws chomping and the occasional gargle of Mr Quode's digestion.

I took a deep breath. This was the risky bit. I would have to slip across in front of the open door. I could only hope that no-one was looking.

But before I could make my move, someone else moved first. It was Craylene Caulkiss. She must have got up from the table without a word. She was coming right out through the parlour door.

I froze. If she had glanced my way she would have surely seen me. But she didn't. She came out through the door and headed immediately towards the back of the house.

I watched her tiny figure disappearing down the hall. She was carrying a candle in a saucer. She turned the corner into the corridor towards the kitchen. I followed the diminishing click-clack of her heels. Where was she going? What was she doing?

I didn't have to wait long to find out. A minute later the click-clack was approaching again. Brighter and brighter came the light around the corner. I had missed my chance to retreat back up the stairs - now it was too late. This time she couldn't help but see me.

But again I was in luck. She emerged from the corridor and crossed towards the opening that led to the cellar. She didn't even look down the hall. For a single brief moment she was illuminated in front of the niche where the coat-stand stood. For a single brief moment I saw the huge red hunk of meat she was holding in her hand. Then she passed in through the opening and was gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I could hear her high heels going down the stone steps. She made a sort of soft crooning sound to herself. Obviously she was paying one of her usual visits to the Little Ones.

I nodded to myself. Suddenly it all fitted together. The red hunk of meat must be for feeding the Little Ones. So they weren't sweet little pets at all - but flesh-eating carnivores of some kind! Probably very large and very savage. I should have expected it.

I waited for a few moments. When she got to the bottom of the steps, there was the rattle of a padlock followed by the creak of an opening door. I listened for animal sounds, for growlings or snarlings. But there was only silence.

I waited no longer. Inside the parlour the conversation was beginning again. Time to make my move, before anything else happened. I crouched down low and slunk past the open door.

It took me a mere split second. They were sitting around the table under the chandelier. Mr Caulkiss and Mr Quode had their backs to the door, while Melestrina was drinking from her glass. No-one was looking my way. Simple!

I hurried on down the hall and into the corridor. I passed the door to the kitchen and the door to Mr Caulkiss's laboratory. Now for my escape!

CHAPTER 42

I pushed open the back door and stood in the doorway. The air was filled with falling snowflakes. I couldn't see them but I could feel their wet icy touch. They settled and froze on my face and hands. I turned up the collar of my coat and pulled Craylene's fox-fur tighter around my throat. Shutting the door behind me, I stepped out into the night.

At once I was lost in a strange blanked-out world. I couldn't see the walls of the courtyard or the long low building that housed the animals. But I could remember. And I remembered how one of the side walls had a trellis set up against it. That would be the best place for climbing over. I headed in what I thought was the right direction.

A thick carpet of snow squeaked and crunched under my feet. It was already five or six inches deep. I had to walk with an awkward high-stepping gait. I marched along in the straightest possible line, regardless of paths or vegetable patches. Once I trampled through the glass of a garden frame, with a breaking shattering sound.

Suddenly a hump in the snow appeared out of nowhere and hit me sharply on the shins. I crumpled to my knees, catching on to the hump as I fell. And then I realised. What I had walked into was the wall of the well in the centre of the courtyard.

I was still on my knees, still recovering my breath, when a muffled voice called out from below:

"Arrrrrgh! Who's there?"

I cursed to myself. I had roused Mr Scrab once again! I looked down and saw a sudden movement break through the smooth white snow by my feet. The surface caved in and four long withered fingers stuck out like a claw. A moment later, and four more fingers stuck out alongside.

"Who is it then? Who comes to see old Mr Scrab?"

The claws worked back and forth through the snow, widening the hole. Scrape, scrape, scrape. The black patch of the grate appeared and a foul rotten smell wafted up to my nostrils.

"Ah, Mr Smythe, is it?" Still I couldn't see his face. "And what brings you to see me?"

"Oh, I - um -"

"Come to tell me the news, have you?"

"Have I?"

"But I've already heard, see? Caulkiss and Quode told me. The Great Return! Soon our Lord will be with us once again!" His voice grew phlegmy with emotion. "Ah, happy I am, to have lived to see the day! A blessed miracle, Mr Smythe! Is it not a blessed miracle?"

"I suppose."

"What's that? You suppose?" His voice turned rough and rasping. "Are you a true believer or aren't you? Are you with us or not?"

"Of course, of course," I said placatingly. "I'm the same as all the rest of you."

"Well then! Don't you know what it means? The Great Return?"

"It means that the Vicar is coming back to life."

"Indeed it does. Praise the Lord! But what do you know about Him, our Vicar of Morbing Vyle? How much have they told you?"

"Well - er . . ."

"Have they told you how He first came to Morbing Vyle? What He did with the choirboys? His artistic creations? His Ultimate Work? Have they explained all that to you?"

"Not exactly, no."

"Hah! You haven't been told properly then! I might've guessed! The Caulkisses and Quodes can't tell you properly because they were never there themselves. They should've brought you out here to me long ago. I'm the only one that can tell it properly."

"Yes, I'm sure. But now I'd better be off . . ."

"Because I was there, see? I can remember everything. You need me to tell you the full story."

"Perhaps some other time."

"What's that?"

"I'll come back later."

"No, now! You must be told now! Now! Now! NOW!"

Suddenly he was shouting at the top of his voice. I glanced nervously around. He would bring out the Caulkisses and Quodes with his noise.

"Hush! Not so loud."

"Stay and listen then," he said, quietening down.

"Okay. I can only stay for a minute though."

I bent down towards the grate, to keep him talking in a quiet voice. A fresh whiff of foulness drifted up through the bars. I held my nose.

"Five minutes," he said. "It won't take long."

But it did. It took ages and ages - an hour at least. For all that time I stood bent over the grate, listening to Mr Scrab's voice rambling on and on. And soon I didn't even want to get away. I forgot about my plan of escape, I forgot about the freezing cold. The story of the Vicar of Morbing Vyle held me in its grip. I was as if hypnotized. At long last I discovered the explanation behind all the mysteries I'd been trying to solve. It was the most dreadful story ever told.

CHAPTER 43

It began in 1895. That was when the Vicar first arrived in Morbing Vyle. He must have made a great impression even then. Mr Scrab could still describe the event in every detail, though he was only a child at the time. "He was like no-one we'd ever seen before," he said. "So beautiful! Like an angel!"

The Vicar arrived in a fine carriage pulled by two black horses. That in itself was remarkable, for ordinary vicars never rode in anything more grand than a sulky. His age was remarkable too, for He was still in His early twenties. As for His appearance, He was strikingly attractive in a delicate, almost feminine way. Slender and slight in build, He had a high domed forehead and thin features, perfectly modelled. His skin was very pale and His hair was truly golden. Half the women in the village fell in love with Him on the spot.

He had come to replace the previous vicar, recently deceased. No-one knew anything about His birth, His background, or His religious training. Later on, there were rumours that some

powerful family influence lay behind His appointment, and that He had never actually completed any formal training. Later on again, there were rumours that the previous vicar's death might not have been due to natural causes after all. But He never told anyone anything about His past. Not even Mr Scrab knew.

So He was an object of gossip and wonder right from the start. He remained aloof from the life of the village, refusing to play the expected role of an Anglican vicar. Except for His services and sermons, He spent all His time in the vicarage, closetted with His books. Often there was a light burning in His study window all through the night. The servants at the vicarage said that He was writing, pages and pages of writing. "He was working His way towards the truth," said Mr Scrab. The villagers thought that He must be some kind of genius.

He continued in this way for three or four years. Morbing Vyle at the time was just a typical farming community, just like the neighbouring villages of Lynford and Mundford and Brandon. As Mr Scrab told his story, I remembered the old photo in the book on ecclesiastical history, and the description in the correspondence of Sir James Russell. A small church with a tower, thatched cottages, a half-timbered pub . . . At first, there was nothing very special about Morbing Vyle.

But little by little things began to change. Especially because of the Vicar's sermons. No-one had ever heard anything like them before. They were brilliantly clever and original - and yet easy to understand too. Following a chain of perfect logic, He reached the most daring conclusions. For the first time in their lives, the villagers began to think of religion as something more than just a social duty. Now they actually looked forward to the Sunday service. And afterwards, they stood around debating the sermon amongst themselves. Even the more disreputable members of the community began to attend: the young lads, the drunkards, the women of dubious reputation. It was a real religious revival.

Not that everyone agreed with the Vicar's approach. The Low Church Anglicans, in particular, thought that He didn't refer to the Bible nearly often enough. And they were disturbed by His fondness for ritual and regalia. Dozens of candles, purple and red robes - He even introduced incense. 'Might as well be a Papist,' complained the Low Church Anglicans. But for others, the Vicar's aesthetic effects were exciting and uplifting and spiritual. The women were especially impressed - and so was the young boy Scrab.

By the time the strange events began, the village was already divided between those who were for and those who were against Him. And the strange events intensified the division. Those who were against the Vicar began to circulate ugly rumours. Those who were for Him became even more ardent in His defence. For some of His followers, He could do no wrong.

The first strange event involved Mrs Haddon, a young widow, very good-looking. But one fine day she lost her good looks. She sat in the church and refused to move. When anyone tried to talk to her she just nodded or shook her head. Then it was discovered - she was totally toothless. Every tooth in her head had been pulled out. And what was even stranger, she refused to say how it had happened. No-one could get a word out of her. It was a complete mystery.

The second event involved the church organist, Mr Knowles. All of a sudden he locked himself up in his house and refused to play at church ever again. For several days he was in an inexplicable state of terror. Then he disappeared. The story circulated that he had left the district. For three Sundays the church services were conducted without music. Then on the fourth Sunday, the Vicar introduced a new kind of organist: - a mechanical machine. It was fixed above the keyboard in a sealed box, with long metal levers extending down to the keys. And not only could it play every bit as well as the old organist - it even reproduced the exact manner of his playing.

That was when suspicions about the Vicar really started to spread. No-one was quite sure of what they suspected. But there was something sinister and disturbing about the whole business. Many of the villagers even stopped going to church. But not for very long. The Vicar's followers soon drove them back.

They were by now an almost fanatical band, the Vicar's followers. What they lacked in numbers, they made up for in determination. And they had very determined ways of getting the villagers back to church. As a first step, they daubed the doors of the non-attenders with graffiti: 'BACKSLIDERS!' 'DEAD SOULS!' 'MATERIALISTS!' The messages were written in human blood. And if that wasn't enough, there were even more bizarre forms of threat. People woke up to find crossed knives laid out on their kitchen table, or all their clocks turned upside down, or coils of rope piled up at the foot of their bed. As for Scrab's own father and mother, they were painted with black spots on their faces while they slept.

Then came another strange event. It was the Vicar Himself this time, behaving more strangely than ever before. This time there could be no doubt about His unorthodoxy. It happened in the middle of August, when the church was decked out for the Harvest Festival. All the usual baskets of fruit and sheaves of corn were arranged around the altar. Then the Vicar appeared to conduct the service - with no clothes on. His delicate pale body was decorated with loops of foliage and clusters of fruit. Apart from that, He wore only the scapular over His shoulders. There was a great gasp of shock from the congregation. They sat through the service hardly able to believe their eyes. Afterwards everyone agreed that it was the most scandalous thing ever.

Following the Harvest Festival, there was no church service for a fortnight. The Vicar kept to His vicarage, and rumour had it that He had suffered some kind of breakdown. But He was only

perfecting His plans. When He was ready, He posted up notices to say that services would begin again next week, and that everyone was expected to attend. His band of followers made sure that they did. But even His followers didn't know the enormity of what was to be revealed. "It was His first great work of art," said Mr Scrab. "It was the Revelation."

The villagers filed into the church and took their pews. The Vicar was already there; but the choirstalls were empty. Where were the choirboys? The Vicar made no move to begin the service. He just stood by the altar, hands folded in prayer and a curious expression on His face. The congregation waited and waited. Then someone looked up - and fainted. Up in the rafters hung the dead bodies of the choirboys, all twenty four of them. They had been nailed to the wooden beams in various dramatic attitudes. All were naked, with wings of papier-mache attached to their backs. They seemed to be flying through the air, like the angels and cherubs in old-fashioned paintings.

There were screams and cries from all over the church. Mothers shrieked and fathers cursed, recognizing their own children pinned up overhead. But another sound silenced their anguish and rage. It cut through the tumult and sent a shudder down every back. It was the sound of the Vicar laughing - a sweet silvery tinkle of a laugh. And as He laughed, He unfolded His hands and displayed them, palms upward, to the staring congregation. The palms were red and wet with blood.

Then there was another sound again: a cracking splitting sound. In every part of the church, the Christian images suddenly started to disintegrate all by themselves. Crucifixes snapped, windows burst, statues shattered. The Biblical scenes represented in stained glass cascaded to the ground in a million fragments. And the Vicar just kept on laughing His laugh . . .

CHAPTER 44

That was the turning point. As Scrab explained it, the Vicar had always been held back before, struggling within the limits of traditional Christianity. But now He had broken right away and discovered His own true message. Now everything appeared to Him in a new and dazzling light. And it was His own true message that He preached on that day, after the Revelation and the shattering of images. As for the congregation, they sat on as if frozen in their places, too stunned to move.

Mr Scrab didn't say what the message was. But it must have been an amazing sermon. Because, by the end of it, the Vicar had won over not only His previous band of followers but some

of the other villagers as well. They were instant converts to a new religion - disciples of Cruelty and Murder.

As for the rest of the villagers, they were reduced to a strange state of helplessness. After the sermon, they gathered around in furtive groups, whispering and plotting and trying to decide what to do. But while they dithered, the Vicar acted. First He ordered His disciples to kill all the horses in the village, except the two that pulled His own carriage. Then He mounted guards on all the roads. Morbing Vyle was cut off from the rest of the world.

So the reign of terror began. Of course, the rest of the villagers outnumbered the Vicar's followers many times over. But the minority had an intensity that the majority lacked. "The strength of His Spirit kept the weaklings in their place," was the way Mr Scrab put it.

The Vicar collected His victims at night. He rode around in His carriage for hours, clip-clopping along the streets until He had made His selection. Then He dismounted, went across to the window of some particular house, and called out the name of some particular person. His voice was so overwhelmingly sweet that the victim was as if under a spell. He must have had some almost supernatural power. The victim rose up and walked out of the house straight into His murderous arms.

Of course, I was reminded of the checkout girl's nightmare. Mr Scrab's story explained it all: why the family hid under the table, why they prayed for the horses not to stop. And the other part of the dream fitted in too: the part where the villagers went out in the morning and there was something terrible to be seen, something discovered on the outskirts of the village. What they had discovered was one of the Vicar's works of art.

Mr Scrab described the works of art as though they were works of great creative genius. Listening to his descriptions, I felt like throwing up. For human bodies were the raw material through which the Vicar's aesthetic sensibility expressed itself. Altogether He must have murdered several hundred people. Some of the worst horrors I can't even remember - I think my mind must have refused to take them in. But I still remember enough to haunt me for the rest of my life.

Obscene parodies of nature - that's what they were. With the aid of wooden frames and props, He mounted His corpses in the most bizarre poses. He liked to develop new and unspeakable forms of copulation - the very old with the very young, for instance. One time He modelled a mother eating the head of a baby. Another time, it was two young lovers with their bowels pulled out and knotted intricately together. He used cosmetics to apply realistic facial expressions of love, desire, tenderness, or whatever.

But above all He liked to dismember bodies and reassemble them according to His own creative whim. He put heads onto torsos back to front, He nailed on extra arms and legs, He

constructed faces with multiple mouths and noses. On one occasion, He used dismembered human parts to ornament a tree, fastening eyes and fingers and toes to the twigs and foliage. On another occasion, He laid a row of twenty kneecaps down the middle of the street.

He was also highly sensitive to the aesthetic beauty of random effects. One of His victims He impaled upright on the spire of His church, in order to observe the patterns of the blood trickling down. Another time He amputated the limbs of the village postman and set him to crawl about on three outspread sheets of white linen. The resulting bloody trails and central body formed one of His favourite compositions, which He then decorated with pink and lilac flower-petals.

The depredations went on for two and a half months. For all that time the ordinary villagers were in a state of terrified helplessness, like animals transfixed in the presence of their predator. The Vicar's followers, on the other hand, grew more and more bloodthirsty, inspired by the sermons which He now preached in His church every day. The more He told them about His message, the more they gloried in all His works.

It was during this period that Scrab - still only ten years old - became a convert. "I saw the truth," he said. "I rejected the unbelievers." The unbelievers, in his case, were his own father and mother. He ran away from the family home and went to live in the vicarage, where all the followers now dwelt. A few days later, the corpses of the father and mother turned up in one of the Vicar's works of art. But Scrab felt no pang of remorse. They had died for the sake of a higher cause.

In fact, Scrab saw everything in the most perverse and peculiar way. Retelling the Vicar's deeds to me, he kept using such words as 'sublime' and 'holy' and 'sacred'. The more vile and horrible the murders, the more he spoke of them with reverence. It was like a genuine religious feeling - but all turned upside-down. His voice grew especially hushed and worshipful when he came to describe the Vicar's Ultimate Work.

CHAPTER 45

The Ultimate Work was to have been His masterpiece - His biggest, most uncompromising artistic statement. In sheer unspeakable obscenity, it would have far surpassed His previous creations. But it was never finished. It killed Him first. Of all the incredible events in His story, His death was the most incredible.

It began one morning when the Vicar was having breakfast, after yet another night of Murder and Art. "Thoughtful He seemed," said Scrab, who was there at the time. "And out of

sorts." He ate more and more slowly until finally He came to a complete halt, with a forkful of poached egg a la Vyle suspended half way towards His mouth. He appeared to have fallen into a trance. The followers came to look, but did not dare to disturb Him. Then suddenly He banged His fork down on the table.

'It is not enough!' He said. 'My inspiration is growing weak. I have been falling into a rut. An artist must always keep moving on. I shall venture into new territory. Morbing Vyle is too small for the scope of my genius. I shall gather my materials from further afield.'

The followers were dismayed and troubled. But the Vicar was adamant. For the next five nights He drove His carriage out through the forest and sought for His victims in other villages and towns. And every morning He returned with a whole carriageload of young female bodies. Four the first night, five the second, seven the third. But still He wasn't satisfied. 'I must have more blondes,' He said. 'I feel an idea coming on.'

So on the fifth morning, He returned with six blondes. And now He was ready to begin. He called His followers together and gave them instructions. He needed a variety of additional materials for His composition. "We had to collect pillows," said Scrab. "And fish-hooks. Ripe tomatoes. A dead swan. Paint. Two dozen coathangers. And bucketsful of manure."

It was late in the afternoon by the time everything had been collected. The followers had encountered difficulties with the villagers. 'They're getting sullen and troublesome,' they told the Vicar. 'You've been away too many nights. They're losing their fear of you.' But the Vicar only laughed. 'Wait till they see my masterpiece,' He said. 'They will learn a fear to last them the rest of their lives.'

The bodies and other materials had been deposited on an open grassy area at one end of the village. The Vicar started off by painting the grass a pale blue colour. Then He began dragging the bodies onto the grass. He wouldn't allow His followers to help. 'It has to be done perfectly !' He cried. 'The idea is coming clearer and clearer in my mind!'

But even as He worked, the followers saw that there was something wrong. His forehead was furrowed with deep creases. Again and again He kept wincing and gritting His teeth. Until finally He drew away from His Ultimate Work and staggered towards His followers clutching His temples. 'I have a headache,' He muttered. 'A terrible terrible headache.'

They walked Him back to the vicarage and put Him to bed. He slept for fifteen hours. But then they had to wake Him up. There was some bad news.

'The villagers have escaped,' they told Him. 'They must have heard about you falling sick. They formed up in one big bunch and marched out through the forest. There were too many of them - we couldn't do a thing!'

The followers were fearful and trembling. But the Vicar sat up in bed and said 'I must get back to work on my masterpiece again. I must finish my Ultimate Work.'

So back He went to the grassy area, back to His Ultimate Work. He arranged the pillows and positioned the bodies on the blue painted grass. Then He took out His tools - the saw and chisel, the hammer and nails. But already He was struggling, already the creases were there in His forehead. And as He lifted His saw across the first body, suddenly He clutched at His heart and collapsed to the ground in a heap.

They carried Him back to the vicarage and laid Him once more in His bed. He had suffered a massive coronary attack. His eyes were closed and His pulse was very feeble. He seemed to be in a kind of coma. But He roused up in the evening, when some more bad news came in.

This time it was the guards from the roads around the village. They burst into the vicarage shouting at the tops of their voices 'Fire! Fire! Fire in the forest!' They had seen flames leaping up amongst the trees. There were outbreaks to the north, south, east and west. 'It must be the villagers lighting fires!' they cried. 'They're trying to burn us alive!'

'Ah,' said the Vicar, 'I must get back to my masterpiece. There may not be much time.'

No-one could stop Him. He walked out into the night, accompanied by His followers, through the streets of the deserted village. There was a lurid orange glow in the sky, and a heavy smell of smoke. When they came to the bodies and the blue painted grass, the Vicar halted and surveyed the whole scene. The eerie light seemed to give Him new inspiration.

'Yes yes yes! Now I see it!' He cried ecstatically. 'The total composition falls into place! The blondes all together in the centre! With a splash of bright blood across the foreground! Balanced against the whiteness of the swan! And something long and pointed . . .'

But even as He stood there gesturing, the twitches began to run through His limbs. It was like a fit. For a couple of seconds He was shaken by a succession of violent spasms. Then He went suddenly rigid and toppled down flat on His back.

Again the followers picked Him up and rushed Him back to the vicarage. "He was completely stiff," said Scrab. "And cold, icy cold." But still He wasn't dead. He sat propped up in His bed and beckoned the followers to gather around.

'It is true, I am dying,' He told them in a whisper. 'My body has betrayed me. It is the triumph of Nature over the Spirit. I have conceived an idea so transcendently vile that flesh and blood can not endure it. My heart and nerves and muscles are breaking down at the mere idea of what I have conceived. What you see are the symptoms of a body rebelling against its own mind.'

All around the followers wept and tore their hair. 'Don't die Lord!' they wailed. 'What will happen to us if you are gone?'

'Do not despair,' whispered the Vicar. 'I shall conquer death. I foresee it all. My spirit must go its own way for a time, gaining strength and power. Then it will return and compel this mortal body to its commands. O my followers, I shall rise again.'

'But what about us, Lord?' The followers were not consoled. Outside in the night the burning forest was shooting its flames hundreds of feet up into the air. The village of Morbing Vyle was completely encircled by fire. 'O Lord, must we die?'

'Have faith,' He whispered. 'Be not afraid. The fire cannot destroy you. You must endure. Preserve my message, generation upon generation. I promise you. I shall return.'

They had to bend very close to catch His words. When His voice stopped, they thought He Had died. But then He raised His hand and signalled for pen and paper. No longer able to speak, he wrote His instructions down on paper. How they were to seal His body in a leather bag, with embalming herbs. How they were to put the bag in an altar, and build a great new church to contain the altar. He sketched the plans for the church on the sheet of paper.

'But when will you return Lord?' they begged Him. 'Tell us how long we must wait!'

But by now He was beyond any kind of reply. As He finished His sketch, the pencil fell from His fingers onto His chest. And where it fell, a tiny bruise formed. "It was the lightest gentlest tap," said Scrab, his voice husky with emotion. "But to Him it was like a mighty blow." The tiny bruise grew larger and larger, an ominous liver-coloured mark. It spread across His chest, it covered His torso, it reached up into His neck and over His face. In a matter of minutes, His whole body was a single purple bruise. "And that's how He died," said Scrab, finally bursting into loud sobs. "He just ebbed away quietly, there and then."

CHAPTER 46

The story came to a sudden end. Mr Scrab was too deeply moved to speak another word. He snuffled and snivelled and made strange gulping sounds in his throat.

"So what happened then?" I demanded.

Mr Scrab stopped snivelling for a moment. "We did as He instructed us, of course."

"But the fire?"

"It was only the forest that burned. The fire never touched Morbing Vyle itself."

"And didn't anyone try to attack afterwards?"

"Who?"

"The people who escaped."

"Huh! They wouldn't dare. Sheep, all of them! They just wanted to escape. As long as we didn't come out after them. They probably thought they had us trapped forever."

"How do you mean, trapped?"

"But they were wrong!" Mr Scrab stopped snivelling entirely. "The Vicar will lead us out through the forest! Everything will be different when He makes the Great Return! Then we shall teach the weaklings a lesson!"

A blast of foul-smelling air rose up from the grate. Mr Scrab's mood was changing. Remembering the Great Return, he became once more exultant.

"Any day now!" he cried. "Our Lord is rising again! Glory, glory glory!"

"Not so loud!" I said. My mood was changing too. I emerged from the horrible enchantment of Mr Scrab's story and became once more aware of my surroundings. It was still snowing. My fingers and toes were numb with the cold, and so were my knees from kneeling. Thick white pads had settled on my arms and shoulders, like snow on the branches of a tree.

"And when He returns," Mr Scrab went on in a calmer voice, "He'll come to me here, you know. And He'll say, 'O Scrab, my good and faithful follower, what have you done in the time I've been away?' And d'you know what I'll say."

I stood up and shook the snow from my arms and shoulders. I was stiff and creaking in every joint.

"I'll say, 'Lord, I have been breeding germs for you. A thousand different forms of disease all in my own body. See, I have not been idle, Lord.'"

As though in demonstration, he burst out into new forms of disease right under my feet. There were blurring and bubbling and frothing sounds, followed by a great bout of hacking and gagging. I took a step backwards as something wet splattered over my shoes.

"Hah! Yes!" he cried triumphantly. "He will lead me out to journey all over the world! I shall spread my diseases for Him! The unbelievers will sicken and die!"

"Hush! Hush!" I shushed desperately. But there was no stopping him. He took hold of the grate in both hands and lifted himself up close to the bars. His face was yellow and puffy, with a slime of vomit dribbling from the mouth. He must have been running a ferocious temperature because I could feel the heat five feet away.

"WARTS OVER LONDON!" he bellowed at the top of his voice. "GASTRITIS IN COPENHAGEN! SWELLINGS IN THE STREETS OF SAO PAULO! DIARRHOEA IN THE DODECANESE! MANGE FOR THE MORROCCANS AND POX FOR THE POLYNESIANS! FLAKY EARLOBES IN MASSACHUSSETS!"

He was going berserk. I turned on my heel and ran for the wall with the trellis. But now the animals in the barn were rousing up.

"CARK!! CARK!!"

"BAAAAAAA - AAAAA!!"

"OINK! OINK! OINK!!"

"BLEHHHHHHHHHH!!"

"QUACKERQUACKERQUACKERQUACK!!"

A tremendous racket echoed around the courtyard. I reached the wall and discovered the trellis, just as I had hoped. I knew I had to hurry. I started to climb.

But my hurry undid me. There was a loud snapping sound and the trellis came away from the wall. I fell backwards with the whole wooden frame on top of me.

Then a window flew open - a bedroom window upstairs in the vicarage. A figure leaned out, holding a lantern.

"Who makes unquiet the peaceful hour of night?"

It was Melestrina Quode. Her voice boomed forth even above the racket of the animals and Mr Scrab's bellowing. I could see her only in silhouette. She turned the lantern and shone the beam down across the courtyard.

"Let sight appear to eyes! Speak, that the ears may hear!"

Luckily for me, the light of the lantern was half-dimmed by the falling snow. Melestrina angled the beam towards the barn. I scrambled out from underneath the trellis and began to retreat, away from the barn in the direction of the vicarage.

"O say, what turmoil here? What cause of this thy turbulence?"

Now the beam of the lantern had swung towards the well in the centre of the courtyard. Melestrina was addressing Mr Scrab. But Mr Scrab was beyond articulate speech. His bellowing had turned into a wordless liquid roar. A fountain of froth and gas and purulent matter sprayed up from his grate. All around, the snow had changed to a sort of yellowish green.

I kept on retreating until I came to the wall of the vicarage. Here the thickly growing ivy gave me some degree of cover. I stood with my back pressed up against the wall, close by a darkened window. Melestrina would have to lean a long way out before she could illuminate me here.

But I had reckoned without baby Panker. Melestrina placed her lantern on the sill and brought forth a small wriggling bundle. She held it up for a moment between her hands. Then she let it drop. It landed on the snow about twenty feet away from me. I heard the shrill distinctive squeak of baby Panker.

"Go forth my child!" yelled Melestrina from above. "Explore! Survey! Enucleate!"

I stood stock still. I was really in trouble now. Panker was bound to find me out sooner or later. I could no longer see him or hear him, but I could imagine him already starting his search. I might as well give myself up and have done with it.

But then I noticed something about the window I was standing beside. It was ajar - a tiny bit ajar at the bottom! Immediately I remembered Mr Quode's kitchen window and how I had escaped from the courtyard once before.

I squeezed the tips of my fingers in under the bottom of the window. A white muslin curtain hid the interior of the room. But I knew that it couldn't be Mr Quode's kitchen this time. Mr Quode's kitchen was to the right of the back door of the vicarage - whereas here I was on the left.

Very slowly, very gently, I raised the lower half of the window. I hoisted my leg over the sill. Then I brushed aside the muslin curtain and climbed in.

CHAPTER 47

I closed the window behind me. The room was surprisingly warm, as though centrally heated. I looked around in the darkness. But it wasn't a total darkness. Over on the opposite wall was a tiny glowing blue flame. It came from a lamp, turned down very low.

I moved away from the window. I tried to move carefully. But immediately I banged my elbow on a projecting edge of metal and knocked over something made of glass and caught my foot in a cable on the floor. The room was full of bits and pieces of apparatus.

Only then did I realise what room it was. Of course - on the side of the corridor opposite to the kitchen. It was Mr Caulkiss's laboratory! And then I realised something else. Mr Caulkiss was in it!

Over on the opposite wall a hand had appeared. A big bony hand with big joints and knuckles. It was twiddling with the lamp, turning up the wick.

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh." There was a long drawn-out groan, like someone recovering from an anaesthetic. The flame of the lamp changed from blue to yellow to white. Gradually the pool of illumination spread wider and wider.

Mr Caulkiss was standing - or hanging - in a very strange position. With his legs pressed together and his arms extended, he made a sort of Y configuration. He seemed to be attached to a

large wooden board, mounted on a dais and tilted slightly forward from the wall. It looked as though he was being crucified.

At first I couldn't see what was holding him up. But then I spotted the various projecting pegs on the board, and the leather straps with buckles. He had straps around his ankles, around his thighs, around his waist, and around his shoulders. I could also see how his shirt was pulled open at the front. There was some kind of instrument sticking into his chest.

I looked away. The whole room was illuminated now. There were shelves and benches everywhere, laden with tools, test-tubes, valves, bolts and other assorted hardware. The walls were covered with diagrams drawn on large sheets of graph paper. Ropes and pulleys and chains hung down from the ceiling. It was an amazing jungle of machinery.

Most amazing of all was the thing that occupied the centre of the room. A single massive machine, it stood about six feet high and ten feet wide, bristling with pipes and rods and cogs. It looked like a cross between a Bren gun carrier and a combine harvester. It was mounted on a chassis and equipped with caterpillar tracks. At its very heart was a squat square box. At first I thought the box was covered in fur, but then I realised the fur was only a brownish sort of felt. Above the box hung a row of cylindrical glass jars, dozens and dozens of them. They were filled with a bright red liquid.

Then I noticed something else. A rubber tube emerged from the machine and snaked away across the floor. I followed its path up onto the dais and over the wooden board. It connected on to the end of the instrument that was sticking into Mr Caulkiss's chest.

And then I recognised the instrument for what it was. Of course! It was the very same syringe in which Mr Caulkiss had intended to collect my blood. The very same glass chamber in the very same shiny metal case. The needle was invisible only because it was buried so deeply in Mr Caulkiss's chest.

I shuddered. But Mr Caulkiss looked straight at me and gave a cackle of triumph.

"Hahhhhh! So there you are Mr Smythe! And what do you think of my machine?"

"This is your machine that runs on blood?"

"Yes, yes! Isn't it beautiful? Observe the pressure chamber! Observe the energy tanks! Observe the motivator and the radial liberating valves! My blood-machine!"

I shook my head incredulously.

"But it's huge! I thought you were just conducting a laboratory experiment!"

"Ah, more than that Mr Smythe! My machine will go out into the world! See those caterpillar tracks! My machine will travel !"

"Hah!!" yelled Mr Caulkiss. "Make your contribution! You said you wanted to!"

"No I didn't!"

"Yes you did! You said that only your young male blood would do!"

"No! You said that!"

"You agreed with me!"

"No I didn't!"

"You meant to agree with me!"

He gave the tube a yank, jerking the needle out of the wood. Then he started reeling it in. He drew the syringe back across the room like a fish on a line.

"We need your contribution!" He was in a frenzy. He yelled and reeled, and reeled and yelled. "Open your shirt! Open your heart!"

In no time at all the syringe was back in his hand. He raised his arm again. But this time I was ready for him. As he threw, I ducked. The syringe passed by safely over my head, spearing into a set of shelves.

Immediately I jumped up and headed for the door. Once more he gave a jerk to free the needle.

"Don't go!" he yelled. "I appeal to you! As a parent! Don't deny a parent!"

I wasn't listening. I could see him drawing the syringe back across the room.

"My machine is my child, Mr Smythe! My very favourite son! My blood will live again! Blood of my blood!"

I dodged this way and that between benches and trolleys and shelves. I overturned bottles, I smashed test-tubes, I knocked over bits of apparatus.

"You can be a parent too, Mr Smythe! We can be parents together! Pass on your blood to the next generation!"

Already he was reaching to take hold of the syringe. But I was nearly at the door. If only the door wasn't locked

It wasn't. I spun the doorknob and flung myself out of the room. Behind me there was a loud resounding THWANNNG! Mr Caulkiss's last cast had speared the wood of the door.

CHAPTER 48

I rushed along the corridor, heading towards the front of the house. I wasn't really thinking about where I was going. But when I turned the corner into the hall, I skidded instantly to a halt. There at the far end of the hall was the light of a lantern. Melestrina Quode was coming downstairs.

I took it all in at a glance. My best chance was to hide in the opening on the other side of the hall, where the steps led down to the cellar. As Melestrina swung around from the stairs and into the hall, I skipped across the hall and plunged into the darkness of the opening.

But the darkness betrayed me. I failed to see the start of the steps. I trod suddenly on empty space, lost my footing and tumbled over sideways. Like a human sled I went sliding down the steps all the way to the bottom. Bump-bump-bump! At the bottom I collided with a mighty crash against the cellar door.

For a moment all the breath was knocked out of me. I lay there leaning against the door, waiting for Melestrina to appear at the top of the steps. But someone else acted first. Suddenly the door opened up behind me. I found myself falling forward into the cellar, flat on the floor.

"Oh it's you Mr Smythe! I thought I heard someone knock!"

I stared up into the tiny doll-like face of Craylene Caulkiss. She gave me a bright pink smile.

"Do come in!" she cried. "Move your legs and I'll close the door!"

Still flat on my back, I twisted my legs out of the way. She swung the door shut with a slam.

I took a look around. The cellar was like a fairy grotto, lit by the flickering flames of a dozen and more candles. Dark brick arches loomed overhead, supported on dark brick piers. Around the sides, I could just make out the shadowy shapes of bags and bottles and boxes. Frowsy smells of grain and fermentation filled the air. The floor of the cellar was mere beaten earth.

"I knew you'd come," she chirruped. "Of course, of course, of course!"

"Why?"

"Because you want to find a commitment!" She nodded her head back and forth. "The others are committed in their own ways too, but not so committed as me! I knew I'd be the one you'd turn to!"

She clapped her hands together like a delighted schoolgirl. A cloud of powder puffed out all around her.

"Come on then! Over here! This is where they are!"

Reluctantly I rose to my feet. The arches were too low for me to stand fully upright, and I had to stoop my head. I followed her across the cellar, threading a path between the piers.

She was tremendously excited. She kept making skittish little runs ahead of me. But when we came to the centre of the cellar, suddenly she stopped. She raised a finger to her lips.

"Hush now! They're resting! We mustn't disturb them!"

In the centre of the cellar there were half a dozen candles arranged in a circle around a stack of old wooden crates. The crates were blackened with creosote and padded with rags. Some were open at the front, others were closed off with wire netting like chicken coops. I guessed that this was where Craylene kept her so-called 'Little Ones'.

She went forward on tiptoe, while I kept well to the rear. I expected to hear the savage sounds of carnivorous animals break forth at any moment. I remembered the big hunk of raw meat that she had been carrying down to the cellar. But no sound came from the crates.

"Come closer," said Craylene, beckoning. "I'll introduce you to Hugo."

I went up closer. The ground around the crates was strewn with strange white flakes, very dry and soft. White flakes of Craylene's make-up, I realized - the long-term deposit from all her tiny sheddings. It was like confetti.

"You'll love Hugo," she said. "Only don't make any sudden movements. He's not used to strangers."

She bent down and peered into one of the open crates. I bent down behind her. But it was too dark to see anything at the back of the crate. At the front of the crate was a dish containing a raw red strip of steak.

"He's sleeping," she said fondly. "Let's leave him. We'll say hello to Trixie instead."

She turned to another of the crates. This one was layered with straw and closed off with wire netting. She lifted the bottom of the netting and slid her hand inside. She seemed to be patting something.

"Hello Trixie," she said in a whisper. "Here's a nice new friend for you."

By now I was becoming curious. She withdrew her hand and I stepped forward. I brought my eye right up against the netting and took a good long look. Again there was a dish with a piece of raw meat in it - a lamb chop this time. But I couldn't see anything else, unless it was hiding under the straw. Nor were there any sounds of rustling or breathing.

"She's a little bit shy," Craylene murmured in my ear. "Put in your hand and give her a pat."

"No thanks," I said, drawing back. I still wasn't going to risk having my fingers bitten off.

"Oh Mr Smythe! I do believe you 're shy too!" She gave me a very arch look. "Come over here then! Come and meet Casper and Big Boy!"

She took hold of my elbow. Her hand was like a tiny bird's claw. She pulled me along to yet another crate. This one was at the very top of the stack.

"Here we are! Casper and Big Boy aren't so shy! Not shy at all! Such fat cheeky things that they are!"

I didn't look into the crate straight away. First I picked up one of the candles from the floor. I was determined to uncover the truth about these Little Ones, once and for all. I held the candle up to the crate and peered into every corner. This time there was no doubt about it. There was nothing inside except a couple of sausages sitting on a large white plate.

"It's empty," I said. "There's nothing inside but a couple of sausages."

"Yes, yes!" giggled Craylene. "Casper and Big Boy!"

"What?"

"Casper is the one lying stretched out on his side! See? And Big Boy is curled up around him!"

"You mean - ?"

"Oh naughty, naughty !" she exclaimed suddenly. "You really are too bold! Just for that I shall have to tickle you to death!"

I realized that she was talking not to me but the sausages. She reached in a hand and lifted them off the plate. They were still strung together. She laid them out across the wrist of her other hand, letting their ends dangle down on either side. Then she started to tickle them.

"Oh! Oh!" she squealed, skittering about and making the sausages twitch and quiver. "Aren't they shameless! They're liking it! Oh dear, oh dear!"

She continued tickling and skittering and squealing until she was quite out of breath. "Tsk! Tsk! Tsk!" she tsked at Casper and Big Boy, with loving disapproval.

Then she bent down and lowered them into a different crate. Here there was no plate but an enamel bowl filled with water. Very gently she arranged the two sausages so that their unjoined ends were just dipping into the water.

"Now it's time for them to wash their faces," she explained. "This is their bathroom. Then I'll put them into their play room." She pointed to another crate that was littered with rags and small chips of wood. "They can have a special frisk tonight, before they go back to bed."

"Your Little Ones," I said slowly, "are sausages and pieces of raw meat?"

She nodded brightly.

"You must be insane," I said.

She giggled and clapped her hands. "Silly silly Mr Smythe! Of course I am! That's my commitment !"

"Being insane?"

"Totally irrecoverably insane!" She fluttered her eyelashes at me. "Non compos mentis!"

I could hardly believe my ears. But when I looked into her face I knew it was true. Her eyes were scarcely even human - more like the fixed blue eyes of a doll. The amazing thing was that I'd never realized it before.

"You should try it too, Mr Smythe," she twittered. "You'll be surprised how it feels! Just let yourself go! Unburden! It doesn't hurt! You can do anything at all when you know you're insane. It's such a relief, you can't imagine!"

She gave me an encouraging smile, putting her rows of little white teeth on display. Then she turned to another crate, reached in, and brought out a large leg of pork. There was a ruffed paper frill around its shank.

"This is Jojo!" she announced. "She'll help you to make a commitment. Don't you think she's a beauty? Look how pink and healthy! Just right for you!"

She held the pork up under her chin and stroked it lovingly. A red trickle of blood appeared on the dry powdery skin of her neck.

"Are you ready?" She looked across at me roguishly, from under lowered eyelashes. "I'm sure you've got some really wonderful madness inside you, Mr Smythe! Just waiting to come out!"

Suddenly she swung the pork off her shoulder and passed it across to me. Automatically I clasped it in my arms.

"Oh yes! What a lovely couple you make!" cried Craylene. "You can see how she likes you already! Only be very gentle with her, Mr Smythe! She's still terribly young and innocent, even though she's such a big girl. Why don't you put your hand around her underside? Like this!"

She adjusted the position of the pork in my arms.

"That's better! Now you're really making a commitment! Isn't it good to be able to act like this? Our Lord will be so pleased when He returns! He understands, you know! He understands what it is to be helplessly mad! And He loves us for it too! We are the apple of His eye!"

I stared at her in a sort of frozen horror. Her voice was so sugary and insidious. It was worse than the worst of Mr Caulkiss's rantings and ragings.

"And when He returns," she went on, "He will lead us out beyond the forest to a world full of meat! A million million chumps and forequarters, tenderloins and rib cuts! Everything we want will be granted! Then we shall be able to play forever and ever and -"

That did it. Suddenly I snapped out of my frozen state. I opened my arms, and let Jojo drop to the ground with a thud. Then I turned on my heel and fled without another word. Wildly I rushed between the piers, heading for the door. Behind me I could hear Craylene uttering little clucking consoling noises. I think she was trying to soothe Jojo, after her tumble to the floor.

I burst out of the cellar and raced up the steps. I had no idea of where I was going - so long as it was away from Craylene and her terrible insanity. But at the top of the steps another surprise awaited me.

CHAPTER 49

It was Melestrina Quode. She was standing in the niche where the coatstand had been. She was utterly immobile. She seemed to be straining forwards with her hips and backwards with her shoulders. She was wearing only her underwear. I goggled. It was a mind-numbing sight.

At first she held the lantern directly above her head, so that her lower regions were hidden in shadow. The illumination spotlighted her hair and face and massive naked shoulders. She had her eyelids fixed in a hooded languid look and her lips half-parted in an expression of passionate expectation.

Then she started to move - but only her arm. Slowly she lowered the lantern. The light travelled across her enormous bosom. Her brassiere was of the old-fashioned kind, with heavily elasticated ribs and stiffeners. But the peaks of the cups had been cut away, allowing her stupendous nipples to stand forth. They must have been at least two inches long. As I watched, they seemed to flex and stiffen in a beckoning kind of way.

Then the lantern descended again. Now I could see her drawers and suspenders and fishnet stockings. Her drawers were of scarlet silk, voluminous as a tent. She directed the beam of the lantern in such a way as to encourage a thorough inspection.

Then lower yet again. Now the light shone up onto the inner surfaces of her thighs and over her colossal tree-trunk legs. There was a great deal of sweat and moisture on the inner surfaces of her thighs. Her legs were straddled wide apart. Between her feet on the floor was a cardboard placard, mounted for reading. I read:

NO.39

THE NIGHT, THE BODY

It was like a gigantic tourist display. A mountain of flesh on a truly remarkable scale. To me, it was no more sexual than the Grand Canyon or the Niagara Falls. But it was meant to be. Melestrina gave a sort of heave that sent the muscles rippling all over her body.

"Begin!" she said.

"Begin what?"

She raised the lantern to face-level once more.

"Take me!" she boomed. "Possess me! Have your utmost will!"

I edged out from the top of the cellar steps and into the hallway.

"Er, I don't know . . ."

"Be masterful with me!" She reached up with her other arm and swept her fingers through her long black hair. It fell like a curtain across her face. "Have no mercy! Crush me to your breast!"

Still facing her, I backed away down the hall. She stepped out from the niche and advanced after me. Her chin jutted forward like the prow of a battleship.

"No matter how strong! How cruel! Dominate me! I submit to your force!"

I turned and fled down the hall. She lumbered along after me. She had her lips puckered and her arms stretched out to embrace.

I reached the bottom of the staircase and started up the stairs. In great leaps I bounded upwards, taking three steps at a time.

"I can no more resist! Desire must have its way!"

She had come to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, resuming her previous hips-forward legs-apart posture. Then suddenly another voice called out:

"Where did he go? Silly Mr Smythe!"

It was Craylene Caulkiss, coming up from the cellar. I caught a momentary glimpse of her through the banister railings. Then I came to the top of the stairs and raced along the corridor. There was a glow of candlelight shining out through the nursery door.

Compared to Craylene's cellar and Mr Caulkiss's laboratory - compared to the rest of the house, the nursery seemed like a place of refuge. I ran right in and closed the door behind. There was a lock on the door and a key in the keyhole. I turned the key and heard the metal tongue slide home.

I breathed a sigh of relief. The door was made of solid oak and the lock was a sturdy old-fashioned affair. Even Melestrina wouldn't be able to barge her way through that ! I was safe in here, I thought.

CHAPTER 50

First it was Mr Quode. He slid off the bed and moved around by the wall. His naked corpulent flesh heaved and rolled and slithered upon itself, as though stirred by some unspeakable slug-like ecstasy. He was working his way towards me, blowing kisses as he came.

I retreated to the other side of the nursery. Now I had my back against the window. But immediately there was a tapping on the glass. I spun around and found myself confronted by the words:

NO.42

THE PASSIONATE PUDENDA OF MELESTRINA QUODE

It was another of Melestrina's placards, held up against the glass on the end of a pole. It was illuminated by a lantern also attached to the pole. Evidently the pole extended across from the window of the adjoining room. Melestrina must have been leaning out holding it.

I was beginning to panic. I turned back to the room, just in time for another bizarre sight. There was something sliding in under the door, something flat and red. It took me a minute to realise that it was a piece of raw steak. Craylene was propelling her meat into the nursery, posting it in through the gap under the door.

I was still goggling over that when Mr Quode landed on my shoulders. He had launched himself at me bodily through the air. With naked arms and legs he fastened on like a fleshy pink polyp. Voluptuous moaning sounds came from his throat.

I jabbed with my elbows but he wasn't so easy to dislodge. There was a soft yielding quality about Mr Quode that made it difficult to land an effective blow. I felt a warm wetness on the back of my neck as his tongue slid down under my collar.

"Gerrofff!" I yelled frantically, provoking the other inhabitants to a further outburst of screams and howls. I stood in the centre of the room and twirled around on the spot, rotating faster and faster. It worked. Suddenly Mr Quode lost his hold and went flying. He fetched up with a pulpy sort of slap against the wall by the fireplace.

But I had no time for triumph. There was an even greater danger than Mr Quode. It was announced by a great bellowing hoot from under my feet. I looked down and saw a thin glittering length of metal sticking up through a crack in the floorboards. The needle of Mr Caulkiss's syringe! It had missed my shoe by inches. He was still after my blood!

"Grruphhh!" With a baffled snort he withdrew the needle back down through the crack.

"Tee-hee-heeee!" cackled Craylene on the other side of the door. "Happy Xmas, Mr Smy-eeeeeeethe!"

"A moi ! A moi !" Mr Quode had got up onto his feet again. "Mmmmmmmmoi !"

'Yeeeeowooooooooo!" Gambels howled in his kennel like a coyote.

Then Mr Quode reached out with his fingers and extinguished the candle. That was the beginning of the worst night of my life.

CHAPTER 51

I don't know how long it lasted. Hours I suppose. It seemed like years. The only light was the light from Melestrina's lantern at the window. But that only shone when she was displaying a new placard. Every time she changed placards there was a period of darkness. She had a never-ending supply of new placards.

NO. 54

SEVEN GREAT POSITIONS FOR MASTERS AND SLAVES

and

NO. 88:

THIS INSATIABLE BODY:

A CARNAL EXTRAVAGANZA

Everything seemed to happen a million times over. Around and around and around they hounded me. I dodged from the the chest to the bunk to the fireplace and back again. If I stood in the centre of the room, Mr Caulkiss's needle spiked up at me through the floorboards. If I retreated to the sides, Mr Quode came slithering towards me in the dark. I could never stay still for more than a moment.

At the same time I had less and less room for manoeuvre. As Craylene continued to push her Little Ones in under the door, a tide of raw meat spread out and occupied the floor. Cutlets, sausages, chops, rumps, liver, loins, kidneys - it was like an invading red army. And all the time she tittered and squealed:

"Come and play with us, Mr Smythe! Here's Maxie and Brutus! Come and play some games with Maxie and Brutus!"

In fact, all the inhabitants were calling out in the craziest way, coaxing and wheedling and trying to persuade me:

"This way!"

"Over here!"

"Don't be shy!"

"You've got us all excited!"

"We want you now!"

"We can't control ourselves!"

"Come!"

"Blood!"

"Desire!"

"We're all hot and panting!"

"You can't leave us like this!"

I don't know how I survived. Several times Mr Quode latched on to me in the dark, and I barely managed to shake him off. Several times I trod on the advancing red margin of Craylene's meat, and went skidding and crashing to the floor. And one time Mr Caulkiss stuck his needle actually into my shoe - but only into the outer edge of the sole. I had to hop around in a circle until I could yank my shoe free.

And still the voices grew more insistent and more insinuating:

"You can't resist!"

"Let go, Mr Smythe!"

"Give yourself up!"

"You're almost there!"

"You know you want to!"

"You can do it!"

"Now you're ready!"

"Don't hang back!"

"You can't hang back!"

"A little bit further!"

"You're almost with us!"

On and on and on. It was like some wild and whirling game. A hundred times over I told myself I couldn't keep dodging away like this. I was living on my reflexes, my last-minute reflexes. But my reflexes were slowing down. I was getting so tired, so very very tired. Desperately I shouted:

"Leave me alone! Please !"

But they only cackled with laughter and shouted back louder than ever:

"Now! Now!"

"No more delaying!"

"You have to come up to scratch, Mr Smythe!"

"Think of all we've done for you!"

"Food and shelter!"

"Nursing you back to health!"

"Taking you for walks!"

"A special banquet!"

"Dramatic entertainment!"

"You have to repay us!"

"For all our kindnesses!"

"You have to start doing things with us, Mr Smythe!"

By the end I was undoubtedly hallucinating. Their voices seemed to be coming from inside my own head. Tempting, demanding, cajoling . . . I could no longer tell what was real and what wasn't. Everything began to blur into everything else. Mr Quode's sprig of holly. . . spare ribs and tripe . . . "Join us! Join us!" . . . NO.104: FORBIDDEN FANTASIES: FROM CLEAVAGE TO CLAVICLES . . . "You need us! You need us!" . . . sausages crawling towards me over the floor . . . gasping and whinnying . . .

I admit it, I was very very close to giving in. It would have been such a relief just to go mad like the rest of them, just to stop struggling and sink down. I seemed to hear someone gobbling like a turkey . . . NO.121 . . . NO.176 . . . "We are the power!" . . . soft warm liquid sensations moving across the small of my back . . . bloodcurdling laughter . . . floating, drifting . . . NO. 289 . . . NO. 305 . . . sensations creeping over my waist and circling my navel . . . "Happy happy Xmas, Mr Smy-eeeeeeethe!" . . .

CHAPTER 52

It was the phrase "Happy Xmas" that saved me. "Happy happy Xmas Mr Smy-eeeeeeethe!" I had heard it many times already through the night. But suddenly something clicked in my mind. Suddenly I actually thought about Xmas; thinking about Xmas, I thought about Santa Claus; and thinking about Santa Claus, I thought about Santa climbing down the chimney. Inspiration! Suddenly I had an idea for a way to escape. I could climb up the chimney!

I shook myself and came out of a sort of trance. I discovered that I was half sitting half sprawling on the side of my bunk. I must have collapsed. And there beside me on the bunk was Mr Quode.

It was disgusting. He had snuggled up beside me like a calf to a cow. His bare fat body was throbbing rhythmically. I couldn't see his head because it was buried beneath my coat.

I realised then what the soft warm liquid sensations were. I flung open my coat and jacket and shirt. He had wormed his way in under my clothes, right next to my skin. When I exposed him, he was licking voluptuously all over my stomach as though I was some particularly delicious ice cream.

I seized hold of his red fringe of hair and pulled his head away. He lifted his eyes in my direction - wide, blind, pleasure-glazed eyes. His tongue lolled out all wet and sloppy.

"Mmmlllubbbllllmmmm," he murmured. He was beyond the power of articulate speech. I gave him a push that knocked him clean off the end of the bed.

At the very same moment, as if on cue, Melestrina withdrew her pole to change placards once again. With the lantern gone, the nursery was plunged in darkness. Just what I needed! But I had to move fast.

Feeling my way in the dark, I crossed the room towards the fireplace. I heard Mr Caulkiss give a roar, stabbing up once again with his needle. But once again he missed me.

I came to the fireplace, planted one foot in the grate, and ducked my head in under the mantel. I was lucky that the vicarage had wide old-fashioned chimneys. Even so it was a tight fit. I wished I hadn't been wearing so many thick clothes. I squeezed my shoulders up past the baffle and stood with my head in the chimney.

The walls of the chimney were furred with soot. I took a deep breath and hoisted myself up. The first part was the worst. With my feet dangling in mid-air I had to use my arms and elbows for leverage. My progress dislodged great clouds of soot. I choked and gagged and nearly vomited.

But a few feet above the fireplace, my chimney joined in with another chimney. Now there was more space for climbing, and the going got easier. There were still no footholds or handholds. But I discovered how to lean with my back against one wall, whilst bracing my legs against the other. Inch by inch, I levered my way upwards.

Muffled sounds arose from the nursery below. Voices were shouting: "Where is he?" "He must be somewhere!" "What's happened to him, Quode?"

There were loud thumpings and bumpings. Then a period of silence. Then:

"Light the candle, Quode!"

"I don't have any matches!"

"Unlock the door then!"

"I can't see the door!"

"Feel for it, Quode!"

Higher and higher I climbed, and the voices grew more and more muffled. Soon I could no longer distinguish the words. I had the impression that everyone was arguing and that Mr Quode was getting the blame.

It took me ten minutes to reach the top. At the top, the chimney terminated in a smooth round chimney-pot. I reached up high with my arms and hooked my fingers over the rim. The pot was narrow and for a moment I thought I was going to get stuck. But I heaved and wriggled and eventually managed to squeeze through.

I emerged out into the cold night air. The night was pitch black, as black as the inside of the chimney. I rested with my arms on the rim of the pot. And then I realised that something had changed. It had stopped snowing!

I heaved once more. Now I was sitting on the rim of the pot. I lifted my legs and clambered out onto the ledge of the chimney. I felt the cold crunchy snow packed all around - but still I couldn't see it. I lowered myself down onto the roof.

But the snow-covered roof was steep and slippery. I couldn't sit and I couldn't crawl. I could only slump across the ridge of the roof with my head hanging down on one side and my feet on the other. It was the only possible position.

I was stranded. I would've like to climb down from the roof - but how? It seemed too dangerous to attempt in the dark. Besides, my legs were shaking and my arms were trembling. I was very very tired.

I lay there thinking, trying to recover my strength. But my body had had enough for one night. After the endless running and dodging in the nursery, after the climb to the top of the chimney . . . Without meaning to, I relaxed and closed my eyes. Waves of drowsiness washed gently over me. I couldn't help it. Even draped across the ridge of the roof, in the most uncomfortable position imaginable, I started to nod. In a matter of moments I was fast asleep.

Part Five:



CHRISTMAS DAY

CHAPTER 53

I slept deeply and peacefully. I had no dreams until the very end of the night But then I had a nightmare so terrifying that it made me wake up.

It seemed that I was looking out from the window in the parlour downstairs. In the dream there were no drapes or undercurtains over the window. I looked straight out at a huge rearing wall with buttresses. It blocked off the entire view. The stonework was dark and heavy, but the buttresses were outlined with a sort of unreal ghostly glimmer.

I came up closer to the window. The closer I came, the more I could see of the same huge wall. Evidently it was part of some tremendous building. It extended out endlessly on either side, with buttress after buttress after buttress. Up above, there were windows, tall Gothic windows, rows upon rows of them. They gave forth a ghastly yellowish light. But still I couldn't see the line of the roof.

I moved forward until I somehow passed through the window and stood in the open outside the vicarage. Now I could see. It was like looking up at a cliff, hundreds of feet high. The line of the roof was encrusted with battlements and pinnacles. Everything was outlined by the same wierd glimmer against the black of the night sky. Further in the background, I could just vaguely make out the shape of something even higher: a stupendous spire. It seemed to reach right up to the stars.

"This is the Church of Morbing Vyle," I said to myself. "Soon the congregation will arrive. I must be there at the West Porch to see them go in."

It was as though my intention immediately came true. The next thing I knew I was standing waiting by the West Porch of the Church of Morbing Vyle. The doors were wide open. I could see the brightly-lit interior, already packed with a tremendous throng of people. And there were more arriving all the time.

They came on four great highways, four great radiating highways that converged to a centre directly in front of the West Porch. They came in huge grey and black limousines, purring up at tremendous speed. They leaped out almost before their vehicles had stopped.

I watched in amazement. There were people of every nationality, talking away in every language of the world. There were judges, generals, politicians, bankers, archbishops, duchesses, commissars, sheiks, beauty queens, businessmen and movie stars - dignitaries of every kind. I even recognised several famous faces amongst them.

And the clothes! They were dressed in the most lavish garments of silk and lace and fur, dripping with jewels and ornaments. I saw exotic oriental robes, Paris designer fashions, ceremonial uniforms with medals and braid. Most of the males wore black or white, while scarlet was the predominant colour for the women.

On and on and on they came, in a brilliant bewildering stream. They swept right past me and in through the open doors of the Church. Their feet seemed hardly to touch the ground. They were possessed of a terrible vitality. They laughed and shouted and flung their arms in the air. There was something almost tigerish about them.

Then suddenly the doors of the Church slammed shut. The congregation was complete. Suddenly there were no more limousines, no more people arriving outside. The ghastly yellowish light shone forth more brightly than ever.

I turned and looked. Now I could see them in the windows, silhouetted against the glass. The congregation must have numbered many many thousands, maybe millions. They seemed to be piled on top of one another, perhaps standing on each other's shoulders. Some even clung to the tracery of the windows, or swung around like monkeys in the roof.

Then the organ began to play. A deep low resonant note, which gradually became a rhythmic pulse, which in turn became a melody. But a very uncanny sort of melody. It was like a hymn with only half a tune.

As the music grew louder and louder, the people joined in with singing and clapping. Their singing was an incredible babel of sound, every word uttered simultaneously in a hundred languages. Louder and louder and louder. I could feel the ground reverberating under my feet.

Then a spirit of demonic frenzy swept through the congregation. Still piled on top of one another, they whirled and danced and capered and cavorted as though they were having fits. At the same time, they started to strip off and exchange clothes. I saw half-naked archbishops wearing the swimsuits of beauty queens, beauty queens wearing the wigs of judges, judges wearing the sequined dresses of movie stars . . . It was total chaos.

At the same time I realised that something had happened to the light. It had taken on a dull and sinister tinge of red. There was a red film spreading up over the lower parts of the windows - a film of blood. It splashed against the glass from the inside of the church. Higher and higher it spread, like a tide. Soon the light was entirely red and the congregation was hidden from view. The windows were awash with blood.

Yet still the organ played and the voices sang. The volume of sound swelled to an unbelievable crescendo. Now the organist was playing in multiple harmonies all over the keyboard,

with amazing impromptu flourishes and glissades. A musical virtuoso, I thought to myself, an absolute genius.

That was when a new and different voice rose up from amongst the multitude. It began very gently, not really loud at all. But it had a quality that pierced through every other sound - a quality of extreme pure sweetness. Like liquid silver it flowed, and all the other voices fell into place around it.

I turned and stepped inside the porch of the Church. The doors were shut but I could see the handle to turn to go in. Should I go in? What else was there to do? Why else was I standing here?

An inexplicable necessity seemed to be laid upon me. I approached the doors. I didn't want to enter, and yet it seemed somehow inevitable that I would. I took hold of the handle . . .

There was a strange sort of struggle going on inside me. On some higher level of consciousness I resisted and rejected the necessity. But I knew that if I kept dreaming I was going to turn the handle, I was going to enter the Church. The only way out was to escape from the dream itself.

It was one of those weird moments when you become aware of the dream even though you're still dreaming it. I stood with my hand on the handle and said very firmly:

"It's only a dream. Only a dream."

My hand started to turn the handle.

"It's only a dream! Only a dream! ONLY A DREAM!"

I screamed the words over and over in my mind, trying to make them come true. It was a tremendous effort of willpower. I forced the door out of existence, I refused to let the handle be real. Frantically I sought to make contact with the ordinary world again. Where was I? I had to be somewhere . . .

It was the coldness of the snow that brought me back. Touching snow, recognizing snow, I remembered where I was. I remembered the night in the nursery and the climb up the chimney. The defeated images of the dream subsided and sank away.

Only then was I able to open my eyes. I was still in exactly the same position where I had fallen asleep. My head hung down on one side of the roof ridge, my feet on the other. I raised my head and saw that the world was no longer completely black. Over the forest the dawn was breaking.

CHAPTER 54

It was a breathtaking sight. A pale pink light was slowly opening up the sky. Above the horizon, numerous small rosy-edged clouds appeared, all very clear and distinct.

Then I saw the red rim of the sun. Dimly the snow-covered world began to blush, in colours of pearl and grey. Long level rays filtered through the air, long thin shadows moved across the ground.

I watched in awe. After the madness of the night, this was like a return of sanity. The darkness was being swept away! The world was clean and fresh again!

I changed my position on the roof. My body was as stiff as a board. I could hardly get my legs and arms to bend. I was lucky to have escaped frostbite. Slowly, creakingly, I swung myself around to straddle the ridge. I sat there flexing my arms and trying to massage the circulation back into my legs.

Now the full orb of the sun was visible. It seemed enormous, molten and golden. Its beams were golden too, sheer shafts of sunlight descending towards the world. They glanced first across the snowy tree-tops of the forest, reflecting a brilliant dazzling glare. A few moments later, they struck the roof of the vicarage, kindling the snow into light all around me. A few moments later again, they played upon the various prominences of the building site, flashing and sparkling from every white-capped pier and arch and wall. I had to squinch up my eyes, the radiance was so intense.

Soon the whole clearing had turned into one single glittering white field. I sat on the ridge of the roof, bathed in light. Christmas Day! A wonderful wonderful Christmas Day! I felt transformed!

How can I explain it? I had been so cowardly through the night, running away from the Caulkisses and Quodes. I had allowed their mere madness to overpower me. I had even come close to surrendering my own sanity. But not any more! Now I was in a different mood! Now I was a different person altogether!

For ten or fifteen minutes I sat there, drinking it all in. As the sun rose higher, the dazzle diminished and I no longer needed to squinch my eyes. I surveyed the entire panorama. I saw how the snow had settled into every crack and cranny, moulding every angle and corner. Even the raw earth and trenches of the building site had been smoothed over, even the jagged bits of brickwork had been softened with tiny white pillows.

Pure perfect peaceful snow. The world held its breath. There was no breeze, not even the faintest stir in the air. Everything so calm, so still . . .

But suddenly the calm was broken. Somewhere down below a door opened. The front door of the vicarage! Immediately Gambels started bouncing loudly around in his kennel, uttering cries of excitement:

"Gabber-hoff! Gabber-hoff! Gabber-hoff! Yipp!"

I watched and waited. The inhabitants of Morbing Vyle were coming out from the vicarage.

CHAPTER 55

At first the edge of the roof blocked my vision. But I could hear metallic sounds of chinking and clinking. I guessed that Mr Caulkiss was fitting the harness over Gambels' head.

Then Melestrina and Craylene and Mr Quode appeared in view. They marched out across the snow, twenty paces away from the vicarage. They turned and looked straight up at me.

"Ah, there you are! Thought so!"

"Found you out! You backslider!"

"You weakling!"

"You chicken-heart!"

"Didn't dare take the final step!"

"Poor silly Mr Smythe!"

They were wearing their Sunday best. Melestrina was resplendent in a long black cloak and gloves and a vast feathery hat with a veil. In one hand she held a bell, in the other a tambourine. Craylene was dressed like a princess with a coronet in her hair and pearls around her neck. She carried a big stack of books in her arms. As for Mr Quode, he had put on an eye-catching toupee that was even more garishly red than his own usual fringe of hair. He flourished his favourite silver trumpet.

Looking down at them, I felt suddenly contemptuous. Freaks, mere freaks! How could I have been so overwhelmed by them?

"Yah!" I yelled down. I blew a raspberry at them. "Didn't think I could get away, did you! I wasn't so helpless as you thought!"

They shook their heads.

"You had your chance, Mr Smythe!"

"Now you'll be sorry!"

"We don't care about you any more!"

"We've given you up!"

"You're with the victims now!"

"Didn't have the strength!"

"Didn't have the intensity!"

"Good!" I yelled again. "Because I'm going back to the real world! Back to real normal people! And I'll tell them about you! They'll probably come and cart you off to the loony bin!"

They laughed. Melestrina clashed her tambourine against her hip.

"That's what you think, Mr Smythe!"

"You don't get away so easily!"

"You'll be in Morbing Vyle for a while yet!"

"Until the Great Return!"

"Our Lord will deal with you!"

"Then you'll wish you'd joined us when you had the chance!"

"Huh!" I sniffed. "Your Lord! The Great Return! I don't think so!"

"Oh yes, Mr Smythe! Very soon now!"

"Maybe even today!"

"We're going out to the Altar now!"

"We're going to take out the bag!"

"Maybe today will be the Bursting of the Bag!"

"Think of it, Mr Smythe! On your Christmas Day!"

"When your namby-pamby Christ was born!"

"But no-one will know about his birthday any more! Not when our Vicar is reborn!"

I was trying to think up some suitably scathing reply, when Gambels and Mr Caulkiss came into view. Gambels was churning along on the end of his reins, kicking up snow like a snowplough. Mr Caulkiss wore the same black cassock that he had donned on the night of the banquet. He didn't even glance up at me.

"Forward!" he cried. "Don't bother with the weakling! Forward to the High Altar!"

And so they set off. Mr Caulkiss aimed Gambels in the direction of the Altar. Mr Quode lifted his trumpet to his lips and blew a strident fanfare. Melestrina rang her bell and jangled her tambourine. Turning their backs on the vicarage, they marched away across the snow.

I watched them go. They really did seem to have lost interest in me. When they came to the trenches they followed a zigzag route, crossing by one plank bridge after another. Their footprints were a track of dirty marks across the virgin snow.

I gazed out towards the choir end of the church, looking for the Altar. At first I could hardly distinguish it. It was half-submerged in the snow, just one white hump like so many others. But eventually I picked it out. I saw the chairs and lectern too, very tiny in the distance.

I couldn't help wondering what would happen when the Caulkisses and Quodes reached their destination. They had said they intended to bring out the bag. They believed that their Vicar would return to life. Impossible! Or was it?

All of a sudden I wasn't so sure that I wanted to escape back to the real world straight away. Now that the inhabitants were no longer trying to stop me, I wasn't in such a hurry to go. All of a sudden I was curious - very very curious. And surprisingly unafraid.

I considered the prospect. If I could sneak out along by the edge of the forest . . . At the back of the choir, the forest curved round a mere thirty or so yards away from the Altar. If I could get to hide behind the trees there, I'd be close enough to see and hear everything . . .

I nodded. Much better to learn the full facts before I went back to the real world. Better to give the world a complete report on Morbing Vyle. At least, that's what I told myself. But perhaps it was only a rationalization. Perhaps the idea of the Vicar had taken more of a hold on me than I could consciously admit. I had to see how the story turned out.

CHAPTER 56

It didn't take me long to get down to the ground. What had seemed so difficult in the night now turned out to be easy. I worked my way along the roof, still straddling the ridge with a leg on either side. The ridge ended in a gable, and beyond the gable was the side-wall of the vicarage. Thickly growing ivy covered the wall.

I clambered over the gable and tested my weight on the ivy. The stems were strong and woody. It was like climbing down a ladder. I lowered myself hand over hand and foot over foot. The snow from the leaves cascaded in a white shower all around me.

The Caulkisses and Quodes were now far away, approaching the choir end of the church. I wondered if they had noticed what I was doing. They didn't seem to be looking in my direction. But it didn't matter in any case. They would only think I was making my escape from Morbing Vyle - especially when they saw me go off into the forest. They'd never guess I was aiming to spy on them.

I came to the bottom of the wall and stood for a moment blowing warm breath onto my hands. Then I turned and headed for the nearest trees. The snow squeaked under my feet.

The forest was strange in a way that I hadn't realised before. Looking down from the roof, I had seen only the blanket of whiteness over the tops of the trees. The snow had settled on the uppermost twigs and branches. But the amazing thing was that it hadn't settled anywhere else. The trunks of the trees were quite black and bare. Nor was there any snow on the ground beneath.

Of course I guessed the explanation. The snow hadn't settled because the trunks of the trees were still hot. The same deep smouldering heat as when I first arrived in Morbing Vyle. Nearly three weeks ago! It was uncanny.

But I didn't worry. Whatever the strange properties of this forest, I didn't believe they were directed against me. If the Caulkisses and Quodes disliked it and regarded it as their enemy, then this forest and I were on the same side. Anything that was opposed to Morbing Vyle was an ally of mine.

I walked in amongst the trees. The ash on the ground was sodden, and there was a constant pitter-patter of dripping water. The snow overhead must be melting fast. The whole place was as warm and humid as a steam-filled bathroom.

I didn't go very far in - only about twenty paces. Then I turned and walked along parallel to the edge of the clearing. I followed a curving roundabout route towards the choir end of the church.

It was a long walk. What made it even longer was the fact that I had to keep weaving from side to side around the trees. I hoped that the Caulkisses and Quodes wouldn't bring out the bag before I arrived.

After a while there was a new kind of sound from the depths of the forest. Not just the pitter-patter of dripping water, but soft muffled swishes and rushes and thumps on the ground. It seemed that the cover of snow was disintegrating overhead, dropping down in whole frozen lumps and floes.

Whoooooshhhh! Swoooooosshhhhhh! Flummmmp! Ploppppp!

I stared in through the trees and saw white ghostly shapes plummeting from the branches. There was movement everywhere. It was as though the forest was coming to life. And I had the sense that the forest was angry, stirring with violence and hostility. But still I didn't feel under any threat myself. Even when large masses of snow began falling where I walked, they never fell on top of me.

On and on I walked. As I came up to the choir end of the church, I could hear a sound of singing, even above the sounds of the forest. The Caulkisses and Quodes were performing a hymn with musical accompaniment on bell and tambourine. I recognised the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers, but I couldn't make out the words. Somehow I didn't think that the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle would be singing the traditional words.

I circled around by the side of the choir. The hymn came to an end and was followed by a low droning chant like a litany. I approached a little closer to the edge of the clearing. I trusted that the darkness of my clothes would blend in and hide me against the darkness of the trees. With only the last line of trunks for protection, I looked out at the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle.

Mr Caulkiss was standing in front of the Altar. He faced Melestrina, Craylene and Mr Quode, who were standing in front of the chairs. Beside them on the snow lay Melestrina's vast feathery hat. Gambels lay on the snow too, hitched by the reins to the leg of one of the chairs. As yet there was no sign of the bag.

I continued to circle around, heading for the place where the forest curved closest to the Altar. The litany went on for several minutes, then came to an abrupt end. Melestrina, Craylene and Mr Quode resumed their seats. So did Melestrina's hat. It jumped up from the ground and settled itself on the chair next to Melestrina's. I didn't need two guesses to tell who was hiding inside it.

Mr Caulkiss turned and started brushing the snow from the top of the Altar. For a moment I was puzzled. Then I saw what he was after. On top of the Altar lay the flat silver box - exactly as I had first discovered it. Mr Caulkiss unfastened the clasps. Then he picked it up in both hands with great reverence. He held it out towards the congregation, displaying the contents.

"The Instruments of the Lord!" he proclaimed.

"Praise the Lord!" the congregation replied with one voice.

From my angle I couldn't get much of a view. I caught only a momentary glimpse of glinting metal. But I remembered well enough. I remembered the fretsaw and file and auger and hammer and chisels, the stainless steel tools with the ebony handles. Of course - the Instruments of the Lord!

Mr Scrab's story explained it all. Those must be the very tools that the Vicar Himself had used. With those very tools He had butchered His human victims, fashioned His so-called works of art. The choirboys hanging dead in the rafters . . . the tree decked out with human parts . . . the amputated body crawling around on bloodstained sheets . . .

I gritted my teeth. The most sickening deeds ever committed - and here were the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle actually worshipping the instruments of butchery! They even wanted the butcher to come back to life! It was monstrous! Abominable!

I stood and watched from the shelter of the trees. Mr Caulkiss closed the silver box and replaced it on top of the Altar. Then he went across to the lectern. There on the lectern were the various books that Craylene had carried out from the vicarage. He opened one of them up and rifled through to a particular page.

"Greatness upon me !" he read. "For I am the Redeemer of the World !"

He rested his hand upon the lectern and looked out over the congregation. It was evidently the beginning of a sermon.

"Those are the words of the Lord," he said. "Redeemer of the World . Let us consider for a moment what He means."

CHAPTER 57

"Redeemer of the World ," repeated Mr Caulkiss. "But why does the World need a Redeemer? We know what the Christians think. They believe that they already have a Redeemer. They believe that the World was saved by their Jesus Christ, two thousand years ago. Humphh! What does our Lord say about that?"

He opened up another book and found another page.

"As for the Christ of the Christians ," he read, "I name him Prophet and Precursor ."

"See? Our Lord is generous. He does not deny the Christ of the Christians. A Prophet of the Spirit, a Precursor of True Religion. But still only a precursor, only a stage along the way. Christianity alone was never enough. And our Lord foretold its failure eighty years ago. Although people still called themselves Christians at that time, still went to church - yet He knew that their religion had become a hollow sham. Overtaken by the insidious growth of scientific materialism. There was no spiritual aspiration, no real sense of the sacred. Especially after the evolutionary science of Darwinism. What hope for the world, when humanity deliberately chose to sink down amongst the animals and identify with mere necessities of nature? Hear what our Lord said in one of his sermons:

Spirit and body are tied together; but which is to lead, the dog or its master ?

"Clear words indeed! But ignored and unheeded! For eighty long years humanity has followed the path of materialism. The Twentieth Century has fulfilled everything that our Lord foretold. Humanity in the Twentieth Century cares only for comfort and gratification. Mere low pleasures and animal satisfactions. The biological body is preened and pampered. But where is the spirit? Dead! Dead! Dead!

"And what have the Christians done to assert the spirit? Phuhhh! Christianity has gone over to the side of the body! The new Christianity! The social conscience! Love and kindness! Taking care of the poor and needy! Helping to feed the starving millions! Which means:- taking care of their biological bodies ! Satisfying their animal instincts of hunger! It is the same, the same low

interest in comfort and gratification! Such Christians are worse than hedonists, because they can't even stop with their own bodies! They have to spread the materialistic heresy into other people's bodies too!

"Only here in Morbing Vyle is the message of the spirit preserved. Outside of here, everything is functional and biological. A materialistic science serves a materialistic technology, and a materialistic technology produces materialistic aids to comfort and gratification. We have seen for ourselves such things as radio and motorcars. And nowadays, we hear, they have T.V. and heart transplants! So says our guest, our Mr Martin Smythe - "

"Our Lord will deal with him!" interjected Melestrina from the congregation. "Hallelujah!"

"Yes, our Lord will deal with him," acknowledged Mr Caulkiss. "But let us also consider what he represents. Our Mr Smythe is a typical example of the modernised individual. No sense of the sacred, no awe or terror. The assumptions of materialism are very deeply ingrained in him. Our Mr Smythe reverences 'normality' - which is to say, the mere normal behaviour of the mere normal body. Anything else he fears and tries to dismiss. He would confine the spirit to an asylum for the insane! That is what we shall be fighting against, that is what we shall have to overcome. But we can draw strength from the words of the Lord:

Intensity I give you, and a power to exceed all the things of this world.

"Our Lord knew that Christianity would fail. He knew how deeply materialism would become ingrained. But He did not despair. Out of disaster He brought forth triumph. Even as a minister of the Church of England, He sought to understand where the Christian way of thinking had gone wrong. Many days and nights, many weeks and months, He struggled in His mind. Until finally He knew that the Christian way of thinking could never be reformed from within. Only a completely new way of thinking would suffice. That was when He discovered the true principle of spiritual transcendence.

"Hah! And what was wrong with the Christian way of thinking? Easy for us to see, having learnt from His revelation. The Christian way of thinking was always grounded upon a false dichotomy! The dualism of virtue versus sin! What does virtue or sin have to do with the sacred, the spiritual, the holy? Away, says the Lord, away with all artificial dualisms and dichotomies and oppositions! There are sins which are merely animalistic - sins to be despised. But there are also sins which transcend the body and assert the spirit. Awesome terrible sacred sins! Sins which serve no functional purpose! Sins which have nothing to do with comfort! Sins which defy biological gain! Religion cannot afford to exclude so much that is holy. The aspiration of the spirit is crippled if we restrict ourselves to the possibilities of mere virtue.

"So our Lord has shown us. Not only by His words but also by His deeds. In His great Works of Art he refuted all laws and categories and regularities. Sublime massacres! Holy depredations! Mystical pornographies! In acts that had previously been viewed as sinful, He explored new dimensions of religious experience! In acts that had previously been committed only in blind states of guilt, he opened His eyes and discovered exaltation! Wonder! Tremendousness! He showed the way to new intensities of experience!

"And in all that He did, he demonstrated the true principle of spiritual transcendence. No functional purpose in His great Works of Art! No biological gains in His onslaught upon the human anatomy! On the contrary - His great Works of Art were a deliberate refutation of Nature. Let us remember what He said at the time of the Revelation:

Deny the natural; for the spirit is asserted where the instincts are cast down !

"And elsewhere (Mr Caulkiss went leafing through the pages of his books):

Whosoever transgresses against biology shall find a joy that surpasses all satisfaction !

"Or again:

Be not obedient to the normality of needs: throw off the chains of Nature and aspire !"

At this point the congregation broke out into spontaneous yells and cries.

"Throw off the chains!" shrilled Craylene.

"The true principle of spiritual transcendence!" boomed Melestrina.

"Against Nature! A rebours !" gasped Mr Quode.

"Gruff! Gruff! Gruffup!" barked Gambels, rousing up from where he had been lying in the snow.

Mr Caulkiss closed his last book with a snap.

"Yes indeed," he said. "We too have known spiritual transcendence. We too have experienced wonder and tremendousness. Each in our own way we have denied and defied Nature. Sometimes, of course, we have fallen short of the highest level. Sometimes we have accepted the body's imperatives, lost sight of our spiritual goal, sunk back among the comforts of Nature. The way of our Lord is not an easy one to follow. But still we have striven as best we could. Even in His absence, even without His help, we have achieved our intensities. And now - very soon now - we shall receive our reward! Hallelujah! The Lord is ready to return!"

He raised his arms in the air like a conductor and turned to face the Altar. Immediately Melestrina, Craylene and Mr Quode broke out at the tops of their voices.

"Hallelujah!"

"The Bursting of the Bag!"

"Redeemer of the World!"

"Praise the Lord!"

"We stand," said Mr Caulkiss solemnly, "at the dawn of a new era. The Christian Age is over! Let the Age of Morbing Vyle begin!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Let it be soon!"

"Let it be today!"

"O Lord, we are prepared!"

"So long we have waited!"

"Come to thy Chosen People!"

Mr Caulkiss moved across from the lectern to the Altar.

"And now let us bring out the bag," he said. "Help me to clear this snow."

CHAPTER 58

I watched them from my place amongst the trees. At last I understood the religion of Morbing Vyle. Craylene with her unnatural pets, Mr Quode with his peverted food and sexuality, Melestrina with her artificial acting, Mr Caulkiss with his mechanical son - of course, they were all deliberately going against Nature! That was their common principle . . . and it made me shudder. For the first time in my life, I had an apprehension of pure unadulterated evil . I had always been a rationalist, a believer in scientific determinism. But no social or psychological or medical explanation could account for this . This was evil as an active choice, a real force, a will-to-evil!

And at the centre of it all was their Lord, the Vicar of Morbing Vyle. Who had died of an idea so infinitely vile that even His own body couldn't put up with it. Who had died eighty years ago - but was now supposed to return and reconquer His own corpse. Was it possible?

They cleared away the snow from the back of the Altar. Melestrina did most of the digging, assisted by Mr Caulkiss and Mr Quode. Craylene and Melestrina's hat gathered around to watch. Only Gambels remained behind, still tied to the leg of the chair.

As soon as the snow was cleared, Melestrina lifted the marble panel and Mr Caulkiss reached forward into the interior of the Altar. A moment later he re-emerged, dragging forth the leather bag. It was about five or six feet long.

"All Hail!" cried Melestrina.

"O Lord of Lords!" cried Mr Quode.

"O Lord of Lord of Lords!" cried Craylene.

Mr Caulkiss altered his hold on the bag, sliding his arms in underneath. Then he lifted. The bag sagged and slumped at either end. Its contents were obviously both flexible and heavy. Mr Caulkiss staggered under the weight. But eventually he got it up on top of the Altar. He rearranged it to lie as straight as possible. The others cried out in adoration:

"O Lord arise!"

"Come forth!"

"Show thy power!"

"Prove the strength of thy spirit!"

"Refute biology!"

"Compel thy body back to life!"

"Spirit over Nature!"

"The ultimate refutation!"

"Nothing can withstand thy intensity!"

"O Lord! O Lord! Greatness upon thee!"

They clustered around the Altar, blocking my view. I could glimpse the bag only intermittently. It didn't seem to be moving But the Caulkisses and Quodes thought otherwise. Suddenly they flung their arms up in the air and shouted at the tops of their voices.

"He moves!"

"See His arm lift!"

"No, no, His chest!"

"Hallelujah! He must be breathing!"

"Isn't that His legs?"

"O look at His toes! O mighty wiggling!"

Simultaneously with their shouting, there was another sound - a sound from the depths of the forest behind me. It was the same swish and thump of falling snow, but louder and louder and louder. It was as though the whole white mass overhead was collapsing all at once to the ground. Like a surging tide it crashed and cascaded through the branches.

I didn't turn round however. My attention was focussed upon the bag. The Caulkisses and Quodes didn't turn round either - probably didn't even notice. With one accord they flung themselves down onto their knees, gabbling wildly.

I stared. Now the bag was clearly visible. And yes, it was moving. Not much, just tiny sinuous ripples running back and forth under the leather. But definitely, undeniably moving.

I clenched my fists. So something was moving. But that didn't mean that it was the Vicar of Morbing Vyle coming back to life! Not arms, not legs, not toes! I refused to believe! It couldn't be Him, it mustn't be Him! There had to be an alternative explanation!

But the more I looked, the more I began to fancy that the contents of the bag really did have a human shape. I could see one end as rounded like a head, and the other end tapering down in a way that suggested feet and toes. And the end with the feet and toes really did seem to be wriggling with exactly the sort of movements that feet and toes might make.

I was terrified. As terrified as when I had hidden inside the Altar and the bag had tried to wrap itself around me. Only this time the terror turned to rage. I had a fierce hard feeling in the pit of my stomach, and a single burning thought in my mind: this monstrosity must not be allowed ! I wouldn't let it come true!

I moved forward through the trees. Louder and louder came the sound of the forest behind me. It was no longer just swishes and soft thumps, but sharp spittings and sputterings too. Perhaps the melting snow was meeting the heat in the trees - but to me it seemed like an expression of anger and hatred. Anger and hatred directed against the thing in the bag!

I came up behind the cleft shell of an old chestnut tree right on the very edge of the clearing. Now I had a length of wood in my hand, a jagged piece of timber about three feet long and shaped like a club. I don't know how it had got there. I suppose I must have snatched it from one of the trunks, ripped it clean off without even realising.

The bag was moving more vigorously than ever. It writhed and stretched and arched in the middle, like someone trying to rise and sit up. The Caulkisses and Quodes grovelled all around the Altar in abject adoration. They couldn't stop me. No-one could stop me.

I stepped out into the open. Behind me, the sound of the forest was like a multitude of voices crying in my ears. The spittings and sputterings became curses and snarls. I even thought I heard words being pronounced - violent, hate-filled words.

"Smash! Strike! Smite!

Revenge! Destroy! Finish!"

I felt an irresistible urge to act. My mind was focussed with tremendous intensity upon the leather bag. I wanted to destroy it! I wanted to gain revenge! Revenge for what I didn't know. It didn't make sense. But I had to have revenge!

I raised the timber over my head and charged forward.

CHAPTER 59

Over the snow, towards the Altar, racing, racing. My feet seemed hardly to touch the ground. There was a trench in front of me, but I didn't need a bridge - I leaped across in a single bound. It was like being borne along on a great wave.

Only at the last moment did the Caulkisses and Quodes catch sight of me. They looked up from from their grovelling and cried out in amazement.

"Mr Smythe?!"

"What are you doing?!"

"Don't - !"

But I rushed up amongst them and stood over the Altar. I cried out in the words of the forest:

"SMASH! STRIKE! SMITE!

REVENGE! DESTROY! FINISH!"

And as the yell burst out of my throat, so at the same instant a flame broke out at the end of my club. A small fierce jet of intense white flame! I flourished my club in the air and the flame spurted forth from the charred black timber. On top of the Altar the bag writhed more vigorously than ever.

"I WILL!" I yelled. I was filled with an irresistable intensity of rage. With a mighty swing I brought the club down on top of the Altar.

But too late. Even as I struck, the bag wriggled itself to the side of the Altar and dropped off. I caught it a glancing blow on the way down. It fell with a flop in front of my feet.

Still on their knees, the Caulkisses and Quodes roared and screamed.

"Sacrilege!"

"Blasphemy!"

"Fool! Fool! Fool!"

"Look what you've done!"

They reached out with their hands, to seize and wrestle me to the ground. I felt someone's hand close like a vice around my ankle. But for the moment I was stronger than any of them. I kicked free and took a step backwards.

"I WILL!" I yelled again. Still the wave of rage carried me on. Even though my piece of timber had shattered at the end, even though my club was only half its original length. I raised it once more over my head and lined up another blow.

But the blow was never delivered. For now I saw that a rent had appeared in the leather bag. Whether because of my first blow or the impact of hitting the ground I don't know. But something inside was swelling and pressing outwards. There was a thick heavy smell in the air, and a strange low hum.

I stood and gaped. The Caulkisses and Quodes gaped too. Slowly the rent widened and spread. The piece of timber fell from my hand. Something pale was starting to emerge.

And then I let out a great shriek of laughter. I laughed until I could hardly breath.

"Maggots!" I shrieked. "Maggots! Maggots! It's nothing but maggots!"

CHAPTER 60

They spilled out in an endless pullulating horde. A million million pale yellowy grubs, rolling and crawling blindly over one another. They poured forth over the snow until it seemed as if the ground itself was moving and heaving. The leather bag deflated like a tyre.

The inhabitants of Morbing Vyle were beyond words. Their eyes looked ready to pop out of their heads. Even the tiny blue eyes peering out from Melestrina's hat seemed thunderstruck. Four motionless human figures, one motionless feathery hat. The horde of maggots divided and flowed around them in separate spreading streams.

Still I couldn't stop laughing. I yelled in their faces:

"Is that your Lord? The Redeemer of the World? Is that His chest breathing then? Is that His toes wiggling?"

I felt like dancing. I was so relieved I was almost hysterical. I had always thought that there had to be an alternative explanation - and now there was.

"Look at the power of the Spirit over Nature!" I jeered. "Look how your Lord defies biology! O praise the Lord! What a pity He let the maggots get to Him! What a pity He rotted away!"

I'm not sure if they even heard. They were in a state of shock. I clasped my hand to my nose.

"Pooh! I think your Lord stinks !" I said. "I'm off! Goodbye, maggot-worshippers !"

I strode away in triumph. Melestrina emerged momentarily from her trance, swivelling huge tragic eyes in my direction. But no-one made a move to stop me.

I retraced my steps back towards the same part of the forest I had just come out from. I was in no hurry. I didn't try to leap the trench, but detoured around and crossed over by a plank bridge.

I felt proud of myself. I had stood up for normality - and won. The insanities of Morbing Vyle were over. I felt that my bravery of today had redeemed my cowardice of the night before. I was almost surprised at my own heroism.

I came to the edge of the forest and stopped. For one last time I surveyed the whole of Morbing Vyle. I took in the maze of trenches, the snow-capped fragments of column and wall, the distant vicarage and the Altar close at hand. Around the Altar the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle had now risen to their feet.

"Byebye lunatics!" I yelled at them. "Byebye Melestrina and Craylene! Byebye Caulkiss and Quode! Byebye Gambels and baby Panker!"

I waved mockingly. Then I turned and plunged in amongst the trees. I felt amazingly lighthearted. I was on my way back to the real world again. Just beyond the forest! Only a few minutes' walk away!

I looked around curiously at the trees as I walked. The spitting and sputtering sounds were still there, but not the soft swishes and thumps. There were no lumps of snow left to fall. Not even the tiniest patch of white remained, not even on the uppermost twigs. The forest had gone back to its usual bare black state.

I wondered a little about the voices I had heard. Had I only imagined them? Certainly the spittings and sputterings no longer sounded like actual words. But they still sounded very angry and fierce. I didn't know what to believe.

As I penetrated deeper and deeper, the forest grew thicker and darker. Here was no avenue such as I had followed on the way in to Morbing Vyle. Here the trunks stood much closer together. Low-hanging branches obstructed my path and spiky ends of twig tried to poke my eyes out. I wondered if the forest extended as far on this side as on the side where I had entered.

I was about fifty yards in when I noticed something strange. There was a smell of smoke in the air! I peered ahead through the trees and realised that the depths of the forest were shrouded by a dense grey haze. And the curtain seemed to be coming towards me.

There was a new kind of noise too, over and above the spittings and sputterings. It was a continuous crackling roar, coming from the depths of the forest. I halted in my tracks.

I was puzzled. I remembered what they had called out to me on the roof this morning. "You don't get away so easily" and "You'll be in Morbing Vyle for a while yet." And I remembered what Mr Quode had said about the way out being very different to the way in. They assumed that the forest was hostile towards me, just as it was towards them. But I thought of the forest as my ally ...

I stood and watched. The grey haze was coming closer. The air grew more and more smoky, catching in my throat, making me want to cough. I covered my mouth with the sleeve of my coat and tried to breathe in small shallow breaths.

Then I saw the fire. At first just a glow, an ominous red tinge in the haze. Then the flames themselves, bright tiny tongues flashing and flickering between the trees. There were hundreds, thousands, millions of them, stretching all across from left to right. The fire was burning on a wide unbroken front. There was no possible way through.

I couldn't believe it. I felt betrayed. Crazily, furiously, I shouted out aloud:

"What is this? Why me? Why against me?"

And then I seemed to hear a reply. It was the multitude of voices again, the violent hate-filled voices. Only this time they roared and crackled in the noise of the flames.

"Smash! Strike! Smite!

Revenge! Destroy! Finish!"

A reply? But they were just saying the same as before! I tried to protest.

"But I've - "

But I couldn't finish my sentence. I broke out in a fit of coughing. The smoke had found its way right down into my lungs.

"Revenge! Destroy! Finish!

Finish! Finish! Finish!"

I had to retreat. I didn't understand, but I knew I was being driven back to Morbing Vyle. The flames leaped forward from tree to tree, progressing at a phenomenal speed. They were almost like live things, jumping and flying through the air.

I turned and blundered back the way I had come. The smoke was choking me, and my eyes were stinging and streaming with tears. I could hardly see. I held my arms stretched out in front, sleepwalker-style.

The retreat was easier than the advance. The low-hanging branches and spiky twigs didn't seem to block my path so much as before. I even had the impression that the twigs were pointing the way for me - like black crooked fingers all turned in the direction of Morbing Vyle.

I walked fast - fast enough to keep ahead of the fire. If I bumped into a tree or slowed down for a moment, the roar of the flames grew suddenly louder. But otherwise the fire kept pace behind.

And so I came out into the clearing again. No more trees, no more violent crying voices. I walked on a few paces, then stopped. I spat and blew my nose. I breathed deeply in and out, in and out. Clean wholesome air filled my lungs. I rubbed the film of tears from my eyes.

The Caulkisses and Quodes were waiting for me. When I raised my head and looked round, they were all standing there in a line. They had formed up on the other side of the trench, about fifteen yards away. They were giving me a look that made my blood run cold.

CHAPTER 61

"Thought you could escape, did you?" said Mr Caulkiss. "Thought you were different?"

"You goody-goody!" cried Craylene.

"But now you're back with us just the same," said Mr Quode.

"Now you can never escape," said Mr Caulkiss. "Look around you, Mr Smythe!"

He gestured with his arm. I followed the gesture and saw what he meant. Smoke was rising up all around the clearing. All around the choir and all around the nave, over behind the vicarage and over behind the South Transept. There were flames too, glowing red and orange, just visible through the trees. The fires seemed to have ignited simultaneously on every side of the forest.

"Only the Lord could have led us out."

"But no Lord now! And no escape!"

"You destroyed Him, Mr Smythe!"

"The Hope of the World destroyed!"

"It's all your fault!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" I objected. "You can't blame me. I didn't destroy Him."

"You burst open the bag."

"Yes. But I didn't turn Him into maggots."

"You burst open the bag too soon."

"What difference did that make? I mean, He'd rotted away long ago."

"Too soon . He should have emerged when He was ready."

"How can you say that? There was nothing there to emerge! You saw for yourselves what was inside the bag! Face facts!"

"There are no facts!"

"Oh come on. Be reasonable!"

"We don't want to be reasonable!"

"But just consider -"

"No more considering!"

"The truth is -"

"No more truth!"

"If you just think calmly about -"

"No more thinking! No more calmness! No more nothing!"

If I'd thought they were crazy before, I now discovered the real extremity of their madness.

In a terrifying frenzy they ranted and raged:

"Nothing to live for! Because of you Mr Smythe! You have taken away the meaning of our existence! You have reduced us! You have pulled us down!"

"No power! No greatness! No intensity!"

"It is the End!"

"All doomed! All doomed!"

"O woe! O woe! O woe! O woe!"

"Despair! Despair! Despair!"

All in a line on the other side of the trench, they gnashed their teeth and beat their breasts.

Mr Caulkiss was on the left of the line, then Craylene, then Mr Quode, then Melestrina on the right.

Melestrina not only beat her breasts but punched herself in the face as well.

"Expire my Soul!" she raved. "Let Void and Vacuum reign! Let every Thing be small and shrivelled!"

She gave herself a mighty backhander across the nose.

"Dread cumber all my Parts! Brain darken! Heartbeat cease! Lungs rift thy Cavity and Kidneys sunder!"

She boxed her ears with simultaneous blows to both sides of her head.

"Our Glory dashed! And I must weep! Then let Synapses now implode! All Mental Functions run amok! Incontinent!"

She pointed at me with her arm and stared accusingly.

"O Blame! O Guilt! Behold the Cause!"

Her stare was so violent that the blood vessels burst in her eyeballs. Two trickles of red ran down the sides of her face.

"It's all your fault, Mr Smythe!" screamed Mr Quode.

He tore off his trousers and his long silken underpants. Naked below the waist, he waggled himself from side to side.

"Because of you I'm foaming at the mouth!" yelled Mr Caulkiss. He opened his mouth and discharged a stream of whitish froth.

"Oh Mr Smythe! Look what you're making me do!" Craylene raked her fingernails over her cheeks, stripping away whole slabs of make-up. Then she took a grip on her left ear and ripped it right off from her head.

"See how we suffer!"

"And you will too!"

"Even more, Mr Smythe!"

"A million times more!"

"We shall make you pay!"

Instinctively I took a step backwards. But something got in the way of my step and tripped me up. It was Melestrina's hat. Baby Panker must have crept around and positioned himself deliberately behind my feet. I lost my balance and fell flat on my back.

"Get him! Get him! Get him!"

They and raced for the plank bridge over the trench. One after the other they came charging across. Mr Quode wagging, Mr Caulkiss dribbling froth, Melestrina bleeding at the eyes, Craylene with her face all cracked and broken . . .

That would have been the end of me for sure. But suddenly there was a sharp puff of wind and a mass of swirling smoke billowed out from the forest. Everything was instantly enveloped in a thick grey cloud. The Caulkisses and Quodes faltered in their rush, momentarily baffled, coughing and choking.

I jumped up off the ground and fled for my life.

CHAPTER 62

I was better prepared for the smoke than the Caulkisses and Quodes. Again I held the sleeve of my coat across my mouth, using the cloth as a filter. I ran around by the side of the choir, along by the edge of the trench.

After the first overwhelming cloud, the smoke thinned out to a general haze. It seemed to extend everywhere across the clearing. I could see to a distance of only ten or twenty yards. It was like looking through a veil.

I made my plans on the run. Since the forest refused to let me through, I would have to find a hiding-place somewhere in Morbing Vyle itself. That shouldn't be too difficult - once I had got well away from the Caulkisses and Quodes. I would just have to lie low for a while.

I found another plank bridge over the trench and crossed back towards the centre of the choir. I couldn't see the Caulkisses and Quodes, but I could hear their cries in the smoke. They seemed to be running along behind me. I wondered how they knew which way to follow . . .

"Wipperwaff! Wipperwaff! Wipperwaff! Oik!"

Suddenly Gambels appeared out of the smoke ahead. He was still tied up to the leg of the chair - only now he was dragging the whole chair along on the end of his reins. He looked like a husky pulling a sled.

"Oikapaff! Oikapaff! Oikapaff! Wipp!!!"

I veered to the side. I don't think he even noticed me. He just rushed right past and kept on going. In a moment he had vanished back into the smoke again.

I kept on running. I ran down the length of the choir, past half built columns and fragments of wall. I could run much faster than the Caulkisses and Quodes. Soon I had left them far behind.

But somehow I couldn't shake them off altogether. I swerved to the left, I swerved to the right, yet still they clung to my trail. How did they manage to keep following?

Then I realised. Of course! I was leaving a clear set of footprints behind in the snow! No use trying to hide if my footsteps led straight to my hiding-place! I would have to think of a way to cover my tracks . . .

It didn't take me long to have an idea. I ran until I was probably half way down the clearing and a good hundred yards in front of the Caulkisses and Quodes. Then I changed direction and headed towards the South Transept. I unwrapped the fox fur from around my neck - Craylene's fox fur which I had been wearing ever since the previous evening.

Soon I came to a suitable deep trench. I kept on going right up to the edge, planting my last footprint on the very brink. Then I retreated backwards, stepping carefully into the footprints I had just made. After a dozen paces, I jumped away to the side and continued walking backwards over the fresh snow. But now I disguised my new footprints by brushing them over with the fox fur. The snow where I had brushed looked almost as smooth as the untouched snow.

I was twenty yards away when the Caulkisses and Quodes came up. I could barely see their shadowy shapes through the smoke. The massive shape of Melestrina was in the lead, followed by the rotund shape of Mr Quode, then the tiny frilly shape of Craylene and the scarecrow shape of Mr Caulkiss. I dropped down onto the snow and continued my retreat on my hands and knees.

They halted at the edge of the trench. I could hear them talking and arguing. Had I jumped clean across? Had I fallen in? They were totally baffled. I smiled to myself. My idea was working just as I'd hoped.

But I smiled too soon. Suddenly, close by, came a piercing high-pitched squeak.

"WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!"

It was the squeak of baby Panker. How had he found me out? I leaped to my feet. Somehow he must have spotted my brushed-over tracks. I looked around but I couldn't see Melestrina's hat. Perhaps he was now hiding in something else?

But there was no time to think about it. Already the others had turned to his summons. I leaped to my feet and took off running. They yelled and shrieked as they pounded towards me.

"Grab him! Grab him! The enemy! Grab him!"

Back towards the centre of the clearing I ran. Once I got going they couldn't keep up. Soon they had disappeared back into the smoke again. I couldn't see them and they couldn't see me. But still they had my footprints to follow.

My next idea came when I was somewhere down at the nave end of the church. I was running along beside a half built wall, far ahead of the Caulkisses and Quodes. Near the end of the wall was a large stack of building materials: tiles and bricks and hunks of stone, all heaped up higgledy piggledy. I could see that the snow had settled only in the hollows of the stack, leaving the points and ridges bare. Here was an opportunity!

I repeated my previous backwards-stepping trick. I ran a few paces on beyond the stack, then reversed over the same distance in my own footprints. Then I made a huge sideways spring through the air and landed on the side of the stack. As long as I stepped only on the points and ridges, there was no snow to take the mark of my feet. Quickly but carefully I clambered across. Then I made another huge leap from the far side of the stack, flying clean over the top of the half-built wall. I wriggled along in the shelter of the wall and headed back parallel to the way I had come.

A minute or two later, the Caulkisses and Quodes turned up. They ran right past me on the other side of the wall, huffing and puffing. When they came to the end of my footprints, there was the same bafflement as before.

"It can't be!"

"He was heading this way!"

"Where has he gone?"

But baby Panker wasn't so easily fooled. Once more my ears were blasted by a piercing squeak. While the others stood debating, Panker had unerringly tracked me down.

"WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!"

It seemed almost supernatural! Again I jumped up and rushed off, just eluding the outstretched arms of my pursuers. Again I accelerated and left them floundering. It was crazy. I

could always leave them behind but I could never get clean away. Not while Panker was on my trail.

Still I kept thinking up new ideas for covering my tracks. What about doubling back over my previous route? I looped around in a wide circle. The snow where we had run before was trampled flat under multiple sets of footprints. How could anyone distinguish a further set of footprints on top of all the others?

But Panker could. I tried that trick not once but several times. Sometimes I ran along the route in my original direction, sometimes in the reverse direction. The five sets of footprints turned into ten sets, fifteen sets, twenty sets. The route became an inextricable mishmash of footprints. But it seemed that it was never inextricable enough to confuse Panker. Just when I thought I was safely away, there was that squeak, that inescapable squeak in my ears. Over and again he signalled my true location, bringing the Caulkisses and Quodes back after me.

What else could I do? I tried everything I could think of. I tried walking backwards so that my footprints would appear to be heading in the opposite direction. I tried using a plank as a vaulting pole, traversing long distances without leaving a print. Nothing made any difference. Somehow, miraculously, Panker could always follow.

In the end I just ran out of ideas. I gave up hope of a clean escape. I no longer attempted to accelerate away from my pursuers. Instead I slowed to a steady jog and concentrated on maintaining a constant lead of about fifty paces. If only I could tire them out . . .

But that was impossible too. For all their physical oddities, the Caulkisses and Quodes had no lack of staying power. They were implacable. Round and round and back and forth they chased me, until it seemed that we had covered the entire clearing many times over. I had the feeling that this strange state of balance could go on forever. But then the balance changed against me. My pursuers gained the benefit of reinforcements.

CHAPTER 63

It was my own fault for running too close to the vicarage. I had gone past the building a couple of times before, seeing it only as a looming dark rectangle through the smoke. But this time I noticed a strange light glowing in the windows. And a tremendous din from the animals in the barn. I ran closer to take a look.

The whole building was on fire. There were tiny blue flames burning on the outside walls, smouldering in the ivy. Inside, behind the windows, large yellow flames consumed the furniture and curtains. Somehow the fire must have crossed over from the forest. A drifting spark in the air perhaps . . .

I ran past the parlour window and the front door. Even Gambels' kennel was blazing like a bonfire. Behind me I heard the startled cries of the Caulkisses and Quodes. Obviously they too had caught sight of the flames.

I stopped and looked back. I could just make out the shapes of my pursuers through the smoke. But they were no longer in pursuit. Now they had turned towards the vicarage.

"Open the barn doors!" shouted Mr Caulkiss. "Bring forth the animals! Bring forth Mr Scrab!"

Melestrina, Craylene and Mr Quode headed for the back of the building. Mr Caulkiss himself rushed straight up to the front door. He flung it open and plunged inside.

For a moment I thought that they might be more concerned to save their home than to continue chasing me. But only for a moment. As soon as the animals emerged from the barn, Melestrina, Craylene and Mr Quode clapped and yelled and urged them into the hunt.

"After the enemy!"

"Bring him down!"

"Go get him!"

The animals responded with a mighty outburst of bleats and quacks and bellows. Wings flapped, breath snorted, hooves drummed on the ground. I took to my heels and fled.

I headed back towards the centre of the clearing. But it was not so easy to outrun the animals. They moved much faster than the Caulkisses and Quodes. When I glanced back over my shoulder, I could see them all quite clearly: hen, ducks, pigs, goats, sheep and cows. They were massed in a pack, with the sheep and the hen at the front.

Then I fell foul of a thick drift of snow. I ploughed my way through, running in slow motion. The animals ploughed through behind - not quite so slowly. Then I tripped and almost fell on some brick or stone hidden under the snow. The animals were gaining all the time.

Suddenly a trench opened up right in front of me. A particularly deep trench, about ten feet down to the bottom. I made a ninety degree turn and ran along at the side. The animals swung across diagonally, reducing my lead yet again. Now I could hear their eager panting and see their open mouths. Their open mouths glittered with metal teeth.

I was getting desperate. But at last I came to a plank bridge. And perhaps I could take advantage . . . I crossed over, spun round, grabbed hold of the plank and pulled it across after me.

The animals skidded to a halt. The trench was too wide for them to jump, too deep for them to clamber in and out. I had cut them off! They stood there baffled for a moment, snorting and bleating and bellowing.

But I had forgotten that some of them had wings. With a great flurry and bustle, the hen took off into the air. She flew up over the trench and hovered above my head.

"CARK! CARK! CARK! CARK!"

The other animals backed away and vanished into the smoke. I stared up at the hen. She was flying in a very ponderous and ungainly fashion. If only I could drive her off . . . I scooped up a handful of snow and made a snowball.

"CARK! CARK! CARK! CARK!"

I threw - and clipped the tip of her tail-feathers. She flapped and fluttered but remained airborne. I made another snowball and had another go. Another near miss. I was just about to have a third go when I became aware of the snorting bleating bellowing sounds again. Suddenly the other animals were approaching from the opposite direction!

I cursed. They must have crossed by another bridge further along, they must have circled right around behind me. I turned to run. But now the trench was blocking my way! I had made a trap for myself!

Desperately I grabbed for the plank. I had only seconds in which to re-erect the bridge. The animals appeared out of the smoke, charging towards me in a wide enveloping formation. They were snapping their teeth together with a sharp metal sound like the opening and closing of scissors. They could hardly wait to take a bite.

I swung the plank back over the trench, back into its original position. I dashed across just inches ahead of their snapping teeth. They were almost on top of me. No time now to pull the bridge away!

I ran as I had never run before. My heart was pounding fit to burst. I sprinted through the snow like an Olympic champion. And little by little I forged ahead. Six yards, eight yards, ten yards ahead.

Then there was a shout from somewhere off to the side. It was Mr Caulkiss giving orders.

"Fall back! Reassemble! Flanking to right and to left! Phelia with Quode! Margus with Melestrina! Move!"

Suddenly the animals were no longer chasing me. I looked around and there was nothing but smoke. Only the hen still remained. She had gained altitude and was now circling high overhead.

I slowed to a jog. My burst of speed had left me exhausted. All I wanted was to curl up and hide away somewhere. But where? How? Along with the problem of my footprints there was now the additional problem of the hen. I couldn't think what to do.

I jogged on across the clearing, turning and swerving this way and that. Five minutes passed. Still nothing happened. Only the hen continued to hover overhead, uttering the occasional harsh "CARK!"

But I had the feeling that they were marshalling against me. Now I could hear muffled sounds in the smoke, animal cries and voices calling out. From every direction the sounds came - and they seemed to be getting closer. There was another sound too, a kind of mechanical rumble. What it was I couldn't guess.

I was still jogging along when Mr Caulkiss's voice rang out once more at full volume:

"Duck assault! Two flights! Commence aerial attack!"

Then came a beating of many wings, followed by a high-speed approaching VRROOOOOOOOOOOOSH!! I looked up as three white shapes hurtled down towards me from a great height. I was being dive-bombed by ducks!

I flung up my arms. Just in time! The leading duck was aiming for the top of my head. Instead it struck against my forearm, tearing into my coat with its beak. The other ducks dived lower, going for the body. I dodged to the side so that one of them missed completely. But the other caught me full on the chest. I stumbled and staggered, winded by the force of the blow.

VRROOOOOOOOOOOOOOSH!!

I looked up and saw a second flight of three ducks descending. Again I flung up my arms and tried to dodge. This time they went for my legs. I was whacked around the knees and bitten on the calves. I slipped and skidded around helplessly. But still I didn't quite fall.

"Left and right flanks deploy! Reserve to the rear! Centre advance!"

One of the birds had its teeth caught in the material of my trousers. I kicked it away. The other ducks had gone. I started to run in what seemed like the opposite direction to Mr Caulkiss's voice.

I hadn't gone far when I came to a mound of snow-covered earth. I climbed the slope and stood at the top. But now I saw a dozen or more shapes approaching through the smoke. Some of them looked like ordinary pigs and goats and cows. But the rest?

Then I realised. The strange-looking shapes were composed of animals and riders. The inhabitants of Morbing Vyle were now mounted. There was Mr Quode sitting on top of a pig, and Craylene side-saddle on a goat, and Melestrina with a large brown cow gripped between her thighs.

"Tally-ho!" they shouted.

"Forward the Vyle!"

"Up and at him!"

I ran back down the slope and tried another direction. Almost immediately I came to a low brick wall. I vaulted clean over without even breaking stride. But that was as far as I got. There were shapes approaching in this direction too. This time it was the sheep that were blocking my escape. And slung across the back of the leading sheep was the festering form of Mr Scrab.

It was the first time I had observed anything more of him than his face. He was wrapped up entirely in bandages - filthy green-stained bandages. He lay across the back of the sheep like a corpse. His feet hung down on one side and his head hung down on the other. But he was still sufficiently alive to open his eyes and see me. His upside-down mouth poured forth a stream of invective:

"There he is! The enemy! The traitor! Dang him! Drat him! The sanitary saint! The well-washed wonder! The dainty-skin! The germ-free juvenile! The self-abluter!"

Again I turned and raced away. Back over the wall, off in another direction. I seemed to be running around in circles. Thirty paces on, I came to a middle-sized trench, about five feet deep and five feet wide. Not too wide to clear with a jump. But even as I was preparing to jump, I heard Mr Caulkiss's voice on the other side of the trench:

"Columns converge! On all fronts!"

I had run straight back towards him! And there was that strange mechanical rumble too! I couldn't see the source, but it sounded like moving metal parts and revolving wheels.

KerCHUG-kerCHUG-kerCHUG! KLANK! KerCHUG-kerCHUG-kerCHUG! KLANK!

They had me trapped on all sides. How could I break out? Already the shapes of the animals and riders were looming behind me!

I had only one hope. I stepped forward into the trench and dropped to the bottom. There was soft snow at the bottom, piled up over a foot thick. I chose a direction and started ploughing through the snow. I kept my head well down below the level of the surface.

The trench led me out between the advancing sheep and cows. Scurrying along at the bottom of the trench, I could hear hooves tramping above, passing by on either side. They were still closing in - on nothingness!

But my disappearance had not been entirely unobserved. With a sudden flurry of wings, the hen came down to block my way. Hovering high overhead, she must have seen everything. Now she landed in the bottom of the trench, rearing aggressively with her chest puffed out. She opened her beak and showed her teeth.

I didn't know whether she was going to utter a cry or take a bite. I gathered my legs under me and launched myself forward through the air. With my right hand I grabbed her beak, with my left hand I grabbed her throat. Before she could move I clamped her beak shut. Desperation lent me strength. I wrenched sharply with both hands and broke her neck.

It took only a moment. I tossed the still-fluttering body aside on the snow. Now my way was clear! I continued along at the bottom of the trench as fast as I could go.

I passed a couple of intersections: first a small shallow trench cutting across at right angles, then a large deep trench running off to the side. But I stayed with my original trench. It was taking me out towards the edge of the clearing. Now I could hear the crackle and roar of the fire in the forest.

After a while I risked raising my head. I peered out over the snowy surface of the ground. There was a reddish light reflecting on the snow, and a wide band of redness glowing through the smoke ahead. And the heat! I could feel it hitting against my face in wave upon wave.

I lowered my head once more and kept on going. I kept on going until I heard the baffled shouts of the Caulkisses and Quodes, the frustrated cries of the animals. Obviously they had discovered the failure of Mr Caulkiss's strategy. For a moment I felt triumphant. But then I remembered the trail of footprints behind me in the trench. How long would it take Panker to track me down again?

I decided that it was time to leave the trench. It wasn't easy to scale a five foot wall with snow at the bottom and snow at the top. But eventually I managed to scramble out.

The forest was only thirty yards away. Now I could see the flames leaping and darting around the trunks, licking voraciously over the branches. The black twisted trees were silhouetted in the firelight like martyrs on a pyre. But they didn't seem to be actually burning away in themselves.

I rose to my feet. The heat was more intense than ever. Around by the edge of the clearing, it had melted the snow to a kind of soft porridgy slush. And right at the very edge, even the slush had melted away. A narrow strip of bare wet ground ran round under the trees.

Immediately I realised my opportunity. Where there was no snow there could be no footprints! This was my best chance yet! I headed for the slush and the bare wet ground.

The heat was incredible. I had to go right up beside the flames. I was sweating and sweltering and drooping on my feet. But I ran round over the bare wet ground as far as I could go. Fifty yards, a hundred yards - I kept on running until I was almost collapsing.

Then I turned and headed in towards the clearing again. I ran across slush, then back onto snow. Surely this time I couldn't be followed . . .

I jumped and almost fell off the arch. Again the sound shrilled out:

"WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!! WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!!"

My first surprise was that he had managed to track me down at all. But my second surprise was that I still couldn't see him. The sound was so very very close. Yet there was no place I could fail to see him up here on the arch. So where was he hiding?

And then finally the truth dawned. I lifted up my coat and there he was - bulging in the pocket on the left-hand side! I must've been carrying him around all the time! No wonder he had always been able to reveal my location!

I was furious. With both hands I took hold of the pocket and squeezed. Slowly I worked the bulge upwards. Baby Panker struggled every inch of the way. But eventually two small blue eyes emerged into the daylight, and a whirl of tiny pink hands and feet.

I was just about to pop him out like the cork from a champagne bottle. But at the very last moment, he wriggled through my hands, back down to the bottom of the pocket. He was as slippery as an eel. I had to start all over again.

I was wasting precious minutes. I should've been thinking about getting down to the ground before my pursuers caught up with me. But all I could think about was getting rid of Panker. Again I tried, and again and again. But always he managed to evade my grip.

In the end I decided on a change of approach. Instead of getting Panker out of my coat, I had the idea of removing my coat with Panker still in it. Balancing precariously, I stood up on the narrow span of the arch and started to unbutton my coat.

But now baby Panker was wriggling more wildly than ever. The left-hand side of the coat flew and flapped in every direction. I slipped the coat off my shoulders, I got my arms out of the armholes. But the left-hand side of the coat wrapped itself around my legs. In the very act of flinging my coat over the side of the arch, I lost my balance and flung myself over too. Flailing and windmilling, I dropped thirty feet to the ground below.

BFFFFFFFFF!!!

I landed with a tremendous impact. I was lucky I didn't break any bones. I lay sprawling and half-stunned. For a while everything seemed quiet, ominously quiet. Beside me on the slush, my coat was now quite flat and empty.

Then I noticed movements, about twenty yards away. I raised myself up on one elbow. The animals of the Vyle were standing around me in a ring. Their flanks had a dull red sheen in the glow of the firelight. I was surrounded by open jaws and metal teeth, by dangling tongues and gloating eyes.

I rolled over to look on the other side. On the other side were the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle. The ring was complete. Melestrina, Craylene, Mr Quode and Mr Scrab were all still mounted upon their respective animals. But not Mr Caulkiss. He was mounted upon something else. I stared in disbelief. He was mounted upon his machine - the machine that ran on human blood!

It looked exactly as it had looked in the laboratory. The same caterpillar tracks, the same glass jars, the same pipes and rods and cogs. Only now the tracks turned, the rods slid back and forth, the red liquid bubbled in the glass jars. The whole machine was panting and throbbing with eager life. And there in the middle stood Mr Caulkiss, upright on the brown felt box.

I could see how he had made the thing work. It was a horrible sight. He had torn open the front of his cassock and connected the tube from the machine directly on to his own human heart. No syringe, no needle. Instead there was a great jagged crack down the side of his chest, a terrible gaping fissure in the flesh. And protruding through the fissure, the red rounded shape of his heart. He had pulled it forth like a soft wet turnip. The tube was attached to the severed end of the main ventricle.

"HAAAAAAAAAGGHHHHHH!" he yelled, in a mingled sound of pain and triumph.

KerCHUG-kerCHUG-kerCHUG! KLANK! rumbled the machine.

BLEEEEEHHH! blared the goats.

MOOOOOOOMMM! roared the cows.

BAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! bawled the sheep.

WAKKERWAKKERWAKK! raged the ducks.

Mr Caulkiss threw a lever. The blood-engine changed to a slower rhythm, a sort of low idling chug.

"Dismount!" he cried. "Maintain guard! Officers advance!"

The human inhabitants of the Vyle dismounted. Mr Caulkiss got down from his machine, Mr Quode from his pig, Melestrina from her cow, Craylene from her goat, Mr Scrab from his sheep. Mr Scrab's sheep was left with a filthy greenish discoloration all over its back.

"Vyle!" they chanted. "Vyle! Vyle! Vyle! Vyle! Vyle!"

They began to advance across the slush. Mr Quode had stripped himself naked and his corpulent body was grimed and black with smoke. Mr Scrab's bandages had come undone and dragged along in a train behind him. Craylene seemed to have lost whole parts of her face, where the skin-coloured make-up had fallen away to reveal a sort of grey stuff underneath. As for Melestrina, her eyes had reduced to small dark buttons like dry clots of blood. But she had acquired another pair of eyes lower down, two tiny blue eyes peeping forth from the front of her gown. Evidently Panker had taken up residence in his mother's cleavage.

Mr Caulkiss was in the worst state of all. He shuffled towards me with the tube still fixed to his heart. He was completely drained of blood. His skin was almost transparent, hanging and flapping in loose slack folds. He was a mere skeleton, a framework, a tottering tower of bones. But he reached up with his hands and squeezed the wet red turnip of his heart. He seemed to be pumping it manually.

"We are going to be vile with you, Mr Smythe," he said in a whisper. "Nothing is forbidden."

The others laughed and giggled in an ecstasy of madness.

"I'm going to be sick on you," said Mr Scrab, breathing out a visible brownish vapour even as he spoke. "I'm going to regurgitate all over you."

"I'm going to play with you," said Craylene happily. "I'm going to have games with your little bits of meat."

"I'm going to snap you and break you," said Melestrina, flexing her muscles. "I'm going to tear your legs off."

"I'm going to put my fingers inside your brain-pan," murmured Mr Quode, rubbing his hands in anticipation. "I'm going to have a nice long feel of your brains."

Closer and closer they came. I scrambled to my feet. But there was no way of escape. The animals remained in position, surrounding me on all sides. They stamped their hooves and baaed and mooed and grunted ferociously. There was no way of escape.

Still I wasn't going to go down without a fight. I made a dart towards the right-hand pier of the arch. Here was the scaffolding I had climbed just a few minutes ago. There were tiny fires and smoulderings everywhere over the woodwork.

I selected a likely looking spar, where the rope lashings had burnt away. I tugged and wrenched and pulled it free. It was about five feet long, charred at one end and smouldering at the other. I held it in my hands and stepped back into the middle of the ring, under the centre of the arch.

Even the charred end of the spar was burning hot. But I hardly noticed the pain. The animals were still roaring and stamping, the inhabitants were still coming closer. I whirled the spar defiantly above my head.

Then suddenly the roaring and stamping died away. It was nothing to do with me and my spar. The animals turned their heads and whimpered. They were obviously terrified. They were all looking in the same direction, over towards the same side of the ring.

The inhabitants realised that something was happening. They halted in their tracks, looked back over their shoulders - and froze. They seemed not so much terrified as astounded. There was an indescribable expression on their faces.

Something was making its way into the ring. The animals shrank aside and opened up a passage. From the angle of their eyes I had the impression that the thing was very low on the ground. But the inhabitants still stood in front of me, blocking my view.

There was total silence. Even Mr Caulkiss's machine had stopped its chug-chugging sound. The inhabitants were literally shivering. Then they too parted ranks and drew aside.

At last I could see. There on the ground was a large pale yellowy shape. With an eerie gliding motion it moved forward, coming towards me. It was in the form of a man . . . the two-dimensional form of a man, flat on the ground.

The inhabitants flung themselves down on their knees.

"O praise!" they murmured.

"O we of little faith!"

"O hallelujah!"

And then I realised. The man-shape was composed of a million million maggots.

CHAPTER 65

It was the Vicar of Morbing Vyle. Not as a body, not as the reanimated remains of a body - but as a spirit, a power, an intensity. Physically, there was nothing there except the maggots. But the maggots were held together and organised, they were under the control of a supreme will. He had made them assume His own previous human shape. I know it sounds incredible, but that's what I saw. He had made His Great Return after all!

The shape stopped about five yards away from me. For a long moment nothing happened. The fire in the forest cast its red glow over the scene. In my nostrils was the same foul smell as when the maggots had first poured out of the leather bag.

Then the shape began to change. It was like some liquid coming to the boil. The tiny grubs were all in simultaneous motion, wriggling away from the edges, piling up towards the middle. Slowly a hump arose . . . which became a sort of column . . . which kept on growing until it was over five feet tall. Then the column began to take on definition and form. Now I could see the arms coming away from the torso . . . the division between the legs . . . and there was the curve of the

shoulders and head. The living pullulating swarm of maggots stood upright, three dimensionally, in a monstrous imitation of a human body. His body!

"Aaah!" sighed Mr Scrab. "I recognise Him! Just as He was! His very lineaments!"

"He conquers Nature!" quavered Mr Caulkiss. "Spirit over Nature! Just as He promised!"

The shape raised an arm. A thousand maggots rippled and squirmed and crawled into position. How they defied gravity I can't explain. But now there was a kind of hand at the end of the arm. It bent and flexed and seemed to be waiting to take hold of something.

As if in response another figure appeared, passing in through the ring of animals. It was Gambels. He approached on all fours, still dragging the chair behind him over the ground. In his mouth he held one of the tools from the Vicar's silver box. It was the shiny steel fretsaw. He squatted beside the Vicar and tilted up his head. He was offering the ebony handle to the outstretched hand.

The Vicar received it in His pale maggotty fingers. Gambels yuff-yuffed softly. Then he trotted away like an obedient dog to join the ring with the other animals. If he had had a tail he would surely have been wagging it.

The Caulkisses and Quodes and Mr Scrab clasped their hands in delight.

"A Work of Art!" Mr Scrab murmured reverently. "The Lord is going to compose a Work of Art!"

"The materialist becomes His material!" exclaimed Mr Caulkiss.

"Reassembly! Realignment!" cried Melestrina Quode. "The first great monument of His miraculous Return!"

The head of the shape didn't exactly have eyes, but I had the impression that it was looking at me. I tried to retreat but my legs wouldn't move. My arms hung numbly down at my sides. I still held on to one end of the spar, but the other end drooped to the ground. I was sweating from every pore - the sweat of utter impossible nightmare.

And then the sound of His voice began inside my head. It was very quiet and gentle and sweet. There were no proper words, but it spoke to me like music. How can I describe it? It made me want to cry, it was so sad and solemn. It filled my mind with beautiful images of death. It spoke to me of the sublimity of sacrifice . . . of infinite surrender . . . of suffering for the sake of a higher intensity. My own poor life seemed small and insignificant. I felt a longing to offer it up . . . to hand it over in an act of ultimate worship . . .

My feet moved underneath me. I looked down and discovered that I had just taken a first step forward. I was walking towards Him!

I couldn't control my own movements. The voice seemed to be ringing in the very bones of my head. Unutterable sweet, unutterably clear, unutterable piercing. Step by step it drew me closer.

But I resisted. With all my remaining strength of will I resisted. I still had a level of consciousness that knew the voice for what it really was. I knew that there was no religious offering or beauty involved, no higher intensity. There was only Him and His mad evil will - His will to murder ! Desperately I clung to my consciousness of that fact, desperately I strove to escape the feelings and images that were being projected into me. I refused to become His raw material!

He raised the fretsaw to the height of my neck. I was standing right in front of Him now. Inside my head the voice took on a deeper note, suggestive of immense patience and understanding. It spoke of the sacred holiness of the fretsaw and the supreme need for sacrifice. It spoke of the beauty of blood and the sheer perfection of a long horizontal cut across the neck. I was moved as if by fine invisible wires. I lifted my head and exposed my neck to the fretsaw.

But even as I lifted my head, I saw something out of the corner of my eye that gave me hope. A flame on the end of the spar! I had kept hold of the spar as I walked, trailing it over the ground behind me. And now, miraculously, the end on the ground had ignited! A small fierce jet of intense white flame! It was just like the flame on my club when I attacked the leather bag!

The Vicar laughed. He hadn't observed the flame. He gave a horrible silvery tinkling laugh and brought the blade of the fretsaw slowly towards my neck.

I couldn't move my neck but I could move my arms. With a sudden jerk of willpower, I swung the spar around. The flame was six inches long and spurting strongly. I thrust the burning end against His pale maggotty legs. They were curiously insubstantial - the timber passed right through. The Vicar seemed to shiver.

Then the fretsaw fell from His fingers and the tinkling laugh was cut off. There was a loud sizzling sound as the flame bit into the maggots. And in the sound of that sizzle, I seemed to hear a different voice, an opposing voice, a voice as fierce and harsh as the Vicar's was sweet. It was like those voices of fire I had heard in the forest before. And it seemed to be muttering those same violent words:

"Revenge! Destroy! Finish!

Revenge! Destroy! Finish!"

I looked down and saw how the maggots were writhing and dropping away. The Vicar's whole human shape was starting to dissolve. In an exact reversal of His previous process, He lost definition and became once more a sort of amorphous column. Still I applied the flame to the place where the legs had been. The column teetered and wobbled. Then it toppled slowly to the ground.

Now there was only a crawling mass of maggots at my feet. I took a firmer grip on my spar and plunged the flame straight into the middle of the mass. The kneeling inhabitants of Morbing Vyle shrieked out all around:

"O Lord, Lord! Assert thy spirit!"

"Prove thy intensity!"

"Put forth thy power!"

"Show us thy true principle!"

Then the Vicar did indeed put forth His power. So far I had taken Him by surprise. But now He exerted all the terrible strength of His will. In spite of the flame, the mass of maggots held together and started to reassemble. With a shock of horror, I saw the two-dimensional shape of a man reforming on the ground.

And now the flame itself was starting to die down. Smaller and smaller it shrank, as though deprived of oxygen. From six inches to three inches, to two inches, to one inch. Soon it was just the tiniest brave glimmer, like a candle on a birthday cake.

The sizzling sound died down too. Instead I could hear the sweetness of His voice again. It was rising on a single note, incredibly pure and acute and penetrating. It was like the sound of a wine glass when someone runs a finger around the rim. It seemed to be slicing into the very tissues of my brain.

The darkness was winning. The whole world seemed strangely indistinct and dim. Perhaps it was the fire burning low in the forest - I don't know, I couldn't look up. But it was like a great universal twilight deepening all around.

There was a similar gloom in my mind, an oppressive foreboding of doom. Defeat was inevitable . . . Now the flame was flickering on and off, on and off. Any second it would go out altogether. All I wanted was to let go of the spar, all I wanted was to clutch my head in my hands and squeeze away that dreadful sweetness.

But I didn't. I concentrated and clung to the spar more tightly than ever. The spar began to shudder in my hands, as though someone was shaking and wrenching at the other end. Desperately I struggled. It was His will against mine. I discovered reserves of strength I didn't even know I possessed. I summoned up the words of the fire, I spoke them out in my own voice now:

"Revenge, destroy, finish!"

Revenge, destroy, finish!"

Over and over, through clenched teeth, I repeated those words. Was the flame already burning a little brighter?

"Revenge, destroy, finish!"

Revenge, destroy, finish!"

Suddenly the shape on the ground shifted and boiled up around the end of the spar. A thousand maggots began swarming up the wood. Like a thick viscous liquid they flowed up towards me, towards my hands.

But I didn't panic. I wasn't going to let go now. The flame was burning brighter! The maggots on the spar were only a distraction. I was winning!

"REVENGE! DESTROY! FINISH!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "REVENGE! DESTROY! FINISH!"

The end of the spar burst into a sudden glorious blaze. It burnt a hole right through the middle of the shape of the Vicar. The maggots mounting towards my hands wavered and halted. Then one by one they curled up and dropped off. The sweet voice died away.

"Down with the Vyle!" I yelled. "Nature forever!"

I thrust the burning spar this way and that amongst the maggots on the ground. It was like wielding a blowtorch. I divided off the legs from the waist and the arms from the chest. And everywhere I divided, the maggoty limbs dissolved into mere separate maggots, streaming blindly away from the flame. Freed from the Vicar's overpowering will, they scattered and dispersed pell-mell.

The light was returning into the world. Now the whole scene was bathed in a lurid orange glow. I could feel heat beating against my back. The fire in the forest was burning higher than ever.

I kept on thrusting until the shape on the ground had melted almost entirely away. Only one solid cluster remained, where the Vicar had formed His head. I drew back the spar for a final thrust. But before I could deliver the blow, the cluster suddenly disintegrated all by itself. The maggots spilled open and wriggled away, leaving behind a curious patch of dark shadow.

I stared. It was a very tiny patch, only an inch or two across. It seemed somehow blurred and raggedy at the edges. It had been lying underneath the maggots in the very centre of the head. It reminded me of a small black spider.

It moved like a spider too. With a sudden quick dart, it scuttled away over the ground. But I was equally quick. I jabbed out with the burning end of the spar in front of it. The thing jumped backwards just in time. The flame on the spar flared up in a pool of white flame. The thing retreated. It scuttled once more in my direction, right beside my feet. Without a second thought, I lifted the heel of my shoe and stamped down hard on top of it.

There was a small squashy PHLUP! under my foot.

CHAPTER 66

That was the end of the Vicar of Morbing Vyle. It took a moment to sink in. I could hardly believe I had finished Him off so easily. But the inhabitants knew it. Still kneeling, they covered their faces with their hands.

The fire knew it too. An almighty conflagration erupted in the forest. Again I heard a multitude of voices, roaring in the roar of the conflagration. Voices of the fire, triumphant and exultant. And now they seemed to be uttering words of victory:

"REVENGED! DESTROYED! FINISHED!
FINISHED! FINISHED! FINISHED!!!"

Then the holocaust began. At first it was a breeze, which turned into a wind, which turned into a rushing raging tempest. It swept in from the forest, hurling clouds of sparks and balls of fire across the clearing. I flung myself flat on the ground, trying to dive beneath the blast.

The heat and light were unbelievable. For a moment it seemed as though the air itself was on fire. I heard the howls of the animals and screams of the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle. There was a sort of dull explosion too, not very far away.

The fire didn't touch me though. I felt the heat, and a few sparks settled on my clothes. But that was all. I sat up and looked round.

Close by me were Melestrina, Panker, Mr Quode and Craylene Caulkiss. Closest of all was Mr Scrab - scattered here and there in little sticky lumps and black greasy blobs of human flesh. I knew it was him only because of the bits of bandage buried in the mess. He must have exploded internally. Perhaps the fire had ignited those noxious vapours he was always brewing inside himself ...

As for Melestrina and Panker, they too must have taken the full force of the initial blast. They seemed to have been baked and hardened like pottery. They formed a kind of composite statue of mother and child, absolutely naked, absolutely immobile. Melestrina was still kneeling and Panker was as if welded between her breasts. Melestrina had her head thrown back in a last dramatic pose. A slow trickle of smoke escaped from her empty eye-sockets and gaping mouth.

Even more bizarre was the fate of Mr Quode. The holocaust had fried him alive. He lay in a pool of his own oozing juices, giving off a succulent savoury aroma. His body had turned a crispy golden-brown. It was a perfect apotheosis - of cuisine a la Quode .

I felt sick to the pit of my stomach. Incredibly, he was still alive and conscious. He rolled from side to side in the most exquisite agony. There was a strange inward look on his face. He was talking to himself in a low fatty bubbling voice:

"O quelle anguousse ! Quelle exquise ! Quelle extremite ! C'est de trop ! Je me sens le bien-roti ! Un soupçon de tarragon s'il vous plait ! Servir avec un Bordeaux des plus hauts crus !"

Craylene Caulkiss was also alive - but not for long. Still on her feet, she danced around and around in the holocaust. Tiny yellow flames fluttered all over her. At first I thought it was her clothes that were burning. But then I realised that her clothes had long since gone. Now it was her actual skin that was on fire. Layer by layer it peeled away from her face and body. She was like a roll of burning newspaper, crinkling, loosening, coming apart. Whole dry charred sheets of her blew away in the wind.

Faster and faster and faster she twirled. Then with a long expiring shriek, she crumpled and collapsed to the ground. The impact with the ground broke her wide open. Already she was smouldering and darkening within. The flames curled inwards, taking a new hold. In a matter of seconds they had consumed her completely.

I was still watching Craylene when something appeared out of the fiery haze, charging towards me. It was Gambels. He looked less human than ever. His school uniform was charred to tatters and his body was one great mass of swollen blisters. Behind him he still pulled the chair, which had caught alight and blazed like a bonfire. I think he was vainly trying to run away from it.

He rushed straight past and vanished back into the haze. A moment later, and another strange form appeared. This time it was Mr Caulkiss's blood-machine. I rolled aside, out of the way of its caterpillar tracks.

Chugger-KLANK! KLANK! KLANK! Chugger-KLANK! KLANK! KLANK!

It trundled past me, heading in the same direction as Gambels. Its rods stuck out at wild angles, and it was shedding cogs and wheels all over the place. Mechanically, it had no right to keep functioning. But it seemed to have acquired a life of its own.

Perhaps the life it had acquired was taken from Mr Caulkiss. Mr Caulkiss himself was very very dead. He trailed along twenty yards behind his machine, bouncing over the ground, still attached by the rubber tube. There was nothing of him left but a skeleton of charred bones - that, and a few shrivelled organs rattling around inside his rib-cage. They looked like glowing coals.

I turned away. It was very mysterious. The fire had struck down all the inhabitants of Morbing Vyle - all except me. I seemed to be under some sort of special protection . . .

As I sat there pondering, the wind gradually died down. The holocaust was moving into a new phase. Now there were small dark specks in the air, specks of ash. The incandescence in the air

was replaced by a growing darkness. Soon great masses of ash were swirling along in the wind, settling on the ground, on the arch, on the incinerated corpses. It was like a weird black snowfall.

The voices of the fire changed too. I listened and heard a deeper heavier roar coming from the forest. And in the new roar was a new word being uttered, over and over again:

"BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY!"

I staggered to my feet. I didn't want to be buried. Already I was covered in a thin coating of ash. I stood up and brushed myself down. Then I looked out across the clearing.

Even through the darkening air, I could see much further now. I could see lights rushing and plunging in every direction. The animals of Morbing Vyle! They had been transformed into sheets of living flame. I saw one sheep like a pillar of fire and a duck silhouetted in the red halo of its own burning wings. There were a dozen more shapes I couldn't even distinguish.

I could distinguish Gambels, though, and Mr Caulkiss's blood-machine. They were racing in circles one around the other. Gambels still dragged his flaming chair, and the machine still dragged Mr Caulkiss. It was like some crazy chasing game. Mr Caulkiss's two sons were playing together!

But their game would not last long, I suspected. The ash was coming down more and more heavily all the time. And the roar of the forest was more and more insistent:

"BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY! BURY!"

But suddenly I heard a different voice. A small quiet voice, coming from close by my feet on the ground. I could hear it quite clearly, even above all the other voices. It was speaking directly to me.

"Leave now!" it said. "Leave by the way you came in!"

I jumped almost out of my skin. There by my feet on the ground was the spar of wood from the scaffolding. It was lying where I had dropped it, burning with a small quiet flame. And I swear that the voice was speaking right out of the flame.

"Leave now! Leave by the way you came in!"

CHAPTER 67

I nodded. Yes, it was time to leave. But what did it mean about leaving by the way I came in? That must be the avenue, the avenue through the trees . . .

I looked towards the forest. The avenue ought to be somewhere near here. But I couldn't see it. The fire was burning more fiercely than ever, a seemingly continuous wall of flame. Fifty feet and more it towered up into the sky.

Then I became aware of an ominous grinding sound overhead. I shifted my gaze. The arch above me was starting to disintegrate. As if in slow motion I saw the whole structure tilt and sag. Fragments of stone and cement rained down. I turned and ran.

RERRR-BOOMM! BOOMM! BOOMM!

There was a mighty rumble. The ground reverberated under my feet. I kept on running, running for safety. When a trench appeared across my path, I hurled myself over in a single spring.

Only then did I turn and look back. The arch had collapsed. The ash-filled air rolled and billowed as though in the aftermath of an avalanche. Like giant dice, stone blocks lay scattered far and wide.

I turned towards the forest again. And now I saw that the wall of flame wasn't completely continuous after all. There was one small gap in the wall, a space where no flames burned. It was the avenue!

I headed straight for it. The gap was only about ten feet wide, framed in a gateway of raging fire. It looked impossibly narrow. But somehow I trusted the voice that had spoken from the spar. I felt sure that the fire was no danger to me now.

Into the gap I plunged. Tongues of flame rushed and roared all around. Weaving and shimmering, red and yellow, they rose on either side and curled over to meet above my head. I ought to have been burned to a crisp. But it was like being inside a tunnel. The tongues of flame never strayed in my direction.

I was under no special protection from the heat though. The blast was overpowering, hot as a furnace. I wrapped my arms over my head, trying to shield my face as I ran.

But even with my arms wrapped over my head, I could see that something very new was happening in the forest. On either side of the avenue, behind the shimmering curtain of flame, the trees were moving.! There were branches snapping off, trunks keeling over, hollow shells falling to the ground. Amazing! It was as though the forest had been finally unlocked from its unnatural rigidity - released from its state of perfect preservation!

Faster and faster I ran. Now even the ground was red hot. There was a fiery sensation in the soles of my feet. I could smell the smell of scorching shoe leather. I tried to run almost on tiptoe. But it was like running on burning coals.

And still the trees were shattering and crashing to the ground. Every part of the forest seemed to be in motion. Some of the trunks simply exploded in showers of sparks, like exploding fireworks. But none of the sparks blew out across the avenue, none of them came close to me.

By this time I was almost fainting. I was dazed by the heat until I could hardly run straight. So I suppose you could say that what I saw next was only a hallucination. But it seemed to me that there was more movement in the forest than just the movement of the trees. It seemed to me that there were people moving in there too.

They were deep in the forest, not close to the avenue. I glimpsed them through the shimmering curtain of flame. They seemed to rise up where the trees fell down. Old men and young men, mothers and children, hundreds and hundreds of them. Every figure was quite distinct and individual.

They rose to their feet, stretching their limbs and straightening up. Then they began to march. Brandishing their fists, they headed towards Morbing Vyle. As I escaped from the place, so they closed in on it. A whole ghostly army, marching through the flames.

Of course, I admit that maybe they weren't real in the ordinary sense. It's true that I seemed to see them most clearly out of the corner of my eye - as soon as I looked full at them they were no longer there. Yet I don't believe that they existed entirely in my own imagination. If I invented them myself, then what gave me the idea of their old-fashioned clothes? Why were they wearing bonnets and shawls and full-length skirts, tall hats and jerkins and waistcoats? Even at the time I thought how very odd that was . . .

I shook my head and kept on running. At last the end of the tunnel was in sight. And now I seemed to hear a mighty noise coming from all around. It sounded like the cheering of a great multitude, a long rolling thunder of applause. Louder and louder and louder it swelled.

And then I was out. I burst forth from the noise and the fire, into the open daylight. Immediately in front of me was a stream, the very same stream with the causeway that I had crossed so long ago.

I took a few more stumbling steps and fell forward into the water. My scorching shoes hissed and bubbled. Beautiful cool water! Blessed blessed relief!

CHAPTER 68

I don't know how long I stayed like that. Maybe one minute, maybe ten. I could hear people singing in the distance, very beautiful. It sounded like a singing of Christmas carols. But I didn't look up. I had my head on my arm, breathing through my nose. Luckily the water was shallow.

Then suddenly there were voices directly above me.

"Is he drunk?"

"Collapsed from the heat, more like."

"What was he doing so close to the fire?"

One male voice and one female voice. They spoke with the accent of Londoners. They didn't seem to realise that I'd come through the forest.

I tried to get to my feet. But already there were hands gripping me under the shoulders. They pulled me out of the water and hauled me up over the grassy slope of the bank. Then they rolled me onto my back. I found myself gazing up into the face of the town clerk.

"It's OK," he said. "Don't try to talk."

"Just take it easy," said the woman beside him. She had fair fluffy hair and a kindly smile. His wife presumably.

I lay on my back and looked around. It was the same scene that I remembered from three weeks ago. The bank of the stream curved away to the left and the right. Except for a few patches of unmelted snow, it was as green and grassy as when I first saw it. But now there were people standing on the grass, hundreds and hundreds of people. They stood in separate groups and clusters, talking and laughing and watching the fire in the forest. One very large group had formed up in rows like a choir, fifty yards away. They were singing Christmas carols:

"Ding dong merrily on high

In heaven the bells are ringing

Ding dong verily the sky

Is riven with angels singing

Glor-or-or-or-or-or-or-or-or-or-or-or-oria

Hosanna in excelsis!"

As for the forest, it was really burning down now. I looked in vain for the strange marching figures in their bonnets and shawls and hats. Now there was only a vast skeletal wreckage of twisted trees and branches. The canopy had entirely collapsed, and most of the trunks too. It was like the red glowing embers of a bonfire. An enormous pall of smoke drifted above the wreckage, blotting out half the sky.

Suddenly the town clerk gave a whistle of amazement. I realised that he had been studying my face.

"Ah! Wait a minute! I remember you! You called on my office a few weeks ago! Asking about Morbing Vyle!"

I nodded. He turned to his wife. "Isn't that incredible! This is the chap who was asking about Morbing Vyle before anyone else had ever heard of it. You remember, I told you at the time. We thought it was a bit of a joke. And now it's all turned out completely true."

I struggled to control my voice. "You know about Morbing Vyle? What do you know?"

They looked at me in surprise. "Only the same as everyone else. What Mr Hoskins told us."

"Mr Hoskins?"

"Over there. Mr Hoskins the librarian."

The town clerk pointed to the group of carol-singers. There at the front, conducting the choir, was the old librarian with the white eyebrows - the one who had reminded me of an Old Testament prophet.

"Weren't you at the meeting then?" asked the wife. "No? We hadn't noticed the smoke ourselves. But the people next door called for us. They rushed in while the boys were still opening their Christmas presents. They told us there was a meeting of the whole town."

"We never even opened all the presents. It was the weirdest thing. The streets were full of people hurrying along to the meeting. Everyone was so excited and eager, so different to the usual New Morbing. It was like a great celebration or something. A real community feeling."

"Then we all gathered together in the High Street and Mr Hoskins addressed us. He was the one who knew the facts about Morbing Vyle. I think the others sort of knew, but they'd never actually been told the facts."

At that moment a small band of chanting girls went past. They were half marching and half dancing. The town clerk and his wife broke off to watch. The girls waved sprays of holly and paper streamers.

"Down with the Vyle! Down with the Vyle! Down with the Vyle!" they chanted. It was the very same phrase that I had used myself, when I wielded the burning spar against the Vicar.

Suddenly one of the leading members of the band stared straight at me. I recognised the girl from the supermarket checkout. She turned aside as the band marched on.

"You!" she exclaimed, coming closer. "You're the one I told about my nightmare!"

"Yes, it's me."

She laughed and sat down on the grass beside us. She had a spray of holly in her hand and a Christmas tree bauble in her hair.

"And now there are no more nightmares! Isn't it wonderful!"

"No more nightmares?"

"Like Mr Hoskins said! No-one will ever have nightmares about Morbing Vyle again."

The town clerk coughed. "We were just telling him what Mr Hoskins said. He wasn't there at the meeting."

"Not at the meeting? Didn't you hear about the murderers of Morbing Vyle?"

The town clerk bent forward to explain.

"It seems that this bizarre religious cult started up in Morbing Vyle. Eighty or so years ago. There were a number of murders connected with the cult."

"Hundreds!" the girl broke in. "Hundreds of people slaughtered!"

"Well." The town clerk looked skeptical. "A great many anyway. There must have been some very mad people involved. In the end the ordinary people ran away."

"My great-great-grandparents ran away," said the girl. "Morbing Vyle was evil. The centre of all evil."

"The people who ran away built the town of New Morbing," the town clerk continued. "And the mad people were somehow trapped inside the old village of Morbing Vyle."

"By the forest!" cried the girl. "The forest protected us!"

"Hmmm." The town clerk pursed his lips dubiously. "If you believe in the supernatural."

"Mr Hoskins said so!"

"No, he only put it forward as a hypothesis. He didn't say it was definitely true."

"Wait a minute!" I interrupted. "In what way supernatural?"

"The ghosts of the victims!" The girl gave a flourish with her spray of holly. "They inhabited the forest! The spirits of all the people who'd been murdered!"

"I think it's a bit far-fetched myself," said the town clerk.

"Ghosts !" added his wife. "I ask you!"

"So why was the forest always dead and burnt?" the girl demanded. "We used to keep away from here even when we were children. We knew there was something not natural about it."

"I dare say there's some other possible explanation," said the town clerk.

"Don't you believe in spirits?"

"No. That is, I believe in the Christian way. This is mere superstition."

"Then how -"

"Enough!" I sat up on the ground between them, blocking off the argument. "I need to see Mr Hoskins. I want a talk with him." I turned to the girl. "Do you think you could get him to come over here?"

CHAPTER 69

The girl went off and the town clerk and his wife fell silent. I sat and watched the various groups along the bank. I watched one group of young children playing with their Christmas toys, and another group of mothers and fathers sitting around a bonfire on the grass. Happy chatter and laughter everywhere. There was a general festive spirit in the air. It was just as the town clerk had said. The people of New Morbing were in a very different state to the way I had seen them before.

Mr Hoskins came across at the end of the next carol. The girl didn't know how to introduce me.

"Mr Hoskins, this is Mr . . . er . . . who was asking about Morbing Vyle."

"Martin," I said. "Martin Smythe."

He didn't offer to shake hands. He regarded me quizzically from under his craggy white eyebrows. He looked more venerable than ever.

"I remember," he said slowly. "Mr Smythe. You came into the library asking about Morbing Vyle. And today you missed the meeting, eh?"

"Yes. What did you say about the people in the forest?"

"People?"

"I mean, spirits. The spirits of the victims. What do you know about them?"

"I don't know anything. Nobody knows. I can only guess."

"Exactly," murmured the town clerk.

"But you said -!" the girl burst out.

"I said that the forest has mysterious properties. And I suspect that those properties come from the spirits of people who were murdered in Morbing Vyle over eighty years ago. Ghosts, if you like. And this is their final revenge."

He gave me a thoughtful probing look.

"You see, the victims were murdered in a peculiarly horrible way, Mr Smythe. Their living spirits were overpowered and their bodies subjected to the most unspeakable vilenesses. So it's hardly surprising if they could never rest in peace after death."

"You know about the vilenesses?" I asked sharply. "You were there at the time of the murders?"

"I was there," he replied. "But not to see the murders. I was just a child. I only heard my parents whispering about things. I was never allowed out of doors for the whole time it went on. Not until the night we ran away."

"When all the villagers broke out from Morbing Vyle?"

"Yes. I shall always remember it as the greatest night of my life. Everyone joined up in a single band. It was like marching to war - even though we were only running away. We marched out along the road through the forest. No-one could stop us. And then we looked back and saw the forest in flames."

"You mean, you lit it as you escaped?"

"Lit it? No, nobody lit it. It was a miracle. The fire started up all by itself. We fell on our knees when we saw it."

"Supernatural!" cried the checkout girl, clapping her hands. "The spirits of the victims!"

"I don't see what else it could have been," said Mr Hoskins. "I've thought about it often enough. I believe that the physical fire was somehow produced by the burning rage of those murdered spirits. A need for revenge so intense that it could go against the laws of nature."

"But the religion of Morbing Vyle also went against the laws of nature!" I cried.

"Hah!" His eyebrows were quivering. "I believe that the unnaturalness of their religion stirred up an opposing form of unnaturalness! A corresponding counter-force!"

"And the intensity of the counter-force was ultimately stronger than the intensity of the Vi—

"

"Ahem!!" He drowned me out, clearing his throat very loudly and deliberately. I was going to say: the Vicar of Morbing Vyle.

There was an awkward silence. Then Mr Hoskins addressed himself to the town clerk and his wife.

"There's something I need to talk about with Mr Smythe. Alone."

They looked surprised, but rose obediently to their feet.

"You too," he said to the checkout girl.

They moved off, all three of them, a short distance away up the slope. I could hear them still disputing about the forest. "I told you so!" "But he was only guessing!" "It even started burning without being lit!"

Mr Hoskins bent over towards me.

"You were in there, weren't you?" He spoke in a loud whisper, gesturing towards the forest.

"In Morbing Vyle?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Three weeks."

"I thought so."

He brought his face down very low, very close to mine.

"Look at me! Look me in the eye!"

I looked him in the eye. It was impossible to interpret the meaning of his expression. For a long minute we stared at each other. Then he nodded thoughtfully to himself.

"I believe you're all right," he said at last.

"Of course I'm all right."

"I mean, I don't think the forest would've let you out if you'd converted to Morbing Vyle."

"Converted ?"

"If you'd joined in with the evil there."

"Listen!" I was indignant. "It was me that helped to destroy the evil there! You don't know what I did! When He -"

Mr Hoskins held up his hand and halted me in mid-sentence. I didn't understand.

"Don't you want to know the truth about Morbing Vyle? I can tell you everything!"

"I don't want to know," he said.

"Don't want to know?" I was baffled. "What is this?"

"This, Mr Smythe, is sanity and normality. My sanity and normality. I'm not strong enough to bear the burden of your experiences. I've lived long enough to recognise my own limits. I'm satisfied just to know that the evil is gone. I don't want to know the details."

"But I have to tell someone. People ought to know. It's the most incredible story ever."

He clicked his tongue. "Look around, Mr Smythe. Look at the people of New Morbing. For eighty years, they have suffered from the most terrible nightmares. Recurring nightmares, generation after generation. Every descendent from the original population of Morbing Vyle has been cursed with a sort of darkness inside their minds. But now the curse has lifted. Now we've been released. Look around, Mr Smythe. Do you really want to stir up that darkness again?"

I looked around. I looked at the happy groups of people on the grass, laughing, chattering, singing, waving sprays of holly. Even the adults seemed like children. Reluctantly I shook my head.

"Humanity is weak, Mr Smythe. Our sanity and normality are easily overturned. We fool ourselves when we believe that we can face up to any truth. There are certain thoughts we can't afford to think. The religious cult of Morbing Vyle spread those thoughts like a contamination. Now they should be allowed to sink back into oblivion. Humanity needs to forget that such thoughts ever existed."

"What about me? How am I supposed to forget then?"

"I don't know, Mr Smythe. You must have a great deal of mental endurance to have come through at all. Perhaps you'll find the memory gradually fading away."

He seemed no longer stern, but very wise and sad. I couldn't think what to say. I sat there on the ground and gazed at the forest. The fallen trees were turning white, almost totally burned out now. Overhead the pall of smoke shifted and blew away, revealing an ever-widening expanse of blue sky.

Then there was a sudden cheery call.

"Sausages! Baked potatoes! Come and get 'em!"

The call came from the group around the bonfire. They had been toasting sausages on skewers and baking potatoes in the embers of the fire.

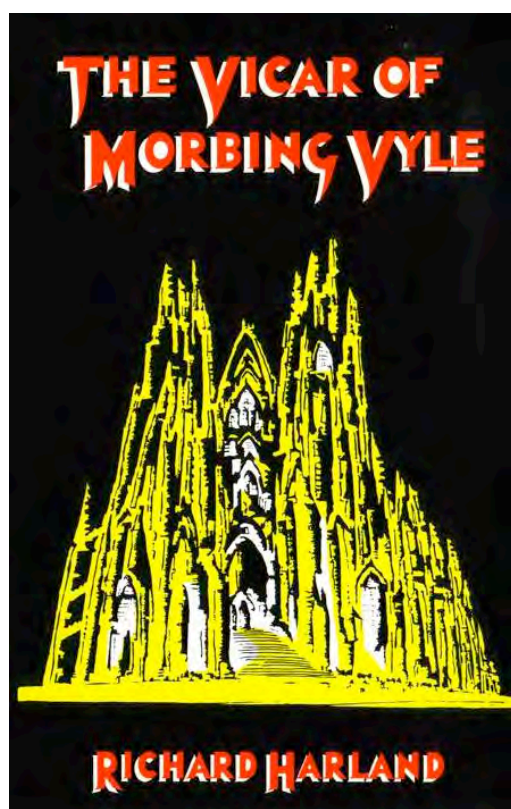
Immediately people began to converge from all directions. The checkout girl came down the slope, followed by the town clerk and his wife.

"Come on!" she cried out, heading towards the food. "Baked potatoes and sausages!"

For one fleeting moment an image from the past flashed into my mind - the memory of Mr Quode's sausages. Those horrible lengths of sheep's intestine, stuffed with partially digested mush . . . But only for a moment. Then the smell of real ordinary sausages drifted across into my nostrils. Suddenly I realised that I was famished.

"Come on," said Mr Hoskins.

He held out a hand and helped me to my feet. We went over to the bonfire and joined the crowd. I ate four sausages and three baked potatoes.



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PUBLISHER NOTIFICATION

Any reader wishing to trace the true history and origins of the Vicar (or force of vileness personified) is strongly advised to peruse a volume entitled [The Black Crusade](#), published by Chimaera/Aurealis.. [The Black Crusade](#) can be purchased online at

<http://www.aurealis.com.au/catalogue.php>

