The Glass Cage

An Unconventional Detective Story

Colin Wilson

Back Cover:

Nine Violent Deaths. . .

Nine Quotes From Blake. . .

draw Damon Reade into a strange and baffling mystery that interrupts his self-imposed isolation and plunges him into a compelling clairvoyant connection with a maniacal killer!

“Enraged and stifled with torment

He threw his right arm to the North

And his left arm to the South.”

Just these words from Blake. No sign of a body, but the tide was still running high. A few hours later they found parts of a body in a sack nearVauxhallBridge .

“Literate and enthralling. . . Far beyond the conventional mystery.”—TheHollywood Reporter

This low-priced Bantam Book

has been completely reset in a type face

designed for easy reading, and was printed

from new plates. It contains the complete

text of the original hard-cover edition.

NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

THE GLASS CAGE

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For

Jonathan and Sue Guinness

and to the memory of

John Cowper Powys

PART I

IT had been bright and clear as he left Keswick; but as he crossed theStyheadPass two hours later, the air smelled of rain. Five miles away, the cold expanse of Wastwater looked like a sheet of metal. The rain clouds had covered the top of Scafell, but the snowline still showed below them. He sat down on a granite boulder, allowing the paratroop rucksack to rest against the slope of the hill behind it. The skin of his back exhaled warm moisture. He stretched his arms above his head and yawned, feeling the pleasant ripple of energy along the shoulder muscles. If it had not been for the threat of rain, he would have removed the rucksack and slept for half an hour, lulled by the sound of the wind and the cries of sheep on the side of Green Gable. In this place, looking north toward Skiddaw and south to the lowlands and theIrish sea , he always experienced an active sense of the benevolence of nature, a desire to become a rock pushing its shoulders into the hills.

The first drops of rain blew against his face. He stood up reluctantly and readjusted the pack. It contained groceries and a heavy volume called A Treatise on Cosmic Fire, bought in Keswick for one and sixpence.

A mile above Wasdale Head, he struck off the footpath over the slopes of Lingmell, his head now bowed into the fine rain. He crossed a stream, removing his shoes and socks and walking with care on the sharp stones. The water was icy; although it was only six inches deep in the middle, he felt the pain biting into the calves of his legs, making him swear aloud. Sitting on the opposite bank and pulling on his shoes, he became aware of someone watching him from a few feet away. A youth with a dark gypsy's face was grinning at him; the smile was as mirthless as the baring of a dog's fangs.

"Morning, Jeff."

The youth said, "Cold?"

"Frozen. I must put the stones back sometime."

There had been stepping stones across the stream, but it became a torrent every winter and carried them away.

He stood up, asking, “How’s the wife?”

“She’s dead. Last night.”

“Oh? I’m sorry.”

The youth shrugged. He evidently felt that no further explanation was necessary. Pointing to the stream, he said, “Give me a call. I’ll help you.”

“Thank you.”

As he walked on across the hill, the youth called, “Someone after you.”

He turned. “Where?”

“In the post office an hour ago.”

“Who was that?”

The youth shrugged and turned away, but when he was a hundred yards off, he called something else. Most of the words were carried away by the wind and the noise of the stream, but the last word sounded like “policeman.”

Half a mile below his own cottage, a man’s voice called, “Mr. Reade.” It was Jeff’s father. He came out from behind the stone wall. There was nothing in the field beyond, so he must have been waiting. He said without preliminaries, “Your goat ate our beans.”

“I’m sorry. I tied her in the shed.”

The dark face was as loutish as his son’s, but more cunning. The left eye had a cast that gave his smile a disquieting air of malice. He stood there, grinning.

Reade said finally, “Where is she?”

“Tied in my shed.”

“Did she do much damage?”

“Can’t tell yet. They’re all shoots. Few bobs’ worth I reckon.”

He felt in his pocket, took out a leather purse, and removed half a crown. He asked, “Will that cover it?”

“Reckon so.” The hard hand closed over the money and pocketed it unceremoniously.

Reade did not miss the glint of humor in the eyes. He said, “I’m sorry to hear your daughter-in-law died.”

The man shrugged. “Her own fault. She took ‘em of her own free will.” He turned away, then added over his shoulder, “I’ll bring the goat over. Reckon she need milkin’.”

"Thank you."

The cottage felt cold. He poked out the ashes from under the logs and turned the charred sides upward. Then he poured paraffin on the logs and ignited it. The blaze was welcome. Afterward he went to look at the rope in the open shed outside. He half expected to find that it had been cut through, but the frayed ends showed that it had been gnawed. As he stood looking at it, he heard the goat's bleat. Bowden came in through the gate, leading her by a length of electrical wire tied to her collar. Without speaking, he released her, waved his hand, and went out the gate again.

Reade took her into the cottage to milk her; she stood quietly near the fire, the steam rising from her flanks, as he squeezed the milk into a basin. As he milked, she relieved her bowels onto the sheet of brown paper that he had spread behind her for that purpose. When he had finished, he set down the bowl on the table and carefully folded the paper, then took it out to the sanitary pit at the end of the garden. When he came back, the goat was sleeping on the coconut matting in front of the fire.

For the next half hour he busied himself preparing vegetables for a beef stew that would last for a week. The meat had been cooked days before. Outside, the noise of the wind was audible above the sound of the stream that ran down the rock face twenty feet from the cottage. This meant that it would probably rain for the rest of the day. (In winter it would have meant a storm, probably hail or snow; but then it had to contend with the thunder of a waterfall from November until March.) He was so intent on slicing the carrots and onions that he failed to hear the knocks on the door. The wind that sucked smoke across the room made him turn. The dark-coated man who stood in the doorway called, "Anyone home? May I come in?"

"Please do." He hastened across to close the door.

"Mr. Damon Reade?"

"Yes. Do sit down. Take your coat off. Are you wet?"

Observing the man's look of surprise as the goat heaved herself to her feet, he said, "Come on, Judy, outside. We've got a visitor."

The man said, "I don't mind."

The goat went reluctantly outside, and then cantered through the rain to the open shed.

"No, but I'm afraid she stinks when she's wet. I don't notice it, but other people do. Do you mind if I go on making this stew? It's nearly ready."

"Not at all. Please do, sir."

"I shan't be long. I just want to get some water."

He picked up a bucket and took the oilskin hat from beside the door as he went out. The rain was now heavy. He held the bucket under the waterfall, allowed it to fill to the brim, then carried it carefully back to the house without losing any water. The man watched this performance with interest.

"I suppose the water's quite all right for drinking?"

"Oh, perfectly. It sometimes gets a little muddy in winter, but it's all right if you let it settle for half an hour. There's nothing up there but rock."

He gestured vaguely in the direction of Scafell Pike. The man watched him as he poured the chopped vegetables and meat into the iron cooking pot, then hung it on the iron spike that projected from the back of the fire.

Reade said conversationally, "I could easily bring the water into the house if I wanted to. But it doesn't seem worth the trouble—except sometimes in winter when it rains for a week on end. There is a pipe that carries water to the boiler in the bathroom. . ." He threw another log on the fire, then sat down in the rocking chair. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"That's a nice idea, sir."

He leaned forward and moved the heavy black kettle across the stones until the fire was underneath it. The water began to simmer immediately.

"You came earlier today?"

"Two hours ago. Your neighbor said he thought you'd be back later. Incidentally, he was in here."

"Inside? When you came?"

"No. But I saw him come out of your front door. I thought he was you at first."

Reade shrugged. "I suppose he was taking a look around. There's nothing worth stealing."

"Don't you lock up when you go out?"

"What's the point? They could easily force a window."

The man looked puzzled. "That's not very satisfactory. I've come across that character before. I've seen him in court. I'd say he's a regular villain."

"He is," Reade said. "But he's not a bad sort all the same. There's more stupidity than villainy."

"Mind if I smoke? Thanks."

Reade had time to examine his face as he stuffed the pipe. He must have been about thirty-five—Reade's own age—with fair hair and blue eyes. At first sight he looked younger, but a closer look showed the lines of tiredness and worry.

He looked up, smiling. "I ought to introduce myself. My name's Lund. Detective sergeant."

"From Kendal?"

"Carlisle."

The kettle was boiling. As Reade spooned tea into the teapot, he said, "I'm sorry I brought you back twice. I've been in Keswick."

"Good thing you got back before the rain."

"Yes. It's a nasty walk in the rain."

"Do you always walk?"

"It's the only way from here. It's only fifteen miles on foot. It's be fifty by road."

Lund took a long pull at the pipe and visibly relaxed. He asked, "You like living here?"

"On the whole, yes. It's sometimes inconvenient in the winter—it's difficult to get coal or wood out here, and I sometimes get snowed in."

Lund said, grinning, "Not to mention your neighbors."

"Oh, Bowden's all right. You see, the trouble with that family is that they all look so awful, so everyone distrusts them. They're quite nice really."

Lund said with gentle mockery, "Quite honest, in fact."

"Oh, no. They're not honest. Why should they be? It's not their nature. They're rather like human foxes. But there's not much malice in them—if they like you."

He was pouring the tea into two large earthenware mugs, both labeled A Present from Windermere.

Lund said, "I gather they didn't like their daughter-in-law?"

Reade handed him the tea. "I don't think they disliked her. The son Jeff is lazy. He tends to stay in bed all day long. So the girl threatened to take a whole bottle of sleeping tablets."

"And he let her do it. And then let her crawl into his bed. . ."

"Yes. But you don't understand how stupid these people are. He could have saved her if he'd forced her to make herself sick—in fact, I think she tried to make herself sick later. But he didn't really believe anything would happen."

Lund said with sharp disgust, "Until she had convulsions. And even then he didn't get out of bed." His voice took on a tone of amazed disbelief. He said, coldly and violently, "He should be on a murder charge."

Reade said, "I'm not trying to defend them. But you don't understand. You put yourself in their place, and that's a mistake. You probably imagine how you'd react if your own wife took poison. These people have no values; life is meaningless to them. They collect their dole money every week—I think it's national assistance now—and then do nothing for a week. At least, Jeff doesn't. He's completely passive. They're really like something out of a Russian novel. I don't think he wanted his wife to die."

Lund said, "That's what they're saying in the village."

"They would. But they all hate the Bowdens. Why should Jeff have wanted her to die? He doesn't really want anything—except perhaps to start to live. Perhaps he'd got rather bored with her. She wanted him to move to Carlisle and get a job on a building site. But he didn't really mind that. He just didn't care."

He could see that Lund was trying to repress his irritation, so he said, "Let's change the subject. That is, unless that's what you want to discuss."

Lund seized the cue. "No, sir, it isn't."

He smiled, and Reade saw that the irritation was only superficial. He thought, with a touch of sadness: He doesn't really care either. For him it's not a tragedy, only a crime. He said, responding to the smile, "I must confess that I haven't the remotest idea of what could bring a detective inspector out from Lancaster to see me."

"Detective sergeant. No, I expect you couldn't guess. S'matter of fact, it's only a very routine inquiry." He smiled apologetically. "Otherwise they wouldn't have sent me."

"Won't you take your coat off?"

"Thank you. I wouldn't mind. It's getting hot in here." He threw his coat into the old armchair in the corner of the room, then sat down again. The stew was bubbling by now and sending up a pleasant smell of onion and beef.

"Well, then, sir, to come to the point. You've read about these Thames murders?"

"No."

"No?"

"You see, I seldom read a newspaper. And although I've got a portable radio set, I don't think I've listened to it for a year."

Lund looked as if he wanted to scratch his head with the stem of his pipe, but contented himself with rubbing his chin.

"Can't say I blame you. And of course you've no television out here. Hmm, so we'll have to start from scratch." He fumbled in his pocket, then went over to the overcoat and took out a notebook.

"Would you like me to light a lamp?"

"No, sir. It's all right. I'll stand by the window." He cleared his throat. "Right. There have been nine murders so far. The first on February the tenth last year—fourteen months ago. They're all the work of a madman."

Reade asked, "How can you know that? Has he been caught?"

"Unfortunately, no. But no one but a madman would chop up the bodies the way he does."

Reade interrupted mildly. "My knowledge of criminal matters is not extensive, but I believe a great many sane murderers have dismembered their victims."

"I know, sir. There was one down at Lancaster—Ruxton. But he only killed two women—his wife and the maid. But can you think of anybody who went on doing it—for fun? Nine of them?"

"No. I see your point."

Lund smiled grimly, then went back to the notebook. "Anyway, let me come to the point. At first these murders didn't get a lot of attention, because the complete bodies weren't recovered. In the first case they only found an arm and a leg. Both on the mud below Wapping. Might've been medical students having a lark. But in August he left the complete body—in several pieces—all piled up outside a factory wall in Salamanca Place—a little street that runs off the Albert Embankment. And on a wall, about ten yards away from the body, somebody had chalked up some words."

"And they were?"

Lund read from his notebook:

"Till his brain in a rock and his heart

In a fleshly slough formed four rivers

Obscuring the immense orb of fire."

Reade had leaped to his feet and exclaimed, "Good God!"

Lund lowered the notebook, smiling. He said, "I thought that might surprise you."

"My God! My God! Now I understand. Now I see why you came to me. But wait. . . How do you know it was the murderer? May I see?"

In agitation he snatched the notebook from Lund's hands and stared at the words; then, as his eyes went down the page, he said, "God, there's more. . ."

"If you'll allow me, sir."

Lund took the notebook. He was obviously gratified by the effect he had produced but annoyed about the snatching of the notebook.

Reade was too excited to care. He said, "Go on, please."

Lund said stiffly, "Well, as you've already seen, there was more to come. About a week later a policeman on the river patrol saw some lines written on the wall under Chelsea Bridge. He'd seen the writing in Salamanca Place and he thought there was a similarity. To begin with, it was very thick writing. I mean, it wasn't written with an ordinary stick of chalk, but a block of it. It said:

Enraged and stifled with torment

He threw his right arm to the North

And his left arm to the South.

There was no sign of a body, but it was high tide. He thought that perhaps there'd been something on the mud under the bridge. And a few hours later they found parts of a body in a sack near Vauxhall Bridge."

"And did anyone realize that it was Blake?"

"No, sir. I'm afraid not. As a matter of fact, no one really connected the things together."

"But somebody must have wondered what it all meant?"

"They did, sir." There was perceptible irony in Lund's voice. "They thought the bit about the ball of fire was a reference to the hydrogen bomb. Which is reasonable, if you come to look at it. And then the chalk—it's the kind that people use for chalking up political slogans. So they got the idea it was probably some kind of political crank—some ban-the-bomber or something."

"But what about the second quotation—about flinging one arm to the North and the other to the South?"

Lund shrugged. "Same thing. That's what you'd expect an exploding bomb to do, wouldn't you? Anyway, the next one made them think they were still on the right lines."

"The next one? There was another?"

"Last December. This time in Pinchin Street, off Cable Street. That's the East End—Whitechapel area. The body was in eight pieces, same as before—behind a hoarding under the railway arches. This time he'd written up:

Then the inhabitants of those cities

Felt their nerves change into marrow

And the hardening bones began

In swift. . .

"That's all."

Reade finished:

"In swift diseases and torments

In shootings and throbbings and grindings

Through all the coasts; till, weakened,

The senses inward rushed, shrinking

Beneath the dark net of infection."

Lund said, “I expect you’re right, sir. Anyway, he was obviously interrupted that time, and broke off. Then a woman came forward and said she’d seen a man come out from behind the fence at five o’clock that morning. . .”

Reade interrupted. “But at five o’clock in December it would be pitch black.”

“Quite. But there was a street lamp. She couldn’t give any description of him except that he was very tall. And she thought he got into a car.”

“Didn’t she look behind the fence?”

“No. Why should she? She probably thought he’d been there for natural purposes.”

“Of course. And what happened when the quotation appeared in the newspapers?”

“It didn’t. The inspector in charge of the case had it rubbed off—after having it photographed, of course. You see, he thought all this stuff about nerves changing into marrow still pointed to somebody in CND—the nuclear disarmers. But he didn’t want the press to get hold of that angle, for obvious reasons.”

“Why?”

Lund said wearily, “I wouldn’t be sure. Perhaps they thought people might start lynching the nuclear disarmers. I don’t know. Anyway, it was washed off.”

Reade said, smiling with cheerful malice, “So they still didn’t discover it was Blake?”

“Oh yes, eventually. We’re not as stupid as all that.”

“And how did you find out, as a matter of curiosity?”

“Through a professor at London University—Dr. Fairclough. He knew it must be Blake, and finally dug out the quotations. Then he told us about you.”

“I see. You have more quotations you want me to identify?”

“No, sir, it’s not that. I told you, this was just a routine check. You see, we thought that a man like this must be pretty well educated. But at the same time a bit dotty, to say the least. Now Dr. Fairclough says that you’re recognized as the leading Blake scholar in England.”

Reade said, “That’s kind of him.”

“And Dr. Fairclough says that people like you do a lot of corresponding with other people who are interested in Blake.”

Reade stood up suddenly. He said, “Oh God. Now I understand. . .”

“Understand what, sir?”

“I know, I know. I know what you’re going to suggest. And if I kept files of all my letters, you’d be

right. . .”

Lund’s disappointment was obvious. He said, “You mean you don’t keep files?”

Reade felt stupid and apologetic; he felt he had somehow to make amends to this man who had been brought so far on a wild goose chase. He walked across the room, saying nervously, “Unfortunately, no. At least, not all of them. But you see, I’m lazy. I correspond periodically with a lot of other Blake scholars—Northrop Frye, Foster Damon, Kathleen Raine—and of course I keep their letters. But as Dr. Fairclough rightly surmised, I also get letters from cranks. You see, Blake is like the Bible—it’s a happy hunting ground for all kinds of maniacs and fanatics. It’s almost as popular as the Book of Revelations with the end-of-the-worlders.”

Lund said gloomily, “That’s why we thought you could help.”

“Quite. But what would be the point in keeping these letters, or replying to them? I simply throw them onto the fire.”

“Hmm. You don’t have any of them?”

“I don’t think so. At least I suppose I may have one or two that struck me as interesting or amusing. I really don’t know.”

Lund said with scarcely any hope, “Could you check?”

“By all means. I’ll check now. Let me just take that stew off before it burns. Would you like to join me in some, by the way?”

Lund did not reply, and Reade became aware of the depths of his depression. As he used a wooden pole to lift the stewpot off the fire, he was thinking: It’s a pity, but I’m not to blame. After all, he was taking an absurdly long shot. That I file all my crank letters. That among them, there is one from a homicidal maniac. . . He placed the pot on an asbestos mat beside the fire. He said, “I shan’t be a moment.”

“Would you mind if I came too?”

“Not at all. After you.”

After the downstairs room, the upper part of the house felt damp and cold. The stairway was completely black. Reade pressed the catch of his study door, and Lund went in first. This was the largest room in the house, and it had an impressive view over Wastwater toward Greendale and the Copeland Forest. At the moment the lake was almost invisible in the rain, and the harshness and bareness of the hills were accentuated. The room had the faintly acrid and charred smell of a paraffin fire that has been allowed to burn itself out.

The light was poor. Reade lit a tall Aladdin lamp on a chest of drawers, and then opened the top drawer. As Lund waited behind his shoulder, he said apologetically, “I’m afraid it might be a long search. You see, I don’t have a secretary and I don’t bother much with my correspondence. Now my Blake files—they’re over there in that cabinet—are in much better order. I’m doing a Blake concordance, you see, and a line-by-line commentary—the most thorough commentary that has ever been done.”

He was talking to cover his embarrassment at the chaos of letters in the drawer. They were piled on top

of one another with no more order than the litter in a paper chase. It seemed hopeless to try to find anything in the confusion.

Lund asked accusingly, "Is that the lot?"

"Er. . . no. There are others. . ." He gestured vaguely at the other drawers.

Lund said glumly, "Oh gawd."

"It's. . . er. . . rather difficult when you have a natural dislike of correspondence, as I do."

Lund said, pointing, "Isn't that one unopened?"

"Is it? Yes, perhaps it is. You see, I often feel I just can't be bothered. . . particularly when they're obviously letters from strangers."

He was surprised that Lund was looking happier.

"Would you mind if I opened it?"

"Not at all. Do."

Lund took the letter over to the window and tore it open. Reade was glad to have him on the other side of the room. He riffled hastily through the other letters in the drawer, but found nothing that could be described as a crank letter. When he looked around, Lund was looking puzzled and disappointed. He held out the letter.

"Nothing much there. Just somebody who wants to know what authority you have for some date you give."

Reade said, smiling, "You see why I don't bother to open some of my letters?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I do. But are there any others you haven't opened?"

"I think so. I occasionally keep them in here."

He pulled open the bottom drawer and was embarrassed to discover that it seemed to be stuffed to the top with unopened envelopes.

"All of these?" Lund said incredulously.

"It would appear so, I'm afraid."

Lund said, smiling, "Don't apologize. We might have something here. Would you mind very much if we took these all downstairs and went through them?"

Reade said hopefully, "Perhaps you'd like to take them away with you?"

"But of course! If you wouldn't object."

"Not at all. You'd be doing me a favor!"

"Splendid!" Lund sounded more cheerful than at any time since his arrival. "Let's just take the drawer down." At the door, he turned. "And if you don't mind, I'll accept your kind offer of some of that stew."

"Of course. With pleasure."

Ten minutes later, as they sat on either side of the kitchen table and Reade spread chunks of new bread with unsalted butter, Lund said, "You know, it's amazing how damned hungry you can get without realizing it. I'd forgotten that I hadn't eaten since breakfast." He sipped a mouthful of the stew cautiously; it was extremely hot. He said, "Ah, that's really excellent." He laid down his spoon for a moment, taking a slice of bread. "You know, I'd have thought a man like you would be a vegetarian."

Reade acknowledged the point, smiling wryly. "I should be. But I'm such a bad cook, and I think I'd soon get bored with vegetable stew."

Lund dropped all pretense of interest in the conversation, and ate voraciously for ten minutes. When Reade offered a second helping, he nodded without ceasing to chew. Then he said, by way of apology, "Marvelous stew. . ."

"Would you like a glass of beer with it? My own home brew?"

"That's kind of you. I think I would."

When Reade opened the heavy stone jars, the kitchen filled with the strong smell of fermented yeast.

Lund said, chuckling, "Reminds me of the brewery we used to live next door to when I was a kid." He tasted the heavy golden-looking liquid, and said, "That's good, but I don't think I'd better take much of it."

"You're right. Two glasses would put you to sleep."

"As strong as that!" He drank half the glass thirstily, then set it down. "Don't mind my asking, Mr. Reade, but were you ever married?"

"I'm afraid not. Are you?"

"Oh yes. And three kids, the eldest eleven." He took up his spoon again and waved it expansively; his manner had now lost all the professional quality and become friendly and open. "You'll excuse me saying so, but I'd have thought a wife was just what you need here. After all, you're a scholar. You shouldn't be bothered with domestic affairs."

Reade felt himself blushing, but was glad that he had his back to the window. "That's true, I'm not a misogynist. But I can't imagine any woman wanting to come and live in this place. As you remarked earlier, it's rather bleak and remote."

"Even so. . ." Lund grinned cheerfully; anyone less inexperienced than Reade might have guessed him to be slightly drunk. "Even so, if you don't mind me saying so, you strike me as the marrying kind. And it's amazing what women'll do. Live anywhere. . ."

He turned his attention back to the second bowl of stew, and in five minutes had emptied it and was cleaning up the remains of the gravy with bread.

Reade decided to anticipate more personal questions by changing the subject. "Tell me, Detective Sergeant, why have they sent you here? Have you any connection with the case?"

Lund shook his head, chewing, then swallowed. "No, but it's not worth their while to send a man all the way from London to see you, is it?"

Reade nodded.

Lund finished his beer in one swallow, and said, "You know, if you don't mind, I'll risk another drop of that stuff."

Reade smiled, pouring it out, concealing his impatience to be alone. The rain was inaudible, but he could see it running down the window behind Lund's head.

Lund seemed to read his thoughts; he said, "If this rain'll let up for a minute, I'll make a dash for it. But it's quite a walk to the village."

"I'm afraid it is. But don't worry, you're not in my way."

"Kind of you. Don't you want to get some work done?"

"I might—later."

"Do you write every day, or just when you feel like it?"

"Most days. . . it depends."

Lund turned his chair sideways, to face the fire, and stretched out his legs. He was obviously comfortable and talkative, and Reade began to regret producing the beer. He also knew what the next question would be.

"Do you write for a set number of hours every day, or do you have to wait for inspiration?"

He said evasively, "I usually work best in the morning."

"Mind if I smoke? I'm not supposed to on duty, of course, but I don't suppose it matters." As he stuffed the pipe, he said, "Yes, I envy you this kind of life—I sometimes dream about retiring to the country—quiet cottage somewhere, little garden, perhaps a boat to do a bit of fishing. . ." He paused to light the pipe, sucking slowly until the flame reached his fingertips. "Still, I'm not sure I wouldn't get bored with it."

Reade did not reply. There was nothing he could say. It would be impolite to answer: Of course you would. You obviously have nothing in your head. Besides, he felt no dislike of the pleasant-faced, pipe-smoking man, only total indifference.

Lund leaned forward and picked up one of the letters from the drawer. He tore it open with his thumb and glanced at the single, typewritten sheet.

"Now this is more interesting. Somebody who doesn't like you at all." He read aloud: " 'It is time somebody exploded your nasty, vicious little conspiracies. A swine like you has no right to pretend to understand Blake. You are obviously corrupt through and through. Blake was a poet, a man of the spirit. . .' It's signed Alison Waite. Do you know her?"

"It's a man, actually. A strange crank who wrote a book trying to prove that Blake was a witch. I reviewed it in an academic journal."

"Has he threatened you before?"

"Several times. I know his handwriting now, so I don't open the letters."

"Mmm. He might be worth checking up on. I can see we're going to have an interesting time looking through those." He drank half the glass of beer in a long draught, then set it down again. "There's a certain interest in being in the police force sometimes. I sometimes think I'd miss it if I retired. People interest me, you know. Most of 'em have got something interesting about 'em if only you look for it. For example, I was talking with an old boy the other day, and it turned out that his father had been on that last expedition with Scott of the Antarctic."

Reade said, "I see your point."

Lund suspected disagreement. He said, "But then, you don't really get a chance to judge, do you? I mean, living in this place? You don't see many people. Don't you ever get fed up with doing the same thing day after day—no offense meant?"

"The same thing?"

"Yes, you know, writing about Blake? If you'll excuse me saying so, it's not the kind of thing I'd enjoy. Mind, I enjoy reading, I read a lot of stuff. Have you read Neville Shute? There's a lot in him."

Reade shook his head, and the silence was heavy for a moment.

Lund had flushed slightly. He said, "You won't think I'm trying to be offensive?"

"Not at all."

"But you know. . . writing about somebody else's books all the time. Or perhaps I'm wrong? Perhaps there's more to it than that?"

His sincerity was obvious, so it was impossible to be offended. Reade was struck with an idea; he would claim that he had to walk to the village to do some shopping, and they could walk down together. This cheered him, and the prospect of being alone again in half an hour made him decide to try to answer the question. He said, "There's no need to apologize. But you see, I always wanted to live alone in some quiet place. Even when I was a child I used to dream about living on an island—or at the North Pole, deep inside a mountain of ice. I suppose you'd call it escapism. I just didn't enjoy having to live—or rather, to do all the things that constitute living. I used to read a lot of adventure stories—Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle and all that. Mind, I lived in quite a pleasant town—Lichfield, in Staffordshire. It would have been far worse if I'd been in Liverpool or Birmingham. But I simply had a strong sense of wanting something else—something apart from the things people do with their lives."

Lund shrugged. He said, "But most people feel that way. Everybody wants to be rich. We'd all like to

be able to hop on a plane to Calcutta or Hong Kong."

"No, not to be rich. I never wanted to be rich. Even when I was small, I never dreamed about money or travel. I enjoyed reading about King Solomon's mines, but I didn't really want to travel. I once went to Scarborough in a car and was sick all the way. And I used to get so bored with train journeys after the first half hour. But when I started reading poetry at the age of thirteen or so, I knew I wanted to be a poet. Then when I left school, I went to Sheffield University for three years, but I hated that too. I was supposed to be studying literature with a view to becoming a teacher. Then an uncle died and left me a little money. He said he wasn't going to leave me much, because he didn't want to encourage my laziness, but that he'd leave enough to give me a start in life. He reckoned without my ingenuity. This cottage cost me thirty pounds—and then the locals said I'd been swindled. And I can live on almost nothing—on so little that you wouldn't believe me if I told you. And that's all I ever asked—a place of my own."

Lund said doubtfully, "And you write poetry?"

"No. I used to in my teens. But I soon discovered I hadn't the talent. But I read poetry—Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley. And I don't feel I'm wasting my life. . ."

He stopped. Lund was looking depressed. He was staring at the rain running down the windows. Finally he knocked out his pipe on the hearthstone and cleared his throat. He said, "Well, to be honest. It wouldn't suit me at all, sir. I'd find it too quiet."

His use of "sir" indicated that their conversation had come to a kind of stop. Lund stood up and went over to the window. He said, "I like peace and quiet, but not too much of it. I think you'd enjoy being a detective. . ."

"Oh, but I am a detective—or a kind of one. So was Blake." He laughed at the expression of incomprehension on Lund's face. "That's why I always wanted to live alone. While you're engaged in living—dashing about and doing things—you never have time to wonder what it's all about. But I always wanted to know what it was all about. Then you look at people and wonder what's wrong with them. They ought to be completely happy just to be alive—and yet some of them commit suicide because they've lost all their money, and others commit murder because their wives have been unfaithful. . . I can't imagine how people can take life for granted. There's so obviously something wrong somewhere. It's a kind of detective story in which you don't know anything at all—you don't know what kind of crime has been committed or who is the criminal. You just know there's something wrong somewhere, and you've got to keep your eyes open and keep putting two and two together. That's what all Blake's poetry is about. That's why it's all so full of violence and torture and people groaning. He just felt instinctively that there's something wrong."

At the mention of torture, Lund's face ceased to be uncomprehending; he looked distinctly interested. "So you think this madman might feel the same?"

"The same?" Reade stared back blankly.

"He might be a kind of social reformer? A man who thinks there's something wrong with the world and wants to change it? Like these anarchists who throw bombs?"

The question threw Reade off balance. He said uncertainly, "That's not exactly what I meant. No. . ."

"But I thought you said. . . something about a man who feels there's something wrong somewhere?"

"Of course. But. . . what can you do about original sin?"

"Original sin?"

It was at this point that Lund stood up and began to look around vaguely. He said, "Yes, I see what you mean. Er, what did I do with my coat?"

Reade helped him on with it, smiling. They then spent five minutes transferring the letters from the drawer to a cardboard box. Reade was feeling friendly again; the rain was still heavy and he was glad that he wouldn't have to use his excuse about walking to the village. He said, "If you want my own theories about this murderer, I can put them in a few sentences. I don't think he's the sort of person who would write letters to me."

"No? Why not?"

"People who like Blake have a particular kind of mentality. And it's not the murderer's mentality."

"But what about the quotations?"

"That doesn't prove he's really interested in Blake. People read all kinds of things nowadays. You'll probably discover that he's rich, bored, and with some kind of record as a psychopath. He's probably well educated but has a butterfly mind. His type don't write letters to people like me."

Lund was standing by the table, waiting to pick up the box. His expression was at once bored, impatient, and grudgingly interested. He said, "But how can you say that? How do you know? Why does he write bits of Blake on walls if he's not really interested in him?"

"As a kind of act of show-off, I think."

Lund persisted. "But surely that's just a guess? You can't know."

"That's true. I may be quite wrong. You may find letters from him among those."

Lund smiled. "Let's hope we do. Well, sir, many thanks for your hospitality. It's been a pleasure visiting you. I might be calling on you again sometime."

He was halfway out of the door, the box in his hands, when he turned. "That reminds me. Is there any reference to someone called John Cox of Northampton in Blake?"

"I don't believe so. In fact, I'm certain there's not. Why?"

"The ninth body was partly clothed, and there was a card stuck in the pocket with those words on it. We thought it might be the name of the victim."

Reade interrupted. "You mean it was a man?"

Lund looked surprised. "Yes. Six out of the nine were men." He stared at Reade's astonished face, then said, "Why?"

"I. . . I don't know, but I somehow assumed they were all women. Come inside for a moment. I'll check

on John Cox."

Lund said, "Oh, all right." He put the box on the floor. "I didn't really think it'd be anything to do with Blake. If you're sure there's no mention of him. . ."

"I'm fairly certain there's not, but I'll check in the biographies if you'll wait a moment."

When he came downstairs again, a few minutes later, carrying five books, Lund was sitting down on the windowsill. He said, "You assumed they were sex crimes, did you?"

"In a way," Reade said. He was glancing at the index in each book. "It's an obvious assumption to make, don't you think? A sort of Jack the Ripper?" He closed the last of the books. "No, I'm sorry, no John Cox. But tell me—what was this man wearing?"

"I haven't got a note of it, but I believe it was a raincoat and trousers."

"He wasn't dismembered, then?"

"He'd been disemboweled." He watched the expression on Reade's face, and asked, "Why does it interest you?"

"It's. . . stranger than I thought."

"In what way?"

Reade shrugged. "It's not too difficult to understand a sadist killing women. . ."

"Isn't it?"

"I think not. Sexual frustration building up until it becomes morbid. Blake said:

'When thought is closed in caves

Then love shall show its root in deepest hell.'

But a man who kills men and women indifferently. . ."

He stopped, feeling a wave of tiredness and depression washing over him, surprising him by its suddenness. He wanted Lund to go; every additional minute with him was sucking away his vitality. Lund stood, waiting for him to finish his sentence. Reade deliberately made no attempt to finish it, letting the silence between them lengthen, until Lund said awkwardly, "I daresay you're right. But I'd better be getting back."

"It is rather late," Reade said.

He watched Lund turn through the gate and into the lane. Jeff Bowden was passing, his long hair plastered in rat tails around his eyes and ears. He stood aside to let Lund pass, although there was plenty

of room in the lane; then he stood and glared after him. Lund turned to wave goodbye to Reade, caught the scowl, and paused for a moment, his face hardening, as if about to return. Then he shrugged and walked on. This interlude made Reade feel more depressed than ever. As he closed the door, he found himself saying aloud, "God, how I detest fools."

He put the kettle on the fire and emptied the cold tea from the teapot. Then he turned the chair to the fire and sat down, closing his eyes, trying to dispel the feeling of gloom by reflecting on it. But when he examined it, he realized that it had nothing to do with Lund. It was the thought of the murderer, and everything associated with him: the idea of boredom, neurosis, materialism, willful stupidity.

He emptied his mind of all ideas and feelings, thinking of darkness and emptiness. Then he brought it back to the thought of Blake, of a man sitting alone on the beach at Felpham, watching the sunlight on the sea and becoming aware of wider horizons of meaning, a consciousness of some immense, universal source of purpose. For a moment the fatigue vanished; power came back to his brain like a current of electricity. Then it faded again as he thought of a dismembered body lying on the foreshore of the Thames.

He made the tea, thinking: It is a mistake to be alone all the time. Thoughts that could be dispelled in a moment cling like leeches when you're alone.

He went to the window. The rain had stopped and the sun was shining on the smooth rock face behind the cottage. The few dark clouds in the sky were drifting eastward. To the west, the sky was clear. The idea of returning to Keswick came to him, and the thought made him feel more cheerful. It was not yet four o'clock; he could be there by seven. Urien Lewis was always glad to see him, and he could anticipate the interest on Lewis's face as he described Lund's visit.

Having made the decision, he resented the necessity of drinking the tea: he poured in more milk, then swallowed it in gulps. Outside, birds had begun to sing in the sunlight, increasing his desire to be gone. He pulled on a pair of gumboots and packed his shoes in the rucksack. Then, as an afterthought, he went upstairs and stuffed the remainder of the letters in the sack.

He filled the goat's manger with hay. She was unwilling to let him go; she followed him to the gate and pushed her nose into his hand, begging for affection like a dog. When he closed the gate behind him, she placed her forefeet on the bank and watched him disappear down the lane.

He enjoyed the first hour of the walk; then the fatigue came back. It was impossible to sit down; the ground was too wet. The thin, tough grass on the high ground held the water and squelched underfoot. Then he looked at his watch, and remembered that the afternoon bus from Buttermere reached Rosthwaite at a quarter past five. He covered the last mile to the main road at a jog trot, the rucksack bumping between his shoulder blades. He reached the road at shortly after five, then sat on a milestone to recover his breath, his body prickling with sweat. Five minutes later he sat at the front of the bus, breathing in the smell of wet clothes and feeling the beginning of a headache. Now he was relaxed, the depression came back again. He looked around the bus, and realized that he would always associate its smell of leather and wet clothes with the thought of murder.

The door at the bottom of the narrow stairs was open. The plate outside said: Urien Lewis, Antiquarian and Bookseller.

He called, "Are you there, Hugh?"

The door above opened. A blonde girl looked out. "Hello, Damon. What are you doing here?"

Her smile made him feel better. She was wearing a blue-checked dress and looked cool.

She asked, "Haven't you been home?"

"Yes. I've come back. Where's your uncle?"

"He's upstairs, doing some cataloguing. Tea?"

"Yes, that's a marvelous idea."

"Let me help you off with that."

She went behind him, taking the weight of the sack. She said, "What on earth have you got in here?"

"Letters. . . all kinds of letters."

"Love letters?"

"Unfortunately, no."

She glanced at him sideways as she went into the kitchen, and the look gave him a shock of pleasure. He stared after her, trying to turn the impression into words. It seemed to him that in the course of a few weeks she had ceased to be the schoolgirl that he could caress or tease with detachment. He had known for years that she was fond of him, but it had not been important; she aroused in him only a protective fondness that was intentional. Now, suddenly, she had developed new powers, powers that came from a depth of instinct, and she was using them against him.

She came in with a cup of tea and said, "I'll tell Uncle Hugh you've arrived."

He smiled absently, taking the tea, and said, "Thank you, my love."

It was play-acting, and he knew it. Luckily, she didn't. He thought with amusement: This is what Lawrence called the sex war. Then as he thought about the instinctive assurance in her glance, joy rose in him from some deep spring. At the same time he became aware that his reason for coming back to Keswick had something to do with her as well as with her uncle. He deliberately refrained from looking up as she came back into the room.

"Uncle's nearly finished cataloguing. He says why don't you take your tea up there."

"Thanks. I will. I'm already feeling better."

She said, "Aren't you going to tell me what it's about?"

"Come up and listen. It's not a secret."

"All right. Wait a moment. Uncle Hugh wants some more tea."

As he went up the stairs, smelling the familiar odor of dust and old books, a port-winy voice said, "Well,

Damon, what on earth brings you back?"

Urien Lewis was seated on a tea chest, another tea chest full of books beside him and an open ledger on his knee. He was an enormous man. Sitting down, he seemed almost as fat as he was tall. His teeth were large, irregular, and tobacco-stained, and his mouth was also big and somehow irregular. There was something about his face that reminded Reade of a crocodile. The gold-rimmed pince-nez spectacles, attached to his lapel by a thin gold chain, looked almost as incongruous as they would on a crocodile. The big, square-fingered hands seemed to confirm this hint of power and violence contained in the face. The voice was smooth and rich; it always reminded Reade of an actor he had known as a child, who specialized in Dickens parts.

"This is a most pleasant surprise, Damon. I hear you've been home and returned."

"Yes. Something rather interesting has turned up."

"Good, good. I need a little interest in my poor, feeble old life. Although books are a great compensation. Isn't this beautiful?"

It was a compact volume in finely tooled calfskin; the title on the jacket: Le Moyen de Parvenir. Reade took it politely. This was a kind of game they played. He was indifferent to books unless they dealt with subjects that interested him; Lewis knew this.

"That's quite a treasure. Béroalde de Verville was an imitator of Rabelais. The language is even more scurrilous. Someone ought to translate it. . ." He coughed, cleared his throat, and spat into a handkerchief. "Where the devil's Sarah with that tea? Sarah!"

"Coming."

She came up the stairs behind them. She had changed the checked school frock for a green and yellow summer dress that left her arms bare. It also emphasized the shape of her small breasts. She had to push past Reade to hand the tea to her uncle, and the contact of the bare arm disturbed him.

Lewis said, "Thank you, m'dear. Going out?"

She looked at him innocently. "No."

"Getting pretty, isn't she, Damon?" Lewis put an arm around her waist and caressed the bare arm.

"Very," Reade said.

"Growing up," Lewis said with mock sadness. "She'll be getting engaged next."

"Don't be silly."

"Dresses like a young lady. Look."

He raised the bottom of her skirt and showed the embroidered hem of an underskirt. But when he tried to lift it higher, her hands instinctively held it down.

Lewis said reprovingly, "No need to be shy in front of Damon. He's known you since you were tiny. What's the good of wearing nice underwear if nobody sees it?"

She said, “They’re not supposed to see it.” But she allowed Lewis to raise the skirt to the level of her navel, showing white panties that matched the underskirt.

Lewis said, “Refuses to wear those green things any more.”

Reade felt slightly repelled and was glad when Lewis allowed the skirt to drop. Sarah had reddened and was looking away. Lewis’s action implied that she was a child trying to pretend to be a woman. For a moment Reade felt irritation; then he reflected that, for Lewis, she was still a child.

Lewis said, “Find a seat, Damon. Sarah, are you going or staying?”

“Staying. I want to hear what Damon has to say.”

Reade sat on the edge of a tea chest. He was observing for the first time that the relation between these two had changed subtly. A year ago Lewis was still mildly impatient at having been made the guardian of a schoolgirl; she had been aware of this and had never been quite at ease with him. A year ago she would have understood her guardian’s question as an order to go away. Now she pulled up a small stepladder and sat on the top step, with no trace of nervousness, as if it were her right to be there.

Lewis said, “Well, tell us what you found when you arrived home.”

“A policeman.”

Sarah said, “Good heavens, why?”

“It’s rather a long story. Have you heard about a series of murders that have been taking place in London?”

She said, “You mean these murders of prostitutes?” But for all her attempt at casualness, she could not keep herself from reddening.

Lewis said, “What on earth do you know about them?”

She said defensively, “We talk about them at school.”

Reade said, “Anyway, it seems that the murderer leaves quotations from Blake scrawled on walls near the bodies.”

“So they think it might be you?” Lewis said.

“Not exactly. But I suppose their next step is to try to track down any cranks or madmen who are interested in Blake. So they wanted to know if I’d had any letters from such people. And of course I have a drawer full. So he took them away.”

She asked, “What about the letters you brought with you?”

“Well, I told him—the policeman—that I was pretty certain there weren’t any homicidal cranks among them. But now I’m not so sure. I thought we might look through some of them later.”

“I’ll help you,” she said eagerly.

Reade said, "Incidentally, do you know of a John Cox in literature?"

"John Cox. . . That wouldn't be the man in Cox and Box would it? I suppose not. There is something. Isn't it a character mentioned in Bunyan's Mr. Badman? Sarah, look on that shelf over there—among the World Classic volumes. See if you can see Mr. Badman."

Reade said, with an admiration that was intended to flatter, "You're astonishing! You must be about the most well-read man I've ever met."

Lewis smiled at the compliment. He said, "But what has John Cox to do with these murders?"

"It was a name written on some paper on one of the corpses."

Sarah had found the book. Lewis leafed through it for a few moments, then said, "Yes, I thought so. John Cox is a man who committed suicide in Northampton. Bunyan describes it at rather gruesome length."

"How did he kill himself?"

"He made a hole in his side with a razor and pulled out his intestines."

Sarah grimaced. "Ooh, don't."

Reade said, "It fits. The murdered man had been disemboweled."

"This is extraordinary," Lewis said. His voice was level, but Reade was aware of the depth of his interest; it showed in his eyes. "You mean to say that this man sets out to make his murders fit quotations from Blake and Bunyan?"

"Oh no. The other quotations don't seem so relevant."

He told them briefly all he could remember of what Lund had said. He would have preferred Sarah not to be there, but realized, on reflection, that this was absurd; she read the newspapers and discussed the murders at school.

After ten minutes he was finding the edge of the tea chest uncomfortable. He stood up, and Lewis yawned and heaved himself to his feet.

"Yes, I think that's an excellent idea. Let's go and find more comfortable chairs. Well, well, this is all very strange. A literate murderer. It shouldn't be all that difficult to trace him. In fact, I should think it quite likely that he's among your correspondents. Do you get many letters?"

"Quite a lot, one or two a week."

"Any from mental homes?"

"Oh no."

"Any from people who mentioned being in a mental home?"

"I don't think so. But you see, I don't read them very carefully."

"Do you reply to them?"

"Sometimes. Not very often. Writing letters bores me."

In the sitting room, Sarah threw more coal onto the fire. Lewis relaxed in the enormous armchair whose springs had been broken to his weight.

"Spot of whiskey?"

"No, thanks. I haven't really recovered from last night."

"I think I'll have some."

Sarah took a whiskey bottle from a cupboard and poured a drink. She filled the glass almost to the top with soda water.

Lewis said, "Tell me, Damon, why don't you go to London and see if you can track this murderer?"

Sarah said, "How on earth could he?"

Reade said, smiling, "I don't think I'd make a very efficient detective."

"Why not? You're obviously interested in the case."

"Not really," Reade said uncomfortably.

"Of course you are. Why did you come all the way back if you're not interested?"

Sarah had gone into the kitchen. Her absence made Reade feel less constrained. He said, "If you want to know the real reason, I felt horribly gloomy and depressed after the detective left. I felt like talking to you."

Lewis said, "Hmmm." He took a long sip of the whiskey, then put the glass on the table. He smiled. "You know, Damon, I've often accused you of keeping your head in the sand. Well, isn't this a case in point? Why do a few murders depress you? There are thousands of murders every day."

"Yes, I know. It's difficult to explain. It's not just the fact of murder. Most murders aren't premeditated—they're just blows struck in anger. But there's something about this man. . . He's obviously educated. Worse still, he's familiar with Blake. That's what baffles me. Do you see? If he knows Blake, he can't be entirely a lost soul, can he?"

"Why not?" Lewis asked, smiling blandly.

"Well. . . because a total materialist never gets around to reading Blake. After all, he's not taught in schools."

"I don't see your point. Blake is a religious poet. I don't regard myself as religious, so I don't find him interesting. But the world's full of people who've gone insane through too much brooding on religion."

"That's not the point," Reade said doggedly. "Religious cranks study the Apocalypse and the Book of Daniel and all that. Blake's a different matter entirely."

As he said this he was aware that he was contradicting what he had said to Lund: that Blake was a happy hunting ground for cranks. He was not saying what he meant, and it depressed him. Luckily, Lewis changed the direction of the conversation.

"I can see what you're trying to say. But there's a fallacy in it. Look at me. I'm not what you call a 'lost soul,' am I? I live what you'd call the 'life of the mind.' Does it follow that I'm totally incapable of murder?"

"I hope so," Reade said, smiling.

"What you mean is that you hope I'm never driven to the point where I commit one. I'm more capable of murder than most people in this town because I'm more intelligent, and consequently more inclined to nervous strain. More frustrated, if you like."

Reade did not like his smile, nor the tone of his voice. He said quickly, "But that's only a manner of speaking. We often say we'd like to murder someone. . ."

"You're mistaken. It's not a manner of speaking. I'm speaking about the urge to release inner tension by an act of violence. And the reason that most of us don't explode into violence is because we're afraid. Why do you suppose most rapes are committed by men who've been drinking? Because they cease to be afraid, they lose their inhibitions. The more intelligent you are, the more you detest modern society, and the more inhibitions you have about expressing your feelings."

Reade said, laughing, "I've never noticed any inhibitions in you!"

Sarah came in. She said, "The joint's in the oven. It should take about three quarters of an hour. Is anyone dying of hunger?"

Lewis said, "No." He was obviously irritated at being interrupted.

Reade said, "I'd like to provide the wine this evening, if I may. Will you excuse me for a quarter of an hour?"

Sarah said, "I'll walk down with you."

"No homework?" Lewis asked.

"Not much. Damon can help me."

Lewis shrugged. He said, "Get me another whiskey before you go."

Reade felt embarrassed and constrained; he would have preferred Sarah not to come. The feeling disappeared when they were outside. The sky was clear again; the late evening sunlight made the houses golden. The breeze was coming from the direction of the lake, and it smelled of spring.

At the corner of the market square, a group of boys was lounging; they watched Sarah with interest. Reade expected someone to whistle, but no one did.

He said, “Don’t you have a boy friend now?”

“Lord, no.” She grimaced. “Most of the boys in this place are awful.” She corrected herself. “Well, not exactly awful, but not very bright. I’m afraid you and Uncle Hugh have spoiled me for the leather-jacket crowd.”

“But there must be a few intelligent boys in this place.”

“I suppose so. But not very attractive.”

He said, with sudden compassion, “You must get pretty tired of small-town life.”

“Not exactly. I was in London last Easter, you know, and I didn’t like that much either.”

They had arrived at the wine shop. He bought two bottles of Beaujolais.

When they came out, she said, “Let’s have a look at the lake.”

It was a hundred yards away, at the end of the street. The boats on the foreshore were still wet with rain. There was no breeze and the surface of the lake was all light, the slight ripples about ten yards apart. Across the lake, ten miles away, he could see the outline of the hills he would climb on the way home. They stopped and leaned on the railings. The smell of wet leaves was stronger now, and it brought again a surge of joy that was almost painful. She looked at his face as he looked across the lake.

“You love this place, don’t you?”

“I. . . suppose so. I never thought of it quite that way.”

“No?”

He said, “I don’t think most people really enjoy being alive. They spoil it by being trivial and stupid. Remember Wordsworth’s phrase about seeing things ‘apparelled in celestial light’? How can you see things that way if you’re always thinking about yourself?”

“Is that why you never got married? Do you think a wife would spoil it?”

He was startled by the directness of the question. He said, “Er. . . not exactly. I don’t suppose I’ve met anyone I wanted to marry. Besides, who’d want to live with me in a damp cottage a mile from the nearest village?”

She said, “I don’t think that would worry someone who was in love with you.”

Again he was surprised by her self-possession; looking at her face, calm in profile, he thought: Women grow up so much faster than men. He decided to change the subject.

“I sometimes wonder how much longer your Uncle Hugh can bear this place.”

She said, “Oh, he doesn’t mind it.”

At the mention of Lewis’s name, they both turned in the direction of home. For a few minutes neither spoke. Then he said, “You know, I felt dreadfully depressed this afternoon after that detective left—quite

neurotic. That's why I came over. Now, quite suddenly, I feel happy again."

She smiled at him, and he lost all inclination to try and explain himself. It was too complicated; simpler to let her assume he meant because he was with her. Besides, it was not entirely untrue. . . but that was only a part of it.

As they drew near to the front door of the house, both quickened their pace, feeling guilty about Lewis, wondering if he resented their absence. But he was in a good mood; he was reading Béroalde de Verville and chuckling aloud. The glass by his elbow was empty. He looked up, smiling, and said, "Back already?"

Lewis liked meals to be leisurely affairs. He had once said, "If I ever became rich, I'd move to London and spend my declining days cultivating good companions and good food." Reade often had the uncomfortable feeling that he was rather a poor second best for the kind of companions Lewis would have preferred: Peacockian philosophers and connoisseurs of old claret.

Over supper, which lasted an hour, Reade made the acquaintance of another aspect of his host: his interest in murder. Lewis began by talking about De Quincey, and his theory that Kant was murdered; then he passed on to the Ratcliffe Highway murders. When Sarah objected that all murder is, by its very nature, uninteresting, he took this as a challenge and spoke at length about the Lizzie Borden case, about which his knowledge seemed to be detailed and encyclopedic.

While Sarah was out making the coffee, Reade said, "I take your point, of course. But while you're talking about the interest of the murder, you seem to forget that it involved the death of a human being. You speak as if it's all a game. I've never heard of this Edmund Pearson you keep quoting, but he sounds an idiot."

Lewis said, sighing, "Possibly he was. But you're always so intolerant, Damon. He wrote well and interestingly. Surely that's enough?"

"Well, no. Because it sounds to me as if he's a kind of a liar as well. He's trying to pretend that murder's something that it's not. He's trying to sound blase and cynical about it. . ."

He stopped, suddenly aware that the same criticisms applied to Lewis, and was unwilling to make an issue of it. Sarah came in with the coffee, so that he hoped the thread of the conversation had been lost. But when the coffee was poured, and he was seated in his armchair, his feet on a stool, Lewis said, "I think you're both being unfair about this. Of course many murders are stupid. Most murders are stupid. Look at this youth in Cockermouth who murdered an old man for three pounds ten."

He sucked at the pipe, then waved its stem rhythmically back and forth—one of his favorite gestures when talking about something that interested him: a sign that he did not wish to be interrupted. "For after all, Damon, what is the essence of crime? Materiality! The grossness and stupidity of matter. All true idealists feel that ugliness is a crime. They feel that stupidity's a crime. Everything that violates our idealism is a crime. Didn't Blake say as much? Crime is the opposite of poetry, in the way that matter is the opposite of spirit. Don't interrupt—I'm coming to my point. You must admit that by this standard your Thames murderer has a touch of the artist."

As Reade shook his head, Lewis said, "But you must agree that he has a sense of effect? You said yourself that he seems to be an exhibitionist. And what is an artist but an exhibitionist? Actors and

novelists and poets all set out to achieve effects. The means, the mode of expression are everything. On the other hand, the common criminal cares only for the end—the five pounds in the till, or whatever it is. He doesn't care if he uses a bludgeon or a revolver or a knife."

A bottle of the Beaujolais stood in the hearth; he bent down and filled his glass, then sipped it. He said contentedly, "You and I disagree on many things—on most things, in fact. But I think there's one thing that we undoubtedly have in common: a loathing of the ugly and the sordid and the stupid—in short, of matter. We're both builders of castles in the air. Do you agree?"

Reade asked, smiling, "What are you trying to prove?"

"Nothing. I'm not arguing. I'm merely remarking on something that interests me. That your Thames murderer's out of the common run—he has a touch of the artist about him. Do you know how I'd set about finding him? I'd make inquiries at art schools about pupils who didn't quite make the grade. I'd talk to Soho painters and try to find out if they know of anyone who's talented but unsuccessful—some man who's always been morose but who's been getting steadily more paranoiac. That's how the police ought to go about it, instead of making these mass checks on every half-witted sexual pervert. They don't understand the kind of man they're looking for."

Reade said slowly, "But a man like that doesn't go around telling everybody that he's going insane. It all happens inside—and so deep down that even his closest friends might never guess."

Sarah said, laughing, "I don't know why you think Damon ought to go to London. I think you ought to go. Perhaps there's a reward for him."

Lewis only grunted. He had never taken kindly to anything that looked like ridicule.

Reade decided to change the subject. He said, "It's nearly nine o'clock. I think I might walk back if there's a moon."

Sarah said in dismay, "You can't go tonight! I've made a bed up now. Try and make him stay, Uncle."

Lewis said, "If he wants to get back, I don't see why he shouldn't."

Reade was mildly surprised at this reaction; it was usually Lewis who insisted on his staying.

Sarah threw open the window and leaned out. She said, "Well, you can't possibly go. There's no moon and it's started to rain again!"

Reade said, smiling, "Ah, well, that settles it."

"Good!"

Lewis said, with mild annoyance, "Isn't it time you did your homework, young lady?"

"I suppose so. Can Damon help me?"

"I don't think that's quite ethical. Off you go. Come down if you get stuck."

Sarah went out of the room with a rebellious shrug. Again Reade was struck by the change in her relation to her uncle in the past weeks. Lewis said, "I'm afraid she's growing up rather fast."

An hour later Reade excused himself, and left Lewis to finish the Beaujolais. When he stood up, he became aware of the depth of his fatigue. Sleep was affecting him like an opiate, making him almost unaware of his legs.

He paused at her bedroom door, wondering whether to say good night, then decided against it and went to the bathroom. The door was locked; when he tried the handle, her voice called, "I shan't be a moment."

"It doesn't matter."

He started to go back to his bedroom, but the lock clicked and the door opened behind him.

"You can come in. I've been washing my hair."

She was wearing a cotton dressing gown. The bathroom smelled of steam and scented toilet soap. Her hair was loose down her back; she was sitting on the edge of the bath, drying it. He looked at his face in the mirror. It looked less tired than he anticipated.

She said, "I don't think Uncle Hugh wanted you to stay the night."

"What?" He looked at her, startled. "Why not?"

She said carelessly, "I think he's getting a bit possessive about me."

He said explosively, "But good God, I've known you since you were ten!"

"Sshh! Not so loud. He thinks I'm in bed."

He looked at her in the mirror, and reflected that if Lewis were jealous, it was understandable enough. He was a frustrated man who felt that life had treated him badly. He was solitary and secretive by nature; there had been a time when Reade had suspected him of being homosexual. But he was definitely not that. And now that Sarah was turning into an attractive woman, and becoming more of a companion, it was natural that he should want to keep her as long as possible.

He washed his face with a sponge, then swilled it in cold water. He said, "Come on, child, off to your bedroom."

When she had gone, he stripped to the waist and washed his chest and arms. He was surprised to notice that the tiredness had vanished. From the bathroom airing cupboard he took the pajamas that he kept here and changed into them. He crossed to his own bedroom, carrying his clothes; a light was showing under her door. But when he opened his door, he found her sitting on the window-sill, drying her hair.

He said, "If you're not careful, you'll have your uncle forbidding me the house."

She said, "If he does, I'll come and live with you."

"That wouldn't be legal. He's your guardian."

He climbed into bed and sat watching her. Her dressing gown had fallen open. The nightdress underneath was of loose pink cotton; it made her seem a child again.

She said, "I always used to say good night to you. I used to get into your bed in the mornings, too. Do you remember?"

"Of course I do."

"Now Uncle Hugh's talking about moving up here. He says his bedroom's damp."

She was brushing her hair, and glanced at him sideways—the same look he had caught earlier.

He said without conviction, "He won't. He doesn't like the stairs."

"I think he might. . ." She came over and sat on the bed.

He said, "I think you ought to go back to your own room now. He might come up to say good night."

She smiled at him, still brushing, and said, "No. I don't care if he does." She put the brush down on the bed. "I think he's getting rather odd."

"Why?"

"Oh. . . he's possessive. He never used to worry if I stayed out until eight o'clock. Now he always wants to know where I've been. You remember Jill Parker, that girl I used to stay with at Millbeck? She wanted me to stay there with her this weekend. Uncle says I can't."

"But it's understandable. . ."

"Why? I wouldn't do anything that I shouldn't."

"I know. I don't mean that. Your uncle's a lonely man. I'm about his only close friend, and I sometimes don't see him for weeks."

"That's no reason to try to keep me on a chain."

"I know. I know. But you have to be patient. He obviously wants to show you that he's fond of you, but he's not used to expressing emotions. I expect that's why he bought you that underwear."

She glanced at him sideways. "No, it's not. He likes to see me wearing it."

"How can he? You don't go around without a dress."

"I do sometimes. He asks me to."

He repressed the surprise, feeling guilty at the thoughts that arose in his mind. "But. . . that's nothing really. . ." He stopped, aware that the comment was inane.

She said, "And he's always asking me about boys at school—and about whether all the girls in my class are virgins."

He smiled. “And are they?”

“No.”

“Oh. . . Well, in that case, he’s got some reason to be worried, hasn’t he? I suppose that’s why he didn’t want you to go and stay with this friend.”

She said nothing. He had a feeling of helplessness that amounted to exasperation. He said, “But what are you worried about?”

She said, “Jill Parker says he’s kinky.”

“What?”

“Kinky. . . you know, sort of morbid about sex.”

He said with surprise, “You seem to know more about the subject than I thought.”

“Well, of course! I’m not a baby. And everybody talks about it enough. The boys I know think about nothing else.”

The door downstairs clicked. She jumped up and hurried to the door. Lewis’s voice said, “Good night, Sarah.”

“Good night, Uncle.”

“Are you in bed yet?”

“Yes. I’ve just finished drying my hair.”

“Get to sleep then. School tomorrow.”

The door closed. She turned back to Reade. “You see?”

“What? He only wanted to say good night.”

“He never used to bother.”

“I know. But you’re getting older. He no longer treats you like a child.”

“Oh yes, he does.”

She came back to the bed. He reached out and touched her forearm; it was cold.

“You ought to get into bed. You’ll catch cold.”

“Shall I?” She reached out for the bedclothes.

He said, “I meant your own!”

“Oh. . .”

He relented, seeing her hesitation; besides the thought of having her beside him was pleasant.

"All right, then. Get in. But if you hear your uncle on the stairs, you'll have to hide!"

She said, "Just for a few moments."

Her feet were cold against his. She sat up beside him and he adjusted a pillow for her back. This sudden change in the situation produced in him a feeling of constraint, a need to emphasize his detachment. He said, "Your friend Jill sounds a bit malicious. I agree that your uncle's rather a strange and complicated man. But I think he has a strong sense of his duty toward you."

She said, smiling, "I wonder what he'd say if he knew I was in bed with you?"

"Let's hope he doesn't find out."

"He asked me the other day if I still wanted to marry you."

"What did you say?"

"I said no, of course."

He smiled. "That's just as well."

"I thought of saying yes, just to see what he'd say. But I knew he'd be upset."

"I don't see why. It used to be a joke when you were ten."

"I suppose so. I didn't think it was a joke."

He said, "I think you ought to get into your own bed now. He might be outside the door, listening."

"No. The stairs creak. Anyway, I haven't told you everything yet."

"No?" He looked at her in surprise and saw that she had colored again.

She went on quickly, as if she was afraid of being interrupted, "I don't suppose I ought to tell you this, but I might as well. You see. . . last time I went out with Jill and two boys. . . we went for a picnic down the lake. And Jill went off with one of the boys and I stayed with the other and. . . he wanted me to have sex with him."

The word made his heart contract. He said, in a voice that did not seem to be his own, "And did you?"

"Oh no. I didn't really like him much. But I let him kiss me and. . . touch me."

"Does your uncle know about this?"

To his surprise she said, "Yes. That's what I was going to say. . ." She proceeded in a rush, as if glad to have got the worst over. "I got home very late, and he wouldn't let me go to bed until he'd asked me lots of questions. He knew I'd been out with boys, and he could see grass stains on my dress. But he wasn't at all angry, you see. He said he knew I wasn't a child, and that if I'd be frank with him, he wouldn't be

angry. So I told him that I hadn't let Gordon. . . do what he wanted. But he kept on asking me about it. . . as if he didn't believe me. He kept saying he wouldn't be angry if I told the truth."

"You say he acted as if he didn't believe you?"

"Well, yes, at first. Then when I kept saying that nothing had happened, he asked me what else Gordon had done. So I told him. Then he wanted to know all the details. I was rather frightened. I thought he was going to try to get Gordon into trouble. But, somehow, he didn't seem angry. And finally he let me go to bed."

She stopped, and they both sat there, saying nothing. He had taken her hand as she talked, to encourage her. Now they both stared at their linked hands. He said finally, "You say he wanted to know details? How much detail?"

She said eagerly, "Everything. How many times he kissed me. . . oh, you know, all the rest."

"Mmm. And it's since this that he's been taking more interest in you?"

"Yes. He made me promise not to go out with Gordon again, but he wasn't at all stern about it. He suddenly started kissing me when I went out of the house. Then he gave me ten pounds to buy myself a nightie and some underwear. And as soon as I came back, he made me change into it. I wanted to go up to my room, but he said it was cold, and I'd better stay in front of the fire."

"Didn't you mind?"

"Well, no. It seemed quite natural. He'd paid for the things and he wanted to see them. But after that I began to wonder a bit. I mean, he'd often lift up my dress, as he did today. And he kisses me and touches me a lot more than he used to. . ."

"Touches you!"

"I don't mean that. Just fondles me. . . Oh, I know all this sounds stupid. There's something else. He gave me a book to read a few weeks ago—some fairy tales by Gogol. The first one was about a father who wants to sleep with his daughter. Little things like that, all the time."

"But why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I. . . don't know. I'd begun to wonder whether I wasn't imagining it all. Perhaps I am. I don't know. Perhaps he just wants to show me he likes me to be grown up. And for the past week he hasn't been doing it so much. He's had a lot of work, and he's even asked me why I don't go out to the pictures. So I never know. . . Then today. . . I notice that drinking always makes him want to touch me a lot."

He said slowly, "I don't quite know what to suggest. There's nothing illegal about an uncle kissing his niece."

"Oh no, of course not. I didn't mean that."

"And probably that's all he wants to do."

"Then why do you think he wants to sleep up here?"

"Are you sure he does? Anyway, I can't imagine him trying to force his way into your room at midnight, it's just not his style. Besides, if you object to being kissed by him, there are always delicate ways to discourage him without hurting his feelings."

She said, "I'm not so sure. He's terribly hard to live with when he's sulky."

They both stopped to listen; a door downstairs had banged. She said, "It's only the downstairs bathroom. That means he's going to bed."

He said gently, "And I think you ought to follow his example."

"Yes, in a moment. . . If Uncle Hugh guessed I was here, he'd question me for an hour to find out what happened."

He was shocked. "Oh nol He couldn't believe that I'd try and. . . seduce you."

She laughed. He looked at her curiously. She said, "I'm not sure it's you he mistrusts!"

"Go on, now! Off to bed! You're only a child. . ."

"Am I?"

She threw back the bedclothes and sat on the edge of the bed. For a moment he felt regret at being deprived of her warmth. Then she leaned forward and held out her mouth for a kiss. He placed his hand on the back of her head, aware as he did so that a hypnotic warmth was holding them together, producing a desire to improve the flow by physical contact. Her lips were passive against his. He found himself thinking: If Hugh opened that door now. . .

She said, "Am I a child?"

"Of course. Now. . ."

Before he could go on, she kissed him again. The contact of their lips did not excite him. He knew her too well and had kissed her often enough before, with this same knowledge that she would be entirely his for the asking. He felt she was playing a kind of game. She had lifted her legs back onto the bed and rested her head on the pillow again. But the feeling of their physical contact brought a strange glow of joy, a sense of freedom. He made no attempt to stop her when she pushed back into the bed again. But he deliberately broke the kiss to say, "Now back to bed."

"No. Let me sleep here."

"That would be silly."

She said, "You know why I wouldn't let Gordon do what he wanted? I was thinking that you were going to be the first."

"Not now, though."

"No, all right, not now. But let me stay a few minutes longer. And put your light out."

"No. You ought to go."

"Not yet. Lie down and kiss me."

It was necessary to lie full length beside her, and to lean on his elbow, the other hand on her waist. The waist was bare, and when he kissed her, he was also aware of the length of her bare legs against him. He thought: This is exactly the right moment for Hugh to come in. . . Then he had a mental image of Lewis outside the door on his knees, his eye to the keyhole.

After a moment she said, "You have more self-control than Gordon."

"That's a rather tactless thing to say!"

"But you don't mind, do you? I wouldn't try to lie to you. Do you want to marry me?"

"You're too young to marry."

"I know. And you're twenty years my senior. Will you marry me, please? Am I being really terrible?"

He propped himself up and looked down at her. Her eyes were open and candid. He said quietly, "Yes, I'll marry you if you really want me to."

She smiled, and for a moment he wondered if she was going to cry; her eyes took on a strange, clouded expression. She said, "And you'll tell Uncle Hugh tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"But we are engaged now, aren't we?"

"Yes, we're engaged."

"And so you're really my husband now?"

"You're not sixteen yet."

"I shall be soon. Don't worry about that. I shan't ever change. I said I'd marry you when I was ten. Turn the light out for a moment, please. I promise I'll go back to bed soon."

He sat up and reached for the overhead cord; then the room was dark except for the reflection of a street lamp. She was also sitting up. He said, "What are you doing?"

"Taking this off. I just want to know we've been in bed together like this. Lie down."

He lay down beside her and held her warm body. This time he allowed himself to be drawn out of his detachment, sinking into the kiss. He let his left hand wander over the small of her back, then over the slim thighs and up to her breasts. As he kissed her, he tasted the salt on her nose.

She said, "Oh, I wish I could stay here all night. . ."

The tone surprised him. The last of the child had vanished; it was the voice of a woman in love.

He knew it would be impossible to ask her to leave now. If she were in the other room, he would have

to join her there. She lay there, completely passive. He found himself wondering which room in the cottage they would sleep in, and which room could be used as a nursery. He was wondering about repainting the outside of the cottage when he fell asleep.

In the dawn he woke up to find her putting on her nightdress, standing beside the bed. She bent over to kiss him, then went out. He fell asleep again.

He woke up again at eight o'clock; she was placing a tea tray on the bedside table. She was wearing her green school uniform. He massaged his eyes and looked at her. She sat on the bed and smiled.

It was difficult to associate this schoolgirl with the night before, until she leaned forward and kissed him. They were the same soft, searching lips.

She said, "I'm afraid I've bad news. I think Uncle Hugh knows we slept together last night."

"What!" He was wide awake instantly. "How?"

"I'm not sure. I left my light on. If he went into the kitchen, he could see the reflection on the wall."

"Does he look furious?"

"I don't know. He's odd. He hasn't even kissed me this morning. That means there's something on his mind."

He said, "Hmmm!" then reached for the tea and took a large sip.

She said, "It doesn't matter, anyway, does it?"

"No, of course not."

"You still want to marry me?"

"This morning, if you like."

"They wouldn't like that at school. Are you going home this morning?"

"I expect so."

"When shall I see you again?"

"That depends largely on your uncle. I suppose he might try forbidding us to meet at all."

"Could I come over at the weekend, if it's all right?"

"Of course, if he'll let you."

"Look, I've written down the number of the telephone box outside our school. I'll be waiting there at half past twelve today, so can you ring me? I'd better go down now."

When she was gone, he ate the buttered toast and finished his tea, staring out of the window. Below, he could hear the occasional rattle of crockery. She would leave for school at half past eight. He felt no desire to see Lewis until she had left. Now that he thought back on the night, he had no regret. It seemed as if he had promised to marry her years before and that nothing could prevent it. To pass the time he began to work out figures on the back of an envelope. If they married when she was seventeen, and he reinvested his money at eight percent. . . The prospect seemed reasonable. When he had finished making plans, he regretted that Sarah was not there to discuss them with. Soon after half past eight he heard the door slam. He went into the bathroom and washed, then returned his pajamas to the cupboard, wondering if this would be for the last time. He felt no nervousness about seeing Lewis; it would be necessary to explain the position clearly. He finished dressing carefully, combed his hair, and went downstairs, carrying his tray.

Lewis was still drinking coffee; the room smelled of eggs and bacon.

Reade said, "Morning, Hugh."

"Good morning, Damon. Coffee?" The greeting sounded heavy with overtones.

"Thanks."

He thought it would be a temptation to avoid Lewis's eyes; but in fact, there was no difficulty. He had never been afraid of Lewis, and he knew Lewis respected him. He poured the coffee and added cream.

Lewis said, "Would you like egg and bacon?"

"No, thanks. I've just had toast. I'll have a meal when I get home."

"You're going home then?"

"Of course." He looked up in surprise.

"Sarah will be disappointed."

He stirred his coffee without comment.

Lewis said, "I hear that I have to congratulate you."

"What?" He stared across at Lewis.

"Sarah couldn't resist telling me before she left for school."

"Oh, I see."

"May I ask you a question? Did you propose, or did she?"

"Er. . . she did."

"I. . . see. And you said yes, of course, being a polite and good-natured sort of chap."

Reade asked, "Have you any objections?"

"Oh no. Of course not. She had to marry somebody. I'd rather it was you than any of the local youths."

"Thanks."

"And I presume you really want to marry her, and didn't say yes simply to avoid upsetting her?"

"Oh no."

"Forgive me prying, but are you in love with her?"

He smiled, saying "I hadn't really thought of it much, but. . . I suppose so. I'm very fond of her. She has a sweet nature. I've no doubt I'll get much more fond of her when we're married."

"And when were you thinking of marrying her?"

"I don't know. How do you feel about it?"

"Oh, tomorrow if you like. I suppose if it's all settled, it may as well be as soon as possible."

Reade understood his attitude, and felt relieved. He was also beginning to feel sorry for Lewis, and distrusted the feeling. He finished the coffee and stood up, saying, "I think I'd better go. I feel rather guilty about all this."

"Don't," Lewis said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"I. . . expect you'll see a great deal of us. . . if you want to, of course. . ."

"You mean to go on living in your cottage then?"

"I expect so. For the time being, anyway."

Lewis poured himself more coffee. His voice seemed cool and steady enough, but Reade noticed that he had not yet looked at him directly. Again it struck him that Lewis should have been an actor. Lewis stirred his coffee carefully, and took a sip, before he said, "How long do you think a girl of her age will want to live in a place like that?"

"I hadn't intended to stay there all the time. I thought I might take up an offer from Wisconsin University to lecture there in the winter. Then there was a tentative offer from the new university at Southampton."

Lewis asked sardonically, "Do you want to become a university hack?"

He preferred to ignore the challenge in this, and replied evenly, "Not really. They'd want me to teach literature and perhaps specialize in Blake, and I'd much rather teach philosophy and specialize in Whitehead. But I suppose that's rather much to ask."

He found it hard not to feel a certain vague irritation with Lewis for making things so difficult. They were old friends; they had always been on the footing of equals. This formality seemed absurd. He sat down again suddenly, and helped himself to more coffee. He said, "Look here, Hugh, I'd much rather you were quite frank. If you think I'm a wildly unsuitable husband for Sarah, then say so, and I'll. . . well. . ."

Lewis looked up at him for the first time; his eyes were flat and inexpressive. He said, "You'd what?

Give her up?"

He felt himself reddening as he said, "I suppose so. After all, you're her guardian, and she is a minor."

He was interested to see a flicker of relief in Lewis's eyes, and he thought: Of course—he wonders how much she's told me. Lewis said, smiling, "I don't think that would solve anything. She'd hate me and you'd stop coming here."

Reade said nothing, drinking his coffee and looking across at the hairy backs of Lewis's fingers. Lewis sat back in his chair and seemed to be thinking, staring down at his stomach and at the top fly button that was undone to allow it room for digestion. When he spoke, he gave the impression of saying something he had already thought out. "Let me put it this way. You're an old friend of mine—the oldest in this part of the country, I suppose. . ." Reade nodded quickly in sympathy, but Lewis was not looking at him.

". . . and so I'm as concerned about you as about her. Frankly, I'm fond of you both."

He now looked up, his face open and frank, and for a moment Reade was convinced that all this was unrehearsed.

"So you see, Damon, it leaves me rather a problem. Put it this way. I don't really believe you're madly in love with Sarah. . . no, let me finish. I think that you're a gentle and good-natured sort of person who'd say yes to any woman who asked you, even if she was ninety. I don't doubt you're fond of Sarah. . . But think of another thing. She's always had a schoolgirl crush on you, but are you really doing the kindest thing by giving way to her? How long do you think she'll be happy in that cottage, living with a man who spends his days with his nose stuck in Process and Reality? She hasn't thought about it because a girl of her age doesn't really know what life's all about. But she'll find out by the time she's twenty. She'll find out that she wants excitement and travel, and perhaps love affairs, who can tell? If she really knew what she wanted, she'd go and share a flat in London with a girl friend and try to see something of the world. You must agree that's reasonable?"

Reade nodded gravely.

Lewis went on quickly. "As to yourself, are you sure she'd suit you? She's quite a bright child, but she'll never understand the first thing about Blake or Whitehead or anyone else. You might meet someone who could really share these things with you. You see, I feel you're just a couple of innocents who don't know what you're letting yourself in for. You're about as practical as a dormouse, and she never had any experience of money."

Reade said mildly, "I wouldn't describe myself as a dormouse. And I'm not all that inexperienced."

Lewis glanced at him from under the bushy eyebrows, and his face assumed for a moment a Churchillian. expression. "No? Then let me ask you what might seem an impertinent question. Have you ever had sexual intercourse?"

Reade said quietly and without embarrassment, "No. Although I almost married once."

For a moment he thought that Lewis was going to laugh, then his face straightened and he said judicially, "Well, that's perhaps as well from a certain point of view, but. . ." He suddenly sighed and shrugged. "I just don't know what to say. . . I don't know what to say. . ."

He picked up his coffee cup and emptied it with a determined movement, as if he had suddenly made up

his mind, then went on firmly. "Look here, Damon, we've been friends for long enough for me to speak my mind. In many ways we haven't much in common. We disagree on almost every important question. But we like and respect one another, so that doesn't matter much. I suppose this situation gives me a rather unfair advantage, but I may as well be frank. Let me put it this way. I may not see much of the world up here, but I think I see more than you do. And I honestly think that you don't have the first idea of what the modern world's all about. You live in that cottage without ever seeing a newspaper, you spend your days studying a philosopher who's been dead for a quarter of a century, and then you write books about the crisis in the modern world. What on earth do you know of the modern world? And while I agree this doesn't matter a damn while you're writing books about philosophy, it'll matter a great deal if you've got a wife and four kids. Now look, take a case in point. A policeman calls on you and tells you about these murders—which you hadn't even heard of—and you get so depressed you have to come dashing over here to talk to me. Is that true or not?"

Reade felt that it was time for making concessions, and he nodded. Lewis gestured vaguely, as if words failed him. It was another calculated effect; Reade had never known words to fail him. Then he said vehemently, "But you see, Damon, that's what the modern world's like—murders and wars and atomic bombs, and Blake and Whitehead have got nothing to do with it. So can't you see why I'd feel happier if you and Sarah hadn't gone into this thing quite so blindly?"

Reade asked, after a pause, "What would you suggest I do?"

"Well, if you agree with me. . . I'd suggest you try to cool Sarah's enthusiasm a little. You can do it and I can't. I don't mean disappoint her or go back on your word, but you could make her see that it might be best to leave the whole thing in abeyance for now. . . just treat it as something you can discuss again in a year's time, when she's out of school. Let her see you don't take it too seriously. Oh, of course I know you do, since you've given your word. But wouldn't it be better—for her sake—to pretend you don't? You're a lot older than she is and you've got to do the thinking for both of you."

They sat silently for a few moments, both looking down at the tablecloth.

Then Reade said, "Very well. But let me try and put my point of view. I don't mean about Sarah. Let's take it for granted that I'd like to marry her. But about your other points. You've a perfect right to call me as impractical as a dormouse, and to feel I'm out of touch with life. But this is the point where we simply can't see eye to eye. We've nothing whatever in common. Don't you see. . . it's not an accident that's drawn me from Blake to Whitehead, it's a certain line of thought which is fundamental to my whole approach. You see, there's something about them both. . . They trusted the universe. You say I don't know what the modern world's like, but that's obviously untrue. Anyone who's spent a week in London knows just what it's like. . . if you mean neurosis and boredom and the rest of it. And I do read a modern novel occasionally, in spite of what you say. I've read Joyce and Sartre and Beckett and the rest, and every atom in me rejects what they say. They strike me as liars and fools. I don't think they're dishonest so much as hopelessly tired and defeated."

Lewis had lit his pipe. He did it as if Reade were speaking to someone else. Now he said, smiling faintly, "I don't think we're discussing modern literature."

Reade had an impulse to call the debater's trick, but he repressed it. Instead he said quietly, "We're discussing modern life, and you brought up the subject. And I'm trying to explain why I don't think that murders and wars prove your point. I'm writing about Whitehead because his fundamental intuition of the universe is the same as my own. I believe like Whitehead that the universe is a single organism that somehow takes account of us. I don't believe that modern man is a stranded fragment of life in an empty universe. I've an instinct that tells me that there's a purpose, and that I can understand that purpose more

deeply by trusting my instinct. I can't believe the world is meaningless. I don't expect life to explode in my face at any moment. When I walk back to my cottage, I don't feel like a meaningless fragment of life walking over a lot of dead hills. I feel a part of the landscape, as if it's somehow aware of me, and friendly."

Lewis said, growling, "You're welcome to feel what you like."

"You mean it's romanticism and nothing else?"

Lewis said reasonably, "I mean it doesn't make any real difference whether you're right or wrong. We're discussing Sarah."

"I know. I'm discussing her too. You say I agreed to marry her because I was too good-natured to refuse, and too stupid to see the consequences of accepting. It's not true. I agreed because I knew instinctively it would be all right."

Lewis said, smiling, "Well, Sarah had an Irish grandmother. I suppose the two of you ought to produce some psychic children."

Reade felt this was a deliberate attempt at a red herring, but he took it up reasonably. "It's not really psychic. My psychic powers are rather undeveloped. It's a matter of an instinct about life."

Lewis said, "Well, tell me, would your instinct. . . would it help you to solve this murder, for example? And if not, what's it worth in practical terms?"

Reade shrugged. "I don't suppose it would. I'm not interested in murders. I think the police are probably going about it in the wrong way. If they got a man like old George Pickingill, for example. In his younger days there was almost no crime in the village because he could solve it without leaving his cottage. He could tell where stolen goods had been hidden and who'd taken them. But that's besides the point. . ."

He stopped speaking. It suddenly seemed that the discussion had come a full circle, and that there was no point in going on. Lewis seemed to feel this too. He stood up and crossed to the fireplace. His voice sounded tired as he said, "I don't know. It's entirely up to you now. If I was one of those old stepfathers in a fairy tale, I'd tell you to go away for a year and make your fortune, and then come and claim her, like Dick Whittington. Or go to London and solve these murders," he added ironically.

Reade said, "All right. Let's talk about it later."

Lewis seemed to welcome this suggestion. He said quickly, "Yes, let's. After all, there's plenty of time. . . Think about it." He shrugged suddenly, then said tiredly, "I don't suppose it really matters what happens."

Reade found his coat. He said, "I'll come over later. Thank you for the entertainment."

Lewis said, "Not at all." Then, as Reade paused at the door, he added drily, "Thank Sarah."

Instead of walking home, he spent the morning at the Druidic Circle of stones near Keswick. It was a calm, misty day. He sat for two hours, his back against the largest stone, staring across at the brown and

scarred sides of Brackenthwaite Fell and Skiddaw. Again the quietness settled on him; Lewis became as unimportant as if he had been dead for ten years. He walked back into Keswick at midday and met Sarah out of school. She blushed with pleasure to see him. They walked to the side of the lake, and he told her about the talk with Lewis.

She said angrily, "He doesn't know me at all. I shan't be bored in the cottage. I love it."

"I know. But he's being very reasonable, all the same. He could forbid me to see you."

"How could he? He's too lazy to keep a watch on me. Anyway, why should he? I know exactly what he'll do. He'll advertise for some girl to come and look after him."

Her perception astonished him. "Do you think so?"

"Of course. He's often talked about it. And if you go to London, I want to come with you."

He said, laughing, "That wouldn't be a good idea. Hugh wants me to go alone."

"Of course he does. He wants to break us up."

"I suppose he does. He probably thinks that I'll get so sick of it that I'll want to rush back home and live alone for the rest of my life. Anyway, I think I shall have to go alone. I have some ideas that I want to try out."

"Not about this murder, I hope?"

"Not entirely. Do you remember that old wizard called Pickingill we once had an argument about? The man who can make a mowing machine stop by putting a spell on it? I'm going to take these letters along to him."

"What on earth for? You don't think he's really a wizard, do you?"

"Perhaps not. . . But he has curious powers. I've seen him stop a clock. He walked into the local pub one day at closing time and wanted a drink. It was a new landlord, and he refused to serve him. Just then the clock started to strike two. Pickingill stared at it and it stopped. The landlord was so astonished that he gave him the pint. Pickingill drank it straight down—and the clock finished striking as soon as the glass was empty."

"But how did he do it?"

"I don't know. I could explain my theories, but they'd take hours. There'll be plenty of time later. Meanwhile, you'd better get home for lunch. I'll ring you at home this evening,"

The cottage stood alone in the corner of a field. Most of its windows were broken and covered with boards. It was surrounded by a neat white fence. The garden was completely overrun with weeds and nettles, many of them waist-high. The whole place had a depressing air of abandonment. No one was visible behind the windows, but Reade had a sense of being observed as he approached. As he pushed open the garden gate, the front door opened and Pickingill looked out.

Reade said cheerfully, "Afternoon, George."

Pickingill was a tall man. Even now, with bent back and stooped shoulders, he was well over six feet.

The old man said, "What brings you 'ere, Mr. Reade?"

His voice had none of the bluntness of the Cumberland accent; local legend placed his origin in Essex.

Reade said, "I wonder if you can help me?"

"Might."

He placed the rucksack on the doorstep. Pickingill peered down at it with birdlike eyes. It was obvious that he was ill; the thin figure, wrapped in a long, dirty overcoat, seemed to tremble as he stood there. The knobby, arthritic hands were grimy.

Reade said, "I've got some letters here. I want to know if one of them is from a murderer."

"What kind of a murderer?"

"Some sort of a madman, I think."

"All right. Would you like to come inside?"

"No, thanks. I want to walk to the village to do some shopping. Anything I can get you?"

"Wouldn't mind a few cigarettes. And some eggs."

"Right. I'll be back in half an hour."

He took his time walking to the village. The sight of the hermit had saddened him. The old man obviously needed someone to take care of him. But the locals were afraid of him, and most of them would be glad when he was dead. There were many strange stories told about him. A boy who brought vegetables to his cottage one night claimed that the furniture in the room was dancing around when the old man opened the door. Another legend declared that he had killed an old gypsy woman—another witch—by boiling up a drop of her blood with vinegar. It was generally believed among local schoolchildren that Pickingill kept a familiar spirit in a casket as big as a thimble, and that if the familiar could escape, it would destroy Pickingill and the cottage as well.

Pickingill himself had taken some care to foster these legends. Now, in his nineties, he was suffering the consequences of his reputation. He was hated and avoided.

When Reade returned half an hour later, the old man was waiting at the door. He said, "Come in a moment. I've made a cup of tea."

Reade followed him reluctantly. He knew what it would be like and wanted to avoid it. It was worse than he had anticipated. The place smelled of damp and stale urine. There were torn blankets at the windows instead of curtains. There was thick dust on the chair that Pickingill offered him. Although it was a warm day, the inside of the cottage was icy cold.

His rucksack was on the table. Beside it lay two letters. Reade asked, "Any luck?"

The old man nodded toward the table top. "Yes. It's the one underneath. That one on top's a bit of a villain, but he wouldn't kill."

Reade picked up the top letter; the signature was that of a well-known professor of literature. The letter underneath was typed, and it was on headed notepaper. The printed words read: Bryce, Furneaux and Lloyd, Estate Agents. The address was in Kensington Church Street. The signature read: Oliver Bryce.

He knew better than to ask the wizard whether he was sure it was from a murderer, or how he found out. He placed it in his pocket, saying, "Thanks, George. If there's any reward, I'll see you get your share."

Pickingill grinned, showing a single brown fang. "Is there likely to be?"

"There could be. It might be from the Thames murderer."

Pickingill's face showed that this meant nothing to him. It was generally supposed he could not read. He said, "Well, don't be too long about it. I haven't got long now."

He poured tea from the brown earthenware teapot; it was almost black. Reade accepted the chipped, tea-stained mug with thanks. It tasted less bad than it looked. Pickingill sat in a rocking chair beside the empty fireplace and moved slowly back and forward as he sipped his tea. He seemed to have no desire to talk. Reade took the cigarettes and eggs out of the paper bag and placed them on the table. The old man glanced at them, nodded, and went on rocking and sipping the tea.

After ten minutes of silence Reade stood up. "How much do I owe you, George?"

"That's all right. Glad to help."

"Let me give you something, anyway—to buy a drink."

He offered the old man a pound note. The clawlike hand accepted it and stuffed it into the overcoat pocket.

"Thank'ee sir. Don't drink much these days."

"Don't come to the door."

"That's all right. See you off."

Reade looked back when he was halfway across the field. The old man was still standing in the doorway, staring after him, but he did not return the salutation when Reade waved to him.

The local pub was just opening its doors as he arrived. He ordered a pint of beer and asked if he could use the telephone.

Lewis's voice answered. When he asked for Sarah, Lewis said, "She's gone out to get vegetables. She ought to be back soon. Can I give her a message?"

"No, I think I'd better speak to her myself. I'm going to London in the morning."

"London? How long for?"

"I don't know. A few days. Perhaps weeks. I've decided to take up your challenge."

There was a pause, then Lewis asked uncertainly, "Which challenge?"

"The one about the murders. I'm going to try and solve them."

"Good heavens, you're not serious!"

"Yes, completely."

"Well, I wasn't! You must be mad! You wouldn't know where to begin."

Reade said, smiling, "I think I would."

There was a long pause, then Lewis said, "Look here, I think you'd better come over here and talk about it. If Sarah thinks I'm responsible, she'll be furious."

He said, "No, seriously, I can't come over. I've decided to catch an early train in the morning, and that involves getting up at about four o'clock. I'll ring Sarah back in twenty minutes and explain everything. All right? See you soon."

As he went back into the bar, the landlord said, "You're looking pleased with yourself this evening, Mr. Reade."

PART II

THE telephone booths at Euston were occupied. He stood his case on one end against the wall and sat down on it. At five-thirty in the afternoon the heat was still stifling. The twelve-hour journey had left him with a headache and a feeling of constipation.

A bowler-hatted man came and stood on the other side of the phone box and tapped a threepenny piece against the cover of a book he carried in the other hand. The door of the nearest phone box opened and a woman came out; Reade hurried past her, then regretted his rudeness and turned to the man, intending to offer him precedence. The glare he met was so virulent that he changed his mind and quickly turned away. The feeling of depression increased.

He rang the number of the house agent in Kensington Church Street. A girl's voice said, "I'm sorry, sir, Mr. Bryce left five minutes ago." His heart contracted as he heard the name. His voice sounded different in his own ears as he said, "Never mind, I'll try again in the morning."

The heat was intolerable. The telephone was sticky in his hand; the mouthpiece was covered with the moisture of the previous user. He loosened his collar and opened the door of the box slightly. He dialed another number. The phone at the other end rang half a dozen times. He was about to hang up when a

woman's voice said breathlessly and with obvious annoyance, "Hello! Who is it?"

He said, "I'm sorry to bother you. Is Kit Butler there, please?"

"No, I'm afraid he isn't," the voice said, still resentful. "He hasn't lived at home for two years now."

"Is that his mother?"

"Yes."

"This is Damon Reade. You may remember me. I stayed at your house once."

"Ah yes, Mr. Reade. Of course I remember." The voice instantly softened, confirming Reade's memory of making a good impression on her. "I didn't know you lived in London."

He explained that he was down for a few days.

She said, "I don't see a lot of Christopher these days. I don't know what he does with himself. Last time he came he looked quite ill. I wish you could persuade him to come home for a while."

"Do you have his present address?"

"Yes, somewhere. He's living near the Portobello Road. That's in Netting Hill. Wait a moment."

A moment later she read out the address, adding, "I'm afraid he's not on the telephone."

He promised to persuade Kit Butler to call on his mother, and hung up. The heat was making him dizzy. Before leaving the phone box, it struck him that it might be worth trying directory inquiries to check about the telephone. The delay was interminable. Eventually the operator came on the line and said, "Yes, he's on the telephone. The number is Bayswater 9932."

He congratulated himself on his insight and dialed the number. The voice he recognized said, "Who's speaking? Good God, Damon! What the hell are you doing in London? When did you arrive?"

"About half an hour ago."

"Have you got anywhere to stay? No. Well, grab a taxi over here right away. No, wait. You'll catch the rush hour now, so you may as well take a tube. Come to Notting Hill Gate. I'll meet you there. Incidentally, who gave you my number?"

"I rang your mother."

"Good God, she hasn't got it, has she?"

"No. She thinks you're not on the phone."

There was an explosive "Thank God!"

"Why? I thought you got on well with your mother?"

"Never mind, I'll explain when I see you. Grab a train now. See you in twenty minutes."

He had already recovered his cheerfulness on leaving the box, and the headache had vanished. Butler was his oldest friend in London, although they had not met or corresponded for three years. It was comforting to hear his voice and to feel there had been no change.

Butler was standing on the other side of the ticket barrier at Notting Hill. He said, "Damon! Marvelous to see you."

His grip was as strong and warm as ever. His physical appearance had changed since Reade last saw him. The face was thinner and the unshaven chin emphasized the hollows in the cheeks. The dark hair was bushy and uncombed. The tweed suit he was wearing had once been expensive; now it looked worn and stained and there was a cigarette burn through the lapel. In spite of the tired look of the eyes, which were underlined with blue circles, he radiated a friendliness and vitality that made Reade forget the boredom of his journey and his dislike of London.

"Let me take that."

In spite of Reade's protests, he took the case. As they emerged, Reade said, "Good God, what have they done to Notting Hill Gate?"

"Oh, it's all changed from our day. But the Portobello Road's the same as ever. What are you doing in London?"

"Several things. . . Spending a few days in the British Museum."

"Good, I'll come too. I've got some work to do."

Reade had no intention of concealing the reason for his visit from Butler, but it could wait until later—perhaps after he had seen Bryce. He asked, "Why don't you want to see your mother?"

"Oh, that's rather an absurd business. You know she's always trying to find a wife for my brother James?"

"No, but I can believe it. Is he still teaching history at Cambridge?"

"Oh yes. He won't leave there. It's too comfortable. And he's making quite a nice little reputation with these books on British diplomacy in the seventeenth century. Anyway, my mother thinks he ought to have a wife, so she's always conspiring with her friends to invite pretty girls to the house when he's at home."

Reade found himself smiling in anticipation; he could guess the rest of the story.

"Well, an aunt of mine brought rather a delicious girl called Isobel last Easter. I was supposed to be in Brighton for Easter, but I got fed up and came back suddenly, and walked in on a little tea party. And the girl obviously found me more interesting than James." He gave a snort of laughter, then went on with relish. "I didn't want to take the girl away from James. I'd be glad to see him married. Although I must say, I don't think he stood a chance, even if I hadn't appeared. So I stayed for twenty minutes, then left. Anyway, she rang me up the next day—she'd got my address from my publisher, the music publisher, I mean. Well, what could I do. . . ?" He assumed a burlesque expression of innocent victimization and bewilderment.

"What excuse did she make for ringing you?"

"Oh, said she had a friend who was writing a book on music and wanted my advice. So naturally I gave it to her." He gave a snort of glee. Then, resuming a mock-pious expression, "I didn't want her, of course. All the time I was making love to her, I was thinking: Christopher, you are doing this to save your brother from an unhappy marriage. Because obviously, if she preferred me at this point, she'd obviously desert James for me as soon as she got tired of Cambridge."

"But how did your mother find out?"

"My Aunt Letitia told her—that was the one who introduced her in the first place. She called on me one night, and Isobel opened the door in my dressing gown. So Aunt Letitia turned and strode off without a word—awful bitch—and promptly phoned my mother." He laughed. "So for the next few months, family relations were a little strained. . ."

"But why aren't you seeing her now? She sounded worried."

Butler grimaced. "Oh, I'm not avoiding her. But I'm never sure when that damned brother of mine'll be there, and I'm not speaking to him at present. There are some things that shouldn't be forgiven even to your own brother. He said some vile things."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, you can guess. The usual stuff about being a bum and a waster and a sex maniac. Then when I pointed out that my name's still better known than his, he started to shout about all my music being a fake."

They had been walking along the Portobello Road in the waning sunlight. At this hour on a Thursday evening, it looked strangely quiet and deserted. A few empty carts, covered with canvas, stood in the gutter.

Butler said, "Turn left here. We're almost there. It's that place across the street Listen, do you know how long you'll be staying?"

"A week or so, I expect."

"Marvelous. I'll tell you why. There's a spare room on the top floor—the tenant moved out this morning—and the landlord might let you use it for a few weeks."

They stopped in front of a scarred and almost paintless front door. Butler produced a Yale key.

"It's a bit of a dump, this place, but it's cheap. It's a sort of a brothel, by the way. The first and second floors are occupied by call girls."

The door opened as he was inserting the key. A short, brawny man in shirt sleeves stood there. He grinned at Butler and stood aside to let them pass.

Butler said, "Hello, Len! I'm glad we saw you. Len, is that room at the top still empty? My friend here needs a room for about a month. Damon, meet Len, my landlord."

The small man took Reade's hand in a powerful grip. "Pleased t'know yer. Yers, I s'pose you can have it for a month. Two ten a week. That suit you?"

"That's splendid," Reade said.

" 'S a bit of a mess at the moment. I was going to get the girl to tidy it up in the morning."

"Don't worry," Butler said, "We'll do that between us."

"Okay. See yer later." He went out, closing the door behind him.

Reade said, "That's convenient."

"Don't say that until you see the room. The last tenant was a Creole bloke, and he was pretty filthy. You'll probably have to scrub it out with disinfectant and flea powder. You'd better stay in my room for tonight."

The stairs were narrow and dark. Butler's room was on the third floor. He opened the door with a key.

"We'll dump your case here for a minute. Come and look at your room."

The next flight of stairs was even narrower. Halfway up, set in the bend under the window, there was a small washbasin. A tea towel and several cups had been left on the windowsill. Outside the window there was a small, flat roof with a clothesline stretched above it. On the line were several stockings and a number of pairs of panties in garishly bright colors—red, mauve, pink and yellow.

The door at the top of the stairs stood open. A strong smell of carbolic disinfectant came out of it. As they went in, the door next to it opened and a pale-skinned Negro girl looked out.

Butler said, "Hello, Sheila. How's things?"

She said, "You can't go in there. It's all wet."

"Who did it?"

"I did. It took me three bloody hours." She spoke with a cockney accent.

Butler said. "My friend's just taken the room."

She gaped with dismay. "Oh no! Not after all that!" She stared resentfully at Reade.

Butler asked, "Why?"

" 'Cause I was going to get a friend of mine in there. I promised it to 'er this afternoon."

"Have you spoken to Len about it?"

"No, I 'aven't seen 'im."

Butler said, "I'm sorry about this, love, but we've just spoken to him downstairs."

Reade said awkwardly, "I can find another room."

She shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter."

"Oh no. I wouldn't dream of taking your room."

She said gloomily, "He wouldn't let me have it if he's already promised it to you."

Butler said, "She's probably right, Damon." He said to her, "Listen, Sheila, why don't you ask Len when you see him? If he's willing, your friend can have the room and Damon can share with me for a day or two until he can find somewhere else."

Their concern obviously placated her. She smiled and her face became pretty. Far back in the pink mouth, Reade could see gold teeth.

"Oh, never mind. It can't be helped."

She gave Reade a coquettish sideways glance, and he was suddenly struck by her resemblance to Sarah.

He followed Butler into the room. It was larger than he had expected. The ceiling sloped down toward the window, outside of which ran the coping of the edge of the roof. The worn brown linoleum shone with wetness. The furniture consisted of a small, rickety table, an enormous tin chest covered with a dirty velvet curtain, two chairs with straw seats and a large single bed with a greasy mattress. Torn curtains flapped at the open window. The gas fire had most of its elements broken, but the boiler ring in the hearth looked new.

Reade turned to the girl, who was standing behind them. He said, "Could I pay you for cleaning it out for me?"

"Forget it."

When they were back in Butler's room again, he said, "She seems rather sweet. What does she do for a living?"

"Oh, has men up to her room mostly."

Reade said with astonishment, "But she only looks about fifteen."

"No, about seventeen, I think. She's not a real professional, like the girls downstairs. She works in a coffee bar down the street and I think she just picks up customers she likes. Like a cup of tea? Or prefer whiskey?"

"I could do with a drink."

Butler produced a quart-size bottle without a label. He said, "This is good stuff—American army issue. I get it at a quid a bottle through a girl friend."

Reade relaxed on the bed, his back against the wall, and let the raw, smoky liquid burn his throat. Butler sat on a hard-backed chair. He said, "Well, here's to us both. It's really good to see you again, Damon. I wish you'd move to London."

A bell rang three times.

Butler said, "Oh God, who could that be? Blast it, I remember! It's probably a girl I met yesterday. I'd forgotten all about her."

"Shall I answer it?"

"Would you please? And listen. . . don't feel obliged to go for a minute or so. But if I wink at you, slip off upstairs, will you?"

"With pleasure."

He opened the front door, and faced a slim, blonde girl in black. She had the kind of high-cheeked beauty that labeled her instantly as a model. She said, "Mr. Butler?"

"Yes, he's upstairs. Would you like to come up?"

She went ahead of him up the stairs. The patent-leather shoes seemed out of place on the broken linoleum.

Reade said, "I'm an old friend of Kit's. I only arrived in London an hour ago. I've taken the room above him."

"Are you a musician?"

"No, a kind of writer."

They went into Butler's room. He was standing in front of the mirror, now in his shirt sleeves, shaving with an electric razor. He set this down on the bed, seized her and gave her a hearty kiss on the cheek.

"Mirabelle! I didn't think you'd remember!"

"Did you think my memory was that bad?" She sat on the bed, crossing her long legs and leaning back. It was the sort of pose that would advertise an expensive cigarette or a tight-fitting dress. She looked incongruous in the seedy room.

"Pour Mirabelle a drink, would you, Damon? Have you two introduced yourselves? Damon Reade, England's foremost Blake scholar, Mirabelle Dixon."

He went on shaving as Reade poured the drink. She stood up, crossed to the gramophone, and looked at the record on the turntable. "When was this issued?"

"Oh, that. A couple of months ago." He said to Reade, "It's my concerto for prepared piano and string. The Louisville people did it."

She asked, "Can I put it on?"

"Yes, go ahead."

The thin, strange sounds seemed to come from all over the room. The strings sounded distant, slightly

out of tune, as if heard in a dream or under opium; then the piano entered with a run the length of the keyboard. But some of the notes made a wooden clicking noise; others made a tinny twanging. One of them made a sharp hiss.

She asked, "What on earth was that?"

"A compressed air valve activated by pressing the key. An engineer friend of mine fixed it up. Actually, it was John Cage's idea."

The music had a hypnotic effect. For Reade, it summarized instantly all he knew about the emotional side of Kit Butler's personality: a painful nostalgia, a haunted, death-laden romanticism, seasoned with sharpness and violence, and a quality of self-mockery. He looked at the girl, who was leaning back on the bed, a pillow between her back and the wall. The long silk-clad legs were crossed at the ankles; under the thin white sweater the breasts were sharply outlined. She was looking at Kit Butler as he finished trimming his sideburns with an ordinary hand razor, and Reade could see that she was trapped in the web of his personality and the music. The expression in her eyes was almost one of pain. Without being aware of it, she was offering herself completely. Reade had to look away because the insight was so sharp. Her expression said: Take me, but take all of me; don't leave any of me behind to be a prey to my own boredom and fear of disillusion. Reade was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of the innocence of all women and their inability to defend themselves.

When he looked again at the girl, she was leaning back, her eyes closed. Butler caught his eye and winked, then burlesqued a look of gloating desire in the direction of the silk-clad legs.

Reade stood up, saying, "I'll just go and get unpacked. See you both later."

He hurried out of the room, carrying his case with him. As he mounted the stairs, he heard the lock of Butler's door click.

In his own room, the sound of the music was still audible. The floor had dried in patches. The smell of Lysol brought back keen memories of a school he had once attended. He closed the door and lit the gas fire. A moment later there was a knock on his door. It was the Negro girl.

She said, "Hey, listen. If I was you, I wouldn't sleep on that mattress. Greg Miller, who left this mornin', wasn't none too clean."

"What do you suggest, then? Could I buy another mattress, do you think?"

"No need for that. Look, I've got a plastic cover here. It's the kind they put around new mattresses. You put it around that and nothing'll get out or in." She lifted her head and listened for a moment. "Gawd, is he still playin' that miserable stuff?"

"Don't you like it?"

"No. Makes me feel creepy."

She came back a moment later carrying a large plastic bag. She held it open while he cautiously slid the mattress into it. It was far too big—obviously it had housed a double mattress. She made him lay the mattress on the bed, then folded the ends carefully underneath. She said, 'There, now you should be okay."

She patted it, pressed it with both hands, then lay down on it and bounced, raising her hips. The motion was not coquettish; she obviously wanted to know how the mattress felt. She said, "Now, if I was you, I sh'd stick the ends with sticky tape."

She bounced again, raising her knees. Against the dark thighs he caught a glimpse of underwear in shocking-pink. Again the memory of Sarah returned strongly. He turned away and lifted his case onto the chest. When he looked round again, she was standing by the door.

"What will you do for blankets?"

"I'll borrow some from Kit later."

"Okay. Like a cup of tea now? Or coffee?"

"No, thanks. I think I'm going to rest for half an hour."

"Like to borrow some of my blankets until later?"

"No, thanks. I'll use my overcoat."

She stopped halfway out of the door. "What do I call you?"

"Damon."

"That's a funny name. Mine's Sheila. . ."

The music downstairs had stopped. He unpacked his pajamas and rolled them into a pillow. He covered the plastic surface of the mattress with his cotton dressing gown, then lay down on it, kicking off his shoes. He lay there thinking about Sarah and the girl downstairs. From the next room he could hear Sheila's voice singing a popular song. He thought: Innocence. The youthful harlot's curse.

The thought of Sarah returned, bringing a feeling of acute nostalgia. The unaccustomed sound of traffic outside disturbed him. A group of teen-agers passed under the window, playing pop music on a portable radio; their laughter struck him as cold and without real joy. Finally he sat up and switched on the light. The gas fire had burned itself out, but the room was warm. He closed the window and drew the curtains, then went over to his case and took out the books. He arranged these on the windowsill: Traherne's Centuries of Meditation, Blake's poems, the Theologia Germanica, the Bhagavad Gita, Law's Serious Call and an anthology of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He had selected them partly because they were all pocket editions.

He climbed back into bed and opened the volume of Traherne. After reading only a few sentences, a wave of joy and well-being dissipated the fatigue and the faint pulse of the headache. The room became timeless and then ceased to exist altogether. He was suddenly aware that under the physical fatigue of the day, there had accumulated this deep spring of pure energy that now seemed to spread upward over his body in faint but rhythmical waves.

When he closed his eyes, he became aware of the movement of dark forms that seemed neither alive nor dead; they were huge and diffused a sense of benevolence.

The sound of traffic woke him several times in the night, but toward dawn he went into a dreamless sleep. Whenever he slept very deeply, he became aware of sheets of color. Sometimes they were mixed; sometimes it was a single color: yellow, red, sometimes purple. Occasionally it became a pale green or blue; when this happened, he experienced an electric sense of pure delight; it was like receiving life from some primitive source.

The heat of the room aroused him, and he realized it was late. Looking at his watch he saw it was half past ten. He sat up in bed and opened the windows; the cooler air came in with the sunlight; as he lay in bed he could see dust motes in the air.

He dressed quickly and went downstairs in his slippers. He was struck by the silence of the house, until he recollected that everyone here slept during the day. The lavatory on the ground floor smelt of damp plaster. A cheap linoleum covered the floor boards; where it was torn across the corner, he could see light filtering up through the boards.

He knocked on Butler's door, then tried the handle. It was locked. Butler was always a heavy and late sleeper.

He washed and shaved in cold water. He was feeling hungry, but the need to find a telephone was stronger. He was sorry Butler was asleep; he would have liked an opportunity to talk it over with him first.

He found a telephone box on the next corner. Inserting a threepenny piece, his hand shook slightly. The girl's voice answered immediately. "Lloyd, Furneaux and Bryce."

"Is Mr. Bryce in yet, please?"

"Hold on a moment, sir. I'll try his office."

A moment later an attractive, low-pitched girl's voice said, "Mr. Bryce's office."

"Is Mr. Bryce in, please?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid. Who's speaking?"

"My name is Reade. He hasn't met me, but he wrote me a letter. Could I make an appointment?"

He expected her to ask what it was about; to his surprise, she said, "He should be in very shortly. Would you like to call in this morning?"

"Very much. At what time?"

"Twelve o'clock?"

"Thank you very much. I'll be there."

He hung up quickly, before she remembered to ask his business.

Now this was settled, he found himself suddenly noticing the smells of the morning with delight. The sunlight and the vegetable stalls in the Portobello Road created a holiday atmosphere. The air smelled of fruit and coffee grains.

The need to talk to Butler had now become urgent. He went back upstairs and knocked on the door. When there was no reply, he knocked louder and called, "Kit!" There was a groan from inside. He shook the door and knocked again. A door downstairs opened and a woman's voice called, "For Christ's sake, shut up!" He called, "Sorry," but went on knocking. It took nearly five minutes to get Butler out of bed.

Butler opened the door a crack and peered out. "God, Damon, you awake already? What time is it?"

"Nearly eleven o'clock."

"Is that all?" He yawned.

"Listen, Kit, get dressed quickly. I've got to talk to you right away. It's important."

Butler responded to the tone. "All right. Come on in." He started to climb back into bed.

Reade said, "Come and have some breakfast. I've got an appointment in an hour, and I've got to eat first."

Butler said sleepily, "It'll take me half an hour to shave and get dressed. What's it all about?"

"Murder. These Thames murders."

"What about them?"

"It's a long story and I'd rather tell you over coffee. Can you get some clothes on?"

"All right." He sat up on the edge of the bed and massaged his face. "Mirabelle didn't leave until seven this morning, so I'm pretty whacked. Is my electric razor on the shelf?"

Reade threw it over to him, then said, "Where's the nearest place we could have breakfast?"

"Right down below. And incidentally, it's a place where this Thames murderer got one of his victims. Did you know that?"

"No! Was he seen?"

"No, not as far as I know. Anyway, Damon, go on down and order tea. I'll be with you in two minutes."

The café was a long yellow-painted room. Somehow it seemed wrong that it should be open during the day. Everything about it suggested the activities of night. Even to Reade's unpracticed eye, the few women sitting there seemed like tarts. Although several of the men were in shirt sleeves, nothing about them suggested workmen. Nobody paid any attention to Reade. He found an empty table near the window. When a boy in a white jacket came over, he ordered two lots of egg and bacon and two teas.

When Butler arrived about ten minutes later, the food was on the table. He said, "I didn't want to eat. Could you eat two?"

"No!"

"I suppose I'll have to try, then. Anyway, go on."

Reade said, "Did you realize that the Thames murderer leaves quotations from Blake scrawled near the bodies?"

"Good God, no! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

Reade handed him the notebook and began to eat. Between mouthfuls he described his interview with Lund, then the visit to Pickingill. He ended by handing Butler the letter that Pickingill had selected.

"Kensington Church Street. Have you checked this address yet?"

Reade said, "I've got an appointment with Bryce in half an hour."

Butler gaped at him. "You're really incredible. Why the hell didn't you tell me all this last night? Oh, never mind. . . Do you want me to come with you to meet this Bryce character?"

"If you don't mind."

Butler read the letter slowly and carefully while Reade drank tea. He said finally, "I don't know what to say. This man's a crank all right, but I'd like to bet you a hundred pounds he's not a murderer. All this stuff about Blake's relationship with his mother sounds the usual Freudian rubbish."

"Perhaps. Hadn't we better go now?"

As they walked through the crowds of the Portobello Road, Butler said, "And you mean to tell me that you came to London because this old witch told you that letter was by a murderer?"

"I suppose so. . ."

"How much did you pay him?"

"A pound."

"Hmm! And what do you intend to do when you meet this man?"

"Introduce myself, talk about Blake with him. Find out where he lives. And after that. . . I don't know."

It was difficult to talk among so many people. But on the other side of Chepstow Villas the road was quieter.

Butler said, "Don't misunderstand me. I'm not being skeptical because I don't believe in clairvoyants. I do. I've known an old fortuneteller who was so accurate she made your hair stand on end. But somehow I just don't believe you can track the Thames murderer as easily as that. And what's more, I can't believe the Thames murderer's a respectable house agent in Kensington Church Street."

They crossed the traffic lights into Kensington Church Street as the clock struck twelve. Reade was glad he had Butler with him. The feeling of excitement disturbed the breakfast in his stomach.

The building they were looking for was within twenty yards of the top of the street. Inside the plate-glass doors a notice board gave the list of firms who occupied the premises; Lloyd, Furneaux and Bryce was on the first floor.

The girl in the inquiry office asked them to take a seat. A moment later she said, "Mr. Bryce's secretary will be down in just a moment."

The door opened and a tall, dark-haired girl came in. She glanced curiously at Reade, then stared at Butler with recognition.

"Hello! What are you doing here?"

"Vivian! How are you! I'm here with my friend Damon Reade. Do you work here?"

"I'm Mr. Bryce's secretary. Are you both here to see him?"

"Yes. . . unless you think it's a bad idea."

"I don't mind."

"Let me introduce you, Damon. Vivian. . ."

"Martin," the girl supplied. "Come on upstairs."

Outside the door, Butler took her arm. "Viv, what's this Bryce chap like?"

Her smile was dazzling, and had a touch of mockery in it. "He's charming. You'll like him. Come on."

She went ahead of them up the stairs. Her legs were slim and shapely. Butler glanced sideways at Reade and licked his lips, blinking his eyes frantically.

Vivian Martin opened a frosted-glass door and said, "Mr. Reade and Mr. Butler."

Reade found himself gaping stupidly at the man who stood behind the desk. He was about twenty-five years old, and was tall and thin. His smile was friendly and intelligent.

For a moment Reade ignored the outstretched hand. He said, "But. . . you can't be Mr. Bryce. . . the Mr. Bryce who wrote me the letter."

"When was it written?"

"Three years ago."

"In that case, I'm not. It was written by my uncle, Oliver Bryce, who is now dead."

"I. . . see." He shook the outstretched hand dazedly, then looked at Butler, who was grinning.

Butler said, "Here ends your chase."

Reade asked, "When did your uncle die?"

"Let me see. . . it must have been nearly three years ago. In October, 1963. Would you mind telling me what the letter was about? Do have a seat."

Reade was glad to sit down. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the letter.

Butler suddenly said, "Good God, we should have realized! That letter's headed Bryce, Furneaux and Lloyd. Now the firm's called Lloyd, Furneaux and Bryce."

Bryce said, "I'm now the junior partner. My uncle founded the firm." He glanced at the letter that Reade had placed on his desk, then looked up, puzzled. "Excuse me. . . but I'd somehow assumed it was about business. This seems to be about poetry."

"Yes, quite. . . I'm sorry if you feel I've wasted your time."

Butler said smoothly, "I should explain that my friend writes books about Blake. He's known as England's foremost Blake scholar. He corresponded with your uncle about Blake."

"Yet he didn't know my uncle was dead?"

Reade said apologetically, "As a matter of fact, we only exchanged two letters."

"Well, I'm awfully sorry you've had a wasted journey. I feel somehow guilty about it."

"Oh, nonsense. It's really my own fault."

Bryce looked at his watch. "Well, it's after opening time," he said. "Could I perhaps offer you a drink by way of apology? There's an excellent pub across the road."

Butler said promptly, "That's a good idea. I've got quite a thirst. How about you, Viv? When's your lunch?"

Bryce asked with surprise, "You two know one another?"

She said smoothly, "Oh, for a long time. This is Christopher Butler, the composer. We met at one of Gerald Bloom's weekend parties."

"Good heavens! Yes, of course I know you. You did that thing—what was it? -- Mobile for String Orchestra. I was at the first performance at the Festival Hall! I saw you then. Well, this is certainly a pleasure—a distinguished Blake scholar and a distinguished composer all in one go."

The atmosphere in the pub was warm and pleasant. Sitting in a corner, next to Vivian Martin, Reade experienced a quickening of life and pleasure, produced by the blending of smells—of beer, of cooking, and the faint scent of her make-up. Bryce was standing at the counter, ordering drinks.

Reade said, "Incidentally, Kit, I wish you wouldn't introduce me as a Blake scholar. It makes me sound like a kind of dinosaur."

Vivian asked, "And aren't you?"

"Well, no. . . not really. I'm writing about Whitehead at the moment."

She said, "Talking of writing, you'll probably be asked to a literary party this evening. Could you bear it?"

"Will you be there?" Butler asked.

"Well, yes. I help with the drinks."

"In that case we'll go! Whose party is it?"

"Jeremy's—or rather, his wife's. She's very keen on literature and music. She'll swoon with delight if she catches you two."

"Do you always call your employer Jeremy?"

Bryce returned before she could answer. He placed a half pint of beer in front of Reade and whiskies before Butler and the girl. "Well," he said, "let's drink to our fortunate meeting." When they had drunk, he said, "Incidentally, I wonder if you two would be free during the early part of this evening? My wife's giving a small cocktail party for a few literary friends. She'd be delighted if you could both come."

"I'd love to, " Butler said.

Reade said awkwardly, "Well, yes, I'd love to accept, but. . ."

Butler interrupted. "Oh, come on, Damon!"

". . . but I was about to say. . . well, I think I ought to be frank with you first."

Bryce asked with astonishment, "What about?"

"I. . . er. This sounds rather absurd. . ."

Butler said, "Shall I explain?"

"Er, no, perhaps I'd better. Mr. Bryce, I hope you won't mind if I ask you a rather impertinent question? You said just now that I probably wouldn't have liked your uncle. Why was that?"

Bryce exchanged a glance of amusement and complicity with Vivian Martin. He said, "That's rather a long story. He was, er. . . it's rather hard to explain. Put it this way: a lot of people found him rather. . . frightening. He was a man of very strong character, and he had a kind of ruthlessness about him. He wasn't the sort of person you'd expect to take an interest in poetry. Why do you ask?"

Reade felt himself reddening, and forced himself to go on, aware of Butler's concealed amusement. He said, "I think I'd better tell the story from the beginning."

He described Lund's visit and the taking of the letters. Bryce continued to look mystified until Reade explained about Pickingill. "So you see, I had this rather absurd idea of showing the other letters to Pickingill and seeing whether he could tell me if one of them came from a murderer."

Bryce suddenly became pale. He said, "And he picked the one from my uncle?"

"Yes."

Bryce tried to smile, but the smile was twisted. As they watched him, he turned to Vivian Martin. "What do you think about that?"

She said, "It's astounding."

Bryce looked at them with sudden suspicion. "You're sure this isn't a joke you've cooked up between you?"

She said, "Word of honor. I haven't seen Kit for nearly a year."

Butler said, "Was your uncle a murderer?"

While Bryce hesitated, Vivian Martin said, "Yes."

Bryce said quickly, but without resentment, "No, that's not quite true. We can't be dogmatic about it. . . and naturally, it's not something I'd announce around the place. But I must say that I've always suspected it. As I said, he was a bit of an old pirate. His early life in South America was a bit of a rough-and-tumble. And my wife says she's certain he killed his wife."

Butler asked, "What makes her think so?"

"Oh, the circumstances of my aunt's death. It's pretty certain my uncle married her for money when the firm was in difficulties. They never got on very well together—she wasn't very intelligent. Then in 1950 she died in a bathing accident at Santa Monica. He said she'd been seized by a shark when she was a hundred yards out at sea. But when the body was recovered a week later, there were no shark bites. And he was a far stronger swimmer than she was. In fact, she was known to be rather timid in the water."

Reade said, shuddering, "You think he deliberately drowned her?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps not deliberately. Perhaps she got into difficulties and he really thought she'd been seized by a shark. I believe they have them off Santa Monica. There's not a scrap of evidence either way. If anyone had called him a murderer during his lifetime, he could have sued them for every penny they'd got."

Butler asked, "Did he have any real motive for wanting her dead?"

"I couldn't really say. I know they quarreled a lot—I often heard my father say so—and she was notoriously stingy. He had a lot of faults, but he certainly wasn't stingy. A most interesting man in many ways, as you probably gathered from his letter."

Reade said with embarrassment, "Er. . . yes."

Bryce glanced at his watch. "Good heavens, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you. I'm meeting a client for lunch at one. But I'd be delighted to see you this evening, if you'd like to come. Will you?"

Reade said, "That's most kind of you. I would."

"Marvelous! My wife'll give me a medal. I'll look forward to seeing you. Don't get up. Viv'll give you the address."

As they passed the post office at Netting Hill, Reade said, "I'd like to send a telegram."

"Who to?"

"A friend in Keswick. . ."

Butler said, laughing, "How old is she?"

"Nearly sixteen."

"Far too young. Keep away from her."

He was tempted to tell Butler about the engagement, but decided against it There was already too much to discuss.

He sent the telegram to Sarah, giving Butler's address and telephone number, and added: "Please send letters when possible." This referred to the letters taken away by Lund; Reade had asked him to return them to the Keswick bookshop.

The afternoon heat was stifling. The two half pints of beer he had drunk had made him sleepy.

As they came out of the post office, Butler said, "What do we do now?"

"I'd still like to look at some of the murder sites. Could you ring your friend at the Express and find out their locations?"

"I'll ring when we get back. What did you think of Bryce?"

"He seems an intelligent sort of man."

"Pretty obvious that Viv's his mistress, wouldn't you say?"

"I think so."

"Lousy swine. God, Damon, I must have her. Did you see her legs on the stairs?"

"How did you meet her?"

"Oh, at some house party a year ago. I was after another girl so I didn't really get a chance to know her. She gave me her telephone number, but I lost it. Quick, that's our bus. Run for it."

They caught the Ladbroke Grove bus at the traffic lights as it started to move.

Reade said, "The trouble is, how do we get around to the sites? Do you have a bicycle?"

"No, but I might be able to do better than that. I've got a friend with an old car. He'll usually let me

borrow it. We're due at Bryce's at seven o'clock. . . that gives us five hours. If I could get the car, we could look at a couple of the sites this afternoon."

Back in the room, Butler opened both windows to their widest, and threw off his jacket and pullover. While Reade went to fill the kettle for tea, he rang the library of the Daily Express. As Reade came back in, he said, "He'll ring back in ten minutes."

Reade knelt down to light the gas. He said, "You know, Kit, I've been thinking about this. Why does he keep choosing sites near the river unless he uses a boat to dump the bodies?"

"But does he? The sites are near the river. But then, lots of places in London are near the river."

Reade sat on the bed and leaned back against a pillow. The breeze from the window was cool and pleasant. But the noises from the street still distracted him. He said, "Strange. I walk for miles in the Lakes without getting tired. But half an hour on the London pavements gives me aching feet."

Butler smoked in silence. He said finally, "How do you feel about this, Damon. . . I mean about all this business of the murders? It's not really your line of country, is it?"

"I. . . don't know. It's still rather strange for me. It has the freshness of variety."

"Still, you don't really expect to find this Thames murderer."

"No, I suppose I don't. Still, when I think about it, it doesn't seem so impossible. Looked at from one point of view, it's a hopeless task, one man among the millions in London. But on the other hand, these murders have a curious individuality. It ought to be possible to get some results with the use of reason. It seems to me that he's left his signature all over these murders. The only problem is to decipher the signature. And if he. . ."

The telephone rang. Butler answered it. A moment later he pulled a writing pad over to him and began taking notes. Meanwhile, Reade made the tea.

Butler hung up and said, "He's a good man, Ted. He's given us the list of murders, their sites, and the names of the victims. Pass me that London atlas on the table. Ted says that six of the nine are close to the river. Can you see a red pencil on the table?"

When he had poured the tea, Reade moved his chair beside Butler's and looked over his shoulder. Butler was marking red crosses in the atlas and making red dots to correspond to them on the key map at the beginning of the book. He said, "He certainly seems to stick to the river. Do you notice another thing? Most of the sites are close to bridges."

Reade said, "There's something else too. Four out of the six are on the south side of the river."

Butler said, "What conclusion would you draw from that?"

"That the killer lives on the north side. Don't you agree?"

"I suppose so. . . It seems a bit doubtful. One more site on the north side and the numbers would be almost equal."

"Nevertheless, it's two against four. A man like this might feel safer if he left the bodies on the other side

of the river from his home."

"I think perhaps you're being a bit too subtle. Anyway, I don't see that it makes any difference at this stage."

Reade took the atlas off Butler's knees and turned to the key map, on which there were now nine red spots. He stared at it for a few minutes, then said, "There's something odd about this too. Look at the area over which he's scattered the bodies—from Putney to Whitechapel, a distance of ten miles or so."

"Well?"

"Why should he make the area so wide? It couldn't simply be caution, fear of being seen in the same place twice. In London he could dump them over a square mile with almost no chance of being recognized."

"I don't know, Damon. That might be true, but a man who's just committed a murder doesn't want to take chances."

"But the further he goes, the bigger the risk he's taking. Supposing a police patrol saw his car at five in the morning and stopped him? That's more likely to happen at Putney than at Charing Cross, where there's always a certain amount of night traffic. No, I'm inclined to believe that he chooses a wide area for the same reason that he prefers the south side of the river—he's choosing places that are pretty distant from his own home."

Butler said, smiling, "In other words, he ought to live just about exactly midway between Putney and Whitechapel. . . that is. . . just about here, in Chelsea."

"No, not in Chelsea. That's too near the river. Say, up here to the north. . . say, in Kensington or Netting Hill."

Butler said, "By the same reasoning, it wouldn't be in Netting Hill. He picked up three of his victims here."

"All right. Then either to the south or the north—in Kensington or Paddington."

"But you don't really believe all this, do you?"

"No. . . it's just speculation. Still, I think it's not unsound."

Butler threw away the cigarette stub and took an enormous gulp of tea. He stood up and said, "Anyway, I think it's worth seeing a few of the murder sites. What's the time? Half past two. I'll go and see if we can borrow the car. Otherwise, this one near Wandsworth Bridge is only half an hour by bus."

Left alone, Reade closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow. Immediately an enormous sense of happiness rose in him, and the bed seemed to rock like a boat on water. At the same time the absurdity of his presence in London struck him. He had no real reason to be here. He had been perfectly happy at home. The murders held no morbid interest for him; they only aroused a feeling of pity, and again, of absurdity.

The telephone rang. A girl's voice asked, "Is that Kit?"

"No. Who's speaking, please?"

"Mirabelle."

"Hello, this is Damon Reade. You met me last night."

"Hello. When will Kit be back?"

"I'm not sure. He won't be long. But we may be going out immediately."

"I see. Will he be in this evening?"

"No. We've been invited to some kind of literary cocktail party."

"I'll try and ring him back in ten minutes. Will you tell him I rang?"

He went and lay down on the bed again. This time he began to doze off. The opening of the door woke him.

"It's all right, Damon. I've got it downstairs. It's a bit of a bone-shaker, but it goes."

The car outside the door was a prewar Morris. As Reade was about to climb in, the telephone upstairs started to ring; its sound could be heard clearly through the open windows.

Reade said, "That'll be that girl Mirabelle. She rang while you were out."

"Oh God. What did she want?"

"She wanted to come round tonight, but I said we'd be going out."

"Good man!" He pulled the starter, and after a feeble whinny, the engine started.

Reade said, "I thought you liked her."

"I do. She's a nice girl. But there's other game afoot!" He chortled as he pulled the car out into the road. "You know, Damon, I wish you'd stay in London. It's fun having you around."

"Thank you. Where are we going to, by the way?"

"Wandsworth first."

They turned right at the end of Wandsworth Bridge, then right again.

Butler said, "Pretty gloomy-looking place. I wonder where he left the body?"

"Didn't your librarian friend tell you?"

"No. He just gave me the name of the street."

Jew Row was a narrow road of mean-looking houses; at the far end some of these were in the process of demolition, and workmen stood around among piles of rubble. The air smelled of the gasworks that could be seen over the rooftops.

Butler stopped the car close to a pile of rubble. They got out and walked down to the river.

Butler said, "Well, it's accessible from the river, all right. So he could have used a boat." He approached a workman who was walking from the river with a bucket of water. "We're reporters doing a story on these Thames murders. Do you happen to know the place where the body was found?"

The man said, "Yes. Over there by them gates. Top corner. You can still see the stain on the pavement."

The gates closed off a pier that faced Wandsworth Bridge; on the pier, men were handling great bales covered in gray sacking. They walked over to the spot the workman had pointed out. There were, in fact, a few brown smears on the pavement, but they were small and almost indistinguishable.

Reade said, "One thing puzzles me. If he was in a boat, why didn't he simply dump the body in the river? Why risk carrying it twenty yards up the street like this? And there might have been a night watchman on duty at the pier."

Butler said, "On the other hand, why choose a spot like this unless he came by boat?"

"Perhaps to confuse the police. He wanted them to think he came by river."

"Then why didn't he dump the body nearer the river?"

Reade sighed. "This murder's a crazy business. I don't even begin to understand it."

They walked back to the car. A big gray-haired man came over from the demolition gang as they climbed in. Butler lowered his window. The man said, "You from a newspaper, are you?"

"We're free-lances—weekend papers mostly. Do you know anybody who thinks they heard a car or a speedboat that night?"

"No. But I'll tell you one thing. If he dumped the body at the time he did—five in the morning—he didn't come by no boat. 'Cause the tide was out, and he'd've had to walk over twenty feet of mud."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Were you working here when the body was found?"

"No. We started this work a week later."

The man began to talk about the murders, but so ramblingly that it was clear he was only theorizing.

Butler said finally, " 'Fraid we'll have to get back. Many thanks indeed." He started the car and made a turn in the road. He said, "I can never get used to the fact that ordinary workingmen are so ignorant and

credulous. You'd think that they'd be so much more shrewd and hard-headed."

"I know. When I first moved to the country, I found it hard to get used to the ignorance of countrymen about country matters. I once caught a grass snake, and the two most skilled poachers in the village assured me it was an adder and ought to be killed."

Butler turned west into Wandsworth High Street. He said, "Will you look up Welfare Road, Putney, in the atlas?"

"It's not far from here—you turn right into the Putney Bridge Road."

Within five minutes Butler had stopped the car in the cul de sac called Welfare Road. It was a row of small semi-detached modern houses with front gardens, and the road had not yet been fully tarmacked. At its end there was a piece of waste ground, separated from the road by a barbed-wire fence.

Butler said, "The river's just behind these houses—in fact, it looks like some kind of a dock. But it's not accessible from the river." He started up the engine.

Reade said, "Don't you want to get out and look around?"

"What's the point? We know what we want to know. He must have used a car to dump the body. Have you noticed another thing—no walls around to scrawl his messages on. That might explain why he only left Blake quotations in certain cases."

"I'm not sure. If he really wanted to leave one, he could write it on the pavement."

Butler turned the car. A moment later they came out into the Putney Bridge Road.

"Where now?" said Reade.

"I think there's one more we could cover on the way home—the one in Chelsea. Here's the atlas. It's Salamanca Place."

"It's off the Albert Embankment. I remember now. That detective described this one to me. Something about a factory entrance. . ."

It took them another ten minutes to find Salamanca Place.

Butler said, "These three places are close enough together anyway. It seems to disprove your theory that he wanted to scatter the bodies as far apart as possible."

"It might also mean that he'd explored this area thoroughly and made a note of sites where he could dispose of bodies. There's another one not far away, the other side of the Waterloo Road."

A railway embankment ran the full length of Salamanca Place; at right angles to it ran the wall of a factory.

Butler said, "That's the place—Doultons. We should be able to find the exact site this time."

Butler got out of the car and approached the timekeeper who stood at the factory gates. The old man said, "Yes, it was just there, five yards away—out in the road."

The spot he indicated was about a foot in front of the car's bonnet.

"Did you see it?" Butler asked.

"No. I wasn't on duty that night—the night watchman found it. We work all night here, you see. . ."

Butler said, "I can't see any bloodstain there."

"No. I believe there wasn't much. They say the bits of the body had been boiled or roasted, so I don't s'pose there'd be much blood, any more than on a Sunday joint."

"Did you hear if anyone saw the murderer?"

"No. He must have come pretty quiet, because the bloke who's on at night keeps pretty wide awake. We've had a few thefts lately, you see."

"Do you happen to know where they found the chalked message?"

"Message?" the old man said. "What message?"

The telephone in the timekeeper's office began to ring. He said, " 'Scuse me a minute."

Butler got back into the car. He said, "Let's move while the going's good. I get the feeling that he's a talker, like that one in Wandsworth."

As they turned back onto the Albert Embankment, Reade said, "Shall we go and look at this one in Lambeth? It's about a quarter of a mile away."

"In that case, let's skip it. I'm getting tired. If we're going to Jeremy Bryce's at seven, I'd like to get ten minutes' sleep." As they crossed Lambeth Bridge, he said, "What do you think about this business of roasting the body?"

"Sounds pretty sickening. Perhaps he wanted to make it hard to identify."

"That's what I thought. I wish we knew somebody who knows about these murders—some detective on the case."

"I'm going to the Colindale newspaper library tomorrow to get all the details I can."

'That's a good idea. But I don't think we're going to stumble on anything useful. I mean, anything the police don't know already."

Reade said slowly, "I don't know. . ."

"Do you hope to?"

"No. . . not actual clues. But I've got an odd sort of feeling that we've got all the clues we need—if only we could see what they meant."

"In what way?"

"I can't explain exactly. . . I'll have to think about it. But I can't believe that the only way to find this murderer is by employing a thousand or so policemen in a mass search. There must be an easier way. For example, my friend in Keswick—a bookseller who takes an interest in murder—suggested that the murderer might be a frustrated artist of some sort, and that he'd make inquiries among the painters of Soho and Chelsea."

'There's something in that. But it'd take weeks, perhaps months."

"I suppose so. I'll have to think about it. I've got an irritating feeling that something's eluding me."

It was half past five when they arrived back at the house. The girl called Sheila was opening the door with her key.

"Like a cup of tea?" Butler said.

"I wouldn't mind." She smiled at Reade.

Reade said, "Excuse me. I'll be back in a moment."

He had no definite aim in leaving them, only a sudden over-powering need to be alone. The link between his inner source of energy and the outer world had suddenly snapped, and he felt exhausted. Everything that now demanded his attention became an irrelevancy.

He washed his face in cold water in the bathroom, then went up to his own room. He sat on the bed and closed his eyes. The knowledge that Butler would call him in a few minutes intensified the pleasure of relaxation. He tried to concentrate his mind on the problem of the murders, to identify with the mind of the murderer, but his fatigue made it impossible. Then suddenly it struck him that he was making a mistake. His own habitual sense of vital purpose would be foreign to the murderer, whose ordinary state of mind must contain an element of fatigue, confusion. Reade tried to focus the idea of such a state of mind, but it brought a sense of spiritual nausea, a falling sensation. He said aloud, "He'd be better dead."

Butler's voice called, "Damon. Tea up."

"Down in a moment."

But he felt a reluctance to go; it seemed, for a second, that he had understood something important.

Downstairs, Butler said, "I've been having an interesting talk with Sheila. She knew two of the murdered girls." He added suddenly, "By the way, she's rather interested in you."

"Is she?" He took his tea to the armchair.

"But I wouldn't have her, if I were you. You might find. . ." His voice trailed off quickly as her footsteps sounded outside the door. He went on casually, "Yes, Sheila's been telling me some interesting things. It was a girl she knew who thought she saw the murderer. Tell him, Sheila."

"Oh, she said he was a big man, huge, about six foot six."

"You see, Damon. That narrows the search a bit."

She said, "But what are you going to do if you find him?"

"We don't expect to find him," Butler said. "At least, I don't. It's a kind of game, a game of logic and deduction. It's amazing how interesting these things become when you get involved. For example, we've been to look at three of the murder sites this afternoon—the ones near the river—and we've discovered that he can't have used a boat to dump the bodies. It's somehow far more interesting learning a thing like that for yourself."

She said to Reade, "Is that why you're looking for him?"

"I don't really know. I've got several reasons. It's not just a logical game—like a detective story. I can't quite get to grips with the psychology of this man. Did Kit explain to you about the quotations from Blake?"

She nodded.

"Well, I want to know how a man who's read Blake can become a murderer. Somehow, it doesn't make sense. Oh, I've no doubt thousands of people have read Blake, and a percentage of them must have become criminals. But Blake must have meant something to this man—otherwise, why does he keep scrawling Blake quotations on walls?"

Butler said, smiling, "Perhaps he didn't want to learn Blake. Perhaps he had him rammed down his throat at school."

The words produced a cold sensation in Reade's scalp. He said, "I wonder. . . You might have something there. Not at school, perhaps. They don't teach Blake's prophetic books in any school I've come across."

"At university?"

"No, not that either. You're pretty well allowed to choose your subject at university. If he hated Blake, he wouldn't choose it No. . . there's something else here. He may have an ambiguous attitude toward Blake. . ."

"I've got an idea!" Butler said. "Supposing his father was a Blake fanatic and made him learn it as a child?"

"That's nearer to what I had in mind," Reade said.

Butler said, "But in that case, the police are bound to find him sooner or later, if they're investigating everyone with an interest in Blake."

"Not necessarily. For example, America has produced some of the finest Blake scholars. France has produced at least one."

"In other words," Butler said, "There's not a hope in hell of following up that line?"

"No, that's not true either. But it would be difficult. I know most of the books on Blake. . . there are at least twenty by American scholars. Then there are various books by Blake amateurs—usually fairly small

things. It might be worth checking. I've got a friend in the Library of Congress. What's the time—half past six. . . that means it's half past one in Washington. I think it might be an idea to send him a cablegram."

"Do you think it's worthwhile?"

"Why not? It wouldn't cost much. And my friend won't mind—he owes me a few favors anyway. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead," Butler said. He took the telephone off the table beside him and handed it to Reade. Reade asked for overseas cables, and dictated a telegram to Elliot Schneider, Library of Congress, Washington. The message ran: "Please cable me surnames all American authors twentieth century books on Blake." He concluded the message with Butler's address and telephone number.

When he hung up, Butler said, "The next move is to check in the British Museum. After all, he's more likely to be an Englishman."

"I agree. I've got a friend in the reading room—I'll ring him in the morning."

Sheila said, "But what good will it do? What can you do with a list of names?"

"Nothing," Butler said, "except use it to cross-check some other information."

"And where will you get that?"

Butler placed a hand on her bare shoulder and caressed it. "Don't be such a defeatist, Sheila! There are lots of ways."

She said, grinning, "Tell me one of them."

"All right. We're going to a cocktail party in Kensington now. Now what do we know about this murderer? He's big, he drives a large car, he probably has some kind of private income—I can't imagine him as the sort who spends nine till five in an office—and he probably lives in the Kensington area. It's not at all improbable that someone might know somebody who fits that description. In which case, the library list is a cross-check. Come on, Damon, we've got to go."

She asked, "Where you goin'? Anywhere nice?"

"Just a literary cocktail party."

Reade said, "Want to come?"

She smiled with delight. "Could I?"

"I don't see why not."

"I'll have to get changed."

"No need. Come just as you are. You look fine."

"Do I? Let me comb my hair, anyway."

As she rushed upstairs, Butler said, "Do you think that's a good idea, Damon?"

"Why not? She was obviously dying to come. And if they don't like it, it'll be an excuse to leave quickly."

"She's a lovely little thing. Hasn't she got a delicious figure? It's a pity it'd be a risk sleeping with her."

"Would it? Are you sure she goes in for prostitution?"

Butler looked shocked at the word. "I didn't say that! But I've seen a couple of different men coming out of her room. They might have been boy friends, for all I know. She's not a regular, like the girls downstairs, anyway. . ."

She came back downstairs, carrying a handbag. She was wearing the expression of a child who has been invited to a party. It made them both smile to look at her.

Cars were double-parked outside the house. Butler rang, and the door was opened by a butler in a white jacket. He led them up the broad, thickly carpeted stairs. Sheila looked around her with unconcealed awe, and slipped her hand into Reade's as they came to the top of the stairs.

Bryce saw them from across the room and hurried over. "Delighted you made it. Come and meet my wife."

Butler said, "I hope you don't mind—we brought a friend. This is Sheila."

"No, I'm delighted. How do you do?" He shook her hand; the warmth was obviously not simulated.

A pretty blonde woman joined them. She had a weak face and large green eyes.

Bryce said, "This is my wife, Millicent."

Her handshake was warm and limp. There was a notable lack of cordiality in her greeting to Sheila.

A girl's voice said, "What would you like to drink?" It was Vivian Martin, wearing a black low-cut cocktail dress.

Reade, watching the face of Millicent Bryce, saw the smile harden. He said, "Has your husband told you about our visit to his office, Mrs. Bryce?"

"Oh yes. I was astonished. I always thought Uncle Oliver was an old pirate."

Butler asked. "Do you have a photograph of him?"

"Yes. I'll get it."

Vivian Martin had gone to get the drinks. Butler leaned toward Reade; he said, grinning, "I've got a feeling we've landed in the middle of a domestic rumpus. I must say, I think Jeremy's a bit tactless bringing Viv here. And I don't think Sheila improves the situation much. Did you see the way Jeremy

looked at her? That man's a satyr. He's worse than me."

Millicent Bryce came toward them, carrying an album. She said, "Come and sit down here, and I'll show you the pictures of Uncle Oliver."

They sat on either side of her on the settee, and she opened the album. The first photograph showed a portly, completely baldheaded man in his sixties. He had a hooked nose and eyes like a fish.

Butler said, "He's an ugly bastard!"

"And yet he wasn't all that ugly when you talked to him. He had fantastic charm."

"Did you like him?"

"No. . . not exactly. He frightened me. But he had tremendous charm."

Reade asked, "Where did he live?"

"In this house. He left it to Jeremy."

"Did you know he was interested in Blake?"

"Oh yes. He has a whole library of books about Blake. Three of them are by you, incidentally. I've been reading one this afternoon."

"I'm delighted. But tell me, do you know if your Uncle Oliver had any other friends in London who were interested in Blake—particularly in this area?"

She said, "Ah, I know why you're asking me that! Jeremy told me about this murderer who leaves quotations from Blake. But I'm afraid I can't help you there. I've no idea whether Uncle Oliver knew any other admirers of Blake."

Butler said, "Do you think your Uncle Oliver killed his wife?"

"I. . . don't know. But he was certainly capable of it."

Reade said, "Could I possibly look at his collection of books on Blake?"

"Of course. They're in the library." By this time Reade had finished the whiskey Vivian had brought him. It had made his tiredness vanish completely, but he now felt light-headed. He was glad to leave the crowded room.

Mrs. Bryce said, "I'd like a chance to talk to you properly sometime, Mr. Reade. I find your book quite fascinating. There are too many people here tonight though." She led him into a large room that overlooked the garden. Bookcases stretched to the ceiling; a grand piano stood in one corner.

She said, "By the way, have you a drink? No? There's one up here—whiskey, was it? The Blake books are in that case—the one with the key in the door."

The books were mostly the ones he expected, the standard works on Blake. But there were one or two small volumes that he had never seen before. One of them was called Blake the Magician, by an author

who called himself Commander Chagworthy; an inscription inside the flyleaf read: "To Oliver, affectionately, from Cecil Chagworthy."

"Any idea who this Chagworthy is, Mrs. Bryce?"

"None at all. . . Oh, wait. Yes, it was an old man who lived down in Surrey. I remember meeting him once. Why?"

"Was he married?"

"No. An old bachelor."

"Ah. That settles that, then. I'm working on a theory that the murderer might be a man whose father forced him to read Blake as a child—someone who expresses his revolt against his father by scrawling Blake quotations near the bodies. I know something about most of the standard works on Blake—I don't think any of them fit my theory. I'll make a note of these titles, if you don't mind."

"Why are you so interested in these murders, Mr. Reade?"

"Solely because I can't imagine the mentality of a murder who admires Blake. It's a kind of contradiction in terms."

"Is it?" She smiled. "Don't you think it's just as much a contradiction that a man who loved books as much as Uncle Oliver should murder his wife?"

"Yes, I find that equally hard to imagine. But perhaps the explanation there lies in the character of his wife. If they were really incompatible, he might have come to hate her. Blake said: 'Rather murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unsatisfied desire.' "

"She was an awful old harridan—utterly mean and bad-tempered. Still, that doesn't explain it."

He said, "Would you excuse me just a moment while I make a note of these titles?"

While he wrote, she took down a book and opened it. When he looked up, she said, "Do you recognize this?"

"No, it's rather beautifully bound. What is it? Good heavens! My Blake of Lambeth!"

"Uncle Oliver must have thought a great deal of it. He's filled it with pencil markings. I've been meaning to ask you about something you wrote. . . ah, here it is. You say: 'If a man understood the power of his own mind, he would immediately recognize that crime is another name for self-destruction.' Uncle Oliver's underlined it too. What did you mean by it?"

Reade said, laughing, "You shouldn't have given me so much whiskey if you want me to sound coherent. However, I'll try to answer. I meant that crime is essentially negative, like meanness or hypochondria or chronic jealousy. It harms the criminal far more than any of his victims. If men could understand their own powers—their capacity for freedom—they'd realize that the real objection to crime isn't its wickedness but. . . but its absurdity, its irrelevance. . . Sorry, I'm not very clear. I've had too much to drink."

"I think you're very clear. Especially about jealousy."

"Oh, I didn't mean. . ." He stopped, embarrassed.

She said, laughing, "Don't worry, I didn't take it personally. I know my husband's the type who needs two mistresses as well as a wife. It's the kind of thing I've had to come to terms with."

He said awkwardly, "I hardly know your husband."

"I'm sorry. I'm embarrassing you. Shall we go downstairs again?"

"If you like. I don't feel embarrassed. . . so much as helpless. What can I do?"

"Nothing. Just forget it. Tell me something else. Do you really believe that this old mind reader knew that Uncle Oliver was a murderer?"

"I. . . I think so."

"Have you any real evidence that he possesses magic powers?"

"Not magic, perhaps. . . at least, not in the usual sense. It's very hard to explain."

She said, laughing, "What a pity. I've always wanted to meet someone with magic powers."

"Oh, I know. Everyone has. Nobody wants to believe that the world's as inflexible as it looks."

"Do you have any magic powers?"

"Oh no. At least, they're only very slight. You see, everybody has what you call magic powers, but we don't use them."

"Why not?"

"Oh, for all kinds of reasons. Partly because we don't know much about them. Partly because it wouldn't be good if we knew about them—we'd get lazy and rely on them too much."

"What can you do with your magic powers?"

"Well. . . very little. I can't fly on a broomstick, if that's what you mean. You see, they're only an extension of quite ordinary powers. Anybody can see into the future by concentrating on it, but some people can see further than others, and we say they have second sight."

"Yes, but we can't really see into the future, can we? I mean, it's a matter of reasoning. . ."

"No it isn't. It's a matter of instinct, of intuition. You concentrate your forces, like a man trying to see ahead in a fog. You don't reason, you concentrate. And in the same way, anybody who carefully read that pile of letters could have made some guesses about the character of the various people who wrote them. But George Pickingill simply had the ability to a far greater extent."

"Why couldn't you tell the letter was from a murderer if you have magic powers?"

He said, smiling, "I wish you'd stop calling them 'magic powers.' They're not. My intuitions aren't as well developed as Pickingill's. They wouldn't be of any great use to me. I try to develop a quite different

kind of power—an ability to see the magic underneath the surface of the world. Or, to put it another way, I try to make myself into a good radio receiver, to pick up messages of purpose from the atmosphere."

"Who sends the messages?"

"Nobody. You might as well ask who sends cosmic rays. The air's full of purpose, like cosmic rays, but people are too stuck inside themselves to pick them up. . . I'm afraid I'm talking too much. Shall we go downstairs again?"

"Tell me one more thing. Why do you say that everybody has magic powers?"

"Oh, it's obvious. Most people can make somebody think about them by thinking very hard. Most people can make somebody turn round by staring at the back of their neck."

She said decisively, "Well, I can't. I've often tried it."

"Then you probably shielded your thoughts without intending to."

She said, "Could you demonstrate your powers when we get downstairs? Stare at somebody and make him turn round?"

"Oh yes, I can do that."

"Really? Anybody?"

"Yes. If you like, I'll try and do more than that. I'll try and make whoever it is come over and talk to me."

She said with animation, "If you can do that, you've convinced me that everything you say is true."

"All right. There's only one thing I'd like to ask you. Don't go around talking about it. And particularly, don't tell whoever I get to talk to me."

"All right. But as a matter of curiosity, why not?"

"Because it's just a party trick, nothing worth talking about. I don't want to get a silly kind of reputation. And it makes people angry if they think you've been trying something of the sort on them."

They were at the bottom of the stairs by now. The drawing room was still crowded; more guests seemed to have arrived while they had been upstairs.

She pointed to a man in a dark suit standing near the window and talking to a pretty, plump girl.

"Try him. That's Harley Fisher."

"Who is he?"

"Don't you know? He writes spy stories that sell by the hundred thousand."

The man was powerfully built and tall. Ten years earlier he had been athletic; now he was slightly

overweight. The fleshy face had the dubious and brutal handsomeness of a shark, and his bad teeth increased this impression.

"Couldn't you choose someone else? I don't much like the look of him."

"I'd rather not. I've chosen him because he's rather stand-offish with strangers. So if you can make him talk to you, you'll be rather clever."

He said, "I'll try."

He stared at the fleshy man over her shoulder, concentrating on the side of his neck. After a moment the man glanced across the room at him. Reade looked down quickly and pretended to be listening to Millicent Bryce. He said, "He's looking over here."

"I wish I could see. Let me move over here."

She changed position; Reade felt exposed now that she was no longer in direct line with Fisher, but he stared hard at the side of the novelist's face, relaxing his mind completely and telegraphing the suggestion that he should come over and speak to them. Suddenly he felt an intuition that Fisher was about to look around; he quickly looked away and began talking to Millicent Bryce.

She asked, "Any luck?"

"I don't know. He might be too interested in that girl he's talking to. Anyway, I can't do any more. I think perhaps I ought to find that girl I brought. She might be feeling abandoned."

She said, with a faint smile of malice, "I expect she is."

He found Sheila in the corner of the room, and he was talking to her a few minutes later when he became aware that Millicent Bryce was approaching him with Harley Fisher.

Mrs. Bryce said, "Damon, Mr. Fisher would like to meet you."

Reade caught her smile of complicity, and looked away quickly.

Fisher's handshake was hard and abrupt. He said, "I hear you're in London because you're interested in the Thames murders."

"Yes."

"It's a subject that quite interests me too. I've got all the press cuttings on them, if you'd like to see them."

Reade said eagerly, "That's splendid. I'd love to. It'll save me the trouble of going to Colindale tomorrow."

Millicent Bryce drifted away. Reade noticed that Fisher was observing Sheila with interest; he introduced her. She asked immediately, "Why is your ear divided?"

Reade noticed for the first time that the lobe of Fisher's left ear had a V-shaped portion missing.

Fisher said, "That's a memento of a Jamaican gun runner. I was in the intelligence during the war. . ." He turned and snapped his fingers as Vivian Martin went past with a tray. He said, "Miss, could I have another vodka and white Cinzano? The Russian vodka, not the English stuff."

Vivian asked, in a conversational tone, "How can you tell the difference if you put Cinzano in it?"

He stared at her a moment, as if about to reply, then deliberately turned back to Reade. Vivian Martin flushed and turned away. Fisher said, "Would you like to come back to my house? It's only round the corner. I'll show you the press cuttings."

"I'm not sure whether I can. I have Sheila with me and another friend, and. . ."

"Bring them along too. I'm expecting another friend of mine, Royston Meredith. Do you know him?"

"I know of him, of course. . ."

"He's also interested in these murders. He'd be fascinated to hear about this Blake business."

"Well, thank you. I'd like to."

"Excellent! I'll look out for you in about half an hour. All right? Now would you excuse me a moment; I want a word with our hostess. . ."

Twenty minutes later Reade was talking to Butler when Millicent Bryce's voice said, "Well, it worked. He came over to me of his own accord and asked to meet you."

"What worked?" Butler asked.

Reade said quickly, "Nothing. By the way, Harley Fisher wants us to go back to his house afterward. He has a lot of press cuttings on these murders."

"Marvelous!" Butler said. "Why don't you come, Millicent?"

She said, laughing, "Because my husband wouldn't like it. He doesn't trust Harley."

Fisher came out of the drawing room as they were speaking. He nodded at Reade. "Ready?"

"Yes, in a moment. Will you excuse me?"

It was pleasant to be alone in the lavatory. As he stood there, he noticed the swift rising and falling of his stomach as he breathed, and wished he could lie down on a bed and fall asleep. At home he never drank whiskey; it always made him tired. The thought of going to Fisher's house was suddenly disagreeable.

Butler was waiting for him as he came out of the lavatory. He said in a low voice, "Do you think we could take Viv along to Fisher's?"

"I. . . suppose so. He said I could invite anyone I liked. But I don't think she'll go. He was rather rude to her while she was serving the drinks. Where is she?"

"Outside. I told her to go on ahead. I didn't want Jeremy to know she was leaving with me."

Harley Fisher was standing in the hall, talking to Sheila; one of his hands rested lightly on her bare arm. He dropped it when he saw Reade and Butler.

Vivian Martin frowned when she saw Fisher walking beside Butler.

Butler said, "Viv, we're going to Harley's for a drink. Come on along."

"I don't think I can. I have to get home."

Fisher said to Butler, "Won't you introduce me to your friend?"

She said coldly, "We met in there. I served you with a vodka and Cinzano."

"Of course! How stupid of me. Then please let me persuade you to come back to my house, and let me return the service."

His smile was charming, concentrated on her like a magnifying glass. She hesitated, then smiled and said, "Thank you. I'd like to."

Fisher's house stood on a corner; it was a small two-story building, unobtrusive and expensive. The front garden was paved in the manner of a Spanish courtyard, with a fishpond and two acacia trees. There were roses in the border under the window.

The door opened before they reached it. A small golden-skinned man who might have been a Javanese or a Filipino took Vivian Martin's coat. He said, "Mr. Meredith is waiting for you, sir."

"Has he been here long?"

"Only a few minutes, sir. He has a lady with him."

Fisher took Vivian Martin's arm and steered her toward a door, which he threw open. A small man in a dark suit was standing by the window, a blonde girl beside him. Fisher said, "Snap!" They both laughed. Fisher said, "Sorry we're late, Royston. May I introduce Miss Martin?"

"You're not late. We're early. We got sick of the reception. This is Violet de Merville."

Reade and Butler were introduced. Again Reade noticed the unobtrusive but definite stir created by Sheila. He observed Meredith with interest. He had seen photographs of the novelist; all gave him a grim and brooding appearance. In fact, he looked mild and nervous. His voice was high and carefully controlled, as if making a long-distance call on a bad line. The girl with him had the soft but stereotyped beauty of a model.

Fisher said, "Mr. Reade writes books on Blake."

Meredith said, "Yes, one knows them well."

"I'm going to show him the cuttings on the Thames murder case. He has some rather interesting information on it." He opened the lid of a cabinet and switched on a tape recorder. "I'm going to switch on the tape recorder. I'd like to get Mr. Reade's story down on tape. Do you mind?"

Reade said with embarrassment, "No, of course not."

"Still, let's get a drink first. What will everybody have? Whiskey? Miss de Merville? Let me persuade you to try this malt whiskey. It comes from a friend of mine who owns a small distillery on the Isle of Mull. It's fifteen years old."

As Fisher talked, Reade stood up and glanced into the tape recorder. The tape was already revolving. He accepted a glass half full of a pale straw-colored liquid from Fisher. It tasted deceptively mild.

Fisher said, "Tinsingh's bringing sandwiches in a moment. So do you think we could have your story now? Let me put this microphone near you."

Reade felt embarrassed about being the center of attention, and not entirely happy about the tape recorder. But since there seemed no help for it, he repeated the story again. It took a long time, because both Fisher and Meredith interrupted him frequently. He let Kit Butler tell what had happened that morning in Bryce's office.

Meredith asked finally, "But what happens now, Mr. Reade? Do you go back home?"

Reade shrugged. "I expect so."

Violet de Merville said, "Are you washing your hands of it?"

"Not quite. But I don't see what I can do. . . No, no more whiskey, thank you."

Meredith said, "And what do you suppose will happen to the murderer, Mr. Reade? Will he keep on?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Until he commits suicide."

Violet de Merville said, "Why should he commit suicide?"

Reade said haltingly, "I can't quite explain. . . It's like a man walking into a cul de sac. He's got to reach the end."

Fisher said, "I agree. But what's to stop him from simply turning back?"

Reade was relieved when the door opened and the manservant appeared with a tray of sandwiches and salads. He realized suddenly that he had not eaten since breakfast. It suddenly struck him that his depression and boredom were probably due to hunger. He also hoped that the food would bring about a more general conversation; he wanted to be left alone. But it seemed that Fisher had no intention of leaving him alone. He handed Reade a plate, helped him to a beef sandwich and some salad, then said, "Explain why you think that suicide is inevitable."

Reade said, rather desperately, "Why me? Why not ask Kit? Or Sheila? She knew two of the victims."

Fisher said, "But you're our expert, Mr. Reade. So let's hear your views. Then we'll allow you to eat in peace."

Reade drew a deep breath. He said with resignation, "All right. I'll try to explain. But it's rather difficult. You see, I've devoted my life to the problem of why certain men see visions. Men like Blake and Boehme and Thomas Traherne. A psychologist once suggested that it's a chemical in the bloodstream—the same sort of thing that makes a dipsomaniac see pink elephants. Now obviously, I

can't accept this view. But I've spent a certain amount of time studying the action of drugs, and taken some of them myself. And it's become clear to me that what we call 'ordinary consciousness' is simply a special, limited case. . . But this is obvious after a single glass of whiskey. It causes a change in consciousness, a kind of deepening. In ordinary consciousness, we're mainly aware of the world around us and its problems. This is awfully difficult to explain. . ."

Fisher said, "You're being very clear so far. Please go on."

"Perhaps an analogy will help. In our ordinary state of consciousness, we look out from behind our eyes as a motorist looks from behind the windscreen of a car. The car is very small, and the world out there is very big. Now if I take a few glasses of whiskey, the world out there hasn't really changed, but the car seems to have grown bigger. When I look inside myself, there seem to be far greater spaces than I'm normally aware of. And if I take certain drugs, the car becomes vast, as vast as a cathedral. There are great, empty spaces. . . No, not empty. They're full of all kinds of things—of memories of my past life and millions of things I never thought I'd noticed. Do you see my point? Man deliberately limits his consciousness. It would frighten him if he were aware of these vast spaces of consciousness all the time. He stays sane by living in a narrow little consciousness that seems to be limited by the outside world. Because these spaces aren't just inhabited by memories. There seem to be strange, alien things, other minds. . ."

As he said this, he saw Violet de Merville shudder. He said, laughing, "I'm not trying to be alarming. There's nothing fundamentally horrible about these spaces. One day we shall conquer them, as we shall conquer outer space. They're like a great jungle, full of wild creatures. We build a high wall around us for safety, but that doesn't mean we're afraid of the jungle. One day we shall build cities and streets in its spaces."

Butler said restively, "But what about the murderer?"

"Ah yes, the murderer. I hadn't forgotten him. You see, drugs and drink are one way of making us aware of the jungle outside ordinary consciousness. Murder is another. When people go insane, they are actually seeing deeper than most of us. Insanity isn't based on delusion; it's based on truth. And it happens when people accidentally destroy some of the wall that separates us from the jungle. You see, that wall isn't simply a matter of ordinary perceptions. It's a matter of social conventions, emotional habits, and so on. Insanity usually begins with bad emotional upsets.

"Now a man who decides to commit murder has already broken the deepest convention that binds him to sanity and society. It's different, of course, in war. Society endorses the murder. But most murderers are men who've killed in anger, so they're not genuine rebels. And then, a large percentage of murderers do it as a calculated risk to gain money—like steeplejacks. They're not rebels so much as gamblers. . . like all professional criminals. That leaves a very small proportion of real murderers, the true rebels, the men who murder purely for self-gratification—sadists, sex killers, and the rest. They know they stand completely alone. They don't belong to any criminal fraternity. In a sense, they're like spoiled children who know they shouldn't do certain things, but who think they can cheat the adults.

"But they miscalculate, like a diver who cuts his own air line because he wants more freedom. They're knocking a hole in the wall that protects them from the jungle. They fail to understand that the sixth commandment isn't merely a social convention. It's a convention of consciousness too. Break it, and you're cutting the lines that hold you to sanity. You're destroying a part of yourself."

Meredith said, "There's only one objection. Why, in that case, don't the mystics commit suicide too?"

"Because they aim at breaking down the wall. Their whole attitude is different. They're like a well-equipped expedition setting out into the jungle. The murderer is like a child who accidentally wanders there. His own terror does more damage than the actual dangers. He doesn't know the jungle exists before he finds himself lost in it."

Fisher said, "That's a fascinating theory, but hardly borne out by fact. Because unfortunately, most mass murderers don't commit suicide. Most of them get caught through their own stupidity—like Christie and Heath."

"One isn't sure," Meredith said reflectively. "One gets the impression that most of them want to be caught, and make mistakes deliberately. Surely that's a kind of suicide?"

Reade took the opportunity of their conversation to eat. It was a long time since he had been so hungry. He looked at them as he ate, thinking: Strange; we talk about the jungle, but no one really believes it exists.

Fisher and Meredith were arguing on the question of suicide; both seemed to have a wide knowledge of murder cases; each cited examples to prove his own point. Reade had never heard of most of the cases they mentioned, although Urien Lewis had described a few of them. He interrupted for a moment to say, "Excuse me, but I believe that about one third of all murderers commit suicide."

"As many as that? But even if that figure is correct, surely it's out of fear of detection?"

Meredith said mockingly, "A drastic way to avoid detection."

He finished the last of the salad and emptied his whiskey glass. He stifled a yawn, and wondered how he could politely take his leave. He stood up, saying, "Could I find my way outside?"

"First on the left," Fisher said.

As he came out of the lavatory, he found Butler standing in the hall. He said, "I'm afraid I'm going home in a moment."

"Tired?"

"Dreadfully."

"I shan't come until I'm sure Viv wants to leave."

Reade stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Butler said, "That bastard Fisher wants to get her into bed. So if I say I'm leaving now, I'm pretty sure he'll find some excuse for getting her to stay."

Reade said, "But she may not want to go to bed with him."

"Don't be silly. He's like us—an expert in persuasion. Anyway, I'm not going to leave her here. So I'll stick around until she's ready to leave. You'd better take Sheila home with you, if she'll go. I think Fisher's hoping to screw her as well."

Reade said, "Surely that's her business? It might be to her advantage to get involved with him."

"No. He'd take her to bed, then get rid of her."

Fisher came out into the hall, carrying a water jug.

Reade said, "I hope you won't mind, but I think I'll go home. I'm rather tired."

"Already? But how about the press cuttings?"

"Could I possibly borrow them overnight? I could return them tomorrow."

"Or get Sheila to drop them in," Butler said. "She comes past here every day. . ."

Reade noticed the sarcastic grin on Butler's face as he went into the lavatory.

"Certainly. Borrow them by all means. I'll get them for you. Oh, Tinsingh, would you fill this jug with water."

As Reade went back into the room, Meredith was saying in his high, deliberate voice, "But I think one can make a number of likely guesses. He obviously has a car. He must live more or less alone, or the other people in the house would soon begin to suspect something. He can't live in central London, because he'd have too many curious neighbors. So my guess is that he lives outside London, perhaps at some old vicarage. It might even be a mad vicar! I once knew a vicar who hated the whole human race."

Fisher said, "Anglican, of course?"

"Oh yes. A nasty man with hair growing out of his ears and a glare like an angry bull. Now he'd have been quite capable of these murders."

Violet de Merville said, "But why does he pick his victims in the Portobello Road area?"

"One can understand that easily enough. Because it's so dreadfully sordid. I should think that area carries off the prize nowadays for sheer darkness and dirt, now that Whitechapel's being rebuilt. I once knew a prostitute who came from St. Mark's Road, and she never washed. She was the filthiest woman I've ever seen. And she had a whole string of clients who wanted her like that. I expect they all came from prim Methodist homes where everything smelled of disinfectant, and she gave them a sense of orgiastic freedom."

Reade said mildly, "I don't find the Portobello Road at all sordid."

Meredith said, "Perhaps not. It's human nature I find sordid, and I think slum districts reflect it more honestly than places like this." He gestured out of the window.

Reade bent over Sheila, saying, "I'm going home now. I'll leave you here with Kit."

She said immediately, "No, I'll come too."

"Oh, you're not going," Meredith said.

"I'm afraid so. I'm not used to whiskey."

Fisher said quietly to Sheila, "I gather you come by here sometimes? So perhaps you could drop these press cuttings in to me?"

She looked puzzled; Reade said quickly, "Don't worry, I'll make sure they get returned. Probably tomorrow."

He always found leave-taking difficult; he shook hands with Violet de Merville and with Vivian Martin, feeling clumsy and awkward as he did so.

Fisher handed him the large cardboard folder, saying, "It's been most fascinating, Mr. Reade. I hope you find this useful. I shall hope to see you both again."

Reade said, "Yes, of course."

It embarrassed him to stand there beside Sheila, as if they were a husband and wife taking their leave.

In the street, the air was colder, and he was suddenly aware of how much he had drunk. She took his arm as they crossed the road. He said, "Wouldn't you have preferred to stay?"

"No. I'd rather stay with you."

A taxi came toward them; he hailed it and opened the door for her. He touched the flesh of her arm; it felt cold. She said, "I'll soon get warm when we get back."

She moved closer to him and took his arm again. The gesture reminded him of Sarah, and brought a stab of guilt. He closed his eyes and said, "God, I'm tired. I'll sleep as soon as I get into bed."

"You getting tired of London?"

"A little. People tire me. When I'm at home, I sometimes see no one for several days."

"I'm not sure I'd like that."

"Perhaps not. People become a habit—like smoking or biting your nails. And once you've broken yourself of the habit, it's hard to take up again. They taste bitter and nasty, like your first cigarette."

He was talking partly out of defensiveness. The feeling of her hand in his arm made him uncomfortable. With Sarah, he had learned something of purely animal forces of attraction, of communication of instinctive warmth in which the mind played no part. It was happening now with Sheila. At present it was no more than a vibration of sympathy, intensified slightly by his awareness of the warm body under the thin frock. But it was Sarah who had sharpened his awareness of these forces.

She said, "Don't you know anybody where you live?"

"A few people. And I have friends in Keswick, about fifteen miles away—a bookseller and his ward."

"Ward? What's that?"

"It means he's her guardian. Her parents are dead."

"Do you like her?"

"Well. . . yes. I'm engaged to her, in a sort of way." It brought a sense of relief to speak the words.

She asked, smiling, "Why'd you say 'in a sort of way'?"

"Because she's not sixteen yet."

"What difference does that make?"

"She might change her mind by the time she's old enough to marry."

"But did she want to get engaged, or did you?"

"She did. . . at least, she actually made the suggestion."

She said nothing for a moment, then asked, "Supposing you change your mind first?"

"That's not very likely. I'm older than she is. I've known her since she was ten."

"What does she look like? Do you have a photo?"

Her interest in Sarah surprised him. He was still talking about her when the taxi drew up.

Outside her door, she said, "Like a cup of coffee?"

He wanted to refuse, but knew she would be disappointed. Besides, his throat felt dry. "Well, perhaps. . ."

His room felt cold and unwelcoming; he lit the gas fire, then sat on the bed and removed his shoes. He lay for five minutes with his eyes closed. Gradually the tiredness vanished; he felt his mind becoming active again. He sat up and opened the folder that Fisher had lent him. It contained a large exercise book made of coarse paper; newspaper clippings had been stuck to its pages. Toward the center of the book, the clippings were loose.

She tapped lightly on the door before coming in, carrying a coffee percolator.

He said, "Is it made already?"

"No. The gas went. Can I use yours?"

"Yes, of course."

She lit the gas ring and placed the percolator on it; a moment later it began to make a soft, bubbling noise.

"What you reading?"

"These press cuttings Fisher lent me."

"What's all this about wanting me to take 'em back?"

"Kit said you went near there sometimes. Do you?"

"No! I don't know what he's talking about."

He said, "I expect he's matchmaking again. I think Fisher found you rather attractive."

"I know. He made that pretty clear. He wanted to know if I was sleeping with you."

"Good heavens! When?"

"While we were waiting downstairs at the party. Want yours black?"

"No, white, please. I don't mind cold milk."

He found it difficult to concentrate on the newspaper cuttings. He was watching her move around the room, enjoying the smooth movements of her body, observing, as she bent to take the coffee pot, the line across the back of her dress that showed the strap of her brassiere. Then he caught an automatic reflex of desire, and looked away quickly. But he could still see her movements out of the corner of his eye, and found himself thinking: Why not? How can one joy absorb another? Are not different joys holy, infinite, eternal? Sarah is mild silver; she is furious gold. Would Sarah really mind?

He closed his eyes; a moment later she said, "Come on. Wake up. Here's the coffee."

He took the cup from her and placed it on the windowsill. Her own cup was on the bedside table.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and he moved over so she could look at the press cuttings over his shoulder. He was now aware that they were playing a game. She was attracted by him; she knew he was attracted by her; both were deriving pleasure from playing with this force that tried to pull them into contact. He knew that it only needed one move from either of them. He had no intention of making that move; but he was enjoying the game. He drank his coffee and tried to make the effort to read the cuttings. He had a hallucinatory sense of being beside Sarah and a dreamlike inability to concentrate.

When she finished the coffee, she stood up. "I'll leave you alone to read."

He said nothing; inaction was becoming a pattern of conduct. But as he heard the door close, he regretted that he had allowed her to go; the room seemed colder.

He heard her moving around in the next room, then going downstairs. He felt too lazy to get up and undress; instead he placed the folder on the floor and lay down. When he closed his eyes, he knew that he had drunk too much. He had fallen into a light doze when she came back into the room.

"Sorry," she said. "You asleep? I just want the sugar. Finished with your cup?"

As she leaned across the bed, he allowed his hand to touch her leg through the dress; it was a gesture of apology. She sat on the edge of the bed. "Aren't you going to get undressed?"

"In a moment."

Her hand was lying close to his face; it smelled of toilet soap. He reached up and touched it. She took

hold of his hand; her other hand reached up to caress the back of his neck. A moment later he heard the noise of her shoes falling on the floor as she kicked them off; then she lay beside him. The pressure of her body against him was pleasant. He thought of Sarah; but there was no feeling of separation from her; it was as if she and Sheila were somehow the same person. He placed his hand on her waist, and realized that she was wearing almost nothing underneath the dress.

She suddenly stirred. "Let's cover us up. I'm cold."

She got up and went out of the room. He lay still, his mind a blank. A moment later she came back in, carrying a bright pink eiderdown. She covered him over with it and switched off the light before she climbed back into bed. When his hand touched her again, he experienced a shock of physical desire, and his mind became awake. Her lips brushed against his; they were dry and rough. He tried to sink back into the state of passive contentment, but her excitement made it difficult.

Now it was impossible to pretend that this was Sarah beside him; suddenly there was no resemblance at all. Sarah diffused a feeling of innocence, of passivity; even in kissing, her inexperience was obvious. This girl was in bed because she was physically excited and because—it was suddenly very obvious—she enjoyed sex. Her body was aware of the hardness of his excitement, and her response was immediate and simple. Her hand brushed his thigh, found its way to the top of his trousers. He felt the relaxation of the cloth around his waist, then again the slow warmth of her hand. He heard the sharp intake of her breath as her hand encountered his nakedness, then her hips came forward to press against him as her tongue searched persistently. His own hand, traveling down the back of her thigh, could feel only the cloth of the dress. She drew away from him, and her body lifted for a moment. When she pressed against him again, her thighs were bare. Her hand moved again to touch his nakedness. She was breathing hard, her lips, now moist and soft, strained against his. As she moved, his flesh touched the smoothness of her panties. She stirred impatiently, trying to remove the obstacle of damp nylon that separated them. His passivity seemed to irritate her. She said, "Please, please."

As he moved across her, he was already detached from his own excitement. The contact between them had become purely animal. At this point it would have been easy to stop; the magic that had possessed him so far was gone. He was making love to her because his body was capable of it, and because she wanted him to. His mind observed that she no longer kept their lips together, absorbed by the intenser contact, and that their bodies gave off a musky odor as they moved in broken rhythm. The love-making had its element of discomfort; the leg of her panties was tight, and the violence of her movements made it difficult to maintain contact. When their bodies became separated, she made impatient, moaning noises, until he moved into her again. Her arms were tight around him, her hands locked behind his waist; and she kept repeating, "Oh," as if starting a sentence that she was too excited to finish. He was glad when her excitement rose to a climax; his own desire had passed the point of wanting to reach a climax. He waited until she was quiet, then moved off her. A bead of sweat ran down the side of his nose and into the pillow. When he closed his eyes, he became aware that he was no longer drunk.

She said, "That was terrific."

He felt no desire to speak. A bubble had burst. He thought suddenly: "Thank God, Sarah doesn't seem oversexed."

She said, "Are you awake?"

He said, "Mmmm."

Her fingers ran through his hair. It was as wet as if he had just washed it. Then she leaned forward and

kissed his forehead. She said in a whisper, "All right. I'll let you sleep now."

She slipped out of the bed; a moment later the door closed. He wanted to tell her to take the eiderdown, but was afraid she would want to talk. He lay there, unmoving, for a few minutes, until he heard the bed-springs in her room creak. Then he cautiously removed his trousers without getting out of bed. He would have preferred to go downstairs and wash, but it would have revealed that he was not asleep. He pulled back the bed-sheets under him, and slipped between them. They felt cool and dry. He lay there, staring into the darkness, feeling calm and contented at the destruction of an illusion. Half an hour ago he had felt that in certain respects Sheila was far older than he was; she seemed to possess depths of instinctive wisdom that were hidden from his male intelligence. Now he knew it was untrue. She had the warmth, the instinctive sympathy and tenderness of a mature woman; beyond that, she was a young animal who enjoyed the physical act of love-making as frankly as a child enjoys ice cream. He knew, with sudden certainty, that he would never feel any enthusiasm for the act of physical intercourse. This, in itself, was unimportant; the negative certainty only threw into sharp relief his other, positive certainties.

Sleep came upon him so quickly that he did not notice it. Then Butler's voice roused him. "Damon. You awake?"

The door opened and light came in. Butler said, "Sorry to disturb you, Damon. Sarah just rang up from Keswick."

He struggled into an upright position. "Is she still on the phone?"

"No. I said you'd gone to bed an hour ago, but that I'd get you to ring back if you were awake. She's been trying to ring all evening but the place was empty, of course. I explained what had happened and she seemed quite happy about it. She sounds a sweet girl."

"What's the time?"

"Half past midnight."

He said, "I think I'll skip it. I'll ring her tomorrow."

"Okay. Go back to sleep."

But the time for sleep had gone. Five minutes after Butler left the room, he switched on the light and dressed quietly. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and massaged his eyes with the backs of his index fingers. He became aware of a great darkness inside him, and of a sense of warmth and meaning. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, imagining the circle of druid stones and the rocky valleys on the side of Skiddaw. Almost immediately his mind and body relaxed. He became aware that he had a faint headache, but it seemed unimportant, as if it were someone else's headache. The breeze from the window stirred his hair. He deliberately concentrated, pushing himself further into the inner darkness, further away from his physical body and his personality.

The ease with which he was able to achieve this surprised him. There was no effort, and it happened more quickly than usual. His breathing became shallow, and it seemed as if the atoms of his body were losing their energy, so that he was sinking into a state of suspended animation. A contentment that was deeper than happiness flowed over him in waves of quiet. He had a sensation as if looking down on his body, on the person called Damon Reade. The events of the past two days were present in his mind, and he found himself regarding them with a kind of tolerant gaiety. Everything seemed absurd and unimportant: his presence here, Butler's intrigues with Vivian Martin, his own involvement with Sheila. He

saw more clearly than ever before that all his ideas about himself and the world were a misunderstanding.

It was tempting to drift away from himself, to leave his body sitting there and pass beyond it into a state of contemplation of the immense silence that underlies human triviality. He resisted the temptation, with an obscure feeling that there were other things to be done. For a moment he was unable to remember what they were. Then it came back: his purpose in being there, the Thames murderer.

At first it seemed infinitely boring, and then slightly absurd, almost funny. He resisted the temptation to assess it in these moral terms, and tried to consider the facts of the case. Then, abruptly, the central facts became clear: guilt, obsession, and the need for purification. He realized suddenly that he had held all the clues since the talk with Lund, and had failed to see their significance. Now it was self-evident. The need for contemplation vanished; he felt a sense of triumph.

Butler was sitting in the armchair, his feet on the bed. The room was full of cigarette smoke.

"Hello Damon. Change your mind about tea? I'll make some more."

Reade said, "I've been thinking about these murders. I think I've got the answer."

Butler bent down and lit the gas. "Yes, go on. I'm listening."

"I was thinking about what we know, and it suddenly seemed obvious. What's the oddest feature of this case? That he writes Blake quotations on walls. Why? He only increases his chance of being caught. . ."

He stopped. He was failing to express what he meant. Butler lit a cigarette as he waited. He decided to start again.

"I try to get a mental picture of this man. First of all guilt, obsession, a powerful sexual urge. But we know that he's not a sort of homicidal gorilla. We know that he's intelligent."

Suddenly he knew what he wanted to say. He sat forward in the chair and began to speak with haste and excitement, jabbing his finger at Butler for emphasis.

"All that spells a self-divided man, a man in conflict with himself. And I feel that's the answer to the Blake quotations. I know this is difficult to understand. But there's a certain kind of temperament that wants to believe that nothing you can ever do makes any difference. Like Father Joseph of Paris—Huxley's Grey Eminence—who was largely responsible for the Thirty Years' War, and yet practiced mystic contemplation. You know Blake wrote 'The true soul of sweet delight can never be defiled.' Well, I think this man's the same. He wants to have his cake and eat it. If you like, he's a Jekyll and Hyde who can't resist doing these horrible things, but who becomes Dr. Jekyll as soon as he's done them. And it's the Jekyll half that writes the quotations from Blake. He wants to assert that he hasn't been defiled."

Butler said, "You're probably right. But where does it get us?"

"I haven't finished yet. I'm trying to explain how I arrived at my conclusion. Once I'd seen why he writes the quotations, I suddenly understood about the river too. It's this same split personality. The

water represents purity, washing himself free of guilt. So while Mr. Hyde commits the murders, Dr. Jekyll dumps the bodies near the river. It's a way of keeping his balance, keeping himself sane. It's like a priest who has sex for health reasons. He commits the murders to relieve a mental strain, and then somehow tries to dissociate himself from them, to achieve mystical detachment. Father Joseph all over again."

"I still don't see. . ."

"Wait, I'm just coming to it. You remember I said that I thought he'd end by committing suicide? This was because I felt instinctively that his Jekyll would end by wanting to destroy Hyde. . . But I suddenly realized that there's an alternative. He may have already gone through the suicide phase. It may have been a suicide attempt that started him on these murders. He fights against the Hyde tendencies for months until he can't stand it any longer, and he attempts to kill himself in total despair. But it doesn't work, he doesn't succeed. So he goes to the opposite extreme, he chooses the only other solution: total surrender to Mr. Hyde. That's why these murders are so violent. It's a suicidal violence turned against other people."

Butler was now listening with intense concentration. When the kettle started to whistle, he leaned over and turned off the gas. He said, "I can see only one objection there. People who really want to commit suicide don't fail. It's the others who fail—the self-dramatizers who don't really want to die. And that picture doesn't fit in with your idea of the killer."

"I agree. But how about the few people who do want to die but still don't succeed?"

Butler shook his head. "It seldom happens. It's so easy to succeed. The gas oven, a razor blade, an old belt and a clothes hook."

"But our man wouldn't use any of those methods. They're not clean enough. Only one way would appeal to him—drowning."

Butler stared at him. "God, yes. . . of course."

Reade went on quickly. "And a man who attempts drowning and gets pulled out is taken to a hospital. And we ought to be able to check on the hospitals along the Thames."

Butler was silent. He said finally, "I don't know whether it's inspiration or lunacy."

Reade misunderstood him. He said, "Oh no, not really inspiration. It's something much more commonplace. I've been doing just what I criticized the police for. . . concentrating on minute particulars and failing to see the wood for the trees. You see, that was one of the reasons I came here. Sarah's guardian and I had rather an argument about Sarah, and he accused me of being completely inexperienced and impractical. And I wanted to make him understand that I just have a totally different sense of life from his, that the universe is somehow a single organism and everything that happens is connected with everything else, so you have to try to get to the root of things to understand them. . . not just concentrate on minute particulars. It's like letting your second sight work."

Butler said, "You mean these ideas about the killer were second sight?"

"Not exactly. Is it second sight when I set out to interpret a difficult passage in Whitehead? I have to get beyond the individual words. I have to try to get above it all—to see it in relation to Whitehead's mind and all his other works. Well, there's no real difference between a murder case and a passage of Whitehead—they both need the same kind of insight. Anyway, that's not important. The next thing is to

find out how many hospitals along the river would deal with attempted suicide by drowning. Would any hospital, do you think?"

"I don't know. But I know somebody who might. A doctor at St. Thomas's. Can you pass that leather notebook? I'll ring him now. He's on night duty a lot."

Butler dialed the number. After a moment he said, "Is Dr. Haggerty there please?. . . Yes, I'll hold on. Well, there's the first piece of luck. He's on duty. . . Hello, Mike. Kit Butler here, Mike. Sorry to disturb you at this hour, but it's fairly important. There's a piece of information I need urgently. Does your hospital take attempted suicide cases in the casualty ward? Yes? Drowning? Would they bring all drowning cases in the central London area to you? No?. . . I see. . . I see. . . Well, it's rather difficult. . ."

He placed his hand over the receiver and said, "Damon, what was the date of the first murder?"

"Er. . . Feburary, sixty-four, I believe. . ."

"Well, this is the point, Mike. We're trying to trace a man who attempted suicide by drowning about January, sixty-four. No, we don't know where he jumped in. . . No, we don't know his name either. But we've got his description. He's a big man, very powerful, quite young, well educated. Not sure of his nationality. He could be a foreigner, perhaps an American. And a real neurotic. . . Well, I'll explain it all later. Will you be at Mary's tomorrow?. . . Good, I'd like to come. . . But one more question. How many hospitals can you think of along the Thames? That's right, where they might take a drowning case. . . Hold on, I'll get a pencil. . . St. Mary Abbot's. St. Stephen's. Hammersmith. Westminster. Charing Cross. Waterloo. . . No, I don't think it would be as far away as Greenwich. I'm thinking of the central London area. Guys. Fulham. . . No, not Ealing. . . St. Luke's. . . Yes, I think that'd be about enough. Do you know any doctors in any of these places?. . . Hold on. Hosmer at Fulham. Everett at St. Stephen's. That's all?. . . Yes, that's marvelous. . . In the meantime, could you check with some of your colleagues about the suicide? See if they recall him. . . I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. . . Okay. Good night, Mike. Many thanks. . ."

As he hung up, he said, "Damn. I forgot to ask him if either of these doctors would be on night duty."

"Never mind. How many did you get?"

"Nine, he knows doctors at two of them. I think I'll get him to do some of the work for us. He can check with some of the hospitals. . ."

Reade was looking down the list of hospitals in the London telephone directory. When he found the names in the London atlas, he ringed them round in red.

Butler yawned and stretched. He said, "What are you doing?"

"Finding out how long it would take to visit all these places."

"I'll drive you round tomorrow."

"I think I'll go tonight."

"What! At this hour!"

"This is the right hour. People don't attempt suicide during the day—there are too many people to fish

them out. They do it at this time of the night. And in that case, the night porters would remember."

"But night porters don't stay on duty forever. They go back on the day shift. In that case, you'd have to check the day shift as well."

"I don't know. . . But it's worth trying. And I think it might be easier to talk to hospital porters at night than during the day. It's quieter. Look, I could go round to six of these hospitals in less than two hours by taxi. Five out of six are all in the same small area, within half a mile of each other. I'll check the ones in central London tomorrow."

Butler said gloomily, "I wish you'd skip it until morning."

"You don't have to come. I can get a taxi from Radio Cabs."

Butler lit a cigarette and shook out the match with a quick, irritable motion. Both drank tea in silence for a moment. Then Butler said, "I don't know whether this idea of yours is an inspiration or a waste of time."

"Neither do I. I just think it's worth trying. Everything depends upon whether we're right about the psychology of the killer. That is, that he's not simply a hundred percent insane, a man who thinks he's Genghis Khan or something."

"Somehow, I don't think so."

"Nor I. I think he's a man who kills because he's under some sort of bad strain. If that's so, I think I'm almost certainly right in guessing that he's the suicidal type. I believe anybody who commits murder has a strong suicidal urge. Human sanity depends on feeling secure, physically secure, assuming that you'll still be alive in ten years' time. And a man who snuffs out a human being every few months destroys his own feeling of immortality. He feels that he would be snuffed out just as easily. He's devalued his own life."

Butler said, "I agree with all that. It's not your psychology that worries me. It's your geography. This man might live in Brighton or St. Albans and come to London once every month or so. He could be the inmate of a mental hospital who's regarded as harmless and let out on his own. We're making too many assumptions."

"I don't agree. I don't believe he could be the inmate of a mental hospital. They're the first people the police would check on. And the nurses would soon suspect something if there was a murder every time their model patient went off to London for an airing. What's more, I don't believe he's ever been in a British mental hospital. The police would have checked on him by now as they've checked on thousands of other potentially dangerous ex-patients. That's another reason for believing he's a foreigner of some sort—if he's been in a mental home, it must have been abroad."

Butler threw the end of his cigarette into the hearth. He said, "Anyway, let's get this over with. I think it's a mad idea, but I suppose we might as well try it."

"Why don't you let me go alone?"

"No point. I'm wide awake now. Come on."

The car was parked fifty yards away, in the Portobello Road. Butler groped inside the lining of the driving seat, and produced the ignition key. He said, "Which is the first stop?"

"The nearest, I should think—St. Mary Abbot's in Marloes Road. Then St. Stephen's, St. Luke's and Fulham."

Butler smoked as he drove. Neither of them spoke. It was soothing to drive through the streets of London by night. Netting Hill Gate was deserted. The trees of Kensington Gardens looked strangely beautiful in the neon lights of the Bayswater Road.

He was surprised when the car stopped; it had taken barely five minutes. The gates of the hospital were closed, but the small side gate outside the porter's lodge was open. There was only one man in the lodge; he was sitting at the telephone switchboard. Butler waited until he had finished speaking, then rapped on the window. The porter came over and opened it. He was short, baldheaded, and looked tired.

Butler said, "Sorry to bother you. I'm a reporter, Daily Express, and I'm doing a story about suicides ..."

The man interrupted immediately. "Now look here, I can't talk to you. I've got my job to think of."

Butler said quickly, "I don't want any general information. I can get that from the doctor in charge. But I'm trying to find out about a particular suicide attempt in January of sixty-four."

The man said irritably, "Sorry. Can't help you. You'll have to speak to the superintendent."

The switchboard began to buzz. The porter slammed the window and turned away. Butler said indignantly, "The lousy miserable bastard. I'd like to cut his throat."

"Never mind," Reade said. "Let's get on to the next place. Perhaps it's not a good idea to mention the press."

Reade looked at the street atlas with the help of the dashboard light, and directed Butler to St. Stephen's. When they stopped outside, he said, "Let me have a try this time."

There were two porters in the lodge, one in uniform, the other in blue overalls. The man in blue overalls was very small and old.

Reade said, "I don't know whether you can help me, but I'm trying to trace a friend of mine. The only thing I know about him is that he made an attempt at suicide by drowning in early nineteen sixty-four. I'm checking on various hospitals in central London to see if anyone remembers him."

The uniformed porter left the switchboard and came over. He said, "It's a funny hour of the night to make inquiries, isn't it?"

"No. Because, you see, I know he attempted suicide in the night. So I hoped someone on night duty might remember him."

"What was his name?"

"Ah, that's the problem. I'm fairly sure he gave a false name. His real name's Pierce. He's a huge man—very powerful physique, an American. . ."

Both shook their heads. Reade said to the uniformed man, "Were you on night duty in January, sixty-four?"

"I'm always on duty at night. I'm permanent night porter, except for four weeks of the year. That's in September. I can't remember your friend Pierce."

"And would you remember if a man of that description was brought in after an attempted suicide?"

"Yes. We don't get all that many drowning cases."

"Where do they usually go?"

"Oh, that depends. . . St. Thomas's. Guy's. Depends entirely where they got fished out."

Reade said, "Thank you very much indeed. You've been very helpful."

"Sorry we can't help you more," the man said.

Reade got back in the car. "No luck there. But they were civil enough. I think we can definitely rule that one out."

"I think it'd be easier to ring in the morning."

"All right. But now we're out, we may as well try St. Luke's. It's only a couple of minutes away."

When they stopped outside the hospital, Reade said, "Shall I try again?"

"No. You wait here."

Reade watched him mount the steps and walk over to the porter's lodge. A nurse was standing there, talking to the man inside. Butler addressed her. There was a conversation for a few minutes; then Butler turned and came back.

"No good there, Damon. She says they wouldn't usually have drowning cases, except under unusual circumstances. She's been there two years, and she can't remember one."

Reade said, "Well, it looks as if it's been a wild goose chase. Let's go home."

"Wait. There's one more nearby, isn't there?"

"There's the Fulham hospital. That's not very close. About a mile away."

"We'll try it." As he started the engine, he said, chuckling, "One begins to derive a grim satisfaction from it. Like banging your head against a wall. . ."

Reade said, "If we're going to the Fulham place, we may as well try the Hammersmith hospital too. It's on our way home, or not far out."

"I suppose so. At any rate, we should be finished in twenty minutes. That's pretty good. It would have taken three times as long in the daytime traffic."

Reade yawned. Fatigue washed over him in a heavy wave. He said, "I can hardly believe that I've only been in London for a day. It seems like a week."

At the Fulham hospital they crossed to the window of the porter's lodge. A young man with slicked-down hair was sitting back in an easy chair, reading a newspaper. On the other side of the lodge, a woman in a sister's uniform was making entries in a book. When their faces appeared, the man leaned forward and snapped open the window. He had the sharp little face of a London street Arab.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Butler said, "We're trying to trace a friend of ours who attempted suicide."

"What's his name?"

Reade said quickly, 'That's rather a problem. We're fairly certain he gave a false name. And this was in January of sixty-four. . ."

"Sixty-four!" the man said with astonishment.

The sister came over to the window and said, "And how do you hope to trace your friend two years later?"

"If we could find out which hospital he was brought to, you might have some address."

She was a middle-aged woman with a birdlike face. Her voice had the incisive quality of a schoolmistress. She asked, "Would he give his correct address if he gave the wrong name?"

Reade said, "But we don't know whether he did give the wrong name. We're just hoping someone might recognize his description. You see, he's quite a striking-looking man—very big and powerful. He's also the sort of personality you wouldn't forget—highly intelligent."

The porter turned to look at her. She said, "How did he attempt suicide?"

"By drowning."

The porter looked at her again. She said, "Are you from the press?"

"No. We're just friends."

Looking at her, Reade knew, with a sudden contraction of the heart, that they had found something. The porter's face made it obvious, and he also sensed it in her manner. He said, "You do remember such a person, don't you?"

She said, "I'm not sure I'd be within my authority to tell you so."

But her manner lacked severity. Both stood looking at her, feeling that it would be pointless to press her. Butler said finally, "I quite understand your feelings. Perhaps we could simply ring up the superintendent of the hospital tomorrow and explain the position?"

She said, in the same controlled, reasonable voice, "I think that would probably be the best idea. In any

case, the hospital records would be locked up at this hour."

Butler said, "All right. Thank you very much." He started to turn away.

Reade said, "Would it be possible for you to tell us what name he used?"

He looked from the face of the porter to the sister's. Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then she said, "I don't suppose that would do any harm. If we're speaking about the same person, he was called Sundheim. Gaylord Sundheim."

It was impossible for them to contain their pleasure. She smiled in response to their excitement. Both leaned forward, in at the window.

Butler said, "Was he an American?"

"Yes."

Reade said, "Just one more question please. . ."

She started to say, "I'm afraid. . ."

"This is a personal one. Why do you remember him so well?"

She said, smiling, "As you say, he wasn't the sort of person you forget easily."

Butler said, "Did you have any personal dealings with him, sister? Was he on your ward?"

She said, "He wasn't on a ward. He was in a private room for twenty-four hours. Then he was allowed to go."

"But you spoke to him?"

She said, "Yes."

Butler said with warmth, "Sister, you don't know how helpful you've been. Thank you very much indeed! We'll phone the hospital tomorrow and see if we can trace his address."

She said, "In that case, I'd rather you didn't mention that you've spoken to me."

"No, of course not."

As they turned away, the door of the lodge opened. She came out and stood looking at them. She said, in the same firm voice as before, "Has he done anything?"

For a moment neither of them spoke. As Reade and Butler looked at one another, she said quietly, "I can see he has."

Reade said with embarrassment, "We can't really answer that question because we don't know. We only suspect."

They stood, looking at her awkwardly. After her help, it seemed boorish not to answer her question. But

Reade was also aware of the eager face of the porter, his head almost thrust out of the window.

Butler said, "Would you say he was the sort to get into trouble?"

She shrugged slightly. "He was in trouble then. . . whatever it was."

As they looked at her, hesitating, neither being certain of what to reply, she said, "Good night." She turned away.

The eyes of the porter followed them to the car. He looked as if he wanted to follow them but was afraid to while the sister was in sight. As they climbed into the car, Butler said, "Think it's worth asking him what he knows?"

"I don't think so. We could always come back tomorrow. I think he's more anxious to find out what we know." As Butler started the car, he said, "I can't decide whether we're on to something, or whether it's just coincidence."

"Oh, we're on to something."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it. I knew it as soon as she said his name—Sundheim. It's the name of an American who wrote a pamphlet on Blake. I saw it tonight in Jeremy Bryce's library. . . Careful, you'll hit that lamppost."

Butler stopped the car and turned off the ignition. He said, "Are you sure of that?"

"Oh, quite sure. I've a good memory for names."

"Is it the same Sundheim, do you think?"

"His father, I imagine."

Butler took out a cigarette. His hand was slightly unsteady as he lit it. He said, "Christ! What do we do now?"

"I should imagine that a good start would be to see if Sundheim's in the phone book. Can you pull up near that kiosk down there?"

At the telephone box, they both got out of the car. The directories were new. Reade looked over Butler's shoulder as he turned the pages of the S-Z volume. Butler said, "Sunderland. . . Sundfelt, Sundius, Sundle. . . No, it's not here. Let's look under Sondheim. . . Here we are. Three Sondheimers but no Sondheim."

"He may not be a Londoner, of course."

"Perhaps," Butler said gloomily.

They got back into the car.

Reade yawned. "Let's get back. I can hardly keep awake."

"You feel sleepy?" Butler said with astonishment.

"Exhausted."

"You astonish me. Do you realize what we've just done?"

"I know. I'm excited, in a way. But there's nothing more we can do now. And if I lose any more sleep, I'll be worn out tomorrow. So let's get back."

It was shortly after three o'clock when they came back to Butler's room. It looked so unchanged from when they left that it was hard to believe what had happened. Butler went immediately to the telephone and dialed. He said, "Hello. Directory inquiries? Sorry to bother you at this time, but it's urgent. I'm trying to trace a man called Sundheim, Gaylord Sundheim, and I think he may have a new number. . . Oh, in the last month, perhaps. Thank you, miss."

He laid the phone on his knee and took out a cigarette. "It's worth trying, anyway. . . Hello. . . Yes. Ex-directory? Ah, I see. I didn't know that. It's rather urgent. Wouldn't it be possible to let me have the number?. . . No, of course, I understand. You're sure it's the right Sundheim? What are his initials? G. G.? Yes, that's him, with the address in Chelsea? Not in Chelsea? Could you tell me where? Well, just what area he's in now. . . No, I see. Of course not. . . Thank you. Good night."

He hung up, grinning. "He's in London. You heard? Ex-directory, though. I tried to find out the area. I should have said Kensington. Never mind. We know he's in town."

Reade stretched, yawning. "I think I'll go and sleep. I'll be able to think better tomorrow."

"Have a drink first. I think we deserve one."

"Not for me. I couldn't bear any more whiskey tonight."

"I shan't sleep without one."

Reade glanced at the bottom shelf of the drink cupboard. "Why do you keep so many directories?"

"Oh, they're old ones. I keep intending to throw them out."

Reade bent down and peered at the spines of the worn directories. He pulled out one labeled April, 1959. He said, "May as well check, anyway." The directory fell open; he saw that it was the right page and felt a prickle of tension, which he suppressed. He ran his finger down the column: Sunderland, Sundfelt. He said, "Here's a Sundheim. Mrs. Beatrice M. Sundheim. Berkeley Mews, Edwardes Square, W.8. Phone Western 4927."

"Marvelous! That could be a relation, perhaps his mother. . ."

"That sounds likely to me. The form of her name—Beatrice M. Sundheim—sounds American. You notice that most entries in the directory either give initials, or the Christian name only—hardly ever a Christian name and initial."

"Yes, you're right. That's typical American. So it could be his mother. . . In fact, it all fits! She's

probably a widow. Father dead. And what's more, I'd like to bet she died about two years ago, when he attempted suicide. . ."

Butler reached for the telephone. "I'm going to try again. And hope I don't get on to the same operator. Hello, inquiries?" He grinned at Reade, placing his hand over the mouthpiece for a moment. "It's a man this time. . . Hello, I wonder if you could give me the telephone number of G. G. Sundheim, Berkeley Mews, Edwardes Square, W.8. . . I can't find it in the book. It may be a new number. Would you check, please? The past month or so, I think. . ."

Reade stood by the door, leaning against it; he was unwilling to sit down again. His one desire now was to return to bed. After a moment Butler said, "Hello. . . Yes. Ex-directory, is he? Oh, what a pity. But are you sure it's the right one? Is his address in Berkeley Mews, Edwardes Square? It is? Good. Thank you very much, operator. Good night."

He replaced the phone with satisfaction. "We ought to set up a private detective agency. Murderer's caught in twenty-four hours. He still lives at Berkeley Mews. So Beatrice M. Sundheim was his mother, and she's died and left him the house. And he's immediately gone ex-directory. . . But what do we do now? Go and call on him?"

Reade said, "We'll talk about it tomorrow. I've got to sleep."

Butler said, snapping his fingers, "I've got it, Damon! You ring him and ask him if he's the Sundheim who wrote the book on Blake. He'll say no, it was his father. You ask if you could go and see him to discuss his father's ideas. What do you think of that?"

Reade said, "First, we don't know his phone number. Second, we're only guessing that this Orville Sundheim is his father. Third, even if he is, he might not want to see me about him—he probably hates his father. And fourth, I've got to go to bed. See you in the morning, Kit. Sleep well."

He locked his door before climbing into bed. As soon as he lay down, he felt as if he had become a feather, floating down through space. When he thought about Sundheim, it seemed somehow absurd and irrelevant. It was something he could not believe in.

Within seconds he was asleep.

PART III

THE rattling of the door and the sound of Butler's voice woke him from a heavy and dreamless sleep. It had been so deep that for a moment he was completely bewildered. He dragged himself out of bed, unlocked the door, and immediately fell into bed again.

Butler said, "Your cable's come, Damon—from your friend at the Library of Congress. And guess what's the first name on the list? Sundheim!"

He said drowsily, "Good."

"So I thought of cabling your friend to ask if he could dig out any biographical details on this Sundheim.

Then I remembered you said Millicent Bryce had a copy of the book. So I've phoned Jeremy to ask if we can borrow it. He's on his way over with it now.

"Good. Well, you go on down, and I'll get dressed and join you."

Butler said good-humoredly, "Okay. You look like a blind mole! Don't go to sleep again."

When he stood up, he felt slightly dizzy, and made a mental note to avoid whiskey on an empty stomach. He washed in cold water at the sink on the landing, then changed into clean underwear. While he was dressing, the doorbell rang. Shortly afterward he heard Vivian Martin's voice on the stairs.

Ten minutes later, in Butler's room, he found Jeremy Bryce striding up and down, obviously excited. As soon as he saw Reade, he said, "Well, this is all tremendously exciting, and quite mad. I've never come across such a fantastic coincidence."

"Coincidence?" Reade poured a cup of tea.

"This business of the name—Sundheim. I've brought his book over."

Butler and Vivian Martin were sitting side by side on the bed, reading the book that rested on her knees. Butler said, "This stuff's fascinating, Damon. There's an introduction about this man Sundheim. He died in 1956 at the age of sixty. It says he was an engineer by profession, and did a lot of mountain climbing. But it doesn't mention if he was married."

"May I see it?"

'There's only one interesting comment—it says he was a man of great physical strength and endurance. So he may have passed it on to his son. . . if this Gaylord Sundheim is his son."

Bryce said, "Excuse me, Damon. Before you begin to read, let me just tell you what I've suggested, and see if you agree. I think it might be a good idea to get a private detective agency to keep an eye on this Sundheim. We've been working out the dates of these murders, and they're getting closer together. They start with an interval of six months—February to August—then it drops to four months, three months, ten weeks, two months, five weeks and a month. The last one was three weeks ago. So we reckon there's another due any minute now. Now the trouble is that private detectives are fairly expensive—at least ten guineas a day. I don't mind paying the money—provided we're moderately certain it's not a complete waste of time."

Butler said, "I think you'd probably get your money back if Sundheim's the right man."

"Of course I would. Apart from anything else, I should think some newspaper would pay a thousand pounds for the story. But we ought to try and get a little more information before we go any further. Do you agree, Damon?"

"On the other hand," Butler said, "it might be simpler to leave it all to the police. They might find grounds for arresting him right away, and prevent all possibility of another murder."

^^Reade was glancing through the booklet. It was ninety pages long; the title page bore the words: "Privately printed for the author." It was called William Blake, Witness to the Truth, by Orville Sundheim. Most pages seemed to contain quotations from the Bible—usually the prophetic books and the Revelation of St. John. He said, "I agree that we ought to try and check on Sundheim before we do

anything else. Excuse me just a moment, though, while I look through this. At a casual glance this man seems to be a crank. A Bible fanatic."

"That's what I thought," Bryce said. "He seems to spend his time proving that Blake borrowed all his poetry from the Bible."

"In other words," Butler said, "just the type to turn his son into a militant atheist."

"I don't know," Reade said. "He quotes the Marriage of Heaven and Hell several times. No man who approves of that book can be a narrow bigot. I'd have to read this carefully to reach any definite conclusions."

Butler had been leafing through Fisher's folder of clippings. He said, "Listen to this. The seventh murder was a man called David Miller, a male model. He was the one whose body was found in the Hammersmith cemetery. Apparently he disappeared on January the seventeenth. His body was found on January the nineteenth, two days later. One of his friends said he was going out to Putney to meet someone in a pub, and he never came back." He looked up from the folder. "Let's suppose the man he went to meet was his murderer. . ."

"Unlikely, though," Bryce said. "Murderer's don't make appointments like that—it's too dangerous. The victim might mention who he's going to see."

"All right. Let's suppose he went to the Putney pub to meet an acquaintance—a new boy friend or something. He's obviously queer—a male model with an address in Soho. The boy friend doesn't turn up, and he meets Sundheim instead, and agrees to go home with Sundheim. Now here's my point. He was found at nine in the morning of the nineteenth. The pathologist said he'd been dead about thirty hours—that places the time of death as about three A.M. the previous day. So the murderer must have kept the body in his home, all day, and taken him out to dispose of the next evening. In other words, he lives alone. That fits Sundheim, as far as we know."

Vivian Martin said, "But how do you know? For all you know, he might live with a boy friend."

"We could find out. But here's a point. David Miller weighed fourteen stones. And if he was a model, that couldn't have been all fat. . . Yes, here's a photograph of him. He looks fairly strong. The murderer must be pretty powerful and athletic. And listen to this. The coroner said that it was pure chance the body was discovered in the cemetery, because it was hidden in a corner with no graves, among high grass. I seem to remember the same sort of thing about that body found on the Lambeth bomb site—it had been there for three days. Do you see what I mean? He's a man who has time to look around for good places to dump bodies."

Bryce said, snapping his fingers, "I'd like to make another guess—that his mother was buried in the Hammersmith cemetery, which is how he came to notice the spot!"

Vivian Martin said, "I know this club called Frankie's."

"Which club?"

"It says David Miller used to frequent a Soho club called Frankie's. It's a queers' club in Soho. I once went up there, and they looked daggers at me."

Butler said, "We ought to check there—see if they know Sundheim."

"No good at this time of day," Bryce said. "We'd have to go in the evening." He stubbed out his cigarette. "Time we got back to the office, sweetie."

Butler said, "Could you give us a lift to Edwardes Square?"

"Yes, of course. But what for? You're not going to call on him, are you?"

"No. But I'd like to look at the place, just to find out how isolated it really is. If it's anything like a place I once had, everybody in the mews knew every time you went to the lavatory."

"Better be careful. We don't want to warn him at this stage."

"Coming, Damon?"

"Yes, of course. . ."

Bryce's Jaguar was parked outside. As they climbed in, the first drops of rain began to fall. It was raining heavily by the time the car turned into Holland Park Avenue.

Bryce said, "What's your opinion, Damon? You seem to have something on your mind."

"Not exactly."

"That means he has," Butler said.

"No. It's too early to say anything at this stage. But what keeps bothering me is why he wrote up the Blake quotations in the first place."

"You've already answered that, surely? Because he had Blake rammed down his throat as a child, and the murders are an act of revolt against his father."

Reade said slowly, "Yes, I know. But. . . it's just that. . . you were discussing whether to get a private detective, or call in the police immediately. But you see, I'd like a chance to talk to him before we do anything like that."

Butler said, "You must be mad! Have you read about what he did to that body in Salamanca Place—roasted bits of it to make it unrecognizable? You're dealing with a homicidal maniac!"

"I know, but I can't believe that a man who knows Blake by heart is completely unredeemable."

"Unredeemable!" Butler said. "Who's talking about redemption? This bloke's a madman with a chopper."

Bryce said, "Here's Edwardes Square. What now?"

"This mews is over there somewhere—Could you stop near that lamppost?"

The entrance to the mews lay to the left of them. A small archway led into a cobbled yard, with lock-up garages on either side.

For a moment no one spoke. Something that had been unreal suddenly became real. It was like looking at a historic monument; but the feeling was tinged with morbidity.

Bryce said, "Do you know the number?"

"Five."

"Do you intend to go and look at it?"

"Why not? There must be people coming and going all day."

"'I think I'll back the car, all the same," Bryce said. "We can be seen here."

He backed a few yards, and stopped again.

Butler said, "If Viv came with me, it'd look less suspicious—young couple out for a stroll."

Reade said, "That's a good idea. You go ahead. I'll wait here."

Butler and Vivian Martin got out of the car; she took his arm. The rain was still falling, but less heavily. Reade lowered his window; the air smelled fresh. There was a scent of blossoms coming from the gardens. Bryce lit a cigarette. Neither of them spoke. Butler and Vivian Martin returned almost immediately. As Bryce opened the door for her, she said, "We've just seen him."

"What!"

"He came to take in his milk off the doorstep."

"Are you sure it was him?"

"Pretty sure," Butler said. "He was a big man in a yellow sweater."

"Did he notice you?"

"I don't think so. We were standing with a tree between us and him. He's a powerful-looking type. The house is right down at the end of the mews, and it stands back from the others."

Vivian Martin said, "The garage is underneath. So he'd have no trouble moving a body out of the house and into the car."

Bryce said, "I suggest we go back to my place and have a drink. We can't do much here. It'd be too much of a risk for Damon and me to take a look at the place." He started the engine and pulled a few yards down the street. As they passed the archway, Vivian Martin said excitedly, "He's coming out. Go on a little."

Butler looked around, but the rear window was covered with droplets of rain. Through the side window Reade saw a tall figure in a yellow sweater emerge from the mews and turn to the right.

He said, "Could you turn at the next corner?"

Butler said, "Is that wise? Supposing he sees us?"

"We'll risk that."

Bryce turned the corner to the right, backed the car, and turned back the way they had come. By now the figure in the yellow sweater had disappeared. But when they reached the next corner, he could be seen twenty yards away, walking toward Kensington High Street.

Butler said, "Could we keep behind him and follow him?"

"It's difficult," Bryce said. "There's too much traffic in Ken High Street. I'll try, though."

The man had now almost reached the corner. Even at this distance, Reade could observe his size. He had the build of a rowing blue or an American football player, and he walked like a man who is proud of his catlike grace. They watched him turn half right to cross the High Street. By the time the car had reached the corner, they could see him across the road, walking toward the corner of Holland Park. Traffic in both directions was heavy, and they had to wait nearly five minutes before they could pull across the road. By this time, the man had disappeared into Phillimore Gardens.

Reade looked in the London atlas and located their position. He said, "There's no hurry. He can't get very far. He can't turn left because the park's there."

But when the car turned into Phillimore Gardens, there was no sign of the man. Bryce cruised along slowly, looking into every side street they passed.

Reade said, "Better turn right here. He must have turned into one of these streets, unless he's gone into a house."

In the Campden Hill Road, they saw him again, outlined against the sky at the top of the hill. He was walking with an easy, leisurely stride. The rain had now stopped, and the sunlight was brilliant on the wet road. He seemed to be enjoying his stroll in the sun.

As Bryce accelerated, Butler said, "Better not get too close. I'd rather lose him than let him suspect he's being followed."

Bryce took the hill slowly, then pulled in to the side of the road, opposite a garage. The yellow-topped figure reached the corner of Holland Park Avenue and turned right. Bryce allowed the car to roll down the hill without switching on the engine. They saw the man on the other side of the road, approaching the traffic lights at Netting Hill Gate. As they waited to pull across the road, he turned left

Butler said, "What are you going to do now, Jeremy? How about the office?"

"I'll skip that for now. It's the lunch hour anyway." At the traffic lights, Bryce said, "I'm afraid we may have lost him. He's nowhere in sight. He may have gone into a shop." He turned left as the lights changed.

Vivian Martin said, "No. I can see him. Standing outside that shop."

They paused to allow a taxi to pull in front of them. The man was standing about twenty yards away, looking into a shop window.

Butler said, "Go on past him, Jeremy, and turn left at the next street. Then try and park. I'd like to get a

closer look at him."

As they drew level with the man, they could see that he was staring in the window of an antique shop. His hands were thrust into the pockets of smart gray jeans. A moment later Bryce turned the corner, and they lost sight of him. Several cars were parked already, and it was difficult to find a space. A moment later Sundheim passed the car without giving it a second glance. They watched him go on and cross Chepstow Villas.

Butler said, "I'm going to follow him. What about you?"

"We'll stay with you for the moment. Can't give up the chase now."

"In that case, I think we'd better split up. He might have seen me in the mews—although I don't think he did. Come on, before we lose him." The man was now out of sight.

Vivian Martin said, "It looks as if he's going to call on you!"

Butler clambered out of the car and opened the door for her. As she climbed out, Reade observed the way Butler's eyes traveled over the silk-clad legs. Butler caught his eye and grinned. He said, "Come on, Damon. Viv, you go ahead and try and keep him in sight. If we lose one another, we'll meet back at my place. All right? Jeremy, are you going with Viv?"

"I'll follow you two. Go ahead while I lock up the car." As they walked on, Butler said, "Look at that magnificent girl! Isn't she marvelous! Those legs!"

Reade said, smiling, "Keep your mind on Sundheim. It'll ease the tension."

"I can think of better ways. Listen, Damon, if you get a chance to leave the two of us alone, will you do it?"

"Of course. But you hadn't better let Jeremy suspect you want to steal his girl friend."

"I don't think he'd care much. I've got a feeling he's a Casanova. . . God, where is she?"

They had crossed into the Portobello Road, and the crowds made it difficult to see for more than a few yards. The sunlight had brought everybody out. There was no sign of the yellow sweater, or of Vivian Martin.

Butler said, "You take one side of the road and I'll take the other. She can't be far."

"No need," Reade said. "There she is, in that shop." She was looking at them from inside an antique shop and waving her hand with a cautious, restrained motion. The crowd that surrounded a cheap jewelry stall came between them; when they reached the window, she was no longer visible.

Butler said, "We'd better separate. You stay out here and look out for Jeremy."

The antique shop had several racks of second-hand books; there were more inside. Reade looked through the rack outside the door, trying to watch the road for Jeremy Bryce. After five minutes there was still no sign of Bryce; he decided to go into the shop.

There were two rooms, separated by an alcove. Vivian Martin was standing in the corner, looking

through a shelf of paperbacks. Through the door of the alcove he caught a glimpse of a yellow sweater. When she saw him, she indicated the other room with a slight movement of her head. He nodded and took a place near her. From the other room an American voice was saying, "You've no idea what happened to the other one?"

"I'm afraid not, sir, I only bought the one."

Reade glanced at Vivian Martin with surprise. The voice, which he had expected to be strong and masculine, was strangely high, the voice of a comic curate. It went on. "It's a pity about this crack. It spoils the look of the thing. How much do you want for it?"

"Twenty-five pounds, sir."

"Th. . . that's rather much."

"But good value, sir."

It was impossible to get used to the voice. It was mild and gentle, slightly nasal, with the toneless, almost whining inflection common to certain American women. If Reade had not known it belonged to a man, he might have mistaken it for a woman's. The very slight stutter added to this impression of mildness and femininity.

The voice said, "How do you know it's genuine? It might be one of these Hungarian imitations."

"Oh no, sir. That's no imitation. You look on the bottom. It's got the real Chinese marks on it."

"Oh yes, I don't deny that," the voice said patiently, mildly. "They're the T'ung Chih period, toward the end of the last century. So even if it's genuine, it couldn't be worth more than ten pounds or so."

The cockney owner of the other voice was beginning to sound ruffled. He said irritably, "Well, if you don't want it. . ."

The ringing of the telephone interrupted him. He said, " 'Scuse me."

Reade was startled when he heard Butler's voice say, "Excuse me saying so, but it's a beautiful piece of work."

"Oh yes," the American voice said hesitantly, "it's beautiful all right. But I doubt whether it's worth what he's asking for it."

"I might be able to tell you," Butler said. "Would you mind if I looked at the marks on the bottom? Ah, I thought so. That's Shun Chih, not T'ung Chih."

"Really? I'm afraid I'm not really an expert. That's earlier, isn't it?"

"Certainly, the middle of the seventeenth century, Ch'ing dynasty. But I can see how you made the mistake. The top four ideograms are the same as the T'ung Chih. But these bottom two are quite different."

The voice said, with naïve astonishment, "Is that so! And do you think it's worth twenty-five pounds?"

They heard the tinkle as a telephone was hung up. Butler said quickly, "A great deal more, I'm pretty certain. If you don't want it, I'll have it. . ."

The shopman came in again. He said, "You decided, sir?"

The voice said, "Make it twenty and it's a deal!"

The tone was at once naïve and cunning, an old lady out to drive a hard bargain. Reade and Vivian Martin looked at one another and smiled.

The shopman said, "Can't do it, sir. How about twenty-three?"

"Er. . . twenty-two?"

"Split the difference and call it twenty-two ten? 'Ow about that?"

"Okay. You got yourself a deal. I'll take it. . . Let me see. . . Here we are. . ."

"I'll get change, sir."

Butler's voice said, "And a very good bargain too. Are you a collector, might I ask?"

"Well, sort of. . ."

"So am I. Antiques have always fascinated me. Why don't you join me for a cup of tea? My place is near here."

The voice said, "Well, that's most kind of you, but at this very moment I can't. I'm expecting an aunt to tea, and I. . . oh, thank you."

The shopman had obviously returned with the change.

The voice said, "I'll leave it here for a moment while I go and find a taxi. Excuse me. . . oh, I'm sorry. . ."

He had cannoned into Vivian Martin in his hurry to leave the shop. She said, "That's all right."

Reade kept his face averted. The man rushed past him and out of the door. A moment later Butler came out of the other room. He said, "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Back home. Come on, Viv."

"Just a moment," Reade said. "I want to buy these books."

A moment later Butler came back into the shop. He said quickly, "Delay as long as you can, will you?"

"All right. . ."

"And if you see Jeremy, delay him as well."

He hurried out of the store. Reade found the shopman and paid for the two paperback books. He glanced curiously at the Chinese vase that stood on the table.

"That's rather beautiful."

"Yes. Just sold it a minute ago."

"Yes, I heard. Tell me, do you know the man who bought it?"

"No, sir. At least, only by sight. I've seen him in here once or twice before. He always haggles about the price. Do you know him?"

"Only by sight, I'm afraid."

Outside the shop he mingled in the crowd; he was afraid he might meet Sundheim again, and be noticed. He realized suddenly that he was hungry. He went into a snack bar and had coffee and a sandwich. A quarter of an hour later he walked slowly back to his lodgings.

In his own room, he lay down on the bed. He still felt tired; it was a temptation to pull the blankets over him and sleep. When he closed his eyes, he could again hear the gentle, nasal voice. He forced himself to sit up, and started to read. The doorbell downstairs rang three times—Kit Butler's ring. A moment later he heard soft footsteps on the stair outside his door. Kit Butler looked into the room.

"Ah, Damon! Thank heaven you're there. Can you answer the door? It must be Jeremy. Don't let him know I've been alone with Vivian."

Reade said, laughing, "You look as guilty as a cat that's stolen the cream!"

Butler grinned and licked his lips. "She's terrific. Anyway, go and answer the door while I finish the cream."

When he opened the door, Bryce was standing with his back to it, tapping his foot impatiently.

Reade said, "Sorry about the delay."

"That's all right. How long have you been back? I've searched everywhere for you."

"About ten minutes."

"Did you lose Sundheim?"

"No. Kit talked to him."

They went into Butler's room. Butler was standing in front of the mirror, shaving with an electric razor. Vivian Martin was sitting across the bed, her long legs crossed; she looked as cool and relaxed as if posing for a fashion photograph.

Butler said, "Has Damon told you about Sundheim?"

"Not yet. What happened?"

Vivian Martin said, “Kit tried to get him to come back here for tea!”

“No! What was he like?”

“A great big pansy,” Butler said.

Vivian Martin said, “We’ve all come to the conclusion that he couldn’t possibly be a murderer. He wouldn’t have the courage to kill a mouse.”

“Are you sure? Tell me about it.”

Butler outlined what had happened in the antique shop.

Bryce said, “What did you think, Damon? Could he be a murderer?”

“I just don’t know. I’m inclined to think not—unless he’s a complete split personality. He gives the impression of being as mild as buttermilk.”

“I wish I’d seen him. Kit, why couldn’t you try and follow up this acquaintance?”

“How?”

“You know where he lives. Try and bump into him in the street. Or perhaps he uses that pub round the corner.”

Butler shook his head. “I don’t mind. But I’ve got a feeling he doesn’t like casual acquaintances.”

Vivian said, “How about Damon? Couldn’t he pretend he’s confused this Sundheim with the Blake scholar?”

“But how?” Reade said. “How am I supposed to know of his existence? I can’t just go and bang on his door and say, ‘Are you the Sundheim who wrote this book?’ “

Butler said, “Wait. I’ve got an idea. Couldn’t you say you had a letter from his father, giving that address?”

“But we don’t even know if it is his father.”

“No. . . I suppose not.”

“And according to this book, he died in nineteen fifty-six. That’s ten years ago. He probably didn’t live at that address ten years ago.”

“That’s easy enough to find out,” Butler said. “Ring directory inquiries and find out if the telephone was in the name of Sundheim in nineteen fifty-six.”

“Would they have phone books dating that far back?”

“I think so. Come to think of it, I might have one. Let’s have a look.”

He rummaged in the bottom of the drink cupboard, tossing old directories out onto the floor. He said finally, "Curse it. There's an E to K for nineteen fifty-six, but no S. I'll ring inquiries."

"Don't do that for a moment. I've seen some old directories in my room."

The directories were in a cupboard in the corner, at the side of the gas meter. Some previous tenant had apparently been using them as toilet paper; several of them had their covers missing and pages torn away. But they were all too late; the earliest was 1959.

On the landing outside the door, he stood on tiptoe and peered on top of an old wardrobe. There were still more directories; when he disturbed them, dust filled his nostrils. The first one he took down was dated 1955. It was the S-Z volume. He took it back into his room and opened it. The name was there: Beatrice M. Sundheim, 5 Berkeley Mews.

He said, "I've got it. This is fifty-five and Mrs. Sundheim had the address then. But I don't see we're much better off. According to this book, Orville Sundheim died in Connecticut."

Bryce said, "But I seem to remember it also says he used to consult Blake manuscripts in the British Museum. Where did he stay when he was in London?"

Reade said, "But we don't even know that he was a relative of this Beatrice Sundheim."

"I think we can assume it," Butler said. "Sundheim's an unusual name—so unusual that it doesn't appear in the London phone directory this year. We know Orville Sundheim was American, and we're pretty sure Beatrice Sundheim was American. We know that Gaylord Sundheim's an American. I'd say it's almost certain they'd be related. In any case, what's to stop you writing to Sundheim simply to ask him if he's the son of Orville Sundheim?"

"And, again, how am I supposed to have found his address?"

"From an old London telephone book."

Bryce said, "I'm inclined to agree with Kit, Damon. You've got a pretty good excuse for approaching Sundheim. You're a writer, on Blake, and so was Orville Sundheim. Why don't you just take the risk and say that you corresponded with Orville Sundheim, and he gave you that address? What risk are you taking?"

Reade said, shrugging, "To begin with, I don't like lying." Suddenly he felt stubborn and reluctant.

Vivian Martin said, "I had an aunt who was always changing her telephone number because she thought the Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuting her. When we wanted to contact her, we had to get on to the switchboard superintendent and ask if she'd ring my aunt, and ask if she'd accept a call from me. Couldn't you try that with Sundheim?"

Butler snapped his fingers. "Marvelous. I should have thought of that. Try it, Damon. What can you lose? If he refuses to see you, that's the end of it. I'll try out Jeremy's idea of bumping into him in the street."

"Why don't you?" Bryce said.

Reade said reluctantly, "I can never lie convincingly."

Butler said, "Let me get him for you, Damon. Then all you've got to do is talk to him. Will you?"

He said, "Oh, all right. I suppose I may as well."

Butler picked up the telephone and dialed the operator. He said, "Could I speak to the superintendent, please? Thank you. . . Hello. I wonder if you can help me. I'm trying to contact a friend of mine whose number is ex-directory. I've got his address and the old telephone number. I wonder if you could ring him for me and ask him if he'll accept a call?. . . It's rather urgent. . . His name is Sundheim, Gaylord Sundheim. Shall I spell that for you. . . ? My name is Reade, Damon Reade."

They were all completely silent, listening to him. Reade wished that he had gone to the lavatory before letting Butler make the call; his bowels suddenly felt watery. The wait seemed interminable. Five minutes went by while Butler sat with the telephone to his ear. The superintendent came back on the line to ask for Sundheim's old number. There was another wait. Then Butler said, "It's ringing. . ."

Reade moved over to his armchair and took the telephone. The ringing stopped, and the voice he instantly recognized said, "Hello."

"There is a Mr. Reade ringing you from. . ." The line suddenly went silent. He listened for a few seconds longer. Then the operator's voice said, "Go ahead, please."

He cleared his throat and said, "Is Mrs. Sundheim there, please?"

"Who?"

"Mrs. Beatrice Sundheim?"

The voice said, "My mother is dead."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. My name is Damon Reade. I once had some correspondence with Orville Sundheim, who I believe was your father. . ."

He stopped, his throat suddenly tight. There was no reply from the other end of the line. He said, "Hello?"

"Hello."

"Ah. . . you're still there. Was Orville Sundheim your father?"

"Yes."

The admission was made with reluctance; it brought a relaxation of the tension in Reade's throat. He felt suddenly in control of the situation. He said, "In that case, you must be the son that he brought up on Blake?"

There was a noncommittal noise at the other end of the line.

Reade said, "I don't know whether you've come across my name. I've written three books on Blake."

"Er. . . yes."

"I've just come across your father's posthumous book in the British Museum. I wonder if you could tell me what happened to his manuscripts and notes?"

"Yes, I can. I have them."

"Are they by any chance in London?"

"Yes."

"Then would it be possible for me to see them?"

There was a silence. The voice asked, "When did you want to come?"

"As soon as possible. I'm down here to do some research. I'd like to return home within the next day or two. I live in the Lake District."

There was another silence. Finally Sundheim said, "Well, I suppose you'd better come and look at them. When would you like to come?"

"Whenever possible. This afternoon? Tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid I shan't be in this afternoon. Could you make it this evening?"

"Certainly. What time?"

"Eight o'clock?"

"That's splendid. I'll be there. Is it the same address as in the nineteen fifty-nine phone book?"

"Yes."

"In that case, I'll take a taxi over. Many thanks indeed. Goodbye."

When he hung up, he gave a deep sigh and dropped into the chair that Butler had vacated.

Bryce said, "That was wonderful!"

Vivian Martin said, "It's a pity you didn't ask if you could take a friend along. I don't like you going to see him alone."

"I'm not too happy about it myself," Reade said. "He's too big for comfort."

"When are you due to go?" Bryce asked.

"Eight o'clock this evening."

"Good. That'll give me a chance to check at this Soho club."

Butler poured four large whiskies. He handed one to Reade. "Here. You deserve this."

Vivian said, "I think we all do."

They all drank. Reade had to force himself to swallow the first mouthful, but he felt better as soon as it had gone down.

Bryce said, "How do you feel now? Do you still think he's not a murderer?"

Reade took another swallow. He said, "I don't know. It's a coincidence about his father being a Blake scholar, of course."

Butler said, "And another coincidence that he was fished out of the Thames? I'd like to bet a thousand pounds that he's the Thames murderer."

Reade said, "What do you think, Vivian?"

"I. . . don't feel so sure. I must admit he didn't look the criminal type to me. And he didn't sound it."

Reade said, shrugging, "It's useless to speculate. We'll have to find out more about him. I'll see what I can find out this evening."

Bryce said, "Well, I need a good meal. It's an hour past my lunchtime. Would you two like to join us for lunch?"

"Not for me, thanks," Reade said. "I'm tired. I'm going to relax for an hour or so."

"All right. Do you want to come with us to Frankie's this evening? Yes, you'd better, in case we find out anything you ought to know. I'll call for you at six o'clock."

When he woke up, three hours later, the sense of fatigue and foreboding had disappeared; so had the remains of the hangover. There was a pleasant feeling of returning vitality, and of anticipation.

He went down to Butler's room. The door was unlocked but the room was empty. He sat on the bed and took up Orville Sundheim's book on Blake. Read slowly, starting from the beginning, it seemed less incoherent and cranky. He was on page thirty when Butler came back in. He was carrying a white paper bag.

"Good, I'm glad you're down. I've been out for sandwiches. You hungry?"

"Very."

Butler said, "Incidentally, I thought of something. . ."

He opened a drawer and took out a small pearl-handled revolver. He held it out to Reade.

"What on earth's that for?"

"I remembered the girl downstairs kept a gun. Take it. You might need it."

"Good heavens, no! Besides, I couldn't shoot anybody even if I wanted to."

Butler said seriously, "But you'd feel safer if you had it in your pocket. And it's so small it won't show."

"But I wouldn't," Reade said. "At least, I'd feel guilty about carrying it. I want to try and meet this man as openly as possible."

"You might not feel like that if he grabs you by the throat!"

"No, really. Please. I'd rather not take it."

Butler shrugged and dropped it back into the drawer.

Reade said, "I've been reading this book by Sundheim's father. It's a curious work. He obviously knows the prophetic books of the Bible by heart. He's a kind of apocalyptic. I think he must have got a lot of satisfaction out of the gloomier bits of the Old Testament."

"Is it more or less sane?"

"Oh yes. He's an intelligent man. But it's somehow terribly obsessed. . . he has a one-track mind. He obviously likes Blake because he gets pleasure out of his obscurity and violence."

Butler said, "I don't really like this, Damon. I've got a feeling we're playing with fire. Why don't we ring Scotland Yard now? I think there's enough evidence to make them investigate Sundheim."

Reade said, "Listen. That's another thing I want to discuss. It struck me just now when I woke up. . . Don't you think that we're considering the means much more than the end?"

"I don't follow you."

"I mean. . . What are we going to do about Sundheim. . . supposing he is the murderer?"

Butler said, with astonishment, "What do you think? Turn him over to the police. What else can we do?"

"Yes, I know. . . but I don't like the idea. We're condemning this man to death—or at least to a lifetime in prison."

"Of course we are," Butler said. "He's got to be stopped. That's all."

"Quite!" Reade said. "He's got to be stopped. And supposing that doesn't have to involve sending him to jail for life?"

Butler was now staring with astonishment. He had poured himself a whiskey but left it untouched beside him.

"Damon, there are times when I'm inclined to doubt your sanity. What on earth are you talking about? How can we know whether he'll kill again? What are you going to do—ask him to promise across his heart that he won't kill anybody else?"

Reade said with embarrassment, "Er. . . no. I can't quite explain what I mean. You see, it seems to me that you and Jeremy are inclined to think of this as a kind of game—playing at detectives. I wanted to say this to you this morning, but I didn't quite know how to put it."

Butler said patiently, "Look, it's not a question of what we feel about Sundheim. It's a quite practical question. If we know he's a murderer, and we don't inform the police, we become accomplices. And apart from that, we've no practical way of knowing that he won't go on killing unless we know he's behind bars."

The doorbell rang three times. Butler stood up. As he reached the door, Reade said, "Let's not talk about this in front of Jeremy. It's not worth raising yet anyway. I mean, Sundheim might be as innocent as he looks."

A few moments later Butler returned with Bryce and Vivian Martin.

Bryce said, "The club's open now. And I've got hold of a member to introduce us. Charles Saunders. He runs Martin Black, the publishers. I remembered he'd once invited me to visit some queer club, so I gave him a ring. We're to pick him up at South Kensington at half past six. So we'd better get a move on."

Butler said quickly, "Have you told him about Sundheim?"

"No, of course not. He's the biggest gossip in London. I just said we wanted to see the place."

The heavily built man, wearing a dark hat and overcoat, was waiting for them outside South Kensington station. He was probably in his mid-fifties, and had the sagging red face of a man with a good expense account. His voice had a pleasant, courteous quality. He moved into the back seat of the Jaguar, saying, "How do you do?" Reade had been expecting something altogether more brash and obvious; he responded with embarrassment.

Saunders leaned back in his seat, his umbrella between his knees, and said, "Well, this is very pleasant, my dear Jeremy. I do hope you're not disappointed."

"I'm sure we shan't be. Have you met Kit Butler, the composer?"

"I haven't, but I'm delighted to do so now." Bryce said, "By the way, Charles, wasn't this man David Miller a member of the club?"

"Indeed he was. I knew him quite well."

"Have you got any theories about this killer?"

"None at all. All I know is that David had quarreled with his current boy friend a few days before it happened, and moved into another room. Unfortunately, he was rather a secretive sort of person, so he wouldn't mention it to anyone if he'd found a new boy friend."

"You think his killer was homosexual, then?"

"Oh, I should think so, beyond all shadow of doubt."

"Why are you so definite?" Butler asked.

"To begin with, David must have gone home with the man—you know he'd been dead for over a day when he was found. Secondly, I should think he must have been asleep when he was attacked. He was quite a strong sort of person—muscular and rather splendid, the Greek athlete type. So they must have been in bed."

"What was his previous boy friend like?"

"Ashley? Rather the same type as himself—big and strong. Incidentally, if you don't mind me suggesting this, I shouldn't talk about David in the club. They might think you were connected with the police. We had a lot of police around, of course."

Bryce parked the car and they turned into a narrow alleyway; halfway down, there was a courtyard into which Saunders led them. There was a bookshop that seemed to be devoted largely to books about sex, and advertisements for rupture appliances. Next to this a door stood open, revealing a flight of stairs without carpet or linoleum. A brass plate on the door said: Social Club, Members Only.

The room at the top of the stairs was lit with shaded red lamps; heavy velvet curtains were drawn across the windows. A juke box was playing a guitar record with a heavy, thumping bass. Two or three youths, sitting at tables, glanced at them without interest. There was a chalked notice on the door: No Drag Allowed. Behind the bar a plump man with a bald head and projecting, irregular teeth smiled at them. He said, "Evening, Charles. Evening, gentlemen." Glancing at Vivian Martin, he said casually, "Evening, sir."

She smiled and rolled her eyes at him; Reade was glad she showed no embarrassment. The man leaned across the bar, saying, "What can I get for your nice friends?"

"Pink gin for me, Tommy. Jeremy?"

While they took the orders, Reade glanced around the room. The record had changed to a slow, sentimental number, and two of the youths were dancing together. Butler was saying to the bartender, "This is rather a pleasant place you've got here."

"Thank you, sir. Thinking of joining?"

"Perhaps. A friend of mine promised to bring me here years ago—Gaylord Sundheim."

"Georgie? Do you still see him? Where is he these days?"

"I don't see him often. He's still living in Kensington, as far as I know."

"Kensington? That's new. He used to keep a place over in Limehouse."

Reade continued to look at the room. He noticed that Bryce was also pretending to find the conversation uninteresting, and was carefully adding soda to his whiskey, then ice.

Butler said, "I think his mother died, and he moved into her place. I haven't seen him for ages. When did he stop coming in?"

"Oh, ages ago—well over a year. Per'aps it was because of his mother. If you see 'im, tell 'im to come in and see us. I used to like Georgie. Whenever he got tiddly, he used to recite po'try. . . what was it. . . the one who wrote 'Tiger Tiger'. . . Wordsworth? Funny, I didn't even know he had a mother still alive."

Saunders said, "Why didn't 1 know this man—what's his name?"

"Georgie Sundheim. He might've been a bit before your time. How long've you been a member?"

"Over two years."

"As long as that? Don't time fly? Well, I s'pose he must've been a regular before that. I think I've seen 'im since then, mind, but not very often. He was a funny sort, George; you never knew what he'd do next. Had a nasty streak."

"I know," Butler said. "He could be pretty bad-tempered."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. Least, I didn't really see that side. I expect you knew him a lot better than me. But he'd get all moody. And he used to talk about his father—'that sonofabitch my father' he used to call 'im."

Bryce said, "Am I allowed to buy a drink, Charles?"

"Not really. This is a club."

The bartender said, "But so long as none of you are policemen. . . same again?"

Reade said, "I'm afraid I shan't be able to join you. I have to be somewhere at eight." He stood up. Butler also slid off his high stool, and said, "I'll come down with you, Damon. Be back in a moment, Charles, Jeremy. I'll just see Damon into a taxi."

Reade made awkward goodbyes, avoiding Saunders' eyes, and hurried out. Butler followed him down the stairs. Neither spoke until they were back in Dean Street. Then Butler took Reade's arm. "Listen, Damon, it's pretty obvious that this Sundheim is the right man. It couldn't be coincidence. His other name's George—and his initials are G. G. I think you'd better skip this visit to him."

Reade shook his head. "Because he was a member of this club, it doesn't prove he killed David Miller. It increases the probability, but it doesn't prove it. I don't much want to see Sundheim, but I think I'd better."

"Then I'd better come with you. You could simply say I'm interested in Blake—tell him I'm thinking of setting one of the prophetic books to music."

"No. That'd defeat its own purpose, since he knows you. He wouldn't believe it was coincidence. Anyway, don't worry. I'll only stay an hour. If I stay longer, I'll ring you. And I'll tell him that I mentioned to some friends that I was going to visit him. Don't worry about it. I'm sure there's no danger. I'll be on my guard."

In spite of his reassurances to Butler, he felt nervous and tense. It was not fear so much as a kind of stage fright, a self-induced nervousness. Staring across the dark emptiness of Green Park, he felt acutely alone. He found himself wishing that he had accepted the second whiskey. The taxi dropped him at the entrance to the mews. It was illuminated by a single lamp at the far end. He remembered to walk in slowly, staring at the numbers on the houses, in case Sundheim was watching him. When he saw the house, he knew this caution had been unnecessary; it stood so far back that its view commanded only the

garage and flat opposite. A small birch tree grew in the midst of the cobbles outside the front door. It was an attractive place, with the lamplight on its front, and the door and window shutters had recently been repainted in dark green. Like most of the houses in the mews, it had a garage underneath; but in this case, the garage occupied only about half the façade.

The door had a silver knocker in the shape of a grinning Silenus. As he knocked, he experienced suddenly the fear that Sundheim had noticed him that afternoon in the antique shop, and would recognize him as soon as he opened the door. He calmed himself with an effort, and knocked again. The door opened suddenly and quietly.

Sundheim looked bigger than Reade remembered him. The blue silk shirt he wore emphasized the power of his shoulders and the depth of his chest. Sundheim's mouth was large and rather loose, and the nostrils above it were broad, but pointed and somewhat flattened. The eyes were pale blue and had a short-sighted way of peering.

"You must be Mr. Reade. Come on in."

He spoke awkwardly, with obvious embarrassment. Reade's tension immediately vanished. It was impossible to anticipate any danger from this bulky, obviously shy man.

The hall and stairs were covered with a heavy and expensive green carpeting that extended to the walls. The door of the room on the left was closed, but the carpeting appeared to extend under the door. Reade found himself thinking: You couldn't kill anyone here.

"Would you like to come upstairs, Mr. Reade? I. . . er. . . Have you eaten?"

"Yes, thank you. Two hours ago."

In the window niche on the stairs there was a Chinese bronze. The grandfather clock at the head of the stairs was also an obvious antique, and an exceptionally fine one.

Sundheim led him into the room on the right. The same green carpeting extended to the walls. Green appeared to be Sundheim's favorite color. The walls were papered in a green and gold pattern, and the furniture—which was modern—was of a different shade of green. There was an ivory Buddha on the table under the window, and jade Chinese dragons on the shelf.

"Do you drink, Mr. Reade?"

"Er. . . sometimes. Are you drinking?"

"No. At least, I shall have some lemonade. But there's whiskey, or beer if you prefer it."

"Perhaps a little beer."

Sundheim opened a cupboard and took out a bottle of lager and a pint bottle of lemonade. As he poured them, he said, with a slight stutter, "We. . . ell, this is a great privilege, Mr. Reade. I know some of your books, of course. In fact, I thought of writing you once or twice myself. I'm most interested to hear that my father contacted you. What was it about?"

"Er. . . my quotation of the Revelation of St. John in my first book. He disagreed with my interpretation of the plague of locusts."

"Ah yes. That was my father all right. He was a very intelligent man, but the Bible was his lifelong hobby, and you know how people are sometimes a little crazy about their hobbies?"

He handed Reade the glass of lager, then sat down opposite in the other armchair. Looking at him, Reade found it impossible to think of him as a murderer. It was suddenly, and very obviously, an absurd mistake. He looked like a tall, shy, somewhat clumsy American college student.

"So you live in the Lake District, do you, Mr. Reade? You're very lucky. I love the lakes. I first went there when I was ten years old—my father took me. I can remember him taking me for a walk along Windermere and telling me about Wordsworth and Coleridge."

Reade found his manner of speaking interesting. He talked quickly, almost confidingly, and would occasionally stumble and look down, as if suddenly embarrassed. Reade was tempted to tell him the truth—that he had come there because he suspected Sundheim of being a murderer. Ordinary caution held him back, and the reflection that Sundheim might find the idea upsetting and embarrassing rather than funny.

Sundheim said, "Before you go, I'd like you to sign your books for me. I have two of them, and I'll buy the rest now I've met you."

"Of course. With pleasure."

"Would you like to look at my father's papers immediately, or would you rather take them away with you?"

"May I?"

"Of course. I never consult them. I know you'd take good care of them."

"Well, certainly. That's most kind of you."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then Sundheim said, "If you don't mind, I'll get the books now."

A few moments later he was back with three of Reade's books: Blake's Symbols, The Mystic Vision and Blake of Lambeth. When Reade glanced into them, he saw that several paragraphs had been marked in pencil, and whole sentences were underlined.

"This is extremely flattering. What do your initials stand for?"

"George Gaylord. But sign it simply to George Sundheim, if you don't mind."

Reade wrote "With best wishes" in the books and handed them back. Sundheim took them and went out of the room again. Reade glanced at his watch; it was only eight-fifteen. He wondered how long he should stay before he could politely take his leave. Another three quarters of an hour at least. In that time, he decided, he ought to try to draw Sundheim out.

As Sundheim came back into the room, Reade said, "What sort of man was your father?"

"Uh? Oh, he was an engineer."

"I know. But. . . why do you think he was so interested in Blake? Would you say he was a mystic?"

Sundheim sat down and leaned forward, his hands on his knees, his face intensely serious.

"He wasn't exactly that. He was a very dissatisfied man. You see, our family used to be closely connected with the church—we produced a lot of ministers. My father was a Presbyterian, but his ancestors were Puritans. He was brought up on Jonathan Edwards and William Bradford. So there's a strong Puritan tradition in the family. My grandfather was a minister in New Haven. He quarreled with my father about Darwin, and my father ended up by becoming an atheist and leaving home. Well, he built bridges and he made money. . . but in a way, I think he really wanted to be a minister. So he took to reading the Bible in his spare time, and became a Swedenborgian. Then he abandoned that and discovered Blake. Toward the end he wanted to use all his money to start a religious community on an island off Brazil. He and Mother had quarrels, and I didn't see too much of him then. Finally Mother won—at least, her lawyers did. Father died, and she got the money. Then Mother died two years ago—and that's how I come to be here on my own."

"And how about you? Do you sympathize with your father or your mother?"

Sundheim grinned, spreading his hands. "At the time I thought I was closer to Mother. Well, naturally. . . I was still only twenty-three when Father died. Since then. . ."

He stopped and made again the vague gesture with his hands; it was at once helpless and impatient. Reade waited for him to finish. Sundheim said finally, "Since then I wish I'd known him better."

Reade said, "But you've obviously continued your father's interest in Blake."

"Sure, in a sense. But you see. . ." He stopped again; his sentences had a way of stumbling, as if they were completely lost. As Reade waited, he went on. "Father knew what he wanted. I guess I don't."

"What do you think of your father's idea of starting a religious community?"

Sundheim shrugged. "That'd never do for me. I don't like people enough. And I'm not sure I'm religious in the sense he was. Look here, you tell me something, Mr. Reade. Do you really think Blake had all these visions? Did he really see spirits? Or was he lying. . . well, not lying, but. . . wishful thinking?"

Reade took a deep breath. He said, "He didn't see visions, and he wasn't lying. Blake did know what he wanted. And he knew roughly how to get it."

Sundheim said, "Explain."

"I try to explain in my books. Most people are victims of their feelings. Blake knew how to control his feelings so he could feel almost anything he wanted. It's simply a matter of control. Look. We can all control our feelings to some extent. If we're depressed, we can go to the theater or take a glass of whiskey or deliberately think about something that arouses pleasant memories. Or stimulate the sexual imagination—that's one of the most effective ways of transforming dead feeling. It's a matter of turning the mind in the right direction, as a sunflower turns to catch the sun. Well, mystics work on the assumption that the sun is always there, and it's only a matter of turning in the right direction. The central human problem is boredom."

Sundheim said, "You can say that again."

"But you see my point? To be a mystic is only to be able to control the mind's vitality, to stop it from escaping."

Sundheim said, "Do you know what I'd like to be? Come here a moment."

Sundheim stood up and went out of the room. Reade followed him. They crossed the landing and went into the room on the far side. It was a library. The floor there had no carpet; its dark stained wood was highly polished. On a table in the corner stood the Chinese vase that Reade recognized from the shop in the Portobello Road. They went on into the kitchen. Near a window stood a table covered with a plastic tablecloth; on it was a large box, three sides of which were made of glass; it appeared to be half full of grass. Sundheim pointed. He said, "That's Jerome. Do you like snakes?"

"I. . . don't mind them. Is he poisonous?"

"No. He's a boa constrictor. Like to see him?" Reade leaned over the cage. It contained a large dish of water as well as the grass. The snake was lying stretched out, its tail hidden under the edge of the water dish, its head just visible against the glass at the other end of the cage. The head was pale green, with a black stripe that extended across the eye. Sundheim unhooked a catch and lowered one of the wooden walls. The snake stirred lazily as he reached it and gripped it.

"He's sleepy. He ate a rat this morning."

He pulled out a thick green coil. The snake tried to escape under the grass. Sundheim grabbed it near its head and lifted it out. He draped its middle around his neck; the snake's tail immediately coiled around his arm. The bulge that was the half-digested rat showed clearly about halfway along its length, Reade guessed that it was about nine feet long.

Sundheim said, "Come on. You can have a little exercise."

He went back into the other room, Reade following him. The snake's head, resting on Sundheim's shoulder, watched him without interest. Its tongue darted in and out briefly. Sundheim dropped the snake onto the settee, where it immediately coiled up, its head underneath.

Sundheim said, "This is the one I envy. Sleeps all day. No problems. No nerves."

"Doesn't he ever bite?"

"He used to as a baby, but not now. They're gentle souls, snakes."

The boa constrictor was now unwinding. Its slow-moving length slid gently over the end of the settee and onto the floor. It came across the carpet toward Reade, slid over his shoes without apparently noticing them, and vanished behind a heavy curtain.

"He'll stay there now," Sundheim said. "He's in no mood for exercise—he wants to sleep."

Handling the snake, Sundheim's tension seemed to have vanished; he became relaxed and cheerful. It was obvious that he had a real affection for the snake. He sat back in the chair, his legs crossed, and sipped his lemonade. He said, "My father was afraid of snakes—he wouldn't even go near the reptile house in the zoo. He had a theory that they were a higher race who'd degenerated through sin. My mother couldn't bear them either. So I decided to buy Jerome and find out for myself."

Reade could think of nothing to say to this except, "They seem to be relaxing creatures to have around."

Sundheim said, "Anyway, let me show you my father's papers. They're back in the library. And I'll show you a few Blake engravings he collected. We'd better close the door in case Jerome decides to wander."

He recognized Jeremy Bryce's Jaguar outside the house. The light in Butler's room was on.

Butler said, "Good! We were just beginning to get worried."

"Sorry I'm late."

"Have a drink," Bryce said, "and tell us everything that happened. Did you find anything out?"

"Hardly anything," Reade said. "Except that he's definitely not the Thames murderer."

"What!"

"Did you ask him?" Bryce asked.

"Oh no. But it was pretty obvious. As far as I can see, most of our theories seem to have been wrong. He didn't hate his father. He's not an aggressive psychopath. He seems to be a gentle, shy sort of person."

"Tell us what happened."

"But there's almost nothing to tell. I arrived on time. He offered me a drink, but he wouldn't drink himself—he sipped lemonade all evening. He'd read my books and got me to sign them for him. He keeps a pet boa constrictor. . ."

"A what!" Butler said.

"A snake—quite harmless. It spent the evening asleep behind my chair."

Vivian said, shuddering, "You sat in the same room with a live snake!"

"But it was asleep."

"But supposing it had attacked you? Those things coil round you, don't they?"

"It couldn't have done any harm. It was only nine feet long."

Butler said, "How do you know? Supposing he'd trained it to get around people's throats?"

"That's impossible. You can't train snakes. They're too stupid."

Vivian said, "He sounds like a psychopath to me! Don't tell me a perfectly normal man wants to keep a boa constrictor!"

"Why not? It's a pet, just like a dog. And far less trouble than a dog."

Their interest in the snake produced a feeling of exasperation, of total failure to communicate. Butler obviously recognized his impatience. He said, "Anyway, explain why you're so sure he's the wrong man."

"I can't really explain. You'd have to spend a couple of hours with him to understand. He's rather mixed up and unhappy—but very mild and pleasant. He rather reminds me of his snake—sinister-looking but quite harmless."

Vivian said, "But snakes aren't harmless. My brother was once bitten by a viper and had to spend a week in bed. If a dog went around biting people, you'd have it destroyed."

Bryce said, "I think Viv's got a point. Why should a man want to keep a big snake?"

"He said that his father had a horror of snakes, so he bought this one to see for himself."

Butler said, "So he does reject his father, to some extent?"

"Yes. But he doesn't hate him, as far as I can see. We talked about his father quite a lot. He was a Swedenborgian and wanted to build a monastery on an island. Sundheim's obviously fascinated by his father. He feels he was on the wrong track. . . yet he can't stop thinking about him."

Bryce said, "How about the house itself. Could it be used for murders?"

"No. Almost impossible. I've been in every room, and they're all covered with carpet right up to the walls. It's very pale carpet too—the smallest bloodstain would show. The only rooms without carpet are the kitchen and the library—and the bathroom, of course. And I just can't believe they'd be suitable for murder. Besides, we could hear the television of the family next door. That means that a scream would be heard by the neighbors."

"What about the garage?"

"Yes, I saw that. He brought me home by car and dropped me at the corner. I suppose the garage could be used, but I doubt it. The floor's made of rough concrete. It would tend to hold blood and be difficult to clean. But all this is really beside the point. Sundheim's not a murderer. I'd swear to that. He's just not the type in any way. I don't believe you could spend three hours with a murderer—and discuss his most intimate affairs—and still have no inkling that he's capable of violence."

"What intimate affairs?" Butler asked.

"Oh, I don't mean that literally—although he hinted about his homosexuality. I mean we talked about his problems, and about mysticism, and about whether he'd be better off living outside London—in the Lakes, perhaps."

"How about the suicide attempt? Did he mention that?"

"No. But he hinted that he'd got into a suicidal state after his mother's death. That's fairly normal for a certain type of homosexual, I think. He had a tremendous passion for his mother, yet didn't exactly admire her. I think he disapproved of her attempts to get her husband certified."

"What!"

"Yes, toward the end, when he wanted to use all his money to build a monastery. Naturally, she didn't want it all wasted. I can see her point."

Bryce poured himself another whiskey. He said slowly, "What you're asking us to believe is that this whole business has been a mistake, that Sundheim's completely innocent. . ."

Reade interrupted. "I know what you're going to say—that everything points to Sundheim: the suicide attempt, the queer club, the interest in Blake. But does it really? I made a guess that the murderer was a suicidal type. And we followed up that idea until it led us to a man who was a suicidal type—for a brief period. There's nothing strange in that. It might have led to any number of other men. I agree that it's a coincidence that he's interested in Blake."

"And that he knew David Miller," Vivian said.

"But did he? We don't know that. We know he was a member of a homosexual club, but that's nothing unusual. But do you see my point? There's nothing whatever to connect Sundheim with the murders. And after an evening spent with him, I'd be willing to swear in court that he wouldn't hurt a fly."

Bryce said, "But how can you tell? If you'd met my Uncle Oliver, you wouldn't have guessed he was a murderer."

"That's not what your wife said. She said he gave her the shudders."

"She's exaggerating. She got along with him perfectly well. And you're ignoring my point. How many psychopaths have you known? How many split personalities?"

"Very few, I suppose. . ."

"Well, I've known several, and I assure you that one half of their personality doesn't know what the other half's doing. You can't judge a man on an evening of conversation. Anyway, you say this Sundheim was drinking lemonade. Yet the bartender at Frankie's club told us later that they'd often seen him drunk. Doesn't that sound as if he was drinking lemonade for your benefit?"

Reade said with astonishment, "You mean you think he suspected what I'd come for?"

"Oh no. I don't think he would. Simply that he admires your books and he's on his best behavior with you."

Reade said, shrugging, "All I can suggest is that you meet him yourself. He seems to me a quite normal person. I can't even begin to believe that he's capable of murder. Besides, where would he do it? Not in that house."

Butler said, "But the bartender said he used to have another place in the East End."

"Before his mother died. Why should he keep it when he has a house to himself? Don't forget he had motives for concealment while his mother was alive—he didn't want her to know about his homosexuality."

Vivian said, "Well, so it looks as if we're back where we started. Pity."

Bryce said, "You agree with Damon, then?"

"I think so. I'm inclined to agree that you can't spend three hours alone with a psychopathic murderer without getting some hint of his real personality."

Bryce said with exasperation, "But perhaps it's not his real personality. With these Jekyll and Hyde types, neither half of them is realer than the other."

Butler said, "Anyway, what do we do now? -- that's the next question."

Bryce said, "It looks as if we're at a dead end. If Sundheim's the wrong man, we have to begin all over again. And if he's not. . . what can we do now?"

Butler said, "Let's sleep on it tonight, Jeremy. Perhaps we'll get some ideas in the night."

Bryce shrugged, standing up. He said, "I somehow can't believe we're on the wrong track. It all fitted together too well."

Reade said awkwardly, "I agree with Kit. Let's sleep on it and have another look at the problem tomorrow."

Vivian stretched in the chair, yawning. "I agree with you about the sleep part, anyway. Ready, Jeremy?"

"Yes. I'll ring you tomorrow, then, Kit?"

"Okay. Thanks for the evening, Jeremy. It's been fascinating. . ."

Butler went downstairs with them. When he came back, Reade said, "Jeremy seems disappointed. But I'm rather relieved. I'm not sure I'd like to catch a murderer."

"No, no. I see your point. When are you seeing Sundheim again?"

"I don't think I shall see him. I may return home tomorrow. To tell the truth, I'm already bored with London. I want some peace and quiet. I want to see Sarah again. And although Sundheim's a nice man, I've no reason to see him again in London. He's talking vaguely about visiting me in the Lakes."

"For heaven's sake, be careful!"

The familiar smell of the reading room was a delight. He found himself a seat, left his books and papers on the table, then went to the catalogues. There were four books under Orville Sundheim's name. One was the Blake volume he already knew; the other three seemed to deal with the prophetic books of the Bible. One was called The Beast in Revelation. He ordered all three.

Back in his seat, he had started to make notes in his journal when someone placed a hand on his shoulder. Reade said, "Hello, Tim! I'd been intending to get the desk to give you a call."

"How long have you been in London?"

"Only a couple of days."

The man sitting next to him—who wore a clerical collar—glanced up severely.

Reade stood up. "Let's go and talk outside."

Tim Morrison said, "Come on down and have a cup of coffee."

Morrison was a tall, slim man, whose gray suit looked as if it had only just been removed from a tailor's dummy in Savile Row. His manner of speaking was cautious, abrupt, as if the words were forced out by compressed air. He led the way down the stairs to the staff canteen. There Reade found a corner table, while Morrison bought coffees.

"Well, and what brings you to these parts? I thought you'd retired to a monastery."

"Not quite. But I live a fairly secluded existence. I've only been in London for two days, and I'm already anxious to escape. This is about the only place in London I really like."

"Then why don't you spend more time here?"

"I wish I could," Reade said with sincerity. "As soon as I came into the reading room it was like coming back home. If they had monk's cells in the catacombs of the Museum, I'd take one. But London drives me mad."

"Then why do you come?"

Sipping his coffee, Reade suddenly felt expansive and happy. He said, "That's a complicated story. But I can tell you one of my reasons. A friend of mine accused me of being a kind of ostrich with its head buried in the sand. He said I was losing my sense of reality in the country. So I came to London to find if it was more real than the Lake District."

"And is it?"

"I don't know. But I know this. The only reason I prefer to live in the country is that I don't waste so much time there. Six months in London would completely destroy my sense of reality."

Morrison said, smiling, "You're just not used to it."

"No. It's my temperament, I like to see grass, and water if possible. Now last night I met a man who had basically the same temperament—but unfortunately, he's not aware of it. So he lives miserably in London with a great pet snake and doesn't realize why he's unhappy. His mother and father brought him up in cities, and he said he'd feel uncomfortable in the country,"

"What's his name?"

"Sundheim—Gaylord Sundheim."

"How old is he?"

"About my age—thirty or so."

"Ah, then it's not the Sundheim I thought it might be."

"Did you know his father? I think he used to come into this place. He wrote a book on Blake."

"That's the one. Whatever happened to him?"

"He died—in about 1956."

"I hope the son's not as batty as his father. He was as mad as a hatter."

Reade said eagerly, "Tell me about him. Tell me everything you know."

"Well. . . unfortunately, that's not much. I was working in the Printed Books department then. You ought to ask George Britton in Manuscripts. He knew him quite well."

"Is he likely to come down here?"

"I don't know. But we could go over and see him if you like. Why are you so interested?"

"Because the son intrigues me. But tell me why you say the father was as mad as a hatter. What form did his madness take?"

Morrison shrugged. "You know he was one of these cranks who study every single word in the Bible?"

"Yes. In fact, I've just ordered three of his books. He also wrote one about Blake."

"Did he? I didn't know that. Now I see why you're interested. All I know is that he once attacked some poor old boy and half strangled him. . . They'd been having an argument about the Old Testament."

Reade said, frowning, "You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely. George could tell you more."

"In that case, I'll ask him. Would he be in today?"

Morrison knocked on the enormous oak door, then pushed it open. A voice said, "Come in." The man sitting at the desk had a round, pink face, thin white hair, and mild blue eyes that smiled from behind rimless lenses.

"George, this is Damon Reade, who's doing a Blake concordance at the moment. He's a one-man Blake industry."

"I'm delighted to meet you. I know your work, of course. Won't you sit down?" He noticed Reade's eyes on the pile of brown manuscript on his desk. "These are rather interesting—some Arabic mathematical treatise that was found in an Abyssinian monastery on an island in Lake Sana. Are you interested in mathematics?"

"It's one of my hobbies."

"Then this might interest you. It dates from the sixteenth century, and yet our Arabic expert assures me that it contains a crude form of the Newtonian calculus. Remarkable, eh? I'm told it should create a furor in the world of mathematics. All very strange. . . Well now, Mr. Reade, Tim tells me you're interested in the late Mr. Sundheim?"

Reade said, "He wrote a short book on Blake, you know."

"Yes, I know. But hardly your kind of thing, is it?"

"Not really. But I met his son last night, so I'm rather curious."

Britton said, "Mmm. If the son bears any resemblance to the father, I wouldn't advise you to continue the acquaintance. However, I may be quite wrong. Tell me about the son."

Reade did so. When he had finished, Britton said, "Well, he certainly sounds pleasant enough. But then the father could be like that too. Did Tim tell you he tried to strangle a rabbi?"

"He didn't say it was a rabbi."

"Oh yes. A dear old man called Goldfarb, who was writing a commentary on the Talmud. He and Sundheim used to take a walk around the terrace and discuss the Old Testament. Then one day the rabbi said he thought the Revelation of St. John was a forgery—or something of the sort, I can't remember the exact cause of the quarrel. And apparently Sundheim began to get strange delusions about him—he thought he'd been paid by the Jews to destroy his work, or something like that. Then one day we had a most extraordinary business. He went up to the man in charge of the reading room—Angus Wilson, it was—and started making the most remarkable charges against the rabbi. He said that he'd left his jacket on the back of his chair, and he saw the rabbi walk past it. And when he searched the pockets later, he found a small piece of paper with some strange sign on it. He claimed that it was a magical sign that was supposed to destroy his health, and that it would have started to work as soon as he put his coat on.

"Angus didn't know quite what to say—the paper looked like a corner of an envelope with part of an address written on it, but Sundheim said it was a cabalistic sign. So Angus tried to soothe him, and advised him to work in the North Library. Which Sundheim did. Then we had a word with Goldfarb and warned him to stay away from Sundheim. But apparently he was terribly upset by it all, and went marching off to the North Library to assure him that he meant no harm. It so happened that Sundheim wasn't in his place when the rabbi went looking for him—and just as the old boy decided to give up, and was wandering out, he bumped into Sundheim, who immediately assumed the rabbi had been dropping more magic spells into this coat, and hurled himself on him—just leaped for his throat and flung him on the ground. And unfortunately, this didn't happen in the library itself, but in the corridor outside—and there was no one to part them for a minute or two. Some girl came across them and screamed, and tried to drag Sundheim off. . . and by the time they got him loose, the old man was black in the face. Sundheim was fantastically strong—it took three men to make him let go."

"What did you do?"

"Well, we thought of sending for the police—but we decided that wouldn't quite meet the case. He was obviously quite insane. So I persuaded him to come into my office and talked to him, while someone else rang his wife. The odd thing was that he talked quite lucidly to me. He said simply that he was sorry to

cause trouble in the museum, but that it had reached a point where it was his life or Goldfarb's. My assistant was hiding on the other side of the door, in case he got violent, and he later testified that Sundheim had said this. His wife sent for some men from an asylum and had him taken away—that was later the same evening. I believe he became tremendously violent again. But he left here quietly enough that afternoon."

Reade said, "When did this happen?"

"It would be. . . late nineteen fifty-five."

"And he died the following year."

"So I gather. Still in the mental home, I think."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Fairly sure—I think Angus told me. You could easily ring him and check, if it's important."

"No, it's not important. You say your assistant later gave evidence that Sundheim said he was going to kill Goldfarb? Why was that?"

"Oh, for his certification. I believe his wife had tried to get him certified for some time, but hadn't succeeded. This business made it all quite straight forward. Not only had he almost killed a man—the rabbi was in bed for weeks afterward, and died a year later—but he'd declared his intention of trying again in the presence of witnesses. I don't really know much about this—I only had to sign a statement for her solicitor."

Morrison said, "But in fact, he didn't say he intended to make another attempt on Goldfarb?"

"Not exactly. . . but he said it was his life or Goldfarb's, so I presume that was what he meant."

Reade said, "But did Sundheim show any signs of insanity before this?"

"That depends what you mean. In certain ways he was quite sane. He had a most gentle and serious manner and I believe he was a highly successful civil engineer. So he didn't strike you as insane on first acquaintance. Then he'd make some perfectly serious statement—such as that he had paid a firm of private detectives to try and trace the Wandering Jew for him."

"What!"

"Yes, he actually said that. He took it absolutely for granted that the Wandering Jew was alive, because Jesus told him to tarry until he came back. And he spent all his time in here consulting manuscripts about the Wandering Jew to find out where he'd been seen since then. I used to see quite a lot of him at this period. He found an account of the Wandering Jew in Prague in the fourteenth century, and another of him visiting Cornelius Agrippa, and another of him being in Wittenberg and Brunswick at the end of the seventeenth century. He finally traced him to Salt Lake City in the mid-nineteenth century. Then there was some legend of the Wandering Jew saving some Jews from the gas chambers at Buchenwald. He took all this quite seriously, and paid thousands to a private detective agency to find what happened to him after that. He went to look at the camp records at Buchenwald to find which Jews escaped, and when. . . Oh yes, he was quite mad, but it all seemed harmless until he attacked poor Goldfarb."

Reade said, "I'm enormously grateful to you, Mr. Britton. All this explains a great deal."

"Not at all. I don't quite see what bearing all this has on your Blake studies, though."

Reade shrugged. "His son has lent me his papers. I thought he deserved some mention as a student of Blake."

"Didn't his son tell you he went insane?"

"No. Nothing at all."

"Mmm. Perhaps that's natural enough. The father hated his son. He once referred to him as Judas Iscariot."

"Did he say that to you?"

"Oh yes, one day when we were talking about his work. I can't now remember the context. I used to be quite friendly with him, and he often talked about his past life. I believe he built one of the finest dams in Africa."

"One more question, Mr. Britton. Have you any idea of what caused his insanity? Could it have been some organic disease of the brain?"

"Ah, that I couldn't tell you. I know nothing about psychology. I can only tell you one thing. He was an atheist until his father committed suicide, then he got bitten by this religious bug. The thought of his father's suicide haunted him. He often talked about suicide. And although I don't know how he died, I wouldn't be at all surprised if it wasn't suicide."

Reade stood up. "Well, you've left me rather dazed. I can't tell you how grateful I am. A thousand thanks."

"Not at all. If you're going to be in the museum for long, perhaps we might meet for tea one day?"

Morrison said, "He hates London. He's rushing back to the Lake District tonight."

Reade said, "I shan't return tonight now, Mr. Britton. So I may well see you again in here."

Outside the office, Morrison said, "What made you decide to stay on?"

Reade said evasively, "Several reasons. I'll have to go and return the papers to Sundheim."

"In that case, let's meet for a meal."

"I'd love to. But let me clear up this Sundheim business first. . . I'd better make a phone call."

In the telephone box, he rang Kit Butler's number. There was no reply. He swore as he replaced the receiver. Someone was waiting outside the box, so he went out. He stood there indecisively. It had suddenly become impossible to go and work in the reading room. Then he remembered the books he had ordered. It had been an hour since he left his seat. He went back and found the books waiting.

He spent the next quarter of an hour trying to read them, but it was difficult. Orville Sundheim was a bad

and clumsy stylist. Sometimes his meaning was obscure; where it was plain, it tended to be trite and obvious. The books struck Reade as no madder than a great many religious pamphlets he had read, except that Sundheim occasionally attacked some other Biblical commentator with unnecessary violence.

It was nearly midday. He was feeling hungry. He returned the books to the counter, then went back to the telephone booth. Again Butler's number gave no reply. On his way out of the door, he saw Tim Morrison, who said, "Going for lunch now? Why don't you wait half an hour and have it with me?"

"No, I'm going back home. Something important's come up. I'll probably be in tomorrow."

"All right. But I should avoid this Sundheim chap. He might get the idea you're trying to cast a spell on him."

Butler was sitting up in bed, drinking tea. He was wearing a threadbare cotton dressing gown. He said, "Back already?"

"Where on earth have you been for the past hour?"

"Asleep. Why?"

"You must sleep like the dead. I've rung you twice."

"I didn't hear it. I went back to sleep as soon as you left."

"Anyway, thank God you're here. Something important's come up. I've just discovered that Sundheim's father died in a mental home—probably committing suicide."

Reade repeated the story of his conversation with the head of the Manuscripts department. Butler listened without interrupting. He said finally, "So you've changed your mind about Sundheim not being the murderer?"

"Not exactly. This doesn't prove that. But why didn't he tell me about his father? Why did he let me think that he and his father were on good terms, when apparently the old man considered him a Judas? Why didn't he tell me his father died insane?"

"Now wait a minute, Damon. Let me just play the devil's advocate here. Why should he tell you his father died insane? It's not something he'd be proud of. He didn't actually lie to you, did he? And if he believed you'd gone to see him as a scholar interested in his father's papers, what's more natural than that he shouldn't tell you the old man was insane? Would you be interested in the papers of a madman? And then, after all, what have you learned from this Britton chap? Simply that Sundheim's father was mad and committed suicide, and that his father before him committed suicide. So? So Sundheim's probably the suicidal type as well. We already knew that."

Reade shook his head violently; it was only with difficulty that he restrained himself from interrupting Butler. "You don't see my point. Sundheim did lie to me, in a way. He set out to mislead me. Everything he told me made me more convinced that he couldn't possibly be a murderer. His father was a normal, ordinary person. . ."

"I thought he admitted that his mother tried to have him certified several times!"

"He did. But he gave me the impression that this was because his father was genuinely religious, and wanted to use his money to build a monastery. Tolstoy's wife thought of having him certified when he wanted to give away all his money. Sundheim must have known about this attack in the British Museum, and that his mother finally succeeded in getting the old man certified because he was becoming a homicidal lunatic. Why didn't he tell me? Because he wanted to keep my mind well away from the subject of violence and insanity."

Butler said slowly, "Well, as far as I can see, we now know what we set out to find."

Reade felt reluctant to understand his meaning. "In what way?"

"Why not ring your friend on the Carlisle police? There's now enough evidence to make them regard Sundheim as a leading suspect. He's a Blake enthusiast and his father was a violent lunatic. What more do you want?"

Reade shook his head. "I can't do that."

"Why?"

"You. . . don't see. Supposing he's not the Thames murderer? In that case, I've accepted his hospitality, borrowed his father's papers, discussed poetry and mysticism and philosophy with him for hours. . . Don't you see? And then I ring the police and accuse him of murder."

"If he's not the murderer. . ."

"But even if he is, I still couldn't do it. At least, not at this point. No, I've got to see him again. I'll try and see him today."

"And what will you do? Say: Are you the Thames murderer?"

For a moment Reade felt despair of ever making Butler understand his feeling. He suppressed the sense of defeat and made another effort. "Kit, he's a human being. . . and he's an intelligent human being, highly intelligent in some ways."

"He's more than that. He's bloody cunning."

"I don't know. But there's one thing I do know. We talked about all kinds of things last night—including mysticism. He's genuinely interested in the subject. So how can he be a criminal in the ordinary sense? A real criminal is a man who's lost himself. I've only ever known one criminal—a professional, I mean. That was when I was a student and I took a holiday job on a building site. I worked with a man who'd steal anything and swindle anybody. He'd been in jail for burglary so many times that they'd threatened to give him twenty years next time. So he was trying to make an honest living. But it was obviously impossible, because he was a criminal through and through. I don't think he had a normal human relationship with anyone, because he couldn't look at anyone without wondering how he could get something out of them. He saw himself as a kind of fox and the world as one big poultry farm. And before I left the job, he'd been arrested for breaking into a pub and half killing the publican with a hammer when he was interrupted. Well, that man was a pathological liar and a boaster. He couldn't open his mouth without lying. And that meant he couldn't take a genuine interest in anything, because he didn't have an atom of detachment. That's the essence of the criminal. He's criminal because he's not disinterested. He's always out for gain in the most primitive sense. Now in that sense, Sundheim's not a criminal. He has something

of the artist in him."

Butler said, "On the other hand, if he is the Thames murderer, he does ten times as much damage as the ordinary criminal. Your burglar only injured one man with a hammer."

Reade said gloomily, "I know. I don't try and defend it. All that I'm saying is that he's not a criminal through and through—and we ought to give the non-criminal part a chance to take over."

Butler asked with astonishment, "You think that's possible? For a man who's done nine murders to just give it up like a bad habit?"

"In theory, yes. You know the Bhagavad-Gita says: 'Though a man be the greatest of sinners, this knowledge will carry him like a raft above his sin.' Well, I believe that literally."

"You're madder than I thought!"

"Oh, I don't mean you can cure criminals by giving them a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita."

Butler said with mild exasperation, "I know you don't. I'm not that stupid. I know as well as you that the criminal and the artist are marching in opposite directions. Ever heard of Gesualdo, who wrote the greatest madrigals of his time and also committed a double murder?"

"Yes, but that was a crime of passion—he killed his wife and her lover. And what's more, I'm arguing that Sundheim is basically the same type as Gesualdo. He's not a criminal in the ordinary sense."

Butler said wearily, "All right, he's not an ordinary criminal. I'll give you that. But he goes around killing people, and he's got to be stopped. Now if we ring your Carlisle friend, you can be absolutely certain that there won't be any more murders—not if Sundheim's the murderer. And Sundheim needn't ever know that it was you."

Reade stood up and walked impatiently to the window. "Look, give me a chance to think about it. I ought to see Sundheim once more, in any case."

"Why?"

"Oh, because. . . because I want to try and make up my mind about him. If he is the murderer and he's arrested, I shall probably never see him again."

"And if you let him suspect you know about his father, he'll probably kill you."

"No. I can't believe that. You don't know him."

Butler said, laughing, "Neither do you, from the sound of it! You told us solemnly last night that you'd swear he wasn't the murderer."

"I know. I still can't believe it. Anyway, I'll ring him now and see if I can go over there right away."

Butler said, "I begin to wish I hadn't spoken to him in that shop. Then I could come with you and pose as another admirer of his father."

"It wouldn't do any good. I think I have to handle this alone."

He found Sundheim's telephone number in the back of his pocket diary, and dialed it. The number rang, but there was no reply.

"He's out. I'll have to try later."

Butler threw back the bedclothes. "Listen, Damon, forget about Sundheim for a while. If you go to see him now, he'll guess there's something wrong. Come on with me and we'll go to that pub in the Bayswater Road and have a cold lunch. Then we'll walk across the park and visit an artist friend of mine in West Halkin Street."

After lunch they entered the park at Marlborough Gate and walked beside the Serpentine. The sky was filled with white clouds, and a cold wind was blowing from the east. On the ornamental lake, two children were sailing boats. A nurse with a pram sat watching them.

Reade said, "The trouble with London is that it encourages weakness. You're tempted to mix with fools."

Butler laughed. "That's inevitable. But the trouble with the countryside is that it gives you no opportunity to test your own strength. Besides, it's my experience that even the strongest people need some stimulus. We're not gods yet. Anyway, the man we're going to visit isn't a weakling. He's like Blake in many ways."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, a painter. His name's Vladimir Weyssenhoff—he's half Russian, half Polish. He was pretty ill a month ago, so I don't know whether we'll be able to see him. He's had a hard life. The Russians didn't like his painting, so he escaped to England. But the English art critics don't like it either."

"Why not?"

"He paints too well for them. He's a great admirer of Titian and Rembrandt—tremendous draughtsman. So they call him an imitator. He's refused to have an exhibition for the past ten years—he hates the critics."

"But why didn't the Russians like him?"

"You'll see when we get there. He's a kind of mystic. And he hates all this stuff about the proletariat."

"Do you see him often?"

"No. He's not very sociable. He had a tremendously hard early life—he watched two of his brothers die of starvation. Then his mother died at some out-of-the-way place in the country, and he had to prevent her body being eaten by rats—the ground was too hard to bury her. He taught himself to draw, and his early paintings were a success. Then he did some paintings on religious subjects, and all the critics accused him of being a counterrevolutionary. So he simply stopped exhibiting—just sold an occasional painting to people who admired him. He's always had plenty of admirers, but he's a tremendously bitter man. He's a bit paranoiac about critics. At his first exhibition in England, he wrote the catalogue himself, and it was mainly a lot of personal attacks on the critics. . . so naturally, they all panned him."

The sight of a telephone box reminded Reade of Sundheim. "Do you mind if I stop here to make a call?"

"I thought you were going to forget Sundheim for this afternoon?"

"I can't. I've got to see him before I go."

The number rang for about a minute. As he was about to hang up, Sundheim's voice suddenly replied. It sounded unexpectedly harsh. "Hello. Who's there?"

"George? This is Damon Reade."

"Ah, hello." The voice softened.

"I think I'm leaving London either tonight or early tomorrow. Can I see you before I go?"

Sundheim's voice suddenly became cautious. "Sure. About anything special?"

"Just a few points about your father's papers."

"Oh, take them home with you. You can send them back later."

"Thank you. I'd like to. But will you be home this evening?"

"I suppose so. Could you come at about seven? I may have to go out later."

"Good. I'll see you then."

Butler said, "What did he say?"

Reade said, frowning, "He wants me to go at seven."

"Did he sound. . . all right?"

"Oh yes. But. . . he said he might have to go out later, and I could tell from his voice that he was lying. At least, I think he was."

"So what's worrying you? It means you only have to stay for half an hour. I'll come and wait for you in the pub across the road."

"No. . . But he seemed so open and friendly last night. He gave me the impression of being rather a lonely person who was glad to have someone to talk to. Just now, when he answered the phone, he sounded vicious and bad-tempered. Then he became quite pleasant when he knew it was me. But. . . I got the feeling he was impatient."

Butler said, "You mean as if he'd done his act last night, and he didn't want to go through it all again?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

They had turned left out of Sloane Street. Now they stopped in front of a fashionable-looking house. The door stood open. Butler rang the top bell before they went into the hall.

The lower floors of the house were well carpeted. After the third floor, the carpeting vanished and there was a complete absence of furniture. The final flight of stairs was unpainted, and had obviously not been swept for some time. It smelt strongly of cats.

Butler knocked on the door, then tried it. It was locked. Reade sat on the stairs below. The place depressed him. After Butler had knocked again, he said, "It looks as if he's out. Let's go."

As they started to go down the stairs, they heard the sound of a key being turned, and the door opened. A woman in a dark dress looked down at them.

"Hello, Camilla. Is Vladimir at home?"

She said, "He died last night."

"Oh Christ. That's awful. I'm terribly sorry."

She stood there, saying nothing. Her air of nervous exhaustion was oppressive. Reade could not see her face, but she seemed young. Her hair was dark and very long.

Butler said finally, "Can we come in for a minute?"

She stood aside without saying anything. They went past her, and she closed the door behind them. Reade stood close to her, and was repelled by the smell she exuded; it seemed to be compounded of exhaustion, perspiration and cats. He glanced at her face, and looked away quickly. It was yellow with tiredness and the left cheek was smeared with black.

They were standing in a large room that was obviously a studio as well as a living room. There was a double divan bed, several greasy armchairs, and a large table covered with dirty crockery and tubes of paint.

Butler said, "But this is shattering. I thought he had some kind of food poisoning."

She said, "It was a cancer. It came suddenly."

Two cats were rubbing themselves on either side of Reade's trousers. Then one of them jumped on a chair and onto the table, and began licking one of the plates. The other immediately followed it.

The girl said, "Do you want to see him?"

Without speaking, they followed her into a bedroom. The smell was nauseating: of stale urine, of cats, of unwashed dishes and human body odors; there was also an unidentifiable medicated smell. Reade glanced at the bed, then turned away. The bearded face on the pillow had the same waxy pallor as the girl, and somehow seemed responsible for the unpleasant smell, as if the dead man were still breathing and exhaling an odor of death. Reade walked quietly back into the other room.

There was only one picture on an easel; other canvases leaned against the walls. A few were framed and hung. As soon as he looked at them, Reade's feeling of disgust vanished. Butler's description had given him no idea of what to expect. His first sensation on looking at the canvases was of clarity. The artist obviously loved color, and the pictures were all basically arrangements in color, as music is arrangements in sound. Some of the canvases gave the impression that they might have been created by light projected

through prisms; transparent greens, blues, reds, blended into purples and yellows. As soon as he saw them, Reade was aware of a distinct artistic voice speaking to him, transforming his feelings, his outlook, replacing his vision with a vision of its own. Other aspects of the artist's personality became clear only when he examined the pictures more closely. There was an obvious obsession with pain, reflected sometimes in agonized faces, sometimes in the trees or rocks of a landscape, sometimes even in the colors of a sky. There was an element of malice in the painting of certain figures, made to resemble twisted trees or dead flowers. Religious symbols were frequent; these seemed to be a part of the painter's obsession with pain and misery. The paintings all seemed to be a vision of the co-existing misery and beauty of physical existence.

There were also two or three portraits. In these, Reade could see what Butler had meant about the influence of Rembrandt. Like the other paintings, they were minutely realistic in a certain sense. Their realism seemed directed at revealing the pain of human existence. Every line and wrinkle in the face of an old railway guard was drawn with care, as if the painter took pleasure in saying: This is how we shall all end. There was also a pencil drawing of the girl who was now talking to Butler; it showed her as astonishingly beautiful, yet also managed to suggest the sadness underlying such beauty, the tragedy of the world's reality that would corrode it. Remembering the face of the girl when she had opened the door, and the smell of exhaustion and sweat, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the prescience shown by the artist.

Butler came back into the room, said goodbye to the girl, and they left.

They went downstairs without speaking. In the street, Butler said, "That's a sad thing, Damon. I've only seen him a few times in the last year, and on one occasion he threw his glass at my head. Yet I feel something important has died with him. Do you know what I mean?"

"Of course. Why did he throw a glass at you?"

"Oh, he never quite liked me, I think. I criticized him for his pessimism. Did you see his paintings? And I never quite forgave him for what he did to Camilla. You could never believe that she was once one of the most beautiful girls in London. And look at her today. I couldn't bear to look at her directly while I was speaking to her. She's become a walking embodiment of defeat and death. She's even begun to smell like a corpse. Did you notice?"

Reade nodded, grimacing. They crossed Hyde Park corner and went into the park. Neither spoke until they were on the grass, walking toward the bandstand. Butler said, "What I liked about him was his courage. He had more guts than anybody I've ever known. What did you think of his paintings?"

Reade said, "I think he's obviously a great painter. I didn't like them fundamentally. I'm completely out of sympathy with his pessimism and world-hatred.. Yet he compels me to respond to his paintings by sheer power."

Butler said, "Poor devil."

"In a sense, yes. In another sense, he's anything but. As you say, he has courage. That's what I admire. A man like that needs even more courage than I do, because I'm fundamentally an optimist. I don't believe the world's a trap."

"He did," Butler said.

"I know. It's obvious from his painting. Yet the painting itself is a tremendous affirmation of vitality."

They walked in silence as far as Victoria Gate. Then Butler said, "What time do you go to see Sundheim?"

"Seven o'clock. . . I wish I hadn't arranged it now."

"Why?"

"Oh, I suddenly find Sundheim a bore. He's spoiled."

Butler grinned. "That's not what you said two hours ago."

"I know. But now. . . I suddenly feel it doesn't matter much whether he's dead or alive."

"Then why go to see him? Let me ring your friend in Carlisle."

Reade shook his head. "I couldn't. I've got to go through with it now."

It was five minutes to seven when he climbed off the bus in Kensington High Street. The weather had changed; it had started to rain. In Edwardes Square, the wind shook heavy drops from the branches of the trees on to his head.

Approaching the house in the mews, he observed his feelings with interest. The excitement and fear of the previous evening had vanished. He experienced a sense of emotional flatness, almost of boredom. The slight feeling of oppression seemed due to the dullness of the smoky sky rather than to the prospect of seeing Sundheim.

He rang the doorbell, and waited. After a minute there was no reply; he rang again. There was still no reply. He looked at his watch; it was five minutes past seven. He began to hope that Sundheim might be out, so that he could return home without seeing him. He rang again, more persistently, to justify his intention of turning away. This time there was a thumping noise from upstairs. After a further five minutes Sundheim opened the door. He had obviously been asleep. His eyes were swollen and heavy, and his hair was uncombed. The lips looked even longer, looser, as if they overweighted the lower part of his face.

Reade said, "Sorry to wake you. Would you like me to go away and come back in an hour?"

Sundheim hesitated, then said, "No, come on up."

When Sundheim switched on the sitting-room light, Reade was struck by the grayness and tiredness of his face. He said, "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yeah. I've got a cold. Would you like to help yourself to a drink while I get a wash?"

Left alone, Reade sat down and stared out of the window. The room was chilly, and it seemed somehow desolate.

Sundheim was away for more than ten minutes. When he came in, he said, "Sorry about that. I'm rather subject to summer colds, and they seem to take it out of me." He spoke slowly, in a mumble, as if indifferent to whether Reade heard him or not.

"Would you rather I went?"

Sundheim shrugged. "Stay and have a drink anyway. Did you help yourself?"

He opened the cupboard and took out a bottle of lager. He also took out a bottle of an expensive brandy.

"I think I'll have a drink myself. Try to throw off this cold. . ."

He handed Reade a tall glass filled with lager. Reade was surprised at the amount of brandy he had poured into his own glass. Sundheim sat down and took a large gulp. Then he closed his eyes, allowing his head to rest on the back of the chair. He began to cough slightly, his eyes still closed, his chest heaving; then the cough subsided and his breathing became easier. He said, "I inherited various ailments from my father. . . like hay fever and summer colds. Would you mind switching on the fire and drawing the curtains?"

Reade did as be was asked. He felt a certain embarrassment about Sundheim that reminded him of the feeling he'd had on seeing the dead face of the painter that afternoon. Then, looking at Sundheim's drawn face, he thought: But he is without real courage. To make conversation, he asked, "How is the snake?"

"Oh, he's fine. He's going to shed his skin. Go and look at him if you like."

Reade went into the kitchen. The table was still set with breakfast things, and a half loaf of bread lay on the floor. He picked it up and put it on the table. The snake was lying with its head against the glass of the cage. Its eyes had become a milky color. It flinched slightly as Reade leaned forward to look at it, then lay still. Reade opened the cage and gently ran his hand along its cold body. He said, "Poor old thing. You look as bad as your master."

He went back into the other room and noticed that Sundheim had emptied the brandy glass. The room was warmer, with both bars of the electric fire switched on.

Reade said, "Look, I think I'd better leave you. You obviously don't feel well."

"I'll be all right in about ten minutes. Have you eaten?"

"No. But I'll eat when I get home. I'm thinking of catching the midnight train back."

Sundheim nodded without speaking. After a few more minutes he heaved himself to his feet and poured more brandy into his glass. This time he poured it down his throat immediately, and then breathed in slowly. He glanced at Reade. "These colds make me feel low. Washed out."

"Perhaps you should go back to bed."

"No, I'll be okay. Let's get some food."

In the kitchen, Sundheim grimaced at the uncleared table, then moved the crockery into the sink. He pushed back the milk, sugar and marmalade against the wall. Reade stood looking on uncomfortably,

uncertain whether he should offer to help. Sundheim seemed to move in a daze.

On the previous day Reade had been struck by the size of the refrigerator; now, as Sundheim opened it, he understood; it contained enough food to last for a fortnight. Sundheim took out a cold chicken, a plateful of ham, a joint of underdone beef, half a dozen peeled eggs, an enormous wooden bowl of salad, a large pat of butter, and a board containing various cheeses. From the dishwashing machine be took two plates and some cutlery. "Help yourself."

Reade wanted to protest that he was not hungry, but decided against it. He sat down in the chair and helped himself to salad and a slice of bread and butter. Sundheim piled his plate high with a leg of chicken, several slices of ham, two hard-boiled eggs, a big slice of Gruyère cheese, and some radishes and celery. Reade watched with astonishment as Sundheim picked up the chicken leg and took an enormous bite from it. While still chewing, Sundheim muttered something, dropped the leg on his plate and went to the refrigerator. From a compartment inside the door, he took a bottle of champagne. He swallowed and said, "We may as well have a drink. Do you like champagne?"

"Er. . . yes. But I didn't realize you drank."

"Sometimes," Sundheim said.

He untwisted the wire from the neck of the bottle, then pulled out the cork with one wrench of his enormous hand. The champagne began to overflow. Sundheim ignored it, allowing it to run down over his hand and forearm while he groped in the machine for a glass. He half filled an ordinary tumbler with champagne, and handed it to Reade; then he filled another one, pouring carefully down the side of the glass to prevent froth, and put it beside his own plate. He sat down again and took a long drink of the champagne. Reade tried his own; it was cold and very dry.

Sundheim ate as if he were alone, ignoring Reade. He ate with voracity and total concentration; Reade had never seen anyone eat so quickly and with such single-mindedness. When he had finished the chicken leg, he hurled it into a waste bucket under the sink, then tore off the other leg. He washed down the food with great gulps of champagne, and refilled the glass as soon as it was empty. He ate the celery with big, crunching bites, eating a whole stick at a time. When he had emptied his plate of chicken and ham, he buttered two pieces of bread, then hacked thick slices of underdone beef from the joint and heaped them on his plate with the rest of the salad.

Reade said, smiling, "Now I understand what they mean by a Gargantuan appetite."

Sundheim glanced up for a moment and grinned almost sheepishly. Then he returned to the beef on his plate and began cutting it with powerful short jerks of his knife, then shoveled it into his mouth two slices at a time. As he came toward the end of the champagne, he began to chew more slowly, like a sated animal. Veins stood out across his forehead, and a drop of sweat trickled down from the hairline. He thrust the last of the bread into his mouth and washed it down with champagne; then he turned sideways in his chair and leaned back, his hands on his thighs, staring across the kitchen.

Reade finished eating his salad. He said, "That was excellent."

Sundheim glanced at him. His eyes were bulging, and dull, as if he were totally withdrawn into his world of food. Reade glanced up and found himself looking at the milky eyes of the boa constrictor; he felt a strange suspicion prickle across the hairs of his neck.

Sundheim said, "Let's go back in the other room, huh?"

Reade followed him back in. He watched Sundheim bend over a cupboard in the corner and pull down a lid; it revealed the front of a large television set. Sundheim switched this on, then returned to his chair. He reached out and switched out the reading lamp. Then he stirred in his chair and broke wind. He said apologetically, "I like to watch TV to digest meals. If you don't mind."

"Not at all."

It was a comedy show from a seaside town. Reade had seen very little television, and he watched with fascination. After half an hour the fascination began to turn to restiveness. He glanced across at Sundheim and saw that he was fast asleep. He stood up and went over to him; Sundheim did not stir. When he bent over Sundheim, he could smell brandy. He touched him gently on the shoulder and called his name. Sundheim breathed in sharply, then began to snore softly.

Reade went to the door and let himself out softly. In the kitchen, he scrawled on a sheet of his notebook: "Thought I'd better let you sleep. I'll be at Bayswater 9932 if you need me. Damon." Before leaving the house he glanced in at Sundheim again; he was still sleeping. The television was now showing a military band festival.

Butler said, "You haven't been too long. How did it go?"

He stood up and turned off the gramophone, which was playing a Shostakovich symphony. He was sitting in front of the gas fire, wearing his dressing gown. There was a glass of whiskey by his elbow and a box of black Russian cigarettes.

"Have a drink."

"Perhaps I'd better if I'm traveling all night."

"All night! You're not leaving?"

"I think I may as well. There's nothing more to do here."

"How about Sundheim?"

"I left him asleep. I didn't have a chance to talk to him."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't quite understand. He's either ill, or drunk, or on drugs. He simply seemed tired and depressed. He drank half a pint of Rèmy Martin and almost a full bottle of champagne, then fell asleep in front of the television."

"I thought you said he didn't drink?"

"He didn't—last night. He claimed the brandy was medicinal."

"So we still don't know a thing?"

"I don't know. He's obviously a split personality. I can see that he works himself up into moods of nervous tension. He ate enough food and drank enough brandy and champagne to anesthetize most men. It was obviously some kind of outlet."

Butler said, "I don't understand this. He takes all that trouble last night to convince you he's a mild, harmless person. He only had to keep up the act for an hour or two more and you'd have gone back home convinced he couldn't be a murderer. And yet he lets you see the other side of himself. Why?"

"Perhaps it wasn't an act last night. Perhaps he's really subject to tremendous depression. He has a refrigerator big enough to hold a small car, and it's jammed with food. So he obviously has these obsessional eating bouts periodically. I wish we knew some good psychiatrist who could tell us what it's all about."

"What about the police? Shall we contact them now?"

"I think I'll go and see Lund in Carlisle when I get back. I'd rather explain it face to face than over the telephone. I'll go there tomorrow."

"Supposing he commits another murder in the meantime? And if you ask me, it's perfectly obvious that he's the right man. I think he's got you hypnotized somehow. He fits in every possible way."

"All right, all right. I promise I'll go and see Lund tomorrow."

"I think you ought to phone Scotland Yard tonight."

Reade stood up, "Please, let me handle this my own way. I don't think twenty-four hours is going to make any difference." He emptied his whiskey glass. "I think I'll go and pack. I'd like to catch the midnight train." It took him exactly ten minutes to pack his few belongings into the suitcase and to fold the blankets neatly on the bed. Instead of returning downstairs, he lit the gas fire and sat on the end of the bed, warming his hands. In the room below the phone began to ring. A moment later there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs. He stood up quickly as Butler opened the door.

"Sundheim's on the phone. He sounds drunk to me. I said I didn't know if you'd come home or not. Shall I tell him you're out?"

Reade said tiredly, "No. I'd better speak to him."

"All right. Tell him you're just leaving to catch your train."

When Reade picked up the telephone, Sundheim's voice shouted, "Hi, Damon. Where are you?"

"You know where I am. At home."

"Yes, I know that. But what's the address?"

"It's the Portobello Road. Why?"

"Because I want to come over and pick you up."

"No. Don't do that. I'm just about to leave for the station."

"What! You can't go tonight. Listen, I feel mean about falling asleep like that. And I've got some important things I want to say to you. Let me come over there."

Reade felt confused and irritable; he was also aware that Butler was facing him and shaking his head violently. He said, "Er. . . where are you?"

"At home, of course."

He looked at his watch; it was ten-thirty. He said, "Could you meet me at Netting Hill Gate station in about ten minutes? Perhaps we could have some coffee or something before I catch the train."

"Okay. Fine. I'll be there."

Butler said, "You'll be mad if you go."

He shrugged. "I don't see any alternative. Anyway, he says he wants to talk to me."

"But he sounds drunk."

"I don't think so. He's a little drunk—not much. It can't do any harm to see him. We could go and have a coffee at the station."

"And how do I know that you've ever reached the station? He might take you to the nearest lonely spot and. . ."

"How could he? He knows you're here, and you know where I've gone."

"But the man's a nut!"

"All right," Reade said, "I'll return here afterward and catch the morning train. Unless I can phone you from the station just before I leave to tell you it's okay. I'll take my case anyway. I'll have to leave now—I said I'd be at Netting Hill in ten minutes."

Butler said, "Try and get back here, Damon. I'll wait up for you."

Reade saw Sundheim standing outside the entrance to the tube station. He saw Reade and waved.

Reade said, "How did you get here?"

"By car. It's round the corner."

His manner seemed abrupt compared with the earlier telephone conversation. He was wearing a dark raincoat and a felt hat. In the yellow arc lights, his face looked tired.

The car was a large black Daimler. Sundheim pulled open the passenger door and Reade climbed in. The inside smelled of new leather. The seats were covered with transparent plastic.

As Sundheim climbed into the driver's seat he said, "Why didn't you want me to come to your place?"

Reade had anticipated the question. "Because we couldn't talk there. I'm staying with a friend."

"Who is he? I thought I knew his voice."

"Perhaps. His name is Kit Butler. He's a composer."

Sundheim pulled into the Bayswater Road. He drove without speaking.

Reade said, "Let's not go too far. I want to catch that train."

Sundheim said, "Uh huh." At the traffic lights at Marble Arch, he said suddenly, "Listen. Why don't you skip that train and travel tomorrow?"

"Is there. . . any particular reason why you want me to?"

"Yeah. I want to talk to you."

Reade said, "All right. It's not important."

"Good."

Sundheim said nothing as they drove along Oxford Street. Reade glanced at his face; it looked grim and tired. At the Charing Cross Road traffic lights, Sundheim turned right, and then pulled across into a side street. He said, "This'll do."

Reade followed him out of the car. "Where are we going?"

"Over there. To a place I know."

The small Italian restaurant was on the other side of the street. When Sundheim pushed open the door, the smell of food made Reade feel hungry.

Sundheim said, "Downstairs."

A waiter in a white coat said, "Would you mind staying up here, gentlemen? That part is closed."

Sundheim said roughly, "We want to go downstairs."

Ignoring the waiter, he started down the stairs. Reade looked apologetically at the waiter, and followed. Sundheim's bad manners shocked him.

A fat man in his shirt sleeves sat at one of the tables. He looked up, frowning, then smiled when he saw Sundheim. "Ah, Mr. Sundheim! How are you! Long time no see."

"Fine, thanks, Tony. We don't want to eat. We just want a bottle of Chianti. Good Chianti."

"Sure. Plenty of good Chianti. You sit in the corner."

Reade said diffidently, "I wouldn't mind a sandwich. I'm a little hungry."

"Oh, sure. Have a meal. Got any good steaks, Tony? Really good, like you used to do 'em? Can we

have two?"

Reade asked, "You're eating too?"

"Sure."

"After that enormous meal?"

"That was four hours ago."

Sundheim threw his hat and coat on another table, then jerked out a chair and dropped into it.

Reade said, "You seem to feel better now."

"Better? Oh, yeah. I'm improving. Tony, can we have that wine right away?"

Watching him as he snapped his fingers across the restaurant, Reade thought: He is a man with several personalities. All false.

Suddenly, looking at Sundheim, he remembered the paintings of Vladimir Weyssenhoff and the waxen face on the pillow. An obscure rage seized him, a violent impatience with Sundheim. He looked at his watch and said, "I mustn't be long. I want to catch that train in an hour."

Sundheim said protestingly, "I thought we'd had that one out? I thought you'd agreed to stay?"

Suddenly Reade knew what he had to say; it came to the surface with a directness that made it natural to express it. He looked across at Sundheim, holding his eyes with his own, and said, "Look, you behave as if you have some sort of claim on me, although I hardly know you and you hardly know me. So there's something we ought to get clear at this stage. The fact that we're both interested in Blake doesn't really give us anything in common. You're intelligent enough, but you don't even begin to understand what Blake is all about. Because you're lazy and utterly spoiled."

He stopped speaking to see what effect he had had. Strangely enough, Sundheim was listening gravely and carefully, as if the words did not concern him. Reade realized suddenly that psychiatrists had probably spoken to him like this, and he was listening with the kind of attention he would have given them. This silence was disarming.

Reade sat back in his chair and said, "I want to get back home because my work lies there. That's something that gives me a real feeling of satisfaction. Sitting here with you doesn't give me anything at all. It's a waste of my time."

Sundheim still said nothing. The Italian brought the wine to the table; Sundheim simply nodded and took the bottle. He poured himself a little wine, then poured some into Reade's glass.

Reade said, "I don't want to be brutal about this. Last night I came to see you to talk about your father, and you behaved very reasonably. Tonight you seem to be playing some kind of a part, and expecting me to accept it passively. Well, I don't want to. It doesn't interest me. I don't like undisciplined people who wallow in self-pity, and I try to avoid them, because they're timewasters. You are now wasting my time, and I don't propose to have it wasted."

Sundheim was looking down at his glass, but made no attempt to lift it. When he spoke, his voice had

lost the heavy American accent with which he had spoken to the waiter; it was the voice with which he had spoken the night before. He said, "I suppose I'm bound to waste your time—or anybody else's. I don't really have much to offer anybody, do I?"

Reade recognized the lapse into a new role of self-pity. He interrupted. "I don't know what you have to offer. You seem to have a reasonable mind. Why don't you try using it?"

Sundheim looked up; he said with a kind of anger, "For what? What am I supposed to do with it? All right, so I talked to you about Blake last night. But where does that get me? It's just words. They may not be words for you, but they are for me."

Reade cut in. "You're evading the issue. You know as well as I do that you drift with the tide. What do you do with yourself all day long in that place? I can guess. You spend most of your time feeling bored and wondering how to get rid of it. You waste whole days trying to get rid of your boredom, wishing it would go away."

Sundheim said, "Don't you?"

"No."

The proprietor came back with two large steaks. He said, "You don't drink your wine. Anything wrong with it?"

"No, thanks, Tony, it's fine. We were just talking."

"You like anything else? Some fried potatoes? Some salad?"

"No, thanks, Tony, just this."

Sundheim took a drink of his wine, then said, "You really seem to have it in for me. What have I done to deserve it?"

Reade said, through a mouth full of steak, "You're trying to waste my time."

"But I'm not," Sundheim said. "I agree I'd like to learn something from you. And since I haven't much time to offer, it's bound to waste some of your time."

"That's inevitable. You're wasting your own time. You're wasting your own life. How can you avoid wasting mine?"

As soon as Sundheim began to eat, he seemed to find a new vitality. Again Reade watched with fascination as Sundheim began cutting huge slices of the steak and ramming them into his mouth. The act of eating and drinking seemed to arouse in Sundheim a machine-like energy; he chewed like a hungry tiger. Reade had the feeling that Sundheim probably allowed himself to make low growling noises when he ate alone. He did not speak while he ate; simply concentrated totally on the food. He also filled his tumbler twice with Chianti, and each time drained it without lowering the glass. Reade thought: There is something significant in this. A psychiatrist could probably tell me what it means.

Sundheim finished the steak in a few minutes. Then he pushed away the plate and sat back in his chair. He seemed to have gained a new confidence, and also a new seriousness. He said, "Look, let me try to explain something to you. Look at me. You can see how big I am. I weigh over two hundred and twenty

pounds—sixteen stone. And a lot of it is muscle. And I get lots of energy from my mother. Frankly, she was a nymphomaniac when she was younger. Do you understand what all this means? You look fairly strong and athletic, but I bet you don't weigh a hundred and fifty pounds. I carry over two hundred pounds of healthy muscle and plenty of energy. I like sport. I'm good at skiing and climbing mountains. But I also inherited a certain amount of brain from my father and his father. So I'm in a strange position. Do you understand what it means to have all this physical energy?"

"I can understand it could be difficult."

"You're damn right it's difficult. What am I supposed to do with it all? Tell me that?"

Reade said with interest, "That's a problem that never struck me."

"Let me tell you something else. At the end of one of your books, you have a tremendous sentence: 'Civilization cannot survive without new men.' You remember? Well, I read that ten years ago, when I was in my early twenties, and it rang a bell. I guess you must have had people tell you this before. You write about new men, and how they find it difficult to survive in a world that's not yet ready for them. Well, I've always believed I was one of the new men. Before I read your book. Did you ever read about Leopold and Loeb?"

Reade shook his head, chewing the steak.

"They were a couple of college students who thought they were supermen and killed a boy to prove it. Everybody said they were crazy. But I understood them as soon as I read about the case. These are your new men, and they don't know what to do with themselves. They've got energy and nothing to do with it."

Reade said, "Committing murder is hardly a solution."

"Okay, it's not. But is it any worse than doing nothing at all?"

"Of course—from the point of view of the victim."

"Sure. It's not ethical to murder. I'm not saying it is. All I'm saying is—what's all this talk about wasting time? What am I supposed to do? Can you tell me? Go climbing mountains?"

"There are worse ways of getting rid of energy. I do it myself for exercise."

Sundheim emptied the last of the Chianti into his glass, and drained it.

"All right. All right. But you don't see what I'm trying to say. You're okay. You've got the temperament of a scholar, and you live on your own and write books. You don't have anything to do with civilization. You've been in London a few days and you can't wait to get back home. But how about the people who can't write books—people there's no outlet for in this civilization? What about your new men who don't know what to do?"

Reade emptied his wineglass. "I think you misunderstand what I mean by new men. The new men I speak of don't exist yet."

Sundheim made an impatient gesture. "Oh, sure. I know they don't exist. But they're starting to exist. And whether they like it or not, they're rebels. They don't like the world the way it is. They want to start

tearing things apart."

"Would that help?"

"Maybe not. It doesn't help an animal to cry when it's in pain. But it does it." He picked up the Chianti bottle, held it up to the light, then set it down with disgust. He said, "Shall we have another?"

"I'd rather not."

"What time does your train go?"

Reade said, "Midnight. But I'll catch the morning train instead."

Sundheim smiled. "Thanks."

"But let's leave this place."

Upstairs, Sundheim paid for the meal by check. When they went outside, it had started to rain again.

"Where'd you want to go now?"

Reade said, "Let's go somewhere where we can talk."

"Okay. Climb in."

He drove to the end of the street, turned left by the church of St. Martin's, then cut through to Kingsway.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, to a place I know." He turned into Fleet Street.

"We're going to the East End?"

Sundheim glanced at him. "Yes. Why?"

"Oh, for no reason. Do you know it?"

"Fairly well. I used to live there."

As they passed St. Paul's, Sundheim asked suddenly, "Would you say I'm the suicidal type?"

"Yes."

Sundheim gave a grunt of laughter. "You're damned right. That's something I got from my father. And his father."

"Did they commit suicide?"

Sundheim hesitated, then said, "Yeah."

It was clearly a question he would have preferred to ignore.

Reade said, "I didn't realize your father committed suicide."

"Well. . . he didn't, exactly. But he was a depressive. And I think he suffered from some disease."

"A disease? What disease?"

Sundheim said vaguely, "I don't know. Something to do with the brain. I sometimes think the old man contracted syphilis, or something, and had a cure."

"Really? Have you any reason for thinking so?"

"No. Only some hint my mother once dropped when she was pretty angry. See, when I get tired, something in the back of my head goes dead—as if it had blown a fuse. It goes kind of blank. It's like when your arm goes dead because you slept on it—only it's in the brain."

"Does it happen often?"

"It happened when you came this evening. I find that eating and drinking brings it back. It sets up a kind of pressure in my head, and the deadness goes. I think the old man got syphilis, and it affected his brain, then he had a cure, but passed some of it on to me."

"But what reason have you for thinking that? Your father doesn't sound the type who'd go with a prostitute."

"You don't know him. He used to go wild sometimes. And why'd you think he married my mother? She wasn't his type. He came from a family of ministers. She needed men all the time. I think that was why they split up."

"How do you know all this?"

"How do I know? I had to live with her for ten years. In that time she must've had fifty lovers. When I was eight years old, I once went into her bedroom when father was away on a trip. She was in bed with the nigger chauffeur and shouting, 'Give it to me, give it to me.' She once said she'd like to be a millionairess so she could keep a harem of men. She needed sex like a fish needs water."

Reade said, "Your family all seem to have violent appetites."

Sundheim grinned. "You can say that again."

They had driven through the city and into Aldgate.

Reade said anxiously, "I don't want to stay out too late. I'd like to get a good night's sleep."

"Don't worry. We'll be back early. Tell me something. Do you think I ought to go and live on this island off Brazil?"

"What island?"

"You know, the one my father bought, Santa Manuela."

"I didn't realize he'd actually bought it."

"Oh yes. Off the Brazilian government, for a quarter of a million dollars. The monastery would have cost him another quarter of a million."

"Have you been there?"

"No, I've never seen it. I'm told it's pleasant in winter. Only a few fishermen live there."

"And why have you never been there?"

"Why? Because I've always been afraid it'd drive me crazy. What would there be to do in a place like that?"

"You don't know if you haven't been."

"Anyway, what's the use of running away?"

Reade said, "Perhaps you wouldn't be running away. You're running away here in London."

They had turned off the East India Dock Road. Above the houses on the right, he could see the outline of ships. They were driving along a cobbled road, with a railway line running along one side of it. Sundheim slowed and turned into a deserted street. The houses were joined together in one block, with no breaks. The pavement was no more than a foot wide. The street appeared to end in a wall, but when they reached it, Reade saw that a narrow lane ran off on the right. This was unlighted. The headlights showed an unpaved road, just wide enough for the car. The rain had filled its hollows with water. A building on the left seemed to be some kind of factory. When this came to an end, there was a wooden fence. On the right, there seemed to be an open space; behind it, against the pale sky, he could see the outlines of cranes.

Sundheim stopped the car at the end of the lane. There was a railway embankment in front of them. Somewhere away to the right, a light was burning.

"Here we are. I'd better lock the car. This is a bad neighborhood."

The rain that was falling steadily was almost a fine mist. When Sundheim turned off the car headlights, they were in total darkness. For a moment Reade felt nervous; then he suppressed it. Sundheim was swearing softly in the darkness, apparently having trouble locking the car. There was no other sound but the distant hooting of tugs on the river, and the sound of a train shunting.

Sundheim took his elbow. "Walk carefully. This way."

A building emerged out of the darkness.

Sundheim said, "Incidentally, they know me as Frazer here. Don't mention my real name."

"That's all very mysterious."

"It's a relic of the days when my mother was alive. She once had me followed by a private detective."

They turned into a yard. On the other side of it, there was a long wooden building, like an army canteen, with a light burning over its door. Just outside and to the right was a concrete wall with a gap in it; from the smell that emerged, it was obviously a public lavatory.

Sundheim opened the door of the wooden building. They went into a long room that smelled of cigarette smoke and stale beer. There were about a dozen men sitting at various tables, many of them dressed in overalls or in workmen's jackets with leather shoulder pads. Two girls who were obviously tarts were sitting near the door; they looked at Reade and Sundheim with interest as they came in. A little man carrying a trayful of glasses paused to say, "Why, if it isn't Mr. Frazer! 'Ow are you, sir?"

"Okay, thank you, Bert."

"Well, this is a surprise! What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Sundheim said, "Rum, I think." He said to Reade, "The rum here is very good. I can't recommend the beer or whiskey. Will you try it?"

"Just a little, please."

They sat at a table near the bar. The two women had turned in their chairs to look at them.

Reade asked, "What is this place?"

"A sort of club. A lot of foreign sailors use it. And the dockers who work nights."

Reade found the place without charm. It had obviously been a café or canteen at some time, and the smell of badly cooked cabbage and greasy mutton seemed to linger. On the walls there were a great many calendar photographs of nude and semi-nude women. The one nearest to them showed a girl with pendulous breasts and purple and yellow striped panties; she was winking and beckoning with her finger.

The barman came over to their table. He was carrying two glasses and had a bottle of rum under his arm. It had no label on it. He pulled out the cork and poured two large ones.

"Thanks, Bert. Have one yourself."

"Thank you, sir." He leaned forward across the table and jerked his head in the direction of the two women. "Watch them. The red'ead's a copper's nark."

When he returned to the bar, Reade asked, "Why did he tell us that? Does he think we're doing something illegal?"

Sundheim said casually, "He's just being friendly. Your health."

The rum was almost black in color and smelled of treacle. Reade took a large mouthful and swallowed it quickly. It made his eyes water. Sundheim drank his as if it were water, and poured more from the bottle.

His mood seemed to have changed again. He had become more taciturn. Reade noticed that his nostrils were now flared slightly, like those of a horse. His eyelids also seemed to droop lower, but the effect was not to make him look tired, but to give him an air of watchfulness, of concentration. Reade wondered if it could be the effect of the rum. It had made his own eyelids feel heavy, but also produced a strange and coarse sense of well-being. When he looked at the picture of the girl in the striped panties, it no longer

seemed entirely cheap and vulgar; it produced the same tingling in the loins that Sheila had produced two nights before.

Sundheim lit a cigarette and breathed the smoke out slowly through his nostrils. He said, "What do you think of this place?"

"It's. . . strange to me. Do you like it?"

"Uh huh."

A big Alsatian dog came out from behind the counter and came to sniff near their table. Reade put out his hand and patted its head.

Sundheim said, "We used to have an Alsatian like that."

"You like animals?"

"Uh huh. I killed it."

"You what?" Reade said. He heard the note of shock in his voice, and wondered if it was the rum that produced this strange sense of being detached from himself.

Sundheim leaned forward, his elbows on the table, and said slowly and seriously, "It was when I was fifteen. We used to have this Alsatian called Robber, and I used to play with him—sometimes roll around on the floor wrestling. Well, one day we were wrestling and he nipped my forearm. . . just here. I've still got a little scar. I had my hands on his throat, and suddenly I couldn't stop choking him. It wasn't that I was angry. I just couldn't let go. I had to go on until I'd killed him."

"But why?"

"Why? For the same reason he nipped me, I suppose. I couldn't hold back any longer."

"Were you sorry afterward?"

"Oh, yeah. I was fond of him. I cried when I buried him. But that was different."

One of the two women came past them. She went to the juke box that stood in the corner and dropped a coin in. The noise was deafening. Sundheim turned and scowled at her. She smiled, and came over. He said, "Can't you turn it down?"

"If you like."

She went back to the juke box and lowered the volume. A moment later she came back and nodded at the rum bottle. "Got any to spare?"

"Sure. Help yourself."

She walked off down the room, moving with a rolling motion of heavy buttocks. A hem of pink slip showed below her skirt.

Sundheim said with irritation, "These bitches can't let you alone. They always want to butt in. . . Oh no!"

The woman was returning with her glass, followed by the red-headed girl.

Reade said quickly, "Don't be unpleasant to them. We can always leave."

"Why should we?"

The two women came and sat at the table, placing their empty glasses in front of them. The dark-haired one picked up the bottle and poured two large helpings. She signaled to the barman. "Got a Coke?"

Reade looked at them with curiosity. The dark-haired girl had a heavy Negroid cast of face. Her eyes looked tired and swollen and she had a bruise on her cheek. The red-headed girl had a thin, tired face. She was smoking a cigarette in a manner that suggested utter boredom. Reade glanced nervously at Sundheim, whose face had become expressionless. He was looking at the bruise on the girl's cheek.

She asked, "What are your names?"

"I'm George Frazer. This is Sidney Reade."

Reade found the situation uncomfortable. He took another gulp of the rum, and regretted it. He said, "Would you mind if I had a little of your Coca-Cola?"

"Go ahead."

The red-headed girl looked at him curiously. "You a schoolteacher?"

"In a way. Why?"

"You sound like one."

Looking at her tired face, he felt a surge of pity.

She said, "You two slummin' or something?"

Sundheim ignored the question, although it was addressed to him.

Reade said, "Not exactly. George used to live here."

"Whereabouts?"

Sundheim looked at her coldly. His mouth gave a sarcastic twitch. He said, "You wouldn't know."

The door behind them opened. The women looked around as two Negroes came in. One of them was even bigger than Sundheim, and had to stoop to enter. They were both drunk. The big one said in a loud voice, "Man, but it's raining!"

Sundheim said, flatly but audibly, "Who the hell cares?"

They came to the bar, and both of them eyed the women with the open curiosity of drunks. The small one grinned at the redhead and winked. She turned away. A moment later Reade saw the black-haired girl look away indignantly. He turned around and saw that the big Negro was grinning at her and making

obvious and gross movements of sexual intercourse with his pelvis. Sundheim also turned in his chair; something in the slowness of his movement made Reade think of the snake in the glass cage. He looked at the Negroes, his arm over the back of the chair. The big Negro's smile faded, and he turned away. Sundheim stared at them for several moments longer, then turned back. He said audibly, "Bastard niggers."

Reade said nervously, "They're drunk. It's not worth bothering about." He did not like the expression on Sundheim's face. The eyes were cold and vicious, and yet there was an air of tension, almost of excitement, in him.

The redhead said, "You two want to stay here?"

Sundheim smiled. "What do you suggest?"

"My place isn't far away."

"Let's have another drink first."

Sundheim picked up the rum bottle and divided the remainder among the four glasses. He picked up his own glass and emptied it in a long pull.

The dark-haired girl said admiringly, "You like rum!"

He grinned at her and reached over the table. His fingers almost touched the bruise, then drew back. He raised the arm and waved toward the bar. "Another bottle, Bert." Reade was puzzled. Sundheim seemed to have become suddenly drunker.

The Negroes were now sitting at a table on the other side of the room; the big one was watching them out of the corner of his eye.

The bartender brought another full bottle over and pulled out the cork. Sundheim reached into his back pocket and took out a wallet. He fumbled clumsily inside and pulled out a wad of five-pound notes. The eyes of both girls widened; there was obviously over a hundred pounds there. Sundheim peeled off a note and gave it to the bartender. Reade glanced across at the Negroes and saw them both looking quickly away. He was beginning to feel distinctly worried. It was too obvious that Sundheim was less drunk than he was pretending, and that he wanted to provoke trouble.

The dark-haired girl said, "Let's go and drink this at Mabel's place."

"That depends how far it is," Sundheim said. He stood up, and the girls started to rise. He placed a hand on the shoulder of each. "You can't come where I'm going, ladies."

He walked out slowly.

The dark-haired girl said, "He's had a basin full from the look of him."

The big Negro asked loudly, "Where'd you keep the can here, mister?"

"Outside and on the right," the barman said.

Both the Negroes stood up, and the small one looked at Reade as he did so; he was smiling slightly.

With sudden sharp certitude Reade smelled physical violence. His stomach lurched sickly. As they reached the door, he stood up and followed them.

One of the girls said, "Bert, lend him the smacker."

The bartender bent behind the counter and came up a moment later with a short length of iron tubing bound with insulating tape. Reade shook his head and hurried out. He blundered through the door, and immediately cannoned into someone. A moment later he recognized the small Negro. The man said, "Close that door and mind your own business." His breath smelled strongly of alcohol.

Reade tried to push him aside and then felt a yellow flash of pain between his legs. At the same time the Negro brought up both hands and caught him under the chin. He reeled backward and fell against the wall. He heard the little man rushing away, and someone shouted from inside the lavatory. Then, as he sat there, he heard the sound of a laugh. It was obviously Sundheim's voice. He staggered to his feet, his hands clutching his crotch, suppressing the desire to vomit. The little Negro had gone into the urinal.

Reade called, "George."

It was dark inside the urinal, but the light from behind him showed a pair of feet sticking toward the door. At first he thought they were fighting; he could hear the sounds of blows and heavy breathing. Then he saw that Sundheim had the little Negro pinned against the wall with his left hand and his knee and was hitting him in the stomach with tremendous short arm jabs. The Negro was making no sound at all. The shape of the big Negro lay on the floor, his head in the gutter.

Reade said, "Be careful. You'll kill him."

Sundheim said savagely, "I hope so. The bastards wanted to kill me."

He pulled the Negro forward with his left hand, then slammed his head back against the wall. Then he threw him away from him. The man landed in a heap on the far side of the urinal.

Sundheim said harshly, "Get back in there, Damon. I can deal with this."

Reade grabbed his arm. He said, "Come on, George. You've done enough damage."

"I'll damage the bastards. Help me get them outside." He grabbed the big Negro by his feet and dragged him through the door. Reade tried to raise the small Negro, but the pain in his crotch made it impossible. He went outside. Sundheim had dragged the man across the yard and left him on the far side. He said, "Where's the other?"

"I can't lift him. He half ruptured me."

"Did he?" Sundheim said menacingly.

Reade said, "For God's sake, don't hit him any more. You'll be in court for manslaughter."

Sundheim dragged the small Negro out and threw him into the shadows with the other one. He said, "They can sleep there till morning. Come on."

Reade followed him back inside. The room seemed shockingly normal. None of the men playing cards looked up. Only the bartender was standing close to the door, his hand in his pocket; Reade guessed it

contained the smacker. Sundheim was breathing heavily as he marched back to his seat. He picked up a full tumbler of rum and half emptied it. Reade followed more slowly.

The red-headed girl said, "What happened?"

"Nothing much," Sundheim said.

Reade was astonished by his calm. His hand was not even shaking as he held the glass. He suddenly felt sick and weak, and the pain between his thighs had spread across his lower belly. He sat down heavily and picked up his glass. He drained it without lowering it, in spite of the burning of the liquid in his throat. When he set it down, he felt better. The ache in his loins no longer seemed important.

Sundheim asked, "Did you get hurt?"

"He used his knee."

The redhead said, "You been fighting? I knew that'd 'appen. As soon as he let 'em see his wallet."

"It was nothing," Sundheim said. He seemed unnaturally calm as he lit a cigarette.

The dark-haired girl said admiringly, "It's a good thing you can take care of yourself."

The bartender asked nervously, "Where are they?"

"They went home," Sundheim said.

The dark-haired girl said, "How about us doing the same?"

Sundheim looked back at her without answering. She asked doubtfully, "Where are they really?"

"Asleep. Want to come and see?"

"Both of 'em?"

He nodded and stood up. The red-headed girl started to rise too, but Sundheim placed his hand on her shoulder. "We shan't be a moment. You talk to Sidney."

She watched Sundheim and the girl go out. She said, "I hope they'll be all right. Are you okay? You look sick."

"I'll be all right."

"Come on back to my place and I'll make you some coffee."

"I don't think we'd better."

She lit another cigarette. "What's your friend do?"

"Nothing. He has some kind of a private income. He lives in Kensington."

She looked at him oddly. "Are you sure?"

Her manner puzzled him.

"Well, yes, of course I'm sure. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I always thought he lived over this way somewhere."

"You know him then?"

"Only by sight. I've seen him round our way."

"Where's that?"

"Piggott Street—Tower 'amlets."

"He used to live in the East End a few years ago. He doesn't now."

She said, shrugging, "Oh well, p'raps you're right. But I've seen him more recently than that. He's a funny sort."

He asked, "Do you think he still keeps a place in the East End?"

"I dunno. I wouldn't be surprised. I've seen 'im around. . . Where you going?"

"Excuse me. . . I think I'd better see where he is."

"What you worried about? They'll be back when they're ready. He's got a car, 'asn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well—he might not like bein' interrupted."

"I think I'd better look all the same."

He hurried away to avoid further objections, aware that she was staring after him. The pain in his lower abdomen suddenly became sharp. He stopped outside the door and leaned back against the wall. The drizzle on his face felt refreshing. The light above the door was not a strong one; it illuminated only a small part of the yard. He walked as far as the urinal, and called, "George." From over on his left, someone groaned. As he stood listening, he heard the distant sound of a car door slamming. He walked into the darkness, his hands stretched out in front of him. His knees encountered something, and he stumbled; at the same time a voice said, "Oh, man." He turned and peered into the darkness; by the light from the door, he could see the big Negro on his hands and knees, crawling toward the gate. He said, "Can I help you?"

The Negro groaned, and went on crawling. Reade hesitated, then decided to go on. He groped his way through the gateway and walked through a puddle of water that ran into his shoes. He called, "George, are you there?" His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness and he could see the outline of the car. The muffled sound of a woman's voice came to him. He turned and went back toward the club, feeling awkward and undecided. Before he reached the gate, there was the sound of the car door opening. He looked around and saw the girl outlined for a moment against the interior light of the car; her dress was around her waist and her thighs showed whitely. Then the door slammed and the light went

out; she was running through the darkness toward him, her feet obviously bare on the wet road. A moment later she ran into him, and he held her for a moment to soften the impact.

She said shrilly, "Christ, who's that?"

"It's only me. Are you all right?"

She recognized his voice. "Where's Ruth? My God, that bloody friend of yours. He's a madman. Keep him off me. . ."

"What is it?"

She pulled away from him. "He'll end up in jail or the loony bin. . ."

He heard her gasp as she stumbled over the Negro. At the same moment the engine of the car started up. He ran over to it and pulled at the handle of the door; it was locked. He called, "It's me."

There was a clicking noise as the door unlocked. Sundheim said out the window, "Get in the back."

As he sat down heavily on the seat, he felt something under him. Groping, he felt a pair of shoes and a silk garment, obviously panties. He lowered the window and dropped them out quickly as the car started forward. Sundheim turned right onto an open space, reversed smartly, then accelerated forward past the gateway. In the headlights, Reade got a glimpse of the Negro now supporting himself against the wall. The car surged forward and made a turn into the roadway that flung Reade across the seat.

Sundheim's voice said out of the darkness, "Stupid bitch. I didn't want to hurt her."

Reade closed his eyes and experienced a strange sensation of lightness, as if his body had become a balloon.

Sundheim said, "Can you drive?"

"Yes, why?"

Sundheim pulled into the side of the road. "Then you drive. I'm drunk."

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind. I feel drunk too."

A policeman turned the corner and walked toward them. Sundheim cursed softly, and put the car into gear.

Reade said, "Let's leave the car here and take a taxi. There's one over there."

"No. I'll be all right."

Reade closed his eyes again as the car turned into the main road. They drove slowly over the cobbles. Sundheim said, in a singsong voice, "God, am I high. . ." He suddenly began to sing:

"I traveled through a land of men

A land of men and women too

And heard and saw such dreadful things

As cold earth wanderers never knew."

He half turned to Reade. "You know that?"

"I know the poem, not the setting."

"Do you know this:

"The roaring fire ran o'er the heav'ns

In whirlwinds and cataracts of blood,

And o'er the dark deserts of Urizen

Fires pour through the void on all sides

On Urizen's self-begotten armies. . ."

Reade interrupted him to say, "You certainly know your Blake."

"My old man used to give me five dollars for every page I learned by heart. I got him to buy me my first car by learning the whole of 'Jerusalem' by heart."

"The whole of it? How long did that take?"

"About two months. He bet me I'd never do it. He never thought he'd have to buy that car."

They had turned into a narrower street. A moment later Sundheim stopped the car.

Reade asked, "Where are we?"

"This is as far as we go tonight."

They had stopped beside two large wooden doors. The street ahead was lit by only one lamp and was deserted. There was a hooting of tugs from the river. Sundheim fumbled in the glove compartment, then got out of the car. He approached the doors and inserted a key into an enormous lock. Then he swung back the two doors and came back to the car. He started the engine again and swung the Daimler into a large shedlike building.

Reade opened the door and smelled the sickly odor of dead meat. He said, "What is this place?"

"What it smells like. A slaughterhouse."

"Do you live somewhere near?"

"Right up above." Sundheim pointed. "That's my flat. Help me close these doors."

Reade felt too drunk and tried to object; he wanted to lie down and sleep on the ground. Sundheim closed and locked the doors again. Then he inserted a Yale key into another door a few yards away. He kicked it open. "After you," he said.

Reade climbed the flight of uncarpeted stairs; the blood smell was still perceptible there and made him feel slightly sick. The tiredness now pressed on him so heavily that he found it difficult to think. He opened a door at the top of the stairs and groped for a light switch. There was a large settee against the opposite wall; he crossed to it and sat down heavily.

Sundheim came slowly up the stairs, swaying as he walked. He said vaguely, "Wish we had a drink. Left the rum there."

"Don't you think we've had enough?"

"I'm thirsty. Need a drink."

He was breathing heavily. The big room was cold and smelled damp. Reade looked at his watch; it was two-thirty. He said, "Have you got a telephone? I ought to ring Kit Butler in case he's waiting up for me."

"No. Never had one installed. 'Scuse me."

He disappeared through a door at the far side of the room. Reade stood up and walked over to the mantelpiece, trying to concentrate his attention on the room. The furniture was old and the carpet on the floor was badly worn in places. On the shelf there was a photograph of Sundheim standing with his arm around a short middle-aged woman. She wore horn-rimmed spectacles with butterfly frames; they were completely unsuited to her face, which was too fat and had a small, tight mouth.

In an alcove on the other side of the room, there were glass doors; Reade crossed to them and turned the key. When he pushed them open, he found himself looking out over a narrow concrete veranda onto the river.

He heard the lavatory flush; Sundheim came out and staggered against the doorjamb, then recovered himself. He pointed at Reade accusingly. "Your friend can't be expecting you back. He thought you were catching a train."

"It wasn't certain. I said I'd ring him from the station if I decided to catch it."

Sundheim went to a cupboard in the corner and pulled it open. He said, "Well, I can offer you a little whiskey, or some vodka."

"Neither for me, thanks. I'm not used to drinking."

"Neither am I. Neither am I."

Sundheim poured whiskey into a tumbler, and sat down in the armchair with a bump. He sniffed the liquor, then drank it down. He pulled a wry face, as if taking medicine. He said slowly, his voice slurred, "You now see Sundheim in the third stage of degeneration. He's back to the womb stage."

"Don't you think you ought to get some sleep?"

"Come and sit down. I wanna talk to you."

Reade sat in the armchair opposite. The night air had made his head feel clearer, the pain in his groin had gone, and some obscure urge of will power was now working to fight off the effect of the drink. Sundheim was also making an obvious effort to concentrate his attention, but he seemed unsuccessful. He said, "I like you, Damon. You know that, don't you?"

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I said I like you. D'you know why? 'Cause you're a gen'leman. Don't mind if my speesh is a little slurred, 'cause I know what I'm trying to say. I'm going to sleep in a moment, but I want to tell you something first. That is that you're a gen'leman. Do you know what I mean?"

"I'm glad to hear it," Reade said.

"Yes, well, so'm I. You're gentle, see. A. Gentle. Man. See?"

Reade nodded.

"I want to ask you something, Damon. I don't want you to judge me on what you've seen tonight."

"Of course not."

"It's not of course. You came to judge me, didn't you?"

For a moment Reade did not take it in. Then he said, "Why do you say that?"

"Don't give me that horse shit. You came along to judge me. Didn't you?"

"Perhaps," Reade said.

"Course you did. Well, have you judged?"

Looking at him, Reade thought: Is this the point where he tries to attack me? He felt no fear, knowing that he would be a match for Sundheim in his present state. Then, seeing Sundheim's eyes wandering back to the whiskey bottle, he knew there would be no attack, and felt momentarily ashamed. Sundheim reached out, took the bottle, and poured all its remaining contents into his glass.

Reade said, "I wish you wouldn't. Come on, put it back."

Sundheim grinned at him. "Why?"

"You can't drink whiskey on top of rum and Chianti and champagne and brandy. You'll kill yourself."

Sundheim said, "Oh, no, I shan't." But he replaced the glass in the cupboard, spilling some of the whiskey as he did so. He said, "It's nice of you to worry about my health, though." He hunched himself into the chair, as if about to fall asleep, then stretched his legs and readjusted himself in an upright position. "You see, you mustn't judge me. Because you know my trouble? I've got too much body. All this. . ." He snatched at himself with his hands, as if scratching.

"You see," he said, "you're okay. But what about me? My family have got too much body. Have you seen the picture of my mother? It's up there. She had too much body. She was interested in all kinds of things—Christian Science and Madame Blavatsky and this whatsisname man, you know, with the enemas, not enemas, engrams. She did all that. But you know what she really needed? She needed a gorilla, or a big bastard like that nigger tonight, to lie on top of her and screw hell out of her for ten hours a day. See, I'm not trying to conceal anything. And my father was the same. I don't know much about his sex life, but he had plenty all right. He used to talk about the mortification of the flesh. But wha's the good of mortifying it? Got to satisfy it."

He allowed his head to fall against the back of the chair, and stared into space. Then he said, "Oh, what the hell. I need to sleep. . ." He stood up slowly, yawning. He said, "Come on and get some blankets. You can use the settee."

Reade followed him into a bedroom. It was occupied almost entirely by an enormous bed that stretched completely against one wall. It appeared to have been made by joining together two or three divan beds.

Reade said, "That's the biggest bed I've ever seen."

Sundheim pulled back the corner of the counterpane that stretched over it and heaved off some of the blankets underneath. They appeared to be the ordinary size. He said, "It's a good bed. That bed has seen some action. It's my orgy couch. Had as many as six people in it. Ever had an orgy?"

Reade was not sure whether he was joking. "No."

"You should try it. You might enjoy it. I'll arrange one if you like."

"We'll talk about it later," Reade said.

"Sure. Pity we didn't bring those girls back. Still, I couldn't trust the redhead." He dumped the blankets in Reade's arms, then added an eiderdown out of a wardrobe. He said, "I've got to sleep, and you've got to catch a train. Pity. I'd like to talk to you. You mustn't judge me by tonight."

"No, I won't."

Reade started to go out of the door. Sundheim placed a hand on his arm. "Just le' me explain what I mean. My mother used to sleep with the chauffeur—big Japanese bastard. . ."

"I thought you said he was a Negro?"

"No, this was another, Japanese. When I was sixteen. And she told me they'd asked her to give the prizes in the Sunday school because she gave the biggest donation. And I said, 'Momma, explain one thing to me, how you can give prizes at a Sunday school when you're sleeping with the chauffeur.' Know what she said? She said, 'Son, what you do in bed's got nothing to do with what you do out of it.' I always remembered that."

Reade said, "Sex is a world of its own."

"Yeah. Sex is a world of its own. Who said that?"

"I did."

"It's true. Sex has got nothing to do with anything else. . ." He yawned. "You go and sleep. Put the lights out. The John's on the right there. See you tomorrow. Good night."

Reade made up the bed on the settee, using cushions as pillows. It was a big settee, but old-fashioned and uncomfortable. He removed his shirt and trousers and switched off the light. When he lay down, the smell of the settee reminded him of the front room of an aunt who had died when he was a child. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling. The light of a boat passing along the river made the shape of the window frame move along it. He was trying hard to focus something, something that eluded him. It had to do with the flash of the girl's bare thighs as she jumped out of the car. But the drink blurred his intuitions; he could not bring into focus the feeling of identification with Sundheim that tried to push through his consciousness. The smell of the settee made him remember his. aunt, then his mother. Almost immediately he was asleep.

He woke once in the night, hearing a door open. For a moment he could not recollect where he was. Sundheim went into the lavatory and urinated with the door open, then he returned to bed without flushing the toilet. When Sundheim's door closed, Reade immediately fell asleep again.

He woke up to morning sounds and sunlight slanting across the room. It was like waking from a bad dream and finding that it still goes on. His eyeballs were burning and his mouth was completely dry. His head ached dully. He lay there staring across the room, with a strong desire to get up to urinate, and an even stronger one to lie still and go back to sleep. Finally he dragged himself into a sitting position and put his feet on the floor. The room began to sway around him and he felt sick. Sweat rose from his chest and neck and began to run down his forehead. He breathed quickly through his mouth, leaning forward with his head hanging. After a few minutes he was able to walk to the lavatory. He sat down and held his face in his hands. He sat there for five minutes, then pulled the chain and went back into the other room. The perspiration was now rising in waves and he felt a desire to lie down on the floor on his face. He forced himself to go into the kitchen and lean over the sink. He turned on the cold tap and splashed water on his face. In a white metal cupboard he found a bottle of milk of magnesia. He poured some into a glass of water, stirred it, and gulped it down. Then he went back to the settee and lay down again. His watch showed half past nine.

At ten o'clock he went to Sundheim's door and knocked. There was no reply. He opened it and looked in. The bed was unmade, but empty.

His first feeling was a sense of relief. He had been expecting to have some difficulty getting Sundheim up. He called, "George," knowing there would be no answer. The flat suddenly seemed quieter and emptier. He went to the glass doors and looked out over the river. Underneath, there were barges at anchor. A man in a striped butcher's apron was standing in a small yard, looking out over the river. An oil tanker steamed slowly past.

He opened the main door of the flat and looked down the stairs. The smell of butcher's meat came up to him and made him close the door sharply. In the wall at right angles to the door, there was another door covered with green baize. He pulled it open and found himself looking into what at first seemed to be a clothes cupboard. It contained a yellow oilskin, a raincoat and some old jackets. When he pushed these aside, he saw that the back of the cupboard was another baize-covered door. It had a key on the inside. He turned it and pushed the door; below him was the slaughterhouse that Sundheim used as a garage. A ladder ran down the wall. The outside of the door was covered with metal. Doors at the far end of the slaughterhouse opened on the river, and men were unloading carcasses of meat from a boat. The car was

no longer there.

Reade closed the door and locked it. Certain now that he was alone, he went slowly and thoroughly through the flat. Sundheim's bedroom contained only the bed and a wardrobe; a drawer in the wardrobe held clean shirts and a pair of trousers; the upper part contained two suits, both well worn, and several seamen's jerseys. He peered at the carpet on the floor, looking for any kind of stain; none was visible. But when he pulled back the pillows on the bed and peered behind it, he saw a glint of metal on the floor. He reached down and picked up a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He turned them over carefully in his hand. They could have belonged to a man or a woman, but something about their design inclined him to believe it was a woman. He was about to slip them into his pocket, then changed his mind and dropped them back behind the bed.

The kitchen drawers revealed nothing of interest; there was a heavy carving knife, but it looked new. When he pulled open one of the drawers, a small slip of blue paper fluttered down. He picked it up and looked at it; it seemed to have been torn from the corner of a ticket of some kind. He closed the drawer and placed the slip of paper where it would fall out again when the drawer was opened.

He looked at his watch; it was after ten. He was now feeling slightly better, but still tired. He dressed and left the flat. On the way downstairs he held his breath, and exhaled only when he was in the street.

To the right of the flat door, there was a butcher's shop. A young man was boning a large joint of beef. Reade stopped by the door, and asked, "Have you seen Mr. Frazer this morning?"

"No, sir. But I believe he's upstairs. I heard him moving about."

"That was me," Reade said.

"Ah, I see. Well, he hasn't been around since I arrived at eight o'clock."

"Thank you."

He walked along the street and turned right; in a few minutes he found himself back in the Commercial Road. There was a telephone box a hundred yards away. He went into it and dialed Butler's number. The phone was answered immediately.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Kit. This is Damon."

Butler yelled, "What!"

"What's the matter?"

"Thank God it's you! Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. Is something the matter?"

"You've got half Scotland Yard searching for your body!"

"Good God, you're not serious? Just because I didn't ring you last night?"

"Not just that. They've got definite evidence that Sundheim's the Thames murderer. They're out to get him. Where is he?"

"Well, I don't know. I spent the night in his flat near Whitechapel, but he left early. I got horribly drunk. So did he. Tell me what's been happening?"

"All right. As soon as you left last night, Sarah rang up. She'd got your friend Lund with her—he'd gone to see them to try and trace you. I spoke to Lund and told him everything—about how we found Sundheim and the lot. Then I told him you'd gone off with Sundheim, and he nearly went mad. Half an hour later Scotland Yard rang up. Lund had phoned them, and it turned out that Sundheim was at the top of their list of suspects. So you can imagine what happened. Sarah kept ringing back every ten minutes to find out if you'd returned. I rang Jeremy and sent him to Euston to try and intercept you—I had to stay here in case you rang. He took two policemen with him in case you arrived with Sundheim. Of course, you didn't, so the police searched every place where Sundheim's known to go. They traced you to Antonelli's restaurant, where you'd apparently just had a meal, but they couldn't get any further. I've had this place full of policemen since seven this morning. . . It's been chaos."

"What's all this about definite evidence against him?"

"Well, I'm not sure. They won't tell me, naturally. But I gather Sundheim's been under observation for quite some time. I suppose they traced him through that queer-club murder. But what about last night? Did you actually stay with Sundheim?"

"Yes. He seemed so drunk it didn't seem at all dangerous. But he must have been sober enough to leave before I was awake."

"You'd better give me the address of the place, in case the police come back."

"All right. It's 157A Narrow Street, Limehouse."

"Good. Now get back here as quick as you can. I'll ring Sarah. She's having hysterics about it. She's sitting by the telephone. . ."

"Oh, my God. Yes, please ring her right away. Poor child. I'll be right over. Must dash—I can see a taxi."

He slammed down the receiver and rushed out of the box, waving at the taxi on the other side of the road. The driver stopped, waited for a moment until the traffic thinned, then made a U-turn in the road. Reade clambered in, giving him the address. As they went through Aldgate, he found himself staring with mild surprise at the people going about their business; it seemed strange that everything should look so normal. Then his own excitement subsided and the fatigue came back. When he thought about Sundheim, and what Butler had just told him, he experienced a sense of relief. It was out of his hands.

Butler appeared at the front door while he was paying the taxi man. He seized Reade's hand in both of his and shook it. He said, "God, you don't know what a bad night you've given me."

"I'm awfully sorry. . . but how could I guess what'd happen? Did you ring Sarah?"

"Yes, of course. She took it rather calmly, considering that she's been ringing every half hour since seven

this morning. Come on up—there's tea. You look awful. What's been happening?"

"Tell me what Sarah said first."

"Oh, that she knew you wouldn't come to any harm! But she made me promise to put you on the train today. She sounds a good girl—level-headed. She wants you to ring her back."

Butler's room looked untidy and cold. Two ashtrays were filled to overflowing; there were cigarette butts all over the floor. An empty gin bottle and two empty whiskey bottles stood on the table, and another half-full bottle of whiskey on the shelf.

"Like a drink?"

Reade shuddered. "No, thanks. I don't think I'll ever touch whiskey again."

"How about a little rum in your tea?"

"God, no! That's worse. I got drunk on rum last night."

Reade poured his tea in a pint mug; he gulped it thirstily. Some of the exhaustion began to dissipate. He experienced a sudden powerful flow of warmth and affection for Kit Butler, and found himself looking around the room with regret at the idea of leaving it.

Butler said, "Hurry up and tell me about last night. The police'll be here in a moment."

"You rang them?"

"Of course. Incidentally, your friend Lund's in town."

"In London? How could he be?"

"He drove all night. He'll probably be along too."

There was the sound of a car stopping under the open window.

"That'll probably be him."

Butler craned out of the window, then said, "Well, I'll be damned. It's Fisher. Perhaps he's come for Sheila. Incidentally, she spent the night there. I met her coming in at seven this morning."

Three rings at the doorbell interrupted him. Butler stuck his head out of the window. "Hello, Harley. Did you want me or Sheila?"

"You. May I come up?"

"Yes."

A few moments later Fisher came into the room. When he saw Reade, he said, "Ah, so you're alive after all!"

Reade said, smiling, "I'm afraid so."

"Where have you been?"

Butler said, "He was just about to tell me. He's only just arrived."

"Ah, then you'd better save it for the police. They're right behind me."

"How do you know?"

"I saw Peterson at Netting Hill Gate—the man in charge of the case. They were going the wrong way."

"How did you know about Damon?"

"From Sheila. She rang me half an hour ago."

There was the sound of car brakes below.

Fisher said, "This should be them. . . ah yes, Peterson. He's not going to be very pleased with you."

Reade shrugged. "I can't help that."

The man who came into the room a moment later was short and powerfully built; he moved in a quick, purposive way. Behind him came Lund. Peterson said to Fisher, "Good God, what are you doing here? Are you mixed up in this too?"

"To some extent," Fisher said. "However, let me introduce you to the potential victim, Damon Reade. This is Chief Inspector Peterson."

"So you're the troublemaker?" Peterson said, glowering aggressively. Then he grinned suddenly and held out his hand. "Well, I'm glad you're still alive."

Reade said mildly, "I don't see why I shouldn't be. There was never any question of real danger."

Lund said, "Don't you be so sure! They brought me all the way from Carlisle on your account, anyway."

"I'm sorry to cause you so much trouble."

"Anyway," Peterson said, "let's hear the story. Mind if I sit down?"

Reade said, "If you'll excuse me saying so, I don't quite know what the fuss is about. I simply spent a pleasant evening with George Sundheim and ended by getting drunk."

"Where is he now?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. He left while I was asleep this morning."

"Start from the beginning," Peterson said.

"All right, but there's not much to tell. We had a meal, as you know. Then he drove me to a kind of dock workers' club somewhere near Silvertown, where we drank rather a lot of rum. He got into a quarrel with two Negroes who tried to rob him in the gent's toilet, but he won the fight. Then we drove

back to his flat in Limehouse. He was so drunk that I thought he'd be incapable of moving for a week. But he left before eight o'clock this morning. I woke up with a bad hangover at nine and came over here. That's all."

"This flat—what's it like? Has it got a garage?"

"In a way. It's situated above a butcher's shop and next to a slaughterhouse, and he seems to have permission to use the slaughterhouse. . ."

"A slaughterhouse? One that's in use?"

"I'm not sure. He told me it was a slaughterhouse. They were unloading meat from a boat when I left."

Butler said excitedly, "You mean it's right on the river?"

Peterson looked at him reproachfully. "Excuse me, sir, but you might let me ask the questions for the moment."

Reade asked him, "Didn't you know about this flat?"

Peterson said shortly, "No."

Fisher said, "Well, well, Bob, you've had this thing presented to you on a plate. . ."

Peterson growled, "Don't you be so sure. We haven't been asleep. It wasn't his old address in the East End, anyway. He gave that up when he moved into this place."

"Interesting," Fisher said. "If he's got a flat above a slaughterhouse, he's got the ideal place for murders."

"I know," Peterson said grimly.

Fisher asked Reade, "Did you notice if it had underground drains, or just concrete grooves in the floor?"

"Yes. Both types."

"So he could dismember a body, wash the blood away with a hosepipe, wrap it up in a meat sack. . ."

Peterson interrupted. "Let's not get too far ahead, if you don't mind. Now, Mr. Reade, does anyone live in the butcher's, as far as you know?"

"Almost certainly not. I imagine the flat above used to belong to the shop. Now I should think the shop's let separately."

"Mmm, we'll soon know all that, anyway. Do you know if Sundheim has a boat?"

"No. But he easily could have. It's right on the river."

Fisher said, "Your blood-test experts are going to have fun in that slaughterhouse, testing every bloodstain to see if it's animal or human."

Peterson didn't reply; he was staring at the floor, frowning. He looked up at Reade, and said slowly, "Has Sundheim said anything to you to indicate that he's guilty of murder?"

Reade shook his head firmly. "Nothing whatever."

Peterson said quickly, "But you believe he is?"

"I. . . suppose so."

"Why?"

"Simply because there's so much evidence." There was a silence for a moment.

Then Fisher asked Peterson, "Is there any evidence?"

Peterson hesitated, then said, "We've got a witness who saw Sundheim and David Miller together in a Hammersmith pub on the night Miller disappeared. But that's not for publication."

Fisher smiled. "In that case, congratulations! You've got your case tied up."

Peterson smiled unwillingly. "I hope so. Anyway. . ."

The telephone rang. Butler answered it, and said to Peterson, "It's for you."

Peterson ambled across the room and snapped into the phone, "Hello. Chief Inspector Peterson. . ." His face changed as he listened, and the color came into his face. He said, "What?" and glanced quickly around the room, as if wondering whether anyone had overheard what had been said. He listened for a few moments longer, then said, "I'll be right over."

They all looked at him curiously as he hung up, but he looked directly at Lund. "We'll have to go."

"Any development?" Fisher asked.

"Sort of. Can't talk about it now." He glanced sternly at Reade. "One more question, if you don't mind. Does Sundheim strike you as sane?"

Reade hesitated. "Not. . . entirely. You know his father died in an asylum?"

"I heard about it."

"Well, Sundheim's not entirely normal—extremely tense. I think it's all tied up with his boa constrictor."

"What?" Peterson glared at him as if he suspected mockery.

"His snake. It's a big one. And I think he identifies with it in some way. He's always talking about his body—as if it were a kind of dangerous pet that had to be kept fed."

Peterson said impatiently, "We'll have to go into all that later."

He said "all that" in a tone that implied something less complimentary. At the door, he pointed a finger at Reade. "And no disappearing this time. We may need you later in the day. Stay here, if you don't mind."

"All right," Reade said.

When they heard the engine start up below the window, Fisher said, "Well, this is all very strange indeed." He lit a small cigar, and drew on it deeply.

"What do you make of it?" Butler asked.

"Hmm. Extremely difficult to say. My guess is that Bob Peterson's not entirely pleased that a mere member of the public has tracked down a murderer. He's already wondering how it's going to look in the papers, and how much he can pretend to know already. Of course, if this thing about the Hammersmith pub is true, he's got a good case."

"Don't you believe him?" Reade asked.

"Oh yes. But you know what witnesses are? I wonder what made them dash off so quickly. It looks as if they've found a fresh piece of evidence."

"How long have you known Peterson?"

"Oh, for years. We were together in Naval Intelligence."

Reade said, "I've just remembered. There's something I forgot to mention. I looked behind Sundheim's bed when he'd gone out, and found a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles—a woman's, I think."

"Did you bring them?"

"No. I had a sudden suspicion that he'd left them there on purpose. . . to see if I took them. And when I opened a drawer in the kitchen a piece of paper fluttered out—just a tiny piece, as if he'd placed it there to see if I searched the place."

Butler asked, "Do you think that's why he left you alone in the place?"

"I think so. At least, it's possible."

Fisher asked, "When do you think he began to suspect you?"

"I don't know. It could have been from the very beginning. You see, we were both in a nearby shop two days ago, and he could have noticed me as he went by. And last night, when I met him, he asked me about Kit's voice on the telephone—Kit actually spoke to him in the shop."

Fisher said slowly, "I think I begin to understand this man's psychology. Let's reconstruct it. If he's a murderer, then he expects to come under suspicion sooner or later. Right? Now what excuse did you use to make his acquaintance?"

"I discovered that his father was a Blake scholar, so it was simple."

"Superb! You should be a detective. You must explain at length. Anyway, let's assume he didn't entirely believe you. He's bound to suspect that you might have been sent by the police. In that case, he begins to play a game of hide and seek with you. Does that fit the facts?"

"Very much."

Butler asked, "Do you think he kills for fun? Or out of some paranoiac feeling about his victims?"

Reade said slowly, "Neither. Until I met Sundheim, I'd never quite understood what sadism is all about. I couldn't understand how anyone could hurt another person. . ."

"And do you now?"

"I think so," Reade said. "At least, I think I understand Sundheim. You'll find this very hard to believe, but he's basically quite good-natured."

"What!"

"Yes. He's not an ordinary neurotic at all. He reminds me of a boy I knew at school who couldn't help breaking things. He was tremendously strong, and he had to break things as a kind of expression of his energy. I once saw him tear a radiator away from a wall. Anyway, Sundheim's the same. He kept talking about his body and how difficult it was to have a body with so much energy. And I gather his mother was a nymphomaniac, and his father seems to have been highly sexed as well. You've only got to watch him eating and drinking to understand it—he wolfs his food with a kind of manic energy, like someone chopping down a tree, out of sheer excess vitality. He's a kind of Gargantuan. He's inherited too much energy and too much money and too much sexual appetite. And I imagine he goes about sex in the same way he eats—with a kind of fury."

Fisher asked quickly, "You think he kills accidentally, in a sexual frenzy?"

"No. It's possible, but that isn't what I had in mind. I didn't tell the Inspector, but he went off with a prostitute last night—after he'd beat up these two Negroes."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you about that in a moment. Anyway, I was worried. I could see he was seething with a kind of suppressed violence, and I thought he might. . . well, injure her seriously. So I followed him to the car, and she came rushing out in the dark without her shoes, and said he was a madman."

"What do you think he was doing to her?"

"I can only guess. Ideally, he'd want to consume her, somehow. . . to eat her, perhaps. Perhaps he was biting her, or hurting her in some other way."

Butler said thoughtfully, "It must have been pretty abnormal if a prostitute got frightened. She'd be used to strange demands."

"And the bed back at his place. . . it's enormous, big enough for six. He said he uses it for orgies."

"Did you sleep in it?"

"God no, of course not. I slept on the settee."

Fisher asked, "Is he homosexual?"

"Oh, I should think so. But a sexual appetite as huge as that probably doesn't discriminate much. Anyway, do you see what I mean? He does everything to excess—eating, drinking, sex. So I could quite imagine that he might want to kill and dismember somebody in some tremendous explosion of animal energy. And afterward he'd feel a little ashamed about it, but not really worried."

"You think he doesn't experience guilt, then?"

"I don't say that. I think he's guilt-ridden about his parents—particularly about his mother. I think there may have been some abnormal relation there. . ."

The telephone interrupted them. Butler picked it up, and said, "Speaking. . . Yes, he's here." He handed it to Reade. "It's Peterson."

Peterson's voice sounded hard and controlled. "Mr. Reade? We may need your help. Your friend Sundheim's gone completely mad."

Reade yelled, "What?"

"He's shooting with a revolver. Could you come over here? Get Harley to bring you if he's still there."

"Yes, of course. To his place in the mews?"

"Yes. Hurry. We're already collecting huge crowds. I think you might be able to talk sense into him."

"I'll be right over." He dropped the phone into its cradle. "Sundheim's shooting at the police. I don't know what's happened. Peterson says he's gone mad. Could you drive me over?"

"Of course! So that's why Peterson rushed off. . . the old villain. And he didn't say a word to us! He wanted to keep us out of the picture!"

Butler was pulling on his coat. He said, "You'd do best to keep well out of it, Damon. If he's reached this stage, he'll kill you as soon as anybody else. Did Peterson say whether Sundheim had shot anybody?"

"No. I presume he hadn't, or they'd have said so."

They were out of the house. Fisher's Bentley stood in front of the door. Reade climbed into the back. For the first time he felt a real tension of fear in his stomach. It had suddenly gone beyond anything he expected, and he could no longer understand it. It ran counter to all he knew about Sundheim.

As the car turned into Ladbroke Grove, Butler said, "It looks to me as if you were luckier than you realized last night."

"Why?"

"Why? The man's a nut. He might have gone off his head while you were asleep and chopped your head off."

"No. You don't understand. There was no danger at all for me. I think he likes me."

Fisher said, "You are either very brave or very. . . innocent."

"You were about to say stupid. But I'm neither. There was no danger. To begin with, he knew he wouldn't be able to get away with killing me. Kit knew where I'd gone. And he wouldn't have killed me even if it had been quite safe. . ." He sank into his own thoughts, the fear turning his stomach to water.

Butler said, "Anyway, don't let Peterson persuade you to stick your neck out. It's his problem now."

He said, "No." It suddenly seemed that it was no longer a question of his choice. Whatever was due to happen would happen. For a moment he tried to face the possibility of his own death, the idea that he might be dead in an hour. His common sense revolted at the thought. Yet the feeling of danger remained.

As they turned the corner into Edwardes Square, they saw a car full of policemen ahead. Fifty yards further on, they could see that the entrance to the mews was inaccessible. A crowd of at least a hundred people had gathered. As Fisher pulled up, a policeman ran over to him.

"Oi, you can't park there. Move on."

Fisher flushed at the man's tone. He ignored him and climbed out of the car.

The man said, "Do you 'ear!"

Fisher said coldly, "We've been sent for by Chief Inspector Peterson."

"Oh, sorry, sir. He's expectin' you. Which is Mr. Reade?"

"I am."

"Come this way. Open up there!"

The crowd opened reluctantly to let them through, and stared at them with intense curiosity. Several policemen were keeping the crowd well back from the entrance. More of them were inside the mews, pressed flat against the walls on the right-hand side. Reade recognized Peterson standing behind the birch tree that grew near the house. When he saw Reade, he made a gesture of relief and darted quickly to the safety of the garage wall. Reade went and joined him.

Peterson said gruffly, "Glad you've come. This is a pretty situation."

His voice managed to imply that it was all Reade's fault.

Reade said, "What happened?"

"He started shooting, that's what happened."

"But when?"

"That doesn't matter. All that matters is that we've got to get him out."

Reade said, suppressing his annoyance, "If you want me to help you, I think you might tell me what's going on."

Peterson grunted, "All right. Two of my men came to ask him if he'd mind going to the Yard with them.

He said yes he would, and started to slam the door. One of the men put his foot in it and said he'd better come and help us clear it up. Then your friend shouted, 'Are you threatening me?' and went to hit him. There was a bit of a scuffle that ended with him slamming the door on them. That's when they rang me. By the time I got over, he'd closed all the shutters. I knocked on the door, and he shouted out of the window that he didn't intend to let me in or come out. Anyway, we had a few more words and he started shooting."

"At you?"

"Not at first. He fired at the tree, to show he'd got a gun. So I sent for two men with guns and they fired a couple of shots through the window. Since then he's been banging away whenever he sees anybody."

"Can't you get him out with tear gas?"

"How? He's closed the shutters. He's got shutters on every single window in this place, including the back. Looks as if he was prepared for something like this. . ."

As he spoke, there was a noise like a champagne cork coming out of a bottle, and splinters flew from the edge of the tree. There was a whine as the bullet ricocheted off the opposite wall.

Peterson said, "Could you get behind the tree and try and talk him into coming out? Don't expose yourself though."

"I'll try. What do you suggest I say?"

"I'll tell him you're here."

Peterson ran across the space again; as he did so, there was a popping noise and the wood flew from the other side of the tree. The shot came too late to hit Peterson, but it was obviously intended to. Peterson leaned out a little from the far side of the tree, taking care that his face was not exposed, and shouted, "Listen, Sundheim, we've got someone here to talk to you. Can you hear?"

There was no reply.

Reade felt foolish, being expected to speak in front of a crowd that was listening breathlessly. He looked across at Peterson, making an interrogative motion with his head. Peterson beckoned him to run across to take shelter behind the tree. After a moment's hesitation Reade did so. As soon as he was in the shelter of the tree, another shot scattered splinters from the tree and struck the bricks of the entrance to the mews. The crowd, which had been pressing forward, began to press backward; a policeman yelled, "Keep right back there, please!"

Peterson said, "Okay. It's all yours. There's not room for two of us here. Don't expose yourself. . ."

This time he dived back to the shelter of the wall with such celerity that there was a ripple of laughter from the onlookers.

Reade felt himself completely exposed and alone. He leaned out from behind the tree and shouted, "George—it's me, Damon." There was no reply, and he felt his mind become blank. After a moment he called, "Can you hear me?"

Suddenly it was impossible to go on. He could not hold a one-sided conversation with Sundheim in the

presence of a hundred spectators; neither could he advise him to come and give himself up without feeling that it was absurd and melodramatic. He looked around vaguely, hoping for some idea of what to do. From a window in the house opposite, an old lady was peering out cautiously from behind the curtain, standing where she was out of range of the bullets. From the next window he could see the face of a child peering at him in astonishment. This decided him. He turned to look at Peterson and Lund, who were now standing together, and shook his head helplessly.

Lund hissed, "Tell him it's no good—he'll have to come out. Tell him to stop playing the fool."

Reade turned back; his heart contracted at the thought of what he intended to do, reminding him suddenly of being a child and deciding to dive into the swimming pool in spite of his panic. Without thinking, he stepped out from behind the tree, exposing himself fully.

Peterson's voice yelled irritably, "Come back, you damn fool!"

Reade stood looking up at the closed shutters, waiting for the popping noise, his flesh shrinking. Then he took a step toward the house.

Sundheim's voice suddenly came from the hole in the middle of one of the shutters. "Don't!"

Peterson shouted, "Come back!" He rushed across to the shelter of the tree.

The noise came again, and the wood of the tree splintered. Reade observed that now he was directly exposed to it, the gun sounded like a damp stick being snapped. He knew that he could move into the shelter of the tree, but it now seemed pointless. He walked deliberately toward the door.

Again Sundheim's voice called, "Don't!"

The stick-snapping noise came, and he felt the wind of the bullet on his cheek. He flinched, but walked on, suddenly knowing that Sundheim would not shoot him down. As he reached the front door, he called, "Let me in, George, please."

There was no reply. He lifted the gargoyle knocker and rapped heavily. Standing on the doorstep, he was no longer in the line of fire from the upstairs windows, although it would still have been possible to shoot him from the downstairs window. All the shutters had diamond-shaped holes in the center.

Reade stepped back a few feet from the door, and then hurled his shoulder against it. There was a noise of wood cracking, but the door held. At the same moment, Peterson shouted, "Will you come back, you damn fool! I told you not to expose yourself!"

Reade stepped back and threw himself at the door again. There was a popping noise from inside, and a hole appeared in a panel a foot above his head.

Peterson yelled, "Give him some covering fire, you idiots!"

The roar of revolvers came from behind him, suddenly deafening after the pops of the silencer. Plaster chipped from the wall and struck his face. They were firing at the upstairs shutters.

Reade turned around and roared, "Stop it, you damn fools, stop it!" As he spoke, he backed five feet from the door, then threw himself at it with all his force. It opened with a ripping noise, bouncing back against the wall.

Sundheim was standing on the stairs, only two feet away, looking down at him and pointing the revolver within a foot of his head. His face was hard and set, but Reade observed in his eyes the same excitement he had seen the night before, after the fight.

Sundheim said, "Shut the door."

Reade turned and kicked the door closed. It bounded open six inches; the lock had broken.

Sundheim said, "Put the chain on."

Reade found the chain and slipped it into the slot. His body shrank as he did so, but in anticipation of bullets coming through the door, not from Sundheim. He looked around. "What now?"

Sundheim said, "You tell me what now."

Reade said, shrugging, "I suggest we talk."

Sundheim grinned. "While they sneak in?"

Reade said, "Let's go upstairs where we can see them. They won't shoot while I'm here."

Sundheim grimaced wolfishly. "You can stop playing games. I don't trust you any more."

"Why not? I didn't bring the police here."

"No? Who did then?"

"Kit Butler—the friend I'm staying with. He got worried when I didn't contact him last night. He sent another friend to see if I caught the train."

He could see, from Sundheim's face, that he wanted to believe him. He said, "Let's go and talk."

"What about?"

Reade shrugged. "This situation—and whether you can get out of it."

He saw the surprise in Sundheim's eyes. "Get out of it! Are you serious?"

Reade said urgently, "Listen, we can't talk here. They might rush the door at any moment, and then they'd start shooting. Let's get upstairs, quickly."

He started to move forward. Sundheim hesitated for a moment, then turned and went up the stairs. The grandfather clock ticked unhurriedly, and the house looked exactly as it had when Reade first came. It seemed strange to see Sundheim carrying the Colt revolver with the bulky extension of the silencer at the end of the barrel. They turned into the room that contained the library. There was glass on the carpet and bullet holes in the shutters. The lower casement had been raised. Sundheim peered out.

"What's happening?" Reade asked. He found himself a chair and placed it at the side of the window.

Sundheim said, "Nothing at all."

Reade said, "I wish you'd explain how you got yourself into this absurd situation."

Sundheim looked at him, and suddenly seemed angered by his confidence. He said, "You explain something to me first. How long have you been in league with the police?"

Reade said, "From exactly an hour ago, when I got back from your Limehouse place. Although that's not entirely true, because a policeman visited me in Wastwater to ask me about the murders."

"Ask you?" Sundheim turned to look at him in astonishment.

"Yes. As a Blake scholar. What on earth made you write those Blake quotations on the walls? It was the most obvious lead the police could have."

Sundheim's lips became sullen; he looked like a spoiled and obstinate child. Then he said, "Anyway, it wasn't such an obvious lead. . . So you've been working with the police all the time?"

"Not at all. I came to London on my own, without telling anybody. I wanted to see if I could find you."

"Why?"

"I don't quite know. Mainly because I thought a man who knew Blake by heart couldn't be as bad as all that."

"How did you find me?"

"By a guess. I knew you were basically suicidal—just as I know now that you were intending to shoot yourself when the police made a rush on the house."

Sundheim stopped bothering with the window, although he allowed the barrel of the gun to rest on the hole in the shutter; he stood aside to stare down at Reade. He said, "Go on."

"So I inquired at hospitals along the Thames to find if a man of your description had attempted suicide by drowning about two years ago."

"Why two years ago?"

"I knew it would be before the murders started. I saw the murders as a strange form of suicide. I traced you to the Fulham hospital, and they gave me your name. So it was easy from there on. I only had to connect you with the Orville Sundheim who wrote about Blake."

"So my father never wrote to you?"

"No."

Sundheim turned suddenly back to the window, as if he suspected treachery. Evidently nothing was happening; he turned back to Reade again.

"How did you know about the drowning? And how did you get my description?"

They were interrupted by Peterson's voice shouting from outside the window. Sundheim peered out.

Peterson shouted, "Sundheim, is Reade still all right?"

Reade stood up and peered through the hole in the other shutter. He called, "Yes, I'm all right."

"Well, tell him he'd better come on out."

"All right. Be patient."

Peterson's head appeared around the side of the tree; Sundheim immediately fired at it; the chips flew from the tree and the head drew back.

Reade said mildly, "I wish you wouldn't do that. You're in enough trouble as it is. Now, we'd better talk quickly, before they get impatient. I'll explain all about how I found you later."

As Sundheim went on staring out of the window, the revolver at the ready, Reade said with a touch of impatience, "Will you kindly stop that? They won't rush the house now. So sit down and talk for a moment. Tell me first of all how you got yourself into this position. What on earth made you decide to open fire on them?"

Sundheim said bitterly, "Your English police are impolite bastards. Puffed-up little bullies."

"Oh, I don't know," Reade said. "I've usually found them pleasant enough. I don't suppose they're at their best if they think they're talking to a murderer. So what happened?"

"I told them to go and screw themselves. I know the law. They can't compel me to go to the station. They can't even compel me to talk to them. And if they try to force their way into my house by force of arms, I've got a right to protect myself. So I told them to go fuck themselves. Then that little bastard out there started shouting threats, so I took a shot at him." He grinned at the memory.

Reade said, "I presume you also thought I'd betrayed you to them?"

Sundheim shrugged.

Reade said, "But even so, why put yourself in a false position like this? They've no real case against you, have they?"

Sundheim looked at him with surprise. "I don't know. Don't you know?"

"No. They can't have much of a case because I don't think they knew much about you before today. . . although apparently they claim you were on their list of suspects. They say they have a witness who saw you in a pub in Hammersmith with a man called David Miller."

Sundheim was again peering out of the window. He said shortly, "That's impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I wasn't in Hammersmith with David Miller."

"And how about your place in Narrow Street? Is there any evidence there?"

"No."

"How about the gold-rimmed spectacles behind the bed?"

Sundheim smiled without amusement. "You found them, did you?"

"Whose are they?"

"My mother's."

"How about bloodstains?"

"No."

"Is there anyone who could give evidence against you?"

"Not as far as I know."

"How about bloodstains in the car? How did you avoid them?"

Sundheim looked at him curiously. "You'd have a nice case against me if you had a pocket tape recorder, wouldn't you?"

Reade shrugged irritably. "Now you're being stupid again. Listen, you'll have to give yourself up soon, and the sooner the better. So let's get clear what you intend to admit. I presume you'll deny the murders?"

Sundheim said, "Wouldn't you?"

"Of course. You deny everything. They can have no real evidence unless you've overlooked something at your flat. In any case, you've always a plea of insanity to fall back on."

For the first time Sundheim seemed to lose the tension and reserve that had held him in check since Reade came in. There was something ugly and frightening about the panic that washed across his face. He said, "And spend the rest of my life in Broadmoor? I'd rather die now."

It was as if a hole had suddenly been torn in the bottom of a boat; it had to be blocked immediately, but without panic.

Reade said, with assumed irritation, "My dear George, you're far stupider than I thought. Why don't you try using your intelligence about this?"

It achieved its effect. Sundheim turned away from the window, his face suddenly curious, no longer afraid. "Well, go on. How?"

"It's obvious. They almost certainly have no evidence against you. So at the moment the only charge is that you've caused a public nuisance and attempted assault with a deadly weapon. They can't even charge you with resisting arrest, because they weren't trying to arrest you. Simply get a good doctor to explain that you suffer from a persecution mania, and to point out that you could have shot either me or one of those policemen, but didn't really intend to, and they'll order you to go for psychiatric examination. Then get yourself voluntarily interned in a mental home—one of your own choice, where you'll have a fair amount of freedom—and the whole thing will be forgotten in eighteen months. A good

lawyer will criticize the police for using firearms, and point out that I was allowed to walk in without danger. . . He'll point out that you tried to scare me off by shooting well above my head. They'll tell that story about your father in the British Museum, and declare that it's hereditary. Within a year or so you'll be able to slip away to your island off Brazil."

Sundheim pulled a chair from the wall and sat down on it. He said, "Supposing they find some evidence I've overlooked?"

Reade said, "Only you know about that. But unless they can find something belonging to one of. . . your victims. . . you should be safe. They'll try to find witnesses to identify you. You only have to plead mistaken identification. No jury would convict. In fact, the police wouldn't dare to bring a case under those circumstances."

Sundheim was now sitting forward, holding the revolver between his knees by the barrel and swinging it gently. Suddenly he seemed as unmoved as if they were discussing someone else's case. He said, "Tell me something. Why are you bothering with me if I'm as stupid as you say?"

Reade shrugged. "I'm in this thing, and I have to take sides. It looks as if I'm committed to your side."

"You won't go back on that?"

"You should know me well enough to know the answer to that."

Sundheim said, "How do I know whom I can trust. An hour ago I thought you were responsible for. . . all this." He gestured vaguely toward the window.

Reade said, "I don't understand you. You seem to suffer from a permanent sense of. . . of unreality."

Sundheim nodded. His eyes had become dull, indifferent. "Maybe."

Reade could see that the effect of his words was already wearing off; Sundheim was sinking back into the state of unreality from which only violence was an escape. It was necessary to arouse his interest again, to keep him from the vacuum that lay so close to his sense of meaning.

Reade said, "Tell me one more thing. Do you think that all this is the fault of your father or your mother?"

It was a meaningless question, but the only one he could think up on the spur of the moment. He was surprised when Sundheim looked up, grinning.

"I always thought it was my father's fault—particularly after the. . . Museum incident. His father went insane too. I used to lie in bed and worry about it when I was about fourteen. . . it looked as if I didn't stand a chance. Then I found out the truth before my mother died. . . she told me a month before she died. He wasn't my father at all. . ."

"Not your father? But. . ."

"My father was the hired man on a farm they had in Connecticut. . ."

There was a sudden violent crash from below. Sundheim started, then jumped up, raising the gun. He started to fumble with the shutter.

Reade said, “Stop it, idiot. This is the best thing that could have happened. . .”

The crash was repeated, and was followed by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. As Sundheim moved to the door, Reade grabbed his forearm. It felt as muscular and unyielding as the body of the boa constrictor. He said, “Sit down, you bloody fool, and give me the gun. Sit down quickly.”

The urgency in his voice had its effect. Sundheim sat down; when Reade held out his hand, he gave him the revolver. Reade dropped the butt into his pocket. He stood up, saying, “Sit there and don’t move. Try and look apologetic. It’s your best chance.”

He went to the door. The police had blundered into the other room and one was already approaching the door. Reade said, “We’re in here. Come in.”

Peterson said, “Is he still armed?”

“No. I have the gun here.”

Sundheim remained seated as Peterson came into the room. Reade caught an expression of disappointment on the detective’s face. Reade said, “I’m afraid it’s my fault. We were just about to come down when you burst in.”

Peterson said, “You are under arrest.”

“On what charge?” Sundheim said. His voice was remarkably controlled. Reade thought: the unreality is a game for him.

“Discharging a firearm with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.”

Sundheim said calmly, “And did I cause grievous bodily harm?”

Peterson snapped, “You know you didn’t.”

Sundheim said, “Sure I know it. Because I didn’t intend to.”

Reade said, “Here’s his revolver.”

Peterson said, “Have you got a firearms license?”

Sundheim stood up, treating the question as if it were a casual query. “Sure I have. I shoot on a range.”

Peterson turned to Reade and said stiffly, “Thank you for your help.”

“Not at all.”

He recognized the anger and suspicion in Peterson’s eyes, and knew it was justified. Peterson said to Sundheim, “We may be preferring other charges later.”

“Oh, really?” Sundheim said with an overdone casualness. “You mean about these murders?”

Peterson turned to Lund and snapped, “Sergeant, notice that I have not mentioned murder so far.”

Sundheim smiled gently. "I think I'd rather speak about that rather strange misunderstanding. So of course I told him to call you in."

"Why did you open fire on us?"

Sundheim smiled gently. "I think I'd rather speak about that to my lawyer, if you don't mind. You see, I don't know much about your English law."

Peterson said angrily, "You will before you're finished. Come on. Let's go."

Sundheim said, "Goodbye Damon. Thanks for everything."

"Goodbye, George."

He avoided meeting Sundheim's eyes. The situation embarrassed him. Sundheim went out between two policemen, with Peterson behind, still carrying the revolver in his hand. Reade had no difficulty in reading his thoughts, and he sympathized.

Lund said, "Well, sir, you did a good job."

Reade shrugged. "It wasn't difficult. It's all play-acting with him."

Lund said with astonishment, "You mean he didn't intend to kill anybody?"

"I don't think so. You saw how he fired well over my head."

Lund said, "This is a stroke of luck, really. It means we can hold him until we've gathered some evidence about these murders."

"Do you have any so far?"

Lund glanced at him appraisingly. "I couldn't say. I've only been here a few hours, and I expect I'll be going back later today."

"Today?"

"I expect so. When I've had a few hours sleep. I'm pretty whacked at the moment."

"Have you anywhere to stay?"

"Not yet. I expect Inspector Peterson'll find somewhere."

"There's no need. You can use my room. Could you give me a lift back?"

"Well. . . I suppose so. . ."

There were footsteps on the stairs. It was Butler, followed by Harley Fisher. He said, "God, Damon, you frightened the life out of me! Was it all right?"

"Oh yes. I think it was play-acting."

Fisher said, "Did he mention the murders?"

Reade shook his head, aware that Lund was watching him. "I mentioned them. He denied knowing anything about them."

Lund said indignantly, "He says that, does he? Then why did he shoot?"

"He's a paranoiac. He has an abnormally suspicious and aggressive personality. His father died in a mental home."

Lund stared at him uncomprehendingly. "You're not telling me that you believe he's innocent?"

"No. I think he's guilty."

Lund said, "Hmm. Thank heavens for that. I thought you'd gone over to his side."

Reade said, "It hardly matters which side I'm on. It's now the task of the police to prove him guilty. I'm withdrawing altogether. I don't want to be brought into it now. I'd like all the credit to go to the police."

Lund smiled. "Well, I don't suppose the inspector'll raise any objections to that. Well, I'd better go and report. I'll take up your offer of a bed if that's okay."

"Yes, willingly. You know the address. We'll expect you in the next hour."

As soon as Lund had gone, Fisher said, "Now, what's going on?"

"Nothing much. I've advised Sundheim to admit nothing and let the police prove he's a murderer. That's about all I could do."

Butler said, "But why? Do you want him to escape?"

"He can't escape. If they can't pin the murders on him, they can get him interned for attempted murder. I pointed out to him that he could commit himself voluntarily to a mental home if he gets a good lawyer. But in that case, the police would want a guarantee that he'd stay there. He can't escape."

Fisher said, "But did he actually admit to the murders?"

"No. He didn't admit, because he didn't entirely trust me."

Butler said, "I don't like it, Damon. He's got money. With luck, he'll get away completely. Then more murders. . ."

"No. I think I can tell you exactly what will happen to him. I think that the police won't be able to charge him with the murders. They'll find there's no evidence. Nothing at all to connect him with the victims. He'll go into a mental home. And unless he can find a good psychiatrist who can get to the root of his trouble, he'll be dead within two years."

"How?"

"Suicide. He meant to commit suicide here today—I guessed as soon as we arrived."

Fisher said, "Are you sure? From my glimpse of him just now, he didn't strike me as the suicidal type. Too jaunty and self-confident. Thoroughly enjoying all the attention."

"I know. And as soon as that ceases, he feels meaningless. He strikes me as a man with a broken mainspring. He'll tick when you shake him, but otherwise he stops. That's the answer to all the violence. It comes out of fear. . . the strange fear that we all feel when life suddenly seems completely empty. He only knows one way of escaping it—by violence, by going to an extreme. If he doesn't kill himself or end in a strait jacket, he'll eat and drink until he's become a huge balloon. He can't do anything by halves."

Fisher said thoughtfully, "The answer might lie in a lobotomy operation—if, that is, you're right about the cause of his violence. If what you say is correct, he suffers from a kind of epilepsy—a kind of convulsion due to an overflow of sheer physical energy."

"Absolutely! You couldn't have put it better!"

Butler said, grinning, "What he needs is castration."

"Well, the lobotomy operation is a kind of castration. It cuts one of the main power lines of energy."

"What do you think caused all this?"

"Heredity," Fisher said. "If his father died in a mental home. . ."

"Unfortunately," Reade said, "that theory won't work. He told me that his real father was a laborer on their farm. His mother was a nymphomaniac. Yet he believed he was his father's son. . . and his grandfather's. He believed he was destined to madness and suicide. Now he can't teach himself to unbelieve it."

It was sunny outside. Only two or three people remained by the gateway of the mews. A policeman stood in front of the door of the house. One panel of the door had been stoved in.

Reade said, "Who'll repair the door?"

The policeman said, "I expect that'll be attended to, sir."

Reade said, "God, I forgot! The snake!"

"What about it?"

"I'll have to take it. I can't leave it."

The policeman said, "I'm afraid I can't let you take anything out of the house, sir."

"But I'll have to. You can't leave a live snake alone in a house. You'd have the R.S.P.C.A. protesting. It might die."

Butler said, "But what can you do with it?"

"Take it home. Lund will give me a lift back in his car this evening. We can get the cage in the boot. Can

you help me lift it downstairs? We'll ring for a taxi."

The policeman made no objection as they went back into the house. The kitchen was in darkness, the window covered with a shutter. Reade pushed it back, allowing the sunlight to fill the room. Fisher peered into the glass cage. The snake had lost its bright green and brown color; its skin had become dull and in places had begun to peel off in flakes. The eyes were completely obscured by the milky coloring.

Fisher and Butler stared at it with fascination. Only the slow movements of the snake's breathing indicated that it was still alive. Fisher said, "It's a nasty-looking thing, isn't it? I hope it won't escape in the car. Awful thought—having a live boa constrictor loose in the car."

Reade opened the door of the cage and removed the dish of water. The snake flinched as his hand brushed it, but it did not move.

"You see—it's quite harmless. Do you remember Lautreamont said: 'Even lice are incapable of the evil to which our imagination prompts them'?"

"It doesn't look harmless," Butler said. "Why is its skin so tattered?"

Reade poured the water into the sink. "Because it's about to shed it. The new skin's underneath. In a few days' time it will peel off its old skin like a glove."

Fisher said, "Lucky snake. I wish I could."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

COLIN WILSON was born and lives in England, and has worked at a variety of jobs, starting when he was eleven. He left school at sixteen and shortly thereafter began to write, and has been doing so ever since. He has produced novels, short stories, philosophic essays; and his work has appeared in innumerable magazines, such as THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, THE OBSERVER AND JOHN O'LONDON'S.

For some years now, it has been apparent that the work of Colin Wilson is developing into a body of ideas that the French call an "oeuvre." He himself has described his central purpose as the creation of a new existentialism. Thus, The Glass Cage is as unconventional as most of his work.

Colin Wilson, a noted authority on the occult, has written about it in many ways—from nonfiction books to novels such as The Glass Cage, which infuses the traditional detective story with occult meaning and mystery.

Besides writing, Colin Wilson spends much of his time as a teacher and guest lecturer, both in England and in the United States.

Scan Notes, v3.0: Proofed carefully, italics intact.