

## AUNT HESTER

by

# Brian Lumley

I suppose my Aunt Hester Lang might be best described as the ‘black sheep’ of the family. Certainly no one ever spoke to her, or of her – none of the elders of the family, that is – if my own little friendship with my aunt had been known I am sure that would have been stamped on too; but of course that friendship was many years ago.

I remember it well: how I used to sneak round to Aunt Hester’s house in hoary Castle-Ilden, not far from Harden on the coast, after school when my folks thought I was at Scouts, and Aunt Hester would make me cups of cocoa and we would talk about newts (‘efts’, she called them), frogs, conkers and other things – things of interest to small boys – until the local Scouts’ meeting was due to end, and then I would hurry home.

We (father, mother and myself) left Harden when I was just twelve years old, moving down to London where the Old Man had got himself a good job. I was twenty years old before I got to see my aunt again. In the intervening years I had not sent her so much as a postcard (I’ve never been much of a letter-writer) and I knew that during the same period of time my parents had neither written nor heard from her; but still that did not stop my mother warning me before I set out for Harden not to ‘drop in’ on Aunt Hester Lang.

No doubt about it, they were frightened of her, my parents – well, if not frightened, certainly they were apprehensive.

Now to me a warning has always been something of a challenge. I had arranged to stay with a friend for a week, a school pal from the good old days, but long before the northbound train stopped at Harden my mind was made up to spend at least a fraction of my time at my aunt’s place. Why shouldn’t I? Hadn’t we always got on famously? Whatever it was she had done to my parents in the past, I could see no good reason why I should shun her.

She would be getting on in years a bit now. How old, I wondered? Older than my mother, her sister, by a couple of years – the same age (obviously) as her twin brother, George, in Australia – but of course I was also ignorant of his age. In the end, making what calculations I could, I worked it out that Aunt Hester and her distant brother must have seen at least one hundred and eight summers between them. Yes, my aunt must be about fifty-four years old. It was about time someone took an interest in her.

It was a bright Friday night, the first after my arrival in Harden, when the ideal opportunity presented itself for visiting Aunt Hester. My school friend, Albert, had a date – one he did not really want to put off – and though he had tried his best during the day it had early been apparent that his luck was out as regards finding, on short notice, a second girl for me. It had been left too late. But in any case, I'm not much on blind dates – and most dates are 'blind' unless you really know the girl – and I go even less on doubles; the truth of the matter was that I had wanted the night for my own purposes. And so, when the time came for Albert to set out to meet his girl, I walked off in the opposite direction, across the autumn fences and fields to ancient Castle-Ilden.

I arrived at the little old village at about eight, just as dusk was making its hesitant decision whether or not to allow night's onset, and went straight to Aunt Hester's thatch-roofed bungalow. The place stood (just as I remembered it) at the Blackhill end of cobbled Main Street, in a neat garden framed by cherry trees with the fruit heavy in their branches. As I approached the gate the door opened and out of the house wandered the oddest quartet of strangers I could ever have wished to see.

There was a humped-up, frenetically mobile and babbling old chap, ninety if he was a day; a frumpish fat woman with many quivering chins; a skeletally thin, incredibly tall, ridiculously wrapped-up man in scarf, pencil-slim overcoat, and fur gloves; and finally, a perfectly delicate old lady with a walking-stick and ear-trumpet. They were shepherded by my Aunt Hester, no different it seemed than when I had last seen her, to the gate and out into the street. There followed a piped and grunted hubbub of thanks and general genialities before the four were gone – in the direction of the leaning village pub – leaving my aunt at the gate finally to spot me where I stood in the shadow of one of her cherry trees. She knew me almost at once, despite the interval of nearly a decade.

"Peter?"

"Hello, Aunt Hester."

"Why, Peter Norton! My favourite young man – and tall as a tree! Come in, come in!"

"It's bad of me to drop in on you like this," I answered, taking the arm she offered, "all unannounced and after so long away, but I –"

"No excuses required," she waved an airy hand before us and smiled up at me, laughter lines showing at the corners of her eyes and in her unpretty face. "And you came at just the right time – my group has just left me all alone."

"Your 'group'?"

"My séance group! I've had it for a long time now, many a year. Didn't you know I was a bit on the psychic side? No, I suppose not; your parents wouldn't have told you about *that*, now would they? That's what started it all originally – the trouble in the family, I mean." We went on into the house.

"Now I had meant to ask you about that," I told her. "You mean my parents don't like you messing about with spiritualism? I can see that they wouldn't, of course – not at all the Old Man's cup of tea – but still, I don't really see what it could have to do with them."

"Not *your* parents, Love," (she had always called me 'Love'), "mine – and yours later; but especially George, your uncle in Australia. And not just spiritualism, though that has since become part of it. Did you know that my brother left home and settled in Australia because of me?" A distant look came into her

eyes. “No, of course you didn’t, and I don’t suppose anyone else would ever have become aware of my power if George hadn’t walked me through a window ...”

“Eh?” I said, believing my hearing to be out of order. “Power? Walked you through a window?”

“Yes,” she answered, nodding her head, “he walked me through a window! Listen, I’ll tell you the story from the beginning.”

By that time we had settled ourselves down in front of the fire in Aunt Hester’s living-room, and I was able to scan, as she talked, the paraphernalia her ‘group’ had left behind. There were old leather-bound tomes and treatises, tarot cards, a Ouija board shiny brown with age, oh, and several other items beloved of the spiritualist. I was fascinated, as ever I had been as a boy, by the many obscure curiosities in Aunt Hester’s cottage.

“The first I knew of the link between George and myself,” she began, breaking in on my thoughts, “as apart from the obvious link that exists between all twins, was when we were twelve years old. Your grandparents had taken us, along with your mother, down to the beach at Seaton Carew. It was July and marvellously hot. Well, to cut a long story short, your mother got into trouble in the water.

“She was quite a long way out and the only one anything like close to her was George – who couldn’t swim! He’d waded out up to his neck, but he didn’t dare go any deeper. Now, you can wade a long way out at Seaton. The bottom shelves off very slowly. George was at least fifty yards out when we heard him yelling that Sis was in trouble ...

“At first I panicked and started to run out through the shallow water, shouting to George that he should swim to Sis, which of course he couldn’t – *but he did!* Or at least, *I did!* Somehow I’d swapped places with him, do you see? Not physically but mentally. I’d left him behind me in the shallow water, in my body, and I was swimming for all I was worth for Sis in his! I got her back to the shallows with very little trouble – she was only a few inches out of her depth – and then, as soon as the danger was past, I found my consciousness floating back into my own body.

“Well, everyone made a big fuss of George; he was the hero of the day, you see? How had he done it? – they all wanted to know; and all he was able to say was that he’d just seemed to stand there watching himself save Sis. And of course he *had* stood there watching it all – through my eyes!

“I didn’t try to explain it; no one would have believed or listened to me anyway, and I didn’t really understand it myself – but George was always a bit wary of me from then on. He said nothing, mind you, but I think that even as early as that first time he had an idea ...”

Suddenly she looked at me closely, frowning. “You’re not finding all this a bit hard to swallow, Love?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Not really. I remember reading somewhere of a similar thing between twins – a sort of Corsican Brothers situation.”

“Oh, but I’ve heard of many such!” she quickly answered. “I don’t suppose you’ve read Joachim Feery on the *Necronomicon*?”

“No,” I answered. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, Feery was the illegitimate son of Baron Kant, the German ‘witch-hunter’. He died quite mysteriously in 1934 while still a comparatively young man. He wrote a number of occult limited editions

– mostly published at his own expense – the vast majority of which religious and other authorities bought up and destroyed as fast as they appeared. Unquestionably – though it has never been discovered where he saw or read them – Feery’s source books were very rare and sinister volumes; among them the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, the *Necronomicon*, von Junzt’s *Unspeakable Cults*, Prinn’s *De Vermis Mysteriis* and others of that sort. Often Feery’s knowledge in respect of such books has seemed almost beyond belief. His quotes, while apparently genuine and authoritative, often differ substantially when compared with the works from which they were supposedly culled. Regarding such discrepancies, Feery claimed that most of his occult knowledge came to him ‘in dreams’! She paused, then asked: “Am I boring you?”

“Not a bit of it,” I answered. “I’m fascinated.”

“Well, anyhow,” she continued, “as I’ve said, Feery must somewhere have seen one of the very rare copies of Abdul Alhazred’s *Necronomicon*, in one translation or another, for he published a slim volume of notes concerning that book’s contents. I don’t own a copy myself but I’ve read one belonging to a friend of mine, an old member of my group. Alhazred, while being reckoned by many to have been a madman, was without doubt the world’s foremost authority on black magic and the horrors of alien dimensions, and he was vastly interested in every facet of freakish phenomena, physical and metaphysical.”

She stood up, went to her bookshelf and opened a large modern volume of Aubrey Beardsley’s fascinating drawings, taking out a number of loose white sheets bearing lines of her own neat handwriting.

“I’ve copied some of Feery’s quotes, supposedly from Alhazred. Listen to this one:

‘Tis a veritable and attestable Fact, that between certain related Persons there exists a Bond more powerful than the strongest Ties of Flesh and Family, whereby one such Person may be aware of all the Trials and Pleasures of the other, yea, even to experiencing the Pains or Passions of one far distant; & further, there are those whose skills in such Matters are aided by forbidden Knowledge or Intercourse through dark Magic with Spirits & Beings of outside Spheres. Of the latter: I have sought them out, both Men & Women, & upon Examination have in all Cases discovered them to be Users of Divination, Observers of Times, Enchanters, Witches, Charmers, or Necromancers. All claimed to work their Wonders through Intercourse with dead & departed Spirits, but I fear that often such Spirits were evil Angels, the Messengers of the Dark One & yet more ancient Evils. Indeed, among them were some whose Powers were prodigious, who might at will inhabit the Body of another even at a great Distance & against the Will & often unbeknown to the Sufferer of such Outrage ...’

She put down the papers, sat back and looked at me quizzically.

“That’s all very interesting,” I said after a moment, “but hardly applicable to yourself.”

“Oh, but it is, Love,” she protested. “I’m George’s twin, for one thing, and for another –”

“But you’re no witch or necromancer!”

“No, I wouldn’t say so – but I am a ‘User of Divinations’, and I do ‘work my Wonders through Intercourse with dead & departed Spirits’. That’s what spiritualism is all about.”

“You mean you actually take this, er, Alhazred and spiritualism and all seriously?” I deprecated.

She frowned. “No, not Alhazred, not really,” she answered after a moment’s thought. “But he is interesting, as you said. As for spiritualism: yes, *Ido* take it seriously. Why, you’d be amazed at some of the vibrations I’ve been getting these last three weeks or so. *Very* disturbing, but so far rather incoherent; frantic, in fact. I’ll track him down eventually, though – the spirit, I mean ...”

We sat quietly then, contemplatively, for a minute or two. Frankly, I didn’t quite know what to say; but then she went on: “Anyway, we were talking about George and how I believed that even after that first occasion he had a bit of an idea that I was at the root of the thing. Yes, I really think he did. He said nothing, and yet ...”

“And that’s not all, either. It was some time after that day on the beach before Sis could be convinced that she hadn’t been saved by me. She was sure it had been me, not George, who pulled her out of the deep water.

“Well, a year or two went by, and school-leaving exams came up. I was all right, a reasonable scholar – I had always been a bookish kid – but poor old George ...” She shook her head sadly. My uncle, it appeared, had not been too bright.

After a moment she continued. “Dates were set for the exams and two sets of papers were prepared, one for the boys, another for the girls. I had no trouble with my paper, I knew even before the results were announced that I was through easily – but before that came George’s turn. He’d been worrying and chewing, cramming for all he was worth, biting his nails down to the elbows ... and getting nowhere. I was in bed with flu when the day of his exams came round, and I remember how I just lay there fretting over him. He was my brother, after all.

“I must have been thinking of him just a bit too hard, though, for before I knew it there I was, staring down hard at an exam paper, sitting in a class full of boys in the old school!

“... An hour later I had the papers all finished, and then I concentrated myself back home again. This time it was a definite effort for me to find my way back to my own body.

“The house was in an uproar. I was downstairs in my dressing-gown; mother had an arm around me and was trying to console me; father was yelling and waving his arms about like a lunatic. ‘The girl’s gone *mad*!’ I remember him exploding, red-faced and a bit frightened.

“Apparently I had rushed downstairs about an hour earlier. I had been shouting and screaming tearfully that I’d miss the exam, and I had wanted to know what I was doing home. And when they had called me *Hester* instead of *George*! Well, then I had seemed to go completely out of my mind!

“Of course, I had been feverish with flu for a couple of days. That was obviously the answer: I had suddenly reached the height of a hitherto unrecognised delirious fever, and now the fever had broken I was going to be all right. That was what they said ...”

“George eventually came home with his eyes all wide and staring, frightened-looking, and he stayed that way for a couple of days. He avoided me like the plague! But the next week – when it came out about how good his marks were, how easily he had passed his examination papers – well ...”

“But surely he must have known,” I broke in. What few doubts I had entertained were now gone

forever. She was plainly not making all of this up.

“But why should he have known, Love? He knew he’d had two pretty nightmarish experiences, sure enough, and that somehow they had been connected with me; but he couldn’t possibly know that they had their origin in me – that I formed their focus.”

“He did find out, though?”

“Oh, yes, he did,” she slowly answered, her eyes seeming to glisten just a little in the homely evening glow of the room. “And as I’ve said, that’s why he left home in the end. It happened like this:

“I had never been a pretty girl – no, don’t say anything, Love. You weren’t even a twinkle in your father’s eye then, he was only a boy himself, and so you wouldn’t know. But at a time of life when most girls only have to pout to set the boys on fire, well, I was only very plain – and I’m probably giving myself the benefit of the doubt at that.

“Anyway, when George was out nights – walking his latest girl, dancing, or whatever – I was always at home on my own with my books. Quite simply, I came to be terribly jealous of my brother. Of course, you don’t know him, he had already been gone something like fifteen years when you were born, but George was a handsome lad. Not strong, mind you, but long and lean and a natural for the girls.

“Eventually he found himself a special girlfriend and came to spend all his time with her. I remember being furious because he wouldn’t tell me anything about her ...”

She paused and looked at me and after a while I said: “Uhhuh?” inviting her to go on.

“It was one Saturday night in the spring, I remember, not long after our nineteenth birthday, and George had spent the better part of an hour dandying himself up for this unknown girl. That night he seemed to take a sort of stupid, well, *delight* in spiting me; he refused to answer my questions about his girl or even mention her name. Finally, after he had set his tie straight and slicked his hair down for what seemed like the thousandth time, he dared to wink at me – maliciously, I thought, in my jealousy – as he went out into the night.

“That did it. Somethingsnapped! I stamped my foot and rushed upstairs to my room for a good cry. And in the middle of crying I had my idea –”

“You decided to, er, swap identities with your brother, to have a look at his girl for yourself,” I broke in. “Am I right?”

She nodded in answer, staring at the fire; ashamed of herself, I thought, after all this time. “Yes, I did,” she said. “For the first time I used my power for my own ends. And mean and despicable ends they were.

“But this time it wasn’t like before. There was no instantaneous, involuntary flowing of my psyche, as it were. No immediate change of personality. I had to force it, to concentrate and concentrate and *push* myself. But in a short period of time, before I even knew it, well, there I was.”

“There you were? In Uncle George’s body?”

“Yes, in his body, looking out through his eyes, holding in his hand the cool, slender hand of a very pretty girl. I had expected the girl, of course, and yet ...”

“Confused and blustering, letting go of her hand, I jumped back and bumped into a man standing behind me. The girl was saying, ‘George, what’s wrong?’ in a whisper, and people were staring. We were in a second-show picture-house queue. Finally I managed to mumble an answer, in a horribly hoarse, unfamiliar, frightened voice – George’s voice, obviously, and my fear – and then the girl moved closer and kissed me gently on the cheek!

“She did! But of course she would, wouldn’t she, if I were George? ‘Why, you jumped then like you’d been stung –’ she started to say; but I wasn’t listening, Peter, for I had jumped again, even more violently, shrinking away from her in a kind of horror. I must have gone crimson, standing there in that queue, with all those unfamiliar people looking at me –*and I had just been kissed by a girl!*

“You see, I wasn’t thinking like George at all! I just wished with all my heart that I hadn’t interfered, and before I knew it I had George’s body in motion and was running down the road, the picture-house queue behind me and the voice of this sweet little girl echoing after me in pained and astonished disbelief.

“Altogether my spiteful adventure had taken only a few minutes, and when at last I was able to do so, I controlled myself – or rather, George’s self – and hid in a shop doorway. It took another minute or two before I was composed sufficiently to manage a, well, a ‘return trip’, but at last I made it and there I was back in my room.

“I had been gone no more than seven or eight minutes all told, but I wasn’t back *to exactly* where I started out from. Oh, George hadn’t gone rushing downstairs again in a hysterical fit, like that time when I sat his exam for him – though of course the period of *transition* had been a much longer one on that occasion – but he had at least moved off the bed. I found myself standing beside the window ...” She paused.

“And afterwards?” I prompted her, fascinated.

“Afterwards?” she echoed me, considering it. “Well, George was very quiet about it ... No, that’s not quite true. It’s not that he was quiet, rather that he avoided me more than ever, to such an extent that I hardly ever saw him – no more than a glimpse at a time as he came and went. Mother and father didn’t notice George’s increased coolness towards me, but I certainly did. I’m pretty sure it was then that he had finally recognised the source of this thing that came at odd times like some short-lived insanity to plague him. Yes, and looking back, I can see how I might easily have driven George completely insane! But of course, from that time on he was forewarned ...”

“Forewarned?” I repeated her. “And the next time he –”

“The next time?” She turned her face so that I could see the fine scars on her otherwise smooth left cheek. I had always wondered about those scars. “I don’t remember a great deal about the next time – shock, I suppose, a ‘mental block’, you might call it – but anyway, the next time was the *last* time ...!”

“There was a boy who took me out once or twice, and I remember that when he stopped calling for me it was because of something George had said to him. Six months had gone by since my shameful and abortive experiment, and now I deliberately put it out of my mind as I determined to teach George a lesson. You must understand, Love, that this boy I mentioned, well ... he meant a great deal to me.

“Anyway, I was out to get my own back. I didn’t know how George had managed to make it up with his girl, but he had. I was going to put an end to their little romance once and for all.

“It was a fairly warm, early October, I remember, when my chance eventually came. A Sunday afternoon, and George was out walking with this girl. I had it planned minutely. I knew exactly what I must say, how I must act, what I must do. I could do it in two minutes flat and be back in my body before George knew what was going on. For the first time my intentions were *deliberately* malicious ...”

I waited for my aunt to continue, and after a while again prompted her: “And? Was this when –”

“Yes, this was when he walked me through the window. Well, he didn’t exactly walk me through it – I believe I leapt; or rather, he leapt me, if you see what I mean. One minute I was sitting on a grassy bank with the same sweet little girl, and the next there was this awful pain – My whole body hurt, and it was *my* body, for my consciousness was suddenly back where it belonged. Instantaneously, inadvertently, I was – myself!

*“But I was lying crumpled on the lawn in front of the house!* I remember seeing splinters of broken glass and bits of yellow-painted wood from my shattered bedroom window, and then I went into a faint with the pain.

“George came to see me in the hospital – once. He sneered when my parents had their backs turned. He leaned over my bed and said, ‘*Got you, Hester!*’ Just that, nothing more.

“I had a broken leg and collarbone. It was three weeks before they let me go home. By then George had joined the Merchant Navy and my parents knew that somehow I was to blame. They were never the same to me from that time on. George had been the Apple of the Family Eye, if you know what I mean. They knew that his going away, in some unknown way, had been my fault. I did have a letter from George – well, a note. It simply warned me ‘never to do it again’, that there were worse things than falling through windows!”

“And you never did, er, do it again?”

“No, I didn’t dare; I haven’t dared since. There *are* worse things, Love, than being walked through a window! And if George hate me still as much as he might ...

“But I’ve often *wanted* to do it again. George has two children, you know?”

I nodded an affirmation. “Yes, I’ve heard mother mention them. Joe and Doreen?”

“That’s right,” she nodded. “They’re hardly children any more, but I think of them that way. They’ll be in their twenties now, your cousins. George’s wife wrote to me once many years ago. I’ve no idea how she got my address. She did it behind George’s back, I imagine. Said how sorry she was that there was ‘trouble in the family’. She sent me photographs of the kids. They were beautiful. For all I know there may have been other children later – even grandchildren.”

“I don’t think so,” I told her. “I think I would have known. They’re still pretty reserved, my folks, but I would have learned that much, I’m sure. But tell me: how is it that you and mother aren’t closer? I mean, she never talks about you, my mother, and yet you are her sister.”

“Your mother is two years younger than George and me,” my aunt informed me. “She went to live with her grandparents down South when she was thirteen. Sis, you see, was the brilliant one. George was a bit dim; I was clever enough; but Sis, she was really clever. Our parents sent Sis off to live with Granny, where she could attend a school worthy of her intelligence. She stayed with Gran from then on. We simply drifted apart ...



“Mind you, we’d never been what you might call close, not for sisters. Anyhow, we didn’t come together again until she married and came back up here to live, by which time George must have written to her and told her one or two things. I don’t know what or how much he told her, but – well, she never bothered with me – and anyway, I was working by then and had a flat of my own.

“Years passed. I hardly ever saw Sis, her little boy came along – you, Love – I fell in with a spiritualist group, making real friends for the first time in my life; and, well, that was that. My interest in spiritualism, various other ways of mine that didn’t quite fit the accepted pattern, the unspoken thing I had done to George ... we drifted apart. You understand?”

I nodded. I felt sorry for her, but of course I could not say so. Instead I laughed awkwardly and shrugged my shoulders. “Who needs people?”

She looked shocked. “We all do, Love!” Then for a while she was quiet, staring into the fire.

“I’ll make a brew of tea,” she suddenly said, then looked at me and smiled in a fashion I well remembered. “Or should we have cocoa?”

“Cocoa!” I instinctively laughed, relieved at the change of subject.

She went into the kitchen and I lit a cigarette. Idle, for the moment, I looked about me, taking up the loose sheets of paper that Aunt Hester had left on her occasional table. I saw at once that many of her jottings were concerned with extracts from exotic books. I passed over the piece she had read out to me and glanced at another sheet. Immediately my interest was caught; the three passages were all from the Holy Bible:

‘Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them.’

Lev. 19:31.

‘Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at En-dor.’ I Sam. 28:6,7

‘Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men.’ Acts 19:19

The third sheet contained a quote from *Today’s Christian*:

‘To dabble in matter such as these is to reach within demoniac circles, and it is by no means rare to

discover scorn and scepticism transformed to hysterical possession in persons whose curiosity has led them to attend so-called 'spiritual séances'. These things of which I speak are of a nature as serious as any in the world today, and I am only one among many to utter a solemn warning against any intercourse with 'spirit forces' or the like, whereby the unutterable evil of demonic possession could well be the horrific outcome.'

Finally, before she returned with a steaming jug of cocoa and two mugs, I read another of Aunt Hester's extracts, this one again from Feery's *Notes on the Necronomicon*:

'Yea, & I discovered how one might, be he an Adept & his familiar Spirits powerful enough, control the Wanderings or Migration of his Essence into all manner of Beings & Persons – even from beyond the Grave of Sod or the Door of the Stone Sepulchre ...'

I was still pondering this last extract an hour later, as I walked Harden's night streets towards my lodgings at the home of my friend.

Three evenings later, when by arrangement I returned to my aunt's cottage in old Castle-Ilden, she was nervously waiting for me at the gate and whisked me breathlessly inside. She sat me down, seated herself opposite and clasped her hands in her lap almost in the attitude of an excited young girl.

"Peter, Love, I've had an idea – such a simple idea that it amazes me I never thought of it before."

"An idea? How do you mean, Aunt Hester – what sort of idea? Does it involve me?"

"Yes, I'd rather it were you than any other. After all, you know the story now ..."

I frowned as an oddly foreboding shadow darkened latent areas of my consciousness. Her words had been innocuous enough as of yet, and there seemed no reason why I should suddenly feel so – *uncomfortable*, but –

"The story?" I finally repeated her. "You mean this idea of yours concerns – Uncle George?"

"Yes, I do!" she answered. "Oh, Love, I can see them; if only for a brief moment or two, I can see my nephew and niece. You'll help me? I know you will."

The shadow thickened darkly, growing in me, spreading from hidden to more truly conscious regions of my mind. "Help you? You mean you intend to –" I paused, then started to speak again as I saw for sure what she was getting at and realised that she meant it: "But haven't you said that this stuff was too dangerous? The last time you –"

"Oh, yes, I know," she impatiently argued, cutting me off. "But now, well, it's different. I won't stay more than a moment or two – just long enough to see the children – and then I'll get straight back ... *here*. And there'll be precautions. It can't fail, you'll see."

“Precautions?” Despite myself I was interested.

“Yes.” She began to talk faster, growing more excited with each passing moment. “The way I’ve worked it out, it’s perfectly safe. To start with, George will be asleep – he won’t know anything about it. When his sleeping mind moves into my body, why, it will simply stay asleep! On the other hand, when *my* mind moves into *his* body, then I’ll be able to move about and –”

“And use your brother as a keyhole!” I blurted, surprising even myself. She frowned, then turned her face away. What she planned was wrong. I knew it and so did she, but if my outburst had shamed her it certainly had not deterred her – not for long.

When she looked at me again her eyes were almost pleading. “I know how it must look to you, Love, but it’s not so. And I know that I must seem to be a selfish woman, but that’s not quite true either. Isn’t it natural that I should want to see my family? They *are* mine, you know. George, my brother; his wife, my sister-in-law; their children, my nephew and niece. Just a – yes – a ‘peep’, if that’s the way you see it. But, Love, *I need* that peep. I’ll only have a few moments, and I’ll have to make them last me for the rest of my life.”

I began to weaken. “How will you go about it?”

“First, a glance,” she eagerly answered, again reminding me of a young girl. “Nothing more, a mere glance. Even if he’s awake he won’t ever know I was there; he’ll think his mind wandered for the merest second. If he *is* asleep, though, then I’ll be able to, well, ‘wake him up’, see his wife – and, if the children are still at home, why, I’ll be able to see them too. Just a glance.”

“But suppose something does go wrong?” I asked bluntly, coming back to earth. “Why, you might come back and find your head in the gas oven! What’s to stop him from slashing your wrists? That only takes a second, you know.”

“That’s where you come in, Love.” She stood up and patted me on the cheek, smiling cleverly. “You’ll be right here to see that nothing goes wrong.”

“But –”

“And to be doubly sure,” she cut me off, “why, *I’ll be tied in my chair!* You can’t walk through windows when you’re tied down, now can you?”

Half an hour later, still suffering inwardly from that as yet unspecified foreboding, I had done as Aunt Hester directed me to do, tying her wrists to the arms of her cane chair with soft but fairly strong bandages from her medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

She had it all worked out, reasoning that it would be very early morning in Australia and that her brother would still be sleeping. As soon as she was comfortable, without another word, she closed her eyes and let her head fall slowly forward onto her chest. Outside, the sun still had some way to go to setting; inside, the room was still warm – yet I shuddered oddly with a deep, nervous chilling of my blood.

It was then that I tried to bring the thing to a halt, calling her name and shaking her shoulder, but she only brushed my hand away and hushed me. I went back to my chair and watched her anxiously.

As the shadows seemed visibly to lengthen in the room and my skin cooled, her head sank even deeper onto her chest, so that I began to think she had fallen asleep. Then she settled herself more comfortably yet and I saw that she was still awake, merely preparing her body for her brother's slumbering mind.

In another moment I knew that something had changed. Her position was as it had been; the shadows crept slowly still; the ancient clock on the wall ticked its regular chronological message; but I had grown inexplicably colder, and there was this feeling that *something* had changed ...

Suddenly there flashed before my mind's eye certain of those warning jottings I had read only a few nights earlier, and there and then I was determined that this thing should go no further. Oh, she had warned me not to do anything to frighten or disturb her, but this was different. Somehow I knew that if I didn't act now –

“Hester! Aunt Hester!” I jumped up and moved toward her, my throat dry and my words cracked and unnatural-sounding. And she lifted her head and opened her eyes.

For a moment I thought that everything was all right – then ...

She cried out and stood up, ripped bandages falling in tatters from strangely strong wrists. She mouthed again, staggering and patently disorientated. I fell back in dumb horror, knowing that something was very wrong and yet unable to put my finger on the trouble.

My aunt's eyes were wide now and bulging, and for the first time she seemed to see me, stumbling toward me with slack jaw and tongue protruding horribly between her long teeth and drawn-back lips. It was then that I knew what was wrong, that this frightful *thing* before me was not my aunt, and I was driven backward before its stumbling approach, warding it off with waving arms and barely articulate cries.

Finally, stumbling more frenziedly now, clawing at empty air inches in front of my face, she – it – spoke: “No!” the awful voice gurgled over its wriggling tongue. “No, Hester, you ... you *fool!* I warned you ...”

And in that same instant I saw not an old woman, but the horribly alien figure of a *man in a woman's form!*

More grotesque than any drag artist, the thing pirouetted in grim, constricting agony, its strange eyes glazing even as I stared in a paralysis of horror. Then it was all over and the frail scarecrow of flesh, purple tongue still protruding from frothing lips, fell in a crumpled heap to the floor.

That's it, that's the story – not a tale I've told before, for there would have been too many questions, and it's more than possible that my version would not be believed. Let's face it, who *would* believe me? No, I realised this as soon as the thing was done, and so I simply got rid of the torn bandages and called in a doctor. Aunt Hester died of a heart attack, or so I'm told, and perhaps she did – straining to do that which, even with her powers, should never have been possible.

During this last fortnight or so since it happened, I've been trying to convince myself that the doctor was right (which I was quite willing enough to believe at the time), but I've been telling myself lies. I think I've known the real truth ever since my parents got the letter from Australia. And lately, reinforcing that truth, there have been the dreams and the daydreams – *or are they?*

This morning I woke up to a lightless void – a numb, black, silent void – wherein I was incapable of even the smallest movement, and I was horribly, hideously frightened. It lasted only for a moment, that's all, but in that moment it seemed to me that I was dead – or that the living ME inhabited a dead body!

Again and again I find myself thinking back on the mad Arab's words as reported by Joachim Feery: '... even from beyond the Grave of Sod ...' And in the end I know that this is indeed the answer.

That is why I'm flying to Australia. Ostensibly I'm visiting my uncle's wife, my Australian aunt; but really I'm only interested in him, in Uncle George himself. I don't know what I'll be able to do, or even if there is anything *I can do*. My efforts may well be completely useless, and yet I must try to do something.

*I must try*, for I know that it's that or find myself once again, perhaps permanently, locked in that hellish, knighted – place? – of black oblivion and insensate silence. In the dead and rotting body of my Uncle George, already buried three weeks when Aunt Hester put her mind in his body – *the body she's now trying to vacate in favour of mine!*