Richard Cowper's recent stories here include "Out There Where the Big Ships Go" (August 1979), "The Web of the Magi" (June 1980) and "Incident at Huacaloc" (October 1981). His latest story concerns a childhood rhyme and a family mystery that is finally resolved during a World War II bombing raid.

What Did the Deazies Do?

BY
RICHARD COWPER

In the summer of 1937 when I was nine years old and my sister Elizabeth was ten and a half my parents moved from London to East Anglia where they rented a house of the outskirts of a little village called Langmere le Willowes. The reason for our move was that my art historian father was researching his definitive study of the Norwich School of painters and needed to be within easy reach of the County Museum. His intention had been to return to London in a year or so, but the Second World War intervened bringing with it the Blitz, and by the time peace was eventually declared we had grown so attached to country life that none of us wished to give it up. However, this is by way of being background information and has nothing very much to do with anything that follows.

Elizabeth and I were placed in the village school where we quickly made new friends and acquired protective coloring in the form of the local accent. At least half the pupils in that school were related and among them three surnames predominated — Dutton, Fletcher, and Jones. In the school playground we used to chant:

The Duttons stole muttons,
The Jones hid the bones,
A Fletcher'll getcher—
And what did the Deazies do?

before we scattered shrieking to the safety of one of the ordained areas of sanctuary while whoever was 'It' tried to catch one of us and make them 'It' in turn.

That this rhyme might conceivably *mean* something never occurred to us — it was, after all, but one of a score of similar jingles which every child in the village knew by heart — until one Sunday over lunch my father remarked to

my mother: "I've just heard that one of the Cotmans married a Langmere girl — Angela Deazie. Her father was a clockmaker. A very good one too, according to Stanforth."

Elizabeth and I gazed at one another across the table and then, in almost perfect unison, we chanted: *And what did the Deazies do?*

"Eh," said my father turning from me to my sister with his eyebrows twitching in that vaguely benign but slightly astonished expression he so often adopted before us. "What's that?"

We recited our doggerel for his benefit and then repeated it a second time while he jotted the words down in the back of his diary, remarking to Mother as he did so, "When I see Peachey I'll ask him if he's got a line on this. I wouldn't mind betting it's a slice of genuine local history."

And that is exactly what it was. The Reverend Sebastian Peachey, our local historian-cum-antiquarian, was able to tell us how, during the notorious "Captain Swing" incendiary riots of the 1830's, a certain Nicholas Dutton had stolen a ewe from a local landowner and had shared his booty with his neighbor, Abraham Jones. The crime would probably have gone undetected had not one Amos Fletcher (who was rumored to have designs upon Dutton's wife) gone privily to the local justices and informed against them. The constables searched their cottages and managed to scrape up sufficient evidence to have the two of them convicted and sentenced to five years' hard labor in Tasmania. Such was country life in Merrie England before Dickens got to work on it!

Even so, this still left the fourth line unexplained, and here Mr. Peachey was less helpful, though not from any reluctance on his part. The Deazies, he told us, were not native to Langmere le Willowes in the same way the Duttons, Joneses and Fletchers were, and the name "Deazie" was, he suspected, of Continental origin. The sole representative of the family still living in the village was a sixty-three-year-old spinster who occupied a remote cottage down by the mere. Miss Sarah Deazie had a formidable reputation as a "wise woman" and, he supposed, it was more than likely that the question "What did the Deazies do?" was some sort of childish acknowledgement of the vague aura of mystery which had always surrounded the family. He was not aware of any strictly historical link between it and the rest of the jingle.

And there the matter would no doubt have ended had I not had the misfortune to become afflicted with a crop of warts. Much to my astonishment five of them (three of medium size and two small) erupted upon the back of my right hand where they steadfastly resisted all my mother's efforts to banish them with applications of dilute silver nitrate. Then, one Saturday in October, Mother took Elizabeth into Norwich to have a brace fixed on her teeth, and I was left behind

in charge of Gladys Dutton, our daily help. Halfway through the afternoon Gladys said to me, "Get your coat right sharp, Sunny Jim, and come you alonger me."

"What for?" I demanded.

"Tha's a secret," she said, "an' you ain't t'tell your mam nothin' neither or I un't a-tekkin' you. Promise me now."

My curiosity aroused, I promised on my honor that I wouldn't say a word to a soul, and off we set hand-in-hand down the lane which led towards the mere.

It was one of those breathless autumn afternoons with just a hint of coming frost in the air. Mist was beginning to gather over the stubbled fields, the sun hung like an enormous orange lantern low down in the west, and the smoke from distant bonfires rose up so straight that they seemed like slim grey poles propping up the sky. We came to a stile, clambered over it and began heading down a winding, hazel-fringed path that led into a wood known as Barkers Holt. At which point I hung back, tugged Gladys by the hand, and said, "We're going to Ma Deazie's, aren't we?"

"Tha's right," she said. "Miss Sarah'll shift them narls off'n you quick as a blink. Here, catch holder this." She dipped her hand into her coat pocket, fished out her purse and from it extracted a sixpenny piece which she thrust into my palm. "When we come out, you mind you slip that in the sosser you'll see agin the door. Don't you forget now or all your luck'll turn sour."

"What'll she do to me, Gladys?"

"She'll charm 'em off," she said. "She has the power on't, see? All Deazies do. Not frit, are you?"

"No," I lied. "Of course not."

Miss Deazie's cottage stood in a clearing of about an acre right in the middle of the wood. It was a much more substantial building than I had expected, with a trim, Dutch-tiled roof and a host of outbuildings, all seemingly in excellent condition. A feather of blue smoke was wisping up from the massive central chimney, and as we unlatched the gate and made our way up the neat brick path to the front door, two magpies passed sarcastic remarks about us from the branches of a large walnut tree.

Gladys rat-tatted the brass door-knocker, smiled down at me reassuringly and whispered, "Don't you forget t'wipe your shoes on the mat. She's mighty particular is Miss Sarah."

I nodded, clutched my sixpence as though it were a talisman against the evil eye, and listened to the sound of approaching footsteps.

The door opened and I found myself looking up at a truly remarkable woman. She must have been close on six feet tall with short-cropped, ivory-white hair sliced off in a neat fringe across her broad forehead. She had completely black eyes (or so it seemed to me then), black eyebrows, and olive-colored skin with scarcely a visi-

ble wrinkle in it. She was wearing what looked like a man's jacket of dark-brown corduroy, a red blouse, a long, bottle-green corduroy skirt and shoes with big, square silver buckles. I stared up at her in wide-eyed and total fascination, while Gladys explained the reason for our visit.

Miss Deazie listened, nodded her head and then beckoned us inside. I scrubbed my shoes clean on the mat and followed the two of them down the stone-flagged passage into the kitchen.

From invitations to visit the homes of my school friends I was by then familiar with quite a number of the cottage kitchens in Langmere, but Miss Deazie's was not like any of them. It was large, light, and airy, and instead of the usual Victorian range it had a modern solid-fuel cooker which looked more like a piece of hospital apparatus than a stove. All the furniture was of plain wood, sturdy and practical, and a regiment of copper saucepans hung in a neat and gleaming file along the beam above the inglenook.

"You'll join me in a cup of tea, won't you Gladys? So take your coat off then. You too, boy." Her voice, though it had a good deal of the local accent, was not really a "Langmere" voice at all. But nor was it a "London" voice either. Like her dress and her kitchen it was something shaped to her own needs and purposes. I found it just as fascinating as the rest of her.

While the kettle was coming to the boil, she led me over to the window, took my hand between both of hers and examined first the back of it and then the palm. "You want me to flit'em, do you, boy?"

"Yes, please, Miss Deazie," I said.

From the lapel of her jacket she extracted a long, silvery pin. "Shove back the sleeve of your jacket, then," she said. "Up as long as your elbow."

When I had complied she took hold of my hand again, turned it palm-uppermost and pricked me lightly five times along a line running from the crook of my elbow down to my wrist. "They'll be away by midnight, Tuesday," she said. "They un't bother you no more."

Still keeping hold of my hand, she trailed the point of the pin along a crease line which ran from the bottom of my thumb up to the base of my middle finger. Then she raised her head and, gazing directly into my eyes, said, "I see you'm right fond of machines — engines and suchlike."

How she could possibly have known this was completely beyond me. I simply nodded dumbly.

She smiled, released my hand and restored the pin to its place in her lapel. Then she walked back to the stove and busied herself over the preparations of our tea. Having filled the tea pot and stirred it briskly, she set it down on the top of the stove to draw and turned back to me. "Come you here alonger me, boy."

Without bothering to see if I was

following, she walked out of the kitchen and down the passage to another door on the opposite side. "Wait you here a minute," she said to me. "The curtains are drawn agin the fadin'."

She unlocked the door and vanished into the room. A moment later I heard the rasp and rattle of drapes being tugged aside. As the room filled with the soft light of the waning day, I peered in and beheld what I could only suppose was some sort of museum. At one end stood a huge, dark oak cupboard, and all along the other three walls were placed stout benches. Set out upon these were perhaps fifteen or twenty dusty glass cases containing models of machines, and on the wall immediately above each case was a plan or sketch, which, I supposed, related to it. These too were framed and glazed.

Miss Deazie brushed the sleeve of her jacket across the top of one of the cases and said, more to herself than to me, "Pity they never thought t'invent a way to keep the dust off."

I looked into the nearest showcase and saw within it a sort of ghostly skeleton of a watermill. Apart from the metal axle rod on which the wheel was hung it appeared to be made of glass. The channel which guided the water onto the top of the wheel was made of glass, and so was the one which conducted the used water away. I followed this conduit with my eyes as it cranked around the base of the little mill, and then, with a sort of shifting flicker, I saw it reappear, higher up, supplying the water source once more.

Miss Deazie came over and stood beside me and peered down into the case. "Ah, that's dried up," she said. "It allus does after a bit. Would you like to see it working?"

I nodded emphatically.

"We's'll have t'see what we can do then," she said. "If you un't say a word to no one, just pop back here on your own next Saturday afternoon, I'll see if I can't get some of 'em shiftin' agin. Reckon as they'd all benefit."

"Did Mr. Deazie make all these?" I asked.

Her eyebrows rose. "An' who's Mr. Deazie, when he's at home?"

I blushed. "Wasn't he a clockmaker?"

She gazed at me thoughtfully. "Ah," she murmured, "maybe. Maybe. But whoever told *you* that?"

"My father said so," I replied. "He said Angela Deazie's father was a clockmaker. A very good one."

"Did he now? Angela Deazie's father a clockmaker? Yes, yes, that could 'a bin. There's clocks enough in this house, all the conscience."

As she was speaking I observed that one of the little mechanisms had begun to revolve slowly and silently within its case, and I went across to examine it. I had never seen anything like it in my life, It appeared to consist of two (or was it more?) three-dimensional equilateral triangles made up of glass rods and suspended in such a way that

that each one appeared to revolve *within* the others, and yet, by some extraordinary illusion, they all seemed to be exactly the same size. It was for all the world as if they were constantly changing places with each other, and yet I could never quite make out where one ended and the next began. Always there would come that same instant of flickering indecision which I had experienced with the water wheel — a moment when my perception was twisted askew and then flipped back again in a different mode. Nor could I see any trace of the clockwork or electrical mechanism which was making it revolve. "How does it work, Miss Deazie?" I asked. "Where's its motor?"

"There's motors we can see and them as we can't," she replied. "That's one of them as we can't. Come you on alonger me now or our tea'll be gettin' cold."

She stepped back into the passageway and, reluctantly, I followed her. As I crossed the threshold I glanced back over my shoulder at the extraordinary gyrating three-dimensional triangles only to discover that the glass case in which they were displayed was now acting as a mirror and reflecting the light of the nearby window so that I could see nothing inside at all.

Miss Deazie was as good as her word. When I woke up on the Wednesday morning following my visit to her cottage, I found that my warts had vanished. All that was left were the five dark brown spots where Mother's silver nitrate had stained my skin. I rushed downstairs into the kitchen and displayed my hand to Gladys. "Well, what did you expect?" she said. "If Sarah says they'll go, they'll go. But don't you never say nothin' to your mam. She wouldn't hold with it. Promise me now."

For the rest of that week Sarah Deazie and her room of strange machines were never far from my thoughts. When Saturday arrived I told Elizabeth that I had been invited to play football on the Common with my school friends (which had the incidental merit of being true); then, immediately lunch was over, I set off for Barkers Holt.

When I reached Sarah's cottage I found a man I did not recognize digging in the kitchen garden. I nodded to him and he nodded back. "Is Miss Deazie in?" I asked.

"Reckon," he said, which I translated from Langmere laconic to mean that she was.

I walked up to the front door and was just about to knock when it was opened from inside. "Oh, so you've come then," said Miss Deazie.

"You did say to, didn't you, Miss Deazie?"

"Yes, yes, boy. Come you along in."

She took my coat and hung it on a peg behind the door. I showed her my hand. She glanced at it and smiled.

"Surprised, were you?"

"A bit" I confessed. "Thank you very much."

She smiled again and said, "I've had a lick round with a duster since last week and I've got some on 'em workin' agin. Get you in an' see for yourself whiles I slip out an' have a word wi' Mr. Pendlebury."

She unlocked the door to the room where the machines were, ushered me in and then strode away down the passage and out into the garden. Prickling with excitement, I moved forward into the center of the room and gazed about me.

Warm autumn sunlight was streaming in through the low windows; the air smelt clean and sharp with the scent of fresh wax polish; and, in perhaps half of the display cases, the models were now working. Little bright sparkles and pinpricks of light flickered on and off as the glass wheels turned, the cranks rocked back and forth, and the mysterious little spectral geometries spiraled around and merged into one another. But none was making any sound that I was able to detect.

My eye alighted upon the glass mill and I walked across and peered down into the case. Water was trickling down the miniature leat, falling in a silent wavering tread onto the twinkling paddles of the overshot wheel, and within the transparent mill house the little beveled cogs were turning sweetly and soundlessly. In the lower leat the used water dribbled away along its channel, skirted around the base of the mill, turned back upon itself, once, twice, thrice, and ... *and flowed gently down the leat again onto the top of the wheel!* I stared and stared until my eyes ached, and *nowhere* could I detect any point at which the water was flowing *up* hill. It was as if I were forever adding one and one and one and one, counting them off upon my fingers, and then discovering that the answer came to five. I even tried surreptitiously lifting up the case, only to find that it was locked immovably to the bench top.

I moved on round the room, and ever and again, peering into the cases, I would arrive at an instant where my perception was teased out to the point of incredulity and then, by means of a sort of instinctive mental somersault, contrived to re-establish itself upon another plane. It was almost as if each contrivance were saying to me: "Thus far and no further." But what they were designed *for* was at least as much of a mystery to me as how they functioned, and when Miss Deazie eventually reappeared, I pointed to the gyrating and flickering tetrahedrons and put my question to her direct.

"What's it *for?*" she repeated. "Well, now, boy, I durst venture we might say it was showin' us a way in and a way out. Like a sort o' door or a window, see? Summat like that."

I stared at her, thinking she must surely be making fun of me, but her ex-

pression was perfectly serious. So I put my face us as close as I could get to the glass case without my breath clouding the surface, and gazed into the heart of it.

It was thus that I discovered how, by steadfastly ignoring the illusory advance and retreat of the skeletal forms, I was able to focus my attention upon an area which was seemingly contained within them — a sort of focal point of stillness at the very center. And there was my own eye gazing out at me as if it were being reflected back from the surface of an invisible mirror — *only it wasn't my own eye!*

I gave a yelp of astonishment, jerked my head back and cannoned into Miss Deazie, who had moved up unperceived and was now standing immediately behind me. "There's someone there!" I gasped. "Someone looking at me! Look! Look!"

She put her head down beside mine, but the eye which I had seen was no longer there.

"It was there!" I cried. "Honestly it was! I saw it!"

"Well, it ain't there now," she said. "Reckon you must 'a frit him as much as he frit you," and this time she did laugh.

"You believe it?" I said. "You don't think I just made it up?"

"Why, no, boy. I don't doubt they watch us just the same as we do them. What's in to us'll be out to them. It's but a way o' lookin'."

It is not easy to convey the extraordinarily matter-of-fact manner in which she said these words, and so my own acceptance of them must perforce be taken on trust. Yet accept them I did, perhaps because I myself had *seen* that other silent watcher eye-to-eye. "But who *are* they?" I demanded. "And *where* are they?"

"They're the others, boy. Them on the other side. You don't want to bother you head about them."

"You mean they're *real?*" I insisted. "Real like us?"

"I dunno 'bout that 'xactly. but to thairselves I reckon they must be. Wouldn't make sense else, would it?"

I looked from her pensive face back to the little machine in which the shapes were forever dissolving and reconstituting themselves around their invisible focus. "But can they...? *Could* they...?" Somehow I could not quite bring myself to say: "Get out."

Miss Deazie shook her head. "They'll have their own lives to lead wi'out wantin' a share in ours."

"But *could* they?" I insisted. "If someone made a bigger one of those? As big as — as big as a man, say?" — and I spread my arms to indicate the dimensions I had in mind for such a noble project.

She studied my face as though undecided how best to respond. "Ah," she murmured. " 'N what did the Deazies do?"

My mouth dropped in astonishment. "You mean he *did?*" I gasped. "He's *done* it?"

"An' just who's this 'he' supposed to be, boy?"

"Why, the clockmaker, of course. The man who made all these," and I waved my arm round at the glass cases.

"Arthur Deazie? But he never made these. That was him up there." She indicated one of the pictures on the wall — a three-quarter length portrait of a swarthy-faced man with a small pointed beard and neatly waxed mustache, dressed in the clothes of Napoleonic times. "He an' his kin contriyed these," she said. "Leastways that's what I was told when I was a gel."

I hurried across to the picture and stared up at it. It was very dark, though whether this was a result of the passage of years or was intentional on the part of the artist I was in no position to judge. What I did observe, however, was that occupying the background was a shadowy, geometric tracery which bore an undoubted resemblence to that very machine in which I had observed the eye observing me. On a tarnished gilded strip fastened to the bottom of the frame was inscribed the name GIOVANNI D'ASSISI.

And suddenly I found that I was very frightened indeed. It was the kind of purely instinctive fear that had gripped me in the previous winter when, all alone, I had ventured far out onto the frozen mere and had suddenly heard the ice going *wheep-wheep!* as the cracks sang out ahead of me and I had gingerly — oh, so gingerly! — edged my way back over the void of black and hungry water to the sanctuary of the reed-fringed shore with my fluttering heart shrunk to the size of a shriveled pea.

"What is it, boy?"

I dragged my gaze away from the somber eyes of the long-dead Italian and shivered as though someone had trodden on my grave. What I felt then I could not express, for I had glimpsed a rent in the veil of reality and what lay beyond it was strange and dark and threatening.

Miss Deazie came over to me and caught hold of my hand. "Come you alonger me, boy," she said. "I've got a gingerbread in the oven. Let's you 'an me go and see if he's done."

She drew me out of the room into the passageway, closed the door with a thump behind her, and turned the key in the lock.

I have often wondered what it was Sarah Deazie thought she had seen written in the lines of my hand which had put it into her head to let me examine the curious treasures she kept hidden away in that room of hers. She never allowed me in there again though I begged her many times. "Ah, you don't want to go pokin' about in there, boyu. It's all nasty old dust and cobwebs," was the nearest she ever came to even acknowledging its existence, and the door was always firmly locked, the curtains drawn.

And gradually, inevitably, it be-

came of less and less importance to me as other adolescent interests arose to supplant it. The following autumn (1938) I left the village school in Langmere and began traveling daily to a grammar school in Norwich. Then came the war, and my youthful imagination was filled in turn with visions of *blitzkrieg* and Panzers and screaming Stukas; with aerial dogfights over the Kentish coast; and finally with newspaper maps of North Africa, Russia, Burma, and God knows where, on which the black arrows wriggled back and forth as the fortunes of battle dictated.

As the years rolled by, my visits to Miss Deazie grew ever rarer and at last ceased altogether. Occasionally I would catch sight of her in the village post office, and we always greeted each other with a smile and a nod and perhaps some vapid politeness, but that was as far as it went. Sometimes I didn't see her for months on end.

Then, one day in the summer of 1943, about a fortnight after my fifteenth birthday, I was waiting to board a late train back from Norwich to Biddenham Halt — the station which served as Langmere's principal connection with the outside world — when who should I chance to see standing on the platform ahead of me but the unmistakable figure of Miss Deazie. I was still wondering whether to pretend I hadn't noticed her when she turned her head and smiled at me. I smiled back and, a minute later, the train pulled in and I found myself committed to sharing a compartment with her.

Almost the first thing I remember her saying to me was: "Since them fags is like to burn a hole in you pocket, we might as well smoke 'em." I grinned, produced the crumpled paper packet, offered it to her, and we both lit up.

She let her head sink back against the dusty plush, surveyed me with those strange dark eyes of hers, and observed: "It's about time I was havin' a word wi' you, lad."

"Oh, yes?" I said. "About what?"

"Has anyone been enquirin' of you 'bout me?"

"About *you?*" I said, and the surprise in my voice could hardly have escaped her. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

She didn't answer straight away; then she gave a curious little shrug and said, "Recent there's bin a message come."

"A message?" I echoed. "What about?"

"I suppose we might call it a warnin'."

I stared at her wondering if I'd heard correctly. "Did you say 'a warning'?"

She leant over towards me. "You'd not mind if I was to take another scan of your hand, would you, lad?"

At that instant I might well have been nine years old all over again. I don't think I hesitated for a second. I thrust out my hands to her palms uppermost.

She gazed from one to the other for perhaps the length of a count of five; then she murmured. "Ah, you're the one all right. It's writ here plain as print."

"What is, Miss Deazie?"

"You an' me, lad. We're threaded together, see? Reckon we'll just have to make the best on't."

I did my best to grin but the result was a pretty sickly travesty of the real thing. I turned my head and looked out of the window at the sunny meadows rocking past, and I realized that some part of me was still back there in that dusty room where she had first shown me her mysterious machines in their glass cases. "What did you mean about a message?" I said. "What sort of a message?"

"Oh, there's allus been them as 'ud wade through Nick's Pit to see what you've seen, lad, and one o' these days they're bound t'come a-lookin' for it agin. But we're wise t'them. They don't get far wi'out us knowing."

"Who don't, Miss Deazie?"

She was suddenly preoccupied with her crumpled cigarette, which appeared to have developed a critical leak in its casing.

"Who *are* they, Miss Deazie?" I repeated.

"Who knows, lad? They'll a' slipped through from beyond like. From t'other side."

"Beyond?" I echoed dully. "Was that where Giovanni D'Assisi came from?"

She blinked at me pensively through the azure fronds of tobacco smoke and nodded her head slowly. "Reckon," she said.

When I reached home I discovered that we had visitors. A jeep was parked outside the front door, and as I let myself in and climbed the stairs I could hear American voices issuing from the drawing room. Having brushed my teeth to banish the smell of tobacco, I went down to see what was going on. I was just about to go in when the door was dragged open from inside and my sister came out. Her eyes were sherry-bright and her cheeks flushed. "Oh, hello," she said. "How did you get on?"

"We won," I said. "Who's here?"

"A Major Beddoes and his friend. From Boston" (she exaggerated it to "Barstern"). "Go on in. I'm just getting some more ice."

She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, and I slipped into the drawing room to find my father and an American officer with their heads bent over a portfolio of sketches. My mother was standing beside another officer near the open french windows. She appeared to be pointing to something in the garden.

The officer at my father's side glanced up and grinned at me. He had very pale blue eyes, short sandy hair and sandy eyebrows, and his cheeks looked as smooth and shiny as if he had just that minute polished them with

jewelers' rouge. "Hi there," he said genially. "I guess you must be the ace pitcher we've been hearing about." He extended his hand. "Beddoes," he said. "Mark Beddoes. United States Army Air Force."

I shook the hand and found it soft and faintly moist. "Are you stationed at Emmingham, sir?" I asked.

"You're right," he said, "though naturally that's a top-grade military secret," and he winked at me.

"Are you flying Forts?"

"I'd say that was a pretty shrewd guess, Richard."

My father chose that moment to hold one of the sketches up to the light. He examined it closely, then said, "There's no question this is a John Thirtle — a preliminary sketch for his *Mill on the Yare*, I'd say. You're a very lucky man, Major. Oh, hello, Richard. I didn't hear you come in. How did the match go?"

"We won by five wickets," I said. "Can I have a sherry?"

"Go ahead, old boy. Help yourself. Another whiskey for you, Major?"

Elizabeth appeared at the doorway holding a bowl of ice cubes. "Here are your rocks, Major," she said, " or should I say 'rarcks'?"

"What's wrong with 'rawks,' Elizabeth?" he replied, and they both laughed.

I selected the largest glass I could see and filled it to the brim with sherry. Without quite knowing why, I decided that I didn't care for Major Beddoes very much.

Mother did her best to persuade our visitors to stay to supper, but they wouldn't hear of it. "That would be trespassing on your hospitality, ma'am," said Beddoes. "Believe me we know the problems you people are up against, what with rationing and all. But if you'd allow us to transfer the invitation to Sunday, then we could make our own contribution to the commissariat...."

Thus it was that, almost without our realizing it was happening, Major Beddoes and Lieutenant Fletcher began to insinuate themselves into the fabric of our lives. They were unfailingly polite and helpful and danced constant attendance upon Elizabeth and my mother, who both appeared to relish every minute of it. Beddoes was an avid collector of antiques and had a knack of hunting out bargains which was almost uncanny. His specialty was early 19th century watercolor drawings, and he would bring along each new acquisition to receive my father's official imprimatur.

One afternoon he arrived bearing a parcel neatly wrapped in brown paper. "This one's for you, sir," he said, handing it to Father. "A small token of my appreciation."

Father unwrapped it to discover that very sketch by John Thirtle which he had spotted and had so much admired. Major Beddoes had had it specially mounted and framed in Norwich. By any assessment it was an astonishingly generous gift, and Father was

completely overwhelmed. Anglo-U.S. relations reached an all-time high, and I suspect that if at the moment Beddoes had seen fit to ask for Elizabeth's hand in marriage, not only would Father have agreed, he'd probably have been happy to chuck in Mother as well.

The major stayed on till late in the evening. Father had insisted on opening a second bottle of his precious prewar Chablis, and I think we all got a bit tipsy. We sat out on the lawn in the deck chairs while the sun sank in the barely acknowledged miracle of copper and rose-pink over the long waters of the mere and the shell-shattered Flying Fortresses limped home to Emmingham, firing off their red and green Very lights to signify how many dead and wounded they had aboard. Elizabeth asked if Lieutenant Fletcher was flying today.

"No, Roger's out hunting up ancestors," said Beddoes. "Seems that the New Hampshire Fletchers originated from round these parts."

"Oh, we've heaps of Fletchers round here," said Mother. "They're one of our three biggest families. The Duttons, the Joneses and the Fletchers."

"And what did the Deazies do?" giggled Elizabeth.

"I beg your pardon?" said Beddoes, turning to her.

"Nothing," she said. "Just being silly."

"Did you say 'Deazies', Elizabeth?"

"She's tight," I said. "Ignore her."

Major Beddoes's face had taken on a curiously alert expression. "You know that's the first time I've heard that name in over twenty years," he said. "It takes me clear back to my childhood. I once had an old maiden aunt called Deazie. She lived up in the Green Mountains in Vermont. She died way back in twenty-two."

"Oh, we have a Deazie living right here in Langmere," said Mother. "I'm happy to say she's very much alive."

"Is that so, ma'am?"

"She must be close on seventy," said Mother. "Miss Sarah Deazie. Perhaps she's some distant relative of yours, Mark."

"That hardly seems possible," said Beddoes. "What's she like?"

"I'd say she was a remarkably spry old girl for her years," said Father. "Always looks as fit as a flea."

"And remarkably independent too," said Mother.

"She sounds quite a character."

"She once charmed away Richard's warts," said Elizabeth. "Ow! Stop it you pig!"

"Really?" said Beddoes, turning his pale-blue eyes upon me. "And how did she do that?"

"I've forgotten," I muttered. "It was a long time ago."

"Rubbish!" said Elizabeth, massaging her shin histrionically. "She did it with a pin. He told me so. She pricked his arm and they disappeared overnight."

If looks could have killed, my sister would have been lying stretched out stiff at my feet. As it was she babbled blithely: "When we first came to Langmere, Richard was always sneaking off to see her." She turned confidingly to the major and stage-whispered, "I think she cast a spell on him."

Beddoes laughed. "You mean she has a reputation as a witch!"

"Of course not," I said crossly. "She just prefers to keep herself to herself, that's all."

"And she lives right here in the village?"

"In the middle of a forest down by the misty moisty mere," said Elizabeth, "with five black cats and an owl and a toad in a house with a roof made of gingerbread."

While she was fantasizing, another Flying Fortress came limping home on two engines. A veritable Christmas tree of colored lights descended from it. "Oh dear, oh dear," sighed Mother. "Those poor, poor boys. I can't bear to think of it."

But Major Beddoes's eyes were not upon the evening sky, they were upon me, and their expression can best be described as contemplative, as though at that moment his thoughts were a million miles away.

After the major had driven off back to camp, I made my peace with my sister and retired to my attic bedroom. I locked the door behind me and opened the window as far as it would go. Then I lit a cigarette, propped my elbows on the windowsill and, gazing out into the night, tried to marshal my thoughts into some sort of coherent order.

It was now all of six weeks since I had had that peculiar conversation on the train with Miss Deazie, and this was the first occasion on which anyone could be said to have asked me anything about her. But, on the face of it, what could have been more casual or less sinister than Major Beddoes's inquiry? So why did I find it so hard to believe in his maiden aunt in Vermont? For I now realized that I didn't believe in her at all, and yet I didn't know *why* I didn't. For some unknown reason she was infinitely less real to my imagination than were those shadowy figures who had their being in some unspecified dimension which *my* Miss Deazie had never referred to as anything other than "beyond" or "on t'other side." If anything was unbelievable, that was, and yet *I* believed in it, just as I believed in her and in the dim and enigmatic figure of Giovanni D'Assisi.

Far off to the southeast a searchlight battery was thoughtfully fingering a tissue of low cloud, probing for a sneak raider. For some minutes I watched the beams prowling restlessly back and forth, and then, without ever quite acknowledging that I had done so, I discovered that I had resolved to call upon Miss Deazie and acquaint her with what had happened.

When I awoke next morning, my mission seemed a good deal less urgent

than it had in the afterglow of Father's Chablis, and it was not until the middle of the afternoon that I set out for Barkers Holt.

I found Miss Deazie busy in her kitchen garden picking late peas. "Well, well. Look who's here!" she called cheerily as she caught sight of me. "We're quite the stranger these days."

"Hello, Miss Deazie," I responded. "Can I give you a hand?"

"I'm all done here, lad," she said. "But you can help me shuck 'em, if you like."

She passed over her basket and led the way into the house.

"You must be very partial to peas," I said. "There's enough for an army in here."

"Well, I'm expecting company," she said. "Wouldn't do to let 'em go short. Not after all the way they'll 'a come."

"Relations of yours?"

"Ah, so you might say." She gave vent to a kind of explosive snort of laughter. "Not what you'd call blood relations, though."

I followed her into her kitchen and set the basket down on the table. "You remember that time you spoke to me on the train?" I said.

Miss Deazie said nothing, just tipped her head slightly to one side like a wise old bird and twinkled a dark eye at me.

"You asked me if anyone had been inquiring about you."

"Yes, yes," she said and nodded her head vigorously.

"Well, last night, someone did. An American officer. A Major Beddoes." And I told her what had happened.

She handed me a pudding basin, took one for herself, and then spilled the pea pods out in a tumbled heap on the table between us. For all the interest she showed in what I had recounted I felt I needn't have bothered. "Well," I concluded lamely, "I just thought you might like to know."

"Yes, yes, lad. I was cogitatin' on Vermont. That'll have been Mathilda, see?"

I gasped at her. "You mean she's *real — was* real, I mean? He wasn't just making her up?"

"Oh, no, lad," she said. "Mathilda was one of us Deazies all right. She won't never ha' told *him* nothin' though, else I'd 'a heard by now."

"You mean that Major Beddoes really *is* a relation of yours?"

"Not a *relation*. Oh, no, I wouldn't say that. Not what *you'd* call a relation."

"So what is he then?"

She split open a plump green pod and the peas rattled into the basin in her lap. "Reckon we might do worse 'n call him a sniffer," she said. "He'll be the one who'll allus have his nose down on the ground, questin' back an' forth, allus busy a-sniff-sniff-sniffin' out things fer his Mister Getcher Fletcher."

"*A Fletcher'll getcher,*" I murmured.

Sarah gave a sudden wicked cackle of laughter. "Yes, yes, lad! You've hit it! But *what'll the Deazies do?* that's what they'll be askin' theirselves, will our precious Mister Getcher Fletcher an' our sniff-sniff-sniffin' Mister Nosey Beddoes."

I gazed across at her and my face creased into a slow, admiring grin. "You know all about them, don't you?" I said. "You've known all along. I almost believe you've planned this, Miss Deazie."

"Get away wi' you, lad," she said. "Whatever will you be a-sayin' next?"

"And where do I fit in?" I asked.

Sarah garnered up a fresh pea pod in her freckled hand and pointed it at me like a green pistol. "There's webs within webs," she mused, "an' traps within traps, an' time's not for foolin' with. So you tek a morsel o' cheese to bait your trap — summat for the sniffer t'sniff, t'make his mouth water and his whiskers twitch — summat that's calculated to draw 'em in at just the right moment, then — *snap!*" She popped the pod with her thumb and laughed.

"And that's me? The bait?"

She shook her head. " 'Tain't that simple, lad," she said. "There's the bait, and the smell o' the bait, and the air which wafts the smell o' the bait to the nose o' the sniffer — and that's only the start of it. Reckon there's enough peas here for four, do you?"

"Four?" I said. "Beddoes, and Fletcher, and you and...?"

"Fancy a supper of roast duck an' fresh green peas, do you lad?"

"Tonight?"

"Seven o'clock. On the stroke. An' don't you be late, mind, whatever you do, for I dussen't keep 'em waitin'."

"Crikey!" I said. "What's going to happen?"

"You get busy shuckin' an' leave me to worry about that," said Miss Deazie.

Not long after half past six, transformed by a clean white shirt, my best pair of grey flannels and my dark-blue First XI blazer, I retraced my steps to Miss Deazie's. As I approached the stile, I saw that a jeep was already parked in the gateway to a nearby meadow. I walked over to it, felt the radiator and found it was still warm. At that moment I heard the church clock beginning to strike the hour, and remembering how Miss Deazie had said "on the stroke," I ran to the stile, vaulted over it, and sprinted down the path into the wood.

If Major Beddoes and Lieutenant Fletcher were surprised when I walked into Miss Deazie's kitchen, they concealed it admirably, though I suppose it's quite possible she had told them I was coming. "Well, hello there, Richard! Long time no see!" cried Beddoes, exposing his improbably white and even teeth in an affable grin. The heavy-brown and saturnine Fletcher contented himself with a cool, " 'Lo, Richard."

"Hello," I said. "I saw the jeep up the road and guessed you were here."

"Helluva place to find," said Beddoes. "You'd never think there was a house tucked away down here unless you'd been told, would you? Must be all of coupla hundred years old, I'd say."

"A hundred and fifty," said Miss Deazie, appearing in the doorway of the scullery with a tray on which were set out four glass tumblers, a bottle and a jug. "The date's carved out up on a beam in the hall. A.D. 1793."

I blinked at her in astonishment. Her "Langmere" voice had vanished as though a tap had been turned off. It was almost uncanny.

She set down the tray on the table and winked at me covertly. "There's no ice, I'm afraid, boys," she said, "but the water's fresh-drawn cool from the well. Help yourselves."

Beddoes screwed the stopper from the bottle, poured out a generous slug of bourbon into three of the glasses, and then glanced up at me questioningly.

"Just a small one," I said. "Thanks."

Sarah stripped the cellophane wrapping from a packet of Camel cigarettes and offered them around. Beddoes took one and so did I. Fletcher declined with a shake of his head. Sarah laughed. "You're the wise one. Mr. Fletcher. Know what we say about these things? They're the only fags with a picture of the factory on the packet. But don't think I'm not grateful. Beggars can't be choosers."

"No one has to be a beggar," said Fletcher. "Least of all you, Miss Deazie."

"Oh, I'm no beggar," said Sarah. "I'd say I was doing very nicely, thank you. Very nicely indeed. What with my bits and pieces and my pension coming in regular and all."

"You're sitting on a nest egg," said Fletcher. "All you need is some expertise in exploiting it."

"As the fox said to the chicken," said Miss Deazie.

Listening to them, I began to get the odd impression that the conversation I was hearing wasn't the *real* conversation at all but was a sort of code which they all understood and I didn't. And it occurred to me then, for the first time in my life, that Miss Deazie must have some other source of income which I knew nothing about, something that placed her in quite a different category from all the other old pensioners in the village. But it was not exactly a subject I felt I could question her about. So I sipped at my bourbon-and-water and puffed away at my Camel, and, by keeping my ears pricked, I learned to my astonishment that not only had Sarah visited the United States but also traveled quite extensively in Europe. The notion of my Miss Deazie strolling along the Promenade des Anglais or popping into the Vatican or even owning a passport was one I found considerable difficulty in coming to terms with, but

neither Beddoes nor Fletcher appeared to share my problem.

Just before she served the supper, Sarah sent me down into the cellar with instructions to bring up two bottles of elderberry wine. "The '41, mind," she said. "It's on the bottom rack and all labeled. You'll find a torch on the shelf at the top of the stairs."

Perhaps it was an effect of the unaccustomed bourbon, but the simple task took me rather longer to perform than it might otherwise have done. When I regained the passage clutching the cool, dusty bottles, I heard Fletcher saying: "Well, that's the basic proposition. Take it or leave it. It's up to you."

"Then I'll leave it, Mr. Fletcher."

"Aw, come on, be reasonable, ma'am." (This was Beddoes). "You know the Flasconis have at least as much right to it as the Deazies have. We've got the original witnessed deeds with the old man's signature. Show her, Roger."

"Don't bother," said Sarah. "That writ doesn't run on this side and never has done. The Flasconis lost their case on appeal in 1805. Whatever Giovanni conjured up on this side is Deazie property, and Deazie it stays in perpetuity. That was the judgment, boys, and well you know it. So if you'll just stop fretting and get yourselves sat down. You over there, Mr. Fletcher. You here, Mr. Beddoes...."

I pushed the door and went in.

That meal was delicious, the duck a golden bird of paradise, the peas and buttery potatoes as tender and sweet as kisses, the wine a fragrant revelation, but neither Major Beddoes nor Lieutenant Fletcher seemed to appreciate it half as much as Miss Deazie and I did. On at least two occasions Fletcher tried to reopen the topic which was obviously preying upon his mind only to have Sarah silence him with: "I've nothing more to say on the subject, Mr. Fletcher, and I'll thank you to remember that. Some more gravy for you, Mr. Beddoes?"

We moved on to apple pie and cream which was every bit as good as the duck had been, and then I helped Sarah to carry the dishes out into the scullery. I stacked them up on the draining board beside the stone sink and was about to return to the kitchen when Sarah plucked me by the sleeve of my blazer, drew me back, and placed a finger to her lips. "Bide you here a minute, lad," she whispered in her familiar Langmere voice: "I just want to see what kinder mischief they two crafty monkey's 'll be gettin' up to." And then, louder: "Would you mind running the opener round this tin of coffee for me while I set out some cups and saucers on a tray?"

I heard a door click and guessed it must be the one which led from the kitchen out to the passage. I looked enquiringly at Miss Deazie but she just shook her head and winked at me. "All in good time, lad," she murmured. "We'm needs let 'em get a good nibble at the cheese."

After some minutes had elapsed she nodded to me, picked up her tray and carried it through into the kitchen. I followed close at her heels, and, as I had expected, there was no sign of either Major Beddoes or Lieutenant Fletcher. Sarah set down the tray, went over to the door and tried the handle. The door was locked. She made a quiet clucking noise with her tongue against her teeth, then came back into the center of the room and turned up the twin flames of the oil lamp which hung above the table. It seemed to me as if she were listening for something. "Shall I go out through the scullery and run round and unlock it?" I said.

"No, no, lad, we'm needs let 'em be till ten."

I glanced up at the Victorian wall clock above the mantelpiece and saw that it was showing twenty minutes to the hour. "What are they doing?" I asked.

"Mekkin' the biggest mistake o' their lives," she replied grimly. "You be a good lad now and draw them black-outs close, and I'll see if I can't fix us both a nice cupper tea. It's better for you than coffee."

As I was tugging the heavy velvet curtains across the second window, I felt the glass shake. Peering out into the darkness, I saw the far-off flicker of searchlights over the treetops to the east. The faint *crump-crump* of distant ack-ack fire was borne to my ears. "Looks like another raid on Lowestoft," I said, and I twitched the curtains to.

Miss Deazie glanced up at the clock and nodded, but she didn't say anything.

The kettle on the stove was just starting to purr when the windows shook again. I jumped back, ran through into the scullery, drew back a corner of the black-out blind and squinted out. In the distance a score of searchlights had clustered together like a huge bell tent, and tiny pinpricks of fire were winking like sparks high up in the peak of it. "They're coming this way, Miss Deazie!" I called. "I wonder if they're going for Emmingham?"

"Come you in here alonger me, lad," said Miss Deazie, "an' let that blind be."

Reluctantly I relinquished my spy hole and returned to the kitchen where I sat down once more and listened to the window panes rattling under the thump of guns and the far-off thud of exploding bombs. Sarah shook two cigarettes out of the packet, handed one to me and struck a match. She had lit mine and was just about to light her own when she twitched the flame aside and said: "There! That'll be them now!"

I cocked my ear and heard faint voices retreating down the garden path. The windows shook again even louder than before. "Are you sure that was them?" I asked.

Sarah glanced up at the clock which was now showing four minutes to the hour. Calmly she lit her cigarette and then blew out the match.

"Reckon," she said.

"What have they been up to?"

"Helpin' theirselves where they'd no business to," she said. "Little good it'll do 'em. Hush now."

There was a brief lull in the firing, and I detected the familiar panting drone of enemy aircraft somewhere overhead. Then the ack-ack batteries around Emmingham suddenly opened up, and their flash and flicker leaked into the room around the margins of the black-out. A moment later I caught the high-pitched weasel-squeal of falling bombs. "Crikey!" I cried. "It *is* Emmingham! I'm going out to take a look!"

"You stay right here, lad!" The ring of authority in her voice was absolute. I stayed.

The clock whirred and began to chime tinnily — *dong! dong! dong! dong!* At the fourth stroke I heard a loud explosion which I knew could not be more than a mile away. There was a second, louder, almost immediately, and then a third, much louder still. Recognizing a stick of bombs coming our way, I ducked my head instinctively. The house rocked to its foundations, the lamp flame flapped, and some china crashed to the floor in the scullery. There was one further explosion further off and then only a sort of muffled silence.

Slowly I raised my head and let out my stifled breath in a long, long sigh. "Jesus Christ!" I whispered. "I really thought we'd had it that time."

"Don't you ever let me hear you taking His name in vain," said Miss Deazie. "I'm right shamed on you."

"Sorry," I said. "I was just scared to death, that's all."

She nodded and then smiled and I guessed I was forgiven. "It's all right now," she said. "You can run round and unlock the door. If they've took out the key, you'll find a spare atop the grandfather clock right agin the stairs."

I hurried out through the scullery into the garden. The Emmingham guns were still firing intermittently, but the throb of aircraft had retreated into the distance northwards. There was a strange, sharp acrid tang on the air which I guessed must be high explosive. I shivered retrospectively and scuttled round to the front door.

I felt my way down the dark hall to the kitchen door. The key was still there in the lock and I turned it without difficulty. By then Miss Deazie had lit another lamp. She came out into the passage and walked over to the museum door, which I now saw was standing ajar. "Hold you on to this, lad," she said, handing over her lamp to me. "I'll have t'draw them curtains close, else we're like to have the A.R.P. on our backs."

A minute later she called me into the room which I had not entered for six years. It looked much as I remembered it, except that the dust was lying even more thickly upon the glass cases and, apart from the portrait of Giovanni, there were now no pictures up-

on the walls. The frames were still there though, flung down in an untidy jumble of splintered wood and broken glass in the middle of the floor. Only the drawings which they had held were missing.

Miss Deazie came over to me, took the lamp from my hand and advanced slowly down the room towards the great oak cupboard which occupied most of the end wall. As the lamp light fell upon it, I saw that the wood was scarred down the edges of the doors as if someone had tried to force them open. I watched her examining the damage; then she stooped and appeared to be feeling around the carved decoration at the base. There was a sudden click and both doors swung outwards. I had a brief, tantalizing glimpse of some strange, glittering reticulation which seemed vaguely familiar, and then she had thrust the doors to again and clicked them shut.

"What are you going to do?" I said. "Call the police?"

"It'll be too late for that now, lad," she said. "I'm a-goin' t'get my coat on and walk you some o' way home. Your mum and dad's like to be frettin' on you."

"You mean you're just going to let them get away with it?"

She looked at me darkly and then shook her head. "They'll not get away wi' it," she said.

While she was putting on her coat, I told her what I had overheard while I was fetching the wine before supper. "What was it they were after?" I said. "Was it just those drawings?"

"What d'you think, lad?"

"Beddoes could have been," I said. "I know he collects pictures."

"Then that's some I daresay he'll wish he'd never collected."

"Was there something else then?"

Sarah chuckled. "Reckon there must a'bin," she said.

"They didn't get it, did they?"

"No," she said, "they didn't get it. They'll 'a got something though."

"What?"

"More'n they bargained for, I reckon."

She finished buttoning up her coat, took down a flashlight that was hanging on a hook beside the front door, and we stepped out into the now-quiet night and followed the pale splash of the torch beam through the wood and down the hazel track to the stile. "It's all right, Miss Deazie," I said. "You don't need come any further. I know the way blindfold from here."

"A coupla steps more, lad," she said. "Just to see you safe over the stile. Mind where you're puttin' your feet now."

I clambered up onto the step, swung my leg over, and skipped down into the roadway on the other side.

And then I saw the jeep.

I suppose it must have been a direct hit. The engine and one of the front wheels were lodged high up in the hedge, and the back half was lying upside-down, smoldering, at the bottom

of the crater. For what seemed hours I just stood locked in the middle of the road and stared at it. Then I came to my senses, stumbled forward, and peering down over the heaped-up earth saw what half an hour before had been either Major Beddoes or Lieutenant Fletcher. "Oh my God," I whispered, and in one violent, involuntary spasm I vomited up the whole of my supper.

I felt a hand descend upon my shaking shoulder. "That's the best way, lad," said Miss Deazie calmly. "You'll be free on it now," and she pushed a handkerchief into my hand.

In retrospect what followed can only be classed as anticlimax. I remember walking into the village with Miss Deazie where together we sought out Sergeant Pendlebury, our local Home Guard officer, and told him more or less what had happened. After that, I made my own way home where I recounted the grisly news to my family. As I recall it, they seemed considerably more relieved to discover that I had survived to tell of my experience than they were desolated to learn that Major Beddoes and Lieutenant Fletcher had gone to join the Great Collector in the Sky. Naturally I omitted to say just what the two of them had been up to in Miss Deazie's house — I simply wouldn't have known where to begin.

Next day, a U.S. Army rescue truck came out from Emmingham and dragged away what was left of the jeep. What was left of Beddoes and Fletcher had already been removed by an ambulance in the small hours of the morning. At neither of these events was I present.

I remember feeling extraordinarily *tired* for some days after it happened, but this, I think, was just an effect of delayed shock. I spent quite a lot of the time lying on my bed, gazing blankly up at the ceiling, and trying without any success whatsoever to make some sort of sense of it all. I knew there must *be* a connection between that bomb and Miss Deazie — I was wholly convinced that she had know it was going to drop just when and where it did and that somehow she had contrived to arrange for Beddoes and Fletcher to be right there under it when it happened. In spite of knowing that it was absolutely impossible that she could have done so, I even believed that she had *planned* it that way. Round and round the questions went like the flies endlessly circling round the light bulb above me, and I knew I should never again have peace of mind until I had confronted her with my suspicions and had it out with her once and for all.

So one sultry afternoon late in September back I went to the house in the middle of the wood and knocked on Miss Deazie's door.

"Oh, it's you, lad," she said. "I've been 'a wondering when you'd call round. Come next week, and you'd 'a missed me."

"Are you going away then?" I asked.

She nodded. "Til Christmas. Mr. Pendlebury'll be keepin' an eye on things for me."

I gazed at her and suddenly it struck me that in all the years I'd known her she hadn't really *aged* at all. apart from her clothes she looked just as she had looked that first time when Gladys Dutton had brought me along to have my warts charmed away. I was the only one of us who had grown older.

She must have read my thought because she laughed and said, "You don't want to go 'a frettin' your poor brain over me, lad, 'Tain't worth the headache. Come along in and we'll sup a glass o' the primrose. It's right lovely this year."

I sat opposite her across the kitchen table and sipped at the golden yellow wine which was as soft and aromatic as the pollen of the flowers she had made it from.

"Isn't that right lovely?" she said. "Tell me true now."

"Yes," I said. "It's lovely."

"Well, what's on your mind, lad?"

I drew in a deep breath, let it out, and said, "I want to know what happened, Miss Deazie."

"Oh, I got them pictures back all right," she said. "I spied them lyin' there all rolled up as neat as you please over the hedge in Carter's medder."

"No, that's not what I mean," I said. "I want to know how you knew about *them* — about Beddoes and Fletcher — and about the raid coming when it did. I want to know what *really* happened. *Please* tell me, Miss Deazie."

She pursed up her lips, regarded me with a sort of speculative sympathy, and then shook her head. "I can't do that, lad," she said. "I dussen't. Not that I'd not be willin' enough on my own account, but 'tisn't mine to tell, see? Never has bin. I'm just 'a holdin' it like for all us Deazies."

"But you did *know*," I said. "About the bomb falling there just when it did. You did, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

I swallowed and then ran my tongue around my lips. "It's something to do with what's in that cupboard, isn't it? That sort of cage thing made of glass?"

"Ah," she said softly. "So you seen that, did you?"

I nodded.

"Then you'm the only one who has, lad, bar us Deazies."

"Did *he* make it?"

"An' who's he?"

"Giovanni."

"Ah. So they do say."

"What does it do, Miss Deazie? Can't you tell me?"

"What does it do?" she repeated. "Why, lad, it's what lets us be Deazies. That's what it *does*. It lets us in and out to do what we do. Now don't you go askin' me no more 'cos I shan't tell 'ee. Reckon I've told you a sight too much

as it is."

I knew then that I'd got just as far as I was ever going to get, and I think that I realized with some part of me that the kind of answers I was looking for would not have *been* answers at all in my sense of the word. They would all have been looking-glass answers and would never fit the questions of my world.

I drained off my wine, set the glass back on the table and stood up. "You didn't mind my asking, did you, Miss Deazie?"

"No, no, lad," she said. "I didn't mind a bit. I reckon I owed you summat."

She stretched out her hand, touched mine gently and turned it over so that the palm was towards her. She looked down at it and then nodded her head sagely. She didn't say anything.

"All right," I said. "So tell me what you've seen there this time. Go on. You might just as well."

She laughed and patted my hand with her own. "One o' these days, long a'rter I'm gone, you'll be minded to write all this down in a book. But t'won't matter, lad. No one'll ever believe a word on't."