

SHADES OF DARKNESS

RICHARD COWPER

It has been claimed that modern blockbuster horror and supernatural stories have forced a redefinition of the boundaries of literary fear. But in this beautifully crafted novel Richard Cowper proves conclusively that fine writing can better *shock horror* for effect, and can, in its own way, also redefine the excesses of lesser writers. Cowper, famed for such novels as *The Twilight of Briareus* and the acclaimed *White Bird of Kinship* series, has achieved the almost impossible and written a novel that produces a tangible feeling of all-pervading dread, without resorting to sensationalism or gore.

Full length ghost stories are rare, and this elegant and literary novel of a modern haunting in an English seaside bungalow, and of forbidden passions in a colonial Africa long since forgotten, will be a welcome addition to a neglected genre.

Shades of Darkness is a new departure for Richard Cowper, it is an intriguing story of suspense and encroaching fear firmly rooted in a strong English tradition, that will delight and please his many admirers.

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SHADES OF DARKNESS

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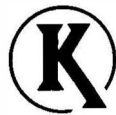
Richard Cowper.

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Shades of Darkness

a novel by
Richard Cowper



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250 copies specially bound in cloth have been signed and numbered by the author; these copies include a special limited edition booklet *The Magic Spectacles and Other Tales*. These 250 copies comprise the collector's edition.

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*'Fear . . . should not be suffered to tyrannise
in the imagination'*

Dr Johnson.

For Noona.



Chapter 1

At two o'clock in the afternoon on Wednesday January 5th a message was brought to me in the Akari Hotel, Kampala that Colonel Makuba wished to see me at Security Headquarters. A car was waiting. I guessed what was coming and blessed my foresight in having sent out my tapes and notes with Pierre at Christmas. The Head of Security was his usual suave self and it soon became obvious that he'd had a tail on me for at least the past three weeks. The outcome of our interview—conveyed with a sort of aggrieved sigh—was that henceforth I was *persona non grata* in Uganda and would be escorted aboard a plane at Entebbe at 8.30 a.m. the following day when my passport and press card would be returned to me. In the meantime I was to be confined to the hotel.

It was raining when we landed at Heathrow. While I was waiting for my bags to be unloaded I phoned Bob Cowans and was told that he was tied up in conference. I left a message that I'd be in to see him at 10.30 the following morning, then

collected my gear, went through Customs, and took a taxi to Earl's Court.

It must have been around seven o'clock when I let myself into the flat. The place looked a mess. It was obvious that Peter had hosted some sort of orgy the night before. The sink was full of unwashed glasses and there was a cardboard box with a dozen empty litre bottles of Italian white lurking behind the kitchen door. My bed had obviously been strenuously occupied. Whoever had used it hadn't even bothered to straighten up the duvet.

I had a shower, changed my clothes and then started in on the charring. When Peter turned up at about half past nine with a girl I'd never seen before, the place was presentable. 'Jesus, Jimbo!' he greeted me. 'When I saw the lights on I thought we'd been turned over. Why the hell didn't you let me know you were coming? I'd have done something about the chaos.'

I explained briefly what had happened and was formally introduced to Veronica. She was a colleague of Peter's at the Beeb and had apparently been cajoled into helping him tidy up the battlefield after the previous night's skirmish. She seemed relieved to find I'd done it.

Peter located a bottle of wine which had got itself overlooked and while he was dealing with it I tried to get hold of Karen on the phone. She was out so I left a message for her to call me if she got back before midnight. I was luckier with Pierre. He had all my material safe and sound in Brussels. Even better, a friend of his was coming to London at the weekend and would bring it over. He added that he'd include a selection of his pictures which I might find useful. I arranged a rendezvous with his friend for Saturday mid-day and thanked him for his trouble.

I was brushing my teeth, all ready for bed, when the phone rang. It was Karen. We exchanged the usual homecoming pleasantries, and I told her what had happened. 'Have you seen Bob yet?' she asked.

'I haven't had a chance. I only got into Heathrow late this afternoon, and when I rang through he was in a conference. I'll be seeing him in the morning. I've got all my notes and tapes though. Pierre brought them out for me. I got through to him in Brussels this evening.'

'Who did you talk to at Kyle House?'

'No one. Well, just the receptionist.'

'So you haven't heard then?'

'Heard what?'

There was a moment's pause before she said: 'Oh, it's just rumours, I expect, Jim.'

'What sort of rumours?'

'About Citizen Kyle.'

'What about him?'

'Well, according to Ralph Binney, Kyle's been throwing his weight around again. Rationalizing he calls it. You know his style.'

'Who doesn't? But why should that concern me?'

'I just thought you might like to know, that's all.'

I laughed. 'Well, thanks for the thought, Karo. But it's too late for shop talk. Do I see you tomorrow?'

'I'm tied up in the evening. I could manage lunch though.'

'O.K.' I said. 'The *Pradello* at one o'clock. I've missed you a lot.'

'Liar.'

'It's God's truth. Did you have a good Christmas?'

'I'll tell you about it tomorrow,' she said. 'Ciao, Jim.'

At half past ten the next morning I pushed through the swing doors of Kyle House and told Reception to let Mr. Cowans know that Mr. Fuller had arrived. Two minutes later I was being lifted up to the fourth floor. As I stepped out of the cage and was making my way down the corridor to Bob's office a door opened and Barbara Tulley came out. She caught sight of me and did a sort of pantomime surprise act. 'Jim! I thought you were in Bongo-Bongo land.'

'I was,' I said. 'I got chucked out, all of a sudden like.'

She wide-eyed me over the top of the file she was clutching, seemed on the point of saying something, then grinned and winked: 'Well, good luck, Ace. See you.'

'Cheers, Barbara,' I responded, and knocked on the door marked *Foreign Editor*.

I walked the last stretch of the route to the *Pradello* through St. James's Park. I needed to think clearly, and that was the one thing I couldn't seem to do. My mind just wouldn't stay fixed on anything. It was as if I had been involved in a road accident. I paused by the lakeside, thoughts spinning through my head. And they were all just *words*, not even as real as the ducks swimming around in front of me, and they hardly seemed real either.

I reached the *Pradello* a few minutes before one o'clock, made my way across to the bar and ordered a double gin and tonic for myself and a Campari soda for Karen. She appeared just as I was paying for them. I kissed her on the cheek, picked up the two glasses and indicated an empty table. She unzipped her quilted anorak and draped it over the back of her chair. She was wearing one of those harlequin jumpers—all multicoloured diamonds—and she looked about ten years younger than her twenty-eight years. I couldn't take my eyes off her. 'Here's to us,' she said, touching her glass against mine. 'So how did it go?'

'I've just been given the sack,' I said.

She stared at me. 'Oh, *Jim*,' she whispered.

I let out the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. 'Technically I've just been informed that my employers deem me supernumerary to staff requirements. I'm redundant.'

'I don't know what to say, Jim. Didn't Bob . . .?'

'Bob said that Kyle's been tightening up on anything that might offend his friends in Africa. No whistle blowing. No making waves. No exposés. All he's interested in is his balance sheets. What does it matter to him where the profit comes from?' I looked across at Karen, her eyes had lost their moistness, and were beginning to blaze. 'All that research,' I said. 'Pierre's pictures. . . . A heap of bloody ashes.'

'The bastard,' she said. 'The dirty, rotten, Fascist pig bastard. Binney must have guessed this was coming, but I never thought

'I'm not the only one, Karo. Anyone who's any good is out. According to Bob I was wired home last Saturday only the cable never reached me. I suppose Makuba was sitting on it. You know, I still can't believe this is really happening.'

A waiter came and handed us menus. I had no appetite at all.

Karen ordered fish soup and an egg salad. 'I'll have the same,' I said. 'And a carafe of the house white.'

'So what are you going to do, Jim?'

'I haven't a clue,' I said. 'My first idea was to get the story together and offer it to Dixon at *The Observer*, but Bob says Kyle would be sure to slap an injunction on it. Legally, he's within his rights apparently. It would have been different if I'd gone out to Africa freelance, but I could never have afforded it. And, besides, I needed the firm's cachet to open doors. The weird thing is I'm better off financially at this moment than I've ever been in my life, thanks to the Big Pig's conscience money. At least it means I won't have to grab the first hack job which comes along.'

'What does Bob suggest?'

'Bob? He seems to think I should lie low for six months and write it up as a book.'

Karen put her head on one side. Her blonde hair curled in under her chin. 'Why don't you?' she said. 'You could, couldn't you?'

'I'm only good for working to deadlines.'

'No, seriously,' she said. 'Why don't you? Go and have a talk to Maggie about it. Perhaps she'll be able to get you a commission or something. She does a lot of that.'

Up to that moment I hadn't given Bob's placebo suggestion more than a cursory acknowledgement but now, as Karen breathed upon it, the spark began to glow in the darkness. 'Yes, I suppose I could do that,' I said. 'She'd want to see a synopsis or something, wouldn't she?'

The waiter arrived with our soup. Suddenly I discovered that my appetite had revived miraculously. I downed the rest of my aperitif, poured out two glasses of wine and reached for my spoon. 'So tell me what you've been up to while I've been away,' I said. 'How was Christmas?'

After lunch I walked with Karen as far as Bedford Street. She worked for a theatrical agency which had its offices in Covent Garden. We arranged that she'd come over to the flat on Saturday evening. In the meantime I'd try to draft some sort of outline that I could show to her literary agent friend. But no sooner had she vanished round the corner than I felt unreal all over again. It was as though I needed her within touching

distance to supply me with validity. It reminded me, painfully, of what I had gone through when Sheila and I had split up four years before. But it was too much to hope that some other Bob Cowans would come floating down through the London haze to rescue me a second time.

I spent the rest of the afternoon back at the flat trying to knock out something I could show to Maggie. When Peter got back from the Beeb at half-past five all I had to show for my efforts was a wastepaper basket overflowing with screwed-up rejects. 'Is there anything quite so impressive as the creative mind in full spate?' he mused. 'What are you up to, Jimbo?'

I told him what had happened. He said all the commiserating things I'd expected him to say and then, at his suggestion, we opened up one of my duty-free bottles and drank to Monroe Kyle's everlasting perdition. 'So what now?' he asked.

I explained what I was attempting to do. 'The trouble is,' I concluded, 'all along I've been aiming at a ten to fifteen thousand word exposé. I could maybe stretch it out to twenty-five thousand but that's the absolute limit. No way is that going to make a saleable book.'

'It has to be fact, does it?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, couldn't you make a novel out of it? You know the sort of thing. Peter Thingummy's done it—that *Guardian* bloke. Don't they call it "faction"?''

'You mean Peter Nieswand', I said. 'But that's dif—'. And then, all of a sudden, I saw it. 'Christ,' I murmured. 'You're absolutely right, Pete. It's all there. Even that C.I.A. stuff I know but can't prove.'

'Even Kyle,' he said with a grin.

'Even Kyle,' I echoed.

'Exotic setting; international intrigue; gratuitous violence; loads of kinky sex *and* the gross Fascist Monster Monroe Kyle snarling in the background. You've got it made, Jimbo! Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, will be absolutely intentional. All we need to do now is to find you a good working title. How does "Up the Makuba with Princess Di" grab you? You're bound to sell the serial rights to *Woman's Own*. Sight unseen, for a hundred thousand at least.'

By the time Karen turned up on the Saturday evening I had hammered out the rough draft of a serviceable plot. I also had my precious tapes and notes together with a selection of Pierre's pictures. Looking through these had brought home to me the near impossibility of making acceptable fiction out of some of the things I had seen with my own eyes. I found myself recalling a poem of Auden's about the Novelist, which concluded with the depressing couplet—

*And in his own weak person, if he can,
Must suffer dully, all the Wrongs of Man.*

and I began to realize something of what I was taking on.

Karen read through what I had written and then started browsing through Pierre's photographs. She reached the one which he had captioned 'Soroti Incident', glanced at it, then dropped them on the floor and bolted for the bathroom. I gathered up the scattered prints, restored them to their envelope, and then thrust it away into a drawer of my desk.

Karen reappeared a couple of minutes later, squatted down in front of the gas fire and rested her head on her bent knees.

'Sorry about that, Karo,' I said. 'But I did warn you, didn't I?'

'But who could *do* that?' she whispered.

'We think that particular one was the work of the M.P.A.,' I said. 'But it could just as easily have been someone who was out to discredit them. It's a madhouse out there. Whole villages are being wiped out for nothing—just for the sheer hell of it. And I'm aiming to make a novel out of *that*. An *entertainment*, for God's sake! It doesn't make sense, does it?'

'Then why are you doing it?'

'Why does a mountaineer climb a mountain? I'm doing it because it's there—because it's *in* me. I've seen some of those things with my own eyes, Karo—not just pictures of them. I can't kid myself they didn't happen just because it suits Kyle's book to have it kept quiet. And even if it doesn't do anything else, writing about it should at least help me to stop feeling so bloody sorry for myself.'

And there's no doubt that I did feel sorry for myself. All that first week following my being kicked out of Uganda I was conscious of a faint dull ache in the gut like a permanent stitch. Word about what had happened soon filtered out. Friends rang

up to sympathize or dropped in to 'welcome me to the Club' and offer sage advice on registering for the dole and applying for supplementary benefit. It was consolation of a sort but I can't pretend it helped my concentration. I began to believe that I'd never get started on my novel unless I could get out of London and work at it free of interruptions.

I said as much to Maggie when Karen and I went round to her flat one evening. By then she'd read my synopsis but obviously she wasn't prepared to commit herself until she'd seen what I could do with it. 'Let me see your first three chapters as soon as you've done them,' she said. 'If I feel you're on the right track I'll consider offering it around. But don't expect miracles, Jim. There really is a publishing recession. And first novels never have been the easiest things in the world to sell.'

By the weekend I was beginning to feel like that chap in Camus' *The Plague* who could never get beyond the opening sentence of his projected masterpiece because he could never manage to get that first all-important sentence exactly right. Karen spent the Saturday night with me, and on Sunday morning we went for a walk in Hyde Park while the lunch was cooking. 'Why don't you go down to Suffolk for a while?' she said. 'You could write there, couldn't you?'

'That would be an open invitation to disaster,' I said gloomily. 'I know Mother. She'd be tip-toeing up with cups of tea and biscuits every five minutes, or stage-whispering outside my door that Jim was working and mustn't be disturbed. She means well but she makes me so bloody self-conscious it's all I can do to write a postcard when I'm down there.'

'You aren't really doing much more than that up here, are you?'

'If I didn't *need* to write the damned thing it'd be different,' I said. 'When Pete first put the idea into my head I suddenly saw it all out there in front of me, ready and waiting. It's just a question of finding my way back into that frame of mind. And I've got the feeling it's never going to happen unless I can get away somewhere. Stuck there in the flat I spend most of the time chewing over what that bastard Kyle has done to me, and what I'd like to do to him. Yesterday I even found myself on the point of crawling back and begging to be taken on in some other

department. I'm getting so I almost despise myself.'

'Then you *must* get away,' she said firmly. 'Even if it's only for a month or two. And if it doesn't work out you've still got plenty of time to find another job.'

When we returned to the flat I remembered I was supposed to be picking up a bottle of wine from the off-licence so I left Karen in the kitchen with Peter and went out again. When I got back she handed me a section of *The Sunday Times* folded open at the property small ads and I saw that she'd put ball-point circles round two of the entries. One was for a cottage in Anglesey; the other read: '*Essex coast. Seaside bungalow. Jan/ Mar. a.m.c. r/r. long let.*' and gave a London phone number.

'What's a.m.c. r/r?' I asked.

'Miles from coast. Rotten rip-off,' suggested Peter helpfully.

'All mod cons: reduced for long let,' said Karen with all the cool authority born of years of small ad. experience. 'Go on, Jim. It's only a local call.'

'It can wait till after lunch, can't it?' I said.

'Not if you're really serious about it it can't,' she replied.

I took the paper out into the hall. As I was dialling the number Karen called out: 'Don't forget to ask them about heating. That's vital.'

I heard the ringing tone and then a child's voice said breathlessly: 'Five six two six.'

'I'm calling about the advertisement in *The Sunday Times*,' I said. 'Have I got the right number?'

'Yes. Would you hold on, please?' I heard her calling: 'Mummy! It's for you. About "Myrtles"!'. Then to me: 'She's coming.'

I heard footsteps approaching and a voice enquired: 'Can I help you?'

'My name's Fuller,' I said. 'James Fuller. I've just seen your advert for the bungalow. Could you tell me a bit more about it? Whereabouts is it exactly?'

'It's near St. Mellows, Mr. Fuller—well, nearish. It *is* rather isolated.'

'And where is St. Mellows exactly?'

'Between Frindel and Walbersham. About fifteen miles from Colchester. Do you know the area?'

'Vaguely,' I said. 'It is on the coast, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes. The bungalow's only two hundred yards from the sea. It's got two bedrooms, kitchen/diner, bathroom, cloakroom and a lovely big sunny sitting-room with a south facing verandah.'

'It sounds great,' I said. 'Er—could you tell me about the heating?'

'It's all electric. Storage heaters. And there's an open fire in the sitting-room. We had the whole place completely done up last spring. Rewired and everything. It really is very nice and comfortable.'

'It sounds ideal,' I said. 'And what's the rent?'

'Thirty pounds a week—or a hundred and ten pounds a month. That's excluding electricity, of course.'

'And if I took it for the whole three months?'

'Oh well, in that case I could let you have it for three hundred pounds. A hundred pounds in advance at the beginning of each four week period.'

'That seems very reasonable, Mrs. . . . ?'

'Cousins. Margaret Cousins. The truth is, Mr. Fuller, I'm really more anxious to have "Myrtles" occupied over the winter than to make a fortune out of it. If you are interested, perhaps you'd care to call round and see some of the photographs we took last summer. They'd give you a much better idea of what it's like than I can over the phone.'

'Thank you very much,' I said. 'Can I come back to you on that?'

'Yes, of course. But you do understand that it's a case of first come, first served? The advertisement only appeared this morning, you see, and I—'

'I understand,' I said. 'I'll ring you back again in an hour. And thank you for being so helpful.'

After lunch I collected the road atlas from Karen's 'Deux Chevaux' and hunted for St. Mellows. I found it—just. It seemed to be a couple of miles inland beside what looked like a tiny estuary. The scale of the map wasn't large enough to be really sure. 'Well?' said Karen. 'What do you think?'

'I think I should go and talk to her,' I said. 'She sounded genuine enough. Will you come with me?'

Mrs. Cousins lived in a Victorian terrace house just off Clapham Common. The door was opened by a girl of about eleven or twelve—presumably the same one who had answered the phone. She greeted us, then took our coats and hung them over the newel post of the bannisters. ‘Mummy’s just gone next door for a minute,’ she explained. ‘But we’ve got the photos all ready. Would you like to see them?’

She led us into the sitting room where another younger girl was squatting cross-legged in the middle of an enormous bean-bag, rapt before the telly. ‘That’s Susan,’ said our hostess. ‘She’s my sister. I’m Jilly. Are you married?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘I wish *I* had blonde hair,’ sighed Jilly. She reached down a box of slides and a battery hand-viewer from the mantelpiece. ‘If you sit there,’ she said to Karen, indicating one end of a large, worn sofa, ‘and you sit there’ (to me, indicating the other end) ‘I can sit in the middle and tell you what they are.’

Dutifully we took our assigned places. Jilly inserted the first slide into the viewer, peered into it and announced: ‘That’s looking from the top of the dunes.’

She passed the viewer to Karen who raised it to her eyes, examined the slide, nodded, and then handed it across to me.

I saw a low, “Thirties” type bungalow, situated slightly above the level from which the picture had been taken. Behind the building farther back and higher up, was a row of dark pine trees. A woman in a grey dress was standing on the verandah. ‘Very nice,’ I said.

Jilly retrieved the viewer and inserted another slide. ‘This one’s looking out from the verandah,’ she said. ‘Those two little dots in the sea are Susan and me shrimping.’

We had looked at half a dozen slides when we heard the front door open and then bang shut. ‘They’ve arrived, Mummy!’ shouted Jilly. ‘We’re in here!’

Mrs. Cousins entered brimming with apologies. I put her age at around thirty-five. She had a squarish face, a wide, friendly mouth, and her brown hair was cut in a fringe. We all shook hands. ‘You’d like a cup of tea, wouldn’t you?’ she said. ‘Jilly, pet, run and put the kettle on, there’s a lamb. Oh, do turn that thing down, Sukie. No-one else wants to hear it. Well, now, Mr.

Fuller, is “Myrtles” what you’re looking for, do you think?”

‘I really think it might be,’ I said. ‘It’s off the beaten track and yet near enough to London to be get-atable at weekends.’

‘And that’s what you want, is it?’

‘What I want is somewhere I can hide myself away and write a book,’ I said. ‘I’m finding that London has too many distractions.’

‘Oh, so you’re an author! How exciting!’

‘Actually I’m a journalist. I’m taking three months off to try and get this book done.’

‘Then you might be interested in taking the bungalow until Easter?’

‘Yes, definitely. Can you give me an idea of what I’d need to take with me?’

‘Just food really. And a few household things like washing-up liquid and so on. It’s fully furnished. There’s bedding and towels and everything. But no telly, I’m afraid. We go down there to escape from it. If you decide to take “Myrtles” I’ll give Mrs. Fenwick a ring and see she has it all properly aired before you arrive. She lives in the farm down the lane and keeps an eye on things for me. She’s very nice and friendly.’

‘You’ve had the bungalow for a long time, have you?’

‘Only for a year or two. It belonged to a distant relative of mine. She died three years ago and left it to me in her will. I’ve never been more astonished in my life. We had some alterations done last year—the kitchen re-designed and new window frames and gutters and so on. But of course! How stupid of me! I’ve got our architect’s floor-plan upstairs. That’ll show you exactly how it’s all laid out. I won’t keep you a minute.’

She pattered out. I retrieved the viewer, inserted a slide at random and switched on. It was the view taken from the verandah looking out to sea which Jilly had already shown us. Northwards the curving coastline stretched faint and blue into the distance towards Peter Grimes’ land. ‘Did you catch many shrimps, Susan?’ I asked.

Jilly’s sister glanced round, nodded her head emphatically, and then turned back to her programme.

Mrs. Cousins reappeared carrying a scrolled plan which she unwound before us. Karen held on to one end and Mrs. Cousins

pointed out the various features. 'At this end, underneath the kitchen, there are two store rooms,' she said. 'We use them for holiday clutter—deckchairs and bikes and so forth. And firewood. The fireplace is right here in the centre. That's useful in cold weather because it helps to warm up the rest of the house. In Cousin Vera's day this used to be a spare bedroom but we had the wall between it and the kitchen taken down and turned it into an open-plan kitchen/diner. Now it gets all the sun there is, except in the late evening, of course.'

'And what happens when the east wind blows?' I enquired.

'Well it *was* pretty draughty until we had the new windows fitted,' she said. 'The dunes do take a surprising amount of force out of the wind, but there's no use pretending you won't know all about it when there's a gale blowing.'

Jilly came back into the room, carefully carrying a loaded tray. Karen let go of her end of the plan, took the tray from her, and when Jilly had cleared a space, set it down on the table in front of the sofa. At that moment the phone rang. Mrs. Cousins smiled apologetically, handed me the rolled-up plan, and went out into the hall. I heard her say: 'Yes, that's right. . . . Between Frindel and Walbersham. . . . Thirty pounds a week or a hundred and ten pounds a month.'

Jilly caught my eye and pulled a quizzical face.

'Have many people been enquiring about it?' I asked her.

'They're the fourth lot,' she said. 'One of the others wanted to take it for six months, but Mummy's promised us we're going down there for Easter and she wouldn't let them have it, thank goodness.'

'You like it down there, do you?'

'It's super,' she said. 'Really fab. Mr. Fenwick lets us help on the farm. Shall I pour out the tea?'

Mrs. Cousins came back into the room.

'Well?' demanded Jilly. 'What did they say?'

'They're ringing back again in half an hour.'

I looked at Karen, then across at Jilly and finally at Mrs. Cousins. 'I'll take it,' I said. 'Up until Easter. If that's all right with you?'

Jilly grinned complacently. 'I knew you would,' she said. 'As soon as I saw you I knew.'

We arranged that I should take up my tenancy from the following Saturday. Although this meant I would be occupying the bungalow for only ten weeks, Mrs. Cousins seemed perfectly happy to agree the same terms as if I were renting it for the full twelve. I paid my hundred pounds advance and handed over two more post-dated cheques for the rest. We left it that I'd settle the electricity bill at the end of my stay.

On the Friday morning, at Peter's suggestion, I went out and bought myself a pair of gumboots. In the afternoon I toured the local supermarket and staggered back to the flat with a couple of crates of the sort of selected provisions which I doubted whether the Post Office Stores in St. Mellows would keep in stock.

Karen arrived at six o'clock bringing with her the Ordnance Survey map of the district around Walbersham. She examined my purchases critically, then we spread the map out on the kitchen table and set about locating the bungalow. We found it eventually—or rather we located the minute speck which we guessed must be 'Myrtles'—by dint of pin-pointing Brimble Farm and then tracing a dotted track which ran northwards along the coast between the dunes and the low headland hill crowned with stylized cartographic trees which was labelled *The Brimbles* and, in Gothic lettering, *Priory (ruins)*. About a quarter of a mile further north beyond the bungalow, the headland curved away inland to permit a small stream called the River Dibble to creep out into the sea. 'Christ, she wasn't kidding when she said it was isolated, was she?' I muttered.

Karen laughed. 'Oh, I'm sure they'll let you go and hoe some sugarbeet on the farm if you're starved for company. Anyway there's bound to be a pub in the village.'

'Can't you just see me groping my way back over The Brimbles at eleven o'clock at night? Hey, that's something I've forgotten! A torch.'

'We can pick one up in Colchester tomorrow,' she said. 'And you'd better lay in some loo rolls too, while you're about it.'

At half-past ten the following morning we finished installing the last of my gear in Karen's car. Peter came out to see us off. As a parting gift he presented me with a small plastic bag of

marijuana. 'It's the best there is in Town,' he said. 'Grown on a disused railway cutting in Devon. Have fun, Jimbo.'

'I'll book you and Vikki in for a weekend in February,' I said. 'Providing you bring your own booze.'

We broke our journey in Colchester, had a pub lunch, and then I went into an ironmonger's and bought one of those hefty, rubber-sheathed flash-lights which are apparently designed to do double duty as a torch and a truncheon. Karen appeared with a twin loo roll pack, half a dozen boxes of matches, a plastic bottle of washing-up liquid and some fancy cooking oil. 'Tomorrow's Sunday,' she pointed out, 'and I'm on a low fat diet.'

'Since when?'

'Since I saw what you'd been buying yesterday.'

We drove out across the low flat lands to the south east under a sky like dirty soapsuds. As we reached the crossroads signposted 'ST MELLOWS 2', the first thin needles of rain flecked the side windows. Karen switched on the wiper. I took out the Ordnance Survey map and unfolded it across my knees. 'Just past the Church there's a left fork which should be signed "Walbersham",' I said. 'We cross over the bridge and go down the Walbersham road for about a mile and a half. Then, according to Mrs. Cousins, there's a gateway on the right and a farm track leading to the Priory and Brimble Farm. She said there's a footpath sign but it's quite easy to miss it the first time.'

In fact we found it easily enough. We turned in at the gateway and drove slowly through the gusting rain along an uneven, flint-paved track which looped across the field in front of all that remained of the medieval Priory—what had once been a gatehouse and various weather-worn lumps of flinty masonry crouched among the mounds of bramble like a herd of browsing dinosaurs. Behind the ruins rose the low hill, crested with its row of pines, which I knew to be the Brimbles. On its far side, invisible as yet, lay the bungalow, the dunes, and the North Sea.

The farm was tucked away in a hollow half a mile further on. A clump of leafless trees, shorn into a sort of Mohican style haircut by the prevailing wind, sheltered it on the sea-ward side. The farm house itself and one or two of the surrounding barns looked as if they might have been assembled out of the left-overs

from the dissolution of the Priory, which they probably had.

As we pulled up before the garden gate, the front door of the farmhouse opened and a woman came out. She had a bright yellow plastic raincoat draped over her head and shoulders and was wearing jeans and green gumboots. She trotted down the path to the car and I saw that she was quite young. 'Mr. Fuller?' she called. 'It is Mr. Fuller, isn't it?'

I opened my door and was on the point of getting out and shaking hands when she called out: 'No, don't get yourself all wet. Drive on round into the barn. I'll show you.'

She set off, leading the way, and Karen started up the car and followed her.

She directed us into a Dutch barn where we parked alongside a Land Rover in the lee of a twenty foot high stack of bales of golden straw. Our guide thrust the dripping waterproof back on to her shoulders. Karen and I climbed out of the car and I shook hands. 'Mrs. Fenwick?'

'That's right,' she said.

I introduced myself and then Karen.

'So you managed to find it all right?' said Mrs. Fenwick with a grin. 'It's not that easy the first time.'

'Mrs. Cousins gave me very accurate directions,' I said. 'How do we get to the bungalow from here?'

'I'll run you down in the Land Rover. We've had a lot of rain these past weeks and where Tom's been up and down with the tractor it's dreadfully sticky. You could be up to your axles in some of the gateways.'

We set about transferring our stuff from the car into the Land Rover. While we were doing it Mrs. Fenwick excused herself and trotted off. Just as I heaved the last suitcase aboard she reappeared carrying three bottles of milk and a carton of eggs. 'I meant to take these with me when I went down yesterday,' she said. 'I nearly forgot them again.'

'I'd forgotten them too,' I said. 'Thank you very much. Shall I pay you now?'

'Oh, it's easier to settle up at the end of the month,' she said, stowing the bottles away in one of the boxes. 'Have you got everything?'

Karen took a last poke around inside the car. She retrieved

the map and the torch which I had stuffed into the dashboard pocket. Then she slammed the door shut and locked it. 'That's the lot,' she said. 'If there's anything else it'll have to wait.'

'There's room for the two of you up front,' said Mrs. Fenwick climbing up into the cab of the Land Rover. 'You'll have to squash up a bit.'

We drove up the gentle slope leading out of the hollow which cradled the farm and were afforded our first clear view of the sea. Apart from a few breaking wave-crests it looked almost as featureless as the grey sky above it. About five miles out a large oil-tanker was heading in towards Harwich. Two other smaller ships were crawling in the opposite direction. The actual part of the shore where the waves were breaking was hidden behind the intervening dunes. Fortunately, the rain seemed to have eased off.

We stopped twice to open and close field gates which gave us ample opportunity to appreciate Mrs. Fenwick's judgment of the state of the track. Then we were bouncing along a wide, sandy, bramble-flanked trail at the back of the sandhills, with the hump of the Brimbles looming up like a slumbering leviathan on our left. A line of poles beside the track carried in the electricity supply from the farm. I noticed telephone wires too. 'I didn't know the bungalow was on the phone,' I said.

'It's not connected,' said Mrs. Fenwick. 'Mrs. Cousins didn't think it was worth it. But you can always use ours if you need to. Walbersham 253.'

'I hope I won't need to take you up on that,' I said. 'But thanks anyway.'

She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. 'Mrs. Cousins said you were a writer. What do you write? Books?'

'Ask me that again in a month's time,' I said, then, thinking she might perhaps feel she had offended me with her question, added: 'This one will be my first, if I ever finish it.'

'There's another writer living in Mellers,' she said. 'A Mrs. Tarrant. Mind you I've never read anything she's written.'

'Have you lived here long?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'Three years last September. We came here from Sussex.'

'Do you own the farm?'

‘I wish we did. It belongs to an insurance company. Phil—my husband—manages it for them.’

Karen touched my arm and pointed ahead. Over the top of what appeared to be a clump of wind-tossed tamarisks I glimpsed the tiled end-roof of the bungalow. Behind it, high up on the crest of the slope, the pine trees were waving their dark arms in a sort of slow semaphore.

Two hundred yards further on Mrs. Fenwick slowed down and turned off the main track. We jolted up the uneven lane which led to the bungalow and halted on an area of weed-fissured tarmac beside two padlocked doors which I recognized from Mrs. Cousins’ plans as belonging to the store rooms. Mrs. Fenwick switched off the engine. At once the cab was filled with the muted rumble of waves breaking on the shingle below the dunes and the rushing of the wind through the pines.

Karen opened the door and climbed out. The wind grabbed her hair and flung it forwards over her face. ‘They should have called it Wuthering Heights,’ she cried. ‘Is it always like this?’

‘Only when the wind’s in the east,’ said Mrs. Fenwick. ‘Shall we get your things in now, or would you rather have a look round first?’

Out to sea a line of dark squall cloud was racing in towards us. ‘Let’s get it inside while we’ve got the chance,’ I said.

We carried our stuff round to the back of the bungalow and piled it up in the hall. By the time the squall struck us everything was safe inside. We drew back the curtains in the sitting room and watched the rain drive in like smoke across the dunes. It exploded against the window panes like liquid shrapnel. For a bewildering moment I felt like some peasant who has had the misfortune to find himself trapped on a battlefield in a war he knew nothing about. My instinct was to duck down and hope it would roll over me. Which of course it did. By the time Karen had put the kettle on and made us all tea, the squall was past and pale shafts of wintry sunlight were slanting down across the far horizon.

We sat round the table in the kitchen sipping mugs of tea and nibbling ginger biscuits and very soon we were on first name terms. ‘I somehow got it into my mind that you’d be middle-aged,’ said Barbara Fenwick. ‘Because of the Henshaws, I suppose.’

‘And who are the Henshaws?’ I asked.

‘They were the couple who stayed here for three weeks in September. Friends of Mrs. Cousins. They were supposed to be taking the bungalow till the end of October, but it was a bit too out of the way for them. For her anyway. He didn’t seem to mind. He was out of the house most of the time, birdwatching.’

‘Did you know the people who used to live here?’ asked Karen.

Barbara shook her head. ‘“Myrtles” was all shut up when we came. Had been for over a year. The owners lived abroad—South Africa, wasn’t it? I don’t think Mrs. Cousins really knew them. I remember her saying you could’ve knocked her down with a feather when she heard the place had been left to her. At first she thought of selling it, but then she changed her mind. Because of the girls she said. Phil thinks it was maybe something to do with taxes.’

‘Is there a Mr. Cousins?’ I asked.

‘She’s divorced. About four years ago. Aren’t you friends of hers then?’

I explained how we’d come to hear about the bungalow. ‘I’ll be living here on my own most of the time,’ I said.

Barbara glanced across at Karen and then grinned at me. ‘You’re used to looking after yourself, are you?’

‘I manage,’ I said. ‘After my fashion.’

‘Would it help if I was to have a word with Janice? She could probably manage to come in for a couple of hours a week to clean up for you. She charges one fifty an hour. I’m not sure what days she’s got free, though. Fridays most likely.’

‘And who’s Janice?’

‘Janice Beaney—Tom Beaney’s wife. He’s our tractorman. She did cleaning for the Henshaws when they were here. They were very pleased with her. She helps Mrs. Cousins too. She knows where everything is.’

‘It sounds like a great idea,’ I said. ‘Will you ask her for me?’

‘All right. Would Friday mornings suit you?’

‘Ideal,’ I said. ‘It’ll mean the place is looking presentable for the weekend.’

‘O.K. then. We’ll say Fridays unless I let you know different. So what else is there? Milk you know about. And eggs. The

Co-op van calls at the farm Thursdays. Would you like me to take anything for you? Bread maybe?"

'There's a shop in the village, isn't there?"

'The Post Office.'

'Don't they keep bread?"

'Ma Rumble keeps just about everything. But it's two miles into Mellers and only half a mile to us.'

'Let's leave it for the time being,' I said. 'I'll see how things go.'

'What about wood for the fire?" asked Karen.

'There's plenty of that down below in the store,' said Barbara.

'The key's hanging over there above the fridge. The Henshaws had Tom lay in a full tractor load in September. They didn't use much of it. But it's all paid for and it'll be nice and dry by now. There's a bike in there too. I daresay the tyres'll need a pump up but it was going all right last summer. If you go out the back way and shove on up the track to the top of the Brimbles, you'll cut off all of a mile into Mellers. Otherwise it's the way you came, round by the farm, and you wouldn't catch me trying to ride a bike along there in this weather.'

Before she left Barbara took us on a conducted tour of the bungalow and showed us where everything was kept. Then she handed over the keys, wished us well, and drove back along the track to the farm. I waved her goodbye, collected the keys to the storerooms, and carried some kindling and an armful of logs up the outside steps and into the living-room by way of the verandah door. After a couple of false starts I managed to get the fire alight. Once the chimney had begun to warm up it drew beautifully. The leaping flames, reflected in the windows, made it look as if the sea was on fire. 'Well, what do you think, Karo?" I said. 'Pretty good, huh?"

She smiled and nodded but didn't say anything.

'Hey, come on,' I urged. 'It's great isn't it?"

'You really think you'll like being here all on your own?"

'Why not? You don't mean you're going to abandon me altogether, do you?"

'No, of course not.'

'Well then. Anyway I thought you'd agreed it was a good idea. Getting out of Town, I mean.'

'I do, Jim.'

'You don't sound as if you do.'

'I don't know. It's just a feeling. I daresay I'm being silly.'

I studied her, trying to read what was on her mind. 'Come on,' I said. 'Let's have ourselves a drink to celebrate our safe arrival. Scotch on the rocks. O.K.?'

I went out into the kitchen, discovered the tray of ice cubes and fixed two generous drinks. I carried them into the living-room and handed one to her. 'Here's to us, to "Myrtles", and to the book,' I said. 'May it be a best seller.'

We clinked glasses and drank. 'And now go ahead and tell me some more about those feelings of yours,' I said.

She laughed. 'Oh, that was just my Nordic ancestry coming out.'

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

She nibbled her bottom lip with her neat white teeth then licked it with the pink tip of her tongue. 'Well, I'll tell you,' she said. 'But only if you promise not to laugh.'

'Why? Is it funny?'

'I don't know. Funny peculiar, maybe.' She swirled the ice-cubes thoughtfully around in her glass for a moment and then she said: 'Ages ago, when I was about four or five, we spent a holiday in a farmhouse in Jorpeland—not far from Stavanger. After we'd been there for a day or two I got this curious sort of feeling that there was someone spying on me. I just sensed it somehow. And then one day I saw who it was. She was a kid of about my own age, or a little bit older. She was standing at the top of the stairs, holding on to the bannister post and looking down at me. We stared at each other for a few seconds and then she wasn't there any more. I wasn't the least bit scared—just puzzled because I couldn't make out where she'd gone to. I told my brothers and they thought I was making it up. Then the woman who came in to cook for us heard about it and she told us that about thirty years ago the sister of the man who was renting us the house had fallen down the stairs and broken her neck. I even remember the girl's name. Kierstie. Kierstie Haagland. I don't suppose I've thought about her for more than twenty years.'

She gazed into the fire, lost in a sort of day-dream.

'And that's it?' I said.

She nodded.

'So what are you trying to say?'

'You asked me what I was feeling,' she said. 'I was trying to tell you, that's all.'

I blinked. 'And you feel that *now*? *Here*?'

She didn't say anything.

'But has it ever happened to you before?' I asked. 'Apart from when you were a kid, I mean?'

'Not *that* exactly. But something like it. Once or twice.'

'And it doesn't—well, scare you or anything?'

She looked down into her glass. 'It's just something that happens. Like I said, it's a feeling.'

'And you say you've got it now?'

She laughed. 'Well, not at this minute, no.'

'When then?'

'When we pulled back the curtains in here and were watching the rain. I went out into the kitchen and made the tea.'

'Yes, I remember,' I said. 'You didn't say anything.'

'And just what do you suggest I should have said?'

I took her point. Then I remembered something. 'Is that why you asked Barbara about the people who used to live here?'

She shrugged. 'Maybe.'

I looked round the room now a-flicker with firelight shadows. Beyond the long windows the winter light was waning fast. Far out on the darkening sea a ruby-red spark of warning gleamed and was gone. Above the ragged crests of the dunes I could just make out the line where the breaking waves were booming into foam along the distant shingle slope. 'I wonder why they chose this particular spot to build a house?' I said. 'Can you imagine living here, year in, year out? Christ, there isn't even a proper road to the place.'

'I suppose it would all depend on what you were looking for,' said Karen.

'In their case it can hardly have been social contact,' I observed.

'Maybe they got all they needed of that when they were abroad.'

'They may have done,' I said, 'but I'm damned if I did.'

I moved across to her, set down my drink and slid my arms round her from behind until my hands were cupping her breasts. She made a purring sound, leant back against me and tilted her face up to mine. A single, filmy strand of her golden hair floated up like a thread of gossamer and touched my left eyelid.

We made love right there and then, half-dressed, lying on the carpet in front of the fire. It was as good as it always was with Karen—even better maybe—and I told her so.

‘I really wanted you,’ she murmured. ‘Not just *it*. You. I wanted to give myself to you. Can you understand that?’

‘Isn’t that the usual way of things?’ I said.

She shook her head. ‘I’m just telling you this was different, that’s all. I wanted you to have some part of me for yourself. To keep.’

I raised myself up so that I was looking down into her face. ‘Just what is it you’re trying to tell me, Karo? If I didn’t know you better I might almost believe that you were saying you were in love with me.’

‘You’re in love with yourself, Jim. You don’t need me to be in love with you too.’

‘Then what *are* you talking about?’

She smiled. ‘Perhaps I’ll tell you one day. When I think you’re old enough to understand. And now, before it gets too dark to see, why don’t you go and get in some more wood? While you’re doing that I’ll go and see about making us some supper.’

‘And after that?’

‘After that I daresay I’ll be in the mood to eat you up alive.’

We had selected as our bedroom the one which was at the opposite end of the bungalow to the kitchen. We chose it partly because it had the best view, partly because it would get some extra warmth from the back of the sitting-room chimney, but chiefly because it had the only double bed and an electric blanket. Even so I woke up shivering in the early hours of the morning.

I leant out of bed and was groping around sleepily for the switch of the electric blanket when I felt something furry brush against the back of my hand. I jerked upright and grabbed for

the cord of the overhead light. And of course there was nothing to see. I had simply imagined it.

‘What’s the matter?’ muttered Karen.

‘Nothing,’ I said, ‘except that I’m perished and I can’t find the bloody blanket switch.’

‘It’s here on my side,’ she yawned. ‘We swapped over, remember?’ She rolled on to her front, reached down, and I heard the click of the switch.

‘Aren’t you cold?’ I asked.

‘I’m fine,’ she said. ‘Feel.’

I laid my hand on her bare shoulder and it felt as warm as a Sunday roast. She turned over and wriggled back towards me. ‘Hey, you’re shivering,’ she said.

She cocooned the duvet around us both, snuggled up close and held me tight against her until gradually the trembling faded away and I fell asleep.

I woke to find the sun streaming into the room and no sign of Karen. I discovered her under the shower in the bathroom. ‘I hadn’t the heart to wake you up,’ she said. ‘You looked so peaceful and happy, fast asleep. I’ve put the coffee on. You can go and make us some eggs and bacon. I feel ready for a cooked breakfast. It must be the sea air.’

‘Anything else while I’m about it?’

‘Just orange juice. And after breakfast we’ll take a walk along the shore. It’ll do you good.’

She appeared ten minutes later looking as fresh and delectable as an early daffodil. The realization that she would be driving back to London without me in a mere matter of hours filled me with sudden gloom. ‘Can’t you put off going till tomorrow?’ I said. ‘Ring Andrew and tell him the car’s broken down or something.’

‘I told you. Andrew’s up in Manchester. He won’t be back till Tuesday. And Sarah’s still on holiday. I’ll be the only one in the office tomorrow.’

‘But you will come down next weekend?’

She stretched out her arm across the table and thumbed my nose like a bell-push. ‘Will I?’ she said.

‘If you got away early on Friday, you could be down here by six.’

'But perhaps I've made other plans for next weekend.'

'Have you?'

'No. But who knows? Something may turn up.'

'Oh, Christ, Karo! I'm serious.'

She laughed. 'Yes, of course I'll come. And I'll expect to see at least the opening chapter of your story. That's the bargain.'

'On Friday?'

She nodded.

While I was getting showered and shaved Karen cleared away the breakfast. Then we walked out of the bungalow, clambered up over the dunes and raced each other down to the shore. So clear and bright was the air, so firm and hard the wrinkled sand, that I had the exhilarating sensation that I was all but weightless and that by simply spreading my arms I could have soared up into the blue like a gull. We wandered along the water's edge until we were level with the clump of trees that sheltered the farm, then we turned and retraced our steps, exploring in the opposite direction to where the stream emerged from a wilderness of reeds behind the shoulder of the Brimbles and was busily scooping out a broad, shallow channel for itself, down across the sand to the sea. The only other human being we saw was a distant figure driving a tractor across the flank of a sloping field a mile away to the north on the other side of the little estuary.

'I'm really beginning to understand what Jilly meant,' I said.

'Who's Billy?'

'Not Billy—*Jilly*. Jilly Cousins. The kid who showed us those photos.'

'What about her?'

'She said this was a super place. She was right. I wouldn't have believed a spot like this could still exist unless I'd seen it with my own eyes.'

'You think you'll be able to work here?'

'I'm sure of it. If I can't do it here I'll never do it anywhere. First thing tomorrow morning it's down to the Olivetti and away. Maggie'll have everything she needs by the middle of next month. I guarantee it.'

'And where has this new-found confidence sprung from all of a sudden?'

'I don't know. From you maybe. Or this.' I waved my arms round to embrace the sky and the sea and the long silvery vista of the wet, gleaming sand.

Karen laughed happily. 'Yes,' she said, 'I really do think you're beginning to get yourself together at last.'

At about three o'clock we walked back along the track to the farm where we stowed Karen's suitcase in the car then knocked on the farmhouse door. It was opened by a brown-bearded man of about my own age whom I guessed, correctly, must be Philip Fenwick. I introduced myself and explained that we'd dropped by to collect the car and to thank his wife for being so helpful.

'You've just missed Barbie,' he said. 'She's driven over to Walbersham to pick up a lamb for fostering. We lost one of ours last night and they've got a twin going spare. Come on in and have a beer or something.'

'It'll have to be a quick one,' I said. 'Karo's not too keen on driving in the dark.'

'You'll have a good hour and a half of daylight yet,' he said. 'That'll see you well beyond Chelmsford.'

He led the way through into a low-beamed parlour where a black and white collie dog was stretched out on a rug in front of the fire. It thumped its tail up and down two or three times in token acknowledgement of our presence. A large colour television set was tuned to a programme of winter sports. Mr. Fenwick turned the sound off but left the picture. 'Sit yourselves down,' he said. 'Now what can I offer you? Well, there's beer or wine.'

'A glass of wine, please,' said Karen. 'White, if you've got it.'

'Beer for me,' I said.

'One white wine, one beer. Coming up,' said Mr. Fenwick. 'How are you finding the bungalow?'

'It's great,' I said. 'Just what I've been looking for.'

'Barbie tells me you're a writer. Can't say that I've ever met a writer before.'

'But I thought you had one living here in the village. A Mrs.—Tarrant, was it?'

'Ah. I'd forgotten about her. I call her "The Black Widow". But then I don't really think of Mrs. T. as being a writer. More as a widow.'

Karen laughed. 'A professional widow? That sounds a bit sinister.'

'Don't get me wrong,' he said, grinning and handing her a glass of wine. 'All I mean is she's been married twice. Her first was killed in the war and her second died of a heart-attack while he was putting up a chicken house. Anyway that's the story I heard. I don't know whether it's true or not.'

He brought over two tankards of beer and presented one of them to me. 'Here's health, Mr. Fuller, Miss . . .?'

'Angström,' said Karen. 'But call me Karen. Everyone does.'

'And I'm Jim,' I said.

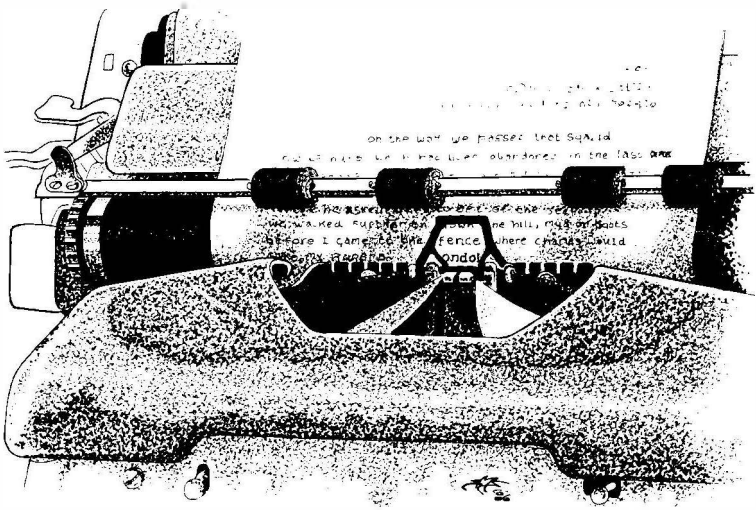
'That's the ticket,' he said. 'Call me Phil. Cheers.'

We chatted about the farm and the village for twenty minutes or so and then Karen raised her arm in front of my face and tapped her wristwatch. I finished off my drink and rose to my feet. Karen shook Phil by the hand and asked to be remembered to Barbara. 'You'll be down again, I daresay,' he said. 'Feel free to drop in any time. It's a treat for us to see a new face—specially such a pretty one.'

We drove back along the flint track past the ruins of the Priory. There Karen pulled up and I got out of the car and came round to her side. She slid back the window and I bent down and kissed her. 'Till Friday,' I said. 'Take care.'

She reached out and laid her hand lightly against my cheek. 'And you,' she said. 'I really mean that.'

I stepped back and watched as the little scarlet machine trundled off towards the gateway. When it finally disappeared I turned and trailed my own long shadow across the rabbit-cropped grass and up the bramble and gorse-dotted slope towards the distant pines at the top of the Brimbles. And every step of the way my heart was heavy with regret; my mind full of images of Karen.



Chapter 2

I spent that evening going through the material Pierre had brought out for me. There were a lot of taped interviews—one of them with an ex-Government Minister who by this time was most likely an ex-ex-Government Minister. Certainly he'd risked his life by talking to me. I wondered why he'd done it. Even with my sworn assurances that I'd never reveal his identity he must have known that if ever my story got into print Makuba would be on to him. 'The truth, Mr. Fuller. We must tell the truth, must we not?' And there the interview had ended, in a sort of ghostly rhetorical question whispered on to the quiet air, signifying what?

I switched off the tape recorder and began searching through Pierre's photographs until I reached the one which had so sickened Karen. The Soroti Incident. The fire-blackened ruins of a native hut and a butchered family. Husband, wife, ancient grandmother, and five children—the youngest surely no more than a couple of years old—all hacked into bits and pieces with a

panga. 'The truth, Mr. Fuller. We must tell the truth, must we not?' But what had the truth to do with that? It had been done; it could never be undone. Never. I thought of Goya, etching with the acid of his own despair the words '*These things I have seen*' across '*Los Desastres de la Guerra.*' Lord, I believe: help thou my unbelief.

Then, suddenly, I found myself remembering Porson. As though it was happening before my eyes I saw him step out of the Press Club in Kampala and stand blinking in the bright afternoon sunlight while with a neatly folded white linen handkerchief he patted the sweat from the plump line of his jaw. Pierre called him '*Le Q.A.*' after some character in a novel of Graham Greene's which I'd never read. But even as I contemplated him in my mind's eye I knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that he was what I had been looking for, the string on which the beads of my story could be threaded. I cleared a space on the living-room table, moved the standing lamp round so that it shone down over my shoulder on to the typewriter, wound a fresh sheet of A4 into the carriage and began to type.

Sometime after ten I broke off, paid a visit to the loo and then walked through into the kitchen and made myself a cup of Nescafé. I carried it back into the living room where I raked together the embers of the fire, laid on the last two logs and read through what I had written. My mind was screwed up to such a pitch of creative excitement that without even bothering to finish my drink I went back to the typewriter. When I remembered my coffee again it was stone cold. I glanced at my watch, saw to my astonishment that it was registering 01.32, and realized that I had been working virtually non-stop for over five hours. It was like waking up from an extraordinarily vivid dream.

I sat for a minute listening to the sound of the waves, then I pushed back my chair, walked over to the glass door and let myself out on to the verandah. I had not bothered to draw the curtains and the light from the living-room streamed out, lit up the wooden railings, and then simply disappeared, swallowed in the gulf of intense darkness beyond. I drew in a deep breath of the cold, damp, night air, let it out in a long sigh of weariness and satisfaction and went back indoors.

I fell asleep still thinking of my story, woke up at eight o'clock, had a shower, a breakfast of coffee and cornflakes and by nine was all ready to start work again.

I must have forgotten to close the verandah door properly before I went to bed because I found it standing ajar and several of the loose sheets of completed script which I had left stacked beside the typewriter were lying scattered on the floor. I gathered them up, arranged them in order, checked them and made one or two minor alterations in ball-point. Then I turned my attention to the four or five lines on the page which I had left in the typewriter. It was the beginning of an account of a trip which Porson was making to observe the work being done on the Malimbi irrigation project. The continuation phrase was already forming in my mind as I reached the last word I had written—and it wasn't the word I had written! In fact it wasn't a word at all, just six letters: *o-n-d-o-k-a*.

I stared at them in absolute, total bewilderment, then I dragged the sheet out of the machine, fed in a fresh one and re-typed the half-dozen lines. When I reached the point where I had stopped the night before, I now typed in the phrase which I had prepared. And then I paused. The thread of my concentration was broken. Those six meaningless letters plucked at me like the claw of a bush bramble. I tried to think back to the moment when I had left off work the night before. I remembered sitting and listening to the sound of the distant waves and all I could suppose was that somehow, at that moment, my fingers had tapped out that curious assortment of letters of their own accord.

And then, quite suddenly, it ceased to bother me. Somehow I had dragged myself clear of it and I was back there with Porson again watching the black and yellow bulldozers crawling up and down the sloping banks of the dried-up river bed. It was like returning home after an irritating but enforced absence. I scrunled the offending sheet of paper into a ball and tossed it aside.

I worked away steadily until about two o'clock then I broke off, went through into the kitchen, opened up a can of tomato soup and set it on the stove to warm up. While it was heating I trotted out and brought in a fresh supply of logs for the evening. But even while I was carrying out these simple tasks, my mind was thousands of miles away in another continent which for me,

at that moment, was far more real than the one I was actually inhabiting.

I was called back to actuality just as the daylight was starting to fade. Without my being aware of it a wind had got up and was banging the door of the woodshed which I must have left unfastened. I let myself out on to the verandah, descended the steps, and was on the point of pushing the door shut and slipping the padlock into the hasp, when I thought I heard a cat mew inside the store. I dragged open the door and peered in. Gazing down at me from the top of the log pile was a black and white cat. We looked at each other for about five seconds and then it mewed again. 'Where on earth have you come from, puss?' I demanded.

Divining from the tone of my voice that I was not wholly ill-disposed towards it, it picked its way down the pile of logs, advanced towards me, and began rubbing itself against my shins. I bent down and scooped it up with one hand while, with the other, I contrived to make the door fast. Then I put the cat down again, said: 'shoo! shoo!' flapped my hands discouragingly, and moved off towards the steps.

I had taken no more than half a dozen paces before it was bouncing after me, its tail sticking straight up in the air like a furry periscope. It skipped on ahead of me up the steps and I found it rubbing itself against the verandah door. I regarded it doubtfully. 'Well, all right, puss,' I said. 'You can come in. But if you make a nuisance of yourself you'll be out on your ear. Is that understood?'

I opened the door and it hopped inside and trotted straight over to the fireplace where it sat itself down on the rug and set about laundering one of its hind legs. I followed it over to the hearth, squatted down, struck a match and lit the fire. The cat paused momentarily in its licking, eyed the burgeoning flame with critical interest and then, seemingly satisfied with what it saw, set about its toilet again with renewed vigour. I made sure the fire was properly alight then switched on the lamp, drew the curtains and went back to my typewriter.

At around six I decided to call it a day. The story had already reached that fascinating point where the next episode seems to grow quite naturally out of the one which preceded it, and, like

the dimly perceived outline of a distant mountain range I was beginning to sense where my tale would eventually lead me. I gathered the completed pages together, slipped them into a folder and went out into the kitchen.

I was filling the electric kettle at the sink tap when I felt something brush against my legs. 'Oh, it's you,' I said. 'I might have guessed.'

I plugged in the kettle and switched it on. Then I opened the door of the refrigerator, took out a bottle of milk, poured some into a saucer and set it down on the tiled floor. The cat walked over to it, sniffed it, then looked up at me as if to say: 'Oh, come on now. Surely we can do better than this.'

I turned to the wall-cupboard in which Karen had stacked the various exotic groceries I had brought with me from London and slid back the door. 'Herring fillets in wine sauce?' I suggested.

The cat abandoned the saucer of milk and moved over to me, purring loudly.

'Danish frankfurters? Ravioli in tomato sauce? Stuffed olives? *Pâté de campagne?*'

The black tail whisked back and forth across my knees; the purring was by now so enthusiastic that it vied with the muttering from the kettle. I lifted down the glass jar of *pâté* and examined it. The little supermarket sticker read '£1.25' and I didn't even *feel* like eating *pâté*. Nevertheless I found a skewer in a drawer, pierced the lid to release the vacuum, and spooned out what I judged to be a fair cat-sized dollop on to a second saucer which I set down on the floor beside the first. 'Make the most of it, Pusser,' I said. 'You'll never have had it so good.'

By the time I had made myself a mug of tea the cat had polished off the *pâté* and had moved over to the milk. I switched off the light in the kitchen, went back into the living-room, collected the folder containing my script and subsided into an arm chair beside the fire. After a minute or two I sensed rather than heard the cat coming back into the room. I glanced round and saw it standing just inside the hall doorway, surveying the room and licking the last traces of supper from its chops. It caught sight of me, began padding towards me, then stopped and turned its head, ears pricked, towards the verandah.

It occurred to me that it probably wanted to be let out and I was on the point of laying aside my file and going to open the verandah door when I saw the cat drop down into a crouching position and begin creeping silently towards the table. I watched fascinated as it inched towards the chair where I had been sitting, slipped beneath it like a shadow, paused, and then suddenly sprang forward. Something small and white leapt out into the lamplight and skidded across the polished wooden floor with the cat racing in pursuit. It caught up with it in the centre of the room, batted it with a swift, sideways swipe of its paw and leapt after it again. Only then did I realize what it was—that sheet of paper which I had dragged from the typewriter, screwed up into a ball, flung aside and forgotten.

The cat chased it helter-skelter around the room until finally it lost it under the second arm chair. Having failed to hook it out it abandoned all interest in the game, wandered over towards the fire, subsided on to the rug and began licking its paws and washing its ears.

I got up from my chair, retrieved the ball of crumpled paper from its hiding place and was about to chuck it into the grate when the memory of the whole odd incident came flooding back with such vividness that I could not resist unravelling the ball, smoothing it out with the palm of my hand on the arm of the chair and re-examining it. It was exactly as I remembered it except for one thing—the letters *o-n-d-o-k-a* were no longer there!

It is all but impossible to convey in words exactly what I felt at that moment. I remember standing and staring down at that wrinkled piece of paper and fiercely willing those six letters to materialize—to reappear as I remembered them. And then I did a crazy thing. I walked across to the typewriter, wound the sheet of paper back into the carriage and typed the missing letters in where they had been. I even remember that I couldn't manage to get the alignment exactly right and for some reason this really infuriated me. I dragged the mangled sheet out of the machine, ripped it into a dozen pieces, strode over to the fireplace and flung them into the heart of the flames. When the last one had burnt to ash I went into the kitchen, poured myself out a large whisky, added a couple of ice cubes and a splash of water from the tap and carried it back into the living-room.

On the face of it the whole episode was so trivial that a part of me was astonished that I was allowing it to upset me so much. I had simply made a mistake—imagined that I had seen something which wasn't there. Such things must happen to thousands of people all over the world every single day—maybe to millions of people. But never, so far as I knew, to me. Yet it *had* happened. I *knew* it had. Right down in that deepest unshakable core of me I was utterly, totally convinced that I had seen those letters typed there. They were—had been—as real as the glass in my hand or the cat lying at my feet.

I opened the folder and searched out the page which I had re-typed that morning. I read it through and then went on to read the rest of the day's production. But when I reached the last sentence that ghostly non-word was still hovering there at the back of my mind. I got up from my seat, dug out my dictionary from the box of books which I had brought with me and so learned that an 'onager' was an Asiatic wild ass from Baluchistan with a broad brown and white stripe down its back and that an 'ondograph' was an instrument for recording variations in waves in alternating currents—both fascinating pieces of information in their own way but, at that moment, of no consolation to me whatsoever.

Yet, in the very act of trying to track it down, to make some sort of reality out of it, to give it, as it were, a local habitation, I found I was becoming convinced that it was a *word* which had a meaning, even if it was only somebody's name. Was it perhaps something I'd picked up subconsciously from one of my tapes? Or a place I'd heard of and forgotten? 'Ondoka'. Yes, it certainly sounded as if it might be either of those things, or even the name of an animal of some sort. For all I knew, at that very moment, some unsuspecting ondoka, tiptoeing nervously down to a waterhole, was about to be pounced on by a famished lion. Or maybe a rare white-tailed ondoka was swinging through the topmost branches of a baobab tree in a mad dash to escape from David Attenborough. Or was there a ten foot long ondoka lying sinisterly coiled among the rafters of a missionary hut . . .? 'Hey, steady on, Jimbo lad,' I muttered. 'The booze is getting to you. Time you had your supper.'

Ever hopeful the cat padded after me into the kitchen and sat

watching with alert interest as I heated up the remains of the tomato soup and prepared to scramble some eggs. 'You know what you are?' I told it. 'You're a schnorrer, that's what you are. You've scoffed at least fifty P's worth of *pâté* and now you're back hoping for more. Haven't you any sense of shame?'

It lowered its head, gave a couple of perfunctory licks to its white bib front, and then resumed its attentive posture.

I broke three eggs into a bowl, shook in salt and pepper, and began whisking them round with a fork. 'And now I come to think of it, puss, what were you doing down there in my woodshed? Haven't you got a woodshed of your own to go to? Where do you come from anyway? Who do you belong to?'

The cat yawned, stretched itself front and back, ambled forward and rubbed itself against me. I transferred the beaten eggs into a saucepan which I placed beside the stove. Then I decanted the steaming soup into a plate and set it down on the table. 'Cats don't like tomato soup,' I said. 'It's a well known fact. Nor are they especially partial to scrambled eggs. Didn't your mother ever tell you that?'

I sat down, extracted a slice of brown bread from its plastic bag and raised my spoon. A moment later the cat jumped up on to the vacant chair opposite and sat regarding me across the table top with a look of steadfast reproach. 'Yes, thank you,' I said. 'It really is very nice. Not exactly your *haute cuisine*, maybe, but in the circumstances both acceptable and adequate.' I dunked my spoon, glanced down at my plate, and when I looked up again I observed that the cat which had been eying me so intently was now staring past me at something in the open doorway behind my back. I half-turned my head, and in the instant of my turning, out of the uttermost corner of my eye I thought I saw a flicker of movement in the hallway, the merest momentary hint of a shadow shifting.

I thrust back my chair and in the very act of jumping to my feet I realized what it was. A log had shifted in the living-room hearth, flared up, and the sudden brightness, seen through the open doorway, had been dimly reflected in the glass panels of the back door which was just visible from where I had been sitting.

I walked out into the hall, checked that this was indeed the

cause of it, and then discovered that my heart was racing. I shivered with sudden violence. 'For Christ's sake, stop playing at silly buggers, Jim,' I admonished myself. 'What'll the cat think of you?' But for all that I felt constrained to collect my transistor radio from the bedroom, tune in to the sound of human voices and carry them back with me into the kitchen where, in a spasm of mortal weakness, I opened the fridge and treated Pusser to a bonus second helping of *pâté*.



I had been hard at work for some two hours the following morning when I heard the sound of a car engine and glanced up to see the Fenwicks' Land Rover bucketing along the track behind the dunes. As it turned in and jolted up towards the bungalow I glimpsed Barbara waving to me. I pushed back my chair and went out on to the verandah to greet her.

She came trotting up the steps carrying two bottles of milk. 'Special delivery, Jim,' she said. 'Thought I'd save you a trek. Actually I just dropped by to tell you that it's O.K. for Friday. I saw Janice this morning. She can do from ten till twelve, if that's all right by you.'

'That's excellent,' I said. 'Thank you very much. And now you're here you'll stay and have a coffee, won't you?'

'Why not?' she said. 'I'd better take my boots off first. You won't want the place ponging of pigs.'

She handed me the bottles of milk, scuffed off her wellingtons and stepped over the threshold into the living-room. 'Hey, I can see you've been busy,' she said. 'How's it going?'

'Touch wood, rather better than I'd dared to hope,' I replied. 'It's early days yet though.'

'What sort of a book is it?' she said. 'Or shouldn't I ask?'

'It's a novel. Well, a sort of novel. Political. I'll know better how to describe it when it's finished.'

'Phil told me you and Karen had dropped in on Sunday. Did she get back all right?'

It struck me that I had no idea whether she had or not. 'I'm sure she did,' I said. 'She's a very good driver. By the way, you haven't lost a cat, have you?'

'A cat?' she echoed. 'Not that I know of. What sort of a cat?'

'A black and white one. It turned up yesterday. I found it in the woodshed.'

'It doesn't sound like one of ours,' said Barbara. 'Is it here now?'

'It was around at breakfast,' I said. 'It spent the night asleep in my bedroom. It's really rather a nice cat. Sort of aristocratic-looking.'

'You like them, do you?'

'Well, I shouldn't call myself a cat lover in inverted commas. But, on the whole, yes.'

'Some people can't abide them. My sister for one. She's allergic to cats. She always knows when there's one in the room. It's almost uncanny sometimes.'

As we entered the kitchen I realized what an untidy mess it was and started to apologize. Barbara just laughed. 'I'll give you a hand with the washing-up while the kettle's boiling. There's not that much of it. It'll only take us a couple of minutes.'

'I meant to have a tidy up this morning,' I explained, 'but over breakfast I got to thinking about the next section of my story and somehow . . .'

'Oh, Phil's just the same,' she said. 'It's all or nothing with him. Once he's stuck into a job he forgets all about time. Me, I've got a built-in clock which rings: breakfast, lunch, tea, supper, bed.'

'Have you got children, Barbara?'

'No.'

'No, not yet, or just no full stop?'

She glanced round at me. 'Phil and I can't have kids.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't mean to be nosey. I just wondered.'

'I know what you mean. I look the motherly type, don't I? But we've been married for twelve years and we've got used to the idea by now.'

We sat before the kitchen window and sipped our coffee. 'How do you like being here all on your own?' she asked.

'It suits me fine,' I said. 'I've done more work these last two days than I managed in two weeks up in London.'

She nursed her cup in both hands and peered out through the

faint mist of rising steam towards the dunes and the gun-metal grey sea. 'That's great,' she said. 'It wouldn't suit everyone, though. Mrs. Henshaw . . .'

She broke off and took a sip at her coffee. I waited for her to go on. When she didn't I said: 'What about Mrs. Henshaw?'

'She was the nervous type. Know what I mean?'

I gazed at her. 'I'm not sure that I do. In what way nervous?'

Barbara grinned. 'She once told me she'd got burglar alarms fitted to every window and every door in her own house. They came from Kingston on Thames. One night they got home late and found they'd forgotten their key. They had to go round and knock up the local police station before they could get in.'

'You mean she was scared of being turned over even down here?'

'Oh, she was always imagining things.'

'What sort of things?'

'I can't remember.'

'I bet you can,' I said.

She turned her head so that she was looking straight at me and smiled broadly. 'You don't believe in ghosts, do you, Jim?'

'I've never met one,' I said, 'so let's say I don't.'

'She did. She swore the place was haunted.'

'This place? "Myrtles"? Are you serious?'

She nodded emphatically. 'She told me she'd seen it—her. Twice.'

'It's a she ghost, is it?'

'A woman in grey, was how she described it. And terribly sad-looking. Have you ever heard of a happy-looking ghost?'

'The only ones I've ever come across have been in ghost stories,' I said. 'But Karen believes in them. She told me she once saw one when she was a kid in Norway.'

'She's a nice girl, your Karen,' said Barbara. 'Are you going to marry her?'

I shook my head. 'I've been married once. That was quite enough.'

'What happened?'

'It didn't work out. The usual thing. Incompatibility.'

'You haven't got kids, have you?'

'No, thank God.'

'You don't like kids?'

'It's not that,' I said. 'My mother and father are divorced. I wouldn't want any children of mine to go through what I went through.'

Barbara laughed. 'God, what a cheerful sort of conversation we're having! Is Karen coming down next weekend?'

'Yes. On Friday, I hope. I'll give her a ring tomorrow to make sure. With luck she'll be able to get the Monday off too.'

'You must come up to the farm and have a drink with us.'

'That's very sweet of you. I'm sure we'd love to. Any particular time?'

'Sunday evening about eight suit you?'

'I should think it would be fine—providing Karo's managed to get the Monday off. If she hasn't, would Saturday do instead?'

Barbara shook her head. 'Sorry,' she said. 'Saturday's darts night. Phil and I are in the "George and Dragon" team. We've got a match with the "Crown" in Frimingham on Saturday. We could make it Friday though.'

I grinned. 'I think you can take it we'll have other things on our minds on Friday.'

'Say no more,' she said. 'Lucky old you. Well, time's up, Mrs. Fenwick. Thanks for the coffee, Jim.' She stood up, carried her cup over to the sink, rinsed it under the tap and inverted it on the draining board.

I followed her through into the living-room and watched as she pulled on her gumboots. 'Tell me, Barbara,' I said. 'This ghost Mrs. Henshaw claimed she saw. Whereabouts was it?'

'In there,' she said, nodding towards the room behind me. 'Standing over by the fireplace. The other time was out here on the verandah. If you're interested, the person who could tell you all about it is Mrs. Tarrant. She chummed up with the Henshaws. But if you ask me, it's all a load of old codswallop. You don't get ghosts in bungalows.'

'I wouldn't know,' I said.

'Well, not in this one. Not with all those old ruins on the Brimbles. That's the place I'd head for if I was a ghost. Plenty of company.' She stamped her feet down into her boots. 'I'll put two pints aside for you on Thursday. Oh, and don't forget, ten on Friday Janice'll be here. O.K.?'

‘Roger,’ I said. ‘Message received and understood. And thanks for dropping in.’

‘I mustn’t make too much of a habit of it, must I, or tongues’ll be starting to wag.’ She winked at me. ‘See you around, Jim.’ And she was away. I waved her goodbye and returned to my typewriter.

After breakfast on the Wednesday I got out Mrs. Cousins’ bicycle, pumped up the tyres and secured a canvas holdall to the carrier with a piece of stout string. Originally I had intended to postpone this expedition until the Friday when Janice Beaney would be cleaning up the bungalow, but the cat had finished off the *pâté* and I was completely out of bread and down to my last two spoons of Nescafé. Furthermore it had occurred to me that I might just as well phone Karen from the call-box in the village as slog up to the Fenwicks’ and do it from there.

It must have been all of ten years since I had last ridden a bicycle but after a couple of wobbly circuits of the tarmac I had got the hang of it again. I locked up the bungalow, left the cloak-room window ajar for Pusser and began shoving the machine up the overgrown zig-zag track to the top of the Brimbles. It can’t have been a climb of more than a hundred feet but I was gasping for breath by the time I reached the top. I propped the bike against the trunk of the nearest tree and looked around me.

The shadows of clouds were drifting in across the long silvery curve of the shore, slipping over the dunes and the scattered remnants of the Priory before sailing away inland across the flat checkerboard of fields and pastures to the north west. Far to the south, miles beyond Brimble Farm, sunlight sparkled from some invisible windscreen as if from a heliograph and then as suddenly went out. Gulls were swirling around like confetti in the wake of a ploughing tractor. And high overhead stretched the limitless, cloud-flocked canopy of the sky, as pale and blue as though it had just been rinsed and hung out to dry. I saw the scene in all its beauty and rejoiced in it, but even as I did so I was aware that some vital part of my mind was still thousands of miles away in another continent, another time.

I mounted the bike and bumped down the landward slope of the Brimbles, steering a tricky path between the gorse and bramble clumps, and reached the flinted track without mishap. Ten minutes later I leant the bike against the yard wall of the 'George and Dragon', went into the call-box and dialled the number of Karen's office.

'Armstrong Agency here. Can I help you?'

I thumbed the button. 'Can I speak to Karen, please?'

'Will you hold the line, please? I'll get her.'

'Hello?'

'Karo?'

'Jim! Where are you phoning from?'

'The call-box in St. Mellows. I'm short on change, Karo, so we'll have to be quick. Is it O.K. for Friday?'

'Didn't you get my message?'

'What message?'

'I rang the Fenwicks first thing this morning. Barbara said she'd tell you. Are you all right, Jim?'

'I'm fine. Does that mean you can't make it on Friday then?'

'Yes, it's all right. That's what I rang to tell you. The weekend's on. I've got till Tuesday.'

'That's great! Fantastic!'

'I'll try and get away early so I don't have too much driving in the dark. I'll come straight on from here. I'll bring a chicken or something if that's—'

Peep-peep-peep.

I shoved in my only other coin. 'Hey, Karo? Are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Guess what? The book's going like a bomb. The night you left I really got stuck into it. I can hardly wait to get back there.'

'That's marvellous, Jim! Shall I be able to read it?'

'Sure. Hey, do you remember me telling you about a chap called Porson?'

'Who?'

'Porson. Kirk Porson. An American. He worked for U.P.A. out in Kampala. I'm sure it was just a cover really. Anyway I've made him the central character and—'

'It's not you, then?'

‘Me? No. Well, I’m in it too, naturally and so’s Pierre and—’

‘Jim, you *are* all right?’

‘Yes, of course I’m all right. I’ve even acquired a mog.’

‘A what?’

‘A moggie. A cat.’

‘Oh. How did that happen?’

‘It just appeared. In the woodshed. I’m on my way to the Post Office to buy it some food. It’s finished off all that jar of *pâté* I brought with me and—’

Peep-peep-peep.

‘Oh, sod it!’ I yelled. ‘See you Friday, love!’

The line was dead.



The St. Mellows Post Office and General Stores (Prop. R.T. Rumble) was a low, Dutch-tiled lean-to built on to the side of an ancient thatched cottage. I propped my machine against the pillar-box, untied my canvas holdall from the carrier, and pushed open the door. A bell jangled beside my right ear. Two other customers were already inside. They eyed me curiously as I entered. I nodded to them, and while I awaited my turn at the counter, I looked about me. The Post Office section was demarcated by a wire-mesh screen to which were fastened various pamphlets concerning Old Age Pensions, National Savings, Postal Rates and so forth, together with a selection of picture postcard views of the village. The rest of the building was entirely given over to the General Stores part of the business. I was astonished to discover how much merchandise could be packed into so small a space.

By the time it was my turn to be served I had collected an armful of goods from the shelves. I set them down on the counter beside the scales, produced my scribbled shopping-list and enquired after various other items which I wanted but couldn’t see. All were produced from somewhere at the back and added to the pile.

‘I expect you’ll be the gentleman who’s moved into “Myrtles”’, observed the postmistress, jotting down the bill on the back of one of my purchases.

'Yes, that's right,' I said.

'And you dussent mind being out there all on your own?'

'Not a bit,' I said. 'It suits me very well. It's a beautiful situation.'

'Ah,' she said. 'Lonely though. Specially in winter.'

Behind me the door bell jangled. Mrs. Rumble glanced up and then returned to her addition.

'Sometimes it can be quite a relief to get away on your own for a while,' I said.

Mrs. Rumble peered at me over the tops of her gold-rimmed spectacles and gave a slight shake of her head. Then she licked the point of her pencil and drew two firm lines under her sum.

I handed over a ten pound note and while she was dealing with my change I began packing my purchases into the holdall. 'There may be one or two letters forwarded to me,' I said. 'I don't suppose anyone ever delivers mail out to the bungalow.'

'Not in the winter they don't. Not to "Myrtles". They dussent take a van no further'n the farm. But if you like I can put aside any as comes for you Mr. . . .?'

'Fuller,' I said. 'James Avery Fuller. Thank you very much.'

'Or would you rather I had them sent up alonger Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick's to Brimble Farm, Mr. Fuller?'

'No, I'd rather you hung on to them for me, if that's all right. There won't be anything that can't wait till I call in.'

She counted out my change into my hand. 'Bar Sundays, Saturday and Wednesday a'rternoons and public holidays, we're open all day from nine till half past five. Wednesdays and Saturdays we close ha'past twelve.'

'I'll try and remember,' I said. 'Thanks again.'

She smiled at me and moved away towards the Post Office section. I finished packing in the last of my tins of cat food, picked up my holdall and turned to leave. As I did so I heard Mrs. Rumble say: 'Well, now, and what can we do for Mrs. Tarrant today?'

Curiosity fought with courtesy and curiosity won. On the pretext of pausing to examine the selection of picture postcards I put down my shopping and took a covert sideways look at the Black Widow. I glimpsed a thick helmet of ebony hair, heavy eyebrows, and a brown, wrinkled face. At that very instant she

did exactly the same to me. For a naked second our eyes met, then her scarlet-painted mouth twitched into a smile. 'Do forgive me,' she said, 'but I couldn't help overhearing your name. You wouldn't be *the* James Avery Fuller by any chance?'

I eyed her warily. 'I'm not really sure how many of us there are,' I said.

'The writer?'

'I'm a journalist,' I said.

'And you wrote that *wonderful* series on the West Indies in one of the Sunday colour supplements! It is you, isn't it?'

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed. 'You must have a fantastic memory! That was three years ago.'

Mrs. Tarrant turned triumphantly towards the postmistress who was gazing at me owlishly through the wire cage. 'There! What did I tell you, Jean?' she cried. 'Didn't I stand here the week before Christmas and say to you we'd have a writer living in "Myrtles" before the snowdrops were out? I knew it! I just knew it!'

I felt both flattered and at the same time vaguely uncomfortable. I was, indeed, astounded that my name could have meant anything to anyone living in a place like St. Mellows. As for the rest it just didn't make sense of any kind at all. I turned helplessly towards the postmistress with my eyebrows raised in a parody of interrogation and a stupid, half-apologetic grin on my face.

'Oh, yes, it's quite true, Sir,' said Mrs. Rumble. 'Mrs. Tarrant has the gift, you see.'

'Ah,' I murmured, nodding my head. 'Then that would account for it.' The words didn't mean anything at all but it seemed the right sort of thing to say.

Mrs. Tarrant returned her attention to me and laid a claw-like hand on my sleeve. She was wearing at least three very large rings. 'I too am a sister of the quill, Mr. Fuller,' she said. 'But I don't expect you to have heard of *me*.'

'Do you write under your own name?' I asked.

'My maiden name. Zena Fullbright.'

I shook my head. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'To be honest I wouldn't pretend to be the world's greatest reader.'

'Yet I'll bet a pound to a penny that you've read some of my work, Mr. Fuller.'

They seemed exceptionally tempting odds to me. 'I have?'

Mrs. Tarrant tilted her dyed head on one side, surveyed me from beneath a pair of false eye-lashes as thick as paint brushes and intoned:

*This comes with tenderest greetings,
From a heart that's ever true,
Whisp'ring of lovers' meetings,
And memories of you.*

I had an hysterical impulse to exclaim: 'Oh, *that* Zena Fullbright!' but, fortunately, I managed to suppress it. 'I've often wondered who wrote those,' I said. 'Are you free-lance?'

'I have an annual contract with Goshawk Galleries for five hundred quatrains.'

'Five hundred a *year*? Good Lord! Really?'

'Birthdays, Engagements, Weddings, Babies, Anniversaries, Valentines and Miscellaneous—that's mostly Mums and Dads and Get-Wells.'

She let go of my sleeve, darted across the shop and plucked a card from a display rack. Returning to the counter she took from her hand-bag a pink fountain pen as thick as a medium-sized stick of rhubarb and scrawled something across the blank inside page. Mrs. Rumble, who had obviously assisted in similar ceremonies, took it from her, dried it reverently with a rocker-blotter and pushed it back beneath the grille. Mrs. Tarrant examined it critically, nodded, then closed up the card and presented it to me with a beaming smile.

I turned back the garish, silver-horseshoe embossed cover and read: '*To James Avery Fuller, with best wishes from the author, Zena Fullbright.*'

'Thank you very much indeed,' I said. 'I shall treasure this.'

'It's not really one of my very best,' said Mrs. Tarrant, with becoming modesty. 'It lacks a little—well, call it freshness, if you like. To see all things new-bright, dew-bright, that is the eternal problem, Mr. Fuller.'

'How true,' I said. 'I know exactly what you mean. But I really mustn't detain you, ladies. The daily round, the common task. We servants of the quill . . .'

I slipped the card in beside the loaf of bread, picked up the holdall, smiled and nodded to them both, and let myself out of

the shop. Having made sure things were anchored securely to the carrier, I straightened up the bicycle. Just as I was preparing to climb on to the saddle, I saw Mrs. Tarrant's face peering out at me through the glass panel of the shop door in the space between the 'OPEN' notice and a sticker advertising 'Zenos Cough Drops.' I waved a hand in brief farewell and pedalled for home.

I arrived at the bungalow to find a note, pencilled on the back of an envelope, had been pushed in under the verandah door. *Karen phoned. O.K. for Friday. Hopes to be here by 6. P.S. She seemed a bit anxious abt you. I said you fine. B.*

I grinned. 'Me fine, Karo,' I said, and then I remembered her reiterated query about my welfare during our brief phone call. It wasn't like Karen to be unduly worried about me and yet I must confess that I found myself rather relishing the notion. I made a mental note to apologize to Barbara for her abortive visit and carried my shopping through into the kitchen.

Pusser re-appeared at tea time. She suddenly leapt up on to the windowsill in front of me with a loud *miaow!* and startled me so much that my fingers skidded on the typewriter keys. 'For Christ's sake!' I shouted. 'I've left the bloody loo window open for you! Go on round and use it!'

She gazed in at me ingratiatingly then proceeded to pace back and forth along the windowsill, mewing and swishing her tail in the air. I watched as she made a couple more passes and then I got up with a sigh and opened the verandah door.

She sauntered in, metaphorically rubbing her paws as if to say: 'So this is what you get up to when I'm not here to keep an eye on you. What's happened to the fire then?'

'Hello, rat-bag,' I said. 'Where the hell have you been all day?'

She trotted off purposely in the direction of the kitchen then stopped and glanced back to make sure I had got the message.

'*Pâté's* off, mate,' I said. 'Terribly sorry about that. From now on it's Jellymeat Whiskas—as advertised on cat's telly. If that doesn't meet with your approval you know what you can do about it.'

I pushed a tin into the wall-mounted can opener, cranked it round, and then spooned out a substantial helping on to a

saucer. I was rather surprised to discover how appetising the stuff looked. The cat launched herself into it as though scarcely able to believe her luck. I filled the kettle and switched it on. While it was coming to the boil I constructed myself a triple-decker jam-sandwich, then went through into the living-room and put a match to the fire.

When I got back to my work table some minutes later, the light outside was fading fast. I switched on the standing lamp, set down my mug of tea and my half-eaten sandwich beside the typewriter, and prepared to resume where I had broken off.

I think I knew what had happened before I actually saw it. Something—call it a sixth sense if you will—seemed to run cold fingertips from the back of my neck all the way down my spine at the very instant when I was reaching out towards the keyboard. I paused and then, very slowly and deliberately, I edged the carriage backwards some half a dozen spaces. The word—‘only’—which I had been in the very act of typing when Pusser had leapt up on to the windowsill, had become completed—or should I say ‘transformed’?—into ‘ondoka’.

As I recall it I just sat there staring at it for about five minutes. I think I was somehow expecting to see it grow fainter and fainter, until finally it faded away into invisibility before my eyes. In fact, all that happened was that I became conscious I had acquired a violent headache. I pushed back my chair, went out to the bathroom and swallowed three tablets of Paracetamol. Then I splashed my face with cold water, dried it, and returned to the living-room. The word was still there. ‘O.K.,’ I muttered. ‘This time there’s no question. You *aren’t* imagining it. So what are you going to do about it?’

Thinking, perhaps, that I was talking to her, the cat who by then had taken up her familiar evening station on the hearthrug, began to purr lustily. I walked over to her, scooped her up into my arms and carried her across to the table. I think I had some vague notion of showing her what she had been indirectly responsible for. But as I approached the chair in front of the typewriter Pusser, who up to that moment had accepted my attentions with tolerant resignation, gave a sudden wild yowl, twisted around in my arms, clawed herself free, and raced for the hall doorway as if a mad dog was at her tail.

I gazed after her in astonishment then walked out into the hall and called her back. When she failed to appear I started looking for her, first in the kitchen and then through the rest of the house. She had completely, vanished, no doubt via the open cloakroom window. I unlocked the back door, peered out into the shadows, called her a few more times and then gave it up as a bad job.

As I closed the outside door I became conscious of how quiet the house was. The wind was blowing off the land, flattening out the waves and carrying their sound away from the bungalow. The only noise I could detect apart from my own breathing was the faint ticking of the electric storage meter in the cloakroom cupboard. I stood still for a moment, listening to the silence, then I walked slowly back into the living-room and crossed over to the table. *The typewriter carriage was no longer as I had left it!* I had pulled it back to the left to expose the word: now it was returned to its original position.

I felt a trickle of ice-cold sweat run down from my left arm-pit all across the cage of my ribs as I leant forward over the machine and touched the spacer bar. The carriage clicked sideways once, twice, three times, to expose the letters 'o' and 'n'. *And nothing else at all.* Where I had stared for so long at 'd', 'o', 'k', and 'a', there was only virgin white paper.

I remember raising my head and staring at the pale reflection of my face in the window before me as I tried to make some desperate sort of sense out of what was happening to me. I felt as though I was clinging by my fingertips to some blank, black rockface above an unfathomable chasm. One false move and I knew that I would be falling, dropping down into deeper and deeper darkness for ever and ever. 'Dear God,' I whispered. 'Dear God, help me, please.'

Hardly had my prayer been uttered than it was answered. I heard a faint scrabbling, a muffled thump, and then a loud and poignant mewling. 'So you're back, rat-bag!' I yelled. 'Just in time!'

When I reached the kitchen Pusser was already tucking in to what was left of her supper. I fixed myself a really solid drink and sat down on the edge of the table. 'I wish you could tell me what scared you, Puss,' I said. 'Was it me? Do you think I'm going crazy or something?'

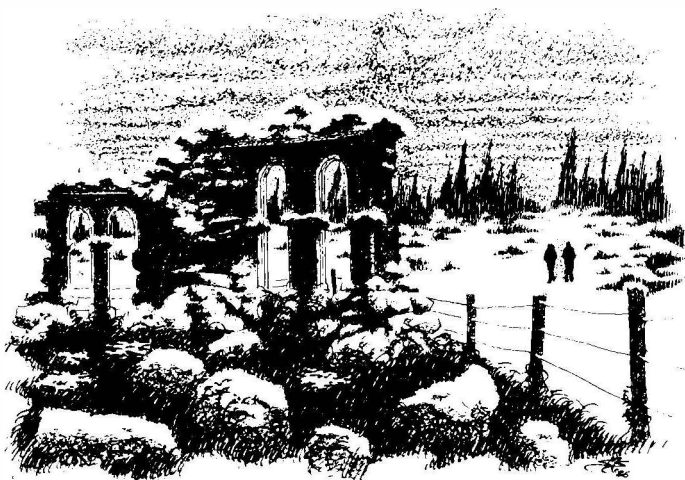
She glanced round at me, gave a sort of snorting purr and returned her attention to her plate.

'It's not conscience that makes cowards of us all,' I said. 'It's imagination. So what did you imagine, Puss? That I was going to hurt you? Was that it? Or was it something else? Something you imagined was there in the room with us? Well, let me tell you, there wasn't anything else, and there never has been. It's all up in here.' I raised my glass and tapped it against my forehead. 'I don't know what it is, mind you, but when I find out, you'll be one of the very first to know.'

I caught sight of the card which Mrs. Tarrant had given me. It was lying beside the loaf of bread on the dresser. I reached out, picked it up and examined it. Framed within the embossed silver horseshoe on the cover were the words 'Good Luck' printed in a gold Gothic script over a background of white heather. I opened it, glanced at the dedication, and then turned my attention to the verse.

*I come to wish you Loads of Luck
And Happiness today!
May Fortune smile upon you,
And speed you on your way!*

I tried to imagine which production category this one could possibly fall into and finally decided it must be 'Miscellaneous' subsection 'Emigration.' Monroe Kyle might have done worse than to lay in a stock of them to hand out to his departing staff along with their redundancy cheques. I wondered whether Mrs. Tarrant had alighted upon it purely by chance when she thought to present it to me. But intentionally or not it unquestionably did its bit in helping to haul me back from the lip of the precipice into the world of ordinary everyday lunacy, and for that I was more grateful than even Zena Fullbright's dew-bright words could adequately express.



Chapter 3

Shortly after sunset on the Friday evening I dragged on my wellingtons, stuffed my torch into my anorak pocket and set off along the track to the farm. Behind me the living-room windows of the bungalow glowed warm in the dusk. The smoke rising up from the squat chimney was a dark thread teased out and tossed away up towards the swaying silhouettes of the pines. The air was cold and raw, only a degree or two above freezing, and I wondered if the radio forecast was right and there was snow on the way. The track was pretty well dry. I carefully examined each of the field gateways and decided that it was worth risking it in Karen's car. If it came to the worst and we got stuck I didn't doubt that I could persuade Barbara or Phil to tow us out with the Land Rover.

I said as much to them when I reached the farm but Barbara told me I was being ridiculous. 'It's no bother at all just to run you down there, and Karen can leave her car in the barn under cover. Down at "Myrtles" it'll be stuck outside in the damp all

over the weekend and then it probably won't start when she needs it on Monday.'

'Barbie's right,' said Phil. 'And it'll be a bloody sight more trouble for us getting you unstuck than it will be if you don't get yourselves stuck in the first place.'

'Say no more, friends. You've convinced me,' I said. 'Which means I'm even further in your debt. Is it going to snow, do you think?'

'It wouldn't surprise me,' said Phil. 'They've got it up in Lincolnshire already, and we usually get what they're having. It'll depend a bit on how much the wind shifts round.'

'Oh, by the way, Jim,' said Barbara. 'I think I know who that cat belongs to.'

'Oh, hell,' I said. 'I wish you hadn't told me that. Who is it?'

'Mrs. Tarrant. There's a reward notice pinned up in the Post Office. Janice saw it.'

'Janice? She didn't say anything to me about any notice.'

'She only saw it this afternoon. Then she told me and we put two and two together. I told her not to let on to anyone till I'd had a word with you.'

'You think it really *is* hers?'

'Well, it sounded like it from what Janice said. Black with a white front and white paws.'

'Ah, there's dozens of cats like that around,' said Phil. 'They're all sprung from Dave Fletcher's randy old Bootle up at the pub. He's fathered just about every cat between here and Walbersham.'

'Where does Mrs. Tarrant live?' I asked.

'Up behind the Church. Old Rectory Cottage,' said Barbara. 'There! That sounds like Karen now!' She twitched aside the curtain and we all saw the gleam of headlights approaching along the track.

Barbara waved her arm in front of the window and was rewarded with a cheerful *toot-toot* from Karen's horn.

'She's dead on time,' said Phil. 'I make it just one minute to six.'

I trotted down the garden path and reached the gate at the very moment the little red car drew up outside it. Karen stuck her head out of the window. She was wearing a knitted woollen

hat like a rainbow teacosy. Her nose felt cold but her lips were warm and soft and utterly delectable. 'Hey, but it's good to see you, Karo,' I sighed. 'How was the drive?'

'Getting out of Town was a real drag,' she said, 'but after that it was O.K. What happens now?'

'They're expecting you to pop in and say hello. Then Barbara's going to run us down in the Land Rover. Come on.'

Thanks to Phil's hospitable nature it was closer to seven than six when Barbara brought the Land Rover to a halt beside the bungalow. She helped us to carry Karen's stuff indoors but resisted all our efforts to persuade her to stay and have a drink with us. 'I've left a steak and kidney pie in the oven,' she said, 'and Phil would never dream of looking in to see if it's done. Don't forget you're coming up to us on Sunday. About eight. O.K.?'

We assured her we'd be there, thanked her once again for all her trouble and saw her off. Then we climbed the steps to the verandah and let ourselves in to the living-room. 'I still can't get over it, Karo,' I said. 'It's only six days since you were here and yet it seems at least a month. And look at this!' I lifted the slab of my typescript and slapped it down on to the table. 'Do you know, I've been averaging around fifteen pages a day! If I can keep this up I'll have the whole damn thing finished inside a month.'

'It's really been going that well, has it?'

'From the moment you left,' I said. 'I started that same Sunday evening. I could hardly get the stuff down fast enough. It just came pouring out . . .'

'Well?' she said. 'Go on.'

'I just remembered something,' I said. 'Something odd—stupid.'

Karen looked at me questioningly. 'Aren't you going to tell me?'

'There's really nothing to tell,' I said. 'Nothing that makes sense anyway.'

Her eyes widened perceptibly. 'You don't *want* to tell me?'

And she was right. I really did feel the most extraordinary reluctance to recount the two 'ondoka' incidents, and I didn't know *why* I felt it. It was almost as though I'd put a mental lock

on the whole thing; sealed it off and stamped 'Top Secret' across it. Telling someone about it—even when that someone was Karen—would have been tantamount to making a public confession of some action of which I felt profoundly ashamed. 'It's not that, Karo,' I said. 'It's just—' and I shrugged helplessly.

'It's just what?'

'I don't know,' I mumbled. 'I can't explain it, that's all.'

'Does it have to be explained?'

I looked at her. 'Well, let's say that I wouldn't like you to get the idea that I might be going round the twist. Come on, let's treat ourselves to a drink.'

While I was fixing two scotches-on-the-rocks, Karen set about transferring the fresh supplies she had brought with her into the fridge and the store cupboard. While doing so she caught sight of Mrs. Tarrant's autographed first edition. She picked it up and glanced inside. 'Who on earth's Zena Fullbright?' she demanded.

'Do you remember Phil Fenwick mentioning a Black Widow?'

'The writer? The professional widow?'

'That's the one. Mrs. Tarrant. Well, she's Zena Fullbright. She actually writes those things.'

'You've met her?'

'You bet I have! On Wednesday. Just after I phoned you. She was in the Post Office.'

Karen read out the rhyme, *con espressione*, and laughed. 'I love it!' she declared. 'What's she like?'

'Considerably larger than life,' I said. 'She even remembered my name from that West Indies series I did three years ago. That shook me for a start. It's the only time in my life anyone's ever asked me if I was *the* James Avery Fuller.'

'How old is she?'

'God knows. In her seventies, I'd guess. Late sixties, maybe. She's plastered in make-up and has her hair dyed jet black—hence the nickname, no doubt. She also wears large amounts of costume jewellery. Oh, yes. And according to Mrs. Rumble she has the gift.'

'According to who she has *what*?'

'Whom,' I corrected. 'Mrs. Rumble. The Postmistress. She

publicly attested to the fact that Mrs. Tarrant had foretold before Christmas that a writer (me) would be living in "Myrtles" (here) before the snowdrops were out.'

'You're making this up, Jim.'

'No, I'm not. It's the truth. Honest. What's more it seems that Pusser belongs to her.'

Karen looked supremely blank.

'My cat. I told you about the cat, didn't I?'

'What about the cat?'

'Well, according to Barbara, Janice (she's the woman who came in to clean for me today—Janice Beaney) well, Janice saw a notice in the Post Office this afternoon saying that Mrs. T. had lost a black and white cat. I've acquired this black and white cat. It seems a reasonable deduction that my cat is really Mrs. T's missing cat. I hope she's not though. I'm really getting very attached to old Pusser.'

'Where is she? Or is it a he?'

'I think it's an it,' I said. 'A she "it", if you get me. She's got two rows of little pimply bumps down her front, but I don't think she knows what they're for. Maybe she thinks they're buttons or something. I expected her to be here when we got back, but she is obviously a cat of supreme tact.'

'Or jealous of another woman, maybe?' suggested Karen with a grin. 'Are you going to go and tell Mrs. Tarrant about her?'

'I'm considering it,' I said. 'I'd hate to be accused of catnapping by my one fan in St. Mellows. On the other hand since Mrs. T. possesses the gift presumably she knows all about old Pusser already and knows where she is. *Ergo* my Pusser isn't Mrs. T's cat.'

I put the drinks on a tray, carried it through into the living-room and set it down on a low table in front of the fire. Karen followed me in and stood for a moment in the doorway surveying the room. Then she walked across to my work table and picked up my script. 'May I read it?'

'Now?'

She nodded.

'O.K.,' I said. 'Why not? I'll go and make a start on the supper.'

'You don't have to, Jim.'

'I couldn't stand the strain of watching your reactions,' I said. 'Will *spaghetti Fullerosi* be O.K.?'

'*Spaghetti Fullerosi* will be just fine,' she said.

I picked up my drink, raised it to Karen in a silent toast, then carried it back into the kitchen where I set about preparing something a little more classy than my usual. After about twenty minutes, consumed by curiosity, I tiptoed back into the hall and peeked into the living-room. Karen appeared to be deeply immersed in the script—certainly she didn't glance up—and I returned to my labours.

I had just sprinkled on the grated cheese and was about to slip the dish under the grill when I heard her footsteps. I hardly dared look at her. 'Well?' I said. 'Let's get it over with quick. What's the verdict?'

'I think it's absolutely terrific, Jim.'

'You're kidding.'

'No, I'm not. I really and truly think so. I was completely hooked from the very first sentence. But it's not in the least what I was expecting.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, that outline you showed to Maggie. It's not like that at all.'

'Ah, well,' I said. 'Yes, I take your point. But once I'd pitched on Porson the thing sort of took off on its own. I've really been surprising myself a lot of the time. I honestly haven't a clue what Maggie'll make of it.'

'She'll go bananas over it.'

'You really think so?'

'I'm sure of it. It really is terrific. I'm not just saying that. It's true, Jim.'

'Well, let's cross our fingers and hope you're right,' I said. 'For the last half hour I've been in a cold sweat over what you'd say. You've really made my day for me! Now you're permitted to seat yourself and toy with a herring fillet in wine sauce while the *pièce-de-résistance* is perfecting itself.'

I poured out two glasses of wine, took my place opposite her and lifted my own glass. 'Here's to a best-selling masterpiece.' I said. 'Cheers, Karo.'

We touched glasses and drank. Karen picked up her fork and speared herself a chunk of herring. 'What made you choose that weird title?' she asked.

I blinked. 'What are you talking about? What title? It hasn't got a title yet.'

'Ondoka,' she said. 'Isn't that the title?'

I stared across at her. 'What did you say?'

She dabbed her lips with her napkin and reached out for her wineglass. 'Ondoka,' she repeated. 'Isn't that how you pronounce it?'

'Where did you see that?'

'What do you mean, where did I see it? On the first page, of course.'

I pushed back my chair and ran through into the living-room. The cat was lying stretched out in its familiar station on the hearthrug and the script was lying where Karen had left it on the low table. I snatched off the blank cover-sheet to expose the first page. There was nothing there except the words 'Chapter One' and my familiar opening paragraphs.

I carried the script through into the kitchen and dropped it on the table beside her. 'Show me,' I demanded.

She gave me a most peculiar look, laid down her fork and turned back the cover-sheet. I watched her carefully and saw the frown lines gather across her forehead. She pointed to the empty space above the words 'Chapter One'. 'It was there,' she said. 'It *was* there, wasn't it?'

'Was it typed, Karo?'

'Well, of course it was typed. In capitals. Right there.'

'How many times did you read it?'

'What?'

'How many times? Just once or more than once?'

This time she really did look utterly mystified. 'What *are* you talking about, Jim? How do I know how many times? Once. Twice. It was the very first word I read.'

'Was it there when you finished reading?'

'Was it *what*?'

A whiff of scorched cheese sent me diving for the grill just in time to rescue our supper. I moved it down to the ovenette to keep warm.

‘Just what the hell *is* going on, Jim?’ she demanded. ‘Is this a sort of joke or something?’

‘Just tell me one more thing, Karo,’ I begged. ‘Please. Would you be prepared to swear on oath that you’d read the word “ondoka” on my script?’

‘Well, of course I did. How would I have known it if I hadn’t?’

‘And you’ve never heard it before?’

‘No. Never. What does it mean?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I really haven’t a clue. But you’ll never know just how glad I am that you saw it too.’

She looked down at the script and then back at me again. The perplexity in her eyes slowly cleared. ‘Is *that* what you wouldn’t talk about before? What you couldn’t explain? When you talked about going round the twist?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘More or less.’

‘So *that’s* it,’ she murmured. ‘And can you tell me now?’

I drew in a deep breath, let it out very slowly, and nodded.



While we ate our supper I told Karen what had been happening. It was like shrugging off a heavy rucksack after a long, hard climb and dropping it on to the summit between us. I recounted everything I could remember down to the very last detail. ‘I really did think I was going crazy,’ I said. ‘When it happened that second time and I saw the typewriter carriage had been moved back. I mean I knew *I* hadn’t moved it, and yet at the same time I knew I must have. I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my life. I even found myself praying.’

‘Who did you pray to?’ she asked curiously.

‘God.’

‘I didn’t think you believed in God.’

‘I did then,’ I said.

‘And what happened?’

I grinned. ‘The cat bounced in. Talk about a guardian angel on four paws.’

‘She bounced in tonight,’ said Karen. ‘Just after I’d started on your script.’

‘Yes, I saw her lying there when I went back to fetch it. I’m

surprised she didn't make the kitchen her first port of call. She usually does!' I suddenly remembered something. 'Hey! Guess what Barbara told me? The last people who were here—the Henshaws—the ones who laid in all that wood I'm using—they thought the place was haunted. Well, she did—Mrs. Henshaw. I don't know about him.'

'Didn't I say so?' said Karen.

'Ah, but Mrs. Henshaw claimed she'd actually *seen* her ghost. A woman in grey, apparently. Come to think of it, I suppose I might have asked Mrs. Tarrant about it, if I'd thought of it at the time.'

'What's Mrs. Tarrant got to do with it?'

'I'm not altogether sure. But Barbara said something about how Mrs. T. had made friends with the Henshaws and that if I was interested she could probably tell me about Mrs. H's spook. I wasn't really paying that much attention.'

Karen got up from her chair, retrieved the card which Mrs. Tarrant had given me and then sat down again. She turned back the cover and studied the text. 'It's a funny sort of good luck message,' she said. "'*Speed you on your way*" isn't exactly welcoming, is it?'

'I don't think she chose it for me especially,' I said. 'It just happened to be lying handy on the rack.'

'Zena Fullbright,' mused Karen. 'Does that sound to you like someone who'd know what "ondoka" means?'

'You really think it means something, do you?'

'Well, of course it does,' she said. 'It's the only thing which would make sense.'

'Go on.'

'It has to be a message of some sort. Someone's trying to tell us something.'

'And just who do you suppose that might be?'

'How should I know? The woman Mrs. Henshaw saw, maybe.'

'But you don't *really* think she exists, do you, Karo?'

Karen raised her head and looked me in the eye. 'Do you think "ondoka" existed?'

'But that's different,' I protested. 'We both saw it.'

'Did we? *Really?*'

'Well, of course we did. We wouldn't be talking about it otherwise.'

'But if we both saw it and yet it doesn't *really* exist, what does that make it?'

'I get it, clever-clogs. I'm supposed to say "a ghost", aren't I? Well, I pass. Who's ever heard of the ghost of a single meaningless word? Have you?'

'No,' she agreed, 'but I don't think that's so important. I believe it was just a way of getting through to you—slipping past your defences—showing you something which *you* could believe in. Maybe if you hadn't set up such a barrier against it, you'd have been seeing what Mrs. Henshaw saw.'

I divided the last of the wine between our two glasses. What Karen was saying did make sense of a sort. But it wasn't a sort of which I had any previous experience. I found myself recalling the moment when I had raised my head and stared at the reflection of my own face in the window before me and I shivered in retrospect. 'What beats me is how you can manage to take it all so bloody calmly,' I said. 'Doesn't it *worry* you?'

'Last Tuesday night it did,' she said. 'I had a nightmare about you.'

'About *me*? Really? What happened?'

'It was horrible,' she said. 'I was so terrified that something awful had happened to you that I rang up the Fenwicks to find out if you were all right.'

'I remember,' I said. 'Barbara left me a note about it. And when I was talking to you on the phone you kept asking me if I was O.K. So what was this nightmare exactly?'

'You remember that awful photo of Pierre's? Well, it was somehow all mixed up with that. Except that it was sort of happening to you and me.' She gave a violent shudder, screwed her eyes up tight, and said: 'Ugh! It makes me feel sick inside just to *think* about it.'

I lifted up her glass and put it into her hand. 'Then don't think about it,' I said. 'Knock that back and we'll go and dig out a turn-you-on tape. The washing up can wait till the morning.'

It snowed in the night. As Phil had surmised the wind shifted round to the north-east and I woke up to find the bedroom bathed in a new, cool, blue-white light. Down in the bottom right-hand corner of the balcony window a little lacy drift lay curled like a scrap of swansdown. Karen's golden mop was buried deep in the pillow beside me, the tip of her nose just visible beneath the edge of the duvet. As I looked at her I felt a deep tidal surge of warm affection. 'You know what you are, Karo?' I murmured. 'You're a life-enhancer that's what you are.'

'Mmm-n?'

'You awake?'

'Time's it?' came the drowsy response.

I reached out for my watch, lifted it up and squinted at it. 'Nine twenty-seven,' I said. 'It snowed last night.'

'Snow?' She hoisted herself up on to one elbow, shook the hair from her eyes and contemplated the window. 'Hey, that's great!' she enthused. 'You aren't going to write today, are you?'

'No way,' I said.

'Good-oh.'

She turned over and wriggled across the intervening space between us. Something round and hard pressed down into my bare chest. I groped around between her breasts and fished out a little silver ornament which was fastened round her neck by a slender gold chain. It was about the size of a 10p piece and had some sort of geometrical design cut into it. 'What's all this?' I said. 'You weren't wearing it when we went to bed, were you?'

'It's my crillyx,' she said. 'You've seen it before, haven't you?'

'No, I don't think so. Where did you get it?'

'In Crete.'

I held up the little disc before my eyes and examined it. It appeared to consist of a right-angled triangle lodged inside a five pointed star. On the back were some Greek letters. 'What's a crillyx?' I asked.

'That one's the Theorem of Pythagoras.'

'You're kidding. The square on the hypotenuse and all that? Is that what this lettering's about?'

'That's right.' She put her hand up behind her neck, lifted the chain free and then slipped it over my head.

‘What a weird idea,’ I said. ‘Does it *mean* anything?’

‘It’s a well-spring of light,’ she said. ‘That’s what crillyx means. This one’s really old. Over five hundred years.’

‘Is that so? And how did you come by it?’

‘Someone gave it to me.’

‘Oh? Who?’

‘No one you know.’

‘Was he madly in love with you?’

She grinned. ‘If you must know it wasn’t a he—otherwise, yes.’ And with that she lowered her face to mine and started kissing me.

By the time we got around to breakfast it was well past eleven o’clock. By then Karen had quite made up her mind what our programme was to be. ‘We’ll walk into the village and do the shopping, then we’ll call on Mrs. Tarrant, and after that we’ll drop in at the pub for lunch. What time does the Post Office close?’

‘Half past twelve on Saturdays,’ I said. ‘Do you really think we have to call on the Black Widow?’

‘Well, obviously we don’t *have* to. But, yes, I think we should.’

I sighed. ‘Well, I’m damned if I’m going to cart poor old Pusser along there in the holdall. She’d never forgive me.’

Karen laughed. ‘Where is Pusser, anyway?’

‘How should I know? Out skiing maybe. She doesn’t usually show up till around supper time.’

‘Well, then, it’s quite simple. All we have to do is tell Mrs. Tarrant that we think we might have seen a cat answering to her description hanging around here. The rest’s up to her. Come on, let’s get the washing up done and get started.’

We dressed up, locked the doors, and then climbed to the top of the Brimbles. The snow was powdery and scarcely an inch deep, but the wind had drifted it around the gorse bushes and the Priory ruins and in so doing had transformed them into something new and strange. Gazing down on the scene I was briefly moved to wonder at the people who had once lived out their lives in this remote place. They must have thought the world they knew was going to last for ever. Until one day the sails of the longships would have appeared over the horizon and, after that, fire and anguish, darkness and death.

‘What did you say?’

‘Just thinking,’ I said.

‘What about?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. History. The people who built the Priory. Life and death.’

A solitary chime came drifting towards us across the snowy fields. I glanced down at my watch and saw that it was already twelve-fifteen. ‘Christ!’ I exclaimed. ‘We’d better get a move on. The shop shuts in fifteen minutes. I’ll race you to the gate.’

We reached the Post Office with about a minute to spare and so out of breath that it was all I could do to gasp out an apology to Mrs. Rumble.

‘Ah, you dussent need to worry, Mr. Fuller,’ she said. ‘Once you’re in, you’re in. What’s it like up Brimbles?’

‘Beautiful,’ I panted. ‘Cold but beautiful.’

Mrs. Rumble snorted tolerantly. ‘There’s a letter come for you. A card I should say. Come in Thursday ar’ternoon.’ She moved up to the Post Office end of the stores and pushed the postcard through to me under the grille.

I picked it up. It was a picture of two horses looking over a gate. I turned it over and read the carefully penned message. ‘*Dear Mr. Fuller, I do hope you are enjoying Myrtles as much as I do. With love from Jilly Cousins.*’

Karen was busy with the shopping so I selected a view of St. Mellows church from the rack beside me and wrote back: ‘*Dear Jilly, Thanks for the super horses. Myrtles is fab. Last night it snowed. Everything looks really Christmassy. Love from Jim and Karen.*’ I found the Cousins’ address in the back of my diary, bought a stamp and then paid for the card and the stuff Karen had bought.

Mrs. Rumble followed us to the door and saw us out. She turned the ‘OPEN’ notice to read ‘CLOSED’, locked up and banged the bolts home. I dropped my card into the letter-box then walked across and peered in through the shop window at the board which carried the local advertisements. I couldn’t see anything about a lost cat.

‘I expect it’s inside,’ said Karen. ‘There were some others pinned up behind the door.’

‘Maybe she’s got hers back,’ I suggested hopefully. ‘Phil says there are dozens of black and white cats around.’

We set off down the road towards the church carrying the holdall between us. A few lost-looking snowflakes were drifting down from what had become a dull grey sky. 'Did you remember the cigarette papers?' I asked.

Karen grinned. 'What do you think? They were the first thing on the list. How sinful can you get?'

'Mrs. Rumble probably fancies the odd joint herself,' I said. 'When she's got her feet up watching the all-in-wrestling on the box.'

'I had her down for a video-porn junkie,' said Karen. 'I bet you a van comes round St. Mellows once a week and all the old girls rush out and fight over who's going to have Harlem Harem and The Texas Chain Saw Massacres. Hey, where do you suppose Mrs. Tarrant lives?'

'According to Barbara it's somewhere at the back of the church. Rectory Cottage—or was it *Old Rectory Cottage*? That's probably it, over there.'

Between the flanking lavender bushes the brick-paved path had been brushed clear of snow. We unlatched the wrought iron gate, clumped up to the front door and rang the bell. Karen poked the tip of her tongue between her lips and pulled a wry face. A few seconds later the door opened and Mrs. Tarrant was standing before us, a remarkable vision in a scarlet and gold Kaftan and shiny, black-leather, fleece-lined knee-boots. 'Mr. Fuller!' she cried. '*What* a lovely surprise! Do come in.'

I looked down doubtfully at my wet gumboots and then in at the polished floor behind her.

'Oh, just pull them off and leave them on the mat,' she said. 'Pop your coats on the pegs over there. I'll run upstairs and dig you out a pair of Ronnie's old slippers. No, no, it's no trouble. I'm always doing it for friends.'

I set the holdall down and Karen closed the door behind us. Then we clung on to each other and dragged off our boots. A minute later Mrs. Tarrant came flaring back down the stairs like a human flambeau. In one hand she was clutching a pair of carpet slippers and in the other a pair of fluffy, sky-blue mules. 'I know it ought to be blue for a boy,' she apologized, 'but beggars can't be choosers.'

'Thank you very much,' I said, accepting the slippers from

her. 'May I introduce my friend, Karen Angström? Karen, Mrs. Tarrant.'

'Oh, *do* call me Zena, *please!*' cried Mrs. Tarrant. 'And may I call you James?'

'Not if I have any say in it,' I said with a grin. 'Try Jim.'

'Jim. Jim and Karen. Oh, that's so *right!*' She thrust out a jewelled hand and held it up in front of Karen's face. 'Don't tell me, let me guess. You're an Aquarian. Am I right?'

'Yes,' said Karen. 'February the sixth.'

'And you, Jim,' she said, turning on me. 'You *have* to be a Libran.'

'When's that?' I asked.

'September the twenty fourth to October the twenty third.'

'Jolly close,' I said. 'September the nineteenth actually.'

'On the cusp! That's *very* interesting. And of course you're lovers. Oh, you must forgive me! I do get so carried away by my stars. Come along through into the sitting room and toast your toes by the fire while I fix us all a drink. Do you both like tequila?'

'Do we?' I murmured to Karen.

She nodded vigorously.

'We both like tequila, Zena,' I said.

'Of course you do,' said Mrs. Tarrant. 'Anyone who knows what's good in life simply *adores* tequila!'

We moved over towards the fire and there, curled up sound asleep in an arm-chair was either Pusser or Pusser's identical twin. I elbowed Karen in the ribs and jerked my thumb sideways.

Karen did a pantomime query of 'Are you sure it's her?' to which I could only respond with a helpless shrug.

'That's naughty Mopsy,' Mrs. Tarrant called out. 'Mopsy's been a very, very wicked girl. She's in disgrace.'

'Oh? What's she been up to?' I asked ingenuously.

'She disappeared, the hussy. Vanished off the face of the earth for two whole days. If the cards hadn't pooh-poohed it I'd have given her up for dead.'

'So what happened?' I asked.

'When I got back from Walbersham on Thursday, there she was as right as rain curled up beside Flopsy on the top of the fridge.'

‘Flopsy?’

‘Flopsy and Cottontail are Mopsy’s sisters. But Mopsy’s the only really wicked one.’ Mrs. Tarrant carried two tall and tinkling glasses over to us. She handed one to Karen and presented the other to me.

‘Thank you very much,’ I said.

‘And how’s your pussy enjoying “Myrtles”, Jim?’

My mouth opened and closed of its own accord. A sort of ‘ugh’ noise emerged from somewhere at the back of my throat.

‘I couldn’t help spotting those tins of Whiskas in your bag when we met in the Post Office last Wednesday,’ chuckled Mrs. Tarrant, retreating to retrieve her own drink. ‘If Mopsy hadn’t turned up when she did I might even have come trotting over the Brimbles to see if she hadn’t been to call on you.’

‘Does she go as far as that?’ asked Karen.

‘Oh, Lordy, yes. Often. One day last summer the little Cousins girls found her rabbitting up on the Brimbles. They *said* she followed them home but I suspect the little scamps rather encouraged her. Oh, Mopsy knows “Myrtles” all right, don’t you, you wicked girl?’ She scooped up the cat in her free hand, subsided into the arm-chair, and settled her down again in her lap.

I sat beside Karen on the sofa. While I was trying to think of something to say, Karen came out with: ‘Did you know the people who owned the bungalow before Mrs. Cousins?’

I happened to be looking at Mrs. Tarrant at that moment and I saw her eyes flicker rapidly from Karen to me and back again. There was what I can best describe as a curiously speculative expression on her wrinkled face. ‘The Barcombes,’ she said. ‘Tony and Vera Barcombe. I used to know them very well.’

‘I gather they lived in South Africa,’ I said.

‘In Kenya originally. Tony was a coffee planter. He was born out there. “Myrtles” was really Vera’s house. Her grandparents used to live in a village on the other side of Walbersham. She’d spent holidays there as a child. She built the bungalow in 1935 with some money an Aunt left her. She bought the land for a song from old Mr. Walcott who used to own Brimble Farm.’

‘Did the Barcombes have any children?’ asked Karen.

‘They had a son—Peter. He was killed in the war.’

‘Did they ever *live* in “Myrtles”?’ I asked. ‘Or did they just use it when they came back for holidays?’

‘Vera lived there. For five years. From ’53 to ’58. That’s when I really got to know her.’

‘And what happened to Mr. Barcombe?’ I asked.

‘Tony stayed on in Kenya.’

‘They were separated, were they?’

‘Not in the way you mean. After the war Vera became—’ Mrs. Tarrant hesitated ‘—rather depressed . . . ill. Peter’s death hit her very hard. And then there was that frightful Mau-Mau business . . .’ She gazed into the fire, shook her head, and then turned to me with a bright smile. ‘Now tell me, Jim. What is it you’re working on?’

‘I’m writing a novel,’ I said.

‘A *novel*! That sounds *most* exciting. And what kind of a novel is it?’

‘I suppose you’d have to call it political,’ I said. ‘It’s set in Uganda.’

Again I saw that same curious, thoughtful expression flicker across her face. ‘In Uganda,’ she repeated. ‘And is it going well?’

‘I know it’s supposed to be tempting fate to say so,’ I said, ‘but I have to admit I’m pretty pleased with it so far.’

‘That’s splendid. And has it got a title?’

‘Ondoka,’ said Karen.

For about a count of five there was complete silence in the room. Then Mrs. Tarrant rattled the ice cubes around in her glass and took a long swig at her tequila. Karen and I both followed suit. We still had our glasses raised when Mrs. Tarrant said: ‘That’s Swahili, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’ I said. ‘Do you know what it means?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve no idea. But I’m almost sure I remember hearing Vera use it on some occasion. She and Tony often spoke Swahili to one another. What *does* it mean?’

‘We were hoping you might be able to tell *us*,’ said Karen.

‘Me? But I hardly know a word of Swahili, my dear. When I was out there I had to rely entirely on Vera and Tony.’

‘You visited the Barcombes in Kenya?’ I said.

Mrs. Tarrant nodded. ‘I went out in May 1953. Tony begged

me to go. I stayed with them all through that frightful summer and then I brought Vera back to England with me. Kenya's an extraordinarily beautiful country, isn't it?"

'It certainly is,' I said. 'But I've seen some very ugly things happen there.'

'Ugly things happen everywhere,' sighed Mrs. Tarrant. 'The television never seems to show us anything else these days. As if we didn't have more than enough of that during the war.'

'Some of us weren't alive then,' I reminded her.

'And is that what your book's about, Jim? The ugly things?'

'It's about what's happening out there today,' I said. 'Some of it really is pretty appalling. I was working on the story for three months before I got chucked off the paper.'

In response to her probing I told her more or less what had led to my losing my job. From there the conversation drifted off on to Fleet Street and publishing and the usual sort of writers' gossip where it remained until I heard the church clock strike and was shocked to discover that it was already half past one.

Mrs. Tarrant seemed genuinely sorry to see us go. 'I've *so* enjoyed our chat,' she said. 'There aren't many people I can talk shop with in this part of the world. You must promise me you'll both come and visit me again next time Karen's down.'

We assured her we would. 'Drop in for a coffee if you feel like a stroll down to "Myrtles",' I said. 'I usually make myself one at about eleven. I might even manage to rustle up a cup of afternoon tea, if you'd prefer it.'

'That's very sweet of you, Jim,' she said. 'But I shan't make any promises. My legs aren't as young as yours and with this snow about it's only too easy to twist an ankle. I very nearly came a cropper while I was brushing the path this morning.'

We shook hands on the threshold, thanked her once again for her hospitality and set off in the direction of the pub. When we were safely out of earshot I asked Karen what she thought of "Zena Fullbright".

'Cagey,' she said. 'Cagey and a bit spooky.'

'And what about Mopsy? I nearly had a stroke when she asked me how my pussy was enjoying "Myrtles".'

'I thought she was referring to me,' said Karen with a broad grin.

'Zena wouldn't even know the expression,' I said. 'She'd think it was ugly.'

'I was dying to ask her what had happened in Kenya,' said Karen, 'but it seemed just a bit too nose-y. I'll ask her next time though, you see if I don't. And at least we've found out what language "ondoka" is.'

'What made you say it?' I asked.

'I don't know. I didn't even think about it. It just sort of came out.'

'It shook me rigid,' I said. 'It shook her quite a bit, too, I think.'

'Hey,' said Karen. 'You don't suppose she was having it off with Tony Barcombe, do you?'

'Christ!' I exclaimed. 'You can't be serious.'

'No. It was just a thought.'

'You must have been reading Somerset Maugham. I can't imagine Zena having it off with anyone, unless it was the King of the Fairies.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Karen. 'We're talking about thirty years ago, remember. Back in the fifties Zena might have been quite a dish in her own peculiar way.'

'How old do you think she is?' I asked.

'Middle sixties,' said Karen.

'Is that all? I had her down for over seventy. Didn't Phil say her first husband was killed in the war?'

'Well, she could have been married in her early twenties. That would put her in the middle sixties now.'

'It's all those wrinkles,' I said. 'Like the Rosetta stone. Do you suppose she'll turn up at the bungalow?'

Karen laughed. 'If she does, I bet she'll arrive by broomstick.'

•

We had a ploughman's lunch at the 'George and Dragon'. There were only two other customers in the place, an ancient old gaffer who sat huddled silently by the fire and a young man in a dark green boiler-suit who was standing at the bar and was obviously fascinated by Karen. He struck up a conversation and when he learned that we were staying at 'Myrtles' he told us that

he'd had the job of rewiring the bungalow for Mrs. Cousins. 'Coldest bloody house I ever worked in,' he remarked. 'What's it like now?'

'It's fine,' I said. 'Thanks to all your storage heaters. And I imagine they must have had the roof well lagged.'

'Dead right, squire. Six inches of fibreglass. Bob Sanders and his brother did it. They put in them new windows and done the kitchen. Reckon they made a right smart job of it. But cold! We used to have a girt old fire roaring away up the chimney all day long. It didn't seem to make a blind bit of difference. It was still as cold as bloody charity.'

'The place had been empty for years, hadn't it?' I said.

He nodded. 'It use t'belong to some folk called Barcombe. Lived abroad some place. I never knew 'em.'

'She'm still there, Ken,' came a quavery voice.

We all turned our heads towards the fireplace where the voice had come from.

Ken grinned broadly and winked at Karen. 'What's that you say, Dad?' he yelled.

'I'm tellin' 'e, boy. She'm still there. I seen 'er.'

'Who is?' said Karen.

''Er. 'Er as built it. That there Somersfield gel.'

'Oh ar,' said Ken. 'You knew her, did you?'

'Course I knowed 'er, boy. Course I did.'

'Old Dad use t'work for Tom Walcott,' said Ken. ''S'right, innit, Dad?'

'Eh?'

'You use t'work for old Tom Walcott, didn't you?' yelled Ken.

'Ar. I did 'n'all. An' fer 'is dad afore 'im,' volunteered the old man. 'Shillin' a week, boy. Shillin' a week . . .' The ancient voice trickled away into an inaudible mutter like dry sand whispering.

'Over ninety, we are,' Ken confided to Karen in a stage whisper. 'They built 'em to last in them days.' He finished off his beer, wiped his lips with the back of his hand and called out: 'See you tonight, Dave.' Then he bade us farewell and left.

The landlord poked his head in through the open doorway behind the bar, glanced around, nodded amiably to us and vanished again. Karen climbed off her stool and walked over to the fireplace. She squatted down and proffered her hands to the

glowing coals. The wispy old figure stirred in his chair. 'Cold, missy?'

Karen turned to him and smiled, but she didn't say anything.

'She'n a head o' hair like yourn,' he observed after a while. 'Barley bright.'

'Who had?' asked Karen.

'The Somersfield gel.'

'Mrs. Barcombe?'

'Ar.'

'What was she like?'

'She weren't 'appy, tha's fer sure. More'n once I spied 'er up along th' Brimbles a-pipin' 'er eyes out.'

'What was the matter?'

'She never told me narthin'. She never told a soul s'far as I know. But I reckon that gel hev shed more tears 'n April up on th' Brimbles n'along agin' the water.'

'And you say you've seen her?'

'I *seen* 'er. Oh ar, I *seen* 'er.'

'What was she doing?'

'Lookin' fer suthin', I reckon.'

'For what?'

'I dunno, missy. Peace o' mind, mebbe.'

At that point the outside door opened and three men came in. They called out to the old man and one of them went over to the fireplace and began talking to him. Karen made her way back to the bar, looking pensive. I asked her if she'd like another drink but she shook her head. 'Right then,' I said, 'if you're ready we might as well start making tracks for home.'

When we got back Karen disappeared into the kitchen to prepare a casserole for our supper while I unearthed a bucket from the woodstore and shovelled out some of the ash which had accumulated in the grate. Then I carted in several more armfuls of logs, lit the fire, and went along to the bathroom to wash my hands.

Karen's crillyx was still lying on the windowsill where I had left it when I was having my shower. I dried my hands, picked it

up and examined it. Almost the first thing that struck me was how cold it was. It lay there in the centre of my palm like a pebble of ice and brought to my mind a memory of a glacial stream high up in the French Alps above Briançon in which Sheila and I had once bathed on our honeymoon. What had Karen called it? A well-spring of light? I turned it over and contemplated the symbols engraved on the back. Were they really the statement of a timeless truth, or merely a convenient symbol of rationality, something to cling to amid the dark welter of medieval superstition? *The truth, Mr. Fuller. We must tell the truth, must we not?* I gave a wink of complicity to my own image in the mirror above the wash-basin, sauntered down the corridor into the kitchen and looped the talisman over Karen's blonde head. 'How's it coming along?' I asked.

'It's finished,' she said. 'I've put it in a slow oven. Now we can go down and take a close look at the sea.'

'The sea? But it's freezing out there! Listen to that wind! *And* it's starting to snow.'

'You don't have to come if you don't want to.'

'I know,' I grinned. 'But I'd hate to lose you. So go and strap your snowshoes on. Once up to the estuary and back again and that's your lot. O.K.?'

We clambered up to the top of the hissing dunes and scuttled down the other side. The contrast with the last time we had walked this way was extraordinary. The wind was blowing hard from the north, whipping wraiths of fine powdery snow along the foreshore and clawing blobs of grimy yellow foam from the backs of the tumbling waves. They bounced and scurried across the wet sand and were trapped among the hollows of the dunes by the whistling spikes of marram grass. The salt spray stung our eyes and made our lips tingle. By the time we reached the river we were both glad to be able to turn around and offer our backs to the wind.

The light was already beginning to fade, drawing the horizon in about us, and I could scarcely distinguish the dim mound of the Brimbles among the grey murk of the gusting snow when Karen suddenly caught hold of my arm and pointed ahead along the beach. 'There's someone there,' she said. 'Look!'

I peered into the gloom. 'Where?' I said. 'I can't see anything.'

'There! Standing on the top of the dunes!' she cried. 'They're waving their arms.'

'That's a bush,' I said.

'Not *that*. Further on.'

I screwed up my eyes and, for just a moment I did think I glimpsed a dim figure beckoning to us. 'It could be Barbara,' I said, and cupping my hands around my mouth I yelled: 'Hel-lo-ooo!'

'They've gone,' said Karen.

'Well, if it was her, she's bound to go on up to the house,' I said.

'It wasn't her.'

'How could you possibly tell from this distance?' I protested.

'I'm long-sighted.'

'Oh, yes? So who was it then?'

'I don't know.'

When we reached the point where Karen insisted the figure had been we scrambled up to the top of the dunes and looked about us. There was no sign of anyone, not even so much as a solitary footprint. And when we got back to the bungalow, there was no Barbara and no Land Rover. 'So you must have imagined it after all,' I said. 'This really is a great place for imagining things. Don't I know it.'

'But you saw it too,' she said. 'That's why you shouted.'

'I let you persuade me,' I retorted. 'All right, so maybe I did think I saw someone. So I made a mistake. Anyway, I bet I know who *you* think it was.'

She glanced round at me in surprise. 'Oh? Who?'

'Mrs Barcombe.'

Karen looked so utterly taken aback I knew at once that I was mistaken. 'Just kidding,' I said lamely.

'But it was a *man*,' she insisted. 'I'm positive it was a man.'

'I thought we'd just agreed it wasn't anyone.'

'All right then. What I *thought* I saw was a man. Does that satisfy you?'

'Did you see what he was wearing?'

In the act of unzipping her anorak, Karen paused, frowning. 'He was dressed in black,' she said. 'All in black.'

'Then it was obviously Valentine Dyall.'

‘Who?’

‘A sinister figure from the far off days of my pitiful childhood,’ I said, and added in vibrant sepulchral tones: ‘The Man in Black.’

Karen treated me to a dark and smouldering look and marched off to the loo.

She soon forgave me. That was one of the nicest things about Karen—she could never stay angry for long. Sheila used to make a grievance, real or imagined, last for days. She’d suck at it like some everlasting acid-drop until you thought she’d extracted the last bitter morsel of resentment out of it and then, as like as not, she’d wrap it up and hide it away, only to bring it out again months later and suck it some more. Karen preferred to go and wash her hair.

She reappeared about twenty minutes later, robed in my dressing gown and with her head swathed in a towel. She knelt down on the hearth rug and informed me with a grin that I was an insensitive, egocentric, male-chauvinist pig.

‘Whereas you,’ I replied, ‘are a sensitive, self-sacrificing, immaculate vision of feminine perfection. What can we possibly have in common?’

‘Alcohol?’ she suggested.

‘Sex?’ I countered.

‘A joint!’ she exclaimed. ‘I knew there must be *something*. I left the papers on the shelf in the kitchen.’

I collected Peter’s parting gift from the bedroom and the cigarette papers from the kitchen, then I returned to the living room and set about combining the two. Karen hunted through my cassettes, found something to her taste and switched it on. She took the seat cushions from the arm chairs, added a couple of others and stretched herself out lasciviously in front of the fire. I licked up a jumbo-sized joint, screwed up its ends, handed it to her, and then set about preparing another one for myself.

Neither Karen nor I were what you would call heavily into the dope scene, and Peter hadn’t been exaggerating when he said that his was the best in Town. After a few minutes’ steady inhalation I began to feel as if I were floating about a foot above the top of my own head. The thumping of my heart seemed to phase itself in with the background beat of the heavy rock and

that in turn merged in with the whistling of the wind through the struts of the verandah railings. And then I began to hear voices in the distance.

I blinked down at Karen. She was lying back with her eyes closed and a drowsy grin on her face. The neck of the dressing gown was open almost to her waist and the crillyx was lying in the dip between her breasts, angled towards me in such a way that it reflected the fire light directly up into my eyes. With each breath she took it seemed to rock back and forth while the reflection of the flames expanded and contracted, one moment shrinking to a brilliant pin's-head and the next swelling out until it seemed to encompass the whole of the area in which she was lying.

With an almost superhuman effort I forced my eyes shut, but the shape of the crillyx refused to go away. It was as though it had become printed indelibly on my retina. Then something so strange and weird happened that even now I find it almost impossible to describe. The best I can do is to say that I gradually became conscious of an area of intense and menacing shadow which was situated somewhere behind me and it was from there that the voices were coming. I sensed it looming up over me like some monstrous and threatening thunderhead, blacker than any night, utterly terrifying, and at that instant I became aware that what the voices were muttering was: *'Turn your head. Acknowledge me. For I am Chaos.'*

I was being sucked down deeper and deeper into the dark womb of the maelstrom; the throbbing walls of the funnel were closing in around me; only one last, tiny, jewel-point of light remained, and my swooning soul stretched out its arms towards it, clutched it, and held on for dear life. My eyes opened of their own accord and I beheld Karen and the crillyx merging into one. I reached out my hand towards her and at the very instant when my fingers brushed her cheek the verandah door crashed open and a blast of freezing wind rushed howling into the room sending a huge cloud of choking smoke billowing out of the throat of the chimney and my papers swirling in all directions like a flock of startled birds.

Karen jerked up with a wild yelp and grabbed at my arm. I lurched to my feet, stumbled over to the door, forced it shut and

twisted the key in the lock. 'Christ, I'm *freezing!*' she wailed, clutching the dressing-gown tight around her. 'What was it? What happened?'

'It was the wind,' I said. 'The door can't have been properly fastened.' I switched on the standing lamp and dragged the curtains across the blind-eyed windows.

Karen crouched down on all fours and pushed another log on to the fire. 'Some trip,' she shuddered. 'Just listen to that! It sounds like wolves howling.'

I crawled round the floor on my hands and knees collecting the scattered sheets of my manuscript. The pungent woodsmoke made my eyes water. As soon as I had restored the pages to some semblance of order I suggested that we might do worse than decamp next door and fix ourselves a drink while we were waiting for the air to clear.

Karen set off for the bedroom to find herself a jumper and I went into the kitchen. I had just reached down two tumblers from the dresser when she appeared at the doorway, still wrapped in my dressing-gown. 'Jim,' she whispered, 'Jim.'

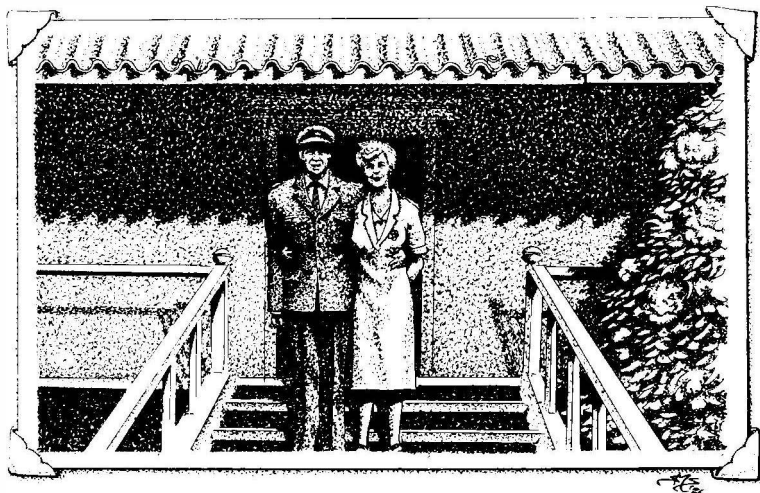
Something in her tone—an unfamiliar, almost pleading note—made me spin round to face her. 'What is it?'

'I'm scared.'

In the three years I had known Karen I had never before heard her speak in quite that tone of voice. It shook me rigid. 'What's the matter, love?' I said.

She took a hesitant step towards me and I saw that her face had gone deathly pale. 'Christ, Karo!' I exclaimed. 'Are you feeling all right?'

She thrust out a groping hand against the side of the fridge and then, before I could get to her, her eyes rolled upwards and she buckled at the knees and slid to the floor in a dead faint.



Chapter 4

I'm not sure how long Karen was out for—at the time it seemed like hours, but it was probably not more than a couple of minutes. She came to hesitantly, like a newly hatched butterfly spreading unfamiliar wings, and blinked up into my anxious face.

'Karo? Are you all right? What happened?'

She caught hold of me by the arms and contrived to drag herself up into a sitting position. I laid a hand on the back of her neck and stroked it gently. Her hair was still damp and smelt of the shampoo she had used. 'What happened?' I repeated. 'What was it scared you?'

She shivered and then drew in a deep, gasping breath. 'The passage,' she whispered. 'In the passage.'

'What about the passage?'

'It was there. I saw it.'

I felt my skin gather itself up into goosepimples. 'You saw it?' I echoed flatly. 'But *what*, Karo? What was it you saw?'

'Dark,' she whispered, so faintly I could barely hear it. 'The dark.'

'You saw something dark?'

She turned her head so that her blue eyes were gazing straight into mine. 'Just the dark,' she said. 'Oh, Jim.' Two brilliant tears gathered along her lower eyelids, spilled over and trailed down her pale cheeks.

I lowered my face and kissed her on the forehead. 'It must have been the pot,' I said. 'You had a lousy trip, that's all. Come on, old thing. Put this on.'

I dragged off my own sweater, pulled it right side out, and pushed it down over her head. Then I freed her arms from the dressing gown sleeves and somehow succeeded in steering her hands into the armholes of the sweater. At which point she began to co-operate.

I helped her up to her feet, guided her over to a chair and sat her down. 'You go ahead and fix us those drinks,' I said. 'I'll be with you in a second.'

I picked up my dressing gown from the floor and walked out of the kitchen and down the passage towards the bedroom. Of the two lights in the corridor the one at the far end nearest to the bedroom was not turned on. I found the wall switch and clicked it down. Nothing happened.

I stood there with my finger resting on the dead switch and gazed along the length of the passage into the shadows. I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs like a prisoner in a cage. *The dark, just the dark.* I ran my tongue along my bottom lip and said, slowly and distinctly: 'In any right angled triangle the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.' Then I drew in a deep breath, paced deliberately down to the far end, turned the handle of the bedroom door, pushed, *and felt something pressing against it from the other side!*

I don't think I'd ever been quite so frightened in my life as I was at that moment. I was so scared that my fingers couldn't even let go of the damned door knob. It was as though they'd become locked round it in a sort of awful rigor-mortis, a paralysis of pure primeval funk. I all but shat myself. And yet, at that very instant, I knew in some inviolable part of myself that it

was really my own panic I was struggling against. It was Karen and the crillyx all over again, except that this time there was no Karen and no crillyx.

And then I think I really must have gone a bit crazy. My blind terror was suddenly transformed into an all-consuming rage. I went berserk. I flung myself against the door, crashing into it with my left knee and my left shoulder. It gave way just enough for me to plunge my arm inside and flail around wildly for the light switch. The rim of black void vanished as the room within flooded with light. At the same moment I perceived a little tongue of pale blue poking out from underneath the door. I let go of the handle, knelt down and caught hold of it. It was the end of the belt of Karen's dressing gown.

I knelt there gripping it in my shaking fingers and then I began to laugh. It was like breathing in lungfuls of pure oxygen. I pulled the door towards me, coaxed the belt along until it was clear of the edge and then I crooked my arm round inside and tugged sideways hard. Next moment the door was swinging free. I pushed it open wide, took a good look round the room, then climbed slowly to my feet and stepped over the threshold.

The explanation of what had happened was so simple that I could hardly believe how frightened I had been. The peg on the back of the door was overloaded with clothes of mine. Karen had looped her dressing gown over the top of them and then, presumably, slammed the door to behind her. The dressing gown had slipped off the peg bringing down a jacket of mine with it. They had dropped on to the carpet immediately behind the door and effectively prevented it from opening. It was all so childishly simple, so obvious, and yet my relief at discovering it was so profound it can scarcely be imagined. I felt like a fighter who has battled his way through fifteen bruising rounds, been knocked down half a dozen times and then emerged from his punch-drunk stupor to find that the referee is holding his arm aloft in victory.

I flung the jacket and the two dressing gowns on to the bed, dug myself out another sweater from the chest of drawers, and then trotted back down the passage to the cloakroom where I hunted out a new light bulb and replaced the one which had blown.

From the vantage point of hindsight I can see quite clearly that my winning of that pitched battle against my own imagination was a real turning point. After it, instead of keeping my mind 'a thoroughfare for all thoughts,' I closed it off into a rigid one-way system. From now on I *knew*. Unfortunately I forgot that none are so blind as those who refuse to see.

When I told Karen what had happened to me in the bedroom I turned it into a joke against myself. She smiled because she knew I wanted her to, but I suspect she found it a good deal harder than I did to see the funny side. Nor, after that, would she discuss with me what it was which had so frightened her in the first place. 'I'm sure you're right,' she said. 'It was the pot, and I was just being stupid.'

Unless you count Pusser's failing to put in an appearance, nothing the least bit out of the ordinary happened over the rest of the weekend. We spent the Sunday evening at Brimble Farm playing cards with Barbara and Phil, and Karen returned to London after lunch on the Monday. Her parting words to me were: 'I'll try and find out what "ondoka" means and let you know.' It is a fair comment on my altered state of mind that until she reminded me of it I'd simply forgotten all about it.

I plunged straight back into the book like a parched Bedouin into an oasis. Without my really being aware that I was doing it, I suppose I had gone on writing the story in my head even while Karen was with me. It was almost as if it was using me to get itself written. I didn't even stop to make myself supper and it was close on midnight when I reluctantly removed my tired fingers from the typewriter keys. I drank a glass of milk, ate an apple and wandered off to bed. I reached under my pillow for my pyjamas and there, lying on top of them, was the crillyx. I picked it up, wishing devoutly that I was seeing it round Karen's neck, then in a sort of token gesture to her fond and absent spirit I slipped the chain over my head and climbed into bed.

The wind which had so dominated the weekend had blown itself out, and I fell asleep to the far off grumbling of the breaking waves. I dreamt that I was back in Africa. I had been arrested but no one would tell me what I was being charged with. I knew

that I would have to confess to my crime in order to obtain my release but I did not know what crime I was being accused of. I was handed a sheet of paper and a pencil and told I had simply to describe in my own words what had happened. I wrote: 'I have been arrested. I do not know why' and signed it. Then I saw that the name I had signed it with was 'Vera Barcombe.' I dropped the pencil and looked down at my hands and found they were covered in blood. At which point, mercifully, I woke up.

I lay there in the dark room, panting as though I had been running in a race. Then I got out of bed and went into the bathroom. I filled the basin with hot water, plunged my hands in up to the wrist then soaped them all over and scrubbed them with the nailbrush, paying meticulous attention to my nails and the skin between my fingers. Then I emptied the basin, rinsed off the soap under the running tap, and finally rubbed the nailbrush all the way round the inner rim of the basin to make sure it was completely clean. I dried myself on the hand towel, took a sleeping pill, and went back to bed.

I woke to find the sun streaming into the room and for some minutes I lay there on the borders of sleep, blinking up at the blue sky and the puffs of silvery cloud, and experiencing what I can best describe as a sort of spiritual jet-lag, as though some vital part of myself was still trying to catch up with the rest. I put it down to an after-effect of the Mogadon tablet and by the time I had showered, dressed, and drunk a cup of strong black coffee, things had more or less reverted to normal. I say 'more or less' because when I had settled myself in front of the typewriter that weird nightmare was still hovering around in the back of my head and I found that I could not get started on my story until I had first written down all I could remember of it. Once that was done I was seemingly absolved and able to forge ahead with the new chapter.

I worked right through the day with only a brief break for a sandwich at lunch time and by that evening I had added another five thousand words to my total—roughly double my daily average. It was as though I had paddled my canoe out into the middle of the river and the main current had seized it and was sweeping it downstream. I was still in control, but only just.

Nor did I really know what might be lying in wait for me around the next bend.

To be on the safe side I had a hot bath and took another knock-out pill before I went to bed. That night my sleep was not troubled by any strange dreams, or if it was I had forgotten them by the next morning. I woke at half past eight, went into the bathroom and discovered to my annoyance that I had left the cold tap in the wash basin running all night. The nail brush was lying across the plug-hole at the bottom of the sink.

I was in the middle of cleaning my teeth when it dawned on me that the nail brush had no right to be there at all. I had used it in the bath before I went to bed and I was almost certain that I remembered putting it into the wall soap dish when I was wiping round afterwards. Nor, for that matter, was I in the habit of leaving taps running, though that could be put down to simple oversight. However, this trivial incident bothered me far less than the discovery I made some ten minutes later that I was almost out of bread and milk and down to my last two eggs. That meant I would have to postpone starting work for at least half an hour while I trailed up to the farm and back again. I felt as frustrated as a baby who has been denied its stint at the breast.

The sunshine evaporated my irritation long before I reached Brimble Farm. It was like a morning in April. High over my head gulls wheeled against the cloudless blue like glittering scraps of silver paper. The air could have been charged with electricity. Brilliant rainbow sparks flashed from the waterdrops in the webs on the gorse bushes. Only a few lurking traces of the snow remained and I guessed that they would all be gone by the evening. I strode on my way whistling.

Phil Fenwick was in the Dutch barn helping to unload a delivery of blue plastic sacks of fertilizer. He gave me a cheery wave and called out that I'd find Barbara up in the house. She opened the door to me as I was walking up the path. 'Hello there,' she said. 'Managed to tear ourselves away from the typewriter, have we?'

'For half an hour,' I said. 'I've come on the cadge for milk and eggs. And a loaf of bread too, if you can spare it.'

'There's one in the freezer you can have. Come on in.'

I pulled off my gumboots, left them on the doorstep and followed her inside.

'You've just saved me a journey,' she said. 'I was going to pop down this afternoon.'

'You were?'

'Karen phoned yesterday evening. She gave me a message for you.'

'Oh, yes?'

'It was something you'd asked her to find out. Some word. I wrote it down.' She picked up an envelope from beside the telephone. 'She said to tell you it *is* Swahili and it means "Go away; Clear off; Get lost". Are you any the wiser?'

I shook my head. 'No. Not really. Did she say how she'd found it out?'

'Asked someone, I think she said. What was this word, anyway?'

'Ondoka.'

Barbara had begun to move off towards the kitchen. When she heard me say it she stopped, turned her head and stared at me. 'What did you say?'

'Ondoka,' I repeated. 'It's Swahili.'

'That's really odd,' she said. 'Do you know who once asked me if I knew what that meant?'

'Ondoka?'

She nodded.

'Someone asked *you* what it meant?'

'Yes. Mrs. Henshaw. The day they left. I'd gone down to the bungalow to read the meter. She came into the cloakroom while I was doing it. She shut the door behind her and asked me if I knew what "ondoka" meant. She was whispering so I had to get her to say it twice. That's really why I've remembered it.'

'She didn't say *why* she wanted to know?'

'Not to me, she didn't. But that was the word all right. I'd swear to it.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her how I'd first come across it, but I didn't. All I said was: 'Well, if anyone else asks, you'll be able to tell them now, won't you?'

She treated me to a sort of half-amused, half-curious look, then she chuckled and continued on her way to the kitchen

where she dug a rock-hard loaf out of her deep-freeze, boxed me up a dozen eggs and found two bottles of milk. She made an entry in a notebook then put everything into a plastic carrier bag which she presented to me. 'Will Karen be coming down next weekend?' she asked.

'No. On Saturday she's going out to the theatre with her flat-mate and she can't get the Monday off. But she'll be down again on Friday week.'

'No other visitors?'

'Not so far as I know.'

'Well then, why don't you come up and have lunch with us on Sunday? Good old English roast beef and Yorkshire pud.'

'Are you sure, Barbara?'

'I wouldn't be asking you if I wasn't, would I?'

'That's great,' I said. 'Really sweet of you. And it'll make a welcome change from living out of tins.'

'How are you coping with the laundry?'

'Karo pushed a load through the machine on Sunday. I don't use much.'

'And how's the book going?'

'Fine,' I said. 'Really well.'

'That's nice. And has the cat come back?'

'No sign of her. But maybe now the snow's gone . . .'

'Phil thinks there's more of that to come. He's usually right, worse luck. By the way, I've got to go to Walbersham in an hour. Do you want me to shop you anything while I'm there?'

On the point of declining her offer I remembered that I was almost out of whisky. 'Yes, please,' I said. 'I could do with another bottle of Johnnie Walker, if it's not too much bother.'

'I've got to go to the International. They're bound to keep it. Anything else?'

'Nothing Mrs. Rumble's emporium can't supply.' I took out my wallet, extracted a ten pound note and handed it to her. 'Hang on to it till Friday for me. I'm not that desperate. I'll pick it up when I come for the milk.'

That evening, just as it was beginning to get dark, Pusser reappeared. I was inserting a new sheet of paper into the typewriter when I heard a tell-tale scrabble and a thump followed by a strident *miaow!* *miaow!* *miaow!* I turned round in my chair to see her marching in through the hall doorway with her tail in the general salute position. 'Well, well,' I said. 'Look who's here. Does Zena know you're out?'

She trotted across the room, purring loudly, and began stropping herself against the back legs of my chair. I reached down, picked her up and set her down on my lap. Her tail whisked back and forth across my chin like a furry metronome. I transferred her to the table and regarded her levelly. 'Mopsy?' I said.

The purring seemed to change gear, became a little deeper, more resonant.

'Pusser?' I said.

She pirouetted round and presented her backside to my face. Her sphincter seemed to be winking at me conspiratorially. She tried, unsuccessfully, to rub herself against the typewriter carriage. By now the purring was really impressive; positively jungly. 'Am I to take it you're telling me you're glad to see me?' I said. 'Is that it?'

She turned neatly in her own length, laid back her ears, presented the tip of her nose to mine and sniffed most delicately.

'Well, so am I,' I said, returning sniff for sniff. 'Welcome back. There's still half a tin of yours in the fridge, if you're interested.'

I pushed back my chair and stood up. She was off the table and half way to the kitchen before I'd taken two steps.

She kept me company all that evening. When I went to bed shortly before midnight I picked her up and carried her down to the bedroom intending to let her spend the night as she had once before, curled up on my dressing gown at the foot of the bed. But she wouldn't have it. The moment I stepped over the threshold I felt her suddenly go tense in my arms. I glanced down and saw that her fur was all standing up on end and her eyes staring wide. I stooped and put her down on the floor. She stood for a moment, stiff-legged and trembling with her back arched, then she turned, shot past me and vanished down the passage.

I switched on the electric blanket then walked back down the corridor in search of her, but as I expected she was gone. I collected the radio from the kitchen, switched over to Radio Four and caught the tail end of a poetry recital. As I carried the set into the bathroom I heard—

*For I will consider my cat, Geoffrey,
For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him,
For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and
glaring eyes,*

For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.

There was a pause and then a cultured B.B.C. voice said: 'You have been listening to *The Sun My Quill*, a programme based on the life and work of Christopher Smart. Those taking part were . . .' and there followed a list of names.

'For I will consider my cat, Pusser,' I declaimed, unscrewing the cap of the toothpaste,

'For she is the paramour of Zena Fullbright, and possibly
her familiar also,

For she hath a tail like an animated bottle-brush, and
golden eyes and silver whiskers,

And all unbeknown to her mistress she leadeth a life of
diabolical duplicity.'

In bed I listened to the late news and the weather forecast and was just drifting off to sleep when I heard a woman's voice whisper at my ear: *Kisu Kimoja Kilitosha*.

I opened my eyes. The radio was standing on the bed-side table about eighteen inches from my head. I could see the faintly luminous glow-worm of the wave-band indicator.

Kisu Kimoja Kilitosha.

Suddenly I was wide awake. I reached up and pulled the cord of the overhead light switch then I stretched across and lifted up the radio. Radio Four had gone off the air and I had presumably picked up some foreign station in the background. I changed wave-bands and fiddled about until I had located the World Service, then I put the set down again and switched off the light.

Five minutes later I turned the light on again, climbed out of bed and padded barefoot through into the sitting room where I unearthed the sheet of paper on which I had typed out my

account of Monday night's dream. Across the bottom I wrote: KISU KIMOJA KILITOSHA. Then, realizing that I would never get to sleep otherwise, I went into the bathroom and swallowed a Mogadon tablet.



Next morning I treated myself to a cooked breakfast then I washed up, did my few household chores and shortly after half past nine I was back in front of the typewriter. I checked through what I had written the day before, glanced at my few brief guide notes to the next section and was all ready to start work when I discovered that the springs of inspiration had suddenly run dry. It was a strange sensation, almost as if a sheet of clear glass had been interposed between myself and the creatures of my own imagination; I could *see* what I wanted to describe but I could no longer *feel* it. I typed a couple of sentences hoping they would start things flowing again, but it was no use. I'd run aground on a mental sandbank and I couldn't push myself off. I was stuck in Limbo.

I sat there with my chin propped in my hands and gazed out of the window at the sea. I wasn't conscious of thinking of anything in particular, but then I realized that I *was* thinking of something. I opened the folder in which I had put the account of my dream, read it through and stared at the three words I had printed across the bottom. KISU KIMOJA KILITOSHA. I tried saying them aloud and no sooner had I uttered them than I knew that they were what was blocking me—like a 'Keep Out' notice nailed up across the Gates of Paradise. I looked at my watch and saw that it was just after ten. I folded the sheet of paper, slipped it inside my wallet and stuffed the wallet into the back pocket of my jeans. Then I went into the kitchen, made a rapid check-list of things I needed, collected the holdall and the bike and set out for St. Mellows.

Having done my shopping and made certain I had sufficient change I cycled down to the pub and put through a phone call to Karen's office. There was a brief delay and then she came on the line.

'Jim! How are you?'

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Missing you though. Especially under the duvet. Barbara gave me your message.'

'Were you surprised?'

'I don't really know. Were you?'

'No, I don't think so. It sort of made sense, didn't it?'

'Your sort of sense, maybe. Not mine.'

She laughed. 'How's the book going?'

'Like an express train. That is it *was*. Right up until this morning. That's really why I'm phoning you. Have you got a pencil handy?'

'Not *another* ondoka?'

'No. Something else this time. I'll try and spell it out for you.' Which I did. 'That's my attempt at phonetic,' I said. 'Have you got it?'

She repeated it faithfully.

'Can you find out if it means anything?'

'I can try Peter again. He knows someone at the Beeb who speaks Swahili. Ondoka was easy enough. Where did you see this one?'

'I didn't *see* it,' I said. 'I heard it. Last night just as I was dropping off to sleep. At least I *think* I did. I wrote it down and now it's been bugging me all morning.' I glanced down at the paper I was holding. 'And here's something else for you, Karo. What do you make of this?' I read out the brief account of my dream.

'That's *weird*, Jim,' she said. '*Really* weird. Have you spoken to Zena?'

'To Zena? No. I haven't seen her since Saturday. Pusser's turned up again though. She dropped in last night.'

'Go and have a talk to Zena about that dream.'

'Oh, Christ, Karo, I can't do *that!* She'd think I was a raving looney!'

'No she wouldn't. Go on. Go and see her. Then you can ring me back and tell me all about it. I'm dying to know what she says.'

'But what can *I* say?' I wailed.

'Oh, you'll think of something. Use the cat as an excuse. Or you could even tell her the truth. Yes, why don't you do that? Ask her advice. One writer to another. She's into all that sort of occult stuff. She'd love it.'

'I don't know,' I said doubtfully. 'I'll think about it.'

'You go and do it,' she said severely. 'Right now. She only lives just round the corner.'

'Well, maybe. I'll see.'

'Coward.'

'That's my middle name,' I said. 'All right, I'll do it. Just to prove to you how brave I am. Wish me luck.'

'You've got my crillyx,' she said. 'That'll see you through.'

'I'm not *absolutely* sure, Karo, but I *think* I love you,' I said, and put the receiver down.



Zena was wearing her composing smock. She told me so. It looked like a Laura Ashley Special and at a rough estimate I should have said it was about fifty years too young for her. I apologised abjectly for having disturbed her and said I'd call round again some other day, whereupon she seized hold of me by the arm and drew me indoors. 'I was just about to make myself a coffee, Jim,' she said. 'You couldn't *possibly* have chosen a better time.'

She led me through into the kitchen where my eye was immediately drawn to the two cats draped over the top of the refrigerator. 'How's Mopsy?' I asked.

'She's a completely reformed character,' said Zena. 'The repentant prodigal. I don't believe she's been out of the house for more than five minutes ever since she came back.'

'Are you sure of that?' I said. 'I could have sworn I saw her yesterday evening.'

'It couldn't have been Mopsy,' she said. 'Yesterday evening we were both watching Coronation Street. Coronation Street and Dallas are her two favourites. She *adores* J.R.'

'Has she got a twin sister in the village?'

'She has heaps of step-brothers and sisters—older *and* younger. All on the father's side, if you follow me.'

'And is she here now?' I asked, peering up at the fridge.

'That's Flopsy and Cottontail. Mopsy's in my den—my study. I like to have her with me when I'm working. That's why I was so upset when she disappeared like that. It's the vital

rapport one misses. I expect you find the same.'

'I know what you mean,' I said. 'What is it you're working on now? Or don't you like to talk about it?'

'I don't mind a scrap,' she said. 'It's a ten line commission for *Milady's Boudoir*. A Spring Garland. Snowdrops and crocuses. As a matter of fact I'm having a bit of bother with rhymes for crocus.' She laughed. 'I keep tripping over "hocus-pocus" and "focus". You can't think of anything, can you?'

I pondered the problem. 'Well,' I offered tentatively, 'I suppose if you were to make them plural you might work in something to do with "kisses".'

'Snow kisses!' she cried, clapping her hands together. 'Oh, that's *beautiful*, Jim!'

'Or how about "blow kisses"?' I said, warming to the challenge. "'Shy snowdrops something something and the breeze blows kisses . . .'"

Zena was regarding me with what almost amounted to awe. 'That's *lovely*,' she whispered. 'Perfectly *lovely*. May I steal it?'

'It's yours,' I smiled. 'You're more than welcome. Now can I ask you to do something for me in exchange?'

She nodded dreamily, obviously still reeling among the crocuses under the influence of my genius.

'Karen thinks you may be able to help me sort something out.'

'Sweet, lovely Karen. Where is she?'

'She's back in Town. She went back on Monday. I spoke to her on the phone just now.'

The percolator gave a muffled belch. Zena adjusted the temperature control and moved across to the stove. She reached down a saucepan and put some milk on to heat. 'I expect it's something to do with "Myrtles",' she said.

'Is it? I wouldn't know.'

'Tell me, Jim. Has anything happened?'

'No. Nothing's happened,' I said flatly.

'But I think it has,' she insisted. 'Otherwise you wouldn't be here. You'd be working.'

On the point of protesting that I'd only come into the village to do some shopping I gave in. I reached into my pocket and took out the paper on which I'd typed out the account of my dream. 'I'd like you to read this, Zena,' I said, unfolding it, 'and

tell me if it means anything to you.'

She dipped into the pocket of her smock, fished out a pair of pink framed spectacles and put them on. Then she took the paper from me, held it up in front of her and peered at it. I watched closely as her eyes moved down the page and saw her frown and shake her head. 'Poor Vera,' she murmured. 'Poor dear Vera.'

Behind her I suddenly saw the milk rise frothing in the saucepan. I leapt forward and grabbed it just in time. Zena gave a startled squeak and jumped as though I'd attacked her. 'Sorry,' I apologised, 'I didn't meant to frighten you. What do you make of it?'

'Poor tormented soul,' she said, handing me back the paper. 'Will she never find peace?'

'What happened to her, Zena?'

'She had a nervous breakdown.'

'I've never really understood what that means,' I said.

'She turned in upon herself—shut herself off. She wouldn't talk to anyone. The native servants believed she'd been possessed by a "pepo"—an evil spirit.'

'That was when you went out there, was it?'

She nodded. 'Vera tried to do away with herself twice. Tony was at his wit's end with the strain. He was drinking far too much and he felt he couldn't trust anybody. So in the end he sent for me.'

'But why?' I asked. 'What had happened?'

'Vera was in terrible trouble.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'With the police. Nothing was ever proved, of course.'

I stared at her. 'Proved,' I echoed. 'You mean she was *tried*?'

'Oh, yes, there was a trial. In the High Court in Nairobi. She was found not guilty.'

'Not guilty of *what*?'

'Of murder.'

'Good God!' I said.

Zena took off her glasses and restored them to her pocket. She reached down two cups and saucers and set them out on a tray. Then she unplugged the electric percolator, poured the hot milk

into a jug and added spoons, a sugar basin and two wrapped chocolate biscuits.

'Here, let me carry that for you,' I said.

'You can bring the percolator,' she said. 'But be careful. It's very hot.'

We sat side by side on the sofa and she poured out the coffee. 'Help yourself to milk, Jim. You'll know how you like it.'

'And what do you make of that dream of mine?' I asked. 'Can you explain it?'

'Oh, I'm sure Vera's trying to get in touch with you,' she said. 'She must think you'll be able to help.'

'You don't really expect me to believe that, do you?'

'Ah, *now* I understand,' she said with a smile. 'You don't believe in the after life.'

'I *can't*, Zena,' I protested. 'I believe in birth and death and the power of the human imagination, but that's my lot. Isn't it enough?'

'Enough?' she mused. 'Well, perhaps. Perhaps for you it is.'

'What does that mean?'

'We're all free to make our own bargains,' she said. 'No one has a monopoly of the truth. Do have a Penguin.'

I picked up the remaining chocolate biscuit from the tray, unwrapped it and snapped it in half. In the act of lifting a piece to my lips I turned to her and said: 'Do you think the bungalow's haunted?'

'I don't *think* it is,' she replied. 'I *know* it is.'

'By Vera Barcombe's ghost?'

'By her unhappiness. And by her terrible fear.'

'But not by her ghost?'

'That *is* her ghost, Jim.'

I gazed at Zena with a wholly new respect. 'What was it she was so afraid of?'

'I never really understood. Vera would never talk about it. All she ever said to me was that she'd once looked into the heart of darkness and now she saw the darkness in everything. I think it must have been fear of losing her reason.'

'So what *did* happen out there? What murder was she tried for?'

'Her Kikuyu houseboy. Her lawyer pleaded self-defence.'

Zena got up from the sofa, walked over to a bureau and tugged open the bottom drawer. From it she removed what looked like a photograph album. 'You can borrow this, if you'd like to, Jim,' she said. 'It's the scrapbook I kept while I was in Kenya. It's got a lot of the newspaper reports of Vera's trial. I've forgotten so many of the details by now. Take it with you when you go.'

'Thank you very much,' I said. 'It sounds absolutely fascinating. I promise I'll take great care of it.'

'Yes, I'm sure you will,' she said. 'And now do let's talk about something more cheerful.'



Before I went back to the bungalow I phoned Karen and told her what had happened. 'I'm having second thoughts about Zena,' I concluded. 'She may be an odd-ball but she's no raving nutter.'

'I still think she's spooky,' said Karen. 'What's made you change your mind?'

'Something she said about ghosts—or about this particular ghost.'

'Go on.'

'She said what was haunting the bungalow was Mrs. Barcombe's unhappiness and her fear of going mad. I think I can understand that in a way.'

'That's more or less what the old man said, isn't it?'

'What old man?'

'The one in the pub. He told me he thought she was looking for peace of mind.'

'Yes, I'd forgotten about him.'

I heard voices at Karen's end of the line. 'Sorry, Love,' she murmured. 'Duty calls. Will you ring me again?'

'O.K.,' I said. 'On Sunday. I've been invited to lunch at the farm with Barbara and Phil. Can you fix to be in the flat at about two o'clock?'

'I'll make a point of it. Take care, Jim.'

'You too, Karo. Enjoy the play. Oh, and don't forget to check out that Swahili, if that's what it is.'

'I will.' And she was gone.

Ten minutes later I climbed down from the bike and began the wearisome plod up to the top of the Brimbles. By now all traces of the snow had disappeared but the close-cropped turf was still spongy underfoot and twice I slipped and nearly fell. When I reached the pines I paused to get my breath back. As I leant panting over the handlebars, gazing out at the misty line of the northern coast, I suddenly sensed that I was not alone. I turned my head, fully expecting to see someone else on the Brimbles, and there was no one at all. But so convinced was I in my own mind that I hadn't just imagined it that I propped the bike against the nearest tree and walked along the top of the ridge peering around me. When at last I was satisfied that the place really was deserted I returned to the bike and wheeled it down the track to the bungalow. Even so I couldn't entirely rid myself of the odd sensation that I was being spied on, and I remember looking back up the slope after I'd put the bike away in the shed, still half-expecting to see someone standing there.

Zena had taken the sensible precaution of wrapping her album in newspaper and putting it into a plastic bag. I took the bag out of the holdall and laid it on the dresser while I unpacked the shopping. Then I carried it through into the sitting room, fully intending to unwrap it and examine it, but I caught sight of the sheet of paper I'd left in the typewriter. I walked across, re-read the two sentences I'd written, and discovered that the barrier between me and my story had completely vanished. I sat down and began to type.

I ate my lunch between paragraphs and worked on all through that afternoon and well into the evening. One of my characters, a Baganda girl I'd called Bimu, had taken such a hold on my imagination that she was threatening to drag my plot off course into completely uncharted territory. I had become aware of strange new vistas opening up all around me, demanding to be explored, and the excitement I felt at the discovery was tinged with apprehension at where I might eventually find myself.

After supper, in an attempt at self-reassurance, I sat down and read through the whole of my script with all the disinterested critical perception I could muster. I ended up convinced that not only was I doing the right thing, but that there was

absolutely nothing else I *could* do. The story had a quality of inevitability about it that was almost hypnotic. Even at those places where I clearly recalled having surprised myself by some odd twist or turn in the narrative I now perceived an underlying pattern as plain and inexorable as death itself. The discovery was oddly disquieting.

I replaced the folder on the table by the typewriter, scribbled down a couple of pointers for the next section, then picked up the bag containing Zena's album. I had just unsheathed it from its plastic sack and was about to unwrap the newspaper when Pusser appeared, demanding to be fed. I went out into the kitchen, opened up a fresh can for her and then poured the last half-inch of whisky into a tumbler, added ice and water and carried it back with me into the sitting room.

The middle of the first page of the album was occupied by a photograph of a bungalow which looked remarkably like "Myrtles" except that it had a roof of corrugated iron and the steps were central to the verandah instead of being set to one side. Standing half-way up these steps with their arms round each other were a young man in Air Force uniform and a slim, rather pretty woman, with short blonde hair. They were both smiling down at the camera. Underneath, in what I recognized as Zena's handwriting, was the inscription: 'Vera and Peter. Kirktura. May 1943. Taken by Tony.'

I turned the page and was confronted with four views. One, which must have been taken from the same verandah, showed a distant, snow-capped peak, which I guessed to be Mount Kenya. The others were landscape views of the plantation. In the foreground of one of them an elderly man was sitting at the wheel of a jeep. At the bottom of the page Zena had written: 'Taken during my stay. Kirktura. June 1953.'

The next two pages were devoted to snapshots of various individuals and groups of people. The pictures appeared to have been taken at a garden party. As a variation from her handwritten script Zena had pasted in small typed labels under the photographs. I was thus able to identify the man who had been in the jeep as Doctor Bancroft. Another plump, bespectacled figure, with large sweat stains under his arm-pits and a beaming grin, who reminded me vaguely of Kirk Porson, was named

'Mr. McLeish'. And among the others I came across Zena herself, thirty years younger but quite unmistakable, caught by the camera as she was chatting to Tony Barcombe—a tall, leathery looking man with short, iron-grey hair and a dark neat thumb-print of a moustache. He was glancing suspiciously towards the photographer as though about to demand that the incriminating film be surrendered to him immediately. I hunted for a picture of Vera but I couldn't find one. Nor was there any sign of a coloured person.

There followed a further page of views of various kinds, several of which had been taken in Nairobi, and, last of all, I discovered the one I had been looking for, though I doubt if I would have recognized it if it hadn't been for Zena's caption: 'V. about to board the plane.'

I stared at the pale wraith in dark glasses whose thin fingers were entwined so tightly around the strap of her white handbag that I felt I could almost see the marks which must have been left imprinted on the flesh. Somewhere, I knew, I'd seen that face before; there was an instant of imaginative identification so acute that I shivered and all but upset my drink. *I have been arrested. I do not know why.*

I turned the page. Pasted overleaf was a newspaper cutting from the *East African Standard* headed in bold, heavy type: 'Barcombe Trial Opens.' I unfolded the time-yellowed newsprint and began to read.

It was long gone midnight when I concertinaed up the last of the cuttings and leafed back through the album till I reached the pictures taken at the garden party. Although Zena nowhere said so I guessed that it must have been held in celebration of Vera's acquittal. Through my reading of the court reports these people had become more to me than mere names. They were part of the cast of a drama which had kept Nairobi enthralled for three whole weeks. The man with the sweaty armpits was revealed as Frank McLeish, Q.C., Vera's Defence Counsel, who had every reason for looking so remarkably pleased with himself. A tall, uniformed man with an 'L' shaped scar on his left cheek was Inspector Deveril who had been in charge of the police investigation. Doctor Bancroft—the man in the jeep—had given his expert and exhaustive testimony concerning the

nature of the wounds on the body of the deceased; and at least a dozen of the others had had walk-on parts, had stood for their moment in the spotlight and had taken their bow. Only the Prosecuting Counsel and Vera herself were missing, along with those totally invisible but wholly indispensable witnesses, Hilda Banuti and Peter Kjano. And rising up behind them all until its long sunset shadow had stretched right across the courtroom was Mau-Mau, that spectre of elemental darkness which was growing like a malignant tumour in the very heart of black Africa.

In the end it was that insubstantial shadow which had tipped the scales for Vera. McLeish had been able to portray her to the jury as the courageous little white woman fighting for her life against the massed legions of primeval darkness—a sort of living symbol of the eternal struggle between good and evil. The Prosecution's contention that Mrs. Barcombe had stabbed Joseph M'Wangato to death in a frenzy of jealous frustration when he had rejected her sexual advances, must have sent a shudder of the purest archetypal horror through the packed court. But those awkward, gritty little bits of fact which might have seemed to lend a certain substance to the Prosecution's case had by then been swept into oblivion before the dramatic revelation that indisputable evidence of a Mau-Mau oath-taking ceremony had been uncovered on the Barcombe plantation. Admittedly nothing was brought forward to suggest that Joseph M'Wangato had participated in the gruesome ritual, but neither was there any conclusive proof that he had not. He was a Kikuyu and, in the Summer of 1953, that was enough. What was more, since he was indisputably dead, Joseph himself was in no position to protest his innocence.

The judge had summed up strongly in Vera's favour. The jury was out for less than an hour. Mrs. Barcombe, her courage commended and her purity acclaimed, had left the court a free woman amid scenes of general rejoicing. Within a week she was back in England, and in England she had stayed until her husband had sold up the plantation and emigrated to South Africa in 1958.

I turned back to the very first page of the album and stared long and hard at that photo of Vera and her son, trying to see in her a woman who would one day be found, clad only in a blood-

stained nightdress, lying unconscious beside the naked body of a black man who had come to kill her and had been killed himself. My imagination balked at it. Yet that was what the jury had been persuaded had happened. Left alone in that remote bungalow while her husband was four hundred miles away in Mombasa, this frail woman had struggled alone in the darkness with her armed assailant and had succeeded in wresting the weapon from him and stabbing him to death. No fewer than eight separate and distinct wounds had been found on the corpse. And if not that way, then how *had* it happened? I had no means of knowing. But I could not rid myself of the suspicion that whatever else might have come to light in that courtroom, the real truth had stayed hidden.



At half past ten the following morning I took advantage of Janice Beaney's weekly clean-up to walk along to the farm and collect my milk and the bottle of whisky which Barbara had bought for me. She invited me to stay and have a coffee with her. Since there was no point in my trying to write while Janice was Hoovering and polishing around in the sitting room I was happy to accept.

'We look a bit droopy around the eyes, this morning,' Barbara observed. 'Been overdoing it, have we?'

'I was up until two o'clock,' I said. 'Not writing though. I was reading about Mrs. Barcombe.'

'What about Mrs. Barcombe?'

'She was tried on a murder charge out in Kenya in 1953.'

'Pull the other one,' said Barbara.

'It's absolutely true, Barbara. Cross my heart. I've been going through the newspaper reports.'

'Well, it's the first I've ever heard of that. How on earth did you discover it?'

'Zena—Mrs. Tarrant—told me. She lent me the newspaper cuttings. She was out there when it happened.'

'Go on.'

'Vera—Mrs. Barcombe—was acquitted. Got off scot-free. It was during the Mau-Mau uprising.'

‘What happened?’

‘That’s a very good question,’ I said. ‘According to the police evidence, Mrs. B. was found flaked out on the floor of her bedroom, covered in blood, with a naked Kikuyu houseboy stretched out cold beside her. He’d been stabbed through the heart. The Defence maintained that this bloke, Joseph M’Wangato, had taken a Mau-Mau oath and come along to carve her up, only she’d killed him instead in self-defence. There was no question he was dead. They found over half a dozen knife holes in him.’

Barbara’s eyes had gone as round as saucers. ‘Good grief,’ she whispered.

‘It takes some imagining, doesn’t it?’ I said.

‘And you say Mrs. Tarrant was there when this happened?’

‘Well, not when the actual killing took place. She went out soon after. She was there all during the trial. She brought Mrs. B. back to England with her.’

‘I’ve never even heard so much as a whisper of it,’ said Barbara. ‘You’d have thought they’d still be talking about it in Mellers.’

‘Who would have told them? Certainly not Mrs. B. That only leaves Mrs. Tarrant, and she was bosom pals with the Barcombes.’

‘Still these things usually do have a way of leaking out. Someone meets someone who knows someone else. You’d be surprised.’

‘I gather Vera Barcombe kept herself very much to herself,’ I said. ‘She had some sort of nervous breakdown apparently. And then in ’58 she went to live in South Africa. After that they only came back to England occasionally.’

‘Why was he starkers?’ said Barbara.

‘Why was who what?’

‘Him. Joseph Thingummy. The bloke she killed. Why hadn’t he got any clothes on?’

‘Ah, well,’ I said. ‘Now here you’ve got two clear choices. If you believe the Defence it was because the Mau-Mau made a practice of stripping off before they got down to the butchery. If you prefer the Prosecution version it was because she and Joseph had been in the habit of having it off together whenever Mr. B. was called away on business.’

‘That’s what I was wondering,’ she said.

‘It caused a sensation in the court when the Prosecution came out with it. The notion of a black man and a white woman having it off together must have touched some pretty deep-seated fears in male colonial hearts.’

‘But surely it must have happened sometimes?’

‘You bet it did,’ I said. ‘After all, sex is sex and Africa’s a big place.’

‘So what do *you* think happened?’

‘I honestly don’t know what to think. It was obvious from his summing-up that the judge gave Vera the benefit of whatever doubt there was. But it wasn’t as simple as that. Mau-Mau signalled the beginning of the end for the whites in British Africa. Admittedly it took another ten years before Kenya got its independence, but the writing was there on the wall for everyone to read. The Barcombe Case developed into a sort of symbolic Rorke’s Drift—a last heroic stand for white man’s rule against black man’s witchcraft, or as they would have seen it, for enlightenment against barbarism. I doubt if the real truth ever had very much to do with it.’

‘And what does Mrs. Tarrant think?’

‘I don’t really know. She seems to have been very fond of Vera Barcombe. I tried to pump her a bit but I didn’t get very far. But she did lend me her scrap-book to look at. When I take it back I’ll try and get her to fill in some of the gaps for me.’

‘I didn’t realize you’d got quite so palsy with her. How did that happen?’

‘I told you. Karen and I went to see her about the cat last weekend. She said to drop in any time. I had a coffee with her yesterday. She’s a bit of a weirdo in some ways, but she’s O.K.’

‘And how did you get round to the subject of Mrs. Barcombe?’

I grinned a bit sheepishly. ‘I had a dream about her.’

‘About Mrs. Tarrant?’

‘No. About Mrs. Barcombe. Here.’ I took out my wallet, extracted the account of my dream and passed it across the table.

Barbara unfolded it and read it. ‘Good Lord!’ she exclaimed. ‘When did this happen?’

‘The dream? The night Karen left. Monday. Well, early Tuesday morning, I suppose.’

'And when you had it, did you know about Mrs. Barcombe?'

'I certainly didn't know that she'd been tried for murder.'

Barbara shook her head. 'Is this a part of it?' She pointed to the three words scrawled across the bottom of the sheet.

'No, that's something else,' I said. 'Something Karen's finding out for me.'

'So what did Mrs. Tarrant say when you showed her this?'

'She said, "Poor Vera, I expect she's trying to get in touch with you".'

'You're kidding.'

'No, I'm not,' I said. 'And neither was she.'

Barbara looked down at the paper again. 'Did this really happen? What's written down here? To Mrs. Barcombe, I mean.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I suppose it might have. According to the evidence at the trial she was in deep psychological shock for days afterwards. That's one of the things I mean to ask Zena—Mrs. Tarrant. Whether Vera actually ever did write anything like that.'

'And if she did?'

'Ah, well,' I said, 'then we're into a different ball-game altogether.'

Barbara folded up the paper and passed it back to me. 'Doesn't it worry you, Jim?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, *scare* you? It would me.'

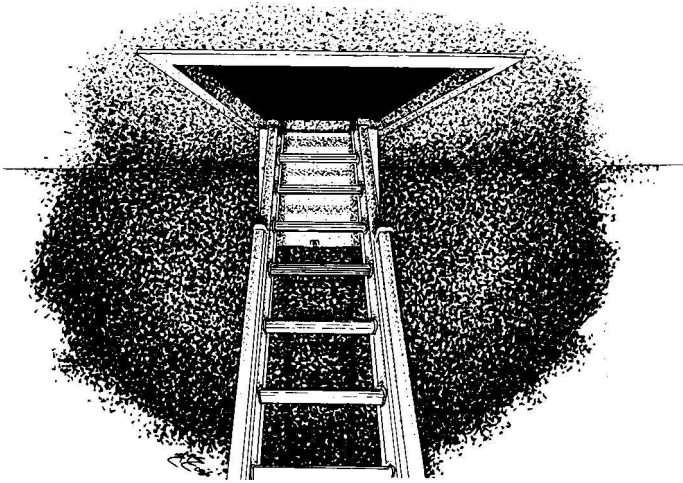
I grinned at her. 'And I thought you were the one who didn't believe in such things.'

'Dreams are different,' she said. 'Everyone has dreams. They come true sometimes.'

'I don't think there's much chance of that,' I said. 'Mrs. Barcombe's been dead for more than two years.'

The telephone rang and Barbara went out to answer it. From what I could overhear of the conversation it seemed likely to go on for some time. I finished off my coffee, picked up the holdall containing the milk and my bottle of whisky and went out into the hall. 'See you one o'clock Sunday,' I whispered into her ear. 'Thanks for the coffee.'

Barbara smiled, waggled her fingers at me over the top of the receiver, and I let myself out.



Chapter 5

Just before three o'clock on the Saturday afternoon I reached the end of the chapter I'd been working on and decided to call it a day. I'd no sooner done so than I became painfully aware of just how much I was missing Karen. After a week's dieting upon thoughts I was hungry for real sensations. I toyed with the idea of hitching a lift into Colchester, catching a train up to London and surprising her, but in the end I rejected it because I guessed that by the time I got to her flat she'd almost certainly be setting out for the theatre. Besides, I had my Sunday lunch date with Barbara and Phil, and to cancel that at the last minute would be just plain bad manners. In the end I decided I'd walk into the village and try to contact Karen by phone. At the same time I could return Zena's scrapbook.

I rang the two numbers I had for Karen and drew a blank at each of them. Then I tried ringing Peter and had no luck there either. I concluded that Karen must be out doing her week-end shopping and would probably be back in an hour or so when I

could try again. I picked up the plastic bag which contained the scrapbook and headed for Old Rectory Cottage.

To my relief Zena was not wearing her composing smock and seemed genuinely pleased to see me. 'Jim!' she cried. 'The answer to my prayers! Do you know anything about washing machines?'

'Not a lot,' I said. 'What's the problem?'

'The wretched thing's gone on strike,' she said. 'It's simply refusing to empty itself. I've only had it a month and I can't make head or tail of the book of instructions. Do come and take a look.'

I followed her through into the kitchen and found the machine humming away to itself and emitting an occasional glooping noise. 'You'd better turn it off and let me have a look at the book of words,' I said.

Zena switched it off and handed me a pamphlet of instructions. I turned to the index, found the page headed 'Faults' and ran my eye down it. 'Have you checked the filter?' I asked.

'I can't even *find* the beastly thing,' she wailed.

I consulted the diagram on the opposite page and then examined the machine. 'I think this must be it,' I said, pointing down at a plastic screw-cap which was clearly marked with a large 'F'. "'Unscrew one half-turn clockwise; remove; clean thoroughly; rinse and replace". Maybe we'd better put something underneath first, in case there's a flood. Have you got anything handy?'

Zena proffered a plastic tray. 'Will this do?'

'Better than nothing,' I said. 'Here goes.'

I slid the tray in underneath the machine, twirled the cap and edged it free. About half a pint of soapy water glugged out of the hole on to the tray. The filter was completely choked with an unsavoury gunge composed of bits of cotton, fluff, cats' fur, wool, and God knows what. I scraped it clean, rinsed it under the tap, and screwed it back into place. 'O.K.,' I said. 'Let's try again.'

Zena pressed the switch. The machine hummed, and a moment later we both heard the water gushing out into the drain. Zena jumped up and down in her delight. 'Wonderful!

Wonderful!' she cried. 'Oh, you are a genius, Jim! An angel of genius!'

I grinned complacently and tipped the trayful of soapy water into the sink. 'It's really dead simple,' I said. 'Next time it happens you'll know exactly what to do.'

'Now let's have a drink to celebrate!' she declared. 'How about a tequila?'

'That sounds marvellous.'

We sat side by side on the sofa and clinked glasses. 'I've brought you back the scrapbook,' I said. 'I was up half Thursday night reading it.'

'You found it interesting, did you? I thought you might. Old newspapers so often are, aren't they?'

'Interesting is hardly the word,' I said. 'I found it absolutely fascinating. The photos too. I presume that party was held to celebrate Vera's acquittal.'

Zena nodded. 'That was over thirty years ago, and I can still shiver when I remember the jury filing back into court.'

'But you must have known what the verdict was going to be?'

'No one can ever be *really* sure,' she said. 'Not until it's all over. Up to the very last minute something can still go wrong.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' I said. 'And you didn't have the benefit of hindsight like I did. Tell me, why didn't they call Vera as a witness in her own defence? I simply couldn't understand that.'

'Frank McLeish advised against it.'

'Why?'

'He was anxious to stop Rami Patel getting at her. He said all we had to do was to discredit the main Prosecution witnesses. Once he'd done that and the Mau-Mau connection had been established, Frank stood up in court and claimed there was really no case for Vera to answer.'

'He was dead right,' I said. 'That Mau-Mau stuff couldn't have come at a more opportune moment. Up to then I must say I thought Patel had been making quite a fight of it.'

Zena glanced at me, opened her mouth as if to say something, and then took a sip at her drink instead.

'You remember that dream of mine I showed you, Zena? Do you happen to know if Vera ever *did* write: "I have been arrested. I don't know why?"'

She shook her head. 'I've really no idea, Jim. But I suppose she might have done. She was like a sleep-walker. She didn't even recognize *me* till three days after I got there. Not really. One of the first things Frank established was that any sort of confession she might have made couldn't possibly carry any legal weight.'

'So she did make one?'

'It never came up in court.'

'But do you remember what it said?'

'Only from hearsay—something I just happened to overhear Tommy Deveril saying to Tony. He told him it was all a load of sick Mau-Mau gibberish.'

'What did he mean?'

Zena gazed into the fire. 'Vera had this fantasy that some part of her had been claimed by a "pepo"—an evil spirit.'

'*Vera* believed that? I thought you told me that was what the *servants* said about her.'

'Oh, this was years before the Mau-Mau business.'

'*Before?*' I echoed. '*Really?* Good Lord! What happened?'

'I never knew the full story,' she said slowly. 'It was after Peter was reported missing over Germany in January, 1945. He was a bomber pilot. They never found his body and Vera refused to believe that he was dead. She came back to England in the summer of '45 and tried to find out what had happened, but nobody had seen him being shot down. He was just listed as missing, believed killed in action. In the end she returned to Kenya and without saying anything to Tony she went up-country and consulted a *mchawi*—a witch doctor.'

'Go on,' I said. 'And . . .?'

'You don't believe in the after life,' she said. 'So it wouldn't mean anything to you.'

'Then here's your chance to make me change my mind. What happened?'

Zena tapped the rim of her glass against her teeth. 'He convinced her that Peter really *was* dead.'

'And how did he do that?'

'He conjured up Peter's spirit and Vera questioned it.'

'Well I never,' I said.

Zena peeped round at me out of the corner of her eye and

smiled faintly. 'It told her that Peter's plane had been hit by anti-aircraft fire and had crashed into the Zuider Zee just off a place called Enkhuisen.'

I stared at her. 'You're not going to tell me it *had*?'

'Oh, yes, it had,' she said, 'but they didn't find that out for sure till the summer of 1946. Then the bodies were brought up and buried in the local graveyard.'

I took a long swallow at my drink. I couldn't think of anything to say at all except: 'Did Vera go to Holland to look for the wrecked plane?'

'No,' said Zena. 'She didn't need to. She knew it was true.'

'And after that she was a convert to black magic?'

'Wouldn't you have been?'

'No,' I said, 'I wouldn't. Because I'd never have gone to consult a witch doctor in the first place.'

'Not even if the son you adored was reported missing?'

'Well, he was Tony's son too. And Tony didn't go.'

'Tony loathed all that side of black Africa. He called it "monkey business".'

'So Vera never told him what she'd done?'

'How could she? The only person she ever told, apart from me, was Doctor Bancroft, and he was sworn to secrecy.'

'But when Peter's body was found? Didn't she say anything then?'

'Not to Tony.'

'So how did this "pepo" fixation come about?'

'Through the ritual, I think—the things she had to do before the *mchawi* would agree to help her.'

'You mean it wasn't just a question of handing over some cash?'

'She had to do that too, of course. But she had to give him something of herself as well.' Zena made a grimace of distaste. 'It was all so sordid—ugly.'

I remembered her using that particular word before and I wondered just what sombre connotations it held for her. 'What sort of thing did she have to give him?' I asked curiously.

'Oh, hair and nail clippings and . . . oh, some part of her which was no longer her, was how she described it. It all sounded too ghastly for words.'

'But it seems to have worked,' I said.

'Yes, it worked. But it left her vulnerable.'

'What to?'

'The powers of darkness, of course.'

'The powers of darkness,' I repeated. 'I see. Well, what then?'

'Vera knew that was the price she had to pay, and she was prepared to pay it. Peter was the only person in the world she ever really loved.'

'But what about Tony?'

'She let Tony marry her, and she had his child, but she was never in love with him.'

'Was he in love with her?'

'I think he was, in his own way. But he was never any good at expressing his feelings. Sometimes I wondered if he really knew the first thing about Vera. Tony was what used to be called a man's man. He was popular with the other planters in the Club.'

'But not with their wives?'

'They were a thoroughly bitchy lot. Frank McLeish thought they were behind the rumours about Vera having an affair with Joseph.'

'Why on earth should they do a thing like that?'

'Because she was cleverer than they were. Vera didn't play bridge; she preferred reading. And she could chatter away in Swahili like a native. That was quite enough to set her apart from the rest of them.'

'Didn't she have *any* friends?'

'Apart from Dicky Bancroft and his wife I can't think of anyone in Kirktura she would have called a real friend.'

I looked down at the glass in my hand. 'Did Vera ever talk to you about what happened that night?'

Zena shook her head.

'And she never spoke to you about Joseph M'Wangato?'

'Never.'

'Do you believe McLeish's account of what happened?'

'Of course I do.'

'Well, I don't,' I said. 'I can see why it worked with an all-white jury out there in 1953 but it just doesn't ring true to me. It *feels* wrong somehow.'

'You're letting your imagination run away with you,' said

Zena. 'You mustn't do that. Now do let's leave poor Vera in peace. Tell me something about your book. Is it going well?'

'Jet-propelled,' I said, 'but not exactly in the direction I'd planned.'

'Oh, that sounds *really* exciting. Are you going to tell me about it?'

'Well, I've just introduced myself to a sensational Baganda girl called Bimu who's intent on leading me astray.'

'Only in a manner of speaking, I hope.'

'More's the pity,' I sighed. 'I'm finding that novel writing's a bit like pressing your nose up against the window of a sweet-shop. You can see the goodies inside but you can't actually touch them. It's all in the mind.'

Zena laughed. 'But at least you don't have to live with your mistakes like we do in real life. You can always turn back a page and re-write it differently.'

'There is that,' I agreed. 'And I've got to admit that I really am getting a terrific kick out of writing this story. But I can't kid myself that I'm a born novelist. What I want is to be out there where it's *really* happening. Reading those court reports reminded me that I'm just a newspaperman at heart.'

'But can't you be both?'

'I don't see how. Not how *I* can, I mean. The two things aren't the same. they'd always be coming into conflict. As I see it there's the truth of fact and the truth of the imagination. They're both true in their own way but it isn't the *same* truth. Does that make sense?'

'Oh, you're a Libran, Jim. On the cusp, I grant you, but a Libran for all that.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'You'll always be looking for rational explanations, even when there aren't any.'

'Ah, but there always *are*, Zena,' I said. 'It's just a question of finding them.'

She treated me to a long, thoughtful look and then gave a slight shake of her head as if to say: 'Well, don't say I haven't tried to warn you.'

•

On my way home I tried to ring Karen again at her flat but there was still no answer and so I gave it up as a lost cause. As I stepped out of the phone box I felt a cold splash on the back of my hand and by the time I reached the Brimbles the rain had settled into a steady, depressing downpour. I squelched my way up to the top of the ridge, gazed disconsolately out over the grey, indifferent sea and wished with all my heart that I was up in Town making love to Karen. Then I remembered that I still had to bring in firewood for the evening. The practical side of my nature reasserted itself. I plodded down the track, let myself in through the back door of the bungalow, collected the log basket from the sitting room, and ten minutes later had the fire going.

When it was well alight I went into the bathroom, ran a hot bath, stripped off my damp clothes and submerged myself up to my chin. As I lay there wallowing luxuriously in the warmth and listening to the rain gurgling into the drain outside the bathroom window, I found myself back-tracking over my conversation with Zena. The whole extraordinary story of Vera and her dead son seemed totally inexplicable, and yet I was convinced that Zena had been telling me the truth and that Peter Barcombe's drowned bones really were lying there in that graveyard on the shores of the Zuider Zee. What my mind simply refused to accept was that Vera had somehow been informed of what had befallen her son through the medium of a *mchawi*. And yet what other explanation was there? Pure coincidence? That seemed almost more incredible than the other thing. It suddenly struck me that the solitary feature of the whole weird story which I did find totally acceptable was the fact that Vera had *not* set off at once for Holland to try and ascertain if it was true. Having made her wholehearted act of commitment she had asked her question and she had received her answer—presumably couched in such unequivocal terms that no further verification was called for. And then what? I tried to imagine what her feelings must have been and found myself floundering. I had nowhere to begin, no common point of reference at all. The nearest I could get to it was to suppose myself cast adrift for ever on a blank, grey, shoreless sea of utter loneliness, condemned to wander dully through the drab and meaningless ritual of day to day existence,

giving and receiving nothing, and all the time pray to God alone knew what dire imaginings.

I thought of those two photographs taken ten years apart, one the pale ghost of the other, and felt a sort of vicarious depression at the sheer waste of a human life which they seemed to represent. Poor Vera. How she must have longed for death. I lay back blinking up at the ceiling light while that sad thought rolled round and round inside my head and finally came to rest. Longed for death? But if that were so why on earth had she fought so desperately to stay alive? I felt a sudden tenseness like a fist gripping my gut as I realized that I had stumbled across a clue to that instinctive uneasiness which had made me say to Zena: 'It *feels* wrong somehow.'

I groped around among my memories of the court reports and found myself remembering a certain Reverend something or other who had given evidence that M'Wangato had been a practising Christian and a regular communicant at his church. It was one of those uncomfortable, gritty facts which had been brushed under the carpet of the Mau-Mau oath-taking ceremony. But what now remained like a recurring whisper in my mind was the parson's reproachful reply to a proposition which had been put to him in cross-examination by Mr McLeish: 'Sir, you are forgetting that I *knew* Joseph M'Wangato. I believe with all my heart and soul that he could never have done this terrible thing.' His sworn testimony might possibly have carried a little more weight with the jury had he not been a Kikuyu or his skin had been a different colour.

All that evening I gnawed away at the problem like a dog chewing over an ancient bone, and by the time I was ready to go to bed I was no nearer to cracking it than I had been when I started. The easy way out was to do what Zena had done—simply accept McLeish's version of what had occurred—and that was precisely what I could not bring myself to do. But neither could I persuade myself that Vera had killed Joseph in a fit of sexual pique as Rami Patel had contended. McLeish had done such a thoroughly professional job of discrediting the two key Prosecution witnesses, revealing them to be both dishonest and motivated by spite, that to accept their testimony as the whole truth and nothing but the truth was virtually impossible.

And yet, unlike the jury, I did not find the notion of Vera's having had a clandestine sexual affair with her native houseboy, to be something altogether too horrendous to contemplate. After all, it was not as if she had been born and brought up out there like they had. Their taboos were not hers. Virtually friendless; desolated at the loss of her adored only child; married to a man with whom she had little or nothing in common; surely—however unlikely—it was still *conceivable* that she might turn to her servant for consolation? But then, having done so, to stab him to death? It just didn't make sense. And yet that was the one absolutely incontrovertible fact in the whole extraordinary case. Vera *had* killed him. Nobody had ever attempted to pretend otherwise. And yet that act of murder remained as the bottomless gulf which my imagination simply refused to bridge.

In the circumstances it was hardly surprising that I had a wretched night. Twice I woke myself out of nightmares so grim that my conscious mind shuddered away and refused to acknowledge them. All I can remember is that on the second occasion I found my face and my pillow wet with tears, something which had not happened to me since I was a child. But the anguish which had drawn those tears from me was already banished beyond recall.

Sunday morning I spent checking through my typescript and making notes for projected chapters, and at a quarter to one I locked up the bungalow and set off for the farm. The rain had moved away inland during the night, but the air was still saturated with watery mist. There was no breeze at all. Tiny beads of moisture gathered along my eyebrows and eyelashes and at each farm gateway the puddles rose well above the ankles of my boots.

As I gained the crest of the slope which lay between the sea and Brimble Farm my eye was caught by a distant glimmer of scarlet in the Dutch barn. For some seconds I stared at it in total disbelief then, with a sudden heart-surge of delighted surprise, I broke into a lumbering gallop down the track.

Karen met me at the door, grinning like a Cheshire Cat, and I had my arms round her and my wet face pressed against hers before she had a chance to say a word. Next moment Barbara had popped up behind her shoulder. 'I was going to run down

and tell you when she phoned, Jim,' she said, 'but we both thought it would make a nice surprise for you to find her here.'

'Surprise is right!' I laughed. 'When did you arrive, Karo?'

'Only about twenty minutes ago.'

'Can you stay?'

She nodded. 'I've got the Monday off. I went into the office instead of Sarah yesterday morning.'

'That's fantastic.' I cried, dragging off my muddy boots and dropping them beside the door. 'I tried to phone you yesterday. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the car sitting there in the barn. It's like winning the Pools.'

'Come on through and have a drink, Jim,' said Barbara, moving tactfully away down the passage.

I slung my damp anorak over a peg behind the door, scooted in pursuit of Karen and seized the chance to slip my arms around her from behind. 'Have I *missed* you!' I groaned into her ear. 'Starving for it I am.'

She leant back against me and made that throaty, purring sound of hers which always acted on me like a 90% proof aphrodisiac. 'Me too,' she growled softly. 'Why else d'you think I'm here?'

The lunch which Barbara had prepared was truly excellent, but we had scarcely finished our dessert before Phil excused himself and went off to attend to one of his cows which was due to calve. Karen and I helped Barbara to wash up the dishes, then she ferried us down to the bungalow in the Land Rover. We invited her in but she was anxious to get back to the farm in case Phil needed her help. Ten minutes later Karen and I were where we both wanted to be—in bed together.

It was just coming up to tea time when she announced that she wanted to go down and take a look at the sea before it got dark. As we were getting dressed she suddenly said: 'Does "One knife was enough" mean anything to you?'

'Come again?'

'Those words you asked me to find out about—*Kisu Kinoja Kiliiosha*—well, that's what they mean in Swahili.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'I got Peter to ask that woman at the Beeb—the one who knew about "ondoka". There didn't seem to be any question about it.'

I looked down at the transistor which was standing on the bedside table. 'One knife was enough,' I murmured. 'Yes, that might make sense.'

'Not to me it wouldn't,' said Karen. 'Is it something to do with Mrs. Barcombe?'

'I'm damned if I know,' I said. 'But since I talked to you on the phone on Thursday I've found out a whole lot more about her.'

'From Zena Tarrant?'

'Yes. And from that scrap-book she lent me.'

'Have you still got it?'

'No. I took it back to her yesterday. If I'd known you were coming I'd have held on to it. Zena told me some quite extraordinary things about Vera. Really weird.'

'Such as what?'

'I'd better start from the beginning,' I said. 'Let's go and get our boots on.'

As we made our way down to the beach, and paced side by side across the hard ribbed sand in the direction of the estuary, I recounted, roughly in chronological order, everything I had been able to discover about Vera Barcombe. Karen listened spell-bound to my recital. When it was finished she said: 'What do you make of it all, Jim?'

'Of what happened on the night of the murder, you mean?'

'All of it. That business with her son. Ondoka. Your dream. Everything.'

'One thing at a time,' I said. 'When Vera killed Joseph M'Wangato I think she was almost certainly certifiably insane. And not just with fear either. After all, nobody goes on sticking a kitchen knife into someone over and over again unless they're completely out of their mind.'

'Or possessed.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, that's what *she* believed, isn't it?'

'That's just Zena's story. No one breathed a word about it at the trial.'

'Well, who could have except Vera? And you said Vera was never called on to give evidence.'

'We've only got Zena's word that Vera ever did believe she was possessed,' I said.

'All right,' said Karen. 'So what about her son's ghost? Do you think Zena was making that up too?'

'I didn't say she was making any of it up,' I protested, 'and I can't explain it any more than you can.'

'Then you really do think it happened?'

'I think Vera did go to see a witch-doctor,' I said. 'I don't know what happened when she got there, but whatever it was she seems to have believed it.'

'It came true, so it *was* true,' Karen insisted. 'But then she discovered that she'd sold her soul to the devil.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, Karo!' I protested. 'Have a heart!'

'I bet you anything you like that's how Vera would have seen it,' she said.

'And I suppose the devil ordered her to carve up Joseph M'Wangato as a sort of quid pro quo.'

'Something like that. After all, you said Joseph was Christian, didn't you?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Well, perhaps he'd been speaking out against the Mau-Mau or something, and he had to be killed as a sort of warning to the rest not to step out of line.'

I came to an abrupt halt on the wet sand and gazed at her. 'You know, Karo, that's not quite so crazy as it sounds. Someone *did* come forward at the trial and say they'd heard Joseph speaking out against the Mau-Mau. It didn't cut any ice with the jury though. And it still doesn't explain why *Vera* did it.'

'So maybe *she* was the one who was Mau-Mau.'

'Now that's *really* crazy!' I cried. 'Vera was *white* for Christ's sake!'

'Yes, I know she was. But perhaps that was only on the outside. For all we know, *inside* she may have been as black as the Queen of Sheba.'

I shook my head in an equal blend of admiration and blank astonishment. 'Even Rami Patel never went that far, Karo. You can't honestly think it's true.'

'No, I suppose not,' she conceded. 'But it would help to explain an awful lot, wouldn't it?'

'If you ask me it's just sick,' I said, 'but then the whole thing's sick. I don't know exactly what Vera had to do for that witch-

doctor, but Zena seems to have been pretty well nauseated when she heard about it.'

'Did he make her swallow a drug or something?'

'Zena didn't say so, but I suppose it's possible. Why?'

'Well, I just thought she might have been stoned or something when she killed him.'

'You're missing the point, Karo. Vera went to consult this *mchawi* years before the murder took place.'

'So maybe she went back to see him again. Maybe that was part of their bargain.'

'For a sort of booster injection, you mean? That's quite a thought.'

'I don't see what's so fantastic about it,' she protested. 'Why couldn't he have got her hooked on some sort of dope?'

'Well she was certainly out for the count when they found her. They put it down to catatonic shock. It seemed plausible enough.'

Karen chewed her bottom lip and frowned. 'Where did they find Joseph's clothes?'

'In his shack. The Defence made a real banquet out of that. It seems the Mau-Mau had a habit of stripping off before they got down to work.'

'Someone else could have put them there, couldn't they? After he was dead, I mean.'

'Why not? Vera, no doubt,' I suggested ironically.

'No, of course not Vera. But someone else. That Doctor friend of hers maybe.'

'For my money I prefer that Joseph put them there himself,' I said. 'It's simpler.'

Karen was silent for a while, then she said: 'This Mau-Mau oath-taking ceremony. Where did that happen?'

'On the plantation somewhere.'

'And who found out about it?'

'I haven't a clue,' I said. 'No, hang on. It was Tony Barcombe. One of his men tipped him off and he notified the police. They went along and took masses of photos and so forth and these were produced in court. From then on everything started going Vera's way.'

'You mean they didn't find out about it *before* the trial?'

'If they did they kept very quiet about it. But I'm almost sure

they didn't turn it up till the third week. McLeish produced it like a rabbit out of a hat. You can imagine the effect on the jury. "Sensation in court" must have been the classic understatement.'

'I'm surprised the Prosecution didn't suggest it might have been planted,' said Karen.

I grinned. 'Rami Patel should have had you devilling for him, Karo. I wouldn't have given much for Vera's chances.'

'But doesn't it seem peculiar to you?' she asked.

'The whole damned thing seems peculiar,' I agreed. 'Right from beginning to end. Take the fact that Vera had hardly a scratch on her. Yet the jury was supposed to believe that she'd been struggling for her life, in the dark, against a grown man armed with a knife! Can you see anyone getting away with that in the Old Bailey? The only way I can explain how they reached their final verdict is by writing it off as mass hysteria. The whites must have been so terrified of the mere *idea* of Mau-Mau that they all went corporately round the bend. I don't suppose it would have been the first time that's happened.'

'Do you think Vera and Joseph were lovers?' she asked.

'I don't know what they were,' I said. 'But I think that's at least as likely as Joseph being a hit man for the Mau-Mau.'

'I think they were,' she said. 'Or they had been. And she certainly killed him, no doubt about that. But I think she didn't know *what* she was doing when she did it. I think she was just used and then she was thrown away. That's what I think.'

'Used by who? The *mchawi*?'

'By the darkness,' she said. 'The darkness which was inside her. I believe it's there inside everyone. When it's allowed to break loose it does terrible things to people. Things like that massacre you saw in Soroti. Or what happened in the Nazi concentration camps, or in the Argentine, or now in Iran. Anywhere. Everywhere. I believe that *mchawi* showed Vera that it was there inside her too—made her recognize it. Perhaps she even *wanted* to recognize it. It wouldn't surprise me.'

'Zena said something like that about her,' I said. 'I asked her what it was Vera had been so afraid of and she said she thought she'd been terrified of going mad. Vera once told her that she'd looked into the darkness and now she saw the darkness in everything.'

‘Isn’t that just what I’m saying?’ said Karen.

‘It still doesn’t explain *why* she killed him.’

‘When she did it I think she must somehow have believed that she was killing herself,’ she said. ‘And in a way I suppose that’s really what happened, isn’t it?’



When we got back to the bungalow I made a pot of tea and Karen curled up in one of the arm chairs with my typescript. While she was reading it I opened the letters she had brought down with her from London. One of them was from Pierre Foucault telling me he was going back to Kampala on an assignment for *L’Oeil Nu*. I felt a momentary twinge of envy but nothing more. It struck me forcibly just how far I had travelled in the past month—not physically but mentally, emotionally. After being so unceremoniously booted off Monroe Kyle’s Inter-Continental Express, I’d fallen by the side of the track, and without really being aware that it was happening I’d somehow contrived to take root and begun to grow. I no longer felt sorry for myself—quite the opposite in fact. And this change in me had been effected almost entirely through the exercise of my imagination. I had submerged my own identity in those of my characters and through them had lived at least as intensely as I’d ever managed to live in the ‘real’ world.

I looked across at Karen and was intrigued by the notion that what she was now ‘seeing’ inside her head were pictures which I was putting there, that by exercising my imagination I had succeeded in infiltrating my own private and personal vision right inside hers. I found myself speculating idly on the ways in which human beings made contact with one another, and from there I drifted on to wondering if such a thing as the human soul really existed. I tried imagining what Karen’s soul would look like if I could see it. Possibly something like a flower, I thought, or maybe a snowflake, or even a sort of semi-transparent bubble. And would it be coloured or just plain white? Coloured seemed most likely—a sort of wild, forget-me-not blue like her eyes. Perhaps all souls had the same colour as their owners’ eyes, in which case Africa must be full of dark brown ones, Scandinavia

swarming with blue ones and England a sort of multi-coloured hotch-potch. At which point the object of my metaphysical speculations turned a page, glanced up at me, smiled and went back to her reading. I contemplated her for a little while longer then I got up, gathered the tea things together, and carried them out into the kitchen.

As I was rinsing the mugs under the tap I heard the familiar sound of mewing. It seemed to be coming from outside the kitchen window. I set the mugs down on the rack, took the tin of cat food from the fridge, spooned some out on to a saucer and set it down on the floor. Then I walked over to the window, opened it and looked out. By now it was almost completely dark outside and the light streaming out through the uncurtained windows on both sides of the bungalow illuminated the steps and the area of tarmac beside the woodshed. There was no sign of Pusser anywhere. I called a few times and thought I could hear her miaowing from somewhere round the side by the back door. It occurred to me that Karen might have closed the cloak-room window forgetting that Pusser used it as her private entrance.

I pulled the kitchen window shut, went out into the hall and unlocked the back door, fully expecting to see her come skipping in, but nothing happened. I looked out, tried calling her yet again, and again heard that plaintive answering mew. 'Where the hell are you, rat-bag?' I called. 'Come on in, the back door's open.'

I stepped outside and walked along to the end of the house thinking that perhaps she had got herself shut in the woodshed, but then I heard her again and realized that the mewing must be coming from somewhere inside the house. I went back inside, closed the door behind me and paced down the corridor peering into all the rooms. I even looked inside the airing cupboard. There was no sign of her anywhere, and yet I could still hear her somewhere in the distance and I guessed she could hear me too.

I went back into the kitchen, stood perfectly still and listened hard. A few seconds later I heard faint sounds of scratching and then another dim and stifled miaow. I looked up at the ceiling. 'Pusser?' I demanded. 'Is that you?' The response was another woe-ful miaow and some more scratching. 'All right,' I said. 'Rescue's at hand. Hang on. There's bound to be a way up somewhere.'

I remembered having noticed a hooked pole propped up in a corner of the cloak-room and sure enough, set into the ceiling just above the door lintel I discovered a trap leading up into the loft. I went into the sitting room to fetch my torch. Karen looked up from the script. 'What are you up to?' she asked.

'Pusser seems to have got herself stuck up in the loft,' I said. 'I'm going up to get her out.'

'How did she get up there?'

'I haven't a clue. I just heard her miaowing somewhere up above the kitchen ceiling.'

'Do you need me to help?'

I grinned. 'You stick in there with the culture, Robin. Batman can handle it.'

I stuffed the torch into my trouser pocket, went back to the cloak-room, picked up the pole and inserted the hook into the ring of the trap door catch. As I did so I heard Karen call out: 'Be careful.'

'Everything's under control,' I assured her cheerfully, and gave the pole a sharp tug.

The catch clicked and the trap swung down to reveal the bottom treads of an aluminium ladder. I released the hook from the catch, repositioned it on the ladder and pulled. It slid downwards with scarcely a squeak. I extended it until its foot was resting on the tiles of the cloak-room floor, found the securing catch and made it fast. Having tested to make sure everything was firmly anchored, I took the torch from my pocket, switched it on, and put my foot on the first tread.

Up until that moment I had thought no more of what I was doing than I would have done about posting a letter or getting in some more wood for the fire. It was simply a job to be done as expeditiously as possible. But as I stepped on to that ladder and began climbing up towards the rectangle of darkness above me I became conscious of a strange, almost sickening sense of apprehension. It was as though every mortal instinct within me had suddenly screamed out '*Stop!*'

With my left hand gripping the wooden frame of the trapdoor I raised the torch and directed its beam shakily towards that area of the loft which I guessed must be directly above the kitchen. The floor was thickly quilted with fibre-glass insulation

and I could see a number of stacked tea-chests, together with a mattress and various odd items of furniture. Beyond the tea-chests was something which looked like the domed end of an old-fashioned, wood-slatted cabin-trunk. 'Pusser?' I called. 'Come on out of there, you stupid twit!'

Low down near the eaves I thought I saw a shadow moving against the sloping background of the roofing felt. I called out again and tried a few cat-encouraging noises. There was no audible response. I glanced back down the ladder, felt an urgent, irrational desire to summon Karen, and immediately checked it. 'Come on, Jim lad,' I muttered. 'What are you playing at, for Christ's sake?' and I stepped sideways off the ladder on to the shrouded hump of the nearest joist.

It was like ducking into a cold storage depot. Once I was clear of the trap-door the temperature can scarcely have been more than a couple of degrees above zero, and it seemed to get progressively colder with each step I took. Half a dozen times I had to stoop down beneath the wooden cross-beams and each time I did so my face and neck got festooned with dusty cobwebs.

I reached the first of the tea-chests, brushed the webs from my face and probed around with the torch beam. 'Where the hell are you, Pusser?' I called. 'Come on out of there.' Hardly were the words uttered than I caught those faint sounds of scratching. I stepped forward on to the next joist, listened intently and finally tracked down the source of the noise. It seemed to be coming from right inside the cabin-trunk.

I directed the torch down on to the dusty, domed lid and between two of the wooden reinforcing slats I saw the initials 'A.R.B.' stencilled in chipped white paint. By now I was shivering so violently from the cold that the beam wouldn't stay still. I laid the flashlight down on top of the adjacent tea-chest and pointed it towards the trunk. Then I seized hold of the rusty hasps and heaved the lid upwards.

There was a choking, musty stench of ancient clothing as it swung open. The hasps slipped from between my numb fingers and the lid fell back against the tea-chest, raising a thick cloud of dust and dislodging the torch from its resting place. It rolled sideways, toppled into the gap between the packing case and its neighbour and buried itself deep in the fibre-glass wadding below.

I swore bitterly, sank to my knees beside the trunk and began groping towards the dim orange glow. My questing fingertips had almost reached it when some cautionary instinct prompted me to twist my head and glance up at the open trunk above me. By the feeble overspill of light through the trapdoor I thought I detected a slow, billowy, humping movement, as though something was trying to heave itself up from beneath the musty layers of ancient clothes. From somewhere within there came a faint and desperate sound of scrabbling, like fingernails scratching, and then, over the wooden rim of the trunk I beheld something as thin and pale as a tapeworm inching its way out. A moment later it was joined by another, then by a third and a fourth.

Completely paralysed with horror I watched them feeling their way along the wooden flange until they reached one of the rusty buckles. They curled themselves blindly around the strap and then contracted into a fist. A shape, faint and smoke grey, was lifting itself up out of the shadows, twisting slowly from side to side as though searching for something. The thin, wasted fingers released their hold upon the strap, rose hesitantly, and then came groping down towards me, at the same time unfolding themselves and spreading out in a sort of appalling gesture of entreaty. The instant before they touched my face my petrified limbs unlocked themselves. In a reflex of absolutely mindless terror I thrust myself backwards, sprang to my feet and felt my skull explode against a beam.

Karen found me almost at once. She had heard the crash overhead as I fell, had rushed out, scrambled up into the loft and seen the glow of the torch. I came to my senses just as she picked up the light and shone it down into my face. 'What happened?' she panted. 'Are you all right?'

My mouth was too dry for coherent speech and my head was ringing like a fire alarm. I caught hold of her arm and dragged myself dizzily to my knees. Then I fumbled the torch from her hand and directed it on to the trunk. The lid was shut.

'Did you shut it?' I croaked.

‘What?’

‘The trunk. You shut it?’

‘Jim? What’s the matter? Are you hurt?’

It was then that I realized that the leather straps were threaded through the buckles and the brass hasps were all fastened tightly down. I guessed that it was locked too—that it had been locked for years.

‘Come on, love,’ urged Karen through chattering teeth. ‘Let’s get back down. It’s freezing up here.’

She led the way, crawling on hands and knees. I followed her down into the cloak-room, thrust the ladder back inside the loft and closed the trapdoor. Then, still semi-concussed, I wandered across to the wash-basin, turned on the taps and peered at my ghastly reflection in the mirror. My face was streaked black with dusty cobwebs. A bright trickle of blood had run down from my scalp in a diagonal line across my forehead. I simply could not stop myself shivering.

While I was attempting to wash my face Karen contrived to examine the cut on my head. She sipped in her breath painfully. ‘There’s a lump like an egg,’ she said, ‘but I don’t think the cut’s anything worse than a nasty graze. Have you got something we can put on it?’

‘I’ll rinse it,’ I muttered. ‘It’ll be all right.’

I ran some clean water into the basin, ducked down and splashed my scalp. Karen trotted along to the bathroom, returning a moment later with the bottle of Paracetamol tablets, a glass of water and a handful of tissues. She set the tablets and the glass down on the washbasin and dabbed my wound dry. ‘What happened up there?’ she said.

As I helped myself to three of the tablets and swilled them down she repeated her question.

I replaced the glass and eyed my by now more familiar face in the mirror. ‘I saw the ghost,’ I said.

‘You *what?*’

‘It’s true, Karo. It scared me witless.’

‘What was it like?’

I gave a violent involuntary shudder.

‘Can’t you describe it?’

‘There was a hand . . . and an arm . . . and a dress.’

Karen gazed at me. 'Go on.'

'That's all. Isn't it enough?'

'Whereabouts was it?'

'It came up out of that trunk. Yes, I know what you're going to say, but it *did*, Karo! I swear to God I did!' I was close to tears with the intensity of my desire to convince her.

'I believe you,' she said. 'Come on, let's go and get ourselves a drink.'

She took hold of my arm and steered me through into the kitchen. As we came through the doorway the first thing I saw was Pusser scoffing at the saucer of food I'd put out for her. I stared down at her. 'When did she appear?'

'Just after you went up to get her,' said Karen. 'I thought you'd brought her down. Until I heard the crash I'd no idea you were still up there.'

'She never was up there, Karo,' I said. 'I'm sure of it. It was just something to get me to go up into the loft. Did *you* hear her miaowing?'

'No,' she said. 'But then I wasn't with you in the kitchen. I was miles away in your story.'

We carried our drinks and the bottle of whisky back into the sitting room where we were joined a few minutes later by the cat. Gradually that awful, hyper-sensitive, *raw* feeling—as though I had had all my skin peeled off—began to diminish. But I had only to recall what I had seen rising up out of that trunk for a cold dew of sweat to start breaking out all over me. Finally Karen said: 'What are you going to do now, Jim?'

'What do you mean?' I asked 'What *can* I do, for Christ's sake?'

'Well, we could get that trunk down and see what's in it.'

'Mother of God,' I muttered, 'you can't be serious. You wouldn't get me back up there again for my own weight in gold Krugerrands.'

'Then let's ask Phil and Barbara to help. I'm sure they would.'

'They'd think I was nuts,' I said. 'And they'd be right too.'

'No, they wouldn't, Jim. And, anyway, does it really matter what they think?'

I stared at her and suddenly realized that she was right. I knew that I'd never be able to spend another night alone in that

house unless I somehow managed to struggle free of the halter of fear which those thin, supplicating fingers had placed about my neck. And I knew I would never manage to do it on my own, or even with Karen's help. But Phil Fenwick was something different. 'All right,' I said. 'First thing tomorrow morning we'll go up to the farm and ask them. Though God alone knows what they'll make of us.'



We found Phil and Barbara just finishing their breakfast. 'You *are* a couple of early birds,' said Barbara. 'Have you run out of milk or something?'

'Nothing like that,' I said. 'We've come to ask you both a great favour.'

'Well, ask away then,' said Phil. 'That's what neighbours are supposed to be for, isn't it?'

I drew in a deep breath. 'Can you both come down to the bungalow with us for half an hour?'

Phil pushed back the cuff of his sweater and looked at his wristwatch. 'Half an hour?' he said. 'Yes, all right. What's up?'

'At the risk of your thinking I've gone stark, raving mad, I'll tell you,' I said. 'But first let me assure you that I'm no more mad than I've ever been.' And then I told them, as best I could, what had happened to me up in the attic.

They heard me out without once interrupting. When I'd finished Barbara said: 'So maybe Mrs. Henshaw wasn't quite such a bundle of nerves after all.'

Phil took the more practical approach. 'I'll get a hammer and a screwdriver to bust open the lock. You'd better bring along the big flashlight, Barbie.'

Ten minutes later we jolted up the rutted track to the bungalow and Phil parked the Land Rover outside the woodshed. 'I wouldn't have missed this for all the tea in China,' said Barbara, jumping down on to the tarmac. 'What do you suppose we'll find, Jim?'

'Peace of mind, I hope,' I said.

We filed into the cloak-room and I hooked the pole into the catch and lowered the ladder. Phil winked at me, switched on

the flashlight and climbed up. I waited until he had vanished inside and then followed him, with Barbara immediately at my heels. By the time I was through the trap Phil was already bending over the trunk. 'We can open it up here, if you like, Jim,' he said.

'Not bloody likely,' I said. 'I want the damned thing outside in the fresh air, and the sooner the better.'

The trunk turned out to be a good deal lighter than I had expected. We carried it back to the lip of the trap, then I descended a few steps and Phil let it slide down to me. Barbara reached up and caught hold of the other handle. 'Where do you want it, Jim? On the verandah?'

'Let's take it down to the parking place,' I said.

We carried it through the sitting room, down the verandah steps and dumped it on the far side of the Land Rover. Phil stooped over it and examined the lock. He slid the brass centre catch to one side, prised with a finger nail, and the metal tongue sprang free. 'Well, that's a turn up,' he said. 'It's not even locked. Just the buckles and those catches.'

Barbara started to wrestle free one of the buckles while Phil went to work on the other. Karen caught my eye and gave me a reassuring smile.

Phil released the second buckle and snapped up the levers of the spring catches. 'Who's going to have the honour?' he enquired with a grin. 'Come on, Jim. It's your party.'

I found I hadn't the courage to refuse. 'All right,' I said. 'Why not?' and stepping across to it I heaved up the lid and flung it wide open.

The trunk was filled to the brim with empty white plastic sacks on which were printed in scarlet the words: 'KOZYRAP FIBREGLASS THERMAL INSULATION'.

'Well, waddya know?' said Phil with a broad grin. 'Someone seems to have been here before us.'

Karen looked across at me and frowned. Then she stepped forward, stooped over the trunk, reached in and pulled out a double armful of the sacks. She dropped them on the ground beside her and dived back for another armful. By the third go the trunk was completely empty, bared right down to its lining of blue and white striped paper.

Phil chuckled. 'But when she got there, the cupboard was bare, and poor old Jimmy was done.'

'Hang on a sec,' said Barbara. 'Isn't that a tray in the bottom?'

We all peered into the depths of the trunk. Fitted with such Edwardian ingenuity that it was all but imperceptible to a casual glance was a false floor. With one accord Barbara and Karen reached down, hooked their fingertips into the shallow recess at either end and pulled upwards. The base of the trunk rose shudderingly, slanted, got stuck, and was wriggled free. I felt a sudden griping spasm of sickness deep in my gut as the papered wooden tray reached the flanged lip of the outer casing and was hoisted clear.

Lying in the exposed cavity at the bottom, half concealed beneath some sheets of creased and damp-stained tissue paper, was a pale silver-grey dress.

'Well, I'll be buggered,' said Phil.



It was Barbara who lifted it out. She held it up by the shoulders in the bright sunlight and shook it. The sleeves flapped and then hung down like two slender mouse-grey pods. 'I can't say it's my style exactly,' she said, 'but I bet you it cost a packet in its day.'

Phil reached down into the trunk and rummaged among the tissue paper. 'Hello,' he said, 'there's something else here.' He held up a grey evening bag which had a dark brown stain at one end and passed it over to Karen. 'That's the lot,' he announced. 'Nothing for you, Jim, old son. Bad luck.'

Karen opened the flap of the reticule and looked in. Then she dipped two fingers inside and drew out a photograph. She glanced at it and handed it to me.

It was a snapshot of a beaming African wearing shorts and a white tuxedo and carrying a silver tray on which was balanced a decanter, a sodawater siphon and a single cut glass tumbler. There was nothing to indicate who the man was but I had no doubt at all that I was looking at Joseph M'Wangato. I passed it across to Phil. He examined it critically. 'Good looking bloke,' he said and handed it to Barbara who in turn passed it back to me.

Karen held the bag upside down and shook it but there was nothing else inside.

‘What do you want to do with this, Jim?’ said Barbara, giving the dress another shake.

As she said it I suddenly knew what I must do with the dress and with the photograph too. It was as though the knowledge had been lying in wait for me in the back of my own mind ever since I had first set foot inside the house. ‘I’m going to take it down on to the beach and burn it,’ I said.

‘Then you might as well burn the trunk too while you’re about it,’ said Phil. ‘It’ll save us having to drag it all the way upstairs again.’

‘But I can’t do that,’ I said. ‘It belongs to Mrs. Cousins.’

‘Don’t be so daft,’ said Barbara. ‘Of course you can. If she ever asks about it I’ll say we found a nest of rats inside it. Come on, shove those sacks back inside and stick it into the truck.’

‘I’ll fetch a box of matches,’ said Karen. ‘I won’t be a minute.’

They dropped us off at the foot of the dunes, wished us a good bonfire, and drove away back to the farm. Karen and I grasped a handle each, lugged the trunk up to the top of the dunes and down the other side, then we set off towards the sea. We set our burden down about half way between the high-water mark and the breaking waves and spent the next half hour collecting armfuls of dry driftwood. Then I kicked the pinewood tray into splinters and we constructed a truly impressive pyre. When it was finished we hoisted the trunk on to the top. Karen put the photograph back into the bag, wrapped the bag up inside the dress and laid the dress across the domed lid of the trunk. When everything was arranged to her liking, she took a twist of kitchen paper from the pocket of her anorak, undid it, and sprinkled the contents over the dress.

‘What’s that you’ve got there?’ I asked.

‘Three bay leaves, some mixed herbs and a teaspoon of salt,’ she said. ‘It’s all I could find in the kitchen.’

She handed me the box of matches and I squatted down on the sand at the foot of the pyre and at the third go succeeded in setting fire to a scrap of the blue and white paper lining. Within a minute or two the splintered tray was well alight, the flames fanned by the off-shore breeze, the dry pinewood crackling and

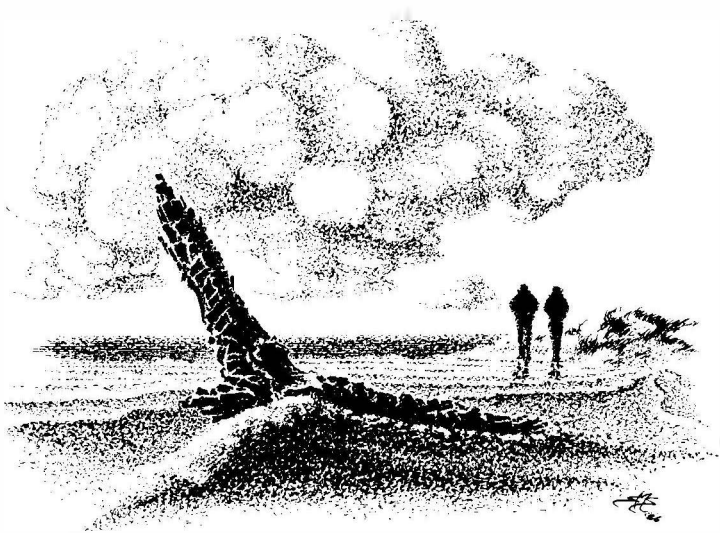
spurting like fireworks. Superb clouds of silver and amber smoke began to billow upwards in the brilliant sunshine as the plastic sacks began to blaze. I felt the heat on my face, rose to my feet and took a couple of paces backwards. I wanted very badly to say something which would let Vera's tormented spirit know that I wished her nothing but good, somehow to release her from her lonely anguish. I lifted up my hands before the flames. 'May you find whatever it is you seek, poor spirit,' I cried. 'God of Mercy send you rest and peace. Fare you well.'

'Amen,' said Karen and dipping her hand back into her pocket she drew out that card which Zena had given me and which she must have found in the kitchen when she was collecting her funeral offerings. She opened it, held it up before the shimmering flames and declaimed:

*'I come to wish you loads of luck
And happiness today!
May Fortune smile upon you
And speed you on your way!'*

The flames licked their hungry tongues up the outside of the trunk and the dark brown canvas began to blister and crack. In the heart of the fire a piece of driftwood exploded like a gun. I reached across, took the card from Karen's hands and laid it on the top of the dress. Then we stood back, hand in hand and watched in silence.

Within minutes the trunk was completely ablaze and little plumes of fleecy white smoke were starting to coil up out of the material of the dress. Soon the canvas of the lid broke away and dropped into the centre of the fire leaving the dress supported on the domed framework of the wooden slats. A moment later the dress burst into flame and flared up. Zena's card opened and the silver horseshoe buckled, turned coppery-gold and then sloe black. Just as it was on the point of becoming totally unrecognizable one of the central wooden slats collapsed and the dress, the bag and the card vanished into the roaring inferno beneath. A cloud of sparks rushed upwards through the shell of the trunk. As we watched them they transformed themselves into specks of black ash against the silver-blue sky and fluttered far away out to sea in what I hope was the direction of the Zuider Zee.



Chapter 6

The spontaneous act of exorcism which Karen and I performed upon the sunlit Essex shore that morning in February may have lacked the niceties of more orthodox ritual but, certainly as far as I was concerned, it wanted for nothing in the way of sincerity. Even so I was not anxious to put its efficacy to the test by spending that night alone in the bungalow. After lunch we tidied the place up, I packed my script and the few things I would need to see me through the week ahead, and we made our way back to the farm. I handed over the key to Barbara, arranged with her that she would pay Janice on the Friday, and then we said 'au revoir' and drove back to London.

Next day I had the script duplicated and gave a copy to Maggie. On the Wednesday I went down to Suffolk, spent a couple of days with my mother, and returned to London on the Friday. Karen stayed that night with me in the flat and early the following morning we drove down to St. Mellows. We arrived at the bungalow just after midday.

The moment I walked into the living-room I knew that everything was going to be all right. The sun was streaming in through the long windows and there was a clean, lavenderish smell of fresh wax polish on the air. But mostly it was something I detected in myself—a sense of ambient *rightness*, of having come home. I knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that my story was still here, waiting for me to complete it. ‘It’s O.K., Karo,’ I said. ‘We’ve done it. I’m not sure how, but I know we have.’

‘You feel it too?’ she said. ‘I was wondering if you would.’

Later we walked down to the sea. The only trace of our obsequies that I could find was a solitary piece of charred driftwood lying above the high-water mark and I couldn’t even be sure that it was one of ours. Nevertheless I carried it down to the water’s edge and flung it as far out to sea as I could. The retreating tide accepted it and bore it away down the coast and out of our sight.

Next day we walked into the village, had lunch at the ‘George and Dragon’ and then, at Karen’s insistence, called in upon Zena. She must have seen us coming for she opened the door before we had even rung the bell. ‘Come along in, my dears!’ she cried. ‘I’ve been expecting you all morning.’ And as if to lend substance to her assertion she produced from behind the door the same two pairs of slippers that she had provided for us on our first visit. ‘I turned up a pair of lovers in the cards last night,’ she confided, ‘and I knew it just *had* to be you.’

‘How’s the washing machine behaving?’ I asked.

‘As good as gold,’ she said. ‘But what did you expect? Jim will make you a very good husband, my dear. Take my word for it.’

Karen grinned. ‘And what makes you think that’ll ever happen?’

‘Oh, it will, it will,’ said Zena airily. ‘Just give him time.’

‘He’s had everything else,’ observed Karen, ‘so I suppose he might as well have that too.’

We sat and chatted about nothing in particular for a while and then I asked Zena if she’d mind Karen taking a look at the scrap-book.

‘Of course you can, my dear,’ she said, getting up from her chair and going over to the bureau. ‘I’m sure Vera won’t mind a bit.’

Karen thanked her, took the album from her and began examining the photographs. As Zena settled herself down again I turned to her and said: 'I wonder if you can tell me something, Zena? You don't happen to remember if Vera ever owned a grey evening dress—one with long sleeves?'

She stared at me long enough for me to notice the line of white at the roots of her otherwise jet black hair. 'What makes you ask?' she said.

'I—er, came across one,' I said. 'In the bottom of an old trunk up in the attic at "Myrtles". I've been wondering if it was Vera's—if it had any special significance for her?'

'If it's the one I'm thinking of . . .' she began, then shook her head. 'No, it can't be. I'm sure Tony destroyed it.'

'Destroyed it?' I repeated curiously. 'Why should he do that?'

'It was the one she was wearing that night . . . when she was found.'

'No, no,' I said. 'You've misunderstood me. I'm not talking about a *night* dress. This was definitely an evening dress.'

'But Vera wasn't wearing a *nightdress* when she was attacked. Whatever gave you that idea?'

I gazed at her in astonishment. 'But I read it in there,' I said, pointing to the album in Karen's lap. 'I'm positive I did.'

'Then it was a misprint,' she said. 'Vera was wearing a grey, three-quarter length evening dress. She'd just come back from a dinner party at the Bancrofts'. As far as I know it was the last time she ever wore a grey frock in her life.'

'And you say Tony destroyed it?'

'I believe so. Of course it was completely ruined. It was covered in blood.'

'It could have been cleaned, couldn't it?'

'Well, I suppose it *could*. The Indians were very good at that sort of thing. But what would have been the point? Vera would never have worn it again. How could she?'

I considered this for a moment and then I remembered something else. 'By the way, what was Tony's middle name?'

'Reginald.'

'Anthony Reginald Barcombe?'

She nodded.

‘Those were the initials on the lid of the trunk,’ I said. ‘A.R.B.’
‘And where *is* this dress?’ she asked.

I glanced sideways at Karen. ‘I’ve got something of a confession to make, Zena,’ I said. ‘I took it down on to the shore and burnt it.’

She gave me a long and searching look, then she nodded her head slowly. ‘I’m so glad you did that,’ she said. ‘It’s exactly what Vera would have wanted. She must have known you’d understand.’

‘You told me that once before,’ I reminded her. ‘What makes you think so?’

‘You know Africa, Jim,’ she said. ‘And you have the gift of imagination. That’s what Vera’s always needed. Someone with the imagination to feel for her, identify with her.’

‘That dream I had, you mean? Well, maybe. But only up to a point. I still don’t know *why* she did it.’

‘And do you still need to?’

I thought about it for a moment then I smiled and shook my head. ‘No, not really,’ I said. ‘I can manage to live without it. Even though I am a Libran.’

‘On the cusp, Jim,’ she insisted. ‘You mustn’t forget that. It’s very important. Vera was the same.’

‘Really?’

‘Her birthday’s September the Twentieth. So you see that’s something else you have in common.’

‘*Had*,’ I insisted. ‘She’s dead, remember.’

Zena smiled. ‘I’ve got a really lovely photo of Vera. It’s one Ronnie took just before she went out to South Africa. Would you like to see it?’

‘I’d like to very much,’ I said. ‘The only pictures of her I’ve ever seen are the ones in your scrap-book.’

Zena got up and padded through into her ‘den’. She returned carrying a photograph in a silver frame. ‘That was taken at “Myrtles” in the summer of ’58,’ she said, handing it to me.

It was a three-quarter length portrait which had obviously been blown up from a snapshot. Vera was smiling straight into the camera. In her arms she was holding a black and white cat. ‘Why, that’s Pusser!’ I exclaimed. ‘Mopsy, I mean.’

Zena chuckled. ‘That’s Zabrina—Mopsy’s grandmother.’

She came to live with us when Vera went back to Africa.'

'You mean she belonged to Vera?'

'Oh, yes. Ever since she was a kitten. She came from Brimble Farm originally. She really was a beautiful cat. And, of course, Vera *adored* her. It almost broke her heart to have to leave her behind.'

I held the photograph out to Karen who glanced at it, smiled and nodded but didn't offer any comment. I handed it back to Zena and thanked her for having let me see it. 'I must say Vera looks a lot happier there than she did after the trial,' I said. 'Was she glad to be going back?'

'Yes, I think she was, in a way,' said Zena, gazing down at the portrait. 'But Vera always seemed to distrust happiness. Some people are like that, aren't they?'

'Well, I daresay she felt she had more reason to than most,' I said.



This story, such as it is, really ends there. The rest is just a hoovering up of some odd bits and pieces.

I started work again on the Monday, pressed on steadily for the next three weeks, and had the first draft of the novel finished by the end of March. There were no distractions of any kind unless you count the weekend when Peter and Veronica came down with Karen. My one great disappointment was that Pusser never reappeared. I imagine that she must have given me up as a lost cause during that week when I was up in London. I presented my two remaining tins of Whiskas to Zena as a parting gift on the day before I left 'Myrtles' for good.

As soon as I was re-established in Earl's Court I telephoned Mrs. Cousins and arranged to go round and hand over a cheque for my electricity bill. Jilly and her sister were out when I got there, but Mrs. Cousins seemed delighted to see me and was fascinated to hear that I had finished my book. 'Jilly will be thrilled to bits when I tell her,' she said. 'She was very taken with you and Karen. And it was sweet of you to send her that card. She's got it pinned up on her bedroom wall.'

'I'll have to send you all a copy of the novel if it ever gets into

print,' I said. 'Jilly will have to wait a year or two before she reads it though. It's bound to have an "X" rating.'

'Have you given it a title yet?'

'Only a provisional one so far.'

'And what's that?'

'*Ondoka*. That's Swahili for "Go away". It's what the blacks wish the whites would do.'

'I must remember to keep a look out for it,' she said. 'Who knows, one of these days we may be putting a plaque up on the bungalow with your name on it.'

We chatted about the Fenwicks and Janice Beaney and Mrs. Tarrant and then I asked her if she knew that the bungalow was supposed to be haunted.

Mrs. Cousins laughed. 'You must have been hearing stories about dear old Lettie Henshaw. Am I right?'

'I did hear something about her from Barbara,' I admitted. 'But it's really your relative, Mrs. Barcombe, I'm interested in. Do you know much about her?'

'Cousin Vera? To be honest, hardly anything except that she died in Pretoria and left me the bungalow in her will. She was only a very, very distant relative of mine. Why? Have you found out something interesting?'

'You mean you don't know she was once tried for murder?'

'I don't believe it!'

'It's absolutely true,' I said. 'Cross my heart. I've read the newspaper reports of the trial.'

'Good heavens! Really? And when did this happen?'

'The murder? In 1953. Out in Kenya. She was acquitted, of course.'

'But what an extraordinary thing! How on earth did you find all this out?'

'Through Mrs. Tarrant, chiefly. She was a close friend of Mrs. Barcombe and her husband. I'm pretty sure she was the only person in the village who ever knew about it.'

'You aren't telling me it's Cousin Vera whose supposed to be haunting "Myrtles"?'

'I don't think anyone's haunting it,' I said.

'Well, that's a relief. For a moment I thought you were going to tell me that you'd seen this ghost.'

I smiled. 'I'm still not a hundred percent sure just what a ghost is,' I said. 'Do *you* know?'

'I've never seen one in my life,' she said. 'I rather wish I had.'

'Well, I'm pretty sure you'll never see one in "Myrtles",' I said.

She laughed. 'I'm glad to hear it. I'd hate to have to pay for an exorcist to fumigate the place. The rates are bad enough as it is.'

I looked at my watch and saw that it was time to make a move. But there was still one thing I wanted to ask her. 'I wonder if I could borrow one of your slides of the bungalow and have a print made from it? I promise faithfully that I'll let you have it back as soon as it's done. I meant to take some photos myself before I left, but somehow I just never got round to it.'

'Yes, of course you can,' she said. 'They're upstairs in the bedroom. I'll run up and fetch them.'

She was back in next to no time with a box of transparencies. 'Have you any particular one in mind?' she enquired.

'Oh, any of the ones taken from the dunes with the Brimbles in the background. There was one very nice one, I remember, with someone standing on the verandah.'

She lifted them up, one by one, against the light from the window and finally held one out to me. 'That's taken from the top of the dunes,' she said. 'Is that the one you mean?'

I took the slide from her and peered into it. It was certainly the view I remembered but there was no woman on the verandah. 'This will do fine,' I said. 'The one Jilly showed us was taken from just this angle.'

'I'm almost sure that's the only one I ever took looking straight across,' she said. 'But hang on a moment.'

She went rapidly through the rest of them and shook her head. 'That must be it,' she said. 'There doesn't seem to be anything missing from the box. You can keep it, if you like. We're bound to take heaps more.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Quite sure,' she said, and put the lid back on the box.

I thanked her once again, tucked the slide away inside my wallet and, shortly after, we shook hands and I said goodbye.

Since there has to be a last word it seems only fair that Zena should be the one to have it. It arrived at the end of July, two days before Karen and I were married in Kensington Registry Office. The form it took was that of a large, be-ribboned card embossed with a lavish design of golden horseshoes and silver bells. The printed verse read:

*'Ring out O silver bells of Joy!
Proclaim the message far and wide!
O'er sea and forest, lake and hill!
This loving nuptial knot is tied!*

and beneath in her inimitable hand the author had scrawled: 'With all our love and best wishes for your future happiness! Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Zena.'

Richard Cowper, a pseudonym of John Middleton Murry, was born in 1926 and educated at Oxford and Leicester University. He worked as a teacher of English before becoming a full-time writer in 1972. Apart from his many highly regarded science fiction novels, Cowper has published several mainstream novels as Colin Murry, and under his real name two volumes of autobiography dealing with his relationship with his famous father. Richard Cowper lives in Devon, and is currently working on a new science fiction novel.

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