



The
Mystery
of
Huntley
Manor

Stephe Brewer

Chapter I

“Do I know you?”

“It’s Carl. From Research and Data-entry.”

The tall brunette stared blankly at him long enough for it to become uncomfortable.

“I talk to you three or four times a day. About the science fiction boardgame you’re doing the Art Design on. Buck Rodgers’ ship designs: with the sparklers out the back. From the old cliff-hanger serials....”

“Oh.” a dim flicker of recognition passed behind her stone grey eyes. “Is that what you look like. I imagined you a little fatter. Thanks, Hank.”

The last remark was directed to the tall marketing manager from ‘Fang of the Were-Beast’: one of the rising stars on the distribution team. He had handed her a Chardonnay, and was now flicking some imaginary lint off the broad shoulders of his Armani. His tie was still done up, despite the fact that the C.E.O. had delivered his seasonal well wishes to the predictably responsive staff, and even his well tanned hands were chiseled.

Carl felt a chilly droplet of condensation trickle over the knuckles of his left hand, from the extra glass of Riesling he still held.

“Hi, Hank!”

Hank grunted in what could have been a friendly way, and turned to display his profile to its full advantage. Carl mustered a hearty, affable grin.

“Well, always good to put a name to a face!” he enthused, then turned before they could fail to give an interested reply, and slouched back over to the corner of the large field of cubicles. He wound his way past merry making bunches of office staff, into the corner of the floor near the toilets, and under the humm of the air conditioning unit; just where a screw had come loose two years before, causing an almost inaudible, yet constant rattle, and a drip onto the carpet that during the summer months gave off a faint rotting smell. Just to one side of this was a door, with a photocopied label that had peeled from one top corner, proclaiming it the realm of the Research and Data-entry Team.

Carl shuffled into the small circle of his friends, and handed the Riesling to one of them, at random.

“But I don’t drink white wine, Carl.” said Ric.

“Whatever.”

“Well give it to someone else then, you Berk!” snapped Alf from the other side of the circle.

“What kind is it?” chimed in Stan. He was just returning from the knot of accountants who had gathered around the water cooler, and was clearly in a chatty mood.

“I dunno. Chardonnay?” offered Ric.

“Nah,” Stan returned, “far too light in hue. Probably a Riesling. Give it here then.”

“My God you’re a pansy.” growled Alf, before turning to Carl and continuing, “Didn’t get us lot one, then.”

Carl began to mutter something appropriately apologetic, when an evil little snigger from the door of their office announced that his dignity was about to be sacrificed to the pagan gods of the office party humiliation. Pat, the last member of the team announced: “Nah, he was too busy chatting up Sarah.”

“Oh, really? How’d it go?”

“Oh, you goose. Out of your league mate: try punching your weight.”

“What?”

and

“Arrgh!”

Stan, Alf, and Ric, followed by Stan again, as Ric’s elbow made short work of the still mostly full Reisling, ruining one of his workmate’s more lurid ties.

At which point, Carl decided that some things are not to be born gracefully, especially at office Christmas parties, and broke out the emergency Tequila bottle that he had stashed in his desk from the birthday bash that the boys had thrown for him six months earlier.

As it is a social gaff of the most terrible nature to enjoy any alcoholic substance given for one’s birthday alone, however, it was not long before Carl found himself relating the entire episode to his assembled staff, behind the closed door of their cramped and cluttered fiberboard office. And so well did he impersonate both the icily aloof (yet unobtainably delicious) Sarah, and the sneeringly superior (yet clearly erectionally dysfunctional) Hank, that even the social butterfly Stan found himself pinned, sharing shots, and proclaiming that all company parties were a wank, and that he would rather be in here in the bosom of his good friends, getting tanked in solidarity to a fallen comrade.

Which of course made Alf call him a pansy again.

Ric had a faint recollection, much later, of the five of them making a large pile of books- their Fiction Quick Reference volumes- in a space cleared in the centre of the small office. This had necessitated the barricading of the one door with Pat’s desk: another fortunate happening, for it allowed them room enough to make the pentagram out of computer cables and phone lines, around the pile of science fiction, western, gothic horror, detective, fantasy, adventure, and comic books....

Then there had been an eldrich glowing, in the darkened room....

Stan had a splitting headache when he awoke. His throat felt like a diseased tube of carpet, and his stomach was making a hollow knocking noise. On reflection, possibly that was the door. Someone was knocking lightly on it. He groaned something, and tried valiantly to raise his head.

From between the curtains of the four poster bed, he saw the door creak open, and an elderly butler carrying a tray shuffle quietly in. The man moved to a bedside table, placed the tray down, then crossed the Persian-silk knotted carpet to the thick velvet curtains that hung before a set of enormous bay windows. He threw them open.

Had he been less hung over, Stan may have had the wherewithal to promptly ask the butler not to do this, but were that the case it wouldn’t have been such an issue. As it was, Stan was hung over enough not to stop him, but too hung over to bear the flood of autumn sunlight that coursed through the lead lined panes, and directly into his eyeballs.

“Apologies, Mr Stan sir, but you did ask to be woken promptly at eight.”

Rolling over, and prying his eyelids apart, Stan squinted at the liveried footman. “Hww ndoo yynn know my name?”

“Sir?”

He sat up, and looked further around the completely unfamiliar room. There was tea on the tray, but at the moment the thought of hot liquid was unbearable. Across the room stood a Dressing table, of mahogany or some dark wood, with a large white bowl, and pitcher of water on it. Mustering all his willpower, Stan lurched

out of the tall bed, and staggered over to the seat nearby. Steadying himself on the back of it, he took two or three deep breaths, and then plunged his head into the full basin. He swallowed some of it, by reflex, and felt it sear a passageway open down his throat. Standing and panting he picked up the jug and, dispensing with niceties, sculled half the contents directly from the spout. Much of it ended up on the silk pyjamas he was wearing. They fitted extraordinarily nicely, and were by far the most comfortable thing he had ever woken up in.

Feeling more able to cope with the world now, he turned and looked at the butler who was standing in the same spot, with an ashen face.

“Mmm. Sorry ‘bout that. Only way to cure a hangover. Ouch. Look I seem to have slept in one of your beds last night, hope I haven’t put you out.”

“Sir!?”

“Umm, the bed. Thank you. But- why do you keep calling me ‘sir’?” he looked around again. There were a pair of monogrammed slippers by the bedside, with the letter ‘S’ on them. The pyjama top he wore had the same stylised letter on its breast pocket. He looked back to the butler.

“And how do you know my name, and why did I have to be woken at eight o’ clock?”

The elderly man drew himself up, composed his face in a state of professional indifference, stared into the middle distance, and pronounced: “I know your name sir, from the twelve years of service I have given to you, and the many years with your father before that. I call you sir, because you are a knight of the Order of the Garter, as was your father before you, and you needed to be woken at eight, because you have a half past nine train to catch, from Piccadilly Station. The express, to Cornwall, sir. Will that be all?”

Cabbies called out to each other over the deafening clatter of their iron rimmed wheels on the cobbles, hawkers plied their wares, flower girls offered their baskets to passing gentry, and the stench of manure and human filth rose high over all as, an hour and a half later, Stan stepped through the gates and onto the platform at Piccadilly Station. He had chosen a cream and gold morning suit, with the family crest embroidered on the breast pocket, a long black cane, and a cream boater. In his lapel stood a chrysanthemum that he had vastly overpaid one of the flower girls for, and he was humming, “Wouldn’t it be lovely.”

He stepped lightly onto the first class carriage and skipped gaily down the corridor, pausing briefly to allow a pretty dame in ballooning skirts pass, and tip his hat. He found his way to berth 13, and slid the rattling door to one side.

“Oh, hello chaps! Fancy meeting you here!”

Pat, Carl and Ric all looked up resignedly as Stan tossed his hat and cane onto an empty seat, and his lanky frame languidly onto another.

“Hmph! You would be a toff.” grunted Pat.

“What do you mean?” Stan looked around at the three of them. Carl wore a scuffed and weathered bowler, over a tweed three piece with a dark bow tie. Ric’s suit was more casual, with a comfortable jacket of fullish length that had leather patches on the elbows, and a green necktie. A leather carry-all with a hinged square opening and two handles sat beside him. Pat however, wore little more than a shirt and pants, both badly torn and patched, and so dirty as to be impossible to state what colour it was other than ‘filthy grey’. His feet were clad in cardboard and rags, that appeared to be held on by leather thongs which wound around and around until they terminated in a mess of knots somewhere above his ankle. He was scratching a lot.

“Ooh. I didn’t think they let people like you on here.” sniffed Stan, pulling a perfumed handkerchief from a pocket and flapping it in Pat’s general direction.

“Well,” said the itchy individual, “Ric is the Country Doctor,” Ric smiled and patted the leather case, “Carl is the Plodding Police Inspector, and I quite clearly got lumped with the Loveable Street Urchin.”

“I think loveable might be stretching the point.” objected Ric, who had the seat nearest Pat.

“How did you all figure this out?” Stan enquired.

“The letters helped.” said Carl. When Stan remained blank, he went on, “We all had one. An invitation, that came with the ticket. Didn’t you?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, the butler did pop something in my pocket, now where...”

Pat snarled “You got a butler? Fricken’ typical. I wake up in a flea bitten den of iniquity and this tosser....”

“Here, read mine.” offered Carl.

“Oh, no: found it!” Stan waved the envelope in triumph, and handed it to the Inspector.

Carl perused it for a moment, then reported on his findings: “Same deal. You are the Earl Stanley Halberd, of Swain’s Court, London. You’ve been invited to the same mysterious weekend at Huntley Manor, in Cornwall. The letter has the same watermark, and is written in the same ink, on thick vellum. I bought a newspaper on my way from Scotland Yard, and it puts the date at 9th of December, 1890, but so far there has been no mention of said Manor, or the W.H who has signed all our letters.”

“You’re really getting into the part there, aren’t you?” Stan noted.

Carl blushed, and Pat growled, “He’s been intolerable since he got on. Listen, aren’t any of you the least bit puzzled as to how in the hell this has all happened?”

All three of them frowned, and Ric nodded. “I have a vague memory... after we divided the tequila worm....”

“Wasn’t that a great idea...?”

“Something about sacrificing Alf’s catfish...”

“And a link up via cable modem to the company mainframe...”

“Shadow Games is really going to be pissed when they find out we did that to the photocopier...”

“Then it felt like I was falling...”

“Yeah, me too...”

“Look, frankly, I don’t mind how it happened; just so long as we don’t have to be in at work today.”

“Yeah? You didn’t have to beat off an overly amorous Fagin this morning at dawn. Jeez I’ve still got a splitting hangover.”

“I wonder where Alf is?”

Just then the sliding door smashed open, and there stood the aforementioned figure, his large frame filling the doorway. He was attired head to toe in a red cheongsam and loose pants, with sandals on his feet, and a small round red hat on the top of his head.

“You lot can’t bloody complain! I’ve been up and stirring laundry since four-a.m!” he announced, brandishing a long slim wooden pole, bleached at one end. “I’ve had to trek across town from the poorest section, on foot the whole bloody way, because no friggin’ cab will pick me up! Children were throwing stones at me! This is blatant racism, and whichever one of you turkeys is dreaming it better damn well wake up in a hurry, or I’m going to introduce this stick into one of his orifices!”

“Sorry, sirs,” came the voice of a conductor from outside, “I’ll just be removin’ this foreign gentl’ man from your berth.”

Before Alf could accost the man, Pat and Carl had hauled him inside, and Stan had interposed himself, explaining that he (as a gentleman) was quite fascinated to be riding with such an individual, having never met a ‘Chinaman’ before. He rapidly dismissed the conductor, and slid the door shut before the man could observe Alf’s reaction to this remark.

Five minutes later, they had calmed their co-worker, and pointed out to him that there were really very few other social roles for a man with the surname Yo-Ip in early industrial London. Then the train had blown its whistle and moved off, and they were all together again, and off to their mysterious rendezvous, at Huntley Manor, on the Cornwall moors....

Chapter II

The train was sumptuously appointed, but noisy compared to twentieth century standards, especially with the window open, and smoke from the big black steam engine at the head wafting in.

Stan slid the window up, and turned back into the carriage.

"It's incredible," he said for the twelfth time, "the countryside just goes on and on!"

The others weren't even getting annoyed with him for repeating himself: they all shared his sense of wonder. Ric, the tall gangly 'family doctor' shook his head and agreed.

"When I woke up, I swore that it must be a dream. Well, at first I thought that we must have ended up in someone's house, but after that..."

"And even when I was walking through the streets," Carl said, "it still seemed like some big stage, or... I dunno, movie set."

"Yeah," Stan agreed, "I could sort of walk along, and not believe it, or something. But this countryside..."

Alf piped up, "It makes it real." The big Asian guy in the cheongsam was sitting near the door, brooding, as far from the windows as he could get. His brow was creased with his usual surly frown, but in this weird environment it was laced with a deep mistrust.

Everybody nodded, and fell silent, staring out at the horizon. So clear, so real, and so distant.

"Bugger this!" announced Pat a few minutes later. "Stan; you've got cash on you, yeah?"

"Really, Pat, I know you've been cast as the street urchin, but do you have to speak like one? Anyway, a gentleman doesn't need to carry money: his name should be 'surance enough for any establishment of worth."

"Including British Rail?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"Right," said Pat, standing, "you're taking us to lunch."

Further up, in the dining car, their motley crew was attracting some very confused stares. But Stan had been right: his position as a gentleman afforded them immediate service, at the best table in the car, and with two waiters to see to their needs. Five breakfasts of smoked salmon and poached eggs, bacon, sausages, mushrooms, grilled tomatoes- the full English treatment- were summarily ordered, and demolished, so that half an hour later they were sitting back replete and very much more relaxed.

"Waiter!" called Alf, "If you still don't have any coffee, then another pot of strong Earl Grey, please."

The waiters diligently leapt to the task, and cleared off the wreckage of the plates and condiments.

"Really, Alf," Stan winced, "you don't need to shout at them. They're very discreet."

"Unless you're a Chinese Laundryman or a Street Urchin." Alf replied, "They wouldn't even look at Pat and I, and you had to order for us. Friggin' class system...."

"Yes, well," interrupted Carl, before an argument could break out, "Let's try to apply ourselves to the situation at hand."

“What, the lack of coffee?” asked Ric.

Carl sighed, and spread out a sheet of paper from his pocket amongst the cups and saucers, sugar pots and silver spoons. “You know perfectly well what I mean. Right: what’s the last thing each of us remembers?”

There was some discontented mumbling, before Pat piped up. “Tipping my desk up against the door so that no-one could disturb us.”

Carl took a careful note.

Ric suggested “I think I was pouring through the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Monstrous Compendium.”

Alf looked at him incredulously. “Why on earth would you be doing that?” he barked, “At a Christmas party with free booze?”

“No,” Stan disagreed, “the liquor had run dry at that point. The accounts department had gotten stuck in at around ten.”

“I was looking for all the actual Christian Demon names that had made it into the TSR game...” explained Ric.

“So,” Carl called out, trying to get them back on track, “our little adventure began after ten o’clock then, did it?”

“Oh, yeah.” Pat assured. “You didn’t try to chat up Sarah until around nine, so it must have been a while after that. Tee hee!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Carl waved away the tide of derision that predictably followed. “Listen, I am trying to figure out what the hell has happened to us! Don’t any of you want to know how we got here?”

There was a general murmur of agreement, and a pause as the waiters returned and poured the tea from a silver pot.

“Right,” Carl continued, “ideas anyone?”

“Well,” Ric ventured, “it could be a dream...”

Everyone glanced at the other men sitting around the table. Gradually, they all shook their heads.

“I mean,” Stan said, “even given the obvious question of ‘whose dream is it then?’...”

“It doesn’t make a stuff of difference.” Pat concluded for him.

“Nah: I don’t buy it, anyway.” Alf decided. “This is nothing like a dream. It doesn’t feel that way. This cheongsam itches, and everything smells a lot more than it generally does in my dreams.”

“And who has this long a coherent string of events in the average dream, anyway?” Stan asked. “I mean, I have been fully conscious, and experiencing a consistent reality for... four and a half hours now.” he said, checking his fob watch.

“Mmm, good point.” Carl said, scratching off the word ‘Dream’ from his little list. “Other suggestions? Come on, guys, let’s think outside the box.”

“Man, have you been practicing using phrases like that to get into Sarah’s pants?” Pat asked.

Carl coughed. “Any suggestions?”

Ric came to his rescue with “Mass joint hallucination?”

“Virtual Reality?” Alf proposed, less than hopefully.

“Mmm, well, we work for a games design company,” Carl countered, “so we all know that VR technology has a long way to go yet, before it is anywhere near this convincing.”

“And I don’t like the hallucination.” Stan mused, “No offence Ric, but you run into most of the same problems as with the ‘Dream’ option.”

“Ehh, I wasn’t married to the idea myself.”

“Ooh! How about ‘Alternate Universe’?” gasped Stan.

Pat sighed. “You’re a doofus, Stan. That’s about as feasible as Time Travel.”

“Uhh, well why not? Haven’t I read something in the papers about Quantum physics, and uhh, that sort of thing?”

“Yeah, Stan, but Pat’s right.” Carl explained. “I mean, whilst such things are – according to some theories – at least within the realms of the possible, that could well be due to our lack of understanding of the fundamental laws of the universe.”

“I dunno,” Ric pondered, “Quantum mechanics does actually support the ‘Multiple Worlds’ model of the universe.”

“Yeah, and that makes for nice science fiction.” Carl went on, “But have you ever noticed that whenever characters in those novels and films get sucked into an alternate universe, one where just one thing is different, it never happens to be one of the universes made of antimatter?”

“Which,” Pat stuck in, “according to straight probability around half of them would be? ‘Boom.’ ”

“Mmm,” Carl said, “or in which one of the values of spin, in the six different quarks which make up all sub atomic particles, is different from our universe? Rendering one of the strong or weak forces that allow atoms to form...”

“Alright!” Stan barked. “You lost me about a minute ago. So that one’s a no-go.”

“You all lost me around Piccadilly.” Grumbled Alf. “Jeez, this itches. Look, all of this is so much bunkum. The simple fact of the matter is that we’re lost. We are in a place we don’t understand, by some magical means that we can’t even come up with a decent explanation for.”

“I don’t know that this is helping, Alf.” Carl complained.

“No! It’s the only bloody thing that will help. Look, we can’t explain it, or probably change it, and I am still expecting a whole bunch of television crews to jump out of the soup tureen and shout ‘Gotcha!’. One thing is clear, though.” He growled, pulling out his invitation letter, “Wherever we are, it’s got a ‘story’ to it. And frankly, not the most original one I’ve ever come across. One way or the other, that means that someone is controlling the situation. Now, while I don’t like that - at all - it does mean one good thing.”

“What’s that?” Ric asked.

“When we come to the end, and finally figure out what the hell is going on, there will be someone for me to punch in the Goddamned mouth.”

And once more they descended into bickering, as the train carried them on, to the moors of Cornwall.

Chapter III

The sound of carriage wheels over the gravel of the deserted country road rapidly faded into the distance, as the boys stood before the wrought iron gates on the deserted moor. The sun had only just sunk below the horizon, and a gibbous moon was leering over the eastern hills. A low mist was already rising from the dells and hollows of the eerily quiet countryside, and a screech owl slid silently by them to fall swiftly on a rodent in the grass, cutting off its brief squeal with a bloody crunch.

On a rise directly before them, at a distance of half a mile, stood the starkly gothic shape of an ancient and neglected Country Manor house, of once great splendor. Only a solitary light shone from one window, high up in the eaves of the western wing, and as they watched, the iron gates creaked open before them, seemingly of their own accord.

Pat McFael, loveable street urchin, spoke with quite deliberation.

“I say we burn it to the ground.”

Stan turned to him, aghast. “What? That gorgeous old place?”

“Oh, come on! Look at this! Five unconnected strangers, invited to a lonely and run down Manse, on the deserted moors, at night time. We’ve all read this one, and it doesn’t end well.”

“He’s right,” Alf agreed, “This has got H. P. Lovecraft written all over it. I guarantee you that beneath the basement of that dilapidated structure lies an ancient Pagan shrine, that leaks its malign influence like a cancer up through the very stones of the old keep, and drives all who sleep there into a spiralling world of madness and fear.”

“Granted it needs a little work...” Stan persisted.

“Work?” cried Pat, “It needs a bloody good torching! Who’s got some matches?”

“Look, guys: we could be in another story. This could be the once-kindly-treated-convict-bestows-his-wealth-on-the-now-grown-but-disadvantaged-companions-of-his-youth, deal.”

Across the moor, now sinking into proper darkness and fog, came the long, mournful sound of a wolf, howling at the coming of the night. Pat looked at the others.

“Burn it?”

“Yep.”

“You bet.”

“I think I saw some dry sticks and things over here...”

“Oh, come on guys...” Stan complained, but it was too late. The four of them had already started up the long gravel path, picking up kindling on their way.

Half an hour later, scurrying movements were happening around the rear of the building. There was a damp rustle, and a repetitious scratching noise.

“This damn fog has gotten into everything!” muttered Ric.

“Look, give me those things!” demanded Alf’s voice. There was the sound of a small scuffle, and then the light wooden tinkle of matches falling on the ground.

“Oh, bloody typical! You’ve dropped them all!”

“Well you shouldn’t grab!”

A moment later everybody froze, as with a click and a creak, a door opened and a golden triangle of light spread out and bathed them all. They remained a frozen tableau of hunched and furtive figures for some seconds, before all straightening up.

“Ah, did sirs have some trouble locating the front door? Never mind, the servant’s entrance will do as well.” The voice coming from the tall, trim figure in the doorway was clipped, and matched it well in its stiffness. “Do come in, please.”

The five boys stood chagrined, and shuffled reluctantly towards the open doorway. As they did so, Carl took to muttering.

“It’s O.K, at least we are going into it forewarned. We’ll just have to keep our eyes open, and the moment anything starts displaying any signs of being a Vessel of Lurking Darkness and Evil, we can jump on it and belt the crap out of it.”

“Alright, fine.” whispered Ric back, “But the first thing I’m doing is getting to the library and finding the old smugglers passage that leads down to the seaside at the bottom of the cliffs. I want a bolt hole!”

The creeping chill of eldritch presences was even beginning to take hold of Stan, however, and he whispered urgently as they entered the kitchens, “I really think we should all stick together. What if I’m the distant relative who has to inherit this place?”

“That’s your bloody lookout mate, but I wouldn’t be going to sleep tonight if I was you...” Pat said, very reassuringly.

As they passed a bench, Alf took a quick and quiet step to one side, and lifted two long carving knives from a block, both of which he stashed up his sleeves. The others observed this in silence, then after an instant began unobtrusively lifting small pocketable items as they walked, that could prove of some use in an emergency situation.

The tall dusty old butler lead them through the laundry, the deserted servants quarters, up some stairs, down a long corridor, through the entrance hall, and into a dining room, to one side of that. By the time they arrived there, each of them was practically clinking with paraphernalia: candle stubs, balls and lengths of twine, a peg or two, small mirrors, and a bottle or two of inflammable polishing liquids, or laundry crystals.

“The master has ordered that a light repast be served for you, before your audience with him, in half an hour’s time. He passes on his sincerest thanks to each of you for accepting his invitation, and hopes you had a pleasant journey. Should you require anything further, tug upon that bell pull, and I shall attend you immediately. My name is Carter.” And with that, the butler left them, pulling the double doors behind him.

After a moment or two, while they all listened to his footsteps recede, Carl began:

“Right, what have we got?”

“A really spooky portrait of a lady in the atrium.” announced Ric.

“Three wings,” offered Pat, “I reckon the west one is the sealed one.”

“That means master and the solitary devoted butler sleeping in the central one,” reasoned Alf, “and us being put up in the east, so we have to creep past them to find anything out.”

“Wasn’t the west wing the one where that attic light was coming from?” Carl asked, pulling out his notebook, and starting to draw a floorplan.

“Hmm, what are we thinking: deformed heir? Werewolf? Was the moon full?” Ric wondered.

“Almost.” called Stan. “The food seems alright, anyway.”

“Don’t eat it, you fool!” barked Alf.

“Nah,” waved Stan, around a mouthful of cold turkey, “We haven’t even been told the family history, yet. Nobody dies till after that. Now, if the butler had hinted at dark goings on... Then no way would I be eating.”

So one after another, the rest of them sat down, and began to fuel themselves up for the coming mystery.

After exactly half an hour Carter returned, bearing a tall glass fluted lamp, and lead them back out through the atrium, under the stern and eerie gaze of the woman in the painting, and up the stairs to the second floor. As they passed through the house, Carter would motion with his hand, and curtly detail the function of the room behind each door they passed. “The Ball room,” lay across the entrance hall, “The Study” and “Library” on the second floor, along with the entrance to the East wing.

“And, what’s behind those wooden boards nailed to the walls, Jeeves?” Alf innocently inquired, as they mounted the stairs to the second floor, without a comment from the servant.

“It’s Carter, sir.”

“Yes, and the boarded up door?”

“Hmm? Oh, my pardon sir. The West wing, sirs. It is in a state of terrible disrepair, and not safe to traverse. I urge you to put it completely from your minds, sirs.”

“Uh huh.” nodded Ric, “And should we hear any untoward disturbances: rattling chains, deathly footfalls, eldritch screamings in the night, coming from said wing?”

The butler looked slightly ruffled, as he paused at the top of the staircase, on the topmost level. “Ahh, I would ignore any such noises, sir. In the unlikely event that any should occur.”

“Of course.”

“How long?” queried Carl, flicking the pages of his notebook. “How long has the wing been sealed?”

“Uhhh, sixteen years, sir.” It was a chilly evening in the dilapidated Manse, but Carter seemed to be breaking out in a mild sweat. “Now, if sirs would just wait here a moment, I will prepare the master, and then call you in.”

He left them in the corridor, and closed the double doors to the Master Bedroom quietly behind him. They could hear the sounds of him shuffling around, and talking to someone; just long enough for them to lift the sword, axe, daggers, and half a halberd (snapped neatly in two across Alf’s knee) from the two sets of armor that stood to either side of the door. Then his dry voice summoned them within.

The room was dark, deeply so, and had been heavily perfumed with some rich, cloying scent. The glass flute that Carter had been carrying had been was extinguished, and one solitary candle stood on a bedside table next to the four poster. Little else could be seen in the room, but there was a sense of vast space, thick carpet and drapes, which swallowed sound like a dead thing.

In the bed lay the emaciated figure of the Lord of the Manor, and by the look of the man he was not long for this world. He appeared almost skeletal, and lay so still in the bed as to appear unmoving. Two hands, more bone than flesh, with skin like yellowed paper lay crossed on his chest. Little else could be seen, for the candle stood on the further side of the bed from him. The dark form of Carter stood at his side, just in the action of making his Master more comfortable, and as they approached, he stood. “Bright light disturbs the Master, in his weakened state. He will not be able to talk for long, so please forgive him, and do not interrupt.”

There was the sound of a ragged drawing of breath, and then a thin, reedy withered voice issued from the darkness.

“Hhhh... I thank you all for coming to me this night. I fear that I am not long for this life, and have but one task to complete, before I go to my Judgement. One last wrong that must be righted, before I may take my peace.

“In my youth, I lead a wild, and adventurous life. I traveled the world, and visited countries far and wide. After many years, I found myself in the heart of the deepest East, and pulling up with some strange foreign ailment, was put up by a family of means. They showed me great kindness, even supplying me with a servant of my own nationality, to wait upon me in the depths of my fever. When I was recovering, however, I learned that that the girl was no paid employee, but a victim of the white slave trade! The family had bought her, and paid a good price, for a previous master had gone to the trouble of removing her tongue, to silence her Western babblings. Themselves, they were no worse than any other Eastern family; and indeed many Western ones I had known; and treated the girl well. And while she could no longer speak, she and I grew to an understanding of the...deepest nature.

“Once recovered, I could not bear to leave her in such circumstances. I traveled to the nearest town, and contacted the British Embassy. Liquidating all funds that I reasonably could, I converted them to silver ingots, and returned to the country farm which had been my hospice. The Chinese Empire is a fickle place though, and during my absence of a little over a month, my host’s family had fallen victim to the particularly vicious politics of the time. A change in Emperors had induced a fall from favour on their behalf, and upon my arrival, I found that the farm had been burnt to the ground, and the family along with their entire household, had fled into the Chinese countryside.”

The boys were nodding, and Alf muttered, “Ohh, here it comes...”

“I returned to England, my heart heavy, and my soul torn in two. Time, however, heals all wounds, if not completely, then at least until they fade to scars, passed over in their familiarity. My father had found me a bride, of suitable peerage, and in her I found solace and a balm for the burns of my youth. When the years had passed, however, and time had taken her away from me before granting us the blessing of a child, my thoughts returned to my earlier manhood, and a girl I had not loved in nigh on thirty years. It took much hard work, by many talented men, and all but exhausted what little remained of my family’s once grand fortune, but at last, in the end, they hunted down the threads of fate that link me to another world. And those threads lie in no other place than here, in England!

“Alf Yo-Ip? You have in your satchel, I hope, the hereditary scroll of your family, that lists the property that your grandfather owned before the Emperor to whom he was loyal was de-throned?”

“Huh?” shrugged the Chinese laundryman. “Well, there’s some mouldy old document, but I’m bugged if I can...”

“And Inspector Blanche? You have brought with you the copies of the Register, of the Orphanage of the Sacred Heart, for the year of 1863?”

“Ahh...” sighed Carl, “That’s what they were all about. Ohh, I can see this coming...”

“Then, Lord Halberd, and Doctor Clamber, I call upon you two respectable gentlemen to witness the authenticity of this, my new Will and Testament, naming as my rightful heir...”

Chapter IV

“Suck it, Paddy! You have to inherit the Haunted mansion!” chortled the Earl Stanley, in a most undignified manner.

“Get stuffed.”

They were on the landing outside the master bedroom, Carter was putting the Lord of Huntley Manor back to bed, and most of them were giggling.

“I wouldn’t be sleeping too heavily tonight if I were you, Pat!”

“Yeah, alright, Stan. Don’t labour it.” Pat growled. “Right,” he turned to face them, “What do we reckon now?”

“Well,” began Carl, “I’ve made a careful note of all the dates mentioned in his tale, and family names, and places.”

“We can check the place over properly now.” noted Ric, “After all: you’re the heir.”

“Good point.” Nodded Pat. “Right, top to toe, people. I want this place ransacked. Try not to destroy anything valuable, but I need facts, clues, and information. Let’s get this Mystery solved before bedtime. That should completely forestall the ‘Evil of my Malign Birthright’ coming to claim me in the night, and then we can get on with drinking port and smoking cigars in the Games room.”

One hour later, the gang had reconvened in the Study, which Pat was insisting on calling his ‘Den’. He leaned back in his high backed, leather armchair, and put his feet on the desk.

“Report.”

“Well, Stan and I found the Secret Passageway in the Library.” Began Ric.

“Ah, good work. You’ll have to show all of us how to open it.”

“Oh,” called Stan, “Don’t worry for now: we left it firmly wedged open. Third bookcase on the right.”

“Took us ages to find,” moaned Ric. “In the end we just went along one row at a time pulling every book out, until something worked. Turned out though, it wasn’t a book, but one of the brass fittings...”

“Yes, yes. So it’s open? Good. Now,” Pat asked, turning to the mess Carl had made, “what’s all this lot?”

“Ahh, well Alf and I have found and removed every picture of your ‘family’ that we can and are attempting to create a family tree of sorts.”

Ric piped in, “One of the books I found in the library was a Genealogy of your house.”

“So,” continued Carl, “as you can see, this is meant to be your father, and the spooky old lady from the atrium is your mum.”

“Crikey!”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm, sorry but in my professional opinion, there doesn’t seem to be much of a family resemblance there, Pat.” Opined Ric mournfully.

Frowning, the new heir rounded on his friend. “Ric, you’re not a doctor! You can’t have a professional opinion!”

“What? If you can be an Heir to a Country Manor, then why can’t...”

“Because my knowing nothing about Rural Estates doesn’t interfere with my filling out the role nearly as much as your complete ignorance of the field of Medicine! You’re not a Doctor!”

“Fine, just rub it in then...”

“He has a point, though Pat.” Chimed in Stan. “And before you start; I am just as much an Earl as you are a Country Lord, so yes, I can have an opinion.” That dubious piece of reasoning aside, he continued, “I mean, Look at that chin. And those cheekbones. You don’t have nearly enough character to be part of this family, Pat.”

“Thank you so much...”

“You are such a Pansy.” Alf weighed in.

“Actually, I was looking more at the eyes.” Carl announced quite loudly to forestall another argument. “I mean, every member, on both sides of the family has quite strikingly blue eyes, Pat. Whereas yours are what can only be described as an unremarkable hazel.”

Pat grumbled.

“Now, we can’t say what colour your mute ‘mother’s’ eyes were, but even given that, I think we have to regard the portraits as a clue.”

“Alright,” conceded Pat, “but where does that leave us?”

“The Butler.” Stated Alf with conviction.

The others nodded their general concurrence.

“I mean,” the said Chinese laundryman, cracking the top of a barrel of beer he had found in the pantry, “do any of you actually believe that was the old man’s voice we heard up there?”

They all shook their heads sagely.

“I’ve heard better impressions from four year olds.” Said Stan.

“Exactly. So what we need to find out, is why the old geezer is lying to us.” summarized Alf.

Pat, however, was rubbing his chin. “Hmm. Nope. The Butler might have some information, but he is never the key. And he’ll never give it to us. He’ll just sneak around, stymieing things, and leaving us false trails.”

“Damn.” Said Stan, “You’re right. That’s what always happens in these stories. But what do we...”

Pat was already walking across the room, to one corner. “You two,” he pointed to Carl and Alf, “behind the door. You two look busy.”

“What are you doing?”

“The great thing about having a Butler as a bad guy is,” he tugged on the velvet tasselled rope in the corner of the room, “is you know just how to find him.” He pulled on it with all his weight, until the rope came loose from its housing, and rippled to the floor.

Thirty seconds later, Carter opened the door, and stepped neatly into the room. He observed Stan and Ric coolly, and uttered the standard, “You rang, sirs?”

“Oh, yes! Carter, could you explain this to us?” Stan inquired, with a winning smile. The Butler raised an eyebrow, and began to cross the room to them. Carl hit him high, Alf low, and the three of them rolled across the floor screaming with surprise, fear, pain and triumph, in mingled parts.

They hauled the winded servant to his feet, and deposited him in a stout chair. Pat tossed the bell pull cord to Ric, who started making fast work of trussing Carter to the furniture. He was already halfway tied before he realised what was going on.

“Whh... No! What are you doing?”

“Shut it, Jeeves!” Pat quipped, “We’re on to you. And no, we know you’re not going to tell us what’s going on, so we’re just going to go and find out. Ready, boys? We’re breaking into the West Wing!”

Amid the cheers and jocularities, the Butler struggled and called out.

“No! You mustn’t! I will tell you everything you need to know!”

“Yeah, right.”

“Don’t bother, Carter: we know your overwhelming sense of duty will keep you from ever telling us the truth.” Carl told him.

“No, honestly: I was lying before, but now I will tell you all! Anything to keep you from going into the West Wing!”

“Save it for the Jury, Jeeves.”

“Don’t bother, we know you’re lying.”

“Not listening- lalalalalalalaaa!”

“Will somebody gag him?”

Stan quickly whipped out the pin from his cravat, pulled the buff silk from around his neck, and stuffed it between the Butler’s teeth. Carter continued to give muffled cautions from behind the cloth, but the boys ignored him, and began their preparations.

“Right: first things first we will need some tools to get those boards off with.”

Half an hour later, Carl announced from amid the pile of wooden boards and debris: “Hey: this bottom board doesn’t have any dust on it!”

Pat looked over his shoulder, and examined it.

“Mmm. And there’s a hole, sawn in the bottom of the right door.”

The boys stood around musing this one, until they were interrupted by a loud spitting noise from back along the landing, and a raggedly raised voice.

“Please, you don’t understand! The heir! The heir must not...” he broke down into a fit of coughing.

“I’ll deal with it this time.” Alf murmured darkly, stalking back along the corridor. He entered the study, and a voice was heard to mumble in relief that at last they were listening to him. This was rapidly followed by a resounding thump. Carter wailed in feeble pain, before the sound of two further blows cut off his cries.

“That did it. He’ll be out for a while, now.”

The others nodded their satisfaction, and returned their attention to the door.

“It’s locked.” announced Pat. “Right, the Butler ought to know where the keys.... Damn.”

“Maybe we can barge it down?” suggested Ric.

“Whatever would hear, if there is something there...” Alf demurred.

“Nah, hang on,” cautioned Stan, who was leaning on the door, moving it back and forth the little way it could in its frame, “there’s a bar on the other side of it. Some kind of wooden block.”

“Damn. They really don’t want us getting in there, do they?” Carl muttered.

“Bugger that.” Pat cried, as he turned and headed down the stairs, “I saw a groundsman’s shed outside somewhere. We’re getting in, one way or the other.”

Chapter V

One hour later, and well into the frigid middle of the night, the fog had fallen and the grass crunched under their feet, as the boys stood out on the drive, opposite the West Wing. There was a blowing on hands, and a stomping of feet, as Ric finally stood, and nodded:

“Yep,” he breathed, his voice coming out in a mist, “it’s tight.”

Alf hoisted the crossbow to his shoulder, aiming high over the building, and fired. The quarrel sprang from the ancient wood and catgut device, and was lost immediately in the inky sky. Trailing up into the heavens behind it, flew a length of string. This whistled out through the frame with a startling hiss for quite a while, before fizzing to a halt, and the string began settling down across the roof of the Wing.

The lower storey windows were all bricked in, with work a couple of decades old at most. Above these, every single frame was heavily barred, with stout iron grilles. The roof, however, was made of simple slab-cut shingles.

“Right, off you go boys.” said Pat, to Carl and Alf: the two largest and strongest members of the group. As they marched off around the building to find the length of twine, Ric again knelt, and began tightly knotting their end to a stout rope. A few minutes later, the twine drew tight, and the rope began its ascent up the side of the block-like structure. Pat turned and handed Stan the tools.

“Right: Claw toothed hammer, candles, matches, flintlock, and two daggers.”

“Remind me why I am the idiot scaling a forty foot brick wall.”

“Cause you’re the only one long and lean enough to do it, monkey boy.”

Stan rubbed his hands together, and strained to think of another reason not to.

“Both of you guys are just as light and fit as me...”

“Yeah,” agreed Pat, “but then there’s the inside part to consider.”

“And you,” finished Ric, “are a much faster runner than either of us.”

“Oh, thank you.” muttered the unenthusiastic climber, as a shrill whistle echoed from the other side of the building.

“Yeah, alright: mind on the job.” Pat ordered, “Up the building, quietly as you can through the roof, and then sprint down to the Wing Door, and pull up that bar up. Try not to get possessed, eaten, or frightened into madness before you do.”

“I hate you.”

But with that, he shook more blood down into his hands, grasped the length of hemp, and looping it through his belt, and under his rear end, began Batmaning up the brickface. By the time Carl and Alf made it back around the house, he was gripping the guttering in deathly white knuckles, and after a few anxious moments, had hoisted himself over.

Stan lay flat on his back, the dew covered shingles seeping damp through to his shoulder blades, looking up at the now clear Cornwall sky, and its almost full moon. Then, moving very cautiously, he wriggled further away from the edge, and sat up. His four friends were just entering the front double doors of the mansion, and heading towards the Wing entrance, he guessed.

Never unlooping his belt from the rope for a minute, Stan crept up the roof a few feet, and fished around in his jacket for the claw toothed hammer. Working as quietly as he could, he loosened around a dozen shingles, and lay them to one side. Then, lighting a candle, he lowered himself into the roof space.

The room around him stretched into the vast distances of an entire wing of the expansive country manor. Shifting his weight very cautiously he eventually stood and, his eyes well adjusted by now, explored the above roof space as quietly as he could. It appeared to be entirely sealed, so no likelihood of marauding monsters up here then, although he couldn't tell if the ceiling extended as far as the roof on its Western length. Possibly an attic behind that brick wall, then.

Moving back to the spot under his hole in the shingles, he took out one of his daggers, and quietly drilled a hole in the plaster below him. Nothing could be seen in the gloom below, of course, so he soon had to give up on that plan, and saw a rectangular patch in the ceiling, and kick it in. Next, lighting a candle from his current one, he dropped the first down into the room. It illuminated a dust shrouded maze of old furnishings, carpets, and shadows.

A minute later nothing had moved, so he reluctantly placed the second candle between his teeth, and using a loop of the rope, lowered himself into the room. Picking up the other candle, he made a quick sweep of the place. No lurking bogies. Lots of small furniture, once-colourful paintings, and stuffed animals, though...

Before he could get too creeped out, Stan took a deep breath and hurried out of the room's only exit. He walked straight into the room adjoining the nursery, uttered a gasp, and dropped one of his candles.

Outside the dusty double doors leading to the West Wing, Pat lay on his stomach.

"What's taking him so long?" he complained aloud.

"Probably poncing around, getting all Victorian on us." opined Alf.

The boys had been waiting for around five minutes, and clearly had not anticipated such a simple task as sprinting through a deserted house to take so long.

"Well," wondered Carl, "He *is* a little more Romantic than the rest of us. Probably just enjoying the creeping around on his own a little too much..."

As they talked, Ric felt a strange chill on the back of his neck. Turning, he wondered where it could be coming from for a moment, and suddenly remembered the secret passageway. That's right, he thought, I left it open. There's probably a draught coming up from down by the cliff sides. I'll just go and close that. No need to tell the others....

And so he ambled off past the Study, and the recumbent form of Carter the Butler, to the book room. As he pushed in through the slightly ajar doors, he noticed a strange blue light, glowing from the far end of the room. Frowning, he looked closer, and saw that the lace curtains around the windows were billowing gently out towards him. Hmm, he thought again, Stan must have opened a window during our search of the place, and forgotten to close it. And that light must be from the moon, streaming in through the clear panes....

So, his natural curiosity having been amply satisfied by this perfectly plausible explanation, Ric wandered quietly over to that end of the room, to pull the window closed.

Step by step, as his feet approached the window, Ric began to feel the chill down his spine more and more keenly. And oddly enough, from the little glimpses he caught he couldn't see the part of the window that was ajar. Frowning, one more time, he reached out a hand to pull the curtains aside and, as he did so he suddenly noticed that his breath was pluming out in a great fog. He parted the curtain.

And beheld a woman of aristocratic beauty. Her brow was high, and her chin was cleft, and her cheekbones shone in their prominence. She wore a restrictive neck-

wrist-and-ankle dress, and had before her a book in her lap. Plus, she was glowing blue and transparent.

She looked calmly up at Ric.

“Oh, Magnus! You’ve come for your dinner!”

Pat heard footsteps rapidly scampering up to the door, from inside the West Wing. From what little he could see, it appeared to be Stan’s feet, but it was hard to tell. The bar was heaved on, and there came a rattle of chain. Then Stan’s face appeared, white but covered with smears of dust and abject fear, through the hole.

“The bloody thing’s chained on!” he whispered desperately.

“Oh, crap.” said Carl.

“Knew it couldn’t be that easy.” Alf muttered.

“Shut up!” hissed Pat, “Right. Chains. Knew it couldn’t be that easy.”

“Oh, you did, did you? Thanks!” Stan hissed back.

“Shut up. Carl, Alf, run off and find us a hammer and chisel.” The two boys hastened away. “Stan- is there anything else you have found out?”

“Yes! This place is frigging bad news! That’s what!”

“Stan, calm down and tell me what you can see around you.”

There was a moment’s quiet marked only by Stan’s short breathing, but eventually there were the sounds of movement, and after a few more moments, his face returned to the gap beneath the door.

“There’s a door just to the other side of the Wing entrance.” he reported, “With a plaque on the front of it.”

“Good!” said Pat, “More information, what does it say?”

“Pat, it says ‘Mater’.”

Pause.

“Pat, that means: Mother, in Latin.”

Long pause.

“Pat, do you think that’s a good thing?”

Long, long pause. Eventually:

“...Yes. Yes. Stan. I. Do.”

There was a long, quiet moment, of solitary contemplation, on both sides of the door. At last Stan spoke again.

“Pat? Thank you for lying about that.”

“No worries mate: what are friends for?” Pat returned. He thought, and then in the absence of peer input forged on, “Look, Stan- all of this is a Gothic horror novel, right?”

“I think we could all safely be said to agree on that one now, Pat.”

“Right, well then you have to do something unexpected. You have to break the mould right now, and change the way the story ends, or let’s face it: you are ending this little saga a crippled and deranged resident of this dusty hall for ever.”

“Gee, thanks for your cheery outlook, matey ho.”

Pat shook his head, and thought furiously. “No, Stan, I mean it! You have to do the one thing that the Author would not have his character do.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“You have to go into that room.”

A minute later Stan had stopped swearing.

“Stan, you have a gun. You know I’m right. Now go and break that mould.”

Inside the dusty and deeply dark West wing, Stan rose to his feet. Holding both his candles in his left hand, the flintlock in his right, and cursing Pat under his breath, he advanced towards the door with the ominous plaque on it. Only to figure out, of course, that when he got there he couldn't turn the handle. After a minute or so's inner debate, he decided that he could lose the use of the gun more easily than that of the light, and so stashed the gun in his waistband, and pushed the door open.

Inside, the room was dry and coated in years of dust. There was a vast bureau, the remnants of plush carpeting, and a vast four poster, with gauzy hangings in tatters. The pool of light from his two candles extended only to the bed, and to see further, to where he assumed the windows must be covered by their drapes, he would have to move further into the room.

"Damn."

He pushed on. A wardrobe of imposing size cast shadows deep enough to hide four or five lurking bogeymen. The ghost of heavy curtains appeared, that were clearly cutting off the light from the ubiquitous bay windows of the room. They too concealed a dozen or so imaginary assailants. At last though, there appeared the fireplace: cold and empty, but fronted by a massive, high backed heavy armchair. With its back to Stan, concealing whatever may have been lurking in the seat.

Oh, you bastard, thought Stan. For one brief moment, he considered putting a bullet through the back of the chair. The only thing that stopped him in the process of this rather Pat-like action, was the sudden realisation that he had only one shot in the pistol he carried.

"Damn damn damn."

Bracing himself, and keeping the flintlock levelled directly at the chair the whole time, he began edging his way around the armchair in as wide an arc as possible. Not wanting to put his back to the heavy curtains, Stan went wide on the bed side of the chair. He let his calves brush the scrolled woodwork of the footboards, and felt one of the lacy hangings brush past his ear. As he edged further and further around the chair, the shadows that were held within its arms seemed to deepen, and become more laden with lurking evil, but as yet no details were discernable. When at last he was fully three quarters of the way around the chair, and standing near the head of the bed, he had a decent vantage, and held out his candles to perceive what was hidden there.

Nothing.

And then the voice, cracked with madness, and hoarse from long disuse, croaked maniacally in his ear from the bed:

"Mustn't disturb MOTHER!"

The flintlock discharged involuntarily in his hand, both his candles hit the floor, and Stan Halberd, Earl of the realm, and Knight of the Garter, squealed like a schoolgirl.

Chapter VI

Alf and Carl bolted up the last flight of stairs, meeting Pat on the way down. “Gimmie them!” he screamed, seizing the armful of tools that they were carrying.

“Was that Stan?” gasped Carl, concern etched across his face.

“Who else would scream like that?” shot Pat without looking over his shoulder, as he dashed back to the door and dumped the tools before them. Rattling around, he seized a crow bar, and bent to the hole under the door. Thrusting his face under, he heard the sound of screams receding into the wing, along with two sets of feet, and a strange guttural howling.

“Hold up Stan! We’re coming!”

“Hurry up! He’s going to eat me!” came the panicked response from far away.

Behind Pat, Alf grunted and turned away. “Bloody idiot. One shot and he misses. Bugger this.” With one decisive sweep of a hand, Alf sent an overgrown potted fern flying off the landing and down into the atrium below. Barking at Carl, he then pushed over the four foot high marble pedestal that it had been sitting on.

Carl leaped over and between them they hefted the thing to their hips, and turned to face the Wing doors, one fore and one aft.

“One two three heave!”

Taking a run of a dozen steps they hurled their combined mass, along with that of the pillar at the centre of the double doors. There was a mighty percussion, and a very slight buckling of the frame. Pat kept fishing around with the crowbar, but found that the chains had been tightly wound around the bar on the opposite side. Carl and Alf continued their assault, while he placed his face to the hole once more.

“Not long now, Stan!”

Stan’s footfalls, plus his voice sang past in a descending wail as he made a lap of the wing, “Huuurry uuup!!!”

After the fourth assault there was a shattering retort, and the doors gave. They flew open to a foot or so, but there the improvised battering ram met the chains, which seemed to pull taught and halt the thing in mid air. Alf and Carl collapsed backwards, winded, and fell to the ground.

“Hold it!” barked Pat, lunging under the door again. After a few failed attempts, there was a rattle and he drew back through the hole with a loop of chain caught in the hook of the crowbar. Holding it in place with his knees, he seized up a heavy hammer and chisel, and began deliberately attacking a single link.

The other two boys struggled to their feet and prepared their battering ram again. After half a minute, there was a biting noise, and Pat rolled back, shouting: “GO!”

The dusty darkness of the insides of the West Wing burst apart in a fury of splinters, chain link, light and noise, as Carl and Alf thundered through what was left of the double doors, with Pat on their heels. They dropped the pillar, and Carl and Pat stood for a moment, trying to discern which way they should go in the murk.

Alf however, had done himself some minor injury in dispatching the doors, and was now thoroughly angry. Bellowing a yawp of frustrated violence and rage, he simply tore off down the main corridor of the Wing looking for something to smash.

“You son of a biitch!”

“Well,” mused Carl, “God help the inbred cult worshipping moron once he finds him.” Pat frowned a question at him. “Hmm? Oh, you know,” he explained, “They’re always inbred.”

Further musing on the subject was cut off, however, as Stan’s terror ridden screech reached them from the far end of the building. The sounds of Alf breaking furniture in a side room ceased, and his head ducked out into the corridor whipping both ways.

“Far end, upstairs!” shouted Pat, and they were all off.

Tearing at a full sprint through the dusty halls and rooms, they came in short time upon a narrow servant’s stair, worn on the insides by generations of feet.

Hammering up this like a herd of bison, they followed it up one floor;

“Two more!” yelled Carl, “They’re always at the top or the bottom!”

-and again and again, until they came to a tiny attic door, pausing not for an instant but running the light wooden frame into the ground, stomping over it, and into the flank of the deranged lunatic who was sitting astride Stan, forcing one of his own daggers closer and closer to their friend’s throat. The four rolled together off the foppishly dressed man, and disappeared in a tangled heap into a corner of the room. Carl was pinning the man’s legs, Pat had seized his dagger hand around the wrist with both hands, and Alf was raining blows down on his head like Samson amongst the Philistines.

Shaking, Stan clawed his way to his feet, and picking up the sole candle in the room, held it aloft. The attic had one door, one cot, made as though for a seven or eight year old child, and one window, forever shedding its light towards the entrance gates of the Manor, a half mile distant.

On the first floor landing, Ric shuffled mechanically out of the library. His hands hung limply from his sides, his breathing came short and fast, and his lower lip was shaking. Turning slowly, he observed the shattered entrance to the sealed wing, and a shiver ran across his shoulders. Clenching and releasing his fists, he sucked in a few deeper breaths, and began to approach the wrecked door.

He stepped lightly over the broken timber and chains, and looked further down the hall, where some dropped tools told of his companions’ dash to rescue Stan. Setting his shoulders, he prepared to follow the trail deeper into the darkness, but suddenly checked. To his left stood a door, ajar, and bearing a stencilled plaque declaiming, *Mater*. From within the room, came the unsteady flickering of light. Ric stepped over and looked inside.

The previously shadow crowded landscape that had so frightened Stan was filled with light, noise, and smoke. Ric could see the outline of a bed, an armchair and a wardrobe, but wasted no time in gawping, and ran into the room.

The Persian rug before the fireplace was heartily ablaze, and beginning to consume the chair that stood on it. Dashing around the area, he found the curtains before the windows, and gave a shudder. Brushing his fears aside, he tried to pull them from their railing, but the rings proved too strong. Heaving them aside, he leaped to the windows, and hammered at the long disused catch until it gave way. Flinging them open as wide as he could, Ric then turned and waded back through the smoke into the room.

With quick, darting movements, he threw the armchair off to one side, and then began flipping the edges of the carpet inwards. After thirty seconds work, he saw that he would get the bundle no smaller, nor would it go out.

Staggering back he panted, drawing as much clean air into his lungs as he could, and then held his deepest lung-full, plunging in for one last time. He wrapped his arms around the blazing mess, and heaved it upwards, staggering backwards towards the open window. The heat was cutting through his jacket sleeves and lapels, and the flames licked up and singed his eyebrows and lashes. With his eyes feircely shut, he stumbled in the direction of the window, turned, heaved, and tossed the blazing mess over the casement. It disappeared in a roaring whirl of flames, and thumped into the ground far below.

Only a few minutes later Ric stepped into the hall, brushing soot and cinders from himself, and met the other four coming down the passage. Dragging along behind them they had a man, around their own age, trussed thoroughly in torn strips of blanketing.

“Oh, you got him!” he exclaimed in surprise.

“Yeah,” retorted Alf, “no thanks to you. Where the hell have you been the last fifteen minutes?”

“Hey! Don’t hassle me. I’ve been finding out exactly what is going on here. I’ve met the lady from the picture.”

“What? She’s around here somewhere too?” exclaimed Carl.

“Not exactly...” Ric went a little whiter for a moment, then recovered, remembering: “And anyway! I just saved your Manor from burning down, Ric.”

“What?”

“Yeah, some silly bastard left a few burning candles lying on the rug in this room.”

They all turned and looked at Stan.

“Ah. Well. Yes, well I didn’t really have time to stop and clean them up, now did I? Someone was trying to eat me.”

Ric gasped. “Is that what he did to her?”

Stan frowned, but before he had time to ask for an explanation, Pat chimed in.

“Ric, you say you put that fire out?”

“Uhh, yes.”

“Then what,” asked Pat, “is that large flickering glow from inside the room?”

Ric frowned, and stuck his head back in the door. A second or so later, his head came back, and he reported. “Oh, that. Don’t know. It’s coming from outside the window.”

There was a few second’s pause for consideration, and then the five of them bolted as one for the window.

Outside, from what they could see, the carpet had fallen to the ground, unravelling and burning more fiercely as it did, and landed at the base of the wall.

Outside the servant’s entrance.

On a very large pile of kindling.

The surf boomed laconically against the rocks, while the sky above the cliffs of the Cornwall coast glowed a bright golden colour. It was an hour and a half later, and still several hours till dawn, so the glowing in the sky was due to the merrily burning structure of the Huntley Manor, some distance away.

Outside the exit to the smuggler’s tunnel, on a conveniently dock-like ledge of rock, the boys recapped, not for the first (or last) time that night, to make sense of the narrative.

“So,” belched Carl, after taking another swig from one of the brandy bottles, “Pat was not the heir.”

“Nope.” said Ric.

“Thass bullshit.” slurred Pat, who was taking the incineration of his newly found wealth badly.

“Sorry, Pat, iss true.” Ric insisted.

“And he would know, because he talked to the mother of the true heir’s ghost.” said Carl, pushing on through the convoluted tale.

“That” Stan ventured “would be the hungry guy in the West wing?”

“Correk.” Alf affirmed.

“Did he really try to eat you?” Carl asked.

“Well,” Stan mused, “dunno. But there were teeth marks all over his mother’s skeleton. That was in the nursery.”

“So why,” struggled Ric, “did the Butler lie to us?”

“Carter?” Carl supplied, “Loyal manservant to the end. Wanted to avoid disgrace to the family of having a raving lunatic for an heir, and so hunted down an orphan of the appropriate age, and concocted a story. Which makes Pat just some street bum, and the rightful heir to diddley squat.”

“Thass bullshit.”

“What happened to him, the Butler, in the end?” inquired Ric.

Carl frowned. “Seemed to have died from shock, or a broken heart or something...”

Alf chimed in while passing the bottle, “Always the way with those devoted character types: never have to face up to their actions. Bloody typical.”

“And what about the heir himself?” Ric posed.

“Let the frigger burn!” burst Stan, “...tried to eat me...”

“I say, Alf.” Carl said, “Well done on rescuing so much of the grog.”

“Thass bullshit...” echoed Pat.

And the other four of them had to agree: it was. The story line had been predictable, and full of every obvious cliché known to the genre. For five veteran story aficionados like themselves, hardly even a challenge. So they resigned themselves to a night of heavy drinking on the Cornwall coast, and passed yet another bottle around.