

I

Cassidy drove contentedly through the evening sunlight, his face as close to the windscreen as the safety belt allowed, his foot alternating diffidently between accelerator and brake as he scanned the narrow lane for unseen hazards. Beside him on the passenger seat, carefully folded into a plastic envelope, lay an Ordnance Survey map of central Somerset. An oilbound compass of the newest type was fastened by suction to the walnut fascia. At a corner of the windscreen, accurately adjusted to his field of view, a copy of the Estate Agent's particulars issued under the distinguished title of Messrs Grimble and Outhwaite of Mount Street W. was clipped to an aluminium stand of his own invention. He drove, as always, with the greatest concentration, and now and then he hummed to himself with that furtive sincerity common to the tone deaf.

He was traversing a moor. A flimsy ground mist shifted over rhines and willow trees, slipped in little puffs across the glistening bonnet of his car, but ahead the sky was bright and cloudless and the spring sun made emeralds of the approaching hills. Touching a lever he lowered the electric window and leaned one side of his head into the rush of air. At once rich smells of peat and silage filled his nostrils. Over the reverent purr of the car's engine he caught the sounds of cattle and the cry of a cowhand harmlessly insulting them.

‘It’s an idyll,’ he declared aloud. ‘It’s an absolute idyll.’

Better still it was a safe idyll, for in the whole wide beautiful world Aldo Cassidy was the only person who knew where he was.

Beyond his conscious hearing, a closed-off chamber of his memory echoed to the awkward chords of an aspiring pianist. Sandra, wife to Aldo, is extending her artistic range.

‘Good news from Bristol,’ Cassidy said, talking over the music. ‘They think they can offer us a patch of land. We’ll have to level it of course.’

‘Good,’ said Sandra, his wife, and carefully rearranged her hands over the keyboard.

‘It’s a quarter of a mile from the largest Primary and eight hundred yards from the Comprehensive. The Corporation says there’s a fair chance that if we do the levelling and donate the changing rooms, they’ll put up a footbridge on the bypass.’

She played a ragged chord.

‘Not an ugly one, I hope. Town planning is *extremely* important, Aldo.’

‘I know.’

‘Can I come?’

‘Well you *have* got your clinic,’ he reminded her with tentative severity.

Another chord.

‘Yes. Yes, I’ve got my clinic,’ Sandra agreed, her voice lilting slightly in counterpoint. ‘So you’ll have to go alone, won’t you? Poor Pailthorpe.’

Pailthorpe was her private name for him, he could not remember why. Pailthorpe the Bear, probably; bears were their most popular fauna.

'I'm sorry,' said Cassidy.

'It's not *your* fault,' said Sandra. 'It's the Mayor's, isn't it?'

'Naughty Mayor,' said Cassidy.

'Naughty Mayor,' Sandra agreed.

'Spank him,' Cassidy suggested.

'Spank, spank,' said Sandra gaily, wife to Aldo, her face in combat with its shadows.

He was a fair-haired man of thirty-eight and quite handsome in certain lights. Like his car he was groomed with loving elegance. From the left-hand buttonhole to the breast pocket of his faultless suit ran a thin gold chain of obvious usefulness whose purpose was nevertheless undefined. Aesthetically it perfectly answered the subdued pin-stripe of the cloth behind it; as a piece of rigging it joined the head of the man to the heart, but there was no telling which end if either held the mastery. In both build and looks he might have served as an architectural prototype for the middle-class Englishman privately educated between the wars; one who had felt the wind of battle but never the fire of it. Heavy at the waist, short in the leg, a squire always in the making, he possessed those doggedly boyish features, at once mature and retarded, which still convey a dying hope that his pleasures may be paid for by his parents. Not that he was effeminate. True, the mouth was well advanced from the rest of the face and quite deeply sculptured under the lower lip. True also that as he drove he was guilty of certain affectations which pointed in the female direction, such as brushing aside his forelock or putting back his head and wrinkling his eyes as though a sudden headache had interfered with brilliant thoughts. But if these mannerisms meant anything at all, then most likely they reflected a pleasing sensitivity towards a world occasionally too shrill for him,

an empathy as much parental as childish, rather than any unwelcome tendencies left over from public school.

Clearly he was no stranger to the expense account. An un-taxable affluence was legible in the thickening of the lower waistcoat (for his safety and comfort he had unfastened the top button of his trousers) and in the widths of white cuff which isolated his hands from manual labour; and there was already about his neck and complexion a sleek rich gloss, a tan almost, *flambé* rather than sun-given, which only balloon glasses, bunsen burners, and the fumes of *crêpes suzette* can faithfully reproduce. Despite this evidence of physical wellbeing, or perhaps in contrast to it, the outward Cassidy possessed in some devious way the power, even the authority, to disturb. Though he was not in the slightest degree pathetic there was something to him which caught the eye and demanded help. Somehow he managed to convey that the encroachments of the flesh had not yet killed the magic of the spirit.

As if in recognition of this protective role which Cassidy unconsciously imposed on his environment, the interior of the car was provided with many important adaptations designed to spare him the distressing consequences of collision. Not only had the walls and ceiling and doors been generously upholstered with additional layers of quilt; the steering wheel, the child-proof door handles – already deeply recessed in succulent cavities of felt – the glove compartment, brake lever, even the discreetly concealed fire extinguisher, each was separately encased in hand-stitched leather and padded with a pleasing flesh-like substance calculated to reduce the most drastic impact to no more than a caress. At the rear window a sun-proof canopy, electrically operated and bordered with small silk balls, hung poised to defend at any time the good man's neck against an overzealous sun or his eyesight against the harmful

dazzle of alien headlights. As to the dashboard it was a veritable medicine chest of preventive physic: from blink-lamps to ice-alert, from reserve battery to reserve oil supply, from safari petrol tank to auxiliary cooling system its switches anticipated every catastrophe known to nature and the manufacturing industries. Cassidy's was a car that conveyed rather than transported; a womb, one might even have thought, from whose padded, lubricated interior the occupant had yet to make his entry into the harder world.

'How far to Haverdown, do you mind?'

'Eh?'

'*Haverdown.*' Should he spell it? Most likely the fellow was illiterate. 'Haverdown. The great house. The manor.'

The lolling mouth opened and partially closed, voicelessly mimicking the name; a grimy arm struck towards the hill. 'Straight on up over look.'

'And is it far, would you say?' Cassidy inquired loudly, as if addressing the deaf.

'Won't take you more than five minutes, will it, not in *her*?'

'Thanks a million. Good luck to you, old son.'

In the mirror the yokel's brown face, frozen into an expression of comic incredulity, watched him out of sight. Well, thought Cassidy, the fellow has seen something of the world today and two shillings won't make him drunk.

All nature, it seemed, had turned out for his procession. In cottage gardens romping peasant children put aside their ancient games and turned to stare at him as he glided by. How *pastoral* he thought; how rude, how vital. From trees and hedgerows buds of varying shades of green were bursting forth with seasonable energy, while in the fields wild daffodils mingled with other flowers he could not identify. Leaving the

village, he began climbing a hill. The high banks gave way to sloping wooded glades. Below him farms, fields, churches, and rivers faded into far horizons. Lulled by such a delightful prospect he abandoned himself to the contemplation of his quest.

My pleasurable quest, as the favoured after-dinner speaker called it, my *very pleasurable* quest.

'A quest for *what?*' a nagging voice inquired inside him. 'A quest *towards*, or a quest *from?*'

With an airy shake of his head, Cassidy brushed aside such pedantries. Nonsense, he told his inward audience, I have come to buy a house. Inspect it, cost it, buy it. And if I have not informed my wife, that is my own affair.

'Shall you stay all night?' Sandra remarked very casually. The piano practice temporarily interrupted, they were finishing their evening meal.

'We may not get going till five or so,' Cassidy replied, avoiding the direct answer. 'It depends when the Mayor's free.' A clause of conciliation: 'I thought I might take a book to read. If you could find me one.'

Slowly, hand in hand with his cultural adviser, Cassidy the aspiring reader paraded the ranks of Sandra's bookshelves.

'Now,' she mused, very earnest. 'What do Pailthorpes read when they go gallivanting in Bristol?'

'It's got to be something I can manage when I'm a bit tight,' he warned. They both laughed. 'And not' – recalling a previous selection – '*not* Jane Austen.'

They settled for non-fiction, a *straight* book suitable to a tired Pailthorpe of little fantasy.

'Sometimes,' said Sandra playfully, 'I wonder whether you ever really see these people at all.'

'I don't,' said nimble Cassidy, volleying at the net. 'She's a blonde and she's eight feet tall.'

‘*Sexy*,’ said Sandra, wife to Aldo, kissing her loyal man. ‘What’s her name?’

Haverdown.

He hoped he had pronounced the word correctly. Such things can make a difference when one arrives in a new neighbourhood.

Haverdown.

Was the *a* long or short? To have or to haver?

A pigeon was barring his approach. He sounded his horn. Prudently it withdrew.

And the *down*: what did *down* mean? A country gentleman should have his derivations. *Down* as in descent, or *down* as in the rolling downs of England? A happy repartee occurred to him, as with the exaggerated gesture of those enjoying their own company the ready wit raised his eyebrows and smiled in quiet academic superiority. Or *down* like duck-down, fluff? Answer me that if you please Messrs Grimble and Outhwaite of Mount Street W.

Haverdown.

It was a pretty name for all that, though names of course meant nothing in such cases. Stately too. Not Hall or Court or Grange, not Haverdown Manor even. Just Haverdown: a sovereign concept, as his Oxford tutor would have said, requiring no qualification. *Haverdown.* A man might well choose it as a title if such a thing were ever asked of him. ‘You know young Cassidy of Haverdown? Remarkable fellow. Flourishing business in London, gave it all up, came down here. Two years later made a going thing of farming. Knew damn all about it when he began, total duffer. Mind you they do say he’s a bit of a financial wizard. Locals adore him of course. Generous to a fault.’

About to consult the mirror in order light-heartedly to put a face to his baronial image Cassidy veered sharply. *The entrance is marked by a Pair of finely pointed stone gateposts surmounted by ornamental Beasts dating from the sixteenth Century.* Directly before him, two disintegrating griffins, glumly clutching armorial shields, rose into the green darkness of a beech tree. Their feet were manacled to the plinth and their shoulders hunched from fatigue. Intently Cassidy examined their scrolled shields. An eroded diagonal cross formed the central theme, feathers or recumbent serpents filled the upper triangle. He frowned in perplexity. Feathers were Wales, that much he knew; but was not the cross Saint Andrew? And was not Saint Andrew Scotland, hence the golf course?

Engaging gear, he set off along the drive. Patience. In due course he would research the matter, it would be an occupation for the winter months. He had always fancied himself as something of a local historian, browsing in county libraries, inspiring local digs, sending postcards to learned vicars.

‘Perhaps,’ said Sandra, wife to Aldo, as they made ready for bed, ‘*next time you go, I could come?*’

‘Of course you can,’ said Cassidy. ‘We’ll make a special trip.’

‘An ordinary trip will do,’ said Sandra and put out the light.

Briefly the coppice closed round him. Over a carpet of bluebells he caught a glint of water between the trees. The drive returned him to the sunlight, passed a derelict cottage, skirted a rusted iron fence. Now a broken signpost drunkenly divided the approach. Tradesmen left and visitors right. I’m both, Cassidy thought gaily and took the right fork. Tulips lined the verges, poking their heads between the nettles. Lot of stock there, if only he could get the weeds in time. The pond was

overgrown. Dragonflies switched across the unbroken surface of the lily leaves, bulrushes almost obscured the boathouse. How fast was nature to reclaim her own, Cassidy reflected in growing exhilaration, how inexorable, how maternal was her will!

On its own grass plateau, between a ruined chapel and the picked skeleton of a fruithouse, Haverdown rose suddenly before him.

An Historic and Scheduled FORTIFIED MANOR HOUSE AND KEEP thirty Miles from Bath (Paddington one Hour forty minutes) Haverdown is a GENTLEMAN'S RESIDENCE FULLY EQUIPPED FOR IMMEDIATE OCCUPATION WITH FIVE LOOSE BOXES AND FORTY ACRES OF GOOD GRAZING. The style is part Tudor part Earlier with restorations dating Chiefly from the Georgian period at which time the original Keep was substantially rebuilt under the genius of LORD Alfred de Waldebere. His many fine Additions include a Fine Curved Staircase in the Style of Adam and a number of Fine ITALIAN BUSTS of great Value which are included in the Asking price. Since Earliest Times Haverdown has been the Home and Fortress of the de Waldebere family.

THE GEORGIAN PORTION. Perfectly sited on a natural Spur the distinguished south Face discreetly Masters some of the finest Scenery in Somerset. The elevations are of old Brick, mellowed by Time and weather to a pleasing russet Hue. The centre block is crowned by a Shallow pediment of Bath stone. Eight freestone Treads worn by the feet of ages lead to a fine imposing curved Portico carried by six Individual Pillars. To the West, between the Chapel and the Fruithouse, a superb Cupola in need of Minor Repair offsets the symmetry. The Pigeon croft is in its unspoilt Original condition providing

John le Carré

ample Space for heating unit, Guesthouse or GENTLEMAN'S STUDIO RETREAT. In rear GARDEN cast-lead cupid in TRADITIONAL POSE, valued separately see annexe.

THE EARLIER PORTION consists of fine battlemented TOWER with Original steps and Bellchamber adjoining to a Row of tudor Almshouses. Central to these stands the castellated Great Hall and Refectory with fine basements under and OLD MOAT ROUND. In the Great Hall, surely one of the finest in the West of England, a Minstrel Gallery dating from the reign of King Edward the 1st comprises the principal Feature. From here according to local lore, journeying Musicians paid their tribute to SIR Hugo de Waldebere the first Recorded Owner of Haverdown until the Year 1261 when he was Outlawed for felony. The House passed to his younger Son whereafter no Tenancy is recorded until 1760 when Lord ALFRED returned from Foreign Parts to rebuild the Home of his Forebears, probably after Catholic Persecutions had temporarily dispersed them. The Gardens are conceived on the CLASSICAL English Pattern of containing Nature without undue Formality and are in need of upkeep all inquiries

SOLELY THROUGH ABOVE NAMED REFER JR/P MR GRIMBLE

Carefully replacing the prospectus in its stand and detaching a light cashmere overcoat from its ingenious hanger beside the rear window, Cassidy happened to glance backward past the baby seat and the silk balls of the blind, and was subjected to a remarkable hallucination. The drive had vanished. Thick walls of green, pierced with dark tunnels, had closed upon his route and cut him off from the outside world. He was alone in a magic cave of dark green; at the pantomime, his father's guest; in childhood, thirty years ago . . .

★

Afterwards, he was well able to explain this optical illusion. A strand of vapour, he assured himself, such as lay upon the moor, had settled below the level of his immediate vision, and by some trick of light assumed the colour of the foliage. It had been raining (as indeed it had) and the moisture on the drive, aided by the low sun, had set up a green shimmer which gave it the appearance of high grass. Or he himself, by the quick movement of his head after the long drive, had transposed upon his own vision images from other places . . . a natural coincidence therefore, such as mirages are made of.

Nevertheless, for an instant, and perhaps for much longer in terms of the interior experience of Aldo Cassidy, he had the sense of being caught up in a world that was not as controllable as the world he was accustomed to: a world in short capable of dismaying metaphysical leaps, and although a second examination soon restored the drive to its rightful position in the scheme of things, its agility, or rather the remembrance of it, caused him to remain seated for a moment while he collected himself. It was with some distrust, therefore, as well as a lingering sense of disconnection, that he finally opened the door and cautiously lowered one well-shod foot on to the capricious surface of the earth.

‘And enjoy yourself,’ Sandra his protective spouse had warned him at breakfast in her Army officer voice. ‘Don’t let them *browbeat* you. Remember it’s *you* who are doing the giving.’

‘I’ll try,’ Cassidy promised with an English hero’s smile.

His first impression, far from pleasurable, was that he had stepped into an air raid. A fierce evening wind had come up from the east, battering his ear drums and crashing like gun fire into the elms. Above him recklessly swirling rooks dived and screamed at his intrusion. The house itself had already

been hit. It groaned from every door and casement, waving its useless limbs in outrage, slapping them in agony against its own defenceless walls. At its base lay the debris of masonry and tiles. A fallen cable passed close over his head and ran the length of the garden. For one disgusting moment Cassidy fancied, looking up at it, that he saw a dead pigeon hanging from its frayed binding, but it was only an old shirt left behind by a careless gypsy and wound upon itself by a careless wind. Odd, he thought, recovering his composure: looks like one of mine, the kind we wore a few years back, striped, with stiff collars and a generous width of cuff.

He was extremely cold. The weather, which had looked so gentle and inviting from within the car, now assaulted him with a quite unnatural venom, inflating his thin coat with barbarous draughts and lashing at the turn-ups of his tailored lightweight suit. Indeed so sudden and so fierce was the first impact of reality upon his internal reveries that Cassidy was actually tempted to return then and there to the safety of his car, and it was only a late assertion of the bulldog spirit that stayed his hand. After all, if he was to spend the rest of his life here he might as well start getting used to the climate. He had driven, by his own standards, a long way, a hundred miles or so; was he seriously proposing to turn back for a mere breeze? Resolutely fastening his collar he embarked in earnest upon the first phase of his inspection.

He called his process *taking the feel of the place*. It was one he had rehearsed often and which involved the sampling of many intangible elements. The setting for instance: is it hostile or amicable? Does it offer seclusion, which is desirable, or isolation, which is not? Does it embrace the occupant, or expose him? Was he – a vital question – born here, is *that* a feasibility?

Despite the cold, his initial impressions were not unfavourable. The park, which clearly provided the view from the principal windows of the house, had a lush pastoral quality which was distinctly soothing. The trees were deciduous (a rare advantage since he secretly found conifers too bleak) and their great age imbued them with a fatherly gentleness.

He listened.

The wind had dropped and the rooks were slowly settling. From the moor, where the sea fog still clung, the rasp of a hand-saw vied with the grumbling of livestock. He examined the grazing. Good fencing there, ample space for ponies provided there was no yew to poison them. He had read somewhere, probably in Cobbett, whose *Rural Rides* he had studied for School Certificate, that yew poisoned ponies, and it was one of those aimless cruelties of nature which had remained impressed upon his memory.

Palominos, that was the word.

I shall have palominos. No need for shelter, the chestnuts will provide the shelter. The Welsh variety is best: hardy beasts, he had heard from all sides, self-sufficient and cheap to run. The right temperament too: townsmen could manhandle them without danger of reprisal.

He sniffed the air.

Woodsmoke, damp pine, and the indefinable mustiness that is fostered by neglect. I find no fault with it.

Now at last, quite coolly in his outward manner, he turned to the house and gave it his critical attention. A deep silence had fallen over the hilltop. In the trees nothing stirred. The shirt hung motionless from its cable. For long minutes he remained as if in prayer, his gloved hands loosely linked over his stomach, his shoulders well back, his fair head a little to one side, a survivor mourning his lost comrades.

Aldo Cassidy in the twilight of his thirty-ninth spring surveyed the hulk of a dozen English generations.

The light was dying even as he stood there. Red shafts glinted from the buckled weather vane, touched what little glass remained in the sash windows, and were gone. A rock, he thought with a gush of proud Victorian purple. A mountain peak against the evening sky, unscalable and immutable, an organic outcrop of English history. A rock, he repeated, his romantic heart pounding with half-remembered lines of heroic English poetry; broken from the earth, whose name is England. A rock, fashioned by the hand of centuries, hewn by God's masons, guarded by His soldiers.

What would I not give to have been born of such a place? How much bigger, how much braver could I not be? To draw my name, my faith, my ancestry, even my profession perhaps, from such a monument of heroic ages: to be a crusader still, serving not brashly but with humble courage a cause too evident to be defined? To swim in my own moat, to cook in my own refectory, to dine in my own Great Hall, to meditate in my own cell? To walk in my own crypt among the shell-torn standards of my forebears; to nurture tenants, counsel wayward servants, and till the earth in pleasingly dilapidated tweeds?

Gradually a vision formed before the dreamer's inner eye.

It is Christmas evening and the trees are bare against the early sunset. A solitary figure, no longer young, dressed in costly but unobtrusive habit, is riding through the long shadows of the chestnut avenue. The horse, well conscious of its precious burden, is docile even in sight of home. A lantern is beckoning in the portico, merry servants hasten to the door. 'Pleasant ride then, Mr Aldo?' 'Not bad Giles, not bad. No no, I'll rub him down myself, thank you. Good evening, Mrs Hopcroft. The celebrations well advanced I trust?'

The Naive and Sentimental Lover

And within? No children, grandchildren tugging at his hand? No amiable lady in a long tweed skirt woven on the premises, no *Eve*, descending the Fine Curved Staircase in the Style of *Adam* holding a bowl of pot pourri in her unhardened hands? No Sandra, younger by a dozen years, piano-less, free of her private darkness, unquestioning of Aldo's male sovereignty? Born to the gracious life, fresh to him, witty, varied, and adoring? '*Poor love you must be frozen through. I lit a fire in the library. Come, let me help you with your boots.*'

There was no within. Cassidy on such occasions concerned himself resolutely with exteriors.

It was all the more surprising to him, therefore, chancing to look irritably upward at a flock of doves whose restless fluttering had disrupted his reflections, to notice a faint but undeniable curl of woodsmoke rising from the western chimney stack and a real light, very yellow like an oil light, swinging gently in that same portico through which, in his imagination, he had that minute passed.

'Hullo, lover,' a pleasant voice said. 'Looking for someone, are we?'

Now Cassidy prided himself on his aplomb at moments of crisis. In business circles he had a reputation for thinking on his feet and he considered it fairly won. 'Deft' they had called him in *The Times Business News* during a recent takeover battle. 'That gentle troubleshooter.' The quality derived not least from a refusal to recognise the extent of any peril, and it was backed by a solid understanding of the uses of money. Cassidy's first response therefore was to ignore the strangeness of the address and to give the man good evening.

'Jesus,' the voice said. 'Is it?'

His second was to walk casually to his car, not by any means in order to escape, but rather to identify himself as its owner and therefore, by definition, as a potential purchaser of substance. He also had in mind the agent's particulars on their aluminium stand which gave the proof, if such were needed, that he was not a wilful trespasser. He felt very badly towards the agents. It was the agents after all who had sent him, they who had given him the clearest assurances that the house was unoccupied, and they who would tomorrow pay very dearly for that error. 'It's an Executors' sale, old boy,' Outhwaite had croaked to him on the telephone in the fatuous tone of conspiracy which only estate agents seem to acquire. 'Offer them half and they'll cut your arm off.' Well, Cassidy would

see who lost an arm after this adventure. Backing out of his car with the duplicated pages prominently displayed in his free hand, he became uncomfortably conscious of the fixity of his interrogator's gaze represented by the unwavering beam of the lantern.

'This is *Haverdown*, isn't it?' he asked, speaking up the steps and using the shorter *a*. His tone was precisely pitched. Puzzled but not dismayed, a dash of indignation to preserve his authority: the respectable citizen is disturbed in the conduct of his lawful business.

'I expect so, lover,' the lantern replied not altogether playfully. 'Want to buy it, do we?'

The speaker's features were still hidden by the lamplight, but from the position at which the head was measured against the lintel of the door Cassidy was able to guess a person of his own height; and from the width of the shoulders, where he could define them against the interior darkness of the house, of his own build as well. The rest of his information, as he ascended the eight freestone Treads worn by the feet of ages, was gained by ear. The man was of his own age too, but more confident, good at addressing the troops and coping with the dead. The voice, moreover, was remarkably compelling. Dramatic even, he would say. Tense. Balanced on a soft beguiling edge. Cassidy detected also – for he had a quick ear for social music – a certain regional deviation possibly in the Gaelic direction, a brogue rather than an accent, which in no way affected his good opinion of the stranger's breeding. *The cross of Saint Andrew and the feathers of Wales*: well here, if he was not mistaken, was the harp of Ireland. He had reached the top step.

'Well I'd like to consider it certainly. Your agents, Grimble and Outhwaite, sent me—' slightly moving the roneoed sheets

to indicate that the evidence was in his hand. 'Did they get in touch with you by any chance?'

'Not a word,' the lantern replied evenly. 'Not a peep, not a funeral note.'

'But I made the appointment almost a week ago! I do think they might have rung you or something. I mean don't *you*?'

'Phone's cut off, lover. It's the end of the world out here. Just the moocows and the chickadees. And wild rooks, of course, seeking whom they may devour, the buggers.'

It seemed to Cassidy more necessary than ever to preserve the line of inquiry.

'But surely they could have *written* after all,' he protested, anxious to insert between them the spectre of a common enemy. 'I mean really these people *are* the end.'

The answer was quite a while in coming.

'Maybe they don't know we're here.'

Throughout the whole course of this exchange Cassidy had been the subject of minute scrutiny. The lamp, playing slowly over his body, had examined first his handmade shoes, then his suit, and was now engaged in deciphering the crest on his dark blue tie.

'Jesus, what's that?' the soft voice asked. 'Indians?'

'A dining club actually,' Cassidy confessed, grateful for the question. 'A thing called the Nondescripts.'

A long pause.

'Oh *no*,' the voice protested at last, genuinely shocked. 'Oh Jesus, what a terrible bloody name! I mean what would Nietzsche make of that, for Christ's sake? You'll be calling yourselves the Filthy Camel-drivers next.'

Cassidy was not at all used to such treatment. In the places where he spent his money even his signature was an

unnecessary formality, and in the ordinary way of things he would have protested vigorously against any suggestion that his credit or his person – let alone his dining club – were in doubt. But this was not the ordinary way: instead of a surge of indignation, Cassidy was once more overcome by the same uncommon feeling of disconnection. It was as though the figure behind the lamp were not a separate figure at all, but his own, mysteriously reflected from the depths of the liquid twilight; as though his swifter, freer self were examining, by the light of that unusual lantern, the features of his pedestrian other half. And after all, the *Nondescripts* were a rather seedy lot; he had thought so more than once of late. Brushing aside such bizarre inventions, he finally managed a show of heat:

‘Look here,’ he said quite strongly. ‘I don’t want to intrude, I can perfectly well come back another time. Assuming you *want* to sell of course,’ he added, to give extra sting.

The voice did not hurry to console him.

‘*You’re* not intruding, lover,’ it said at last, as if passing a considered verdict, ‘you’re *gorgeous*, that’s my view. In the first position. No fooling. We haven’t had a bourgeois for years.’

The beam descended. In the same moment a ray of red sunlight, reflected from the upper window of the chapel, broke like a tiny dawn over the interior of the porch and provided Cassidy with a first sight of his examiner. He was, as Cassidy had already suspected, very handsome. Where Cassidy curved, his examiner went straight. Where Cassidy was weak his examiner was resolute; where concessive, zealous; where Cassidy was fluid, the other was rock, and where he was pale and fair his examiner was dark and sudden and eager. From a handsome face dark eyes shone with the greatest animation; a Gaelic smile, at once predatory and knowing, illuminated its features.

So far so good. Still seeking, however, to assign him to one of the social categories into which the world is naturally divided, Cassidy transferred his concentration to the man's attire. He wore a black coat of the kind favoured by Indian gentlemen, midway between a dinner jacket and a military blazer, but cut with a decidedly oriental flair. His feet were bare and his lower body was encased in what appeared to be a skirt.

'Good Lord,' Cassidy said involuntarily, and was about to offer some further apology such as: 'Oh my God, you were in the middle of your bath'; or: 'Oh look here this is monstrous of me I've got you out of bed,' when the lantern turned sharply away from him and shone upon the car.

There was no need for the lantern at all. The pale coachwork stood out excellently against the half light – a safety factor which Cassidy was well aware of – but the examiner used it all the same, less to observe, perhaps, than to stroke the pure outlines in slow caressing movements of the beam, much as a moment earlier he had studied its owner.

'Yours is it, lover?'

'Yes it is actually.'

'Your very own? All of it?'

Cassidy laughed easily, presuming a veiled reference to hire purchase, a form of payment which (since he had no need of it) he considered one of the ills of his generation.

'Well yes. I think it's the only way really, don't you?'

For some while the examiner made no reply but remained in deepest concentration, his body motionless, the lantern swinging gently in his hand, his eyes intent upon the car.

'Jesus,' he whispered at last. 'Jesus. There's a hearse for a Nondescript.'

Cassidy had watched people admire his car before. He had even encouraged them. He was perfectly capable, on a

Saturday morning for instance, returning from shopping or some other semi-recreational errand, and finding a small group of enthusiasts gathered along its elegant length, of offering them some account of its history and properties, and demonstrating from a stationary position some of its more unusual modifications. He considered this democratic open-heartedness to be one of his most likeable characteristics: life had wrought its distinctions true enough, but when it came to the fellowship of the road Cassidy counted himself little better than the next man. His host's interest however was of a different sort. Once again it appeared to be an examination in principle, a fundamental questioning of certain unstated values which were inherent in the car's existence, and it only added to Cassidy's unease. Did he consider it vulgar? Was it inferior to his own? The upper classes, he knew very well, had strong views on the display of wealth, but surely the car's *specialness* put it beyond the reach of such superficial charges? Somebody has to own it, after all. Just as they have to own Haverdown, ha, ha. Perhaps he should say something, offer some deprecatory phrase? There were several which in other circumstances he might have ventured: 'It's only a toy really . . . well I think of it as a sort of man's mink coat . . . of course I couldn't begin to run it without the Company . . . present from the taxpayer I'm afraid . . .' He was still considering such a move when he felt his left arm seized in a grip of unexpected force.

'Come on, lover,' the voice said, beguiling. 'Get your cork out, I'm freezing.'

'Well, if you're sure it's not inconvenient—' Cassidy began as he almost stumbled over the rotting threshold.

He never discovered whether it was convenient or not. The heavy door had closed behind him. The lantern had gone.

He was standing in the total blackness of an unknown interior with only his host's friendly grasp to guide him.

Waiting for his eyes to grow accustomed to the light, Cassidy endured many of the hallucinations which afflict the temporarily blinded. He found himself first in the Scala Cinema at Oxford, edging past rows of unseen knees, trampling apologetically on unseen feet. Some were hard, some soft; all were hostile. There were seven cinemas at Oxford in the days when Cassidy was privileged to receive his higher education, and he had got round them nicely in a week. Soon, he thought, the grey rectangle will open before me and a dark-haired girl in period costume will unbutton her blouse in French to the appreciative whistles of my fellow academics.

Before any such delight was afforded him, however, he was abruptly translated to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington whither one of his stepmothers had threatened to consign him as a punishment for self-abuse. 'You're no better than an animal,' she furiously assured him. 'So you'd best go and join them. For ever.' Though his vision was by now clearing he found much evidence to support the nightmares: prickly upholstery redolent of cinemas, the pungent smells of moulting fur and formalin, the severed heads of elks and wildebeests which glared down on him in the glazed terror of their last agony, looming mammoth shapes draped in white dustcovers.

Gradually, to his relief, more familiar images reassured him of human habitation. A grandfather clock, an oak sideboard, a Jacobean dining table; a stone fireplace armed with crossed muskets and the pleasingly familiar crest of the de Waldeberes.

'My goodness,' said Cassidy at last in what he hoped was a voice of awe.

‘Like it?’ his companion asked. Retrieving the lantern from Cassidy knew not where, he carelessly flicked the beam over the uneven flagstones.

‘Superb. Quite superb.’

They were in the Great Hall. Chinks of grey light marked the tall outlines of the shuttered windows. Pikes, assagai, and antlers adorned the upper levels; packing cases and mouldering books were strewn over the floor. Directly before them hung a gallery of dense black oak. Behind it, stone arches mouthed the openings to dismal corridors. The smell of dry rot was unmistakable.

‘Want to see the rest?’

‘I’d adore to.’

‘The whole thing? Warts and all?’

‘From top to bottom. It’s fabulous. What date is the gallery by the way? I should know, but I’ve forgotten.’

‘Oh Jesus, some of it was made from Noah’s Ark, no kidding. So they tell me anyway.’

Laughing dutifully, Cassidy could not fail nevertheless to detect, above the familiar smells of antiquity, the fumes of whisky on his host’s breath.

Ha ha, he thought with an inward smile of recognition. *Les aristos*. Slice them where you will, they’re all the same. Decadent, devil may care . . . but actually rather marvellous in an other-worldish way.

‘Tell me,’ he asked politely, as they once more turned a corner into darkness, ‘is the furniture for sale too?’ His voice had acquired a new Englishness as he offered it for the aristocrat’s consideration.

‘Not till we’re moved out, lover. Got to have something to sit on, haven’t we?’

'Of course. But later?'

'Sure. Have what you like.'

'It would only be the smaller things,' said Cassidy cautiously. 'I've quite a lot already, actually. *Put by*, you know.'

'Collector, eh?'

'Well a bit, certainly. But only when the price is right,' he added on the same defensive note. *If there's one thing your English gentleman does understand, it's the value of money.* 'I say do you think you could shine that light a little higher? I can't see a thing.'

The corridor was lined with portraits of gentle soldiers and murderous civilians. The beam revealed them only capriciously, and this was unfortunate for Cassidy was sure that, given the chance, he could have identified in their varied features traces of his eccentric escort: the brilliant erratic smile for instance, the pirate's eyes lit from within, the crop of black hair that fell so nobly over the powerful brow.

The lantern descended what appeared to be a short staircase, leaving him again in the deepest darkness.

'It's interminable,' Cassidy said with a nervous laugh, and then: 'I'd never have done this alone. I'm rather afraid of the dark to be honest, always have been. Some people don't like heights, I don't like the dark.' In point of fact, Cassidy did not care for heights either, but there seemed no point in spoiling the analogy. 'Have you been here long?' he asked, receiving no absolution for this confession.

'Ten days.'

'I meant your family.'

The beam shone briefly on a rusted iron coat-hanger, then sank to the floor. 'Oh Christ . . . for ever, man, for ever.'

'And it was your father who . . .'

For an uncomfortable moment Cassidy feared he had again

trodden upon too delicate ground: a recent death, after all, is not a subject one discusses in the dark. There was quite a delay before he had his answer.

‘My uncle *actually*,’ the soft voice confessed, and gave a small revealing sigh. ‘But we were very close.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Cassidy murmured.

‘He was gored by a bull,’ his guide continued in a more cheerful tone which reinforced the brogue. ‘So at least it was quick. None of your ugly lingering, I mean, the peasants dropping in with gruel.’

‘Well that’s some consolation,’ said Cassidy. ‘Was he old?’

‘Very. And I mean that bull—’

‘Yes?’ said Cassidy, puzzled.

The lantern appeared to shake in a sudden paroxysm of grief. ‘Well the bull was *terribly* old himself. I mean it was kind of death in slow motion. Come to think of it, I don’t know how they caught each other up.’

Comedy had evidently dispelled tragedy, for now a wild boyish laughter rose to the unseen roof, the beam swayed merrily in time to its peals and a strong hand descended gaily on Cassidy’s shoulder.

‘Listen, it’s great to have you. Great. You’re doing me a power of good, and that’s the honest truth. Jesus, I’ve been so bored; reading John Donne to the chickadees. Imagine. Great poet mind, but what an audience. The way they look at you. Jesus. Listen, I’ve had a wee drink, you don’t mind that now?’

Very much to his surprise, Cassidy felt a definite tweak on what the law courts call the upper thigh.

‘Like a drop yourself now and then, eh?’

‘Indeed yes.’

‘Specially when you’re lonely, or down on your luck a mite?’

'And at other times too, I promise you.'

'Don't do that,' the stranger said shortly, with a sudden change of humour. 'Don't promise a thing.'

They descended two stairs.

'Who the hell do you meet round here anyway?' he resumed in his jocular tone. 'Even the bloody gypsies won't talk to you. You know, Christ, it's class, class all the way.'

'Oh dear,' said Cassidy.

The hand still guided his shoulder. As a rule Cassidy did not like to be handled, particularly by men, but the contact disturbed him less than he might have expected.

'What about all those acres?' he asked. 'Don't *they* keep you busy any more?'

The smell of woodsmoke which Cassidy had hitherto admired for its rural fragrance became suddenly oppressive.

'Ah, fuck the acres. Who the hell wants land any more? Form-filling . . . rabies . . . pollution . . . American air-bases. It's over, I'm telling you. Unless you're in mink of course. Mink are great.'

'Yes,' Cassidy agreed, somewhat confused by this idiosyncratic description of the farmer's problems. 'Yes I hear mink can make a *lot* of money.'

'Hey listen. You religious at all?'

'Well, half and half . . .'

'There's this fellow in County Cork calling himself the one true living God, have you read about him? J. Flaherty of Hillside, Beohmin. All over the paper it was. Do you think there's anything in it at all?'

'I really don't know,' said Cassidy.

Obedient to his companion's whim, Cassidy allowed himself to be brought to a halt. The dark face came very close to his and he was suddenly aware of tension.

‘Only I wrote to him see, challenging him to a duel. I thought that’s who you might be.’

‘Oh,’ said Cassidy. ‘Oh no, well I’m afraid I’m not.’

‘You’ve a trace of him though, all the same, you’ve definitely a spot of divinity in you, I could tell it a mile off.’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh yes.’

They had turned a second corner and entered another corridor even longer and more derelict than the first. At its far end red firelight was playing on a stone wall and whorls of smoke were curling towards them through the open doorway. Seized by a sudden sense of lassitude, Cassidy had the eerie feeling of walking through an adverse tide. The darkness was dragging against his feet like currents of warm water. The smoke, he thought, the smoke has made me dizzy.

‘Bloody chimney’s bunged up. We tried to get the fellow to fix it but they never come, do they?’

‘It’s the same in London,’ Cassidy agreed, warming to his favourite topic. ‘You can ring them, write to them, have an appointment, it makes absolutely no difference. They come *when* they want and charge *what* they want.’

‘Bastards. Jesus, my grandfather would have flogged the lot of them.’

‘You can’t do that these days I’m afraid,’ said Cassidy loudly, in the voice of one who also yearned for a simpler social order. ‘They’d be down on you like a ton of bricks.’

‘I’ll tell you this for nothing, it’s time we had another bloody war. Listen, they say he’s about forty-three years of age.’

‘Who?’

‘God. This fellow in Cork. That’s a bloody odd age for him to choose, don’t you think so? I mean let’s have him young or

old, that's what I said to him see, who the hell thinks he's God at forty-three? Still, when I saw the car, then you . . . well you can't blame me can you? I mean if God *was* going to run a car, well that Bentley of yours . . .'

'How is the servant problem round here?' Cassidy inquired, cutting him short.

'Bloody awful. All they want is fags, telly, and fucks.'

'I suppose they get lonely. Like you.'

Cassidy was now quite recovered from his initial nervousness. His companion's racy tones, echoing ahead of him, were for all their quaintness pleasantly reassuring; the firelight was now definitely closer and the sight of it, after their inward journey through the successively darker chambers of the enormous mansion, gave him further cheer. His composure however was barely won before it was violently intruded upon by a new and wholly unannounced phenomenon. A sudden waft of tinny music issued from a side doorway and a girl crossed their path.

Cassidy in fact saw her twice.

Once, silhouetted against the smoky firelight at the end of the corridor and once in the direct beam of the lantern as she stopped and turned her head to look at them, at Cassidy first and then in cool question at the torchbearer. Her stare was straight and by no means welcoming. She held a towel over one arm and a small transistor radio in her hand. Her copious auburn hair was banked on top of her head as if to keep it out of the wet, and Cassidy recognised, as they briefly exchanged glances, that she was listening to the same programme which he had been playing in the car, a selection of Frank Sinatra's music on the theme of male solitude. These impressions, fragmented as they were by the wandering beam of the lantern,

the flickering of the firelight, and the clouds of woodsmoke, did not by any means run consecutively. The girl's appearance, her fractional hesitation, her double glance, were but flashes upon his heightened consciousness. She was gone in a moment, vanishing into another doorway, but not before Cassidy had observed, with the helpless detachment which often accompanies a wholly unexpected experience, that she was not only beautiful but naked. Indeed, so utterly improbable was the apparition – at once homely and yet totally disconcerting – so irreconcilable its effect upon Cassidy's beleaguered fantasy, that he would have discounted her altogether – fed her at once into his ever-ready apparatus of disbelief – had not the beam of the lantern firmly pointed him the proof of her terrestrial existence.

She had been walking on tiptoe. She must have been quite used to going barefoot, for each toe-mark was drawn separately in round spots on the flagstone like the print of a small animal in the snow.

Long ago in a great restaurant an elderly lady had stolen Cassidy's fish. She had been sitting beside him at an adjoining table facing into the room and with one movement she had swept the fish – a sole Waleska generously garnished with cheese and assorted sea foods – into her open tartan handbag. Her timing was perfect. Cassidy happened to look upward in response to an inner call – a girl probably, but perhaps a passing dish which he had almost ordered in preference to his Waleska – and when he looked down again the fish had gone and only a pink sludge across the plate, a glutinous trail of cornflour, cheese, and particles of shrimp, marked the direction it had taken. His first response was disbelief. He had eaten the fish and in his distraction not even tasted it. But *how* had he eaten it? the Great Detective asked himself. With his fingers? His knife and fork were clean. The fish was a mirage: the waiter had not yet brought it, Cassidy was looking at the dirty plate left by a guest who had preceded him.

Then he saw the tartan handbag. Its handles were clamped tight together, but a tell-tale pink smear was clearly visible on one brass ball of the clasp. Call the waiter, he thought: 'This lady has stolen my fish.' Confront the thief, summon the police, demand that she open her handbag.

But her posture of spinsterly composure as she continued

to sip her aperitif, one hand curled lightly in her napkin, was too much for him. Signing the bill he quietly left the restaurant, never to return.

Following the lantern into the smoke-filled drawing room Cassidy underwent the same symptoms of psychic disarray. Had the girl existed, or was she the creation of his lively erotic fantasy? Was she a ghost? A de Waldebere heiress, for instance, murdered in her bath by the reckless Sir Hugo? But family ghosts do not leave footprints nor carry transistor radios, and are certainly not constructed of such eminently persuasive flesh. Assuming then that the girl was real and that he had seen her, should he as a matter of protocol venture some casual comment suggesting he had not? Imply that he had been studying a portrait or an architectural feature at the critical moment of her appearance? Ask his host whether he was all alone here or who looked after him?

He was still wrestling with the problem when he heard himself addressed in what he took to be a foreign language.

‘Alc?’

To compound Cassidy’s sense of unreality he had the strong impression of being cut off by fog, for the enormous fireplace was emitting billows of cannon-smoke over the stone floor and heavy palls already hung from the rafters overhead. The same fire, which seemed to consist entirely of kindling wood, provided their only source of light, for the lantern was now extinguished and the windows, like those in the Great Hall, were firmly shuttered.

‘I’m awfully sorry I don’t think I understand.’

‘Alc, lover. Alcohol. Whisky.’

‘Oh thank you. Alcohol. Alc.’ He laughed. ‘Yes indeed I’d love an alc. It’s quite a long drive from Bath actually. Well

fussy, you know. All those narrow lanes and side turnings. *Alc.* Ha ha.'

Mistress? Lecherous housemaid? Incestuous sister? A gypsy whore slunk in from the woods? Fiver a bang and free bath after?

'You want to try walking it.' Glass in hand, the tall figure rose massively at him out of the smoke. If we are the same size, thought Cassidy, how are you now bigger? 'Eight bloody hours it took us, with all God's limousines damn near running us into the hedge. It's enough to turn a man to drink, I'm telling you.' The brogue was even stronger. 'Still *you* wouldn't do that would you, lover? Carve us into the ditch, and not even stop to set the bone?'

A call girl perhaps, sent down by disgraceful agencies? Question: how can you call a call girl when your phone's cut off?

'Certainly not. I'm a great believer in defensive driving.'

'Are you now?'

The dark eyes seemed, with this question, to invade still further Cassidy's unprotected consciousness.

'Look, my name's Cassidy,' he said as much to reassure himself as to inform his host.

'Cassidy? Jesus that's a lovely native name if ever I heard one. Hey, was it you robbed all those banks then? Is that where you got your money from?'

'Well I'm afraid not,' said Cassidy silkily, 'I had to work a little harder for it than that.'

Emboldened by the aptness of his retort, Cassidy now undertook an examination of his host as frank as that which he himself had recently undergone. The garment which encased his dark legs was neither a skirt nor a bath towel nor yet a kilt, but a very old curtain embroidered with faded serpents and ripped at the edges as if by angry hands. He wore it off the

hip, low at the front and higher at the back like a man about to bathe himself in the Ganges. His breast under the black jacket was bare, but garnished with clusters of rich black hair which descended in a thin line down his stomach before opening again into a frank pubic shadow.

‘Like it?’ his host inquired, handing him a glass.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘*Shamus* is the name, lover. *Shamus*.’

Shamus. Shamus de Waldebere . . . look him up in Debrett.

From the direction of the doorway Cassidy heard Frank Sinatra singing about a girl he knew in Denver.

‘Hey Helen,’ Shamus called over Cassidy’s shoulder. ‘It’s not Flaherty after all, it’s Cassidy. *Butch* Cassidy. He’s come to buy the house now poor Uncle Charlie’s dead and gone. Cassidy me old friend, shake hands with a very lovely lady, lately of Troy and now reduced to the abominable state of—’

‘How do you do,’ said Helen.

‘Matrimony,’ said Shamus.

She was covered, if not yet fully dressed.

Wife, he thought glumly. I should have known. The Lady Helen de Waldebere, and all doors closed.

There is no established method, even to a formalist of Cassidy’s stamp, of greeting a lady of great family whom you have just met naked in a corridor. The best that he could manage was a hog-like grunt, accompanied by a watery academic smile and a puckering of the eyes, designed to indicate to those familiar with his signals that he was a short-sighted person of minimal libido in the presence of someone who had hitherto escaped his notice. Helen on the other hand, with looks and breeding on her side and time to think in the dressing room, displayed a stately composure. She was even more beautiful

dressed than not. She wore a housecoat of devotional simplicity. A high collar enfolded her noble neck, lace cuffs her slender wrists. Her auburn hair was combed long like Juliet's and her feet were still bare. Her breasts, which despite his simulated myopia he could not help remarking, were unsupported, and trembled delicately as she moved. Her hips were similarly unbound, and with each balanced stride a white knee, smooth as marble, peeped demurely through the division of her robe. English to the core, thought Cassidy to his relief, what an entry; what a dash she'd cut in trade. Switching off the wireless with a simple movement of her index finger and thumb she placed it on the sofa table, smoothed the dustcover as if it were the finest linen, then gravely shook his hand and invited him to sit down. She accepted a drink and apologised for the mess in a low, almost a humble tone. Cassidy said he quite understood, he knew what it was to move, he had been through it several times in the last few years. Somehow, without trying, he managed to suggest that each move had been for the better.

'My God, even moving the *office*, when one has secretaries and assistants, even one's own workmen, it takes months. Literally *months*. So what it's like here . . .'

'Where is your office?' Helen asked politely.

Cassidy's opinion of her rose still higher.

'South Audley Street,' he said promptly. 'West One. Just off Park Lane, actually. We went in there last spring.' He wanted to add that she might have read about it in *The Times Business News* but modestly he forbore.

'Oh how *very* nice.' Chastely rearranging her skirts to cover her peerless thighs, she sat down on the sofa.

Towards her husband she showed a greater reserve. Her eyes seldom left his face and Cassidy did not fail to notice their darting expression of concern. How well, as always, did he

understand a pretty woman's feelings! A drunken husband was liability enough. But who could tell what other blows her pride had suffered in the last months, the fights with lawyers, the towering death duties, the painful partings from family retainers, the tattered keepsakes in the silent desk? And how many potential purchasers in that time had swept brutally through the treasured chambers of her youth, mouthed their gross objections, and left without a word of hope?

I will ease her burden, he decided; I will take over the conversation.

Having concisely rehearsed the reasons for his unheralded arrival, he laid the blame squarely at the door of Grimble and Outhwaite:

'I've nothing against them, they're very good people in their way. I've dealt with them for a number of years and I shall go on dealing with them no doubt, but like all these old firms they get complacent. Slack.' Under the velvet, the steel showed. 'I mean to take this up with them in quite a big way as a matter of fact.'

Shamus, who had crossed his legs under the curtain and was leaning back in an attitude of critical reflection, merely nodded with energetic approval and said 'Attaboy Cassidy,' but Helen assured him that his visit was perfectly convenient, he was very welcome at any time and it made no difference really:

'Does it Shamus?'

'None at all, lover,' said Shamus heartily. 'We're having a ball.'

And resumed, with a complacency amounting almost to pride of ownership, his study of his unexpected guest.

'I'm so sorry about the smoke,' said Helen.

'Oh it's quite all right,' said Cassidy restraining himself with difficulty from wiping away a tear. 'I rather like it actually.'

A wood fire is one of the things we just can't buy in London. Not at any price I'm afraid.'

'It's all my own fault,' Shamus confessed. 'We ran out of firewood so I sawed up the table.'

Shamus and Cassidy laughed loudly at this good joke and Helen after a moment's doubt joined in. Her laugh, he noticed with approval, was modest and admiring: he did not care for women's humour as a rule, fearing it to be directed against himself, but Helen's was different, he could tell: she knew her place and laughed only with the men.

'Now there's a terrible thing about mahogany.' Leaping to his feet, Shamus wheeled away to where the bottle stood. 'It just won't bloody burn like the lower class woods. It positively resists martyrdom. Now I count that very bad manners indeed, don't you? I mean at a certain point we should all go gentle into that good night, don't you think so, Cassidy?'

Though the question was facetious, Shamus put it with great earnestness, and waited motionless until he had his answer.

'Oh rather,' said Cassidy.

'He agrees,' said Shamus, with apparent relief. 'Helen, he agrees.'

'Of course he does,' said Helen. 'He's being polite.' She leaned across to him. 'It's weeks since he met a soul,' she confided in a low voice. 'He's been getting rather desperate, I'm afraid.'

'Don't give it a thought,' Cassidy murmured. 'I love it.'

'Hey Cassidy, tell her about your Bentley.' Shamus' brogue was all over the words: the drink had brought it to full flower. 'Hear that, Helen? Cassidy's got a Bentley, a dirty big long one with a silver tip, haven't you, lover?'

‘Have you really?’ said Helen over the top of her glass. ‘Gosh.’

‘Well, not new of course.’

‘But isn’t that rather a good thing? I mean aren’t the old ones *better* in lots of ways?’

‘Oh absolutely, well in my judgement anyway,’ said Cassidy. ‘The pre-sixty-three models were a *much* superior job. Well certainly this one has turned out pretty well.’

Before he knew it, with only the smallest prompting from Shamus, he was telling her the whole story, how he had been driving through Sevenoaks in his Mercedes – he’d had a Merc in those days, very functional cars of course, but no real hand-writing if they knew what he meant – and had spotted a Bentley in the showroom of Caffyns.

‘In Sevenoaks, hear that?’ Shamus called. ‘Fancy buying a Bentley in *Sevenoaks*. Jesus.’

‘But that’s half the fun of it,’ Cassidy insisted. ‘Some of the very finest models come from as far away as India. Maharajahs bought them for safaris.’

‘Hey, lover.’

‘Yes?’

‘You’re not a maharajah yourself by any chance?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Only in this sort of light you can’t always see the colour of a person’s skin. Are you a Catholic then?’

‘No,’ said Cassidy pleasantly. ‘Wrong again.’

‘But you are holy?’ he insisted, returning to an earlier theme. ‘You do *worship*?’

‘Well,’ said Cassidy doubtfully. ‘Christmas and Easter, you know the kind of thing.’

‘Would you call yourself a New Testament man?’

‘Please go on,’ said Helen. ‘I’m riveted.’

‘Or would you say you were more in favour of the barbaric and untrammelled qualities of the Ancient Jews?’

‘Well . . . neither or both I suppose.’

‘You see this fellow Flaherty in County Cork now—’

‘Please,’ said Helen, directing a second quelling glance at her husband.

Well, Cassidy had had this feeling that the car was *right*, he couldn’t explain it really, and so in the end he’d stopped and gone back to take a second look. And anyway to cut a long story short this young salesman hadn’t pushed him at all but recognised one of the breed, so to speak, and in five minutes they’d done the deal. Cassidy wrote out a cheque for five thousand pounds dated that same day and drove away in the car.

‘Goodness,’ Helen breathed, ‘how *terribly* brave.’

‘Brave?’ Shamus repeated. ‘Brave? Listen, he’s a lion. You should have seen him out there on the terrace. He frightened the hell out of me, I’ll tell you that for nothing.’

‘Well of course I did have the weekend to stop the cheque,’ Cassidy admitted a little injudiciously, and would have gone on with a great deal more of the same thing – the Automobile Association’s report for instance which had been one long paean of technical praise, the car’s genealogy which he had only stumbled on months after he had bought her – if Shamus, suddenly bored, had not suggested that Helen show him round the house.

‘After all, if he’s a compulsive buyer, maybe he’ll buy us too, eh? I mean, Jesus, we can’t pass over an opportunity like this. Now Cassidy have you brought your cheque book? Because if you haven’t you’d best get in that grey bedpan and hurry back to the West End and fetch it, I’m telling you, I mean we don’t show the house to just *anyone*, don’t you know. After all, if you’re not God, who *are* you?’

Once more Cassidy's seismographic spirit recorded Helen's reticence and understood it. The same worried glance troubled her serious eyes, the same innate courtesy prevented her from putting her anxiety into words. 'We can hardly show it to him in the dark, darling,' she said quietly.

'Of course we can show it to him in the bloody dark. We've got the lamp, haven't we? Christ, he could buy the place by Braille if he felt like it, couldn't you, lover? I mean look here, Cassidy's quite clearly a *very influential person* and *very influential persons* who can wander round Sevenoaks signing cheques for five thousand pounds don't bloody well like having their time wasted, Helen, that's something you have to learn in life—'

Cassidy knew it was time for him to speak. 'Oh now look here, *please* don't worry. I can perfectly well come another time. You've been so good already—'

In an effort to make his intention real, he rose falteringly to his feet. The woodsmoke and the whisky had had more effect on him than he knew. His head was dizzy and his eyes were smarting.

'I can *perfectly* well come back another time,' he repeated foolishly. 'You must be tired out, what with all the packing and making do.'

Shamus was also standing, leaning his hands on Helen's shoulders, and his dark, inward eyes were watching Cassidy intently.

'So why don't we make a date for next week?'

'You mean you don't like the house,' Shamus said in a flat, menacing tone, more as a statement than a question. Cassidy hastened to protest but Shamus rode him down. 'It's not good enough for you, is that it? No central heating, no low flush suites, no poncy fittings like you've got in Londontown?'

'Not at all, I merely—'

‘What do you want for Christ’s sake? A tart’s parlour?’

Cassidy in his day had handled scenes like this before. Angry trade unionists had beaten his rosewood desk, deprived competitors had shaken their fists in his face, drunken maids had called him fat. But finally such situations had remained within his control, occurring for the greater part on territory he had already bought, among people he had yet to pay. The present situation was altogether different, and neither the whisky nor his misted vision did anything to improve his performance.

‘Of *course* I like the house. I thought I’d made that abundantly clear, as a matter of fact it’s the best I’ve seen for a long time. It’s got everything I’ve been looking for . . . peace . . . seclusion . . . garage space.’

‘More,’ Shamus exhorted.

‘Antiquity . . . what else do you want me to say?’

‘Then come on with you!’

A brilliant, infecting smile had replaced the brief cloud of anger. Grabbing the whisky bottle in one hand and the lantern in the other, Shamus beckoned them brightly up the great staircase. Thus for the second time that evening Cassidy found himself conveyed, not altogether against his liking, upon a compulsory journey that seemed to his swimming consciousness to alternate with each new step between past and future, illusion and reality, drunkenness and sobriety.

‘Come, Flaherty!’ Shamus cried. ‘God’s house has many mansions, and me and Helen will show you the whole bloody lot, won’t we, Helen?’

‘Will you follow me?’ Helen asked with an air hostess’s charming smile.

Sir Shamus and Lady Helen de Waldebere. It was symptomatic of Cassidy’s confused state that he never stopped to consider

whose heritage was actually for sale. Having cast Shamus as a kind of grounded cavalry officer drinking away the humiliations of a horseless existence, he vested in Helen the fortitude and dignified resignation which properly accompany the evanescence of a Great Line: and never asked himself how it had come about within the probabilities of a conventional union that the two of them had passed their childhood in the same house. Even if he had hit upon the question, Helen's bearing would only have added to his bewilderment. She was in her element: the young chatelaine had stepped lightly from her portrait and was showing them her *domaine*. Whatever restraint she had felt in the drawing room was swept aside by her transparent devotion to the task. Solemn, wistful, informative by turn, she guided him with loving familiarity through the labyrinth of mouldering corridors. Cassidy kept close behind her, led by the smell of baby soap and the contra-rotations of her firmly rounded hips; Shamus followed at a distance with the bottle and the lantern, moving on the edge of their discourse or calling after them with harsh ironic jokes. 'Hey Cassidy, get her to tell you about Nanny Higgins having it off with the vicar at the Servants' Ball.' In the Great Hall he found a pike and fought a shadow duel with his father's ghost; in the planthouse he insisted on presenting Helen with a flowering cactus, and when she accepted it he kissed her for a long time on the nape of her neck. Helen, in her serenity, took it all in good part.

'It's the waiting and the worry,' she explained to Cassidy while Shamus was chanting Gregorian plain-song in the crypt. 'It's so frustrating for him.'

'Please,' said Cassidy. 'I do understand. Really.'

'Yes, I think you do,' she said casting him a look of gratitude.

'What will he do now? Get a job?' Cassidy asked, in a tone

which recognised that, for such as Shamus, employment was the final degradation.

‘Who would have him?’ Helen asked simply.

She took him everywhere. In hanging dusk with the first stars breaking they patrolled the crumbling battlements and marvelled at the empty moat. By the light of the lantern they stood in awe before worm-eaten four-posters and delved in dust-filled priest-holes, they caressed mildewed screens and tapped on panelling honeycombed by beetles. They discussed the problems of heating and Cassidy said small-bore piping would do the least harm. They worked out which rooms could be sealed off with little alteration: how the rewiring could be run behind the skirting boards and how an electrolite circuit worked perfectly as damp-course.

‘It turns the house into a dry battery,’ Cassidy explained. ‘It’s not cheap but then what is these days?’

‘You know an *awful* lot about it,’ said Helen. ‘Are you an architect by any chance?’

‘I just love old things,’ said Cassidy.

Behind them, hands clasped, Shamus was chanting the *Magnificat*.