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Girls of the Night

Petra Christian

*Sally's assignment was
'witchcraft', but
how far should
she become
involved...?*

GIRLS OF THE NIGHT

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Girls of the Night

Petra Christian

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TIMES MIRROR

**For the NEL Sales force -
the best gang I ever banged**

An NEL Original 1973
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CHAPTER 1

I had often thought, as I suppose many other people must have done, that I would like to be a writer. The very idea of living a life of ease, of pottering about aimlessly, of jotting down a few hundred words here and there, had a truly irresistible appeal. Add to this the fact that most writers eventually become rich, are invited to all the best parties, do guest-interviews on *Late Night Line-Up*, and gradually become awed and respected members of the establishment, and there remained very few arguments against the notion.

All one had to do was write.

Someone had suggested to me that my life in the recent past was, to say the least, unusual, and would make good material for at least one book and perhaps more. Oddly enough, this had never occurred to me and my first impulse was to reject it. I didn't feel any different from anybody else, and at the time my 'adventures' had seemed rather prosaic and everyday. So I dismissed the thought, and began hunting for a job.

But the seed had been sown. A few days later, still jobless, I was sitting in a pub, dawdling over a vodka and lime and scanning the sits. vac. column of the evening newspaper, when my eye was caught by an advertisement for one of those correspondence schools who claim to be able to teach you to write.

'Make a pleasurable hobby into a lucrative way of earning a living,' the advertisement said. 'Everyone's a writer, and we will show you how.'

I stared at it thoughtfully. There was something about the ad. that didn't quite ring true. If it was as easy as they seemed to make out, who the hell needed them anyway? Then I remembered the advice I had been given. 'Write it all down, Sally. You could make an interesting book or two out of your memories.'

Suddenly, it didn't seem as far-fetched as I'd first supposed. I drank the rest of the vodka, and ordered another. I began replaying my memories, trying to fit them into coherent order. I chuckled, remembering an incident which had absolutely croggled me at the time, but which became just patently absurd afterwards. A cold sweat crept over me, when I remembered nearly walking into a situation that would have been very embarrassing, to say

the least. I felt a thrill of excitement, remembering a certain young man who had, for a time, played a large part in my life.

And then I saw the point of the advice. In the simple act of casting my mind back, I found I was reliving the experiences. Perhaps if I were to write them down, someone else would participate in the same experiences.

By the time the vodka was insinuating itself around my alimentary canal I was half a mile down the road and heading for the nearest stationery shop. I bought a ream of stiff bond paper, and a ream of white flimsy paper. I bought carbon-paper, and pens, and a typewriter eraser, and a notebook. Then I walked a little further down the road to a secondhand office-equipment shop, and found a portable typewriter which was not too expensive but which seemed sturdy enough.

I lugged all the stuff home to my bed-sitter, and dumped them on a table. Hardly waiting to slip off my coat, I pulled up a chair and sat down to launch into the greatest novel since 'Middlemarch'.

A couple of hours later, I sat looking at the two pages of almost indecipherable typing and wondered where the devil I had gone wrong.

Even to my prejudiced eye, what I had produced looked like the unintelligible meanderings of a backward ape. Compound this with the fact that I had just discovered that I couldn't type, and couldn't spell either, and I realised I might have never bothered starting.

The torid Meediteranean moon shone lazily accross the water, I stood on the after@dek with a man I knew whose name was Alphonse and he was a sailor and he wanted me to delliver a message to another man who I'd had been to bed with in the afternoon and his name was Tony and he was & a singer singer in a group, and I liked them. I didn't know then, as we stood there on that trankwil night, that Alfonse was a dope-pedler from Tangier who had beeN thretened with being murdered when he was incolved in a plot to smuggel jewels from Holland and had ratted on the others. His hand slipped into mine and then we kissed and he began tearing at my clothes and undid all the buttons and I didn't habe a bra on because it was a hot night.

And on and on. . . . It pains me now to dig out that historic piece of prose because, well, I think I've learned something since then.

Anyway, I became very disillusioned about the whole idea, and watched television instead. But the odd thing about writing, any

kind of writing, however lousy, is that it makes you aware of writing. I think I watched a play that evening, and instead of just sitting back and following the story I found I was listening to the way the writer had phrased his dialogue, how he had set up each scene.

In the morning, I re-applied myself to the problem.

Within a week, I was more and more convinced that I wanted to write, but equally aware of my basic inability to come to terms with it. So I went to night-school instead.

I took a secretarial course, and an English course. With the first I learned the rudiments of typewriting and with the second I came to grips for the first time in my life with the English language. Neither course was the 'secret' of writing, but they did provide me with the indispensable tools of the trade.

The trouble was that when I went back to the book, I became so involved with making my typing neat, and making sure I didn't dangle prepositions or split infinitives that writing was now so difficult and so self-conscious a process that I hardly made any headway at all.

For the second time in a very short period I wondered whether writing a book was a good idea at all.

Then I had a stroke of luck.

I'd been invited to a party, and had been in two minds as to whether or not to go. I knew the girl who was running it quite well, but we'd been out of touch for several months. She was a librarian, and was planning to get married in a few months' time. She seemed, from a safe distance, to be set on a future of solidity and reliability . . . in other words, a girl wholly different from me. I did a mental toss-up, and lost. I went to the party.

It was like a dozen other parties I'd been to that year. Music, cheap wine from the local plonk-store, cheese straws and crisps, and young and not-too-interesting people. I talked for a bit, danced a bit, ate a bit.

And then a young man came into my awareness. He was standing on his own, staring about the room with much the same kind of expression as the one I assumed I'd been wearing: slightly bored, slightly drunk. He was quite good-looking - tall, longish hair, modern colourful clothes - but what was more interesting was that his appearance had a slight edge of intrigue about it. One glance, and he looked just like a hundred other young men you'd meet in the street; but a longer look and you realised that he was really quite extraordinary. In that room he stood out. There was an earnestness in his face, perhaps an underlying seriousness . . . I couldn't tell.

Determined to find out more, I manoeuvred towards him.

At the appropriate moment, I gave him a half-smile and to my relief he took the cue.

'Enjoying yourself?' he said.

'Not really. It's O.K. I don't know many people here.'

'Neither do I.' He gestured towards my glass. 'Can I get you another drink?'

'Yes please.'

He was gone a few seconds, then he came back with two full glasses.

'My name's Chris Bishop.'

'Sally Deenes.'

'What do you do for a living, Sally?'

I shrugged. 'Nothing really. I'm out of work. Drawing dole and living on savings. What about you?'

'You could say I'm out of work too.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well . . . if you must know, I'm a manufacturer of waste paper.'

'Eh?'

He laughed. 'That's right. I produce litter on a vast scale.'

I shook my head. 'I don't get it. Is it a joke?'

'No, just one way of looking at it. What I do for a living is one way of producing a lot of things that people will one day throw away.'

'What's that?'

He looked a little embarrassed. 'Well, I'm a writer.'

'But that's not producing litter.'

'It is, in one sense. I throw away masses of scrap paper myself, and when the books are printed most people throw them away when they've finished with them. Even if they keep them, someone will undoubtedly put them in the dustbin when the original owner moves house or dies. Even the British Museum will be sacked one day, and its contents destroyed.'

'That's a rather gloomy way of looking at literature.'

'I don't agree,' Chris said. 'It's just realistic. There's too much crap talked about the immortality of the printed word for my liking. Writers are like everybody else: they've got a job to do, and someone pays them to do it.'

I decided to take the plunge.

'I'm writing a book,' I said.

An expression flickered over his face. Had I said the wrong thing . . . did everyone say this to him?

'Oh. That's interesting,' he said.

'Sorry. You must get very tired of people trying to keep up with you and telling you about their own little efforts. How many

books have you written?’

‘Nine,’ he said shortly. ‘But I’m more interested in you. Tell me about what you’re writing.’

I shook my head.

He stared at me intently. ‘Look, Sally, I didn’t mean to put you down. Please . . . I really do want to know.’

I shrugged. ‘It’s nothing much. Someone suggested I should have a go at writing a novel based on my own experiences, and so I’m trying it. Without much success.’

‘Could that be because your experiences are as dull as everybody else’s?’

‘I don’t know. I used to think so, but I happened to be talking about them one day and great interest was expressed.’

Chris looked thoughtful.

‘The thing is,’ he said in a moment, ‘that if you’re writing a novel you shouldn’t write directly about what happened to you, but to try to think of some way in which they can be incorporated into a story. Would that be possible in your case?’

‘Want me to bore you with them?’

‘O.K.’

So I gave him a brief synopsis. I talked of the first trip abroad, when I ended up in Greece, and the second, when I found myself in a castle in Morocco turned on to the love-generation . . . and I told him about the time I had worked in a holiday-camp. I kept it as brief as I could, and omitted as many of the fleshy details as I felt right . . . but even so, the expression on his face by the time I had finished was reflecting at least one kind of interest. I fancy that the few fleshy details I had afforded him had worked up a different kind of interest, too, but that wasn’t uppermost in my mind at that moment.

‘It’s worth a try,’ he said. ‘Definitely worth a try.’

‘A try at what?’

‘Writing a novel. Are you up to it?’

I told him about my problems with the actual job of putting words on to paper. He grinned.

‘There are solutions to that little problem,’ he said. ‘Nothing like a couple of hundred quid in the bank to help the words flow.’

‘And where would I get that from?’

‘Where else? A publisher, of course.’

‘But I don’t even know any publishers. That’s the least of my considerations. Until I’ve written the book I can’t even knock on a publisher’s door.’

Chris drained his glass. ‘That, young lady, is just where you’re wrong. I know at least two publishers who right now are looking for original novels by new authors. I reckon I can squeeze an

advance for you out of at least one of them. If you like, I can ring them on Monday. Want me to?’

I just grinned.

We didn’t do much talking after that. I danced with him for a long time, and when he drew me closer and pressed my head to the side of his I didn’t mind at all. Later, kissing passionately in the corridor, away from the main action of the party, I developed an inkling of where this was leading. It crossed my mind that he might have made it all up about his being a writer and having contacts in the world of publishing, and was using it as a slightly original way of chatting me up. Even if he was, I mused, it didn’t matter that much because I liked him anyway. He drove me home, and we made brief but passionate love in my tiny room. When he left, I thought that was probably the end of it . . . but I was wrong.

On the Tuesday following the party, he telephoned me.

‘Sally?’

‘Yes.’

‘Chris Bishop. I’ve got some good news for you. I had lunch today with a guy called Mark Jameson. He’s an old pal of mine, who has published several of my books. I told him about you, and I think he was interested.’

The old cynicism reared its head. ‘What . . . interested in me or my book?’

‘Your book, Sally. The firm he works for has just started a series of original novels, and he thought you might well be able to write one of them.’

When I realised he was not kidding, I felt a little dazed. Here I was, the ultimate in non-writers, seriously considered as publishing potential.

‘O.K.,’ I said, trying to keep my voice calm. ‘What do I do?’

‘Give Mark a ring tomorrow. He’s expecting to hear from you. He’ll probably invite you to have lunch with him. Don’t expect much in the way of grand treatment . . . he doesn’t spend much money on writers, but it’ll give you an opportunity to tell him what you had planned, and you’ll be able to find out from him what he wants. It may not come to anything, but you’ve nothing to lose.’

‘Well, thanks Chris.’

‘Nothing to thank me for yet. But there are a few things you should do. When you’ve spoken to him, and fixed a date, write out a quick synopsis of what the book will be about. This could be more or less what you told me the other night. Give that to Mark. It’ll give him something to work on.’

‘O.K. Anything else?’

'Yes,' Chris sounded emphatic. 'Don't talk money or business to him. If he makes you an offer, don't accept it. I know this sounds crazy, but just do it. Tell him your agent will deal with that.'

'But I haven't got a literary agent.'

'Leave that to me. Ring me as soon as you've seen Mark, and I'll put you on to one. You must have an agent. He'll take ten per cent of your money, but it'll be worth it in the end.'

'Any more things I shouldn't do?'

'Not really. Just ring me as soon as you've any news, and I'll do what I can to make sure everything goes through smoothly. And good luck.'

He gave me Mark's business number, and reminded me of his own. I rang off, and sat in bewilderment for an hour or two.

I don't know what it was in Chris's words that alarmed me about Mark Jameson, but I know I went to see him full of trepidation. As it turned out, I needn't have had any worries at all. Mark was charming; only a few years older than me, he seemed determined to talk about anything at all except business, and throughout our lunch in an excellent but cheap Chinese restaurant (Chris was right when he said Mark didn't spend much money on writers) he kept me entertained with a string of funny stories and anecdotes. To such a degree that I began to wonder if we would ever get around to the subject of my writing a book for him. In the end I was forced to bring it up myself.

I gave him the synopsis I had hurriedly typed out the day before, and he stuffed it into his pocket without looking at it.

'That's O.K.,' he said casually. 'How soon can you let me have the manuscript? Three months? Good. Just put it down as it happened, don't try to dress it up at all.'

I nodded.

'You got an agent?'

I shook my head.

'Chris'll probably know one. I never talk about money, I leave that to an agent. That's what he's there for. Don't worry though, I'll get the contract off to you this week.'

And he changed the subject, and that was all.

The next day I sat down at the typewriter and began putting it down. Just as it happened. A few names changed to protect the innocent, and all that, a few events joined together to make it a bit more interesting. And you know what? Suddenly writing didn't seem so difficult. Once I got into it, I found it was really quite fun.

And six weeks later, I gave the typescript to Mark, he dropped

it into a wire basket . . . and took me out for a drink. I don't think he had any idea of the pure sweat and blood which went into the work, he was so casual about it.

But he certainly seemed to care about me. I was given first-class treatment all the way down the line. When the book came out it received mixed reviews, but much more importantly it sold well. It sold and sold and sold. . . . And Mark's smile grew broader, and my bank-balance became really quite respectable.

Two months after publication, I sat down and wrote a second story. And then a year later, a third.

But then the rot began to set in.

CHAPTER 2

'The rot's setting in,' I said one day to Mark. We were in the inevitable Chinese restaurant, eating our way stoically through their set lunch (40p, including coffee). This restaurant was apparently Mark's favourite; two days before one of the Sunday papers had featured an exposé on hygiene in London restaurants, and this one had come off just about the worst of all. I hadn't had the heart to point this out to Mark, and could only hope that the cockroaches and mouse-droppings had somehow managed to miss landing up in our chicken chop-suey and fried rice.

'The only rot about you is what you write,' he said tactlessly.

'No, I mean it Mark. I'm wasting my time.'

'Write another novel,' he said. 'We could use another. You're already one of our best-selling writers.'

'I know. But it doesn't do *me* any good. I'm better off now than I ever was, but underneath this lovely black bank-balance I'm the same person.'

'Then it doesn't matter. Live your life, spend your money, enjoy yourself . . . and write us at least one book a year. What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'But it isn't *me*. I'm not living my life, sitting in my back room tapping away at a typewriter. I want to get out, meet people, do things . . .'

'But you've always said you enjoy writing.'

'I do. While I'm actually doing it. But in between I get restless. I feel I have to keep on writing, because now it's part of my life, but somehow it has changed me. I was never like this before.'

'You were on the road, living out your experiences.'

'Right. And I'm not doing that any more. I'm a hermit now. I've lost all my old friends, and the ones I've got now are all connected in some way with books, publishing or writing.'

Mark said: 'If your friends before were anything like the way you described them in your books, I think you're better off. By the way, what's the latest on the libel-action?'

'It's been dropped,' I said.

He was referring to a suit which had been taken out against me a few weeks before. One of the men I had known in the past thought he had recognised himself in one of my stories, and decided that his wife may not like what I said. In an angry exchange of letters he had claimed that what I wrote about him was a bit near the truth. In fact, it was the truth . . . and there was no way out of that. I had been frightened at first, and then remembered a little incident I had *not* put in the book. When I reminded him of that, and mentioned that I was planning a new novel, he had gone very quiet indeed. Only that morning I had had a letter from his solicitor telling me that the action was not going to be pursued.

Phew.

'Anyway,' I went on, 'I feel as if I'm going stale. You say you want more books from me. What do you want me to do? Make them up?'

'Most fiction is made up,' Mark pointed out.

'Is it?' He nodded slowly. 'Oh . . . I hadn't realised. Anyway, mine isn't. Well, not entirely. I have to have something to go on. And the simple fact is that while I'm sitting at home writing about what happened a couple of years ago, I'm not getting any new ideas for other books.'

'So the cornucopia is drying up.'

I nodded, and shovelled another spoonful of chop suey into my mouth. Something in it went *crunch*, and I held my breath and swallowed quickly. Probably full of vitamins, I thought philosophically.

'You know what you should do?' said Mark.

'What?'

'Get a job.'

'But I don't need a job. I don't need the money . . . and anyway, I can't think of a job I'd like to do. Damn it all, I enjoy being lazy.'

'You can't have it both ways. Either you're a writer, and you don't get out, or you get out. No . . . just a minute.' He looked thoughtful. 'What would you say to a job which was a job, and yet allowed you to carry on writing?'

'That'd be O.K. But does such a job exist?'

'Ever heard of journalism?'

I stared at him.

'Me a journalist?' I said. 'But I don't know anything about it.'

'I'd say you do. Your books are a form of journalism, if you like. You're reporting on experiences. There are many different kinds of journalism: you could probably find one to suit you.'

'But I wouldn't know how to start . . . even if I wanted to.'

'Use your contacts. You know plenty of people now. There's always work around . . . it's just a question of finding out about it soon enough. And the more I think about it, the more I believe that you do want this. It'd be the answer Sally. You'd meet hundreds of people, and not just those you would work with. And by the very nature of the work you'd be doing, you would still be writing. Why not think about it?'

'I'm thinking about it,' I said. I saw what he meant, and I suppose I'd already half considered it myself. Perhaps I had been waiting for someone like Mark to put it into words, because to a large extent he was already preaching to the converted. I did want to carry on writing, and I did want to get out more; journalism seemed to be an ideal compromise.

'If I hear of anything going, I'll let you know,' said Mark.

I looked at him with some surprise.

'Will you really?'

'Don't hold out too much hope. I'm not the source of all the best jobs in London. But I do hear about what's going on, and you never know what may turn up. In the meantime, you keep your own ear to the ground.'

'I'll do that,' I said, wondering who I could get in touch with. I mean, one doesn't just like to ring up all one's friends and say, I'm looking for a job, how about it? Does one?'

We crunched our way through the rest of the chop suey, and I looked round weakly to find a glass of water. It's funny how little bits stick to the teeth.

I didn't think Mark would be as good as his word, but anyway what he had said made sense and in the next couple of weeks I made discreet and casual enquiries of those of my friends who had anything whatsoever to do with publishing. There were a few hopeful noises, but nothing came of any of them.

Then Mark rang, just as I was thinking I ought to start a fourth novel.

'Sally, are you still interested in a job in journalism?'

'Well . . . yes, I suppose I am.'

'O.K. don't get to excited, but I think I may have something. Do you want to hear about it?'

'Yes,' I said cautiously.

'Good . . . because I think it may suit you down to the ground. There's a new magazine being planned at the moment. It's called *Freedom Girl*, and there's some large American corporation behind it. I don't know too much about the kind of thing it's going to be, but I do know the editor. Her name's Constance Elliot, and she's an old friend of mine. From what she told me, I think you should meet her.'

'O.K.,' I said. 'Have you told her anything about me?'

'Yes. This was the interesting thing. She said she knows very well that if she were to advertise the job in one of the trade papers she'd be deluged with applicants, all of whom wouldn't care too much about the actual paper so long as they got into publishing. The fact that you don't really need a job, and that you'd be doing it for interest's sake, made you fit the bill very well. Do you want to see her?'

'Yes, I'd like to. When can she see me?'

'If you can come up to the office now, she's here. We had lunch today, and she's stayed on for coffee. Can you be here in half an hour?'

I looked at the typewriter. There was a stack of blank paper by its side. The prospect of putting sixty thousand words on the paper hadn't grabbed me, I decided.

'O.K. . . . I'll be there,' I said.

We hung up. I slipped on a clean dress, tidied my face and hair, and set off straight away.

As was now my custom, I walked straight into Mark's office without announcement. He was sitting, as usual, with the chair leaning back on two legs, holding on to the shelf above him for support. It made him look faintly ridiculous, but I'd never seen him sitting behind his desk in any other way and by now I'd grown used to associating him with that position.

There was a girl sitting in the chair at the side of the desk. As I walked in, she turned and faced me.

Mark crashed forward in his chair and stood up.

'Ah . . . Sally. This is Constance Elliot. Constance . . . Sally.'

We shook hands. I liked the look of Constance immediately. She was either my own age or slightly older, but there could be only a few months between us. She was dressed fashionably and casually: tight cord jeans, bright yellow blouse and she wore her hair long.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Sally. I read one of your books this week.'

'Gawd . . . which one?'

'Did you? Thanks.' I was genuinely flattered. Writers don't
'One Mark recommended to me. I liked it a lot.'

get much response from readers these days, and it's nice every now and then to meet someone who has not only read you, but enjoyed you as well.

Mark was ostentatiously shuffling some papers on his desk. He banged his head on his angle-poise lamp (unintentional) and rattled his coffee-cup (intentional).

'Come on, Sally. Mark's been trying to get rid of me for the last half-hour. Let's go and have a drink.'

'But aren't the pubs shut?'

'Yes. I know a club.'

She stood up, grinned at Mark (who was sitting back in his chair again), and led me out of his office.

We walked out of the building and down the street. On a corner she hailed a cab and gave the driver an address. I remarked to myself on her poise and self-assuredness. She was totally unselfconscious, at ease with her body and appearance. Quite different from me; I was always worrying if my hair was blowing or my make-up was smudged. Constance looked good, and knew it, but wasn't so self-confident that it became obvious.

I found myself admiring Constance. She seemed to me to have all the subtle qualities that I had ambitions for in myself, and apparently with none of my hang-ups. In a word, I suppose she was fully liberated. A few minutes later, I was to reflect on the appropriateness of that adjective.

She paid off the taxi, and led me down a narrow flight of stairs. We found ourselves in a large basement, beautifully decorated and laid out. A bar ran down one side of the room, there was a small dance-floor (not presently being used) and in one corner was a booth where a lurid poster described the club's discotheque.

'It's quiet at this time of day,' Constance said. 'But you should be here at midnight when the music's on.'

Most of the clientele at the moment seemed to be businessmen and their guests; it was difficult to imagine the same place full of young people dancing.

'Sally, what will you drink?'

'I'll have a vodka and lime, please.'

She ordered, and then led me to a booth in one corner. We sat down and in a moment a waiter brought us our drinks. I noticed that they were doubles.

'Good, now we can talk.'

'Mark said you were starting a new magazine,' I said.

'Well, I'm not starting it personally, but I shall be editing it.'

'What kind of magazine is it?'

Constance gave me a half-grin, and sipped her drink.

'That's the whole point,' she said. 'It's new, brand-new . . . and we're convinced we're going to open a brand new market.'

I stared at her. She exuded confidence, and yet there was still no trace of arrogance about her.

'What's it to be?'

'Steady on, I haven't finished this one yet.' She lifted her glass and drank some more. I hadn't exactly meant the drink.

'No I mean the magazine. What kind is it?'

'It's to be for women. It's a monthly magazine, it's going to be glossy and expensive. We're planning a circulation on the first issue of at least a hundred thousand . . . and we hope to double that in the first year.'

'But aren't there a lot of women's magazines already?'

'Yes. But not like *Freedom Girl*. What we're aiming for is the kind of woman you represent, Sally.'

'Me?' I was astounded.

'That's right. You. Or at least, the side of yourself you reveal in your books. You're not hung-up about anything, you think freely, you travel, you meet people. Inside every woman on Earth there is someone like you hiding inside. You lead the kind of life they secretly hanker after.'

I was quietly hugging myself. She was right in a sense, but then the Sally Deenes that was in my books was not the whole me.

'What *Freedom Girl* is going to do is show the readers the way they too can liberate themselves.'

'So it's a women's liberation magazine.'

'In a sense. But not in the way most people imagine. We're not advocating that women burn their bras, or force their husbands to stay at home and look after the kids. What we want to do is work from inside. Simply by showing, month after month, that women can be free, can liberate themselves . . . if only mentally. You see, Sally, there are two kinds of women's liberation. One is the political kind . . . the sort that exploits women by using them as sex-objects. You know, film advertisements that use a sexy shot of the female star to sell the film to the public. And then there's the other kind, which I call private liberation. This is freeing women from the drudgery of shopping, washing, ironing and so forth.

'Of the two, *Freedom Girl* will be probably more interested in the latter. We don't want to revolutionise society; it's too well

entrenched for that. All we want to do is show that household chores aren't the only things in life for women. We'll be providing them with alternatives, perhaps the kind of thing they've secretly longed for but have never pursued simply because they can see no alternative to their present existence. By opening their minds a little to the possibilities, perhaps they'll want to do something about it, perhaps not. Anyway, the rest is up to them. We won't be banging any kind of political platform . . . that's not commercial. You may not realise it, but many ordinary women are against women's liberation . . . perhaps as many as there are men. It frightens them, threatens to overturn their present life.'

'Yes, I see that,' I said. 'But what about the other kind? Surely that's just as important.'

'You mean the political exploitation of women?' I nodded. 'I agree. And I'd hoped you would feel that. I'm looking for an assistant in our features department who would be concentrating on just that sort of thing. In this respect, *Freedom Girl* will be a campaigning magazine. We want someone who can search out stories, and write reports on them. Again, this will be to open the readers' eyes to what is going on around them.'

I swallowed the rest of my drink. I was about to ask Constance if she would have another when she saw my glass was empty, and clicked her fingers in the air. A couple of seconds later, the waiter materialised.

'Same again, please.'

He nodded, and withdrew. Half a minute later he was back with the drinks.

'Well . . . how about it?'

'Are you offering me the job?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Do you want an answer now, or can I think about it?'

'Oh, please think about it. I realise you have your own career, and frankly I was surprised when Mark suggested you for the job. But I understand you'd be doing it mainly for the interest. I'd hate to drag you away from a literary career for nothing, so the salary will be quite respectable.'

She mentioned a figure which practically had me choking on my vodka.

'Are you serious?' I said.

She nodded. 'Mark told you that an American company is setting this up. At the moment, there's a lot of money available . . . but in the future, if the magazine doesn't sell, you'd understand if the staff were reduced quite considerably. So you'd be

hired on merit, and judged on results. That must be clearly understood.'

'It is, it is,' I said, mentally working out how much the tax-bill would be. 'O.K., I've thought about it. I accept.'

'Good. I hoped you would. So we can expect masses of lively copy from you about nasty mercenary men who exploit girls to line their own bank-balances?'

I grinned.

'I'll drink to that,' I said.

'So will I. Whisky mac, please.'

I stared. Her glass was empty again.

CHAPTER 3

I started work at the offices of *Freedom Girl* the following Monday. In the intervening days I had found myself rather looking forward to it, though the prospect of going to work again after so long was strange. I think what appealed to me was the way Constance had talked to me. It gave me a good feeling of self-respect, as if I were an outside expert that she was calling in . . . and no one else in England would do. I even half expected, in my fuller flights of fancy, that when I arrived in the offices the entire staff would rise to their feet and give me a round of applause. Here comes Sally Deenes, they'd say, the girl who's going to provide that spark that none of us other cruds can produce.

Well, pride does come before the fall, as the Bible says . . . and my reception was nothing like I imagined it would be.

To start with, I had great difficulty even finding the place. The address Constance had given me certainly existed, but the porter in the hall had never heard of *Freedom Girl*, and gave me a funny look when I asked him. In the end I had to go and find it myself, and landed up on the sixth floor, very out of breath and sweaty. There it was: a simple door, and a piece of card thumb-tacked to it, casually announcing the existence of the magazine.

I walked in, expecting a roomful of people. Instead, there were a couple of girls sitting behind typewriters, gossiping idly.

I said: 'I'm Sally Deenes. I've come to see Constance Elliot.'

Neither of them rose to their feet; neither of them applauded,

'Constance? Don't think she's in. Is she, Jen?'

'She might be,' said Jen. 'I saw her earlier, but she didn't say anything about anyone coming to see her. Are you sure?'

'Yes of course,' I said heatedly. 'Look, I'm Miss Deenes. Surely Constance said I was coming?'

'Not to me she didn't,' said the first girl. 'Did she say anything to you, Jen?'

Jen shook her head. 'Oh go on in. You'll find her. She's somewhere in there.'

I decided I wasn't going to get anywhere with these two . . . typists, and walked through the door Jen had indicated. Beyond it was a larger office, much littered with paper, telephones and typewriters. Three or four people sat at the desks, and one person - a young man of about 28 or 29 - was talking on the phone. Two girls clattered away noisily on typewriters, and a third sat at a drawing-board patiently painting an intricate design.

'That's nice,' I said, looking over her shoulder.

She looked up and grinned at me.

'Like it?' she said. 'It's an illo for a short story. It's the third attempt I've made. Not too happy with it myself, though other people seem to like it.'

'It's very good,' I said. 'Is Constance here?'

'Yes.' The girl looked at me closely. 'Are you Sally?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, Constance said you'd be coming. I'm Penny, and at the moment I'm the whole art-department. It's all a bit chaotic here. No one knows what's going on half the time. Welcome to the mad-house.'

'Thanks,' I said, glad to have made something of a friend. 'I was beginning to think Constance had forgotten I was coming.'

'No, Sally, she's expecting you. Don't expect a big welcome, though, because she's very busy this morning.'

'Should I wait then?'

'No. Let her know you're here, because she said to send you in as soon as you arrived.'

'How do I find her?'

'Through there.' Penny pointed to two swing doors. 'Second door on the right. Just knock and walk in.'

'Thanks,' I said.

I followed her directions, and in a moment found myself outside Constance's door. There was no way of knowing it really was her door, because there was no nameplate on it, but I'd followed Penny's directions exactly. I knocked and walked in.

Constance was on the phone. As I came in she waved to me,

and pointed towards a chair. I sat down, and waited for her to finish.

Finally, she put the receiver down, and looked at me.

'Hello, Sally. Glad you're here. Hope you're ready to work hard, because there's a lot to do.'

'I'm ready for anything,' I said truthfully.

'Good. Look, I've got a meeting with some people from an advertising agency in five minutes, so I think the best thing I can do is take you to meet Maggie, and she can show what to do. She knows everything about you, and you'll be working under her to start with. If you want anything, just ask her. O.K.?'

'O.K.,' I said, and followed her as she took me to meet Maggie.

Maggie Turnbull was a woman in her middle forties. She shook hands with me when Constance introduced us, and then sat down again behind her desk.

Constance said: 'Well, I'll leave you two to get on with your work. Good luck, Sally.'

'Thanks,' I said.

Constance went out and shut the door.

I turned back to face Maggie, and realised she was treating me to a long and searching appraisal. Never one to be put off my cool by this sort of thing, I stared straight back. I saw a still-attractive woman pushing middle age from the right side, though the fullness of her figure tended to betray the carefully-preserved youthfulness in her face. She wore dark, horn-rimmed spectacles, and her hair was swept up from her brow into a tight bun. There was a cigarette smouldering in a brimming ash-tray, and a tumbler in front of her did not look as if the liquid it had recently contained had been water.

'So you're the author, are you?' Somehow, she managed to make the word sound like 'awful'.

'Yes . . . that's right.'

'Constance told me. You absolutely *must* let me read some of your work some time.'

'Yes, I will,' I said, noting that the conventional formality was over, and that I had as much intention of giving her one of my books as she had of reading it.

'Of course, you do understand, don't you, that journalism is nothing like the airy-fairy world of books?'

'It depends, I suppose, on how well you write,' I said, managing to give a slight emphasis to the word 'you'. In the few seconds of our relationship, I was beginning to see that Maggie Turnbull and I were not going to be lifelong allies. She was getting at me, and I didn't see why I couldn't sling some of it straight back.

'Don't worry about me, love,' she said. 'I've been in this trade all my life. There's nothing you can tell me about writing, even if you have written a couple of paperbacks.'

'It's three, actually.'

'Yes, well, there's quite a difference between that and a career in Fleet Street. Don't get too important about yourself. I've written more words in a week than you've written in your lifetime.'

Aah . . . but what did they say, I thought to myself, but refrained from saying it. I didn't like the way things were brewing up between us, and if we were going to have to work together we ought at least to try to get on.

'Constance told me how experienced you were,' I said instead. 'She spoke very highly of you.'

'So she should.'

I'd hoped to mollify her with those words, but no luck. Maggie lit another cigarette with the glowing end of the first, and blew a cloud of smoke in my direction.

'Let me give you some advice, Sally love,' she said. 'You're a journalist now, and don't forget it. A journalist never writes from hearsay. She writes from experience where she can, and if she can't do that she only writes from known facts. And she always checks those facts. That applies to everything you write for me. Is that understood?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Now this is where you'll be working.' She pointed to a small desk next to hers, on which was a tiny portable typewriter and mounds and mounds of paper. I felt a surge of disappointment. I'd hoped that at least I would have a room to myself . . . and having met Maggie I didn't want to work in her presence all day.

'It's a bit cramped,' I said.

'Not my fault, love,' she said. 'You'll have to put up with it like everyone else has to. We don't all qualify for executive suites.'

I thought with some longing for the bright and apparently happy general office I'd passed through. I'd gladly swap any number of executive suites for a desk out there. As it was, it looked as if I'd be locked away in this tiny room with Maggie all day.

Give it time, I thought. Give it time.

'I suppose I'd better start,' I said.

'Yes, well clear away all that stuff, and I'll find you something to do.'

I picked up the largest of the heaps of papers and placed it

gingerly on the floor. That made things better, and by the time the rest had joined the others on the floor, the desk didn't look too unrespectably small.

I looked askance at the typewriter. It wasn't nearly as good as the one I had at home, and in far worse condition, too.

Maggie scratched her head.

'No . . . it's about time all that stuff was filed. Why don't we get down to it, then it'll be out of the way for ever.'

'O.K. by me,' I said, having been blessed from birth with a tidy mind.

So we started filing. Or to put the record straight, for 'we' read 'me'. After a few minutes, in which Maggie showed me how she wanted the filing done, she drifted out of the room and left me to it.

I didn't mind too much. At least I was on my own, and one of the few good things about filing is that it gives you a small chance to find out a few things about the way a firm is run.

But it was terribly boring . . .

The trouble was that being a new firm, not only had they not done any filing, they didn't have a filing-system either. At first I just didn't know where to put anything, and so built up a big pile of papers I'd have to ask Maggie about. In the end I realised that she wouldn't know any better than me, so I decided to forge ahead and invent my own system.

Lunchtime came, and still no Maggie. In the end, very hungry and rather fed up, I went out into the general office to find the others. The place was deserted.

It was then that I felt very low indeed. Working in journalism was not, I decided, all I had expected it to be.

I went to the loo, washed my face and brushed my hair, then went out of the building in search of some lunch. I was beginning to feel lonely. Very much the new girl that no one speaks to.

I found a pub, and went inside. By good luck. I discovered that all the people who were in the general office were here, and I joined them.

They were a little cool to me, though Penny gave me a big smile. Someone bought me a drink, and we began talking.

After an hour, I felt much better.

None of them actually said as much, but I got the impression that they had seen me as being a bit snooty, locking myself away in the editorial offices all morning. If they'd only known that all I had been itching to do was to join them . . .

So once I'd realised this, I did my best to dispel this illusion and we got on fine.

In addition to Penny, there was a staff photographer called

Martin O'Donnell, a trainee journalist called Carrie, a sub-editor called Alice, two or three typists and a guy called Fred who did office-boy duties, even though he was obviously in his sixties.

They told me a bit more about how the magazine was being run.

'It's all a bit free and easy,' said Martin. 'I mean, look at my situation. I'm the only photographer on the staff, there's no art-editor and we're dependent on freelance work. So who has to choose what they send in? Me. And naturally enough I want to see as much of my stuff included as possible.'

'Me too,' said Carrie. 'I'm supposed to be a trainee, but there's no one here who can train me.'

'Oh, I'm only a trainee, too,' I said.

Carrie stared at me.

'But we thought you were an editor.'

'Oh no. Or at least, if I am no one's told me. I'm just working with Maggie.'

'Still, Constance is good,' said Penny. 'She knows what she wants.'

'But she's always too busy.'

'Catch her at the right moment,' said Martin, 'and she'll listen. But she's the sort of girl who wants to let people carry on as freely as possible. In that sense, she's great to work for, but in practical terms nothing's been sorted out yet.'

'Maggie's got me to do the filing.'

To my surprise, everyone laughed.

'She's been looking for someone to do that for her for weeks,' said Alice. 'She tried to get me to do that, and Martin, and Penny. Now she's got you. Poor old Sally.'

Poor old Sally indeed. After lunch, we went back to the office, and I returned to the seemingly endless task of filing Maggie's papers. Maggie came back from lunch pretty late, and judging by the odours on her breath she'd been in a pub too. But with perhaps a more single-minded devotion to duty than any of us had been. She looked at what I had been doing for a few minutes, then went out of the office without comment.

I couldn't help wondering where she was, or when she did any work. Without knowledge to the contrary I had to assume that she was out on a story, but judging by the singular lack of activity from the phone or evidence of current work on her desk I was beginning to wonder.

The whole of that first week I slaved away at the filing, growing more and more despondent.

Perhaps the worst thing of all was the feeling that I might as

well have stayed at home for all the good it was doing me. I wanted to get out and meet people, not stick in a poky little office all day. The original idea of mixing my talent as a writer with a worthwhile job was beginning to sound very hollow indeed. Couple this with the fact that when I got home in the evenings I was too tired to do more than heat up a meal and slump on my bed, and any idea of continuing to write in my spare time became even further removed.

I was determined, though, to finish the filing, and I stayed behind late on the Friday to finish it.

On the Saturday morning, Martin, the photographer, rang me up and invited me to see a film with him. It seemed like a good idea, and so I said yes. We had a pleasant evening, and it made me feel a lot better.

The following Monday, I went into the office determined to wriggle some real work out of Maggie. There seemed to be nothing to stand in my way.

I showed her the neatly-tabulated files.

'That's a lot better, love. Now we can find our way around.'

'Maggie, I wondered if there was any feature-work I could be doing.'

She glanced at me sharply.

'What do you mean?'

'Well . . . some journalism.'

'Plenty of time for that. I've got some correspondence for you to deal with first. Can you do shorthand?'

'Yes, a little. But . . .'

'Anyway, I'm too busy at the moment on a big story to have to worry about you. I'd have to supervise you, and I just haven't got time.'

'O.K.,' I said, prepared to cut my losses. 'What about this correspondence I can do?'

She sat down then, and produced a whole pile of papers from a drawer. I hadn't seen these before, and they looked almost identical to the masses of stuff I'd just filed.

'Get a shorthand book from the stationery cupboard, and we'll start working through it.'

At this point I suddenly realised with a cold chill that she was intending to use me as her secretary. It was too late to protest, because I'd expressed interest in doing it. Glumly, I went to the cupboard and found a book.

'Now the first one,' Maggie said when I was sitting down, 'is to ABK Printers Ltd. "Dear sirs" . . .'

My shorthand was rusty, and I made a lot of mistakes. My mind was bored, and I grew resentful. My hackles were rising,

and I began to lose my temper.

I stuck it for ten minutes, and when she suddenly dictated a letter to me that was obviously a private letter to her plumber, I blew.

I threw down my pencil, and stood up.

'I'm not your flaming secretary!' I shouted. 'You've got a typewriter, write your own bloody letters!'

I stormed out, and went and sat in the general office to cool down. I said nothing to the others out there, though they must have guessed from the slammed door and my flushed face that I had just had a row with Maggie.

Half an hour passed, then Maggie appeared.

'Sally . . . come here, please.'

Feeling low, I followed her into her office.

'Listen, Sally, while you're working for me I'm not going to tolerate temperament.'

'I'm not your secretary, Maggie. I've been employed as a journalist.'

'But you don't know anything about the job. I didn't ask to have you as an assistant, and I don't especially want you, but if you're to be a journalist on this paper then you're going to have to learn the trade my way as long as you're working under me. Is that understood?'

'I suppose so,' I said. 'But if all I'm given to do is letters you dictate to me, then I'll never learn anything.'

'I repeat, Sally love, you'll learn the trade my way. If you don't like it, then you know the alternative.'

I sat and glowered at her. In a strange kind of way I saw her point, though it didn't make me any happier.

'Well . . . ?'

I was considering the alternative. I could jack in the job, sure enough, but then I'd be back to where I was a few days ago. Constance had offered me what seemed to be a good opportunity that suited both me and her, and I'd be unwise to throw it in so soon.

'I think,' I said in the end, 'that we'll finish the business letters. I'll do them for you.'

Mentally I added that this was in the spirit of getting the backlog of routine out of the way, and never again would I take dictation . . . but I didn't say this.

It seemed to mollify Maggie slightly.

'All right, let's get on and finish them. I'm no more interested in them than you.'

I sat at my desk, and re-opened my dictation notebook. The first few letters were business ones, and then Maggie tried to

slip in another private one. I said nothing, but appeared to continue with the shorthand. In reality I was just scribbling shapes on the page, with no intention whatsoever of typing it out for her.

She didn't realise, and we continued.

Two hours later, Maggie announced that we were finished.

'Work your way through those, Sally love, and then I'll see about getting you some feature-work to do.'

So there was the carrot. . . .

She stood up. 'I've got to go out for a few minutes,' she said. 'I'll be back after lunch.'

As she went out of the room, I looked at my watch. The pubs had just opened. I grinned, and put some headed notepaper in the typewriter.

CHAPTER 4

It took me the rest of that day, and all the next, to finish the letters. Maggie pronounced herself satisfied with them, and much to my surprise produced the promised feature-work.

She explained to me in great and boring detail just how I should go about it.

It consisted of a press hand-out from an advertising agency. It described a new cosmetic soap coming on the market shortly, what was in it, how much it would cost, where it would be available, and so forth. Maggie explained that all I had to do was re-write the hand-out so that she could include it in one of her columns.

'But shouldn't we try out the soap first?' I said.

'Eh?' She looked at me curiously.

'Well, it might be no good.'

'And if it was no good?'

'We could say so.'

She looked at me with an expression of patient suffering.

'Sally, love, that would put us in a bad pitch with the agency.'

'So what? We have our readers to think of.'

'And we have our budget to think of. If we give this agency a bad write-up, they may not place any adverts with us for other products. We can't afford to go around making enemies.'

'So whether the soap's lousy or not, we recommend it to our readers.'

'That's right.'

'But it's dishonest!'

I should have known better. Maggie raised herself to her full height, placed her hands on her hips and took a deep breath. I winced. The lecture arrived . . . how professional she was, how she knew all about journalism, how I was not only inexperienced but naive too. . . .

'O.K., Maggie,' I said, when I could get a word in. 'You know best. I'm sorry. . . .'

'Let me see it before you type it out finally. I want to make sure your style's good enough.'

Burning under the insult – it takes the writing of only one novel to find out whether you can write well or not, and I'd written three – I knuckled down. I raved about the soap, I said it was marvellous, a bargain, a miracle, a complete indentification of everything a cosmetic soap should be . . . and I got so worked up about it I began to believe in it myself.

I showed it to Maggie.

'Himm. . . .'

She looked it through. I didn't see how she could find fault with it. I'd done everything in my ability to follow exactly her words, and I'd even tried to copy her (somewhat lousy) writing style. She *couldn't* find fault with it.

She could. . . .

She had to read it through three times before she made any comment, then crossed out a comma and changed the spelling of two words.

'Not bad for a beginner,' she admitted. 'You'd better type it out neatly now, and I'll see if I can find a space for it in the first issue.'

I decided I'd scored a victory. Feeling much better, I typed out a beautifully neat copy, and Maggie tossed it casually into her tray.

I went to lunch with Martin.

Afterwards, Maggie discovered some more dictation. That, I supposed, was the price I had to pay for a few minutes of quasi-creativity.

It went on like this for a few more days. Hours of boring routine work leavened with occasional ventures into the lowest kinds of journalism. I was, frankly, fed up . . . but stuck with it for the moment.

One thing I found disconcerting was the way in which the work I was doing was all vaguely away from the original editorial credo Constance had described.

Instead of hard-hitting and punchy revelations about the way

in which women are exploited I found I was writing deathless prose about moisturising creams, shampoos and vaginal deodorants. Not at all the kind of thing I had expected.

One day, Maggie sent me in to see Constance on a message, and for once while I was in her office she wasn't on the phone. Since the first day, I hadn't passed more than about ten words with her. This time, though, she looked up as I walked in and waved me to the seat opposite hers.

'Well, how are you enjoying yourself, Sally?'

'O.K., thanks,' I said. She stared at me, and something in me told me that there would be no harm in being totally honest. 'No . . . to tell the truth, I'm sick to the back teeth.'

'Maggie hauling you over the coals?'

'Yes, she -'

'Well she's a bit like that. Her bark's worse than her bite. Very experienced journalist, you know.'

'She keeps telling me.'

'We all have our faults.'

I shrugged helplessly. 'But, the trouble is -'

'Of course, she has her own ways you know. That's how I want this paper to be run. There's too much editorial interference on other papers.'

'But I -'

'She's probably a bit frightened of you, you know. A young writer, already well-known, and she's been around for so long and no one except people in the trade really know her. Don't worry about her, Sally. She'll look after you, and if you make any mistakes in print she'll defend you to the death.'

'That's great,' I said. The phone suddenly rang. 'But what I really wanted to say was -'

'Excuse me a minute.' Constance picked up the phone. 'Yes? Oh, hello. Could you just hold on a minute?'

She looked at me.

'I'd better go,' I said.

She smiled at me. 'Stick at it, Sally. You're in good hands.' I reached the door, and opened it. 'Just one more thing . . . I do know what's going on. I haven't forgotten why we hired you, but for the moment I really must let Maggie take over. Do what she says, and you'll be O.K.'

I nodded, and walked out. Her last words made me feel a little better, but not all that much better. She couldn't really know what was going on, how bored I was, how much Maggie and I were beginning to loathe each other.

And so I went back to Maggie and did what she said, which this time was to ring up yet another advertising agency and ask

for some press hand-outs.

Another week passed, and I was beginning to resign myself to the dull and virtually meaningless work. Then one day, events took a surprising turn.

Maggie was late back from lunch, as usual, and I was sitting alone in the office, wondering what to do next, and whether I could get away with popping out to the general office for a chat with Martin, Penny and the others. Then Maggie walked in, breathing her usual afternoon fumes.

'Doing anything?' she said.

'No Maggie,' I replied, fearing the worst.

'Good. I've got a little dictation to do, and that'll keep you going for the rest of the afternoon. But tomorrow, I think I'll have something that you'll really enjoy.'

I brightened a little. 'That sounds interesting.'

'Yes. I think I've been a little hard on you, Sally. I was reading through some of those pieces you've done for me, and I like your style. There's a story coming up that I think you can work on.'

'O.K. . . . when do we start?'

'Tomorrow, as I said. But there's a little preparatory work we'll have to do, and I was wondering if you'd care to have dinner with me this evening and we can discuss it in detail.'

I was so surprised, you could have bowled me over with the proverbial feather.

'Yes . . . that'd be nice.'

'Good. Look, this is my address - ' she scribbled on a piece of paper, and passed it to me ' - come over at eight this evening, and I'll explain a bit more.'

With an almost sickening enthusiasm, I grabbed my shorthand pad.

'Shall we get started?' I said.

CHAPTER 5

It was a very much transformed Sally who rushed home that evening, had a bath and changed into a clean dress. I was encouraged by Maggie's apparently new attitude, and all my early enthusiasm for the job returned as quickly as it had vanished.

She'd read my work. She'd had the face to say she liked it, and now she was prepared to give me something to do that I could really prove myself with.

It didn't occur to me to wonder why she wanted to see me at her home, or why she hadn't been able to talk about it to me in the office. Bowled over by the surprise, I took her new attitude at face value.

I arrived at her address just before eight that evening. She lived in a rather grand but decaying block of flats, and her apartment was on the third floor. I rang her bell.

A few moments later she opened the door, and I was surprised to see she was wearing a long and attractive dress.

'Good . . . you're early. Come on in.'

She ushered me into a small lounge, where a table had been set for two.

'Glass of sherry?' She was pouring it before I had time to accept.

'Nice place you have here,' I said approvingly.

'Like it? I moved here about fifteen years ago. It must be worth a fortune, now. It was left to me by my mother. I don't think I'll be selling up though.'

'You live here alone?'

'All alone. That's right. How about you?'

'I live in a bedsitter. It's not much fun, but it's better than living with parents.'

'I don't know.' Maggie looked thoughtful. 'At least if you live with your parents you have company.'

'But company you don't necessarily want,' I said.

'It depends.'

I sipped my sherry. There was a lushness to the furnishings that belied Maggie's manner at the office. I'd imagined that she would live in rather spartan conditions, but instead the furniture and decorations had been chosen with a fine eye for taste and style.

She glanced at her watch. 'Excuse me. I'll dish up dinner.'

She went into the kitchen, and I heard dishes clattering.

'Can I help?' I called.

'You stay where you are. I can manage.'

I moved to the table, and sat down. On an impulse I lit the two candles Maggie had placed on the table, and turned off the central light. As she walked in with the food, she nodded her appreciation.

'That's good,' she said. 'Makes the place more cosy.'

It was all slightly incredible. The Maggie who was entertaining me had almost no relation to the rather stiff and unforth-

coming woman who bossed me around in the office.

We helped ourselves to food, and began eating. It was delicious.

As we ate, Maggie asked me a few questions about myself and my life. It was the first time she had expressed any interest in me at all. I gave her some of the story . . . the version I reserved for polite company. Hitch-hiking, camping, youth-hostelling and other healthy outdoor pursuits. As usual, I omitted the white-slavery racket I'd been involved with, the Nice night-club, the hippie castle in Morocco. . . . If she wanted to know about those, just about every bookstall in London could supply the details.

Gradually the conversation shifted, until I found that it was Maggie who was telling me about her life. It was interesting enough, but time and again she would drop in the odd phrase, hinting at how lonely she was. I found it a little upsetting; London is full of lonely people - me included - but there is only so much anyone can do about it.

'Of course, this flat is really too big for just one person,' she concluded. 'I've been thinking of getting a flatmate for some time.'

'Have you thought of going to one of those flat-sharing agencies?' I said.

'Well, no. I've thought of it, but I'd rather share with someone I know.'

She sipped her wine, staring at me over the rim of the glass.

Suddenly, the penny dropped. She was thinking of me.

'But you must have someone in mind,' I said hastily. 'Perhaps a sister, or an old schoolfriend. . . .'

She shook her head slowly. 'There's no one I'd want to live with like that. How about you? We get on well together, don't we? You could have a room to your -'

'But I've got a bedsitter,' I said.

'I'd do all the cooking, and you wouldn't have to pay any rent -'

'I love cooking for myself,' I said, getting really quite worried. 'In fact, I -'

'Sally!' To my horror and surprise, she reached out across the table and laid her hand on mine. 'You know, we'd be really happy together. I know you think I'm a bit of a tyrant in the office, but it's all been for your own good.'

I tried to stay calm. 'Maggie, I don't think it would work. We can't live together and work together. We'd fall out in a couple of hours.'

'Sally, please. . . .'

I stared at her helplessly, wishing I could pull my hand away. The food lay on our plates, momentarily forgotten.

'I'd leave you alone, you know. You could have your own room, and all we'd share is the kitchen and bathroom. If it's the rent you're worried about, well you know I wouldn't charge you anything.'

'But, Maggie, I want to be independent!'

'That's what I'm offering you! You'd be independent of financial worries -'

'I don't have any!'

'- and independent of the problems of living alone. You'd have security, and freedom and -'

'Those are just the things I'm afraid of losing!' I blurted out.

She snatched her hand away, and as unobtrusively as possible I placed both my hands out of her way, in my lap. I hoped this would be an end to the physical contact, but no. . . .

She stood up, and walked round the table to me. She put an arm around my shoulders, and crouched down beside me, her head close to mine.

'Sally,' she whispered, her tone very gentle and pleading, 'I could look after you. I'm very fond of you, you know.'

'Maggie . . . no.'

'I'll be kind to you, I wouldn't make any demands on you, Not unless you were willing.'

I looked at her in shock. 'What do you mean?'

'Don't you understand, Sally? I'd hoped you realised. I'm not like other women . . . I'm different. You know. . . .'

I tried to wriggle away from her, but her arms lay firmly around my shoulders.

'No, I don't know!'

'Don't make me spell it out, Sally. I've fallen in love with your soft skin, your eyes, your hair. I could be so kind to you, so loving.'

I stood up quickly, forcing back my chair and pulling myself away from her. I stepped back, leaving her on her knees beside the chair.

'Maggie, I think I'd better go.'

'Please don't!' She was imploring me now. 'I'll calm down, I promise you. Let me make some coffee.'

'No, I think I'd better go.'

She burst into tears, collapsing across the chair I'd vacated, her shoulders shaking, her hair falling about her neck. I simply stood and watched her, incapable of any emotion.

'Maggie . . . please don't cry. I'm just not like that. It's nothing personal. I'm capable of loving, but it's just that I like men. I'm not a Lesbian.'

I'd used the word that Maggie had so carefully avoided, and it

had a remarkable effect on her. She stopped crying immediately, and turned to face me. She stood up.

She walked towards me. Though tears streaked her face, she was clearly not crying now.

'Sally, come to bed with me. I'll show you what love with another woman can be like.' She fumbled with the zipper at the back of her own dress. 'Come on . . . I'll show you.'

I lost my nerve and slapped her face . . . good and hard. 'No!'
That did it. She stopped, and moved away from me.

'O.K., Sally. I understand. I'm sorry. I'll never mention it again.'

'You won't have to. I've had enough. I don't have to work for the lousy magazine, I don't have to work with you . . . and I certainly don't have to make love to you! I've got my own life to lead, and I'm perfectly capable of leading it without you or without anyone else!'

'I think you'd better leave.'

'I'm glad we agree on one thing,' I said.

I went and found my coat, and pulled it on. My handbag was lying on an armchair, and I retrieved it. I headed for the door. All this time, Maggie made no move. Just as I reached the door, I found my emotions suddenly start to work again. I paused, turning to look back at her.

Pity welled in me. I saw her for what she was. She was no longer young. Her parents were dead. She lived alone. Her career had been only moderately successful. Her attempt to seduce me had been hatched in desperation. She was not guilty of anything.

I said: 'Maggie, I don't blame you for anything.'

Her shoulders were slumped, her whole posture signalled defeat and despair.

'I'm very, very sorry Sally. That was the worst mistake of my life.'

'And I'm sorry too. You just picked the wrong girl, that's all. I wish I could help you, but I can't. I'm going to go now, and you probably won't see me again.'

'I know. It would be impossible to carry on working together. I've been rotten to you, Sally. I was trying to fight off the feelings, but they just carried me away. I tried to disguise them by giving you bad work to do, tried to make you give up the job and go away.'

'It nearly worked, but I stayed on because of Constance. Now they have worked. I'll have to leave.'

'I know.'

'O.K., Maggie. Goodbye. And thanks for cooking the meal.'

She nodded. I couldn't stand it any more, and opened the door and walked out.

CHAPTER 6

That, I decided, decided that.

I woke up early the next morning, full of resolve and determination. Sally Deenes had just discovered a renewed interest in writing books. The world of journalism could go jump in its own muddy pond.

I still felt a duty to Constance, so I decided to go into the office once more, tell her I was resigning and go my own sweet way. With any luck, I could be in and out of the office by ten o'clock . . . and Maggie rarely turned up before half-past ten. I consumed a healthy breakfast of fruit-juice, cheese, crispbread and honey, hurried down to the tube-station and was in the office before nine.

The general office was deserted, but I knew Constance would be in. I walked straight up to her office, and banged on her door. There was a short silence. In those few seconds, I thought about what I may be losing by this action. Only Martin, the photographer, meant anything to me at all, but there was no reason why I shouldn't go on seeing him after I left. I liked Penny, but I had very little to do with her.

'Come in!' Constance called.

I opened the door, and walked in. Maggie was there.

She looked at me, and I looked at her. She nodded to Constance, then walked past me, and out into the corridor.

Constance appeared to be very much on edge, sitting forward at her desk, her elbows resting on the surface. She waited until Maggie had closed the door behind her, then indicated that I could sit down.

'I know what you've come to say, Sally, so please save your breath. You want to resign. Frankly, I don't blame you.'

'Maggie's told you then?'

Constance nodded.

'Everything?'

'Enough. If there's any more, I don't want to hear it, so save your breath on that score too.'

'Suits me,' I said. 'I wasn't going to tell you anything anyway.'

I just want my cards, and I want out.'

'Do you have any other reason, apart from the business with Maggie?'

I raised by eyes elaborately in the direction of the ceiling.

'Do I?' I said. 'I've been here for four weeks, and all I've done is Maggie's filing, Maggie's letters and the occasional bit of advertising hand-out re-write work. While I'm sitting in that room with, with *her*, I could be much better off going slowly spare in my own time. That's what I'd rather do, and quite frankly that's what I intend to do from here on out.'

Constance raised her hands, palms towards me.

'Cool it, Sally. I know all this.'

'You asked me, and that's the reason.'

'O.K., O.K. I just hadn't realised it had gone as far as that. If you don't leave, Maggie tells me that she wants to, so either way I look as if I'm going to lose a good journalist.'

'Don't worry, you won't lose Maggie. I'm off.'

'I don't want to lose either of you. I've thought of a compromise, and I want you to consider it.'

'But what can I offer you?'

'Precisely what we first talked about. Your experience, your life-style. I want *you*, Sally. I need Maggie for her experience in Fleet Street, but I need you too.'

'O.K., what's the compromise?'

'Just this.' Constance shifted in her seat, sat forward slightly. 'As of this instant, you no longer work with Maggie.'

'Good.'

'You have nothing more to do with her whatsoever, beyond passing each other in the corridor.'

'Good.'

'Also as of this instant, you work alone. You will have to take on more responsibility, and you'll have to carry the can for yourself if you fail.'

'I'm ready for that,' I said.

'You'll find the work far more interesting, but also more demanding.'

'Does this mean I'll be actually working on stories?'

'Not quite. It means you will *be* the stories. They'll be your responsibility entirely. I was intending to let you do this work through Maggie, but that's obviously out of the question now. I think Maggie may have mentioned something of the sort to you, well this is what it was.'

'She didn't make it sound exactly attractive,' I said.

'That's up to you to decide. A story doesn't exist on its own.'

The reporter has to make something of it. Shall I go on, or are you still intent on leaving?’

‘Keep talking.’

‘Good.’ Constance grinned at me. ‘I want to make you a special-assignments reporter, with direct responsibility to me. What this means is that you’ll go out on a story alone, live it as far as possible, mingle with the people you’re writing about and become one of them. Obviously, you wouldn’t reveal that you work for a magazine. When you’ve got enough material for a story, you come back here and write up the copy.’

‘Now you’re talking,’ I said. This was right up my street.

‘I’m making this suggestion because, well, frankly we’re looking for a good strong story to lead off the first issue. We had one in mind, but that’s fallen through. We’ve got about a month to cobble something together, and I think I can rely on you for this.’

‘But aren’t you taking a chance?’ I said. ‘I mean, I’ve never done this kind of thing before.’

‘O no . . . ?’ Constance waved her hand towards a shelf behind her. On it were my three novels. ‘If you can write those from your experiences, then you can do the same for *Freedom Girl*. It’s right up your street, Sally.’

‘You took the words from my mouth,’ I breathed. ‘O.K. . . . if you think it’s worth a try, I’m willing.’

‘So no more talk of resignations. O.K.?’

‘No more. What have you got in mind?’

‘I’m glad you asked me that. We’ve dreamed up a beauty.’ Constance stood up, and walked to the window. ‘Know anything about witchcraft?’

While I recovered my breath, I mentally recited the Lord’s Prayer backwards, drank bat’s-blood, stuck a stuffed sheep’s heart on Maggie’s door and pranced naked around a bonfire.

‘Witchcraft? Me? I don’t know anything.’

‘Good. And neither does anyone else. We want you to go out and find out. Then write about it for the magazine.’

‘What . . . ? Candles and spells and nude rituals and black cats?’

‘Precisely.’

For a moment I thought Constance had gone off her jolly little rocker. I mean, no one *believes* in witchcraft. Do they?

‘You look puzzled.’ Constance stood by the window, grinning at me.

‘Do you blame me? Strewth, I thought this was a woman’s paper.’

'A paper for the liberated woman, yes. This is all grist for our mill.'

'I don't get it.'

Constance returned to her seat.

'Look at it this way, Sally,' she said. 'You expressed an interest in the aspect of women's-lib that we called political exploitation. This is where a woman or her body or her beauty are used for commercial gain. Well, if you don't already know, black magic is big business in this country. There's a lot of money being made by nefarious practices. Don't ask me how . . . that's one of the things I want you to find out. But believe me, there's a lot of money in it for the right people. Witchcraft is a growth industry, and it needs a lot of recruits. How do they get those recruits?'

'You tell me,' I said. 'I'm fascinated.'

'By the very thing you described . . . the nudity, the promiscuity. You've seen those Sunday-newspaper shots of the rituals. Noticed how many of those witches are actually young and pretty girls? The witches are shrewd, you see. They know that there's no such thing as bad publicity, and however much the Sunday papers may beat their brows and "expose" the evil practices, it's all good publicity. The public's interest is aroused, and those people who might be otherwise turned away from the subject are attracted . . . by the sight of very pretty girls very obviously stark naked. And so men are attracted to join a coven, presumably to find a source of easy lays.'

'But why is this exploiting women?'

'I just told you. Because most of the photos that somehow manage to find their way into the mass-media are of nubile and attractive girls. The men go into witchcraft for that, and then find themselves caught up in it . . . no doubt to the financial advantage of the people running it.'

'Surely, though, a girl who allows herself to be photographed like that isn't being exploited? She's a free agent.'

'Yes. But just as much a free agent as, say, a girl who allows herself to be photographed semi-nude to sell an after-shave lotion. She gets her cut, presumably, but that isn't the point. It's not the individual girl who matters, so much as the fact that she is a girl.'

'I'm beginning to see,' I said. 'So you want me to go in and take a lot of shots of fat and flabby men?'

'And fat and flabby women. Or anything else. It's your story, and you run it exactly as you find it.'

'I see. . . .'

'We've got together a small file to start you off. Most of this is

just old press-cuttings, but there are a few addresses there that may be of assistance. Other journalists who have covered similar stories, people who used to be in witchcraft, and people like that.'

I took the file, and looked at it.

'What now?'

'Go away and write the story . . . and don't come back until you've got five thousand words of scintillating prose.'

I stared at her. She meant it. Clutching my file, I went away to write the story.

CHAPTER 7

'Done any work like this before?' I said to Martin.

'Some.'

To my joy, Constance had had a word with Martin soon after I left her office, and he was being seconded to work with me on the story. I'd cleared a space for myself in the general office, and Martin had volunteered (bravely, I thought) to collect my typewriter from Maggie's office.

'Where do I start?'

He shrugged. 'Grass roots, I suppose. Start trudging the streets of London -'

'- and wait until I see green smoke billowing out of a chimney,' I completed for him.

'That's one way. Don't ask me, Sally. It's not that I don't want to help, but I'm just the guy with the Hasselblad who poops off pretty pictures. Anyway, if I did give you my ideas on it you wouldn't be writing your own story.'

'Try me.'

He shrugged again. 'O.K. Do what Constance said. Read through the file, see if you can get any names or addresses from that, and contact the people if possible. You should get one or two leads from that, and then you'll be able to make your own way.'

'Hmm.' I looked again at the small collection of cuttings and photographs. 'Do you know any journalists who've investigated witchcraft.'

'Not really. Journalists are a bit funny about that subject. They don't really like it. They're subjected to quite a bit of harassment. Some witches are quite serious, I believe, and if they think

a reporter's out to expose them, then they come on rather strong with the bad eye and the upraised sword.'

'Do you think that's going to happen to me?'

He looked at me shrewdly. 'I don't know. Depends how you go about it. I think Constance has been rather clever in giving you this to do. The way I see it, if you can bring in copy on this, you can do it on anything.'

'It's that difficult?'

'Not necessarily.' He grinned, and my fears began to dispel. 'Not if you infiltrate them in secret.'

I realised he was looking at a photograph clipped from a newspaper. Two very naked girls frolicked gaily for the benefit of the cameraman.

'You mean I should. . . .?'

'Perhaps.'

I blushed furiously. Suddenly I understood what Martin meant.

And, looking at the photograph, I understood what Constance had meant. They *were* very pretty girls . . . and those dim, indistinct figures in the background didn't look nearly as lithe. If most witches are as unattractive physically as most nudists seem to be, then wouldn't it be more honest if the photographs showed just that?

Still, I thought to myself, I've done worse things in my time than prance naked around a bonfire. So even if I did go as far as that, why worry?

'Look, Martin, if I'm going to do this properly, I ought really to join a coven. And I'm going to need photographs, so you'd better join too.'

His grin faded. 'I don't think you need to go to that length.'

'Then how else can I infiltrate them? Wait inside a ruined abbey until they turn up?'

'I suppose so.' He didn't look convinced.

Already my mind was racing ahead. 'What I could do is join an ordinary coven, and see what happens. If there's a story in it, I'll just quietly back out and write it up. If not, then I'll think of something else. But I am going to need pictures. How about it Martin? Will you join with me?'

'Witchcraft's a funny scene. . . .?'

'Meaning what?'

'I don't know. It's not exactly in my bag.'

'It's not in mine either,' I said. 'But it's the only way of doing it. What do you think?'

'I'll let you know.'

I shrugged. Witchcraft was hardly the first occupation I would

turn to for spare-time pleasure and profit, but if I was going to prove myself as a journalist then I was going to have to do something. But, then, maybe there *was* an easier way.

I looked again at the file Constance had given me, and read its contents carefully. I took my time, trying to get some kind of grasp of the overall situation.

Later, I walked down the road to a nearby library, and read quickly through a few books on the subject. The more I read, the more I realised that witchcraft wasn't for me. As far as I could see, it was taken so *seriously!* There's nothing on Earth worth doing unless there's some degree of fun in it. Take your clothes off and have group sex, by all means, but don't do it because someone's about to get a black-handled knife in the post the next morning. . . .

I got back to the office in time to join the others for lunch, and we had a good drink and a gossip together. Now the situation with Maggie was safely resolved, everything seemed so much more normal and enjoyable.

I spent a lot of time talking to Martin. At first we spoke a little more about the witchcraft thing then, realising it was shop, we switched to other subjects. Namely, things we were more interested in: ourselves. I'd talked to him before, on the couple of dates we'd been on, and I'd always found him good company. We seemed to like the same things, though he had an interest in music I didn't share. He was very much into Bach, and kept trying to talk me into going to the Queen Elizabeth Hall with him sometime to hear an orchestra he particularly liked.

I wasn't agin the idea, and we fixed up a tentative date for a fortnight ahead. He would, he said, try to get tickets.

Much later, we drifted back to the office and I continued with my researches.

Just before going-home time I plucked up the courage to telephone a man who was listed in Constance's file. He had once been, the newspaper cutting said, a full witch. I found his number through directory-enquiries.

'Hello. Is that Joshua Renn?'

The voice at the other end said: 'No it isn't. Who wants him?'

'My name is Salley Deenes.'

'Who?'

I repeated my name.

'Who are you?'

'I'm a . . . secretary. In a shipping-office.'

'Then what business have you in speaking to Mr Renn?'

'It's a private matter.'

There was a long silence. 'Can you elaborate on this matter?'

'I'd like to speak to Mr Renn himself, please,' I said firmly.

'Just a minute.'

There was a shorter pause. I heard the phone being put down on a table, then it was picked up again.

'Joshua Renn speaking.'

I wouldn't have put ten quid on it, but it sounded to me like the same voice. Curiouser and curiouser. . . .

I decided to play along with his game. 'Mr Renn, my name is Sally Deenes and I was hoping you could give me some advice.'

'It depends on the nature of the advice.'

I took a deep breath.

'Well,' I said, 'it concerns the ceremonies I believe you were once connected with. I'm very interested in joining a group of people, and - '

'Are you referring to witchcraft?'

'Yes.'

'Then I advise you to leave it well alone.'

'That isn't the advice I wanted,' I said. 'I intend to go ahead with this, and hoped you could put me in touch with a coven-leader.'

'I assume you realise what you may be letting yourself in for?'

'Yes. I have been warned.'

'In which case, I can only tell you that you will regret it. However, if you are an adult and in full possession of your senses, there is nothing I can do to prevent you from indulging in the evil practices.'

'But will you assist me?'

'It depends. In the first place, how did you obtain my name?'

'A friend gave it to me,' I said.

'I see. Then you will also know that I am in fear of my life, that my career has been ruined and that my health is precarious.'

'Yes.' I hadn't heard this, but it seemed logical I would have been told this.

'All these are the legacy I have received for indulgence in the Black Arts. These are the risks you run. Are you still intent on joining a coven?'

'Yes.'

'Then call me tomorrow at this time, and I will give you the information you require.'

'Thank you, Mr Renn.'

As I put down the phone, I discovered I was trembling.

By the end of the day my trembling had grown into a distinct twitchiness. I'd contacted several other journalists who had worked on witchcraft stories, and almost to a man they had said

much the same as Renn. Witches had a habit of getting their own back on reporters who tried to infiltrate their meetings.

'Look at it this way,' a man from one of the Sunday papers told me. 'A good reporter shouldn't reveal his identity. If he does, then he has only himself to blame. By and large, a lot of reporters just won't touch this thing. The fact is that these people have a way of finding things out. So you don't have to be just a good reporter . . . you've got to be a very good one. If you're careful, you will probably be caught. If you're very careful indeed, you may get away with it. If you handle it well and take the greatest pains, then you could bring off a scoop. But if you want my advice, steer well clear of the whole scene.'

I may do just that, I thought and stared across the *Freedom Girl* office at where Penny was bent over her work. There seemed to be a lot easier ways of making a living.

After work that evening I went for a drink with Martin, and told him what I'd learned. He was a little amused.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I think there's a lot of nonsense talked about this. After all, what can they do to you? Short of actually murdering you?'

'That doesn't grab me either,' I said.

'What everyone's worried about is the threats. And as far as I know, that's all there is. O.K., so they put the evil eye on you, and send you a spiked sheep's heart . . . so what? It's only if you believe in their powers that they can actually harm you. I take it you don't believe in them?'

'Of course not,' I said, and munched my way through a handful of salted peanuts. 'It's a load of old rubbish. But a lot of people do believe in it.'

'I don't.'

'You're lucky,' I said. 'But then it's not you who's being warned off.'

'I'll come along with you. We're working on the story together, aren't we?'

'Will you really come?'

'If you want me to.'

'I do, I do,' I said, and took his hand, gripping it firmly.

'Come on. Drink up, and we'll go and see a film.'

'O.K.'

We saw a film. It was a well-made film, but I wish to God he hadn't decided to take me to see a horror-film about raising the devil. . . .

The next day I telephoned Joshua Renn.

'Hello? This is Sally Deenes.'

'I have the information you asked me for. But before I give it to you, I must repeat my warning. You go into this on your own initiative, but you will only leave at the behest of someone else. Is that clear?'

'Mr Renn, haven't we been through this?'

'Yes. But it's important. Do not play around with witchcraft, young lady. It's a dangerous and deadly pastime. A way of life, yes . . . but no fun thing to do for kicks. I've seen so many young people destroyed by it. They come along to the meetings, looking for excitement, and - '

'You were going to give me some information,' I said.

'All right then . . . but don't say you were never warned of what might befall you. I will tell you what you wish to know, but in the manner of all witches you will be told this only once. If you do not understand, I cannot repeat it to you.'

'I'm ready,' I said, already doodling on my notebook.

'By the church with the three elms, not one league from the field, the house with the mark is the place you seek. The time is tonight. The city is the one you know best. The area is one that will soon fall.'

I was scribbling like mad, trying to keep up with him. I was still only halfway through the directions when the line cleared and I got the dialling-tone.

'Rude bugger,' I said to Martin.

'Who? Me?'

'No . . . Joshua Renn. Didn't even say goodbye.'

'What . . . he just rang off? Muttered something, and was gone?'

'That's right. "Summat to be," or something like that.'

Martin was grinning. 'That's good witchery for you. He probably said, "So mote it be."'

'What does that mean?'

'I'm not sure. It's a witch-phrase. They say it at the end of a spell, or a speech. It establishes one thing, though: he's your actual witch. No one says that sort of thing without meaning it. You can depend on the information he gave you.'

I looked helplessly at what I'd scribbled.

'That's all very well, but I can't even understand it!'

'Let's have a look.'

Martin peered over my shoulder and peered at my notes.

'He's been reading too many children's adventure stories,' he said. 'Why couldn't he have just given you the address?'

'I bet it's a test,' I said. 'He didn't want to give it to me straight, and so if I can solve this, then I must be really determined.'

'Are you?'

I frowned. 'Yes . . . I think I am.'

'Good. Then you've got until this evening to sort it out.'

'But it doesn't mean anything!'

Martin found a chair and sat beside me.

'He wouldn't have given it to you if you couldn't solve it. A witch never breaks his word. He was just doing what you said, making it difficult for you. It may be a bit cryptic, but there are ways of solving these things.'

'"The time is tonight." That bit doesn't seem in much doubt.'

'Right. And neither is "the city you know best". I take it that means London. Or are you a secret habituee of Macclesfield?'

'Well, I know Tangier pretty well,' I said. 'On second thoughts, no I don't.'

Martin looked puzzled, but said nothing. He hadn't read any of my books.

'So you're left with three things. All you have to do is find a church with three elms in its front garden, one league from a field in an area that's about to fall into the Thames, and you're home and dry.'

'Martin . . . that could be anywhere in London!'

He looked thoughtful. 'No . . . I'd say it is just one place in the whole of London. He might have been vague, but you can be certain that it's just a question of decoding the words.'

I stared at the piece of paper.

'I don't even know what a league is,' I said.

'Neither do I . . . let's look it up.' He went away and found a dictionary. 'Here. It says about three miles.'

'But it says, "not one league". That means it could be two or three or even more leagues.'

'No, I think it means no further than a league. We'll have to take that to start with, otherwise we may as well not look at all.' He frowned at my scribble. 'The bit that worries me, you know, is this bit about an area that will soon fall.'

'D'you think that could mean demolition?' I said.

'That's it! Witches often go for abandoned places . . . somewhere that's scheduled to be bulldozed any week now would be right up their street.'

'So how do we find that?'

Martin picked up a phone, and handed it to me.

'This is where you start journalistic legwork,' he said. 'Give the G.L.C. Planning Department a ring, and ask them where rebuilding is about to take place. While you do that, I'll dig out a few street maps and start looking for fields.'

'Or parks,' I said. 'Or public gardens. Or -'

'Get on and ring the G.L.C.'

'O.K.'

A few minutes later, after a rather boring conversation with one of the assistant surveyors at County Hall, I had most of the information I wanted. There were three major rebuilding schemes about to be started, and I had precise details of where they were to be.

I described them to Martin, and we plotted them on his street-maps.

'Now all we do is find open spaces in these areas, draw a three-mile circle round them and if a church lies on that line then we go and see it.'

'All right,' I said doubtfully.

We started work. It took far longer than I'd thought, and by six o'clock, when the rest of the staff had long gone home, we were still hard at it. By half-past six, we had found nine churches, all of which lay either on or near a line drawn three miles from an open space.

'Is that enough?' I said.

'I think so. Let's go and have something to eat, then we can drive round to each of the churches and see if they've got any elms there.'

We adjourned to the nearby snack-bar, and had a few sandwiches and coffee. Then, driving in Martin's car we set off for the first of the churches.

No go. It was in a treeless road.

So was the second. The third had a large oak in its graveyard. The fourth had already been demolished. The fifth had been converted into a warehouse. The sixth was in another treeless road. The seventh we never found. The eighth had a treeless graveyard.

We were about to head for the last one - by now feeling very tired and ready for a relaxing evening getting drunk - when Martin stopped by the car and pointed.

'Wait a minute, Sally! What are those?'

'Tree stumps I suppose. But how could we tell if they were elms or not?'

'Ask someone. They look as if they've been recently felled. Someone round here might know.'

'If we could find anyone,' I said gloomily. 'The whole place is deserted.'

Just then I caught a glimpse of a movement. I nearly screamed, my mind was so full of images of hooded figures and lonely groups.

'Martin!'

'Relax . . . it's just the verges.'

He walked over to him, and they spoke together for a moment.

Then Martin came back looking elated.

'This is the place Sally, I'm sure of it. He couldn't remember what kind of trees they were, until I asked him why they'd been felled. He said it was because they'd got Dutch Elm Disease . . . so that more or less settled that.'

'Great!' I hugged him to me. 'Now all we've got to do is find the house.'

'It must be one of these,' Martin said, looking down the street. 'We want one with a mark. You go that way, and I'll go to the other.'

We parted, and walked off into the evening gloom. It was getting difficult to see anything at all, especially when I didn't know what I was looking for.

What kind of a mark had Joshua Renn meant?

I didn't have far to look. The very first house I came to – on the same side of the road as the church, and to the right of it – had what appeared to be a sword etched into the gatepost,

'Martin!' I called. 'I think I've found it.'

He came over.

'Would that be it?' I said. 'It looks like a sword . . . or it may be just something some kids have scratched on it.'

'I think not. If my hunch tells me right, that's no sword at all. I think it's a Christian cross, drawn upside down.'

'But that doesn't make sense!'

'It's just the sort of thing the witches would do. They say they are the antithesis of conventional religions; well, in England Christianity is the conventional religion . . . and so they do what they can to turn that upside down. In this case, they've done just that literally.'

It was growing cold. I shivered, and hugged my arms to my side.

'So what do we do now?'

'That's up to you, Sally. I'm just the photographer . . . it's your story.'

'I suppose we should explore. But it looks so dead, so abandoned.'

And so bloody creepy, I didn't add.

'Then we wait.'

'Standing here just like this?' I said.

'No . . . come on. Let's try and get inside.'

I took one more look down the deserted street, wondering what it had been like when people still lived here, wondering what it would look like by the time the bulldozers had finished with it. Then I followed Martin as he headed with almost indecent enthusiasm to investigate the old house.

CHAPTER 8

All the downstairs windows of the house had been covered up with sheets of corrugated metal. There was a great deal of broken glass on the steps leading up to the front door. Someone had nailed two or three stout hasps across the door, making it unopenable.

Martin stood back, and stared up at the first floor windows. These too were boarded up, but with wood and not metal. The paint was peeling from the frames, and the brickwork was crumbling.

'Let's see what's at the back,' said Martin, extending his hand to help me over a pile of rubble.

I tripped, and there was a scuttling noise. A large brown rat hurried into the gloom, and I sucked in my breath sharply.

'You always find those in derelict houses. Don't worry . . . he won't harm you. Only if he's cornered.'

'Who decides when he's cornered or not?' I said, alarmed to hear my voice trembling.

There was a narrow alleyway, leading between the house and the wall of the churchyard. It was almost impossible to see here, and I was greatly relieved when Martin suddenly produced a pocket-torch and flashed it over the ground.

'No more rats, Sally. At least, not rodent-type rats.'

'Don't joke about it,' I said.

'For all we know, this isn't even the right house.'

'It is . . . I'm sure of it.' I hadn't liked that upturned cross. What Martin had said about it at the time had a distinctly logical feel to it.

In the alley itself there was another door, and this too was nailed tightly shut. Martin leaned against it with his shoulder, but there was no budging it. I followed him round the corner to the back patch. Here there was a veritable pile of rubble, and I kept my distance from it, imagining it infested with rats . . . all thinking they were cornered.

Martin flashed his torch over the various windows here; each one was securely boarded up. Once more, he banged one of them . . . but it was quite secure.

'Sally, I'm not sure this is the place. No one's been in here since the workmen left. We've come to the wrong place.'

I shook my head.

'No,' I said. 'This place has got a *feel* to it. There's something evil about it.'

'The only thing evil about this place is the property development company which is going to make a cool ten million or so out of building new flats here.'

Martin switched off his torch.

'We're wasting our time. Let's go.'

'I think we ought to stay.'

'And I think we ought to go.'

'Stay with me, Martin . . . please.'

And so we stood there in that grubby, grotty hole, arguing about whether or not we should cut our losses and leave. It *was* the right place, I was sure of it . . . but Martin obviously had a point. The house hadn't been used since its occupiers left.

In the end I gave way. I didn't want to stay on my own, and Martin was adamant about leaving. So I went back to the car with him, and accepted his offer of a lift home.

We drove down the rest of the road, past the ghostly empty houses. At the end was another road, and that abutted on to a main road. As we stood at the junction waiting for a gap in the traffic, a bus roared by.

'Hey . . . that's a 24, isn't it?'

'If my eyes don't betray me,' said Martin, 'yes it is.'

'That's my route.'

'You only live just up the road.' To demonstrate, Martin drove about a mile and a half down the main road, and turned into the street where my bedsitter was.

'I hadn't realised it was so close,' I said, suddenly confronted with the truth that London is being torn down around our ears, and hardly anyone's aware of it.

'Convenient, I'd call it,' said Martin. 'Next time you want to strip off and make love to the devil, you won't have far to go. If you can get in through that boarded-up door, that is.'

'All right . . . you've made your point.' I leaned over and kissed him on his cheek. 'Want to come in for a coffee?'

He looked at his watch. 'Thanks all the same, but no. I think I'll have an early night. See you in the morning.'

We kissed briefly but passionately, then I hopped out of the car and he drove away. I went upstairs to my room.

An hour later I was still thinking about that house. It *was* the right place. We shouldn't have left. Martin had said it himself: a witch's word is never broken. Joshua Renn had told me to go there tonight, and I hadn't waited long enough to see for myself. There *was* going to be a coven there . . . and I had missed it.

I should never have allowed Martin to talk me out of staying.

The more I thought about it, the more unhappy I became. This lead from Joshua Renn was the only one I had. If I dropped this I'd be back to square one, and I'd probably never find another as good. Then the article would never be written, and either I'd be back filing Maggie's private letters or I'd be out on my ear.

That decided it. I pulled on my coat again, and hurried down to the bus-stop.

A few minutes later, I was walking through the urban wilderness towards the house and the old church.

As Martin and I had seen it, it was as dark and forlorn looking as all the others. Apart from the occasional car whizzing down the street as a short-cut, the whole place was deserted.

I went to a house opposite, and squatted down on the front steps, hiding behind an abandoned dustbin.

I was resolved to wait until something did happen.

Half an hour passed, and the coldness was growing in me. I looked at my wristwatch . . . it was nearly a quarter to midnight. I thought of my bed and my gasfire, and Martin's face in the morning if I told him I'd come back here without success. Across the road, the house was as dark and vacant as ever.

Then something very odd indeed happened. I had been wide awake all the time I was there, and to my sure knowledge nobody had walked down the street, let alone entered the house. And yet . . . I suddenly discerned a faint glow of light behind one of the window-boards. I rubbed my eyes, but there was no mistaking it.

In the front upstairs room, there was a faint glow of light. Every so often it dimmed a little momentarily, as if someone had passed between the source of the light and the window.

Excitement surged up in me . . . to be replaced instantly by a cold chill of fear.

If no one had entered the house while I was watching . . . they must have been there all the time.

Possibly whoever it was had arrived while I was back at my bedsitter.

Or even more alarming . . . perhaps they had been there when Martin and I had been investigating. . . .

Now I was in a difficult position. Did I stay where I was, or make a direct approach on the house? I wished more than I could say that I was not alone, that Martin was with me.

Frankly, I was too frightened to approach the house.

I was still wondering what to do when I heard a car approaching. I crouched lower behind the dustbin, hoping it would quickly pass.

Instead, it slowed down and stopped outside the darkened

house. Three people climbed out, though it was too dark for me to tell which sex they were. They walked quickly towards the house, and the car drove away.

I strained my eyes in the gloom, trying to make out what happened next. I heard a scraping noise, and I could just make out the front door being opened. The three people went inside.

I waited . . . and a few seconds later another car drove up. The same thing happened, except only two people went to the house.

Then a couple walked down the road, a man and a woman. They went straight to the house and were admitted.

Another car arrived . . . four people went inside.

There was no doubt in my mind that I had been right all along. This was the place Joshua Renn had meant . . . and these people were attending a meeting of a coven.

O.K. Sally, I thought grimly, this is where you adopt your pose as a neophyte, and barge in on an orgy. . . .

Five minutes later, I was still behind my dustbin, trying to work up courage. There were no two ways about it . . . I was scared to go in on my own.

In the meantime, more people had arrived, and the light in the upstairs window had grown a fraction brighter.

I realised I was angry . . . probably as a reaction against my fear. I was angry with myself for not having the nerve to go through with my plan, and I was angry with Martin for walking off and leaving me on my own.

Dammit! I thought, Martin can be in on this too.

Not caring whether I was seen or not, I left my cover and walked quickly away down the street, in search of a phone-box.

There was one at the far end of the street. I went inside, and then discovered that I didn't have the right change. I swore to myself, then decided to reverse the charges. He could pay for the call too!

The operator took ages to answer, and then Martin was a long time coming to the phone.

He sounded cross.

'What is it, Sally? I'm in bed.'

'Listen, this is important. After you left I went back to that old house. I was right all along. There is something going on there! There's a light on and a lot of people have arrived.'

'O.K.,' he said, and I heard him yawning. 'We'll go back in the morning.'

'What's the point in that? It'll be over by then. We must go now, Martin.'

'You're there and I'm here in bed. You go.'

'I'm frightened to go on my own, and you did say you'd help.'

There was a long silence.

'All right,' he said in the end. 'Where are you now?'

I described the location of the call-box.

'Wait there, and I'll be over as soon as I can.'

I put the phone down, and went to stand outside in the road. I had been there only a minute or so when a police-car came prowling along. The driver stopped the car beside me.

'Come on now, miss. Time to be home.'

'I'm not doing anything wrong,' I said.

'What *are* you doing?'

'I'm waiting for my boyfriend to come and pick me up.'

'I've heard that one before,' the policeman said. 'Going out with your boyfriend at midnight?'

'Yes.'

He turned to talk to his mate. 'Does she look like any of the regulars?' he said.

The other shook his head. 'Never seen her before.'

I was fuming with indignation. They thought I was a call-girl!

'What's your name, miss?'

I told them, but changed my christian name to Sarah.

They spoke together again, then drove slowly away. The police-car parked about a hundred yards down the road where the two men could see me. They made me nervous, and not a little angry. I began to will Martin to hurry up and get to me.

He arrived twenty minutes later. I stepped into his car and told him to drive off immediately. I explained about the police.

'Not many motorists around at this time of night,' said Martin.

'They've got nothing to do. Anyway, what about this house?'

'What about it? There are people in there now, and there's something going on, there really is.'

We drove slowly down the road. I told Martin to stop his car about a hundred yards away.

'You're coming in with me?' I said.

'O.K.' He took his camera from the glove-compartment. I looked at it.

'I don't think you should take that,' I said. 'Not the first time.'

He shrugged, and returned it to the compartment.

'So what's the story, then?'

'We want to join,' I said. 'We heard about the meeting from Joshua Renn, and we'd like to be initiated.'

Martin swallowed noisily. 'If you say so.'

'I do. Come on.'

We got out of the car, and set off towards the house. From all appearances it was still deserted.

We paused outside. Everything was very quiet indeed.

I lead the way to the front door. Martin came up behind. In the gloom, it was just possible to see that the door was ajar, 'See?' I hissed. 'This was firmly sealed this afternoon.'

I pressed my hand against it, and it swung back with a faint scraping noise. We stepped inside. Ahead of us was a staircase. I started to climb it, holding Martin's hand behind me. The house was absolutely silent.

I paused.

'What's the matter?' Martin whispered.

'Nothing. Just pausing for breath.'

'Get on with it!'

Our upwards journey continued. I was heading for that front upstairs room, the one where I had seen the light.

At the top of the stairs I paused again. The house really was silent. I had an awful image of a roomful of people, pressing up behind the door, holding their breath and waiting to *pounce* on us as we went inside. I could feel my heart beating. The palms of my hands were sticky with perspiration.

'Which room?' Martin whispered.

'That one, I think,' I said, pointing at the door. We walked over to it, and I leaned against it trying to listen. The total silence continued.

'Let me.' Martin took hold of the handle, turned it . . . and pushed the door open. As he did so, he switched on his torch and flashed it around the room.

It was empty. He went inside, and I followed.

The air was heavy with scent, and it was warm. There was a distinct feeling of people having been here recently. Martin shone his torch on the floor, and we saw a white circle chalked on the floorboards. Against one wall was a chest, covered with a black cloth and holding two or three bowls. There was a knife, and beside it a little pile of black powder that Martin identified as charcoal.

All over the room were stub-ends of candles. Martin picked one up.

'Look, Sally . . . it's still warm.'

He held it out for me, and I could clearly feel that the top of the candle was still soft. It must have been blown out only a few minutes before. Martin dropped it on the floor.

'How did they know, Sally? How did they know we were coming?'

CHAPTER 9

Martin drove me back to my bedsitter. As he stopped the car outside he yawned elaborately.

'Tired?' I said unnecessarily.

'It is half-past one after all.'

'It's been a long evening. Can I interest you in that coffee now?'

Much to my surprise he accepted. I took him inside, and led him up the stairs, signalling for him to be as quiet as possible. My landlady was very tolerant, but there was no point in rubbing her nose in the fact that I was having a male visitor in the small hours of the morning.

It was the first time Martin had been to my room. He sat down on the bed, and watched tiredly as I made some coffee. When it was ready we sat together on the bed, sipping the hot liquid and not talking about what had just happened. I didn't like to think about it. This kind of thing was outside my experience.

Martin put aside his empty cup and yawned again.

I said: 'Do you want to stay the night?'

He grinned tiredly. 'I was hoping you might say that.'

'Floor or armchair?'

'Floor will be O.K.'

I looked at him carefully. 'I wasn't entirely serious. You can get in with me if you like. There's room.'

'But is there inclination?'

'If there's time.'

Martin glanced at his watch. 'There's time.'

I stood up, and carried the dirty cups to the sink. Then I went back towards him, unbuttoning my blouse. He grinned up at me.

'Sally . . . you amaze me. All this time I've known you and the subject of sex hasn't been mentioned once. Now here you are, coolly preparing to bed down with me for the night.'

I paused. 'Who said anything about sex?'

'I just did.'

'Oh yes. I thought it was you. It wasn't me. I'm offering your half my bed, that's all.'

A look of rampant disappointment crossed his face. 'I'm sorry . . . I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions.'

'It's not the conclusion I object to, it's the jumping.'

He stood up too, and took off his shirt.

'Which side do you want?'

'The one furthest from the wall. Then I have an option to change my mind at the last minute.'

'O.K.'

I took off my blouse and skirt, and when I realised he was eyeing me appreciatively, I switched off the light. In the darkness we completed undressing, and I heard him climb in. I left it a few seconds, then crawled in beside him. The bed was smaller for two people than I had imagined; our bodies were pressed up close against each other.

We lay still for a few minutes. Martin was obviously puzzled. True enough, our relationship to date had been confined to friendship and the occasional kiss. The question of going to bed together just hadn't been raised. Still, I had nothing against Martin, and I had nothing against the idea of having sex with him. It was just . . . well, he hadn't asked nicely enough. There was always hope. . . .

I could feel him fidgeting. He turned to face me, put an arm around me and kissed me gently. I held back at first, then finally responded. He pressed himself against me, and in the darkness my eyes opened wide.

Oh!

It wasn't a *nice* way of asking, but it was to the point. I could feel myself weakening.

I did.

Martin was awake before me in the morning. Having discovered the way to a woman's body is through her body, he set about waking me up in the most effective way he - or I - knew. I decided breakfast wasn't as urgent as I'd thought.

Later, Martin climbed out of bed and found his wristwatch.

'Christ!' he said. 'We're going to be late into the office. And I've got to go back to my place to pick up the camera.'

'Go on without me,' I said. 'There's a tube-station round the corner, and I'll make my own way.'

'O.K.'

He hastened to get dressed, staying only long enough to drink a very hurried cup of coffee. After he'd gone, I potted around, not feeling any urgency to be at work. Now I was away from Maggie, and working on a story of my own, I felt that the time was more my own.

Alone for the first time since we had visited the house I had time to think. Then I decided I wouldn't think about it anyway. The whole thing was a bit too creepy for my liking.

Whatever the hell had happened, one thing was sure: I hadn't made my contact with a coven. I was back at the beginning again.

I got my things together, and left for the office. I headed for the tube-station.

Just outside the entrance, a woman stopped me,

'Are you Sally Deenes?'

'Yes.'

'What were you doing at our house last night?'

It stopped me dead in my tracks, literally and figuratively.

'I -'

'We divined danger in you. Were you alone?'

'No, I . . . was bringing a friend.'

'Why were you coming to the house?'

'I wanted to join you.'

She was not at all a forbidding looking woman. If she was who I assumed she was - that is, one of the witches - then she didn't look the slightest bit like a witch. No hooked nose. No broomstick. No black pointed hat. Not even a tame black moggy. Instead, she was a rather dumpy, matronly figure, with a wide face and a friendly expression. She was looking anxious though, and I remembered what I had read in the library the other day, that sometimes the modern-day witches were very frightened of strangers. I decided to do my best to reassure her.

'I didn't mean any harm,' I said. 'I'm very interested in magic, and a friend gave me the address. I thought the best way of joining you would be to come to one of your meetings and ask if I could be initiated.'

'Have you had anything to do with Wicca before?'

'No,' I said. I couldn't help remarking to myself that if any of the commuters hurrying into the station could have realised what we were discussing they just wouldn't have believed it.

'Do you realise the implications of joining a magic group?'

Here-we-go-again, I sighed to myself mentally.

'Yes, I do.'

'Very well. If you wish to join, then we will accept you. But there is one thing. We divined danger. If you say you were coming with a friend, then perhaps the danger to us lay in that friend. If you wish to pursue membership, please come alone.'

I stared at her evenly. 'All right.'

She turned to walk away.

I said: 'But where do I meet you? Will it be at that house again?'

'No, not the house. Here is the address.' She gave me a slip of paper, on which an address was already scribbled. 'Go there to-

morrow night at eleven, and be prepared for a ceremony of initiation.'

She turned away again. I seized her arm.

'Please . . . tell me how you knew who I was. I could have been anyone in this street, and yet it was me you stopped.'

'You are Sally Deenes, and it was she we sought. We have our ways, and you should not question them.'

With that she pulled her arm free of my grip and walked off down the street. I watched her go, then walked into the station.

Martin was already in the office when I arrived. He came straight over to my desk.

'Listen, Sally, I've had an idea.'

'What about?'

'What happened last night.'

I tried to look uninterested. 'I think that was a wild-goose chase. I should have listened to you. It was probably a crowd of kids. I'm going to have to think of a new way.'

'That's my idea. I thought -'

'Martin, I'm sorry but this is my story. I'd like to do my own thing on it.'

I spoke too quickly, and too hurtfully. He looked completely crestfallen, and turned away. He went back to his own desk, and sat down. I found myself staring across the room at his hunched back.

I should have explained to Martin, but something about that woman's manner had communicated to me an implicit need for secrecy.

A little later it crossed my mind to wonder how deeply involved a reporter should be.

Was I going into this to get a story for a magazine . . . or was I really going into it out of my own curiosity?

It was a sobering thought. I shouldn't insist on going it alone. I thought I'd tell Martin about it. That lunchtime, I went with him to a pub, and suggested that he should come over and visit me again that evening. It seemed to make up for my tactlessness and he chirped up considerably,

CHAPTER 10

I found myself wishing that these witchcraft-followers wouldn't keep such late hours. If they had any respect for a hardworking girl they'd invite her round at half-past seven, not eleven o'clock. It had been a tiring day in the office, and I was more ready for bed than anything else. Still, it was a Friday, and I could have a long lie-in the next day.

I looked up the address in a street-map, and headed out there by Underground in the late evening. I was mildly surprised to discover that the area was a reasonably modern suburb. I think I'd been expecting another tumbledown derelict house, but I was to be pleasantly wrong. When I found the house, I discovered that it was a large detached building, set back from the road in a large garden. Lights showed behind the curtains of several windows, and the whole atmosphere was considerably more agreeable than the last place I'd visited.

I paused at the gate, reassuring myself. In the interim I'd come to terms with my motives: I was a reporter, and I was researching for a story. I kept Constance's general brief clear in my mind. Whatever the implicit warnings I'd received, I could come to very little harm so long as I stayed detached from what was going on around me. Play along with what they wanted by all means, but I wasn't going to become involved.

Even so, I wished Martin was with me. . . .

I headed up the drive, and banged the knocker. This was a large, brass affair, made in the shape of a goat's head. There was a long wait, and then the door opened slowly. A woman's head looked round it at me, and I recognised her instantly as the woman who had stopped me the previous morning.

'Are you alone?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Good. You may enter.'

She held the door open, and I walked in. She ushered me into the first room off the corridor. This was furnished very much like anyone else's front room. There were a few armchairs, a settee, a television, a bookcase. In one corner was a cocktail bar, liberally adorned with bottles. So far, so ordinary. But the difference between this room and everyone else's was that it was full of discarded clothing. Not just coats and hats . . . but dresses, trousers, shirts . . . and underwear. I turned to face the woman.

She was wearing a long brown dressing gown, held at the waist by a white cord.

'Before we proceed,' she said, 'I have to ask you for your contribution to our expenses. Do you have any money with you?'

'A little,' I said, hoping that Constance would allow me to charge this to expenses.

'Well, we want £48 from you.'

'I haven't got that much!' I said. 'And why is it such a lot?'

'We see it as a deterrent to idle curiosity. Believe me, your indulgence will pay you handsomely in the long run. The £48 is made up of an introductory fee of £30, a fee of £5 for the initiation ceremony, and £13 for the garments we provide. It is all refundable except for the initiation fee, and you will receive this if the Master does not find you acceptable.'

I stared at her evenly. 'Is there any way this can be reduced?'

'In certain circumstances. Stand over there, under that light.'

Reluctantly, I complied. The woman looked at me critically.

'Turn around.'

I could feel her staring at me, as if her eyes emitted a palpable ray that could touch me.

'For the very young, we occasionally allow a discount. Would you please remove the upper part of your clothing.'

'Why?'

'I assure you, there is a reason.'

I glanced round at the abandoned clothes in the room. If I was going to undress, I certainly wasn't going to be alone.

I unbuttoned my blouse, and took it off. The woman indicated that I should remove my bra too.

She smiled. 'You are very beautiful, Sally. I think the Master will be satisfied.'

'Well . . . do I get the discount?'

'I think so. We can reduce the introductory fee to £10. Refundable, as I say, if the Master will not accept you.'

'O.K.' I fished in my bag for my cheque-book. She watched as I wrote it out. 'May I put on my clothes again, now?'

'No. You must now undress completely. I will give you a robe to wear.'

Determined to go through with this thing, I took off my clothes, and put them with the others. The woman handed me a white robe, which I slipped on. There was no cord, and I had to hold it together at the front.

'Would you like a drink, Sally?'

'Wouldn't say no.'

She opened a bottle on the cocktail-bar, and poured me a glassful of white liquid. I sipped it cautiously, and was well-

advised to do so. It tasted herbal, somewhere between marjoram and thyme . . . but it wasn't the taste I noticed most. It scorched down my throat like an angry wombat, and proceeded to stamp around in my stomach as if digestion were going out of fashion.

I gasped.

'Like some more?' she said. 'It may help you relax.'

'Yes please,' I said, and held out my glass. It was good.

This time the woman poured herself a glassful, and we toasted each other.

'Cheers,' I said.

'To the Great Mother of Darkness.'

'O.K.'

'It is traditional to finish a toasted glass in one mouthful,' she said, and proceeded to demonstrate. I followed suit.

'Good. Now we shall join the others.'

To tell the truth, I was a little relieved. Any more toasts to the Great Mother and I would have been flat on my back. As it was, when I stood up I tottered slightly.

'I have a few things to tell you, Sally. Once we leave this room, it will be as if the ceremony of initiation has started. I must ask that you do as you are instructed, and without delay or question. Some of the things you will see and do will be unusual, but you must continue with the ceremony. I assure you that you will come to no harm. Is that clear?'

I nodded.

'Then I wish you well. Come with me.'

We walked out into the corridor, the woman leading the way. We walked through the house, and out of the back door. It was now very late at night, and distinctly chilly. The wind whipped at my body through the light robe, and I hugged it to me. We headed out across the garden towards a large building which had been erected at the end of the garden.

The woman opened the door, and I walked in. The place was in almost total darkness, but there was a sweet, perfumed odour and the air was warm. She closed the door behind us.

I felt her hand take my wrist, and she took me to one side, 'Climb over the partition, and sit still.'

I fumbled in the dark. There was a kind of low wall at the side. I did as she instructed, and sat on its top. I heard her strike a match, and then a candle was lit. She brought it over, and placed it on the wall next to me. Below me, I caught a glimpse of liquid reflection.

'Please get into the water.'

I remembered her instruction to follow her guidance without question. I put one foot down into the water, and it tingled with

the cold. Hesitantly, I put my other foot in too, and stood there. The woman climbed on to the low wall, and sat beside me.

'Lie down in the water, Sally, so that all your body is covered,'
'But it's cold.'

'It's designed that way.'

I lowered my behind into the water, wincing at the cold.

'It is unpleasant, I know, but it takes only a few seconds. Your body must be purified of its earthly grime.'

'I had a bath this evening.'

'Without question, Sally. . . .'

There was a distinct threat in her voice. I sat down fully.

'Please lie down.' With immense bad feelings, I did as she instructed. The water really was BLOODY cold. It came right up to my neck.

She moved so quickly that I didn't have a chance. The next thing I knew, her hand had covered my face, and she pushed me down into the water. I struggled helplessly, but she had the advantage. She pushed and pushed, so that I went right under, I felt the water rushing up my nose, down my throat, into my eyes.

Then she relaxed the pressure, and pulled me out of the water. All I could do was stand there in that bath up to my knees in water, coughing and choking. The water had gone everywhere: my hair was matted over my face, I could hardly hear, hardly breathe. And to make matters worse, the water tasted of salt.

She waited until I had stopped coughing, and then said: 'Are you O.K.?'

'Like a million dollars.'

'I'm sorry about that, but total immersion is essential. Your body is now pure.'

'Help me out of this. I'm freezing to death.'

'You will be warm in a moment.' She helped me over the low wall, and stood me up. She blew out the candle.

'Have you got a towel?' I said.

'No towel. You would become impure again. You will be warm shortly.'

'O.K.' I said resignedly, wondering if Constance had any conception of what she had led me into. . . .

'If you are ready, the initiation will commence. Follow me through this door. You must walk with your hands held behind your back, and with your face lowered. When I tell you, you may look up. Understood?'

'Yes.'

'All right, then. Follow me.'

I did as she instructed, and lowered my face. A moment

later, a wave of hot air hit me, and bright light flooded in. The woman stepped forward, and I followed close at her heels.

I could not see very much, as my wet hair was falling around my face. It was still soaked through, and droplets of water were falling on to my body. I was grateful for the warmth, though I was still shivering. Looking down, I could see that the white robe that I was still wearing had been made completely transparent by the water. It clung wetly to my body. In any event, it wouldn't have concealed much, because it hung open at the front and as my hands were behind my back I couldn't pull it together to preserve modesty. My left breast was totally uncovered, and my right breast was only too obviously revealed through the thin, wet material.

The woman stopped walking, and I halted behind her.

I felt utterly foolish. Soaked through, naked, and with my hair a tangled mess I must have looked like nothing on Earth.

'Sire . . . I have the initiate.'

There was a long silence.

The woman whispered to me: 'You may look up now, Sally.'

I did so, tossing back my dank hair. What I saw took several seconds to sink in, there was such a complexity of impressions.

Bright lights shone in the room, making my first sight indistinct. I presumed it was from these that much of the heat came. The floor was black and shiny, presumably made of some plastic preparation. The walls were deep red, and seemed to be covered with something like thick carpeting. I was aware that there were several people in the room, but my eyes were dazzled and it took several seconds for them to acclimatise. Like the woman who had met me at the door, they were dressed in long dark robes, completely covering them so that it was impossible to determine even their sex. They stood with their backs towards me, facing the far wall. Here I could just make out another figure, dressed in a brilliant white robe.

'Initiate . . . you may advance!'

I assumed he was talking to me. I stepped forward hesitantly. No one else moved.

'You may stop.'

More silence. Now I was nearer to him, I could see a little more clearly where he was standing. There was what appeared to be a long low altar behind him, on which four black candles burned. On the wall behind this there was a huge mural, depicting a naked girl lying with her legs spreadeagled, and just about to be mounted by a being that looked like a cross between a man and a goat.

I looked down, and realised that he had told me to stop in the

very centre of a white circle, inlaid into the black.

I gathered that this man was the 'Master' that the woman had spoken of; he certainly appeared to be in charge of everything.

'Sister Auriga, you have chosen this initiate well.' I couldn't see his face, as it was covered by a hood, but there was a distinct element of relish in his voice.

'Brothers and sisters,' he said in a more formal voice. 'Is there any one of you here tonight who knows of a reason why we should not initiate this girl to our circle?'

There was another silence.

'Very well. Let the ceremony commence.'

Two of the cloaked figures stepped forward. They walked to the altar, and bowed to the Master. Then they stepped aside, and stripped off their cloaks. I was faintly surprised to see that they were two rather young and well-endowed girls. One was a redhead with beautiful pale skin, and the other was a small, mousy girl. The redhead picked up a small bowl, and the other girl collected a shallow dish. They both returned to the altar.

On the floor in front of the altar was a small brazier, containing a few glowing coals. The redhead took a handful of powder from her bowl, and tossed it into the embers. Immediately, a cloud of green smoke poured out into the room, faintly choking but pleasantly perfumed.

As the smoke billowed, the two girls went to the Master, and undid his robe. They slipped it from him, revealing most of his body to be nude but leaving the hood that covered his face. He had a broad, well-muscled body, and I guessed that he was a man still fairly young. He stood with his arms folded in front of his chest, his maleness revealed for all to see.

The second girl now approached him, holding her shallow dish. She took from this a handful of what appeared to be a bright-orange mud, and began smearing it liberally over his skin. The redheaded girl helped her. As the orange substance was applied, his amazing virility began to assert itself.

'Remove your garb, initiate, and step forward.'

My robe was virtually dry now, and I was feeling warmer. I slipped off the white robe, and let it fall to the floor.

'You may stop.'

I was now only two feet from him.

'Sisters of darkness, assist in the bondage.'

The two girls came towards me, one of them carrying a white cord. They wound the cord around me loosely, as if to strap my arms to my sides. In fact, the cord was loose, so that if I cared to try to free myself I wouldn't experience much difficulty. I understood that this bondage was only symbolic. The girl with

the brown hair tied a loose knot, then with the spare end of the cord began to flay my skin very gently. Again, it didn't hurt at all.

The two girls stepped to one side, each holding one of the ends of the cord which bound me.

For a couple of minutes, nothing happened. Nothing, that is, except that my nose began to itch. I didn't think it the right time or place to start scratching, so I let it itch away.

The woman who had brought me in - 'Sister Auriga', as the man had addressed her - stepped forward.

'Initiate, are you prepared to pay homage to the Prince of Darkness?'

'Yes,' I said. Anything for a quiet life,

'Answer "aye".'

'Aye,' I said.

'Very well. The initiate is yours, sire.'

Sold into bondage by my aye. No going back from here.

The Master now knelt before me. I was really very impressed with the way he was built. I wasn't sure whether it was the sight of my unadorned charms . . . or the orange mud that was on him . . . but something surely was doing things to his desires. I could only marvel. He was all male.

I felt his hands enclose my ankles. I looked down. It was all rather unusual. I could feel a strange tingling sensation where his hands touched me. His head bent down, and I felt his lips touch my feet.

He raised himself, and took each of my thighs in his hands . . . then kissed my knees.

He moved up a little more, reaching behind me and clasping each of my buttocks in his hands. He pressed his face into my crutch.

He was now almost standing. He put his hands behind my shoulders, and kissed each of my breasts, sucking the nipple into his mouth, and teasing it with his tongue.

Finally, he stood before me, took me in his arms and planted a passionate kiss full on my lips. Even this close to him I could not make out the details of his face. He was shrouded by the hood, and the lights were placed so that he was always in shadow.

Again, as we kissed, I could feel the tingling sensation, both from the touch of his hands and from his lips. Whatever was in that orange goo, it certainly did things to the nerve-ends.

He moved back from me.

'Release the initiate!' he boomed suddenly, making me jump.

The girls moved quickly, releasing the knots which held me. When I was free, they took my hands and propelled me forward.

I was taken to the low altar, and as one of them removed the candles the other indicated that I should sit down.

Then both of them moved behind me, and pulled me down so that I lay full-length on the altar, my buttocks on the edge. It was jolly uncomfortable, and the thought of all those eyes on me wasn't the sort of thing you'd buy a ticket for.

And then I felt a familiar sensation. There was a tingling . . . and it was in a suitable part of my body. Moving my head, I saw that the Master was now standing before me, pressing himself against me. I made a mental note to get the recipe for that orange stuff. It worked faster and more efficiently than all the soft lights and sweet music in the world.

In spite of everything – my recent ducking, the cold, the rope, the strange circumstances – I found my body arousing. There was a hunger in me for this man, and he knew it.

I raised my arms, welcomed him to me. He lay across me.

'I'd rather do this in bed,' I whispered.

'Shut up,' he said in a rather unMasterly voice.

I'll say this for him . . . he knew what he was about. My homage to the Prince of Darkness was completed efficiently and without extraneous loss of energy. I was laid, and I was laid expertly.

A few seconds after he had finished, he drew away from me and before I could move or even sit up, he grabbed his white robe and disappeared through a small door set behind the altar. The two girls – still naked – came forward and helped me to my feet.

'Welcome to the club,' the redhead said.

'I hope I'm not in one,' I quipped. 'Is the ceremony over now?'

'Yes. You can relax now.'

'Good . . . I could just do with a nice lie down.'

'I'm Carole,' said the redhead, 'and this is Sarah.'

'Hi,' I said.

'Come and meet the others,' said Sarah. 'There's some food and drink.'

'Good.'

I retrieved my white gown from the centre of the white circle, and pulled it on. It appeared to have shrunk from its recent immersion in the water, and it didn't make much success of covering me. Anyway, I wasn't the only one without much to wear; I noticed that now the formal aspect of the meeting seemed to be over the other members of the coven were taking off their gowns. It really was very warm in there.

So, I thought, any minute now the orgies and nude rituals will begin. I wasn't exactly against the idea, because it would be

fun to see some other people taking part. I didn't like the thought that I'd been the prime attraction of the evening.

I followed Carole and Sarah over to where there was a table set out with various dishes. I looked at it with great interest, fully expecting to see all manner of exotic dishes . . . instead, there was a percolator of coffee bubbling away, and several plates of very ordinary-looking sandwiches. Never a snob about sardines, I dug in with the others, grateful to have anything at all.

Afterwards, somebody produced a bottle of wine, and it was passed round. The conversation began to perk up a bit, but there were no signs of any orgy developing. Quite a pity, I thought privately, as there were one or two rather good-looking men there.

'Is this all that happens?' I asked Sarah.

'What . . . you mean the eating and drinking?'

'Yes.'

'Usually. It's nice to settle down after a ceremony and have a good chin-wag, don't you think?'

'I thought there'd be a bit of excitement.'

'Well we do have a dance sometimes. Depends on how we feel. It's rather late tonight . . . we have to have initiations at midnight, so we're all a bit tired afterwards. If you want to see proper rituals, you ought to come to one of our Sabbats.'

'What are they?'

'The quarter-days. Then we really let our hair down. But there was one of those a few weeks back, so there isn't another for some time to come.'

I decided to circulate. There was some curiosity about me, seeing as I was a new convert and all that, so I didn't have much difficulty in talking to people. I stuck to my story - that I was a secretary in a shipping-office - and kept the fact that I was a reporter firmly under my hat. Even if I wasn't wearing a hat. . . .

There was one chap I stopped and talked to for rather longer than any of the others. Well, he was something of a good-looker after all, and as he, like everyone else, was nude I was in no doubts about his masculinity. His name was Jiri, he told me, and he came from Czechoslovakia. We had some difficulty communicating at first, because his accent was rather difficult to follow, but once we began understanding each other we got along fine.

'What do you do?' I asked him at one point.

'I - ' He paused, and for a moment I thought he was lost for

the right word. But suddenly it dawned on me that maybe he didn't want to tell me.

'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to,' I said.

'Come.' He nodded towards a far corner of the room, and we went there together.

He lowered his face to mine.

'I am a writer,' he said. 'A newspaper writer. I am from Prague.'

'A journalist, you mean?' I said.

'Yes,' He nodded enthusiastically. 'But . . . I cannot say here. People here do not like journa . . . newspaper-writers.'

'You mean they are frightened of them?'

He nodded. 'I have heard . . . bad things. They hate the newspapers. So here I pretend I am in a bank.'

'But are you going to write about the meetings?' I said, suspecting a bit of competition.

'No, no . . . but they would not believe.'

So feeling a little in common with him, though I didn't reveal my own true occupation, we chatted on.

Then, at about half-past two, Sister Auriga called for our attention.

'Coven-members . . . the next meeting will be next Friday at eight. Please attend if you can. We will meet here.'

There was a general murmur of assent, and a few people stood up. It seemed the meeting was over. I followed the others to the main house, and retrieved my clothes. I was standing there wondering how I was going to get home, when Jiri came over to me again.

'Can I take you in my car?' he said.

'That would be very nice,' I said. 'Thank you.'

'Where do you live?'

I told him, and when he didn't seem to understand said I could show him on a map. He took me to his car, and I pointed out the street. He nodded firmly. 'That's O.K.,' he said.

We headed down the drive, and set off across London. I was very tired, and was looking forward to a bed marked 'Property of Sally Deenes.'

During the drive, Jiri said very little at all. Now we were away from the coven I was hoping he would speak more freely, and reveal to me some tit-bits of information that might be useful to me in my article. But no luck. Apart from the occasional comment, Jiri kept his silence.

He dropped me off at the end of my street, and I trudged home. I almost fell into bed, and drifted off to sleep straight away.

CHAPTER 11

waltzed into the office on Monday morning feeling good. My descent into the maw of Hell had been a bit of a laugh, really, and I couldn't wait to tell Martin all about it.

'You've been up to something!' he said as soon as he saw me.

'I've had a lucky break, that's all.'

'What . . . on the witches?'

'Yes,' I watched his reaction. I could tell he wasn't as indifferent as he tried to make out. 'I joined a coven on Friday evening.'

'How did you find them?' He was all agog, if you can imagine such a horrible sight on a Monday morning.

'Looked 'em up in Yellow Pages. They're listed under *Magic, Practitioners of.*'

'Really?'

I nodded. 'Look yourself if you don't believe me. It suddenly struck me as the most logical place to look.'

I passed him the directory, and he took it. He opened it, with a disbelieving expression on his face. I decided to run for it. I was halfway to the door when the directory struck me.

Martin advanced on me. 'Never exploit a friend's weakness on Monday morning,' he said.

'Sorry, sorry!' I squealed as he grabbed me and started tickling. 'Let's go out for a coffee, and I'll tell you all about it.'

He released me. 'O.K.'

We went down to the nearest coffee-bar, and I told him what had happened, in a suitably cleaned-up version.

'So you've got the material for your story now?' he said when I'd finished.

'Not really. Constance wants me to do a slashing exposé of the evil practices of exploitation. It's just not like that.'

'So are you going to tell her?'

'Not yet. I'm just not sure. It's all a little tepid to my mind, but they might have been playing coy just because there was someone there they didn't know.'

'How much longer have you got?'

'A few weeks yet. I'm going to keep going, and walk with my arse on the ground.'

'You'll get neck-ache.'

'Ha bloody ha.'

'So I'm out of it now, am I?' said Martin. 'You seem to be firing ahead on all cylinders, and once you couldn't do without me.'

Quickly, I laid my hand on his arm.

'Don't be silly,' I said. 'I still need you. How else am I going to get these photos? Now I'm a full member of the coven, I can introduce you as an initiate and then you can come until the story's ready too.'

'And what do I have to do as an initiate . . . walk barefoot across burning coals?'

I grinned. 'It's more fun than that.'

'Tell me more.'

'I think I'll let you find out for yourself. Who am I to spoil your fun?'

'I couldn't say. So long as it's you I have the fun with.'

'I'll see what I can do,' I said, and stood up. 'Come on . . . there's an editorial conference in a quarter of an hour.'

'Oh yes.'

Without enthusiasm he stood up too, and we went back to the office.

Constance's editorial conferences were not much fun. I went to the first one full of high hopes that in the course of it I'd learn a lot more about the direction in which the magazine was supposed to be heading, but the matters discussed were always strictly factual. How much we should pay outside contributors, the advertising revenue we could expect, the number of full-colour pages, and so forth. Of course, it wasn't without interest, but it did serve to bring home to me the fact that *Freedom Girl* was part of a business enterprise, and that my swanning about the black-magic covens of London was all strictly in the line of business.

The one that morning passed without incident, even though Maggie took the opportunity to bestow upon me one of her best glowers. I smiled back at her sweetly.

Towards the end, Constance looked directly at me.

'How's the witchcraft article coming along, Sally?' she said.

'Not bad. It took me a bit of time to get in touch with the people, but I've made contact now. I joined a coven last week.'

'Excellent. So you'll have the article ready soon?'

'Not long now. A couple of weeks. I'm going with Martin at the weekend to get the photographs.'

'Good,' Constance said. 'Bring them in to me on Monday, and we'll go through them together. Then at the same time you can give me a rough idea of what the article will be like, and then you can get on with the copy. After that, I've got another

little project lined up for you.⁴

'O.K.,' I said.

What I didn't say was that I was beginning to wonder if what Constance was looking for was there. I certainly hadn't seen any signs of exploitation of women there. About the only thing I had to report was that I'd been laid by the 'Master' . . . and anyway I'd gone into that with my eyes open. Everyone who was there seemed to be an adult, and in full possession of their senses. In other words, if they hadn't wanted to be there, they wouldn't be. No signs of a white-slave traffic, no sexy pics for the girlie magazines, not even a taint of male chauvinist piggery in the air. From what I'd seen, it looked to me as if white witchcraft was just another one of those games played by middle-class suburbanites to while away the time.

But I wasn't going to say so . . . not while Maggie was there.

The week passed slowly. Most evenings I saw Martin. He and I got along well. He didn't spend every night at my room . . . but once or twice he did. He appeared to be nervous about his first visit to the coven, and several times he asked me again about what was involved in the initiation ceremony.

'Look at me,' I told him. 'I've been through it . . . no marks, no scars, no hang-ups. It's easy, and it might even be fun.'

During the day on the Thursday, I telephoned the woman known as Sister Auriga, and told her I'd be bringing a new recruit. She seemed to be pleased. So that was all right.

That evening, Martin called round to pick me up, and we went to a pub for a few drinks.

'Look at this,' he said, and produced a slim object, made of plastic and metal.

'What is it?' I said.

'A camera.'

I looked at it more closely. From a brief inspection it looked something like a fountain-pen, though it was made with square edges. Along one side there was a tiny lens, and there was a flap at the other end, presumably where the film was inserted.

'How does it work?' I said.

'Like this,' He took it from me, and pressed one of the ends. There was an almost inaudible clicking noise. 'As you do that, it takes a picture, and as you release it the film is wound on automatically.'

'It's marvellous. Is it yours?'

'No . . . I hired it. I couldn't afford one of these. They're made in America, and they're not generally available yet. They're perfect for taking secret photographs. The film is a special fine-

grain stock, and the lens is so good that you can work in the dimmest of lighting. When it's processed, the picture will enlarge up in the normal way.'

'Will it take colour?'

'Colour or black-and-white.' He unscrewed the end, and showed me how the film-cartridge fitted. 'I'll be using both tomorrow night.'

'I don't think you'll be able to take it in with you,' I said doubtfully.

'Why ever not?'

I had a mental image of Martin being dunked in the bath of cold, salt water . . . but thought I'd spare him it. Let him find out for himself . . . I'd had to.

'Well . . . they search you. You'd never get away with it, however small the camera is.'

'But I've got to get the pictures. That's the whole point of my going.'

'Right. The only thing I can suggest is that I'll take it in for you. They know me now, and they won't be so anxious to search me.'

I neglected to add that I'd be wearing a voluminous brown robe, in which I could easily secrete the camera, and that Martin would be wearing. . . . Let him find out.

Reluctantly, he passed it over to me.

'O.K., but look after it carefully. It's incredibly valuable. I had to put down a deposit of fifty quid in cash to get it, and take out an insurance, and pay the rent.'

'I'll look after it, don't worry,' I said, slipping the camera into my handbag.

'And don't forget to bring it. You know what you're like, you'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on.'

'I did once,' I said.

'Did what?'

'Forgot my head. It came undone.'

Martin grinned and finished his beer. 'Want another?'

'No thanks,' I said. 'I think I'd like an early night. Strenuous weekend ahead. Even more so for you.'

'Why?'

'You'll find out,' I said.

Martin winced.

CHAPTER 12

At five minutes to midnight, I was standing with the other coven-members in the chapel. I was dressed from head to foot in the dark-brown gown, and thus indistinguishable from the others. I had been briefed on what was going to happen, and knew what I had to do. In short: nothing, but stand with the others looking mysterious. I was beginning to appreciate how much theatre there was in these ceremonies.

Under the cover of my hood, I couldn't help smiling to myself at the thought of poor Martin, even now being dunked in the bathful of icy-cold salt water.

In my left hand, I held the miniature camera, hoping that I would have the chance to slip it to Martin later in the proceedings.

The man I knew as the Master came in.

'Greetings, brethren,' he said. 'I think we are about ready to begin. There is to be a ceremony of initiation first, and this will be followed by our normal celebration of freedoms.'

I sighed to myself. There was so much promise in such a statement. But I knew what would happen: once the ceremony was over it would be down to sandwiches and conversation.

I had seen Jiri when I arrived. He nodded and grinned at me, and we managed to exchange a few words. He wanted to talk to me afterwards. That, at least, held some promise.

'Maintain your positions,' said the Master, 'It is almost midnight.'

We waited in silence. I wished the gown wouldn't prickle against my naked skin so much. I wanted to scratch more than anything else just at that moment, but had to keep still.

As before, it was tremendously warm in the chapel.

The door at the back opened.

Sister Auriga's voice said: 'Sire, I have an initiate for you.'

She stepped forward, leading Martin. As I had done a week earlier, he moved forward until he was in the centre of the white circle, then the Master bade him to stop.

I was very curious to see developments. I knew what had happened to me on the altar, but couldn't exactly see Martin submitting to the same thing from the Master. I guessed they'd have something else up their sleeves.

Martin was stripped of his soaking wet transparent gown,

and stood naked. The two girls came forward, and he was symbolically bound with the cord.

But already the ceremony was different. The Master had not yet been daubed with that orange mud, though I had earlier espied the stuff lying around in two pots.

Sarah and Carole picked up the pots, and advanced on Martin. With what seemed to me to be unnecessary devotion to duty, they slowly massaged the magic stuff on to his body. From where I was standing, I could see that the operation was already having an effect on Martin, though whether it was the orange mud or the close attentions of the two naked girls I couldn't tell.

After what felt like an age, the two girls were finished, by which time Martin was obviously ready for anything. But for about two minutes nobody moved. Even the Master, from whom I at least had expected the next move, stayed by his altar, his arms spread wide in a dramatic gesture.

I was suddenly aware of another presence. I'm not sure how it was done, but one minute I was certain that all present were the only ones in the chapel, then the next I was aware of a tall woman standing to one side of and just behind the Master.

Perhaps she had been there all the time in the shadows, and had stepped forward slowly. But I was sure there hadn't been a movement. Alternatively, someone may have gently dimmed up a light to illuminate her, but again I hadn't been able to detect it.

It was as if she had materialised out of nowhere. This at least was the impression the witches obviously wanted to convey, and already I had been admiring their sense of theatre. Obviously, it was a trick of some sort . . . but it was certainly a good one.

The woman stepped forward into the main lights. I saw that she had a full head of jet-black hair, and her eyes seemed to gleam with a life of their own.

She walked over to Martin, and stood before him.

Carole and Sarah went over to her, and relieved her of her gown. Underneath, she was naked but for a necklace that looked as if it was made out of slivers of polished wood, and a garter tied around her right thigh that was made of a bright-red fabric.

She knelt before Martin, and administered to him the five kisses I had received myself from the Master.

At the end, she pulled Martin down to the floor and made what seemed to me to be a most distastefully obvious sexual advance to him. Much to my surprise, Martin responded.

And I had to stand there with the other witches, and watch my boyfriend making love to another woman.

In the end it was over, and the woman retrieved her gown and went towards the back of the chapel.

A moment later, the Master followed her.

Sister Auriga moved forward: 'The formal ceremony is at an end, brethren. You may partake of the cakes and ale.'

Everyone relaxed. Martin was handed his white transparent robe, and pulled it on.

He came over to me, grinning ruefully.

'It wasn't bad, was it?'

I snorted. 'You seemed to enjoy yourself.'

'Well I had to . . . didn't I?'

'You could have said you didn't feel like it.'

'But I did.' He glanced down at himself, and I followed his line of sight. His body was still liberally smeared with the orange goo, and he was still, well, ready. 'Good stuff, that. Like to get the recipe.'

'That's what I thought too,' I said, and turned away from him. 'When I was initiated last week.'

I left him and went in search of Jiri.

I wasn't sure exactly why, but it had disturbed me a lot to see Martin and that woman making love together. I suppose I was beginning to understand the alienness of the witches, the way they deal so casually with accepted morality. To them, freely-given intercourse was just part of their rituals. That woman had literally walked out of the dark and made love to Martin. Not a word had been spoken between them, as far as I knew. Under everyday conditions, such behaviour would have been unthinkable. Suppose Martin and the woman had met on an Underground train; the possibility of their enjoying intercourse together would have been the last consideration. And yet, under the heightened conditions of a black magic ritual, it was the first and only consideration.

Then I remembered back to my ready submission to the Master the week before. Was that so different?

It was not too difficult to see why such practices took place. I had succumbed to them, and so had Martin. I was in no position to moralise about it.

I needed time to think about it. A change of scenery was what was called for.

I found Jiri by the table of food, and joined him as he tucked into some coffee and sandwiches.

'Hi,' he said.

'Hi,' I replied. We weren't the greatest conversationalists in the world.

'A friend?' he said, nodding towards Martin.

'Yes.' I reached out to take some sandwiches, then realised I was still holding the camera. I wished there was a pocket in the

robe, but as there wasn't I was obliged to keep holding it. The sooner I unloaded it on to Martin the better, and I knew I should have given it to him while I was speaking to him.

With some difficulty I reached out and took two or three beef sandwiches, and began munching through them.

When the food was out of the way, Jiri slipped out of his own robe, and stood naked.

'Come, Sally,' he said. 'Let's dance.'

Now that made things difficult. By implication, Jiri wanted me to strip off too. Nothing against that, except that I was still wondering what to do with the camera. Precious few places to conceal an object - even a small one - on a naked female body. Except. . . .

No.

'Just a minute,' I said.

I hurried over to where Martin was chatting amicably with Sarah.

'Just in case you've forgotten,' I whispered grimly in his ear, 'you're here to do a job.'

I pressed the camera into his hand, and left him.

His problem now.

I went back to Jiri, and undid my gown. Stark naked, he and I began dancing in time to the music being piped in through two large loudspeakers set high on the wall.

Jiri and I were the only two dancing at first. We couldn't communicate well by words, but one action can replace a thousand of those. By moving together, we spoke thousands.

I liked the look of him, and I knew he was keen on me. The signs were pretty clear, especially when I snuggled up close to him for the slower numbers.

Soon, we were joined by other coven members, and someone turned up the volume of the music.

What with the strange lighting and decor and the loud rock music, we could have been in some West End discotheque . . . were it not for the fact that everyone was in the nude.

In my gyrations I found time to glance over in the direction of Martin, and saw that he seemed to be happily ensconced with Sarah. No point in my trying to talk to him . . . I'd be seeing him at the office.

In between two records, Jiri lowered his face until it was next to my ear.

'You been in the house?' he said.

'No . . . why?'

'I show.'

He took my hand, and led me towards the exit. I suddenly

thought about crossing the garden late at night without clothes, and pulled back.

'No,' I said. 'I must have my gown.'³

I went back to where I had dropped it, and pulled it on. As I did so, my eye was caught by Martin. He left Sarah and came over to me.

'You're not leaving?' he said,

'Not yet, no.'

'Where are you going?'

'Just over to the house. You should worry.'

'She's a drag,' he said, presumably meaning Sarah. 'Let's go home.'

'No, Martin, I'm busy just for a moment. I'll be back soon.'

Jiri was standing by the exit, watching us.

I tried to give Martin a comforting grin, but I suppose it came out as a sort of sly grimace . . . in any event, he shrugged in an angry way, and went back to Sarah.

I joined Jiri, and he bestowed a light kiss on my cheek. Taking my hand, he led me out of the chapel, across the garden and into the house. Not saying anything, he led the way up a flight of stairs, along a short passage and into a large room where there were several beds.

Jiri closed the door, and put his arms around me. We kissed, then he opened the front of my gown and fondled my breasts. Language barrier or no, there was little mistaking his intentions. I pulled away.

'No, Jiri. We can't. Not in someone else's house.'⁴

He waved a hand expansively about the room.

'This . . . for members. Convenient, no? You like?'

'You mean, anyone can come up here?'

He nodded at me, grinning broadly.

'Then other people might come in,' I said.

'Why not?'

I had to hand it to the people who ran these witchcraft covens . . . they seemed to think of everything. There was no one else in the room at the moment, and even if someone came in while we were there . . . Jiri and I had been seen together, sexual intercourse evidently took place in public down in the chapel, so no one was uptight about it. The conditions were just more comfortable here, that was all.

'O.K.,' I said, resigned to the fact that I was mixing in very strange circles. I sat down glumly on the bed. 'I just don't feel like it now, that's all.'

'Ah!' Jiri came and sat next to me. 'I show. Old Slovak custom. Very unusual.'⁵

'It's no good,' I said. 'I just don't feel randy.'

All he did was grin. 'Old Slovak custom very effective.'

'You can try,' I said, 'but I don't think it'll work.'

He made the gesture of spitting on his palms, and rubbing his hands together. I thought it was a joke.

It was no joke. He tried . . . and old Slovak custom was indeed very effective.

'Know any more folk-lore?' I said to him when it was all over, and I lay back in his arms feeling decidedly warm and comfortable.

'Only one custom is popular.'

'I can see why,' I said, wondering whether it might be possible to get Czechoslovakia into the Common Market, and then I could pop over to Prague every weekend for research into the ethnic lores of the people.

'I show you again?' said Jiri.

'Yes please.'

He moved in the bed to take up position . . . but just at the very same moment the door opened, and another couple came in.

'Jiri!' I hissed. 'Not now!'

He surfaced, with a rueful grin on his face. He saw the other couple, who were busily ignoring us, and were climbing into a bed on the opposite side of the room.

'It's O.K.,' he said.

'Not for me it isn't.'

I climbed out of bed. It wasn't that I was all that coy, but quite frankly I didn't want word of the old Slovak custom spread around. The novelty would wear off if everyone knew about it.

'Where are you going?' Jiri said, climbing out, and following me into the corridor.

'Back to the chapel. I'm hungry . . . want to see if there are any more sandwiches left.'

It wasn't only that; I was beginning to wonder if Martin was all right. I was feeling a little guilty about him. After all, I'd got stewed up about him having sex with the woman, and it was nothing more, really, than just a part of the ceremony. I was determined to make it up to him.

Jiri took my hand as we went back across the garden. The bass notes of the amplified music reached our ears, and it crossed my mind to wonder what the neighbours made of all the goings-on here. Did they, could they, have any conception of the true nature of the weekend parties at this place?

It was a large house, after all, and its grounds were surprisingly spacious for London . . . but even so, there were two or

three houses overlooking the gardens. Perhaps in the daylight, this looked like just a garden with a large shed in it.

We went inside. There were fewer people here now, some of the coven-members presumably having gone home. I soon spotted Martin, lying on the floor with Sarah next to him. He saw me and stood up.

'I'm going now,' I said.

'O.K. I'll see you in the office on Monday.'

'Shh!' I warned him. 'What about you?'

'I think I'll stay on a bit longer.'

'Have fun.'

I noticed that his body was still liberally smeared with the orange mud, and some of it looked as if it had been recently applied . . . especially the stuff nearest to the scenes of operation, as it were. Then I noticed that the pot lay near them, and that Sarah's hands were wet and orange with the stuff.

To myself I made a little shrug. I'd asked for that. Have fun, I'd said, and so I thought he might as well.

Jiri said: 'I run you home, Sally?'

'That'd be fabulous,' I said. 'Let's go and get dressed.'

I left Martin there, and went with Jiri back to the house. Here we retrieved our clothes, and headed for his car. I was in a strangely wrought-up state, unable to decide what my true feelings about Martin were. On the one hand we had been seeing a lot of each other recently, but then neither of us had any claim on the other.

Jiri drove me home. It was very late. When he suggested he came up to my room with me, I didn't demur, and a few minutes later we were in bed together. This time he didn't need to show me any of his native customs. There are some languages and customs that transcend national boundaries. It was good and enjoyable, and Jiri stayed with me until Sunday morning.

CHAPTER 13

'I'm dying to see those photos,' I said to Martin on the Monday morning.

'Well, yes . . . they're not processed yet,' he said.

'How long will they be?'

'I'm not sure.'

He went quiet, and backed away towards his own desk.

'How many did you take?' I said, getting up and following him.

'Er . . . not sure. I don't think they'll come out. Terrible light in that place.'

'But there's masses of light! And you told me that because it had a short focal length, the lens would work under almost any circumstances.'

'Yes.'

I put my hands on his desk, and leaned over him aggressively.

'Why don't you just own up?' I said. 'You didn't take any, did you?'

'Well . . . it was difficult. I wasn't sure what that guy in the cape would think of me taking pics. And I wasn't quite clear about what I should be looking for.'

'You knew the brief. We want shots that indicate that girls are being exploited.'

'Most of the girls there looked to me as if they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.'

'Too right. And you were part of the reason,' I said.

He grinned modestly,

'You're too kind.'

'No . . . I was otherwise engaged.'

'Look,' said Martin, 'I think we're going about this the wrong way. I'll stop scoring off you, if you'll stop scoring off me. We're forgetting the one major factor. We went to that coven on Friday night for one reason, and one reason alone. We're journalists, and we're out to get a story.'

'And pictures.'

'O.K., O.K. I'm as much to blame as you are. If we carry on the way we're going, Constance is going to want to know - and rightly too - just what the hell we've been playing at.'

'Witches and Warlocks,' I said. 'It'd make a good board-game.'

Ignoring my subtle humour, he went on: 'If my guess is right, we've got about a fortnight to turn in some copy. If we don't, my neck's possibly for the chop, and yours is almost definitely for the same thing. You're here on sufferance, Sally. If Maggie had her way, you'd have been out weeks ago.'

'That's not strictly true,' I said hotly. 'Constance and I understand one another very well.'

'That's as maybe. But Constance is herself on sufferance. There's a lot of money going into this magazine, and if she doesn't turn in results, she'll be out too. So we ought to do something about it.'

'O.K. . . . what?'

He seemed to relax slightly. 'I dont' know.'

'Then we're of a mind,' I said. 'Now let me get in my two-pence worth. In my view, the article is based on a fallacy. That is, that witchcraft is run by male chauvinist pigs, with innocent young wenches being depraved and corrupted by the evil practices they're coerced into.'

'Well . . . aren't they?'

'Have you seen any of it?' I said.

Martin shook his head.

'Neither have I. To all appearances, the people who go to this particular coven are all open-minded adults - kinky adults, perhaps, but that's not really relevant - and they're there because they want to be. The witches aren't trying to sell anything, they're not using women as chattels, they aren't publishing salacious pictures of naked girls. From what I've seen, it's just a rather barmy way of getting laid.'

'Maybe we're going to the wrong coven,' said Martin.

I stared at him blankly. 'Say that again.'

'Maybe we've run into the wrong witches. Perhaps by sheer bad luck we've run into the tamest witches in London.'

'D'you think that's possible?'

'Who knows? Witchcraft is supposed to be like ordinary religions. There are different castes and sects . . . some are more devout than others.'

'Then I'll bet that's it,' I said. 'We're missing out on the real scene.'

Martin groaned. 'I think we've left it a bit late to realise that. It took us long enough to find these; God alone knows how long it'd take to find another lot.'

I chewed my fingernails for a moment.

'Look . . . we haven't really explored the possibilities yet. After all, you've only been once, and I've only been twice. Perhaps they're a bit cautious when they've got new people there. Let's go this week, and see if anything more interesting happens. If it doesn't, well . . . we're both full members now, perhaps we could start something up.'

'Do you feel ready to start casting fertility spells on barren women?' said Martin.

'No,' I had to admit.

'Neither do I. Anyway, from what I hear, a fertility-spell isn't nearly as exciting as it sounds.'

'You seem to know a lot about it.'

'Some. There's a difference, for instance, between a fertility spell and a fertility rite. The latter is just another name for a

good old orgy, with as much wine, women and song as can be arranged.'

'That sounds like the sort of thing we want.'

'Right . . . but we don't seem to be finding it at the moment. Fertility spells are far more common. Say there's someone in the coven who knows of a childless couple, and they're friends of his. He knows a baby would make a lot of difference to them, and as most witchcraft these days is white magic - for the good - he can do something about it.'

'Would the couple know that a spell is being worked?' I asked.

'They might do . . . but probably not. All he would have to do is to get the meeting to artificially inseminate the woman, in a symbolic way. When this has been done, a totem is planted near the couple's house.'

I stared at him. 'What do you mean, inseminate the woman symbolically?'

'I'm not sure exactly. They might use some part of her body, which would be obtained for the ceremony: nail-parings, hair or something like that. Even a photo would do . . . witches use a lot of photographs these days. Then they'd invoke one of the old gods of fertility on that sample, and as I said, bury it and a few other things near where she lives. It sounds a bit chancy, but I was reading up on it once, and I gather it's usually effective.'

'But this is horrible,' I said, aghast at the idea. 'Suppose the couple don't want a child?'

'Well the spell wouldn't be worked unless they did. Or else, the magic would be black; willing a child on to a couple who didn't want one. If it's black magic, you're into a whole different scene, one much nastier and more dangerous.'

I felt an unpleasant sensation creeping down my spine.

'You're putting me off, Martin,' I said.

'Sorry, but you did ask. I don't think we need to worry. It's quite clear that we've fallen in with a white-magic crowd. And a pretty anaemic white-magic crowd at that. Look at it this way, the witchcraft aside the people who go are all quite ordinary middle-class, bourgeois people. They've got their mortgage and kids to worry about, and a job to look after. They know the implications of black magic, and steer clear of it. It's really very rare, believe me. I should reckon that if they got any whiff of a heavy, black magic scene developing, they'd run away from it as fast as anyone. All they want is the sex and conversation, and a slightly alarming touch of the supernatural. At a guess, I'd say they go to the covens for much the same reason as some people go on a roller-coaster . . . it shakes you up a bit at the

time, and it looks more dangerous than it actually is, but it feels great afterwards.'

'I think.' I said deliberately, 'that when I've got this story safely written and out of the way, I'm going to stick to roller-coasters.'

'Me too. I told you when all this began, that most journalists don't like witchcraft stories. You're beginning to find out why.'

'But we go on with it?' I said.

'Of course. But let's not get too involved.'

'I'll drink to that.'

I got up and headed for my desk.

'By the way,' he called after me. 'You haven't forgotten that we're going to a concert tonight?'

'No,' I said, having forgotten. I'd been intending to wash my hair and have an early night. 'Will you pick me up?'

'Seven-thirty.'

'Right.'

I sat down to do some subbing for Constance, and try to think up some better way of getting the story I wanted.

CHAPTER 14

Exactly one week later, Martin and I were in the throes of another conversation, but this one was tainted with a note of expectancy. We were killing time until the messenger from the processing laboratory called, and brought us the photos Martin had managed to shoot off at the weekend.

In a way, our expectations about the coven seemed to be borne out. It wasn't just because they had a new member, first in me and then in Martin, that they played a restrained game of witchcraft. That third meeting was in no way more spectacular than either of the previous two. Both Martin and I had been more at ease, and we'd taken the opportunity to circulate more.

But once again, after a brief ceremony, the formalities were over and we had the time to do as we chose. Everything really was most free and easy, and not at all good copy.

After half an hour of mindless chit-chat with the others, I was beginning to despair of getting any copy at all out of the venture, and Martin said the same to me about the photos.

I said to him quietly: 'Why don't I do a dance?'

'On your own?'

'Why not?'

'O.K. Then perhaps one or two of the others might join in.'

'Wish me luck.'

As usual, music was being piped in from somewhere, so I waited until a number came on that had a distinct rhythm, then moved out into the centre of the floor and began swaying in time to it. I felt a bit silly, prancing around all on my own in the nude, but felt it was in a good cause. I noticed Martin moving around, hoping to catch the best angles for his photos.

After ten minutes on my own, I was beginning to wonder if it had been a good idea. The same air of desultory boredom reigned. A few people had gone out of the chapel – presumably to visit the facilities in the main house – but the majority still lounged around.

Soon, I gave up, waving a dismissive hand at Martin. He grinned at me, and went to get a drink.

After that, I had spent some time with Jiri, which led, naturally enough in my view, to a fairly extended tour of duty up in the main house.

I got home late, slept through most of Saturday, and spent the Sunday pottering around my room, cleaning up.

Now, on the Monday, Martin and I were still curious to see the shots.

At about half-past eleven, the messenger arrived, and Martin collected the pictures from the reception area.

Together we looked at them . . . twelve in all.

'It was difficult,' Martin said immediately. 'You know what it was like.'

'Yes . . . but it's the only hope we've got.'

He spread them out. I had to marvel at the results given by the tiny camera. Every shot was in crystal-clear focus, the colours were good, and the exposure was exactly right.

However . . . there was one snag. All the shots were of me.

Martin looked at me unhappily.

'It was the best I could do, Sally,' he said. 'You were the only bit of action in the room.'

'Hmm. . . .'

I was, of course, interested to see the pictures. Who doesn't like looking at photographs of themselves? But we were supposed to be journalists reporting a story.

'What do you think?'

'Well . . . they're good shots.'

'Beautiful. But can you hang a story around them?'

'I can hang a bloody good autobiography,' I said. 'But that's not the point. Do you realise that if I hadn't been out there prancing about, you wouldn't have any photos at all?'

'Only too well.' He collected them up. 'I supposed we ought to show them to Constance.'

'Couldn't we just forget it?'

He shook his head. 'We're running out of time. If we don't show Constance some results - however minor - she'll want to know what we've been doing.'

'Looking at those, she won't find it hard to imagine,' I said.

I followed him down the corridor to Constance's room. As luck would have it, Maggie was in there with her.

'Ah, our two satanists,' said Constance. 'How are you getting on?'

'We've got some photos,' said Martin, 'and thought you might like to see them.'

'It's the story I'm more concerned about,' said Constance.

'But let's see them anyway.'

She spread them out in front of her, and Maggie peered over her shoulder to see too. When Maggie realised who the pictures were of, she glanced up at me and grinned. I flushed at once.

'You photograph well, Sally.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'These are all of you,' Constance said.

'Yes, I -'

'I can explain that,' Martin said quickly. 'We were trying out the camera. I hadn't used it before, and I got Sally to dance around for me.'

'Did you take any others?'

'Er - no.'

'Why not?' said Constance, looking at us in a concerned way.

'It was a quiet night. There weren't many people there.'

Constance picked up one of the prints, and regarded it closely.

'There seem to be quite a few people in the background,' she said. 'At least a dozen.'

I glanced at Martin. I was getting the sort of feeling I used to get at school, when hauled before the headmistress to account for myself. Neither of us said anything.

'What are they doing?' Constance went on.

Martin took the print, and he and I looked at it together. I was whirling around in the foreground, but just as Constance had said there were lots of the other coven-members in the background.

'They're . . . eating,' I said lamely. 'And drinking.'

'Eating what? Ambrosia? And what were they drinking . . . spirits?'

'Er . . . sandwiches and coffee,' I said.

Constance threw the photographs on to the desk. 'What do you think, Maggie?'

'I think they're good photos of Sally,' she said. 'But I thought this was going to be an expose article. The only thing exposed here is Sally's beautiful body.'

'The other girls weren't quite as good-looking as Sally,' said Martin gallantly.

'Those I can see look O.K.,' said Constance.

'I know,' I said, having come to what I saw as being the only logical conclusion. 'We could say that I was a witch . . . I don't mind that. We needn't mention that the photo is of me, the reporter writing the story.'

Maggie and Constance exchanged glances, and I knew at once I'd said the wrong thing.

'Look Sally . . . put it this way: no. We're going to do this story properly, or not at all. If word ever got out that we'd faked the photos in our first issue, our credibility would be sunk on everything else we tackled. Is that clear?'

I nodded. 'Sorry I mentioned it.'

Constance piled up the photos and passed them back to Martin.

'Right. You two have got exactly one week to turn in finished copy and photos for the story. If it's not in by then, we're dropping the whole idea. You'll be put on to other work. Maggie . . . you could find something for Sally to do, couldn't you?'

She nodded, not meeting my eye.

'One week,' Constance repeated. 'Now get going.'

Martin and I left her office feeling as if we had been thoroughly chewed. And what an incentive to get on with it! Maggie's filing . . . ugh!

After a day of fruitless mind-searching, endless phone-calls and intense thought, Martin and I were no nearer the solution than at any time. All we had established for definite was that witchcraft took place in London, that it was a frequent and almost normal pastime for many people, and that nothing much happened.

It was mundane, dull, and nothing to get uptight about.

Certainly, no one was exploiting anyone, so far as we could tell.

'But there must be something more in it!' I said to Martin for the umpteenth time.

'Perhaps they have cream buns sometimes,' he said.

At one point I was all for going back to Constance, and telling her that there was no story, and where was Maggie's filing.

'No,' said Martin. 'We've got another week. There's a feeling in my bones about this. I can't determine it, but somehow I feel we've been missing the point. There's a story there, and it's a good one, but we're not finding it.'

'I'm not finding it, you mean. It's my can to carry.'

'O.K., I just take the pictures. But you know what I mean.'

'So how do we find the good story?'

He shrugged expansively. 'Luck, I guess.'

'And that's the one commodity that's in short supply.'

'Unless we could get a witch to work up a good-luck spell for us.'

I jumped. What an inspiration.

'Great!' I said. 'Or were you joking.'

He spread his arms on the desk-top, and lowered his forehead to rest on them. 'I was joking,' he said indistinctly.

After work, Martin and I went to a restaurant to eat dinner, and then we went on to see a film in the West End. He dropped me off at my bedsitter at eleven o'clock. I went in, undressed, and ran a bath. Half an hour later, I was sitting in my dressing-gown, cutting my toenails and wondering whether or not to have one last cigarette before turning in. Then the doorbell went. I thought it was probably either a mistake, or someone just fooling around, so I didn't answer it. Then it rang again, insistently. I went downstairs, clutching my dressing-gown around me.

It was Jiri.

'Sally, can I come in?'

'I was just about to go to bed.'

'I - I'm sorry. Is important.'

'How long will you be?'

He shrugged. 'Ten minutes, maybe.'

'O.K., I led the way upstairs.'

As I closed my door, I noticed for the first time that he was carrying a large suitcase.

'What's in there?' I said.

'A few things.' He took both my hands in his. 'Sally, you help me, right?'

'If I can. What's up?'

He was trembling. He took off his overcoat, and laid it on the back of the chair. Then he reached into his breast-pocket, and produced a piece of card. He passed it to me.

'Is this,' he said. 'Is this that is wrong.'

It was a photograph of a young man, whom I recognised with some difficulty as Jiri. It had evidently been taken some years before, and Jiri was looking thinner, and with short hair. The scene was of a lake in the mountains, and on a pebbly beach Jiri stood in bathing-trunks, with his arm around a young girl. They were both smiling happily.

I gave it back to him. 'It's good.'

He shook his head firmly. 'Is not good. Do you not see what this is?'

I said truthfully: 'It's a rather old and battered photograph of you and an attractive girl. Whoever has been keeping the photo has not been looking after it well, as it is damaged.'

'Ha!' he said triumphantly. 'Is damage which is not good.'

He held it out to me again. I saw that a cigarette had been allowed to rest on the picture, charring the paper brown.

'Where is the burn?' he said.

'On you. Just on your chest.'

He pounded his chest demonstratively. 'On my chest. No! On my heart!'

I frowned.

'I don't get it,' I said.

'They are trying to kill me. This is a threat.'

'I'm going to make some cocoa,' I said. 'Want one?'

He shook his head, then nodded. I went to the gas-ring, and began to boil up some milk. As I did so, Jiri paced the carpet nervously. He was obviously dying to get it all out, so when I sat down with the two mugsfuls of cocoa, I gave him my best reassuring smile, and asked him to tell me all about it.

At first he bumbled and spluttered in his attempts to get it off his chest, and what with the language difficulty I had trouble following him at first. In the end, he calmed down a little, and I began to get the gist of it.

It seemed that the girl in the photograph was called Kveta, and he and she were engaged to be married. His own father was a craftsman machinist, but her father was a top civil servant. His family were proud of the engagement, because it would almost certainly ensure that his chosen career in journalism would now be successful. The photo was taken on their last holiday together in the mountains.

'Your last holiday?' I said. 'But what - ?'

'Kveta is dead, I think.'

He told me what had happened. Kveta's father had been a strong supporter of Mr Dubcek, and during the long 'Prague summer' had come to prominence. He - Jiri - had written many articles for his newspaper about the new regime, and how it was

going to bring prosperity and democracy to Czechoslovakia. But then the Russians had entered Prague, and the brief respite was over.

Kveta and her father were forced into hiding. Jiri stayed on in Prague, not daring to get in touch with them. He was questioned closely as to their whereabouts and although his own reputation was at stake, he managed to keep his information to himself. Then one day, the newspaper received a report that Kveta's father had been shot trying to leave Czechoslovakia. Of Kveta herself, there was no word.

The next day, Jiri was visited by the secret police, and informed that he was to be charged with sedition. Wasting no time, Jiri contacted the political underground, and the very same night was smuggled across the border into Austria. From there, he had gone to France, and then to England. He was still being hounded by the Czech authorities, and still felt himself to be on the run.

'There's no chance that you will ever go back?' I said.

'Never!' he said emphatically. 'It is home . . . but I will not go back. Unless they make me.'

'But they can't touch you here,' I said.

He shrugged, and went on with his story.

In England, he did what he could to learn of Kveta's whereabouts, but it was almost impossible. The most hopeful news – if hopeful was the right word – was that Kveta had been arrested and was now in a forced-labour camp. But the evidence was that she had been shot with her father. Jiri told me this calmly, and without emotion.

'It is five years since I have been seeing her,' he said simply.

In desperation, Jiri had managed to contact a witchcraft group in London. He had been brought up in the countryside, and was already familiar with recourse to the supernatural, and to him it seemed the logical thing to do. His motives, he said, were to see if the witches could locate Kveta for him, and somehow reunite them.

But the months and years had passed, and nothing had been done. Now, Kveta was just a memory.

'But why are you frightened now?' I said.

'Because they know.'

He had made the mistake, he said, of letting the witches know his background. This he had obviously had to do for them to help him, but now it was valuable information, and they were using it as a threat against him.

They used him for many of their more difficult jobs. It was he who would be sent out to deliver their 'black totems', he who

would make the threatening phone-calls to intimidate victims of Black Mass, he who was called upon to do many of the tedious jobs organising various functions.

'They hold me, Sally. All the time, this threat that they will betray me to the authorities. So I have to do what they say.'

But recently, he had changed his mind about co-operating with them. He had been offered a job in America, and wanted to go . . . but the witches were using their threats to hold him. They had ordered him to do a job last week, and he had refused.

'Who are these people who control you?' I said. 'Are they the people at the meetings I go to?'

He laughed. 'No . . . they are O.K. I don't know who these people are. They telephone me, I get letters. But now I refuse.'

As a result of this refusal, he had been sent the photograph. He did not know where they had got it; in fact, he would dearly love to know how they had found it. To his knowledge, there had only ever been one copy of it, and he had that framed at home. But it existed without doubt, and they had used it to threaten him.

The cigarette-burn on the heart was a clear witch-threat. We have the power to kill you, and we will.

'So why do you come to see me?' I said.

'I want to hide, Sally. They know where I am at my flat, and they can reach me. I want to hide.'

'But if they're as all-powerful as you seem to think, it won't do any good just to run away.'

I immediately regretted saying this, because from the expression this brought to his face I realised I had only confirmed his fears.

'I suppose, though,' I went on quickly, 'that to lie low for a few days won't hurt. At least they wouldn't be able to telephone you.'

His face brightened.

'I stay with you, right?' he said.

The penny dropped about the suitcase.

'One night,' I said.

'But I thought. You are a good witch, you could help me with magic.'

Eh? I thought. Eh? What's this?

'Me . . . a good witch?' I managed to say.

'You are so kind, so gentle. You work spells with me to fight the evil men.'

'But I'm no witch,' I protested.

'You go to the meetings. Why, if you are not a witch?'

'Because . . . Well, because I'm curious.'

'You don't know magic?'

'Not a scrap of it. If I knew magic, I'd have won the pools five years ago, and wouldn't be having to work for a living.'

'But, I thought. . . .'

'No, Jiri. I'm not a witch, I can't help you that way.'

He looked really glum.

'I can help you practically,' I said. 'If you want to stay the night, that's O.K. And if you like, in the morning I'll help you look for another room. But if you're expecting me to boil up bat's blood and leg of toad, forget it.'

'Do you understand my danger?'

I remembered something Martin had once said, about the way witches threaten each other. A witch can boil up spells until he's blue in the face, and he won't hurt a hair on the head of a sceptic. But one meaningful look at a believer, and he's got him in the palm of his hand. I wasn't sure whether you'd class me as either (perhaps an open-minded sceptic, of you like), but Jiri was certainly up there bopping with the believers. They'd decided to scare the pants off him by implying threats, and Jiri was playing along just as they wanted.

But it was a sincere enough belief and fear, so I couldn't see any other way than playing along with it. If I tried to reason with him, who knows what his reaction might be? He might think I was one with them, whoever they might be.

So I said to him: 'Jiri, I understand the danger. I'll do what I can.'

'I stay the night?'

'I've already said that's O.K.'

'Thank you, Sally.' With that, he jumped up and planted a big, passionate kiss on my forehead. Well, it would have been more passionate somewhere else, but he did his best.

A bit later, as we snuggled up together in my rather small bed, he told me the latest job he'd been given to do. This was the one he'd refused.

Apparently, this year was a big one in the witches' calendar, and the coming weekend was the biggest one of the year. To celebrate it, the hierarchy of witchcraft wanted to launch the biggest fertility-rite in the history of British Wicca. They'd found an old, abandoned mansion in the heart of the Wiltshire countryside, and were going to move in, *en masse*, for the entire weekend, and lay themselves silly. But the trouble was that witchcraft is a mainly-male pastime, and there was a shortage of girls. Jiri had been instructed to find them some girls.

'How many?' I said, incredulously.

'Oh . . . a hundred or so.'

'But how could they expect you to do that?'

'I have done it before. You get to know these things. They get paid, a little, and they get food . . . London is full of such girls.'

'If you know where to find them . . . ' I said.

'I know.'

'So why don't you do it, and be finished with them?'

'Because, is not the finish. Always they find more to do. I got to stop soon, and now is the time.'

I laid there beside him for a few minutes, the old dried-up cogs beginning to turn. If this was so, then perhaps this was the sort of thing Constance was looking for. It could be a scoop, for me and for *Freedom Girl*. I suppose the fertility-rite thing would go on whether or not Jiri co-operated with them, but from my point of view the more girls who were talked into going, the better. Jiri said he knew how to find them – how would he know such a thing? – and I thought he should go on with it. But how to talk him into it?

I suddenly realised that Jiri was not quite so far relaxed as I'd thought. His hips were moving rhythmically, stroking his body to and fro against mine. His hand was cupping my breast and I could feel the warmth of his breath against my neck. His probings became more insistent, and I felt my own desires beginning to respond.

And then I thought of a way.

'No,' I said, fighting against all that was in me, and attempting to move away from him in the cramped bed.

'Oh SallySallySally,' he moaned passionately,

'No, Jiri. I don't feel like it.'

'So . . . we try old Czech custom.'

'Oooh!' I panted furiously, then with great determination pushed his fingers away. 'No, Jiri . . . I want to think.'

'What you think?'

'I think you should. . . . For God's sake!' I was beginning to sweat. I grabbed hold of his wrist, and held his hand forcefully away from my body. 'Listen, Jiri . . . will you listen?'

He slumped beside me. 'O.K.'

'Three things.' I was still panting. 'One . . . tomorrow you look for a bedsitter somewhere. Right?'

'Right.'

'Two . . . you go through with what the witches want you to do. Right?'

'But, no. . . .'

I relaxed my hold slightly, and allowed his fingers to brush lightly against my body.

'You do it. Right?'

'Right.'

I moved his hand away again. 'Three . . . I'll do what I can to help you afterwards. It won't be much, but I'll do what I can. Right?'

'Right.'

'Good. Now, you won't go back on any of that, will you?'

'You really help me?'

'If I can,' I said.

'O.K.'

I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

'Right, Jiri,' I said with renewed enthusiasm. 'On with the folk-lore!'

He needed no further encouragement. I moved back towards him in the bed, and he embraced me passionately. I felt his hand slide across my body,

'Oooh!' I said.

∴

CHAPTER 15

Jiri left with me in the morning, resigned to a day of trudging round London in search of a temporary room. I told him to call me at three in the afternoon, to let me know how he'd got on, then hurried off to the office.

When Martin arrived, I told him about my new idea.

He clicked his fingers. 'That's perfect, Sally. Just what we need.'

'So you think that's our story?'

'Yes . . . but it's your story Sally. You've done most of the work on it.'

'O.K., if you say so. But look, I've got so much to go on, now. We ought to discuss everything in great detail, but first I think we ought to talk to Constance.'

Again Martin shook his head.

'Your priorities are all wrong, Sally. I don't mind supporting you when things aren't so good, but now you've worked out what you want to write it's entirely your own work. You go and see Constance. I'm just the pictures-man.'

I grinned at him. 'If you say so.'

I sat at my desk and thought for half an hour, then went to

see Constance. This time, fortunately, there was no sign of Maggie.

'Hello, Sally. What's new?'

'Have you got a few minutes, Constance? I'd like to discuss the witchcraft story with you.'

'Yes, I'm free this morning. What's the problem?'

'No problem,' I said. 'At least, not now.'

Just then, the door opened and one of the typists came in with a cup of coffee for Constance. She told the girl to bring another one for me. When we both had our cups, I decided to come clean with her about everything.

'Up until last night,' I said, 'I was thinking I wasn't going to get you a story on the witchcraft.'

'But you and Martin sounded quite hopeful yesterday.'

'I know. But we were bluffing. The thing is, we discovered that apart from a few trappings of nudity and ritual, a coven is about as dangerous as a works-outing to Scarborough, and probably not as much fun. I could have written about it, I suppose, but it certainly wouldn't be the incisive journalism you want.'

'That's a bit of a surprise,' Constance said censoriously. 'After all, the sensational Sundays certainly get a lot of mileage out of the subject.'

'Maybe. All I'm saying is that unless you wanted me to make up a bit of fiction, what I had experienced myself wouldn't raise the eyebrows more than a couple of millimetres. But all that's changed.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'The weekend after next there's going to be a big meeting . . . as far as I can tell most of the witches in southern England will be there. And this is the point: they haven't got enough girls to go round, and they're coercing someone into finding them.'

'How?'

'I don't know, but he says he's done it before.'

Constance's expression changed. 'It's a man that's doing this?'

'Yes.'

'Ah . . . we might be on to something.'

'Now hold on,' I said, not wanting to paint poor Jiri too black. 'The man I know is being blackmailed by others into doing this. But these others are, as far as I can tell, men.'

'Let me get this right. They're short of girls, so they're black-mailing someone to obtain them. That right?'

I nodded.

'Where does this friend of yours expect to find these girls?'

'I don't know. He didn't seem too worried about it, said he'd done it before.'

'I think I know. Students, drop-outs, girls on holiday from a job. Not too difficult finding girls for a weekend, if there's something in it for them . . . the main problem, I should have thought, would be knowing how to contact them.'

'He's a journalist, I said, and immediately regretted it. I hastily added a brief outline of Jiri's background.

'O.K., well we won't go too far into that.' Constance doodled on her pad; peering over I could see that she was drawing a large, naked man. Well, well. 'Now,' she went on, 'I think you're on to a good story here Sally. But you say it's the weekend after next?'

'Yes, and that's why I had to tell you about it. I just can't produce the story before then. So if you can allow me another week I can promise to have the copy ready in the first couple of days the week after that.'

She nodded absently. 'That should be O.K. And Martin will go as well and get the pictures?'

'Leave it to me,' I said, and got up and headed for the door. I was suddenly enthusiastic about the whole thing, and wanted to get down to details with Martin.

'Sally?'

I turned. Constance was looking at me with a curious expression on her face.

'Yes?' I said.

'Um. . . I wonder . . . no, put it another way. I always give my writers a free rein when they work for me, and I don't want you to think I'm breathing down your neck. You write whatever you see best about this subject. But I was wondering . . . I'd be very interested in seeing what goes on at these covens you've been going to. And I'd like to attend this weekend meeting. Is there any chance you could introduce me?'

I stared at her blankly for a moment. It wasn't that I didn't understand, but I was overwhelmed with the idea of Constance in a flimsy nightie being plunged into a bath of cold water. It was a hell of an idea. And then I thought of an even better idea.

'Why not?' I said. 'And why not bring Maggie too . . . ?'

I'd made a promise, and that was I'd help Jiri. It was made in a rash moment, because I'd wanted something out of him . . . but in the cold light of day I suddenly realised that any day soon Jiri might expect me to deliver the goods. I made a mental

note to visit the local library, and see if I could dig out a book on good-luck spells.

In lieu of that, I asked Martin.

'Martin . . . ?' I said casually. 'Suppose someone asked you to help ward off black magic, what would you do?'

'What do you mean by ward off? With magic of my own?'

'Yes.'

'I'd run like fuck.'

'Thank you.'

'Who's been asking you to work magic spells?'

'Er - no one,' I said. 'As a hypothetical situation, I really meant.'

Martin was staring at me with a you-don't-fool-me expression on his face. Still. I was stuck with it now I'd started.

'Yes,' I went on. 'Suppose I happened to meet someone in the street and he - or it might be she, of course - said that witches were threatening him, and would I work a spell to save him . . . what should I do?'

'Like I just suggested . . . though you could do it less obscenely.'

'No, seriously.'

'O.K. Well, let us suppose this hypothetical person was receiving ill-will totems . . . stuffed hearts with spikes through them, or something. The best thing to do would be to send them back with a few of your own.'

'But that escalates the situation.'

'Not in witchcraft, it doesn't,' said Martin. 'The best form of defence is attack. Someone throws a spell at you, so you throw it right back at him with knobs on. Bad witches are basically bullies. So long as they can frighten you, they'll come on like Beelzebub himself. But give 'em a bit of their own, and you hit them where it hurts most.'

That set me thinking . . . and it obviously set Martin thinking too. He stood up and walked over to me.

'Sally . . . don't get involved. You're a journalist, never forget that. You're reporting on someone else's scene, not your own. Anyway, who's this hypothetical friend?'

'No one,' I said automatically.

'Let me see . . . it wouldn't be that Czechoslovakian stud, would it?'

'You've really got it in for him, just because he fancies me.'

'You haven't answered my question.'

'I don't intend to,' I said.

'So it is him. Well, I wish you luck. When someone starts sending you bits of old lizard-guts, don't come running to me for

help. Because that's what will happen. Looked at from the outside, this witchcraft lark is all bum and tit and a bit on the side . . . but the people at the top of the hierarchy take it very seriously indeed. It's a big bad scene, and I for one don't want anything to do with it.'

'Except as a photographer,' I said.

'Right. Speaking of which, I've got something to show you.'

The subject had been adroitly changed, to the satisfaction of us both. Martin opened a drawer in his desk, and pulled out a black cardboard box. He opened it, and inside was one of those expanded-polystyrene containers which always feel warm to the touch. He opened this with great care, and inside that was yet another box.

'Don't tell me,' I said. 'It's a Chinaman.'

Martin ignored me as ever, but this time I reckoned because the joke was near to truth and he wished he'd said something himself. Inside the third box was a fourth. He opened it, and this time withdrew a slim polythene envelope. We had finally arrived at our destination. Inside the envelope was a gold-plated and heavily-jewelled bracelet.

'No, Sally, not a Chinaman. Inside the Chinese boxes is a Japanese. What do you think of it?'

'It's beautiful,' I said, reaching out to take it from him. 'Is it for me?'

He pulled it away from my grasping grasp. 'No it's not. It's not for anyone. It's on strictly temporary trial loan, and my guts will be for garters if anything happens to it.'

'It'll look lovely on you, ducky,' I said.

'What do you think it is?'

'A bracelet, isn't it? Or a watch, perhaps?'

He shook his head. 'No . . . it's a camera. The very latest thing from Japan. Look, I'll show you how it works.'

He fitted it deftly on to his wrist, then held it up.

'You see, most of these jewels are very clever fakes. Just paste, I imagine. But that one there . . . see, the tiny diamond in the centre . . . that's the lens. The film runs through the strap, and you can take up to fifty shots on one film. All you do is put pressure here, and the camera automatically takes a picture, and winds on the next frame.'

'And you're going to use it at the coven . . . ?'

'That's right. That other one's O.K., but even that's bulky compared with this one. And now you say there's the weekend convention coming up, I can use it there too.'

Suddenly, I giggled. I hadn't yet told him that Constance . . . and possibly Maggie, too . . . was going to join the coven. When

I told him about Maggie he nearly fell off his chair laughing.

'That confirms it,' he said. 'I'm taking the camera to the next session. Can't wait to get a few candid shots of Maggie in a soaked see-through nightie.'

'That's unkind,' I said, but I was being a hypocrite. I couldn't wait either.

I went back to my desk, and put in some desultory time doing some sub-editing work. After that I had a chat with Penny and took an extended lunch-hour with the rest of the crowd down at the pub.

Shortly after we got back, Jiri rang me.

'Sally, I got a room,' he said.

'Oh, good. Where is it?'

He dictated an address and a phone-number, and I made a note of them.

'Today, I met a man. In the street. He did give me an envelope. It was another photo of me.'

'Had it been disfigured?' I said.

'Yes. I'm frightened.'

'Don't worry,' I said quickly, remembering my promise and Martin's words of comfort on the subject. 'Do you know who the man was?'

'No . . . but they following me.'

'Do you think they know where your room is?'

'Not sure.'

'Well don't worry,' I said softly into the phone, hoping Martin wouldn't overhear. 'I won't go back on my word. I know a way I can defend you . . . but you must do what they want you to do. Tell them now, and they'll lay off you at once. Get down to it, get those girls lined up for next weekend, and you can breathe easy for a while. If they start any more trouble after that, I'll sort 'em out.'

I hoped my voice sounded more confident than I felt.

Anyway, Jiri seemed happier. 'That good. I knew you were a witch really. I know you help me.'

'Yes, but you get on with it straight away. The sooner you start, the better it'll be for you.'

And me, I thought. Jiri outlined some of his plans about recruiting spare girl-talent for the weekend, but here his enthusiasm began to carry him away, and I couldn't follow everything he was saying. Somehow, though, I got a feeling a lot more people were going to learn about Slovak fertility rites. . . .

We rang off, leaving me feeling a bit better.

Just before finishing-time, Maggie walked past my desk. She came and stood behind me, slightly to one side, and leaned

down confidentially with her hands resting on my desk,

'I've spoken to Constance,' she said dramatically,

'What about?' I said brightly.

'Sssh. . . You know. About . . . Friday.'

'That's pay-day, isn't it?'

'No, dear. You know . . . the ceremony. I've decided to come along.'

I pretended to have only just understood. 'Oh good! Oh you'll have a ball!'

She glanced round the office anxiously. 'Don't let it get about, Got my reputation to protect.'

'Don't worry, Maggie,' I said reassuringly. 'It's all very innocent and harmless.'

She looked at me doubtfully,

CHAPTER 16

Martin and I stood together in the chapel, near the back. Just in front of me stood Jiri. Like everyone else in the coven we were wearing the long gowns and hoods, ready for the initiation-ceremony. It was almost midnight.

Under his gown, Martin was wearing the bracelet-camera. In ordinary circumstances, that bejewelled band might have looked somewhat extraordinary on a bloke's wrist, but in the environment of the coven-meeting it was quite in place. Nearly all the witches, male or female, wore some kind of jewellery. I wasn't sure why, but Martin had said once it was all part of the good-luck thing, and signified rank in some arcane manner. The more senior witches, like Sister Auriga, had such things as garters and wooden necklaces, while the others just had bangles on their wrists or simple pendants around their necks. In any event, to all intents the camera was completely invisible as such.

He had already taken one or two surreptitious shots, this time taking care not to concentrate on me too much. He had whispered to me a few minutes earlier that he was confident of having several good shots of the witches arriving.

Because we were near the back of the chapel, we could hear muted sounds coming from the ante-room. I heard the outer door open and close, then the sound of words. I couldn't make out what was said . . . but in a moment I heard a familiar sound:

the splashing of water. I smiled to myself. A minute or two passed, and then the door opened.

Constance came in with Sister Auriga. As was to be expected, Constance was soaked from head to toe, the skinny white nightie clinging to her body. I was amazed to realise that Constance had a beautiful body, and had never thought about that before. Martin had noticed this too, and was looking at her with renewed interest.

I gave Constance a reassuring wink, and she responded.

Sister Auriga said in a loud voice: 'Stay here, initiate!'

She took a few steps forward, and bowed expansively towards the altar. Then she turned, and walked with affected majesty outside again.

Now it was Maggie's turn.

'O.K.?' I said to Constance.

'Bloody freezing,' she whispered back.

'*Silence!*' The voice boomed from hidden loudspeakers, making us all jump.

I froze into immobility, and waited.

Once more the outer door could be heard opening and closing, and once again I could just detect the sound of voices.

Then: '*What do you mean, a bath?!?*'

Sister Auriga's muttering could be heard.

'Like hell you do!' Pause. 'Get your hands off me!' Pause. 'What do you think I am, a dyke?' Pause. 'Help! Someone, help!' Splash. Splutter. 'Get off - ' Splash. Splutter.

I couldn't help it, I had to catch Martin's eye. We made spluttering noises of our own . . . of laughter. Just beside me, Constance was obviously having difficulty keeping a straight face.

There was an incredible amount of splashing and shouting going on in the ante-room. What the other witches waiting must have thought I can't imagine. There was more shouting - incoherent this time - and then we heard the slamming of the outer door. A few seconds of silence passed. Then the inner door opened.

For the first time in my experience of the coven, the formality of the initiation-ceremony was broken. As Sister Auriga came in, all the assembled witches turned to look at her, curious to see what had happened.

She stood there looking somewhat abashed. Her gown was soaked with water, the hood had been ripped right back and her hair was all over the place. She was obviously out of breath. She glared balefully in my direction - Maggie was, after all, someone I had tried to introduce to the coven - and straightened her

gown, trying to collect the formal manner so beloved of these ceremonies.

'Well?' boomed the voice from the loudspeakers,

'The . . . second initiate failed the first test, sire.'

'Very well. We shall proceed without her.'

Constance had been grinning broadly all this time, but she was shaken out of this by Sister Auriga, who grabbed her arm forcefully and propelled her forward. As they approached the centre of the circle inscribed in the floor, the Master stepped out of the shadows. He looked pretty uptight to me. I wouldn't have been in Constance's shoes – had she been wearing any – for anything.

The Master hurried through the preliminaries, then got Constance on to the altar. I was a bit concerned for her, for his manner and behaviour were very rough indeed.

In a few minutes it was over, and the atmosphere relaxed a little as he went back into his hidy-hole behind the altar.

At once, people were talking and laughing, speculating about the mysterious – to them – initiate who had refused the cold bath. I went over to see Constance.

'You O.K.?' I said, still concerned about the rough sexual treatment she'd been afforded at the hands of the Master.

'Mind your own business,' she said, grinning broadly.

'All right . . . but, I was just a bit worried.'

'What about? It was fun. No wonder you and Martin have been keeping all this to yourself for the last couple of weeks.'

Speaking of Martin, I saw him making a bee-line for us. Constance, who was of course still naked, turned to him.

'Hi,' she said with a big welcoming grin.

'Hello, Constance,' he said, throwing off his own gown. 'Let's go and have a drink.'

'Sally!'

I turned. It was Jiri. I caught a glimpse of Martin and Constance heading for the drinks-table before Jiri had me cornered.

'I got to talk.'

'I know,' I said. 'But not here.'

'Is very important.'

'O.K. . . . but later.' I looked over my shoulder. Martin's arm was lying casually around Constance's waist. Hmm. 'Let's go and have a drink.'

He followed me sheepishly towards the table, and we stood there sipping our glasses of wine. My left ear was bending towards Martin and Constance, trying to hear what they were saying. It was difficult: their heads were close together and they

were talking quietly. Whatever else, I was sure it wasn't shop-talk about *Freedom Girl*.

'Let me show you the rest of the house,' Martin said loudly.

Constance finished her drink, and put the glass back on the table.

'Yes, Sally tells me the house is very interesting.'

Oh, did I? That was a slip. Martin winked at me, unfairly I thought, and propelled Constance towards the exit. All I could do was stand and watch. I could hardly come on all possessive – for reasons already stated – but however broadminded one tries to be about these things, it's no joke watching your best boyfriend going off with your boss. Presumably, Martin thought I was all stacked up with Jiri for the evening, but if only he knew what a big heavy scene that was becoming, and, old Slovak custom or no, Jiri was a bit of a drag.

'Martin!' I suddenly called, hurrying after them. They had reached the door, and they both turned as I called.

'What is it?' Martin said.

'The bracelet,' I hissed. 'You're not thinking of using it outside, are you?'

Constance giggled, and I could gladly have landed one on her.

Martin looked disconcerted and glanced from one of us to the other. Suddenly, he wrenched the bracelet off his wrist and thrust it at me.

'Here! You take the shots.'

'O.K.' I slipped it on, and they made their undignified exit. I went back to Jiri.

'You want upstairs, in house?'

'No, Jiri. Let's have a sandwich.'

'Is urgent we talk.'

'Maybe,' I said. 'But I've got things to do first.'

'Is nothing to do here . . . except eat.'

'O.K., I'll have to come clean with you.' I glanced round furtively. 'Look . . . do you know what this means?'

I half-closed my eyes, and looked sideways at him.

'No.'

'It's a closely-guarded secret,' I said. 'It's called the witches' eye. If you look like that at another witch, you can find out a lot about him. You still want me to help you?'

'Yes!' He nodded so eagerly he nearly butted me.

'Right . . . well I've got to go round and give the witches' eye to everyone here. That's going to help me find out a bit more about what's going on here. Then I might be able to decide who it is who's pushing you around. When I've worked that out I

can do something to ward 'em off. Got that?"

He nodded again.

'O.K., so leave me in peace for a bit. I want a sandwich anyway, and in about half an hour, I'll tell you what I've found out.

'Good. I go have coffee.'

'You do that.'

I left him, and went over to help myself from the rapidly-dwindling pile of sandwiches. Every time I thought Jiri was looking at me, I gave him a wink . . . but what I was actually doing was sizing things up for photographs. As before, there wasn't much going on, though a couple of the men were in an animated conversation with two girls. I wandered over in their direction.

I still wasn't sure exactly how to use the camera, so I made a big gesture of scratching my nose, holding my wrist so that the cluster of fake jewels were pointed in roughly the right direction. Then, as Martin had shown me, I squeezed the back of the strap, and was instantly rewarded with a slight clicking feeling inside the bracelet.

I moved round to the other side, and saw that one of the men was standing so that his arm was resting lightly against one of the girls' naked breasts. I snapped off another shot. They obviously had no conception of what I was up to. I looked around, hopefully in search of signs of an orgy developing. No . . . the coven was its usual blameless self. It really was the craziest place. All these middle-class people, stark naked and chatting away as innocently as if they were at a dinner-party. I moved over to the altar.

Here the lights shone down across the inscribed circle, sending up a dazzling reflection. I sat down on the altar, munching my sandwich, and waited for someone to walk past. As they did so, I brought my hand up as if eating my sandwich, and shot off a snap.

I realised that Jiri was watching me, so for effect I narrowed my eyes, and glanced over towards one of the men.

Much to my horror, he jumped to his feet, raising his hand,

'In the name of the Great Mother!' he roared.

Everything stopped . . . people looked round.

'Eh?' I said. He was still raising his hand, palm towards me.

'*In Horned Darkness, in unholy Light,*' he intoned. '*Be thy eye away, away from me!*'

'I beg your pardon?' I said, popping the rest of the sandwich into my mouth.

'The eye . . . you were putting the eye on me!'

'No, I wasn't,' I said, beginning to get alarmed.

'I saw you.' He looked round at the others for confirmation, 'This she-witch, I saw her make the Evil Eye at me!'

For some unknown reason, I felt impelled to take a photograph at that moment. No one noticed.

'I'm . . . sorry,' I said, for want of anything better. 'I didn't mean it.'

'No one makes the Evil Eye without meaning!'

I was definitely the centre of attention. Everything had stopped, and to my sudden alarm I saw out of the corner of my eye that the Master had come out of his hidy-hole,

'What's going on?' he said loudly.

'This she-witch . . . she put the naked Evil on me.'

'Is that correct, Sister?'

I opened my mouth. 'No. . . .'

'Hold!' The Master took my arm, and pulled me into the centre of the ring. The man who had accused me stepped in too.

'If you have a grievance,' the Master said to me, 'state it now, for all to hear.'

I swallowed. 'Look . . . can't we talk about this sensibly? It was an accident. I got a speck of dust in my eye, and I just happened to be looking his way.'

The Master stared at me for a full thirty seconds.

Then he said to the man: 'Does that satisfy you, Brother?'

I grinned at the man, giving him my best helpless-little-girl smirk. He stared straight back, and for a second or two I thought I detected real fear in his expression. Then he straightened.

'It satisfies me. It was a coincidence. Nevertheless, I demand Recompense, as is rightly mine.'

'Recompense is granted,' said the Master. 'She is yours for an hour.'

He grabbed my wrist again, and pulled me towards the man, suddenly, I found I was enclosed in his grasp.

The Master went silently back to his place behind the altar . . . as far as he was concerned the incident was closed. But not for me it wasn't.

The man scooped me up in his arms, and marched full-pelt for the door.

He kicked it open, pushed through the ante-room, and out across the garden towards the main house. We were halfway up the stairs when Constance and Martin came out of one of the rooms, arms around each other. I was in view long enough for them to recognise me, and then I was inside the room, alone with the man.

Without preamble, he started to claim his recompense . . . and

I don't think I need to go into details. Well, once I'd got over the surprise, all I could do was remember the old adage: when all about you is lost, lie back and enjoy yourself. . . .

An hour later, give or take a few minutes, we were back in the chapel. The man left me, and went to join his friends; his honour, his manhood and, presumably, his security all intact. He hadn't even bothered to ask me my name, and I didn't know his.

As soon as I was on my own, I saw Jiri making one of his determined bee-lines for me. I looked round for escape; the last thing I wanted just at that moment was another heart-to-heart with him. I saw Martin and Constance, and waved to them. Trying to ignore Jiri, I moved towards them.

But just at that moment, the Master reappeared in full regalia, 'Sisters and Brethren!' he boomed. 'I will not interrupt the festivities for long. I have to announce that next week the usual coven-meeting will not take place. Instead, we will be celebrating the Unholy Festival of the Ram. As most of you know, this is an important Festival in our celebrations of all that is Dark, and it is essential that all attend. Sister Auriga will provide the details of where it is to be held . . . but be assured that this year the Festival of the Ram will be one to remember. Much preparation has gone into it.'

With that, he turned on his heel and vanished again. Strange bird.

Now there was no escaping Jiri. As soon as the Master had returned to wherever it was he went to, Jiri came over to me. He took me by the shoulders, and planted a big wet kiss on my lips,

'Sally . . . you magnificent!'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'You gave the witches' eye, and it had him worried!'

'Yes.' I frowned at him. 'Look, Jiri . . . don't start getting ideas. I don't think he is necessarily one of the people you have to worry about. Witches don't like having the eye put on them, that's all.'

'But did you find anything out?'

'Oh yes,' I said, thinking of the consequences of putting the Evil Eye on that chap. 'I found out a lot. . . .'

'So you can help me?'

'I think so.'

'Good, well I got news.' Jiri took me by the arm, and led me over to a quiet corner. 'I arranged for lots of girls to be there next week. Is what you wanted?'

'Yes. Keep co-operating with them. Don't queer my pitch now. It's going to take me a while to muster the magic I need.'

'So you coming to the Festival?'

'Yes . . . and I'm going to bring Constance and Martin too. Everyone has to go, right?'

'Right. There are witches from all over Southern England going to be there. Is great fun.'

'And,' I said, 'you've laid on the spare talent.'

He grinned. 'Is laid on . . . yes.'

'O.K., but I've got things to do. I'll be in touch.'

I left him, and went over to join Constance and Martin. I don't know what had happened between them, but there was a slightly bad feeling going on. Their first tiff . . . already?

'Hello Sally,' said Martin. Constance grinned at me.

'What do you think of all this?' I said to Constance.

She glanced quickly at Martin. 'It's very much as you said, Sally. Rather tame.'

Martin had the decency to blush.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said. 'Apart from not getting a story from it, I've always found it rather unusual.'

'Ah, but you're a specialist,' said Martin,

'Could be.'

'Anyway,' Martin went on, evidently wanting to change the subject, 'it looks as if next weekend is definitely on. Did you get any shots here?'

'A few,' I said. I slipped the bracelet off my wrist, and passed it back to him. He inspected it briefly (for damage?) then slipped it on to his own wrist.

'I think I'll try and get a shot of the Master,' said Martin. 'I gather you created quite a scene earlier.'

'It was nothing,' I said modestly. 'But it brought the gov'nor running.'

Martin glanced round. Things were finishing. Already, most of the coven-members had left. There were no sandwiches left, the coffee-pot was empty, and what few bottles of wine there were had been finished.

'I think I'm going home,' said Constance. 'Would you like a lift, Sally?'

'I'll come to,' said Martin.

And so that was that. We collected our clothes from the house, and Constance ran us home in her car,

CHAPTER 17

For old time's sake, I decided to hitch-hike down to Wiltshire. Constance tried to talk me into going down with her in the car . . . but in the end it was me who talked her into hitching with me.

So at about three o'clock on the Friday afternoon, we were out on the Great West Road, thumbing away.

Things didn't look too good, and I was beginning to regret my airy remarks to Constance that hitching a lift these days was as easy as falling off a log. Half an hour we'd been standing there in the sunshine, and not even a glimmer of hope so far.

'Are we in a good position?' Constance said doubtfully. 'They seem to be going very fast here.'

'This is O.K.,' I said determinedly, though I had to admit to myself that I was having my own doubts. We were just by a lay-by, about a hundred yards after a large roundabout. The best hitching-pitch in southern England, and no one took any notice. Trying to hitch from the centre of a bridge over the M.1 would have been more successful, the way things were going.

It had been a fairly uneventful week. Martin had the shots developed, and most of them had come out pretty well.

'Aren't they rather small?' I said critically, squinting at the tiny frames.

'They enlarge up. But that's a bit expensive, so it's not worth doing until we've got more photos to choose from. But I had a look at them in a special viewer at the processing-lab, and they're good enough to use. Colours are fine, focus is O.K. They'll be a little grainy, because of having to enlarge them so much, but I think that'll enhance the documentary feel to the story.'

So, curious as I was to see them properly, I had to wait.

There were only two other things worth remarking on. First, Maggie hadn't come in to the office on the Monday. A 'friend' telephoned Constance to say that Maggie had caught a cold, and was spending the day in bed. She came in on Tuesday, but we got hardly more than a glimpse of her. She went straight into her office, and rarely ventured out.

The other thing that happened was a phone-call from Jiri. He'd telephoned on the Friday morning, just as Constance, Martin and I were preparing to leave.

'Sally . . . you going to Wiltshire?'

'Yes, we're just getting ready.'

'I got a letter this morning. Something is up. They say that they have felt a threat to them from you.'

'Oh Christ, it's not that Evil Eye business again, is it?'

'Might be. They say it's O.K. for you to go, because they want many girls. But not your friend, Martin. They say he a bigger threat than you.'

'What have they got against him?' I said.

'I don't know. They very vague. They decided he is a threat, how I don't know. Magic, perhaps. It frightens me.'

'So if Martin turns up, they won't let him in and they probably wouldn't let me or Constance in either.'

'No.'

'Let me think.' I bit my lip. The thing was, I wanted Jiri to co-operate with these guys, whoever they were, because I wanted the weekend convention to go off the way *they* wanted it. Now that had back-fired on me a bit, because they didn't want Martin there. To keep things smooth, I had to go along with this. But what was a bit weird was the way they had picked on him. Was there some supernatural reason? Had they somehow divined that Martin intended to take pictures? But then . . . in almost the same sense I was an even bigger threat to them, what with my planned expose article and all. It was a bit mystifying.

'You still there, Jiri?'

'Yes.'

'Look . . . I'll try and talk Martin out of it, if I can. But he wants to come.'

'It will be dangerous for him if he comes.'

'Do you believe that?' I said.

'Yes I do. These people mean business.'

'O.K.'

So after that I'd had the pleasant task of trying to talk Martin out of coming. Of course, he resisted the idea on the grounds that it was bunkum. But . . . I'd pointed out to him that his name was specifically mentioned, and that if he tried to get in through the gate he just wouldn't make it.

'I could climb over the fence, I suppose?' he said.

'Yes. . . . But try and get in with Constance and me, and you'd spoil our chances too.'

'O.K.' He took the mini-camera out of its protective-wrapping.

'I suppose I'll have to trust you with this again. Take care of it.'

So leaving it at that, Constance and I had set off on our own, not at all sure of what we were going to find, not even sure of what we wanted to find,

After an hour of thumbing unsuccessfully, I reckoned desperate

measures were called for.

So did Constance. 'I thought you were the expert at this.'

'I am. But for some reason no one wants to stop today. I'll have to fall back on one of the tricks of the trade.'

'Learnt the hard way, I suppose,' said Constance.

'Let's say that in the past necessity has often had to be the mother of invention. Here, give me a hand.'

I glanced up at the sky. The sun beat down from a cloudless expanse. Both Constance and I were feeling the effects of the heat. Behind the lay-by, the ground dropped down to where a hedge formed the perimeter of the nearest field. I scrambled down towards it, and Constance followed. We pushed our way through.

'Right,' I said. 'Desperate measure number one.'

'There's more than one?'

'Eight in all . . . I once reached number seven before passing out.'

I slipped off my jacket, and draped it over the suitcase. Then I undid my blouse, and took off my bra. Traffic roared past only a few yards away, but we were quite invisible from the road. I hoped.

I pulled on my blouse again, this time not buttoning it up, but tying it loosely and suggestively at the front. I rummaged in my suitcase, and found a pair of jeans. I exchanged these for my skirt.

'Now you,' I said to Constance.

'Is it absolutely necessary?' she said.

'If you want a lift.'

She shrugged, and took off her outer clothes. At my suggestion, she took her bra off too. She had some jeans, but nothing really suitable for the top.

'I'll go like this,' she said, laughing so that her boobs danced up and down.

'We want a lift, not a multiple road-crash,' I said. 'Here, try this on.'

I gave her one of my tee-shirts, and she pulled it on. It fitted her snugly, exaggerating the round contours of her well-shaped breasts.

'That's fine,' I said. 'Now . . . I reckon we should be halfway to Wiltshire in a few minutes. Getting a lift using one of the desperate measures has its drawbacks, so follow my lead. I know what I'm doing. A little is permissible, but not too far.'

'A little what?' she said.

'You'll see,' I said grimly.

We packed our clothes back into the suitcases, and trudged

back to the side of the road. We had just put down our suitcases, and had raised our thumbs, when a car screeched to a halt beside us. There were two youngish men inside.

I winked at Constance. 'See?'

'Where you going, girls?'

'As far as Marlborough,' I said.

The one in the passenger-seat hopped out, and helped us with our cases. By a clever contrivance, he managed to get into the back seat with Constance, leaving me in front with the driver. I think I'd have preferred it to have been the other way round; after all, the driver normally has his hands full . . . and I was supposed to be the old hand at this.

We drove for some way without anything untoward happening. The two men were pleasant enough, but I could tell they thought they'd landed themselves with a couple of right ravers. The number of double entendres and euphemisms that were floating around just wasn't true. Any minute now, I thought, the car will be running out of petrol, or they'll pull off the road to stretch their legs. . . .

After about half an hour we fell into silence. I tried to keep the conversation up, but the driver only grunted his replies, and all was silent at the back. It was that silence that was beginning to alarm me, but I didn't like to turn round. I could hear faint sounds, but couldn't really identify them. Then I noticed that the driver kept looking at the rear-view mirror, and was grinning to himself.

'Like to stop for a bit?' he said.

'No thanks,' I said, and turned round. 'Cigarette anybody?'

Constance was looking at me with a 'help' expression on her face. The bloke sitting next to her had his hand up her tee-shirt and was gripping one of her breasts.

'Thanks,' he said, reaching out with his free hand. Constance leaned forward to take hers, obviously hoping to pull free . . . but he moved his hand with her.

'Got a light?' I said to him, and then he had to let go as he fumbled with a box of matches. Constance straightened her clothes, and moved away a little. I nodded to her. That was too far . . . the rules of the game say that eyeing a hitch-hiker in come-on clothes is all right, but not groping her. A grope costs them a meal . . . and there's more to pay for more, if you see what I mean.

We continued on our way. At every opportunity the driver was eyeing me, and that was O.K. On another occasion he reached out across me on the pretext of making sure my door was firmly closed, and on the return journey his hand 'accidentally' brushed

against me. Well, that was a bit naughty, but not as verboten as a straight-out grope. Anyway, we had nothing against them . . . they were pleasant enough, but our main motive had been to get a lift, not get laid.

In a couple of hours we were approaching Marlborough, and the two fellas made what appeared to me to be one last desperate attempt. The driver started asking me about where we were staying in Marlborough, and how they might be able to break their own journey there too, and perhaps we might all like to go out for a meal this evening. . . . I told him 'no', but rewarded him with a big smile. He was getting the hang of it after all.

They dropped us in the centre of town, and Constance and I carried our suitcases for about half a mile, until we were well out on one of the side-roads. I was doubtful about our chances of getting a lift here – main roads are always the safest bet – but we had been thumbing for only two minutes when a mini-bus stopped beside us. There were two fellas, and six girls inside. They greeted us friendly enough . . . and in a moment we discovered why. They were going to the same place as us. I was glad to see that we wouldn't be the only young people there; from what they said we definitely got the impression that they were out for a weekend of sunshine, music and sex. Witchcraft wasn't mentioned once.

Half an hour outside Marlborough, the driver turned off the road, on to one of those one-track country lanes. We followed this for about three miles, then turned on to a cart-track. This led out on to another country road, then we followed another track, and bumped across a field. There wasn't a town or a village in miles. Coming out on to yet another lane, we turned in a short while into an open driveway which was overhung by unkempt trees. A temporary barrier had been erected, and this was staffed by two middle-aged men wearing suits. We were asked for our names, and these were compared with a vast register held by one of the men. We were ticked off on the register before being allowed to pass. I noticed, as the mini-bus accelerated away, that in the background there were four men standing in the trees with large dogs on leads.

We were directed into a large car-park, already half-full of vehicles, and from here we walked to the house. We were shown to a large room, in which literally dozens of mattresses and blankets had been scattered, and told to leave our belongings there. A large agenda had been thumb-tacked to the door, and here we learnt what was in store for us.

Adoration of the Unholy. Fertility celebration. A Call to the Wild Spirit. Fertility celebration. Individual requests to the

Great Mother. Fertility celebration. Mass singing and dancing, Fertility celebration.

And that was just the agenda for the first evening. And so it went, a rather obscure-sounding series of black-magic ceremonies, liberally interspersed with fertility-rites. In other words, if you didn't get laid this weekend, you might as well go jump in the lake. Yes, a lake was provided.

I don't know what powers the organisers had over the weather, but either by design or chance they had picked a marvellous weekend. Although it was now late afternoon, the temperature was still high. I had a word with Constance, and we agreed that what we were already wearing was enough. We went downstairs,

In the hallway, a young man demanded our registration-money. Ten pounds . . . each. We went back upstairs, and found the money.

'It can come out of expenses,' said Constance.

Downstairs again we paid up, and were rewarded with an indelible-ink stamp on our wrists. Mine went just above Martin's precious mini-camera.

'Cheques made payable to S. Atan Esq?' I quipped.

The young man didn't even smile. We passed on out into the grounds, and joined the many people already there.

'Oh God,' Constance said. 'I think we're over-dressed.'

She was right. About half the people milling around were completely naked, most of the others just wore the bottom half of bikinis or swimming trunks; a few, like us, were wearing casual clothes.

'Want to strip off?' I said to her.

'Not yet. It'll be cool in an hour or so, anyway.'

'O.K. . . . but we don't want to be conspicuous. As soon as the majority have got undressed, we do too. Right?'

Constance nodded, and we walked together towards one of the large marquees which had been erected in the grounds. At every possibility, I took a snapshot. I had several replacement films in the back pocket of my jeans, and Martin had shown me how to re-load the camera.

'Buckshot effect, Sally,' he had told me. 'Shoot off as many pictures as you can, and you'll be sure to have at least a few which will be publishable.'

Inside the marquee it was much warmer. At several long tables, an extravagant buffet-meal had been laid out, and dozens of people were helping themselves. It was stiflingly hot, and the longer Constance and I stayed inside the more aware we became that we were, as predicted, becoming conspicuous. Without a word, Constance took off her tee-shirt and jeans. I took off my

blouse, and we stuffed the discarded garments into Constance's duffel-bag.

'I'll leave it at being topless for the moment,' I said. 'Certain goodies I'd like to keep in my pants if I can.'

I had been referring of course to the spare films, but to my horror I realised I was being overheard by a tall young man.

'I'd like to see the goodies you've got in your pants,' he said.

I looked at him. He was naked, and by his obvious interest in me he wasn't referring to photographic goodies. Caught un-awares, I blushed like a schoolgirl. His mate came over and poured Constance a glass of wine, while the tall young man took my arm and led me over towards the exit to the marquee.

'Like to come and see the herb-garden,' he said, not asking a question.

I scratched my nose, clicking a shot of him.

The herb-garden was full of prone couples. We found a patch of ground which was at least twelve feet from the nearest couple, and sat down. Immediately, his hand found the zipper of my jeans, and whisked it open. In seconds, I was naked.

'But the fertility rites don't start for an hour . . . ' I said.

'These things never start on time,' he replied.

Afterwards, when he had left me - presumably to go in search of more instant conquests - I snapped off a few shots of the copulating couples, then went in search of Constance. She wasn't in the food-tent, though her duffel-bag was. I thrust my jeans into it, then carried it with me. I looked into two more marquees - one was empty, but had been laid out in the form of an elaborate black-magic temple, the other was full of people chanting some mystic dirge - then found Constance in a third.

The interior of this had been made into a stage-and-auditorium. Without going into too great a detail, the stage was full of naked girls, the auditorium was full of naked men. Constance was on the stage.

Some kind of auction was going on. The men in the audience shouted out words I couldn't understand (it sounded like one 'she-line', two 'she-line' and so on). There was a man at the side of the stage completely naked but for a mask shaped like the head of a ram; he was obviously in charge of the proceedings. Whenever the bids ran out, he waved his arms in the air, pointed at the last bidder . . . and then one of the girls would go down to the successful bidder. The other girls stood around - some casually, some affecting provocative nude poses - passing from hand to hand one of several hand-rolled cigarettes. From the overall aroma in the air, it didn't take much to guess what was in the cigarettes.

I snapped away with the mini-camera, then had to stop as the first film was completely exposed.

As I was changing it surreptitiously, the bidding went on around me.

I shoved my jeans back into the duffel-bag, and replaced the bracelet. There was a rather good-looking man standing near me, and I went over to him.

'Excuse me,' I said innocently. 'What's a "she-line"?'

He grinned at me, appraising every inch of my naked body with obvious relish.

'You mean a Chi-Lyne,' he said, and spelt it for me. 'It's a kind of witches' penance, which we have to pay for with tasks during the next twelve months.'

'Oh,' I said. 'And so you're bidding for the girls?'

'Of course. Are you going up on stage?'

I glanced at the stage. Constance had noticed me, and was beckoning. I thought: why not . . . at least you get a joint passed on. . . .

'If you are,' the man went on, 'I'll bid 30 Chi-Lyne for you.'

'Get bidding,' I said, and headed for the stage. As I clambered up, a throaty cheer went up from the men.

The auction went on, and in the meantime I had several healthy sucks at the cigarettes. I was wrong, incidentally, it wasn't pot . . . but it was something which had much the same effect. Constance was already quite zonked - she was giggling all the time, and making lascivious remarks about some of the more obviously randy members of the audience - and in a minute or two I was almost up there with her.

Constance's turn came, and she provoked heavy bidding. In the end she was knocked down for 25 Chi-Lyne, which I didn't think was at all good, especially as I already knew something about what kind of price my charms could command.

She leaped gladly off the stage into the arms of one of the men she had been ogling. The last I saw of her was being carried bodily from the marquee . . . destination unknown, but intelligent guesses could be made.

Then my turn came. The bidding started quickly, soon reaching 10 Chi-Lyne. Then it slowed markedly, with only three men bidding away. I had no idea what a Chi-Lyne involved, but evidently it was quite a hefty price to pay. As the bidding reached 25, a hush fell on the men. Then the chap I'd spoken to called out: '30 Chi-Lyne.'

Heads turned in surprise, and someone applauded. Then a second voice called out: '40 Chi-Lyne.' Excitement grew, and I took another puff on one of the joints. The auctioneer waved his

arms to indicate that I was sold . . . but then my chap called out: '50 Chi-Lyne.'

That did it . . . no one could or would out-bid that, so I was knocked down to him. He came to collect me, grinning broadly. In what I imagined was the traditional way, I was carried bodily out of the tent.

'O.K.,' I said to him. 'You got me . . . now what?'

'You're mine,' he said. 'I can do whatever I like to you for the whole of the next twenty-four hours.'

'You'll never keep it up,' I said,

'You wait and see.'

I was to find out sooner than I'd bargained. It turned out that the auction was only the beginning of the process. My chap was the front-man, it seemed, for a syndicate of bidders, and he could sub-let my charms for privately bargained Chi-Lyne. It was all very complicated, and I didn't try to follow. What it meant was that I sat on the grass at the back of the marquee, while eight or nine chaps haggled over me. In the end, the deals were struck. It seemed I didn't get much choice in the matter . . . but I wasn't complaining. By some stroke of the ever-reliable Sally Deenes luck, all the guys were quite young, and all rather attractive.

Ten minutes later, I was upstairs in the dormitory with the first of the men, and having a whale of a time.

And so the evening passed.

From time to time I'd be given more of the strange tobacco to smoke, and so I stayed pleasantly high the whole time. I was always with one or the other of the men, and although they were always very pleasant and polite I was obliged - by some earth-shattering Unholy Law I didn't understand - to do *exactly* as they instructed during the time I was in their thrall. This led to one or two rather unusual activities . . . but I won't dwell on that. . . .

Although I was still taking the occasional photograph, I had to be more careful. It would have been awful to be caught, and anyway, I had no opportunity to change the film.

One of the chaps took me to a black-magic ceremony, but this was a very heavy scene: all drifting smoke and incantations. No excitement at all. It was becoming clear that this weekend convention was attended, in the main, by two kinds of person: the ones who took witchcraft very seriously indeed, and saw the Festival as an excuse for total devotion to whatever Cause it was, and the ones who were there for the side-benefits, namely the drink, the food, the smokes . . . and the freely available women.

In the few moments of relaxation I had that evening, I was

already composing in my head the draft of my article.

I finally got to sleep about two in the morning. I was curled up with the man who had bid for me, and after we had had the obligatory body-conversation, we both fell sound asleep. My last conscious thought was that I hadn't seen Constance all evening . . . and where the hell was Jiri?

CHAPTER 18

The second day of the Festival passed in much the same way as the first. I got a distinct impression that everyone had a hangover in the morning, but after lunch things began to liven up again. I was still in the possession of the syndicate, but either they were feeling as hung-over as I was, or else they felt some sensibility towards my headache, but anyway I was left to my own devices for most of the morning. I took this opportunity to wander around the whole area and get a few more photographs.

The weather was again sunny and hot. Already, the fact of being naked had become completely accepted in my mind, and I took no more notice of it.

Just before lunch I came across Jiri. He was with three girls, and though he waved to me in a friendly way, I got the impression that his hands were full.

The day passed slowly. After lunch, the syndicate showed a renewed interest in me, and I found my services were actively sought. Constance too was well occupied, and though we were in each other's company from time to time we had no opportunity to compare notes. I guessed she was doing much the same as me, though.

There was another auction after lunch, and I decided to miss that. It was all very well but being sold off like that tended to restrict your freedom of movement. I wanted to become as mobile as possible to learn what I could about who was organising this, and so on.

I gathered that tonight was going to be the 'big' night. There was to be a mass ceremony, followed by an all-out fertility-rite. I took this news with an indifference that worried me . . . until I realised I was just bored with everything that was going on. On the one hand, the people who dug magic were taking it all far too seriously . . . and the people who were there for the sex

took it all too lightly. Speaking entirely for myself, I was thinking the whole thing had gone too far, and that it was all a bit childish. It wasn't even possible to get talking to people. On the one hand, if you tried to strike up a conversation with one of the magic nuts, in a few seconds the thing had come down to scratching runic symbols on the ground and big meaningful remarks about the Great Mother . . . and on the other hand, you met someone and ten minutes later you were flat on your back being laid.

So far as possible, I confined myself to keeping well in the background, taking mental notes for the article, and shooting off occasional photographs.

After the evening meal – taken as usual from the buffet table in the food-tent – I discovered that my thrall to the syndicate was over. The men lost all interest in me, and went off to the auction-tent, presumably to start all over again with some other chick. Constance's thrall had finished too, and we found ourselves alone.

'Well?' I said to her, as we walked through the trees surrounding the site of the Festival, 'What do you think?'

She giggled. 'It's fun.'

'Have you been on that smoke again?'

'Yes . . . you should try it.' She giggled again.

'I did.'

It was useless talking to her. I was getting fed up, and wanted to leave. I'd got everything I'd come for: enough material to write the article, and enough photos to illustrate it. I was fed up with these men using me as a straightforward sex-object, and I was a little disgusted that Constance had thrown herself so wholeheartedly into it. The idea of getting back to London and doing something boring and normal – such as walking down the Embankment on a Sunday afternoon, or sitting in Hyde Park – was growing quite irresistible. I'd had enough of witches and witchcraft to last me the rest of my life.

Constance was obviously not interested in talking with me. A chap materialised out of the trees, and she galloped happily towards him. The last I saw of them was hurrying towards the main house. I sat by myself in the trees, and started to doze.

I must have slept for about an hour, for when I woke up it was almost dark. A large bonfire had been lit, and most of the people were sitting around talking. A few people were dancing naked around the fire, intoning some strange chant.

I checked that the mini-camera was full of film, and thought I'd head over that way and get a few more shots.

Suddenly, my way was barred by a tall man, naked but for a huge goat's-head mask.

I let out a little scream, and jumped back. He came straight over to me, and grasped me by my wrist.

'You are Sally Deenes,' he boomed at me.

'I . . . yes.'

'It has come to my attention that you are taking illegal photographs here. You know the penalty for that.'

'No . . . but, I didn't . . .' I bumbled helplessly.

'It is no good denying it,' said the man, leading me away from the rest of the people, deeper and deeper into the trees. 'It has been divined by the powers above. You are a threat to our sanctity, and you must pay the penalty by sacrifice.'

I struggled, but it was useless. His grip on my arm was like steel.

'Listen,' I said desperately. 'You're wrong!'

'The sacrifice is to be at the Unholy Altar, where your blood will be spilled to appease the Great Mother of Earth.'

This wasn't funny. . . . I was now really terrified.

The man stopped, seeing how frightened I was. He let go of me, and pushed back the goat's head. In the dim twilight, I could just make out his features.

'Martin! For God's sake . . . don't do that!'

He took me into his arms, and I hugged him tight.

'It was just a joke, Sally.'

'Very funny,' I said, still shaking. 'I thought I was for the high-jump then. But what are you doing here?'

'I couldn't let you girls have all the fun. I got bored, so I thought I'd come along. I parked the car about a mile away, walk through the fields, and climbed over the wall. Dead simple really.'

'Where did you get that mask?'

He shrugged casually. 'It was lying around. Very fetching, don't you think?'

'God . . . you gave me a start!'

'I'm sorry.' He hugged me tenderly, and kissed me. That was nice. 'Anyway, what's been going on here?'

I filled him in with a brief outline of the goings-on. I left out many of the blow-by-blow details, but told him just enough that his imagination could fill in the missing bits.

'Is Constance still here?' he said.

'Somewhere around. She seems to be really enjoying herself. I hope we haven't made an addict of her.'

Martin discarded the goat's-head, and we walked back through the trees.

'Have you eaten?' I said.

'No.'

We went into the buffet-tent, and Martin ate some food. Then we went next door, where a ceremony was in progress. Though it was fairly interesting, to me it was just as repetitive as an ordinary religious ceremony. I was really wondering what the appeal of all this was. Well . . . I suppose the answer to that was outside in the rest of the Festival. How many other religions lay on so much freely-available sex?

The activities at the bonfire had changed slightly now. The chanting and dancing wasn't going on any more: instead, a lot of people sat around idly, watching a girl in a long flowing hood do some mystic dance.

Martin took me by the hand, to a sheltered spot under the trees, though in full view of the bonfire. We laid down, seeking the comfort of each other's body. I don't know whether it was the sight of so many other naked female bodies, or that Martin was just glad to see me, but his passions were aroused and almost at once we began to explore each other intimately.

A few minutes later, Martin rolled on top of me and we began to make love. Somehow, my left arm was wedged between his body and mine, and as he began to move against me I could feel the release-mechanism of the mini-camera clicking away. . . .

And then it was finished . . . and Martin lay slumped on top of me.

I was the first to become aware that something was going on. The girl who had been dancing by the bonfire had stopped, and now stood naked. She was staring towards the ceremony-marquee, from which was coming a strange procession.

Thirteen men, wearing the weird ritual masks, walked out in solemn array and stood near the bonfire. One stepped forward.

'Sister and brethren,' he said loudly. 'There is a matter of great importance we must consider.'

He paused for dramatic effect. Martin was still lying in and on me, and it was comfortable to us both, so neither of us moved.

'Most of us here,' the man went on, 'fully appreciate the absolute necessity for secrecy in a society such as ours. A gathering as large as this makes us vulnerable to intrusions from outside, and as you will appreciate we take rigorous measures to maintain our privacy. The freedoms of communion with the primaevial elements of Earth and Evil which you are even now enjoying are freedoms won with great difficulty from the world around us.'

Once again he paused, looking round at all those assembled. Martin shifted, and pulled away from me. We both sat up.

Martin put his arm around me.

'It is therefore with deep regret that I must tell you that there are enemies within our midst. We have just conducted a rite whose nature is of the most arcane kind . . . a protection for us all. In that rite, we discovered that our ranks have been penetrated by some who wish us ill. These people are reporters. They have been taking photographs, and an article is being prepared. If that article and those photographs are published, our activities would come under the critical scrutiny of the world at large. I need not dwell on the consequences.'

Beside me, Martin had stiffened. I noticed that the girl who had been dancing by the bonfire had turned, and was facing in our direction. It was Constance.

'At the moment we have only the vaguest notion of who these people might be. We are about to conduct another divination to establish just this . . . but for the moment be warned. Trust no one!'

The thirteen men turned, and headed back towards the tent.

'They're bluffing,' said Martin. 'It's probably a standard warning against idle chat, and a tip-off to anyone who might have come here without being invited.'

'Like you,' I said. 'Let's get out.'

'O.K.'

Martin's joke-warning about blood-sacrifices was already seeming rather hollow to me. Whether I believed in all this guff or not – and they might, as Martin claimed, be bluffing – it was all a bit close to home for me.

With affected casualness we walked over to Constance, and took her by the arm. We headed for the main house.

We managed to get up to the dormitory, and after stepping over several linked couples, we grabbed our bags.

'I'll take these,' Martin whispered. 'You and Constance act as if nothing has happened. Go round to the part of the wood where I met you, Sally, and I'll wait for you there. Whatever else you do, don't panic.'

'O.K.,' I said.

Constance was still slightly high on the smokes she'd been having, but sense was coming through to her. I took her arm again, and we wandered casually back to the bonfire. The chanting had started up again . . . and so had the ubiquitous fertility-rites. Martin left the house in the opposite direction, carrying the suitcases, and headed round the back. In a few minutes, I led Constance into the wood, and after a little stumbling around in the dark were reunited with Martin. Hastily, we got dressed. Martin's clothes were in his car, so

Constance lent him one of her coats.

Quietly, we walked through the trees until we came to part of the boundary wall. Martin helped us over.

Half an hour later we were back at his car. Martin pulled on his clothes, and without further ado started the engine, and headed back towards London.

Constance fell asleep almost immediately, and a few minutes later I too was asleep.

For my part I wanted to have nothing whatsoever to do with witchcraft again. But that was not to be. . . .

CHAPTER 19

By common consent, neither Martin, Constance nor I went in to work on the Monday.

I slept through the Sunday, and after pottering about on the Monday morning I got down to starting a draft of the article. I just wanted to get it out of the way as soon as I could. It ran surprisingly quickly, and by early evening the end was in sight, I took a short break, and went out for a meal, then returned to it. By midnight, it was all finished . . . ready for Constance's approval.

I turned up at the office an hour later than normal. Penny was obviously waiting for me, for as soon as I arrived she came over to my desk.

'Constance wants to see you,' she said.

'What . . . now?'

'Yes.'

I looked round the office. 'Is Martin in yet?'

'He's in with Constance.'

'O.K.'

I found the draft in my bag, and took it in with me. I stopped only to collect a coffee from the dispenser on the way.

Constance was sitting behind her desk, looking tired. As I walked in, she looked up, and Martin appeared to relax. I sensed trouble.

As I sat down opposite her, I realised that the irresponsible, zonked-out, giggling, promiscuous Constance of the weekend had completely vanished. This was Constance as I remembered her: calm, efficient and carrying the responsibility for the magazine.

'I've brought the article,' I said. 'If you'll give me the O.K., I'll type it out neatly this afternoon, and -'

'Never mind about that,' said Constance. She fidgeted with some pens on her desk. 'Listen, Sally, we ought to come to some kind of mutual agreement about what happened at the weekend.' I glanced at Martin. He was watching me closely.

'All right,' I said. 'But what is there to agree?'

'Well, you must understand that within a few weeks, *Freedom Girl* will be on sale to the public. When that happens, we'll be coming in for a lot of publicity. In addition, when we get down to a regular schedule, the staff on the paper will have to be drastically increased. I've been thinking over what happened at the weekend, and I consider that if word of it ever were to leak out - either to the public or to other members of the staff - we would lose a lot of credibility on one hand, and a lot of respect on the other. You know what I mean.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But surely, there were exonerating circumstances. The drugs, the need to mingle with the witches to get the story. . . .'

'Even so. I think we all got rather carried away in our enthusiasm, so I'll thank you both to draw a veil over what happened there.'

'You know you can trust me,' said Martin.

'Me too. After all, I've as much to cover up as you. . . .'

Constance grinned. 'Good. Then that's settled. You've got the copy with you, Sally?'

'Yes.'

I passed it over to her.

'Let me read this through, and then we'll discuss it this afternoon. If everything's O.K., it can go off to press this evening. Martin, what about the photographs?'

'They're at the lab now. We should have them by tomorrow.'

'Right. I'll leave the lay-out and paste-up to you and Penny, but I'd like to see the main picture, the lead photo myself.'

'Right.'

Martin and I returned to the office, leaving Constance to read the article.

As it turned out, she passed the article with only a few minor changes. And the photos were fine. There were one or two we couldn't do anything with, but on the whole there were about twenty or thirty excellent prints to choose from.

Martin took in the five best shots to Constance, and came out a few minutes later with a quizzical expression on his face.

'What's up?' I said.

'Nothing . . . it's fine. But she's decided to put this photo on

the cover, and make the article the lead story.

'Good heavens,' I said. 'Fame at last.'

'Yes,' said Martin. 'But listen. I think I caught Constance at a bad moment. She was waiting for a call from America, and only glanced at the pic. I'm sure she didn't look at it properly....'

I grinned. 'Well, she's given you the go-ahead . . . get it marked up for the cover.'

And so he did. Four weeks passed, and the first issue of *Freedom Girl* was launched on to an unsuspecting public with much huzzahs and fanfares. The first issue sold well, and although it was full of good things, I couldn't help feeling that my story had had something to do with it.

Because . . . well, by one of those fortunes of war, the cover-pic had been taken by accident. While Martin and I had been making love on the floor of the forest, near the bonfire, the mini-camera had been clicking away. And not far away, a young and beautiful girl had been dancing naked before an adoring audience of men, while an orange bonfire flickered behind her.

It was a good photograph, and it fitted the theme of the magazine. For if ever a girl looked exploited, that slim nude figure dancing for the pleasure of men was it.

The face was half-turned away from the camera . . . but there was no mistaking who it was. Constance only recognised herself on the first day of publication . . . and by then it was too late.

The next day, she came into work with her hair-style changed. She wore her spectacles whenever walking about the office, or being interviewed by anyone. But now, if ever Martin or I want anything a little out of the ordinary, we happen to leave that first issue lying around for her to see, then just ask. It always works.

The sales of the magazine picked up, and we were guaranteed that it would be published for at least another year. Word came through from America, and both Martin and I were promoted.

Martin was made Photographic Director, and got for himself an office of his own.

Me . . . I was promoted into a position that suited me better than if I had created it for myself. My actual label was Special Assignments Features Editor . . . but the essence of the job was that it gave me much greater freedom. In theory and in practice, from now on I would be virtually responsible unto myself. I could do anything, go anywhere . . . so long as every now and then I wrote a feature for the magazine, describing my adventures.

Already I was seeing in my mind the freedom of the open road, the travel and the encounters. For it was in my bones that

the Sally Deenes luck was still in full working order. . . .

But not yet.

For even as *Freedom Girl* was selling like hot-cakes from every railway bookstall in the country, and I was getting ready to flex the limbs of my new-found freedom and start on another story, I received a phone-call from someone I had almost forgotten about. And who was most certainly unwelcome.

Jiri,

'Sally, you got to help me.'

Here we go again, I thought, glaring silently at the phone.

'Sally, you there?'

'Yes,' I said resignedly. 'I'm here.'

'You got to work magic for me. They want me to do more work, and I'm being threatened.'

'Just like before?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Look . . . Jiri, one day you've got to break out of this. They can't control you for the rest of your life.'

'They can.'

'So you've got to do something. Leave the country, take on a new identity. Run, and keep running.'

'They always find me. You were right. I got to fight magic with magic. I can't do it alone . . . I need someone to do it on my behalf. You are a clever witch, I know. And you did promise.'

I bit my lip. He had me there. I had promised, and I don't like going back on promises. If it hadn't been for Jiri, I wouldn't have got the story for the magazine. Fair's fair, Sally, I said. But bloody difficult.

'So you want me to do a spell?'

'Yes.' His voice was full of eager hope. 'It will be difficult, and it must be powerful. But you strong enough.'

An idea was forming.

'And you believe,' I said. 'that I'm strong enough to ward off all the evil they are throwing at you?'

'Yes, absolutely.'

The idea formed. 'O.K., come round to my place at eight this evening. And be prepared for anything.'

We rang off.

CHAPTER 20

Jiri came in with a hang-dog expression. 'Look at this.'

He showed me another photograph of himself; this one had been torn almost in half, and scribbled over with blood-red crayon.

'You see,' he said bitterly, 'they hate me, and will kill me.'

'Have they done anything to you yet?'

'Well, no . . . but I know they can.'

'That's it,' I said. 'You know they can. And as long as they know you know they can (got me?), you're in their power. Right . . . from tomorrow you'll be free.'

He shrugged miserably.

I told him to sit down, and then asked him some close questions. I discovered that he still didn't know who his oppressors were – though he could, by a bit of guesswork, imagine that the organisers of the Festival were somehow involved – but he did have an address of sorts for them. A Box Number at a regional newspaper. He also had a crude example of handwriting on one of the envelopes.

'My reasoning is this,' I said to him. 'You have the ability to fight back, but they're trusting to your good nature not to. O.K. then . . . that's the answer. Reveal to them the mean streak in you. Fight back, and keep fighting.'

'You fight for me?'

'All right . . . but one last question. Do you trust me?'

'Yes, Sally.'

Mug, I thought. 'Trust me absolutely?'

He nodded eagerly.

O.K., here goes, I thought . . . and stood up.

'Very well,' I said in sepulchral tones. 'I assume The Power over you.'

I waved my arms about in what I hoped looked like an impressive manner. Judging from Jiri's expression, he was impressed.

'Right,' I said in my normal voice, 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. This is a very old and very powerful English spell. You won't understand much of it, but I have used it on many occasions . . . always with absolute success. It's a bit dodgy, so you must question nothing at all. If you do, the Power will be

broken, and might even hurt you. *Is that clear?*'

'Yes.'

'O.K. . . . close your eyes.'

He did as I instructed, and then I got him to kneel on the floor. I walked round him three times, patting him on the head.

'O.K. . . . open them.'

I went over to where I had assembled my hastily-prepared ingredients. First, a large polythene bag.

'This is the Containment of Power,' I said. I took my bread-knife from the draining-board, and made slashing motions over the bag. 'And this is the Blade that Divides the Power.'

I then placed into the bag the various ingredients, describing them to Jiri in lurid detail.

I poured in some of the very expensive henna I use on my hair ('witch-dust'), and followed that with some red paint I'd borrowed from Penny at the office ('menstrual blood of a dying virgin'). Then I dropped in two or three dried-up old carrots I found in my vegetable-rack ('twisted root of salamander') and some assorted offal I'd picked up cheap at the local butcher's shop ('gizzard of lizard' . . . made that one up on the spur of the moment).

Jiri was watching all this with his eyeballs popping – simple soul – and so I got a bit carried away with the idea. I threw in a tumblerful of tapwater ('isinglas of the Orient'), a handful of sand from the local builder's yard ('dust from the grave of my grandmother'), an old candle ('stick of light from temples of depravity'), some mixed herbs from Sainsburys ('tormentil, sage, coriander and thyme') and a whole sachet of my best shampoo ('saliva of muskrat').

The polythene bag still looked rather empty, in spite of the gooey mess at the bottom, so I got Jiri to close his eyes again, while I got some cushion-stuffing out of a box in the wardrobe. This went in when Jiri opened his eyes again ('compressed leaves of the lily'), and wadded up the parcel nicely.

Now for the finishing touch. I have been carrying around with me for the last two years, for no good reason at all, and old doll I used to have as a child.

I laid this on the floor, and got Jiri to walk around it three times. I then attached to it the sample of handwriting, and with ritualistic fervour tore of each of its arms and legs. These I dropped into the polythene bag along with everything else.

I handed Jiri a meat-skewer.

'Drive it through the heart,' I said.

Jiri took the skewer, an expression of horror on his face. He held it at arm's length, regarding it as if it were the scimitar

which had lopped a thousand heads.

'The heart, Jiri. Plunge it into the totem's heart.'

He looked at the doll, and then back at the skewer. Sweat beaded his face, and his lips were trembling.

'That's it,' I encouraged him. 'Put as much hatred into the act as possible.'

But I suspected it was fear, and not hatred, that was twisting his lips.

I watched his expression closely, and it was an awful experience. His mouth was contorted, his eyes were blazing. He clenched the skewer like a dagger, and slowly raised it in his fist. Then he screamed.

'Aarrgh!'

The skewer smashed into the doll, neatly penetrating the cheap plastic just about where the heart would be.

'Now, quickly. Spit on the totem!'

He puckered his lips, and spat in a vile way on the poor, helpless old thing.

'Now in the bag . . . and seal it before the spell disperses!'

He tied the end of the polythene bag with string, and I give him a large sheet of brown paper and some Sellotape. He wrapped it up into a fairly neat parcel, and addressed it to the Box Number at the newspaper.

'Is done.' He sounded satisfied.

'Good. Get it in the post as soon as possible. Take it down to Trafalgar Square post office . . . they're open late. As soon as you have posted it, you will be free.'

He snatched up the inoffensive parcel, brushed his lips quickly against my face . . . and was gone. I've never seen such a fast exit in my life. I must remember that for when I next want to get rid of an unwanted boyfriend. . . .

After he had gone - I saw him hailing a taxi in the street outside - I cleared up the mess, and sat back on my bed and enjoyed a cigarette. I had no way of telling whether or not the ruse would work . . . but it seemed psychologically sound to me. Jiri believed in it, and that was all that mattered.

In any event, as things turned out, I neither heard from Jiri again nor saw anything more of the witches. I still sometimes chuckle at what the unsuspecting recipient must have made of my rather squelchy parcel. But that night was the end of it all. I knew I was going to miss my old doll Moppsie, but felt she had died for a just cause.

I opted for an early night.

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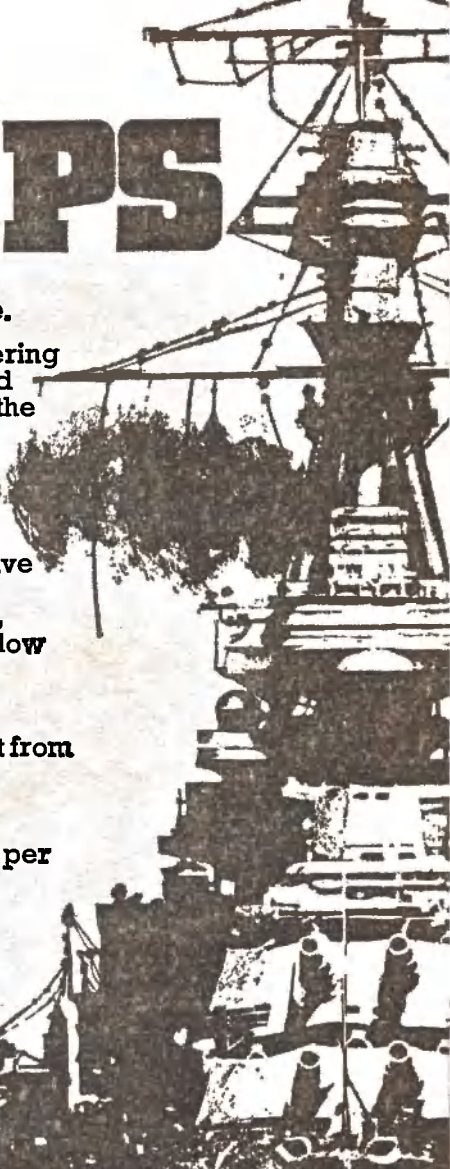
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