# Where All Things Perish

*TANITH LEE*

TANITH LEE BEGAN WRITING at the age of nine, and after various employment, she became a full-time writer in 1975, when DAW Books published her novel *The Birthgrave.* Since then she has written and published around sixty novels, nine collections and over 200 short stories. She has also scripted two episodes of the cult BBC-TV series *Blakes 7,* and has twice won the World Fantasy Award for short fiction and was awarded the British Fantasy Society's August Derleth Award in 1980 for her novel *Death's Master.*

In 1998 she was shortlisted for the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction for her novel *Law of the Wolf Tower,* the first volume in the 'Claidi Journal' series. More recently, Tor Books has published *White as Snow,* the author's retelling of the Snow White story, while Overlook Press has issued *A Bed of Earth* and *Venus Preserved,* the third and fourth volumes respectively in the 'Secret Books of Paradys' series. She is currently working on a sequel to her novel *The Silver Metal Lover* for Bantam Books.

'Late one night, my partner John Kaüne and I fell to talking about ghost stories and other sinister matters,' recalls the author. 'Outside the by-then-darkened room, leaves were appearing on the trees and seeming to form strange shapes and faces. The idea of looking from windows took hold of us. Then, as is his

wont, John produced an idea so perfect for a story that the usual scramble was on to grab a notebook. The spine of the work supplied, the characters began to arrive on their own, as is *their* wont.

'The story was almost entirely there, even its title, which came to me at once. Then I had only to think of a remedy. I went to sleep with my head well-filled by the tale, and woke up with the solution to everything shining darkly there on some efficient desk in my brain.'

## I

It was glimpsing Polleto again, between trains, at that hotel in Vymart, which made me remember. Which, in its way, is quite curious, for how could I ever have forgotten such a thing? So impossible and *terrible a* thing. And yet, the human mind is a strange mechanism, and the human heart far stranger. Sometimes the most trivial events haunt our waking hours, even our dreams, for years after they have happened. While episodes of incredible moment, perhaps only because they have been marked indelibly upon us, stand back in the shadows, mute and motionless, until some chance ray of mental light discovers them. And then they are there, burning bright, towering and undismissable once more. At such times one knows they are more than memories, more than the mere furniture of the brain. Rather, they have become part of it, a part of oneself.

'What is it, Frederick, that you are staring at?'

'That little man at the table over there.'

'What, that little clerkish chap in the dusty overcoat? He hardly looks worthy of your curiosity. Of anyone's, come to that.'

'No, he probably isn't. A very ordinary fellow, the sort you wouldn't recall, I suppose, in the normal way of things.'

'I should think not. But you do?'

'Well, as it happens, he was resident in a place where something very odd once happened to me. And not to myself alone.'

'He was involved in this odd thing? He looks blameless to the point of criminality.'

'I imagine that he is. No, he was simply living there at the time, had been there two or three years, if I remember correctly. I met him once, in the street, and my aunt introduced him as a Mr Polleto. We exchanged civilities, that was all. He had the faintest trace of a foreign accent, but otherwise seemed a nonentity. My aunt confessed they had all been very disappointed in him because, learning his name before his arrival, they'd hoped for some sort of flamboyant Italian theatrical gentleman, or something of the sort.'

'He looks more like a grocer.'

'My aunt's words exactly. Those were the probable facts, too, I believe. He'd been a shopkeeper, but had come into some funds through a legacy. He bought a house in Steepleford, which was where I was visiting my aunt.'

'This is a remarkably dull story, Frederick.'

'Yes.' I hesitated then. I added, 'The *other* story isn't, I can assure you.'

'The story which you recollect only since you caught sight of your Mr Polleto? Well, are you going to blab? We have four long hours before the Wassenhaur train. Let's refresh our glasses, and then you can tell me your tale.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Oh, come, this is too flirtatious. What have you been doing all this while but trying to engage my attention in it?'

'I protest.'

But the brandy bottle intervened. And presently, sitting on that sunny terrace of the Hotel Alpius, I recounted to my friend and travelling companion the story which I will now relate. That was the first time I ever told it to anyone. And this, now, I trust, will be the last.

## II

The modest town of Steepleford had some slight notoriety in the eighteenth century, when it was one of the centres of a cult known as the Lilyites. These people believed so absolutely in the teachings of Christ, and acted upon them so unswervingly, that they soon turned the entire Christian church against them. There were a few hangings and some riots, as is often the way in these cases, until at last the cult lost both dedication and adherents, and ebbed away. Even so, through the succeeding years (from about 1750 to 1783), now and then some murmur might be heard of the Lilyites. Being, however, still generally feared and loathed for their extreme habits, they were soon rooted out and disposed of, one way or another. The last hint of the cult seemed to surface, nevertheless, in sleepy Steepleford. During the July of 1783, one Josebaar Hawkins was

harangued in Market Square for holding a secret meeting of seventeen persons, at which they had, allegedly, sworn to slough their worldly goods and to love all men as themselves, in the celebrated Lilyite manner.

At his impromptu trial, Hawkins either denied all this, or ably recanted. He was said to have laughed heartily at the notion of giving up his fine house, which was the product of successful dealings in the textile industry and which stood to the side of Salter's Lane in its own grounds. He asked, it seems, if the worthies now questioning him thought that he would also abandon his new and beautiful young wife, who went by the unusual name of Amber Maria, or drag her with him in the Lilyite fashion, shoeless and penniless, about the countryside.

Hawkins was presently acquitted of belonging to the sect. No others were even interviewed upon the matter. Thereafter no more is heard, in the annals of Steepleford, of the Lilyites, but there is one more mention of Hawkins and his wife. This record 'states that in 1788, Amber Maria, being then twenty years of age, (which must have made her fifteen or less at her wedding), was taken ill and died within a month. Hawkins, not wishing to part from her even dead, obtained sanction for her burial in the grounds of his house.

All this, though possibly of local interest in Steepleford, where as a rule a horse casting its shoe in the street might cause great excitement, is of small apparent value on the slate of the world. Yet I must myself now add that even in my own short and irregular visits to the town, I had been, perhaps inattentively, aware of a strangeness that somehow attached itself to the Hawkins house, which still stood to the side of Salter's Lane.

The Lane ran up from Market Gate Street. It was a long and winding track, with

fields at first on both sides, leading in turn to thick woodland that in places was ancient - great green oaks and mighty chestnuts and beeches, some over two hundred years of age. I can confirm from walks I have taken that there exist, or existed, areas in these woods which seemed old nearly as civilization, and when an elderly country fellow once pointed out to me a group of trees that had, he said, stood as saplings in the reign of King John, I more than half believed him. But this, of course, may be attributable merely to an imaginative man's fancy.

Some two miles up its length, Salter's Lane takes a sharp turn toward the London Road. At this juncture stands the house of Josebaar Hawkins.

It was built in the flat-faced style of those times, with tall, comfit-box-framed windows and a couple of impressive chimneys like towers, behind a high brick wall. Although lavish enough for a cloth merchant and his wife, the 'grounds' were not vast, more gardens, and by the time I first happened on the place these had become overgrown to a wilderness. Even so, one might make out sections of brickwork, and the chimney tops, above the trees.

Having found it, I asked my aunt about the house, idly enough I am sure. She replied, also idly, that it was some architectural monstrosity a century out of date, standing always shut up and empty, since no one would either buy it or pull it down. Perhaps I asked her even then why no one lived there. I know I did ask at some adjacent point, for I retain her answer. She replied, 'Oh, there's some story, dear boy, that a man bricked up his wife alive in a room there. She belonged to some wild sect or other, with which he lost patience. But she had, I think, an interesting name… now what can that have been?' My aunt then seemed to mislay the topic. However, a few hours, or it may have been days, later, she presented me, after dinner one night, with a musty thick volume from

her library. 'I have marked the place.'

'The place of what, pray?' I inquired.

'The section that concerns the house of Josebaar Hawkins.'

I was baffled enough, not then knowing the name, to sit down at once in the smoking room and read the passage indicated. So it was that I learned of the Lilyites, of whom also I had never heard anything until then, and of Hawkins and his house off Salter's Lane. Included in the piece was the account from which I have excerpted my own note above on Hawkins's impromptu 'trial'. It also contained a portion quoted from Steepleford's parish register, with records of both the marriage and the death of Amber Maria Hawkins. This was followed by the notice of her burial in the grounds of the house, which had been overseen both by the priest and by certain officers of the town. Then my aunt's book, having set history fair and straight, proceeded, in the way of such tomes, to undermine it.

According to this treatise, Hawkins, at first an enraptured husband, had come suddenly and utterly to think his wife an evil witch. Growing afraid of her, he tricked her to an attic room of the house and here succeeded in locking her in. Thereafter he had both the door and the window bricked up by men who, being sworn in on the scheme with him, turned blind eyes and deaf ears to her screams and cries for pity. My aunt's book was in small doubt that the priest and the officers who later pretended to have certified Amber Maria's death and conducted her burial were accomplices in this hideous and extraordinary act. (I have to say that, perusing this, some memory did vaguely stir in me, but it was of so incoherent, slight and indeed uncheerful a nature, having to do, I thought,

with a children's rhyme of the locale, that I did not search after it at all diligently.)

As I have already remarked, I seldom then visited Steepleford. On that visit I may have offered some comment on my reading, or my aunt may have done. I fail to recollect. Certainly the rest of my visit was soon over, nor, having gone away, did I return there for more than a year, and during my next dutiful brief holiday I remember nothing seen or said of the house in Salter's Lane.

But now I come to my next *relevant* visit, which occurred almost three years after those I have just described.

I had been in Greece for ten months and had come back full of the spirit of that place, thinking to find England dull and drab. But it was May, and a nice May, too, and by the time the train stopped at the Halt, I had decided to walk the rest of the way to the town through the woods and fields. So, inevitably, I found myself, just past midday, on the winding path of Salter's Lane. It was the most perfect of afternoons. The sky was that clear milky blue that certain poets compare (quite wrongly, to my mind) with the eyes of children. Among the oaks that clasped the track, green piled on green, wild flowers had set fire to the hedges and the grass, and sunlight festooned everything with shining jewels. Birds sang in a storm, and my heart lifted high. *What is Greece to this*? thought I, staring off between breaks in the trees at luminous glades, steeped in the most elder shadows. *Why, this might be Greece, in her morning*.

And then, between one step and another, there fell the strangest thing, which I could and can only describe as a sudden quietness; less silence than absence. I stopped and looked about, still smiling, thinking the world of nature had fallen

prone, as is its wont, to some threat or fascination too small or obscure for human eye or mind to note. I waited patiently, too, for the lovely rain of birdsong to scatter down on me once more. It did not come.

Then, and how curious it sounded to me, as if I had never before heard such a thing, I picked up the song of a blackbird - but it seemed miles off up the Lane, the way I had come. And precisely at that moment, turning again, I saw something of a dull, dry red that thrust between the leaves. At once I knew it for a chimney of the Hawkins house.

I was taken aback. Imaginative as I freely admit I am, I would not say that I was especially superstitious. But something now disturbed me, and that very much. Not being able to divine what it was, beyond the presence of that wry old house, discomposed me further.

Accordingly, I stared at the house, right at it, and, crossing over the Lane, gazed up the outer wall over which the vines and ivies hung so thickly. What an ugly house it was, I thought, and no mistake. Even its windows of filthy glass, largely overgrown by creeper, were ugly. While that window there, above, was the ugliest of all, an absolute eyesore, stuck on at quite the wrong architectural moment.

While I was thinking this and standing there, staring so feverishly and insolently, the childish rhyme came back into my head with no warning, from out of some store cupboard of the brain. And with it a host of tiny bits and pieces that, over the years of my visits here, and all unconsidered, I had apparently garnered. I heard my aunt say again how a woman had been bricked up in 'that house', and I heard a friend of my aunt's, a titled lady I barely knew, saying once again, as she

must have done years before: 'Oh, the peasantry won't go by the place after dark. No, it's a fact. They all go out of their way by Joiner's Crossing. And this, mark you, because of a tale more than a hundred years old."

And the rhyme? I had doubtless heard children singing it in play, in the streets and yards of Steepleford, and maybe they still do so, although I wonder if they do. I will set it down, for having remembered it, I have never since forgotten.

*She looks through water,*

*She looks through air,*

*She leaps at the moon*

*And she looks in.*

~

*Give her silver,*

*Give her gold,*

*And bind her eyes*

*With a brick and a pin.*

'Aunt Alice,' I said to her that evening, when we were pursuing some sherry before the meal, 'I want to tell you about something I saw on my walk today, coming here to the town.'

Pleased to see me, she turned to me a willing, expectant face, but no sooner did I mention the house in Salter's Lane than she laughed.

'Dear boy, I shall have to think you obsessed by the place. Are you intending to buy it? I should certainly be delighted to have you live in the town, but not in such a miserable property.'

I replied, rather irritably, that nothing was further from my desires. Looking rather crushed, she sought to make amends. "I'm sorry, Frederick. I am sure that London is more suited to your temperament than such a dreary backwater as Steepleford." After which much of the evening was spent in my praising Steepleford and herself, for I felt ashamed of my bad temper. When I was a boy, this aunt had been very kind to me, and deserved far better of me than three-yearly visits laced with petty ill humour.

By ten o'clock we were friends again and playing cards, and so I reintroduced my topic. Although I admit I stuck strictly to the facts as I saw them, omitting all the other sensations I have outlined.

'The oddest thing, Aunt, is that I could swear the window that I saw had not been there previously. It was very high up, almost into the roof, rather small, yet somehow extremely noticeable. Although I have only once - to my recollection - looked at the house before, yet I thought I remembered it quite well, and I truly believe there never was a window in that position - however fantastic this may sound.'

As women will, my aunt then said something damningly practical. 'So many of the house windows there are closed up with ivy and creeper. Could some of this overgrowth simply have fallen away, and so revealed the casement you speak of?'

Such a banal solution had not occurred to me. I agreed that she was probably

correct. To myself I said that I must put up with the necessary boredom of my visit, and not try preposterously to dress it up with invented supernatural flights.

The following morning, I penitently accompanied my aunt on her round of social calls. By midday, my face had set like cement in a polite smile, and thus, as we crossed Market Gate Street, I found myself beaming at a small, nondescript man in unostentatious dress who had touched his hat to us.

'Ah, Mr Polleto,' said my aunt, magnanimous to a fault. 'What fine weather we are having.'

Mr Polleto conceded that we were. He had a flat dusty voice, old even beyond his bent and well-aged appearance. In it my ears caught just the trace of some foreignness. Then I found myself introduced, and not standing on ceremony, as my aunt had not, I shook hands with him. What a hand he had! It was neither cold nor hot, not damp, but rather dry - it did not have much strength in it, certainly, yet nor was it a weak hand. But an uncomfortable hand it was. It did not seem to *fit* in mine, and I sensed it would not fit in anyone's.

'Mr Polleto has resided in the town for quite three years now, I believe,' said my aunt, when we had parted from him. She then told me of the general disappointment that he had not lived up to his name. 'He has the cottage by the old tiltyard.'

But I was not interested in Mr Polleto and his indescribable handshake. His face I had already mislaid, for he was one of those men who are eternally unmemorable, or seem so - for if ever seen again, somehow they are known at once, as I have already demonstrated, and later must demonstrate further.

However, now I wanted my lunch, and was dismayed to find my aunt was leading me to yet another doorstep. I rallied rather feebly. 'And which lady is this, Aunt Alice?'

'No lady, Frederick. This is the house of our local scholar. I have some purchases to make and will leave you here, with Mr Farbody, who has written and published pamphlets.'

'Indeed,' said I. But just then the maid let me in, and presently I was taking a glass of very drinkable Madeira in a sunlit library with Mr Farbody, who had at once addressed me thus: 'My good sir, I understand you are interested in the history of the Hawkins house.'

'Well, it is a curious tale,' Farbody continued, requiring little prompting from me. 'Did you know that the farmhands hereabouts, and workers and their families in the town, have kept up a tradition that the spot is cursed?'

'I remember someone saying that people refuse to go along Salter's Lane by night.'

'Well, that, of course, isn't always to be avoided, but they make a to-do about it. The thing is, it seems, not to *look* at the building. I've heard of girls, if they are due to be married, still binding their eyes with a scarf and having to be led, should they need to pass the house even in daylight.'

'And all this because Amber Maria Hawkins was thought a witch?'

'Ah, she *was* a witch, if the tales may be believed,' and here Farbody winked at me. 'She could see treasure in the ground, for one thing. No one knows her

origins. Josebaar said he came across her one day in the woods. She was probably a gypsy girl, but all alone, bright-haired and straying with her arms full of wild flowers. He took a fancy for her, and perhaps she for him; it seems so - or else she liked the idea of his status in the town. He had already made some money and his family was an old one. And if she was a gypsy or itinerant, homeless and without kin, all that may have appealed to her, do you see. So there and then she is supposed to have said to him, "You may sport with me, and I will let you. Or you may marry me and I will make you rich." And he said, "How might that be, seeing you are in rags?" To which Amber Maria replied simply, "I will bring you silver and gold."'

At this, the rhyme came into my head again and I interrupted. "I thought it was she who was to have the gold and silver?"

Farbody smiled, and lit his pipe. 'It does seem she could have been rich on her own account for sure, if she'd cared to be, for the next thing she did was point at the ground under a tree and say to Hawkins, "Dig there, and you will find a large store of coins." Even money likes money, so he dug in the ground, and - *hey presto!* - found a box of gold pieces, deep down and undisturbed for a century. When he asked her how she knew where to dig, she shrugged and said, "I saw them." Nor did Amber do this only once, but several times, apparently. And in the same way she could find items that had been lost. And once she is supposed to have seen a sheep that had fallen down a deep well, which animal was then got out alive. She could see, you understand, *through* things. Through the earth, through stone, and through certain other natural materials - though not, I think, through metal, which may account for the metals in the rhyme.'

'What does the rhyme mean?' I asked him.

'It's essentially to do with binding her, shutting her up where she couldn't do harm. You see, Hawkins was besotted with her some while, but then he began to be afraid of her. He's said to have told the priest, "She will sit quiet all day and only look at me." When the priest said that many a man would be thankful for such a placid, adoring wife, Hawkins replied she did not look *on* him, but *into* him. And he said that once he had told her hotly to leave off, for he was a sinner like all men, and if she would keep on staring in such a way, she would see his foul and mortal corruption. To which she gave this strange response: "Men say always they are wretched and tainted by flesh and sin, but in all men there is such goodness and beauty, as in the earth and all living things, that it is to me like my food and drink, and I can never be tired of having it." '

When Farbody told me this, there in that warm and pleasant room, the sunlight on the books and the domestic pipe-smoke mild in the air, the hair rose on my neck.

'In heaven's name,' I said.

The scholar smiled again, pleased with himself and with the peculiar tale he had memorized so well. 'Yes, something in that gives you a turn, doesn't it? She seems to be speaking so charmingly, innocently, and it makes the skin creep. I can tell you, sir, I read this story first when I was a boy of eleven, and I was awake nights after, until my mother scolded some reason into me and hid the volume I'd been reading. Which may explain,' he added amiably, 'my lifelong quest for such hidden trifles of knowledge.'

Farbody then went on with the narrative.

Josebaar turned quickly from love to shrinking horror at his young wife. At first he tried to arrange a separation between them, but she would have none of this; then he had thoughts of escaping her by going overseas. But she guessed his course, and is said to have assured him she loved him too well to let him go. If he must leave, she would find and follow him, and he did not doubt that she had the powers to do so.

In the end, Hawkins, pale and harried, went to his friends, among whom was the priest, and confessed he was in such fear that he should not 'soon remain alive, since the woman eats me up from the inside out'. By what grim stages the others came round to Hawkins's state of mind, Farbody said one might only conjecture, and similarly if any money was involved in it. 'But those were ignorant and superstitious times,' he reflected. 'Alas, they are still.' Whatever went on, whatever the span of its duration, a plan was presently devised to rid Josebaar Hawkins of the woman.

'He pretended to her that he had only been testing her with his talk of going off, to see how much she loved him. And finding her so faithful, he meant to reward her. He told her he had put by an especial gift for her, an heirloom of his family, kept in a wooden chest in the attics of the house. But it would amuse him if she would go up and look first *through the wood* of its lid, and so say what she saw, before he unlocked the chest and gave her the trophy. Well, it seems she could easily see through wood but not through her husband, and up she went. No sooner was she in the room with the empty chest than he slammed closed the door and secured it. And then at once came a gang of men and bricked the door up, and others came along the roof to seal and brick up the window.'

The bizarre quality of Farbody's recitation was added to, for me, by a sense of

historical fact that seemed to underlie the whole. I found myself asking abruptly, 'Could she not have opened the window - or broken the pane, before the roof-gang reached her?'

'No, dear sir. Remember, the glass in those days was of much thicker and sturdier stuff than the flimsy crystal of our day. Besides, Hawkins had previously *pinned* the window shut. I mean, he had driven iron pins through the frame to the brickwork, and hammered in longer pins lengthwise all across.'

'Hence the horrible rhyme: a brick and a pin.'

'Just so. Besides, too, she was very high up, and the men anyway would have thrust her back - she was physically no match for them. They must have been a harsh crew. All the while they were doing it, blocking her in to die the slow death of starvation and thirst, Amber Maria was shrieking, imploring them. And after they had finished, she screamed and howled in her prison for uncountable days and nights, before she fell silent for ever. There are many reports of this.'

I shuddered. 'In God's name, you speak as if it really happened.'

He looked at me. 'My dear sir, it did. I can make no claims for her sorcery, but the facts of her death are undoubtedly true. Some years after, Josebaar Hawkins was hanged for her murder. For he confessed to it, having had not a quiet hour since.'

'And then? Did they unlock the room?'

'That they did not. The story concludes with that asseveration. No one would go near the house, let alone pull bricks away from any part of it. That they left, and

leave, to the mercy of God.'

I sat some while in silence. Perhaps, very likely, I looked grim or rattled, for the scholar came and refilled my glass and moved the biscuit plate nearer my elbow.

'The children's rhyme,' said Farbody, 'as you're aware, has its own oddities. The brick and the pin relate to the window and door, the sealing of the room. I've come across one text which states that Amber Maria could see *only* through natural substances, and that therefore a brick, which is man-mixed, would defeat her gaze, just as would refined metal; obviously the very reason why she could detect coins in the ground, rather than see through these also. But do you recall that other line, *She leaps at the moon*?'

I said that I did.

'Salter's Lane,' said the scholar, 'has nothing to do with the salting trade. Indeed, one wouldn't expect it, so far as we are here from the sea. No, the word *salter* relates to the Latin *saltare, to leap*. In medieval times, that area of the woods was known to be a place where witches held their revels and danced the Wild Dance for their lord, Satan, "leaping high as the moon". Which moon, of course, is a calendar feature of the sabbat, whether full or horned for the Devil.'

Just then the doorbell jangled. My aunt had returned for me. I was astonished to see, glancing at Farbody's clock, that only half an hour had elapsed. But then, I suppose I was struggling back to my own time, across the centuries.

I thanked him and, going out with my aunt into the summer street, I resolved to shake myself free of the unnaturally strong emotion that had dropped upon me. And so we went to our luncheon.

Three or four days later I, reluctantly but evincing cheerfulness, accompanied my aunt to a church tea party, held in honour of the new bell which had recently been installed, and for which everyone had, the year before, been engaged in fund-raising. Here the social classes mingled with uneasy and ill-founded camaraderie, and I was revealed to a succession of people of all types, to whom it seemed my aunt wished to show off her nephew. Touched by her pride in me, I did my best to be jolly.

'And look,' said Aunt Alice, 'there is Daffodil Sempson. Or rather, Mrs King, as she is married to a hotel-keeper at St Leonards now, and has come for the first time to visit her sister. They are a somewhat estranged family. None of them is in service now, but in her youth, Daffodil was lady's maid to the Misses Condimer, and travelled all over Europe with them, before she was even seventeen. A great advantage for any girl.'

Struck, I admit, by the name Daffodil, I turned, and saw a very pleasing young woman, dressed most stylishly, a trick no doubt learnt during her travels with the minor aristocracy.

'By all means introduce me to her,' I told my aunt, with a more genuine enthusiasm.

But neither of us was able to catch the lady's eye. She seemed to be fixedly interested in something that was going on at the far end of the room, where several people were walking about, and the tables groaned beneath their loads of cakes and lemonade.

'I wonder what has engaged her attention so,' speculated my aunt.

Mrs King, nee Sempson, was staring now almost unnaturally. Then I saw her turn her pretty head, seem to check, and then once more compulsively gaze back towards the tables.

Suddenly she quite changed colour. I have been witness to several instances of abrupt illness, slight or extreme. Mrs King seemed in the grip of the latter. Her face took on not a white but a thickly shining, greenish pallor. Without thinking I moved towards her. But in that moment she dropped to the ground.

At once she was surrounded by women, one of whom must have been her sister. Presently she was carried away.

From all sides came sympathetic murmurs concerning the heat.

To my sorrow, Mrs King did not return to enjoy the over-bountiful tea. My aunt made enquiries of her sister, who said that Daffodil was been obliged to be sent home in the pony cart. 'It is a great nuisance, as she intended returning to St Leonards tomorrow, and now she won't be well enough.'

'Is her indisposition more serious than we had hoped?' asked my aunt.

'Oh,' said the sister, blinking at me with eyes not half so fine as her sibling's, 'she makes a fuss about it. She has these delicate ways from her younger years. I may say, she'd never have dared go on so *then*. They would have dismissed her.'

'I thought,' said I sternly, 'that she seemed most unwell.'

'No, it isn't that she's ill,' declared the vulgar sister, whose hat might have been a

lesson to us all in the virtues of regret. 'She says it's something that she saw in Austria, once.' My aunt and I evidenced incomprehension. The sister said, 'I can say nothing of it. She refuses to explain. She says it's too dreadful, and it's taken her these six years to put it from her, and now she's been reminded and will need to stay in bed, with me expected to be flapping round her all day long, and neglecting my duties and Pa.'

We extricated ourselves from the uninspiring Miss Sempson and soon after left the tea party. As we were going out I remember that Aunt Alice said to me, 'There is disappointing Mr Polleto. I understand he contributed generously to the bell fund, which I find curious, since he's far from affluent, and never attends the church. Nor is he sociable. Did you happen to notice him this afternoon?'

I said that he might easily go unnoticed, but that I had not, I thought, seen him. Nor had I.

The day before my departure from Steepleford, I had planned a walk through the woods. Whether or not I would approach the stretch of the Lane that ran by Josebaar Hawkins's house I was myself unsure. In any event, a sudden thunderstorm erupted. Its violence and tenacity were such that I gave over any idea of walking, and spent all that last day with my aunt. The following morning we parted most affectionately, and I returned to London. A month later I went abroad and spent the rest of the year in Rome, in which ancient, imperial and legend-haunted city it may be supposed Steepleford and all its tales sank in my memory to a depth of fathoms.

Just after the New Year, I spent a day or so again at Steepleford. This time, there was snow down, but a flawless snow, thick and solid to tread upon, the weather

chill and fine. Had I truly forgotten the house in Salter's Lane? I think that I had in everything but my heart. I took my way across the white fields, admiring the shapes of everything, each changed by its cover of pale fleece, then strayed off into the ancient woods, which were like a cathedral of purest ice.

And then somehow, in the way these things turn out, I took at random another of the silent avenues, and found myself ten minutes later at one of the several openings into the Lane. I had been walking by then for more than two hours, and it seemed foolish not to follow this path back to the town.

Soon I reckoned I had been wise to do so. The low afternoon sun was clouding over and a mauve cast hid the sky. So I strode briskly, thinking of a warm fire ahead and other cheer, and came level with the high wall of Josebaar Hawkins's ill-starred house.

At first I think I did not recognize it, for like everything else it was plastered with white. But then I got a great shock, and stopped dead in my tracks.

'What has happened here?' I asked, perhaps aloud. Until that time, the trees of the old estate had made a second wall behind the first, and the pile of the building had been visible only in portions, as I have previously described. Now, looking beyond one huge holly tree, I gained abruptly a view of the entire upper front aspect - all of it, its timber, stone and brickwork, the roof and chimneys, and every cold window, glaring as if it were eye to eye with me, like some person who has suddenly whipped from their face a mask.

Astonished, I attempted to reason how this should be. It was not that the trees were bare. No, it was that every tree, saving the holly, which in any case stood this side of the wall, had been brought down.

I confess that meeting the house like this, head-on, unnerved me. I made no secret of that to myself. But in a moment or so, I had a rational thought. Some vandals had been at work in the 'grounds'. They had chopped down the trees and carted them away, no doubt to provide firewood for needy winter hearths.

On the strength of this rationale, an unusual, perhaps a boy's desire took me, having seen so much, to scale the wall and peer over into the precincts of the house, now open to be studied. I have to say too that my peculiar eagerness to do this was prompted, I now think, more by an *aversion* to doing it, rather than a longing after secrets. It was like a dare one must not evade, for fear of being thought - worst of all by oneself - a coward.

I am quite strong and fit. The wall had inconsistencies and irregular stones in plenty. Despite the snow, I got up it in less than three minutes, and, perched there on the top, stared down into the gardens.

They were the most desolate sight. Patches of snow lay all about, but the ground had turned dark, and in places black, the snowfall having partly melted away as it already had on some of the higher trees in the woods. There was a good reason for this. Any sun that fell here must fall directly over everything since nothing now stood between it and the ground, only the house. Every tree and shrub that had grown, rampantly and untended, within the walls had been felled and, presumably, taken away. And I wondered who could have made so bold after all these hundred and more years.

Then something else caught my eye. There was, toward the side of the house, a sort of ornamental little building, perhaps a folly. It was ruinous and falling

down, and its demise seemed to have been hastened by a young oak tree, which had toppled aslant upon its roof, and leaned there yet.

So why then, I wondered, had the wood-stealing vandals not carted off also this ready-felled tree? There it lay, as useful as any other timber, bare and exposed, its dislocated branches creaking in some unfelt wind, clear as complaining voices in the stillness.

There were no birds, of course. There was, as before, no sound - beyond, this time, the creaking of the fallen tree's branches. But this effect had been common through much of the woods, as the day advanced and the winter sun prepared to leave the earth. Until this point I had not noted it particularly.

Now I did. For here the absence of all sound, save that sinister creaking whine of broken branches, seemed heavy with presage. The air smelled sour, and faintly dirty, like one might expect in the centre of an industrial town, where smoke and cinders fall and make each breath lifeless, and potent with disease.

And then, even as I sat there gazing at it, the unlikeliest thing occurred. The leaning dead oak tree swayed, and out of it there burst a shower of dry pieces, splinters of wood ejected, and then one whole limb snapped off and dropped, disintegrating even as it went, so that by the instant it touched the ground, there was no more left of it than dust. What had caused such a thing? The action of some animal? No animal was in the vicinity, so much was plain. The simple process of a slow decay, then, electing to finish its work coincidentally with my scrutiny? I had the strangest notion that, simply by *staring* at the tree, I had hastened the branch's breaking off and dissolution.

And then, and then, I knew that it was not I, *I* had not caused it. Across my scalp

my hair crawled as if filled by icy tricklings. Against my will, it seemed to me, yet no more resistible than as if at the pull of a chain of steel, my head turned and tilted back, and I looked up the unmasked face of that house, towards its highest casements.

There was not a creeper left upon any of them. Even the snow had been leached away. But oh, something white there was, which stood at the window, looking out, and out.

I can put down here only what I saw. I saw a woman's shape. Her gown I cannot detail, nor how her hair was dressed, though it seemed to me that both were disordered. Her features I could not see, and that had nothing to do with distance, and I believe nothing to do with light or shade. She *had* no features, none. That is, she had only one feature. She had two eyes. But her eyes were set in that featureless whiteness of a shape like two burned holes. They were not eyes at all - but… they *were* eyes, more eyes than are possible to any thing that lives.

I remember little of my descent of the wall. Perhaps I fell from it. Certainly I think some of it crumbled and broke away too, as I slipped down. And then I fled along the Lane, and this I do recall. I fled and I whimpered like a man pursued by the dogs of hell that are really fiends, and they will tear him, even his soul, if they catch him. But they did not catch me, and I reached the town. And then came maybe the most sinister and curious thing of all.

For running out into Market Gate Street in the wintry dusk, a carriage passed me, and in the carriage a friend of my aunt's who greeted me as she went by most graciously. And I raised my hat, and nodded, and then walked on to my aunt's door, like some man who has not just met the devil on the road.

'Aunt,' I said to her that evening, 'why not come up to London for a spell?'

'Oh, no, dear boy,' she said. 'I'm too comfortable here. Why should I wish to be in London?'

'Well, I am there. And half a dozen theatres and shops and museums that are the envy of the country.' But she would not be moved, saying it would put me against her, if she encroached upon my 'London World'.

And so, after another day, I went again away from Steepleford. And naturally, I had spoken to no one of what I had seen, and no one had asked me what I had seen. Nor did I hear a single mention of Hawkins's house, or its current state, about the town, let alone of anything else.

However, as I sat in the train, I took myself sternly to one side, and told myself that perhaps ghosts did exist, for there are nowadays even photographs of some of them. But of all things, the dead could not harm the living: their power was done.

## III

Less than a month later, I was at a supper given by my then acquaintance, Lord D —. The food was of the best and the wines Olympian, which made up, somewhat, for the conversation. At midnight I well remember we had some music, amongst the rest an attractive rendition, given by a female singer of superb voice, of the words of Alexander Pope's *Pastorals*, the melody being, I think, Handel's. As it finished, one of the servants came discreetly in, and presently handed me a telegram.

To my dismay I read that my aunt had fallen seriously ill, and begged my attendance on her. My own man had taken alarm and brought the message directly on to me.

I hurried to my rooms and flung some things together, and was soon on the train for Steepleford Halt.

I have said that I had great affection for my aunt, and with good reason. My agitation was increased because she had never, until then, that I knew, been afflicted with any ailment not trifling and swiftly over. Other thoughts I believe I dismissed from my mind.

The morning was young when we arrived at the Halt, where her carriage had been sent in readiness. It was a dismal day in February, sleety and cold, with leaden skies. Everything looked horrible to me in the deadly light of it, and in the light of my anxiety, and all the station buildings, the gaunt trees, seemed covered by an air of desuetude and darkness. This impression only increased as we bumped through the wintry woods, and I cannot describe my abrupt unease when I thought we must turn along Salter's Lane. Then the carriage veered away, and went instead by the other route, to the Crossing. On asking the coachman, he told me that some trees had come down in the Lane, which made it impassable, and I dare say I was ridiculously relieved.

I barely noted the town. No sooner had we reached my aunt's than I sprang from the carriage and hastened indoors.

In the hall I met her doctor, a solid man, who reassured me somewhat. 'It is a kind of low fever we've been seeing in the town recently. Unfortunately, given

your aunt's age, it has stayed with her longer than one might have hoped.'

Then he frowned, and I asked him why he did so.

He said, 'Ah, well, there have been rather a lot of such cases in the past month. But there. The old and the very young are always vulnerable. Your aunt, of course, is not yet sixty.'

I said, 'Have there been fatalities?'

'No, no, nothing like that.'

None of this prepared me for the sight of my aunt, who, lying propped on her pillows, looked white, and seemed, to me, near death. I took her hand, and she murmured at once, 'I called you here, my dear, because I was afraid I might not be able to remain much longer. But today I feel rather better.'

I told her she was a fraud, and that I was happy to find her so.

Despite my nervousness, my aunt rallied. She improved. But she did not entirely get well. Two weeks later, when pressing concerns of my own urged me to go back to London, she too implored me to leave. 'I was being very foolish,' she said. 'What nonsense. I shall see the New Century, I am determined on it.' And I realized I made her more uncertain by remaining so faithfully, as if hourly fearful of her collapse.

The doctor too grew confident. 'She is completely out of danger, or I'd never concur with your departure. And she has the best of care. I'd like to see more progress, but then her age has been against her a little. When the spring weather

comes, then we should see a change for the better. Although,' he added, rather insensitively and ominously, 'I find that all those who have succumbed to this pernicious malady take a great while over mending. There's a young woman I have heard of, of only three-and-twenty, of the working families, you understand, but well nourished and fit, and the mother of healthy children, who has been sick with this same fever off and on for eight weeks. She was one of the first to contract it, and again and again she seems to throw it off, only to sink down once more.'

Receiving this news, I was now in two minds whether or not to go. However, in the end a telegram arriving the other way, from the metropolis, forced my hand, and I caught the train.

Truth to tell, it was a relief to escape the atmosphere of a convalescent house, not to mention all Steepleford, which had seemed unbearably dreary and run-down in the rain and mud of a newborn and unfriendly March. Indeed, I had never seen the place look so forlorn; it had depressed me. And when, having been returned to the city only a few days, a firmly written letter came from my aunt, assuring me she had now taken the upward path, and even given a tea party for some friends, I resolved to stay where I was. Soon after this, and in the light of a further optimistic bright epistle from Steepleford, I allowed myself to be lured to France with Nash and his brother, and then was persuaded on to Italy again.

In retrospect I gain a terrible impression of my short time there in the awakening summer, and of that previous more leisurely summer I had spent in Rome, happily wandering among the bronzes and the marbles of both inanimate and human subjects. Because concurrently there ran on and on, behind the veils of distance and inattention, that dreadful horror of which I could know nothing, and

yet which I do believe I sensed. For had it not shown itself to me behind its own shadow, brushed me with its noiseless wing?

I shall not try to excuse myself. Perhaps I was afraid. I might have seen that there was good reason to be.

Certainly I did not ponder that chance vision I had had of a 'ghost' in the window of Josebaar Hawkins's house. I did not even offer the experience as a suitable Gothic tale, one hot Tuscan night among the soft blue hills when others were telling ghost stories. Did I even call it to mind? Perhaps - I cannot remember. But of course, too, what I had seen was not a ghost. Not that at all.

Needless to say, when I got back to England late in July, I was at once assailed by feelings of unquiet and guilt, and instantly wrote to Aunt Alice - there had been no letters from her waiting for me, but as a general rule she did not constantly put pen to paper. I asked how she did, and if I might come down and see her.

After a slight delay, I received her reply, which was brief and penned in a careful, rigid style. She said she was in her usual health, and would be glad if I would 'take time to call on her'. I thought the whole tone of her letter sulky, and was peeved that she had not mentioned some presents I had sent her on my travels - for which churlishness may I be forgiven.

For some reason, as I saw to the packing of my bag, I had upon my mind that fragment of Pope's *Pastorals*, which I had heard the very evening the telegram reached me informing me of my aunt's illness. The gracious verse was in every way unlike the rhyme that had accrued about Amber Hawkins and her murdering spouse, yet now it too lodged fast in my head, and repeated itself over and over.

Never came warning in a stranger guise.

The words are well known, of course, but I shall put them down even so, such is their unconscionable significance to me now:

*Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade,*

*Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade;*

*Where'er you tread, the blushing flowers shall rise,*

*And all things flourish where you turn your eyes.*

The train reached Steepleford Halt soon after three o'clock of a peerless summer afternoon. London had been somewhat stuffy and overheated, but as we entered the countryside beyond, a wonderful honeyed peace descended, balmy, lazy, and a-flicker with butterflies. Flowers blazed from every hedge and bank, the trees were laden with heavy green, the sky was as blue as the mysotis.

Descending from my carriage I was struck initially only by the sense of the huge sun, which was hammering the earth. But looking about me I perceived at once a quality in the light, both dry and harsh. Everything looked to me, in this glare, drained of colour, faded like a woman's lovely gown worn too often.

The veteran who oversaw the station was standing to one side, consulting his watch as the train pulled out again. It was my habit to exchange a few pleasantries with him when I met him, and I prepared to do so now, but he forestalled me. Looking up, his face was not as it had been, not so much older as used up. He nodded but did not smile.

'Good day. I regret the train was late.'

'No matter. It was a delightful journey today.'

'But a poor arrival, I dare to think,' he said. He sounded surly, which surprised me very much; he was not of this sort. Then he pointed straight by me. 'D'you see that tree?'

I turned, to humour him, and gazed towards an old copper beech that had guarded the ground above the railway for as long as I had been coming there, and no doubt for some regiments of years before that.

'The tree. Indeed I do.'

'See how it leans?'

'Why, yes - what can have happened?'

'The good Lord knows,' said he. 'The roots are out to one side. Dying, it is.'

'What a great pity. Can nothing be done?'

He made a noise. He was angry, not merely at my paltry concern, but at all things that had somehow conspired to ruin the beauty of the tree.

'It's got to be felled tomorrow,' he said. 'A danger to the trains if it falls, d'you see.'

I said again I was very sorry, as I was, and gave him something for his trouble, at

which he looked as if the coins concerned were the Thirty Pieces of Silver themselves.

I was glad to get out of the station after that.

My intention had not been to walk; it was too sultry, and here for sure there was a dull storminess to the air that was already making my head ache. The station farther up the line lay five miles beyond the town, but in an outpost where a cab might be accosted. Here, however, I had been promised my aunt's carriage, which now, going out on to the path, I did not find. This I could have understood more readily if the train had been early, or on time.

I almost turned back to ask the stationmaster if a carriage might be procured from the local inn, but then thought better of it. The walk to the town would not take so long, providing I struck off at once for Salter's Lane, and followed that to Steepleford.

There I idled, on the gravel, under the impoverished shade of some spindly, desiccated sycamores, as if a decision had still to be made. I was reluctant to go on. But go on I must, and would.

Until this moment I had, I think, almost entirely suppressed or driven away my utter unease at the prospect of the Lane where witches once had leaped in their revels, and where lay the house of a murderer - and of his wife who, as I had seen and still believed, haunted its window. Now my fears rushed in like the sea tearing through one small crack in a dyke, carrying all before it.

I broke out into a sweat that even the leaden heat had not occasioned, for the moisture was cold, and my heart thudded in my breast.

*Come*, I thought, *in heaven's name, you are not a baby. What is there to be afraid of? If the wretched nook affects you so, do what the others do, and look away from it.*

What finally galvanized me was a dawning grasp of what the absence of the carriage might mean. In the past, when it had been promised, it had been reliable. If my aunt had forgotten to order it forth, or her coachman had not brought it, then something must have happened to interrupt the mission. And all at once I was vastly unsettled as to what.

Then I did set off, striding the path between the fields, towards the woodland that lay like a smoky cloud upon the nearest horizon.

I must have noticed as I went the state of those fields. They were bleached and barren-looking, the grain in parts fallen, and where it was still upright, then not normal in its colour. In other areas it seemed burnt. At the time I suspected a fire had taken place, or infestation of some sort. My mind was not truly on the fields, and did not want to be.

But then I reached the edge of the woods. And with the best will in the world, I could no longer delude myself.

Only after the most serious of gales would so many great trees have fallen. Looking in, at what had been the greenest of green shades, I now beheld bald, wide avenues, all railwayed with these broken pillars, which had tumbled in every direction, taking in every case more than one or two of their fellows with them. Besides these fallen giants, the standing wood was sickly. There could be no mistaking it. A yellowish tinge was on each leaf, or worse, a blackened

scorching, as if some acid had been thrown over and among them all. The leaf canopy besides showed great holes.

I advanced like some soldier into enemy territory, where any lethal *hazard* or trap may be encountered. No sooner was I in, however, than I paused again. Upon the raddled ground, bare of anything but the most hardy weeds and brackens (and these burnt and brown), I had begun to see strange heaps and drifts of a dark dust. I knew at once what these were, but going over to one of the fallen trees, I tapped it, not very hard, with a strong-looking stick I had found on the outer path and picked up thoughtlessly, as one sometimes does on a walk. No sooner did the stick make contact than the bole of the prone trunk, for about five feet either side of the light blow, gave way in a shower of what appeared to be the finest black sugar. The sturdy-looking stick also snapped in half, brittle as charcoal. And the sugar-like substance sprayed out from it too. I dropped the stick then. As it hit the ground, it shattered into some twenty further fragments. The dust - the dust was all that remained of trees that, last summer, had seemed to touch the sky.

But I had to go on through this wreckage of a poisoned wood. I followed doggedly the carriage-ride, which normally at this time of year would have been rather overgrown. Surely I had seen it so myself - with sprinklings of woodland flowers everywhere the sun could penetrate, thick moss and large lacy ferns where it did not. There was no hint of that now. Not even the toadstools and other fungi that colonize any woodland, good or bad, had ventured in. Nor was anything else to be come on. No beasts or birds ran or fluttered or fluted through the trees, or played about the tracks. Silence ruled the woods. Absence ruled them. And here was I, forging on perforce, like the last man alive upon a dying earth. And my feelings of horror and dejection increased with every step I took.

By the time I got out into Salter's Lane, I may say I was prepared for anything. Had I not been, the quantity of felled trees that marked the exit point would have alerted me, and the expanses of the deadly dust, which resembled here nothing so much as the encroachment of a desert.

Even prepared, yet I halted where I stood. I looked down the Lane, and knew it for an avenue accursed. It was - and I do not exaggerate - like some landscape of the damned.

Nothing stood in it. Its length was paved by horizontal trees and in between them the dust had formed mounds which had partly solidified, in a friable, hopeless manner, perhaps from the direct action of the weather. Where hedges had been, there were sometimes left some bare black twigs and poles. I did not want to enter the Lane. I did not want to travel over it.

But I had no choice - unless I turned back, retrod my path and then went on to Joiner's Crossing, a detour which would now add almost an hour to my urgent journey.

So I went on. I walked into the Lane and advanced, having, every yard or so, to get over the fallen trees, most of which gave way under my feet, meaning I must scramble and jump to save myself from a fall. The mounds of dust were much the same; I sank in them as in the dunes of some hellish beach, or else the humps of powdery 'soil' they had formed crumbled, and I slithered unsafely.

This was very exhausting, and additionally foul from the dust that was constantly billowing up as if purposely to stifle me.

Above, the sky was no longer blue. It had a tarnished sheen to it, like unpolished metal. True clouds were hung out on it, grimy-looking and peculiar in shape, like torn banners, each a mile across.

Of course, I knew that I must come to the house. I knew that I must pass it. I had vowed I would not give it one glance. The perils and obstacles of the Lane would assist me, surely, in that, since I needed all my attention for the road.

However, **I** reached the house of Josebaar Hawkins, and did not keep to my vow.

The holly tree was gone. There was no trace of it - it had become one with the dust. The wall too had come down. It lay scattered all over the Lane, the bricks and bits of stonework disintegrating, like everything else. Behind the wall stretched a vast piece of ground that was like a bare, swept floor. It had nothing at all growing upon it, and even the dust had blown or otherwise vanished away. It was a nothingness, in colour greyish. And upon this table of death there rose - the house. Beside it was the little ornamental building that I had spied on my last excursion there. This I now saw, with an unnerving pang, had been a small mausoleum, no doubt the supposed resting place of Hawkins's wife. Now it comprised merely a part of a roof upon a couple of columns. Within, too, was nothing. Of the toppled oak that had leant there, no sign remained, naturally.

Of everything that had been there, of nature or contrivance, the house alone stood — but not intact. Its roof had come away in broad segments: one could see the gaping joists and beams, which were in turn collapsing. Both chimneys were down, crashed inwards. On the lower floors not one window had kept its antique glass or its boxed decorations. The creepers had slipped from the exterior walls and after them the bricks had tried and were still trying to come out. Yet the shell

of the building, what there was of it, still jutted upright. And in that spot, this made it a thing of unbelievable terror. Ruined and distorted and every moment increasingly giving way, nevertheless *it* had so far *stayed*, where nothing else remained.

I perceived all this before I had raised my gaze beyond the lower floors. When I did raise it, I selected its targets with much care. But in the end, I knew I would have to do it, would have to look full-on at the upper window under the roof.

I had been in Rome, I had been in Siena and Venice. Among the hills and waters, among the bronzes, surely I had somehow understood that *she* still stood here, on and on, stood here looking out, eating with her eyes first the bricks and mortar, then the pins that sealed her up, patient as only a hopeless thing can be, taking a century over it; next eating out the glass, and next what lay beyond the glass - the trees, the air, the Lane, the countryside.

They must have known, the people of Steepleford town, in 1788, when they passed by on the Lane, hearing her weeping and shrieking in agony and fear, all those endless days and nights. They must have known what he had done to her. What then did *they* do, but cross themselves, perhaps, or use some older, less acceptable mark. But they knew, they knew.

She had loved too well, that was her sole crime. She had seen too much in mankind that was beautiful and good, and for sure too much in him, in Josebaar Hawkins, and for this they had condemned her and killed her. How she must then have hated them. How she must have *looked*, fixing despairingly her mad eyes upon the impenetrable dark. And if she had not survived her death, *something* that came of her, and of her hatred, and of those eyes - and which

learned too, new skills whereby to use those eyes - that *did* survive, and lived still, and saw and looked - and fed. And it was there, there in that window, drawing up the whole world in its slow and bottomless net.

'Oh, God, Amber Maria, poor lost pitiable hideous residue—'

My gaze was fixed on her window, her death's window. My gaze was stuck there and now could not pull away. I felt my heart turn to water inside me and the occluded atmosphere blackened over.

I did not quite lose my senses. Instead I found myself leaning on my hands, kneeling in the desert of dust among the slaughter of the trees.

To myself I said, *But what did I see this time*?

For I had not seen a single thing. The window - *her* window - was empty of everything. Of creeper and of bricks, pins and glass. Of light and shadow, and of any shape. As with the rest, nothing was there. And yet… the nothing that was in that window was not empty. No. *She* was there in it, there in the core of it, as things hide in darkness. Or her eyes were there, those pits of seeing, her *looking* was there, her *looking* looked out. It had looked even into me, and through me, and away, to have all else.

Presently I got up. And, as before, I ran.

The town - I wondered afterwards why the stationmaster had not warned me. I wondered too why the newspapers and journals in London had not carried some mention of it, why no sensational word seemed to have escaped from it. Perhaps there had been some news which was not believed - or believed too well and

suppressed. Besides, events had raced to their final act as swiftly as a wave.

I have read of times of siege and plague in medieval Germany, Italy, France. In certain of those occult little towns, crouched in the profundities of deep valleys, hung like baskets from the sides of cliffs, the dim and winding alleys make such images still all too credible. But Steepleford was a slow, flat, gentle settlement, prosperous and mild, where the horse, casting its shoe, caused a stir, and they had longed for a foreign theatrical gentleman to liven them up.

Getting near the outskirts, I saw a cloud hanging over the fields and town. It was a wreath of smoke. The dead gardens along the approach I had scarcely noticed, nor the untended houses, which seemed to have been afflicted too by a kind of partial hurricane, ripping the tiles from roofs and setting askew anything that had been in the slightest way vulnerable. There was a dearth of people going about their trades or gossip. Instead, there hung in the atmosphere a *presence* of incredible raw heat and turgid staleness. I have never smelled such air, even in the sinks of greater Europe.

I came into Market Gate Street before I properly knew it, and there, as in some canvas by Hieronymus Bosch, I saw what I took at once for plague fires burning in archways and at the corners of houses, reeking of sulphur and other purgatives.

The fumes by now were nearly as thick as a London fog, and in them, as I moved on, persons came and went anonymously, their heads down and swathed in scarves, none looking at another. They were creatures from the selfsame painting, at large between torments.

Then came the River Styx, for the street was awash with a black, stinking body of fluid. I had splashed into it before I could prevent myself, but in any case,

there was no other way across.

Up toward my aunt's part of the town, a pony and trap leapt rattling by, the unhappy animal tossing its head and red-eyed as the horses of Pluto from the smoke. A man hailed me and pulled the horse in. Amazed to be recognized in the Inferno, I stopped. There was my aunt's doctor, peering down.

'Thank God you've arrived, young man. We sent off a wire this very morning.'

My heart clenched inside me. 'It must have missed me by an instant. Is she so bad, then?'

'I fear she is, now. It's the same all over the town. The deuce knows what the illness is. We have three specialists down from London, and one from the Low Countries, and they have drawn a blank on it. My own sister, who has never taken sick in her life - well. But besides all this business of burst pipes and subsiding walls across the entire town— But I won't trouble you with that, either.' The pony shook its head violently. The doctor raised his voice to curse. 'Be damned to these confounded fires! What do the fools think they're doing? Have they heard nothing of modern hygiene - our only reliable ally against disease - to fill up the air with such muck? Superstition, ignorance— Make haste to get on!' And with this baleful cry, whether to me or to the pony I was unsure, the doctor whipped the beast on, and like King Death himself flung off into the smother.

But I ran again, and so reached my aunt's house. And ten minutes later I was in her bedroom, by the side of her bed. But she, although living yet, did not see or hear me.

When I was a small boy, and my youthful mother died suddenly and without warning, this aunt of mine, then an elegant and pretty fashion plate of an Alice, herself not much above thirty-five, sheathed in softest clothes and scented by vanilla, took me in her arms and let me sob out my soul. And now again I stood beside her, and again I wept. But she never knew it, now. And oh, any pity I had felt for that other, for that thing once known as Amber Maria Hawkins, you can be sure I had given it up.

So now I must come to the strangest part of my abnormal tale. To a conclusion, indeed, that any writer of fiction would be ashamed to set before his audience, having brought them thus far, and by such a fearful road. Therefore, prior to the last scenes of the drama, I will say this: One piece evidently missing from my narrative has since been supplied, and only the discovery of that unique absentee has brought me, at this time, and so many years after these events took place, to write them down at all.

My aunt, where she lay on the bed, did not stir. Only the faintest movement indicated that she still breathed. I looked ardently for this proof, and once or twice it seemed to me that it faltered, and then I too held my breath. But always the slight rise and fall of her breast resumed. At least she was not in pain or distress. That was all, at this time, that I might be thankful for.

Near midnight the doctor called again. He was worn out, as I could see, by his conscientious tours up and down the stricken town, through the acrid fumes of the fires, the stenchful spilled waters, and the furnace heat, which even nightfall had not lessened. When he was done with his examination, a frighteningly swift one, I had them bring him some brandy, and he thanked me, then solemnly announced that he 'did not think it would be long'.

'Is there nothing that can be done?' I asked like a child.

The doctor shook his head. He was doubtless exhausted too by this question, which must have been asked of him everywhere that night, by tearful wives and white-faced husbands, by daughters, by fathers, by one-third of the folk of Steepleford. In that hour they had become the people of Egypt when the Angel of Death did not pass over them but took from them, across all the boundaries of age and condition, their first-born.

After the doctor had gone, I sat down again, and drank some of the wine that had been brought to me on an untouched dinner tray. Then I think I must have slipped into a doze.

I was woken, as were countless others, by the most fearsome noise I have ever heard.

Starting up, I gave a cry. As I did so, I heard below and above me in the house, and everywhere around, many other throats exercised in similar startled exclamation. I can only describe the sound as being like an exact representation of that well-known phrase: the Crack of Doom. It was as if a thunderbolt hurled from heaven had struck the town, cracking it open with one awful brazen clang.

Finding myself unharmed, and the house still entire about me, I turned in fear to the bed. But a glance at my aunt showed her to be still insensible. Going to the window then I stared out, but the street was thick with smoke and darkness, its few lamps half blind. Worse for being inevitably unseen, vague noises of fright and panic had risen all around, and I made out windows lighting up here and there like red eyes. Then a man came running by. I opened the casement and

called down to him. 'What was that sound? Do you know?'

But he only raised to me a face peeled by terror, and flew on.

I truly believed some apocalyptic conclusion was about to rush upon us all. The most primal urge came on me, and going to my poor aunt I meant to lift her up in my arms, so that we might at least perish together. But as I reached the bedside, I stopped dead once more. For I saw her eyes were open and looking at me lucidly. And where the lamp shone on her face, her colour had come back, not feverish but soft, even attractive.

'How nice to see you, Frederick,' said my aunt. 'I have had the most refreshing sleep and feel so much better now.' Her voice was not weak, nor did she seem to be lying to console me. She added, nearly winsomely, 'I hate to trouble cook - I know the hour is late - but perhaps Sally might boil me an egg? An egg with a little toast. And oh, a cup of tea. I'm so thirsty.'

And then, before my astounded gaze, she was sitting herself up in the bed, and as I sprang to forestall and help her, she laughed. 'You're gallant, dear boy.'

When accordingly I went out into the passage, I found the maid, Sally, standing there and looking at me with great round eyes. Before I could speak of the wonder concerning my aunt, Sally announced, 'They say the new church bell has fallen right down the spire and landed in the chancel. The roof there is all damaged and come down, too. Did you hear the horrible noise, sir? We thought the End had come.'

Distractedly I asked, 'Was anyone hurt?'

'They say not.' (I learned later that 'they' was the carter's boy, who had bustled in with the news.) 'But the whole town has been woke up.'

This was, it turned out, true in more than one way, if the process of waking may be associated with revival. For my aunt was not alone in her abrupt and miraculous feat of recovery. It transpired, as over succeeding days I learned in more detail, that of all the six hundred-odd persons lying sick that night, or even, it was thought, at the point of death, not one but did not rouse up an instant or so after the appalling clangour of the bell. And not one thereafter but did not take quickly a swift and easy path to full recovery. (Even, or so I was assured, a cat that had been failing grew suddenly well, and a canary that had sunk to the floor of its cage flew up on its perch and began to sing.)

Shamelessly, it was spoken of as a miracle, this reversal of extreme illness to good health. And there were those who spoke religiously of the falling bell, some claiming that it had cast itself down in some curious form of sacrifice, which it achieved, having cracked and buckled itself beyond use. Others averred that it had been itself unlucky or impure in some sensational but mysterious way, and therefore fell like an evil angel, at God's will, after which the town was freed from its curse.

These notions, of course, were ludicrous, but everywhere for a while one heard them, and small suprise. For the saving of so many of the town's lives, both young and old, affluent and poor, and in so abrupt and unheralded a form, did indeed smack of divine intervention. While I did not for a moment credit this, yet I thanked God with everyone else there. And as the days went on, and Steepleford hoisted itself slowly but surely from its own ashes, the streets cleared of water and debris, the baleful fires vanished, and the summer sun took

pity and shone with greater brightness and less heat. The smell of furnaces and dungeons melted away.

Ten days later, accompanying my aunt on her first walk up and down the thoroughfares, I saw fresh roses blooming in twenty gardens. Now and then, where a tree had come down or been axed, new growth could be seen rioting, shining green, from the stumps.

They had found by then that the bell rope had been eaten away. By rats, some said, as Steepleford moved, a rescued ship, back upon its even keel.

'Such a nuisance,' added my aunt, flighty as a girl. 'Now the rector will want' another one.'

I said that this would mean more fund-raising bacchanals, and Aunt Alice remarked that the strange Mr Polleto at least would spare them all his disappointing presence. 'Lady Constance, when she called, told me that he had left the town only last Monday. Generally such a thing would never have caught her attention, but it seems the cottage is now for sale, and she wishes to buy it for a young painter she has found.'

But I had then no interest at all in Mr Polleto.

My aunt, meanwhile, had more than become herself again. She seemed to me younger and more active than she had been for years. The doctor too assured me that he now thought her 'good for three decades'. And when she said to me one evening, 'Do you know, dear boy, I think being ill has done me good,' I could only agree. And so, it must be confessed, once more at liberty to do so, I began to hanker after my own life.

Of course, I was bemused too. I wanted time to myself to think over events. One instant I felt I had been the involuntary party to a delusion. At another, the unreal seemed actual. But we seldom trust ourselves upon such matters, I mean upon matters that may involve the supernatural. There is always some other explanation that surely must be the proper one.

I am not unduly superstitious, and now, in the glow of returning normality, I began to prefer to think of myself as having been in the grasp of a wild obsession. In this state I had imagined some things and brooded upon others, until I could make them fit my vivid scenario.

When finally I commenced my preparations to leave Steepleford, I was told, in passing, by a neighbour that no carriage could now be driven along Salter's Lane.

'Are the fallen trees still uncleared?'

'No, no. It's the new growth shooting out there. It's become one great coppice, with trees bursting, they say, from the stumps. Those that have seen it say they've never known a sight like it. But there's a deal going on with trees and other plants, after that drought we had.' Here he gave me a long list of things, which I will not reproduce. Then, as I was tiring, he said this: 'Perhaps you may have noticed the old beech at the station? A fine old tree, but it was twisting and due for the axe. But now it's been spared, and they say the roots have dug down again, if such a thing is to be believed, and the trunk is straight again too. And the leaves are coming out on it as if it were May, not August. A strange business and no mistake. Did you ever get a peep at that house in the Lane? The Witch House, some call it."

Sombrely I replied that I had.

'Well, that's all come down, like a house of cards. Not a wall of it standing, nor one stone on another. A great heap of rubble.'

I had a dream, not while I remained in the town but a month later, when Nash had persuaded me back to France, in the south, in a little village among the chestnut woods. I dreamed I was on the roof of Steepleford church, and pale, glassy arrows flew by through the air. They were the looks of a woman who stood at a window in Salter's Lane. These arrows severed the rope of the bell in the church spire. And when it fell there was no sound, only a great nothingness. But in the nothingness, I knew that woman was no more.

'What's up?' said Nash, finding me out in the village street, smoking, at four in the morning, the dawn just lifting its silver lids beyond the trees.

'Do you suppose,' I said, 'that something thought fully virtuous, if attacked, might rebound on the attacker, might destroy them?'

'History and experience relate otherwise,' said Nash.

And so they do.

## IV

That, then, was my story of Steepleford, all I had of it at the time, but which I gave to my companion, Jeffers, on the terrace of the Hotel Alpius as we waited for the Wassenhaur train.

I was nevertheless moved to express to him my regret for the unsatisfactory lack of explanation concerning the final outcome of events.

'I haven't been back to the place for years now,' I finished, 'and so can add nothing. My aunt, you see, grew sprightly - she still is - and moved to London, where she has a fine town house.'

'Hmm,' said my companion. He drew upon his cigar, and looked covertly again at the instigator of my tale, that same quaint little shopkeeper Polleto, who still sat at his adjacent table.

Precisely at that moment the untoward took place. Or perhaps I should say the apt, as it had happened before, and neither of us could now miss its significance.

A party of three gentlemen and two ladies had just now been coming across the terrace, and had taken their seats to my right. So it was that I heard, from behind my right ear, a stifled little cry, and next the splintering crash of a water glass dropped on the paving.

Jeffers and I both turned sharply, in time to see that the second young lady of the party, ashen in colour, was being supported by her friends. As they fussed and produced a smelling-bottle, and called loudly for spirits, Polleto darted to his feet and went gliding quickly from the terrace.

'Now I fancy,' said Jeffers, 'you've witnessed something of this sort before. And I too, in a way, since you told me of it.'

'You mean Daffodil King, who fainted at the church tea?'

'Just so.'

'You imagine that she, and the lady over there, swooned for a similar reason - that they had seen Mr Polleto?'

'Don't you imagine it?' asked Jeffers laconically.

I thought, and answered honestly, 'Yes. But why?'

'I wonder,' said Jeffers, infuriatingly. Then he added, 'No, I'm not being fair to you. You see, I've read of the case, and viewed a rather poor photograph once, in a police museum, in circumstances I shan't bore you with. When you first pointed him out, I had a half-suspicion. But in the light of both ladies fainting at the sight of the man… Recollect, Austria is only over the border here. I believe you told me that the charming Daffodil had been in Austria once, and said she had seen something there so awful that it had taken her six years to recover from it?'

'Yes, or so her sister informed me.'

'What she saw then was that same man, Polleto, in the street probably, on the day that the people of a well-known Austrian spa almost lynched him. I have no doubts the other lady, to our right, saw him in a similar style. Unless she had the singular misfortune to have met him.'

'Then he's notorious?'

'No. Of course, his real name *isn't* Polleto. I was never told what his real name was. The documents referred to him only as the Criminal. And the crime too was

hushed up in the end, and rich acquaintances got him away to avoid a most resounding scandal, which would, I believe, have brought down the Austrian government of the hour.'

'In God's name - what had he done?'

Jeffers shrugged. 'That's the thing, Frederick, what *had* he done? No one would say. Not even the file on him, which I was shown, would say anything as to the *nature* of his crime. Not even the policemen I spoke with. It was something so vile, so disgusting, so inhuman, that no scrap of it has ever been revealed by anyone who knows. They won't - can't - speak of it. They try to push it from their minds. And if they see him, like that lady across the terrace, some part of them withers. There now, she's looking a little better. All the better, no doubt, since what made her ill has left the vicinity.'

I sat staring at him.

Presently I said, 'Are you then saying to me what I suppose you must be?'

Jeffers stretched himself in his chair, and smiled at me. 'Even you,' said he, 'asked yourself whether or not something of great perceived virtue, like a church bell, could halt Amber Maria, should she set her sights on it. But it wasn't virtue she avoided, was it? She loved the earth and all the people in it. I, too, Frederick, have heard of the Lilyite sect, and of course she must have been a member of it. No doubt Josebaar Hawkins let her have her meetings in his house, and protected her afterwards by lying. But maybe, in later years, he feared that in her too, that she was one of the Lilyites and put the teachings of Jesus before all other things. What did she do but love others and want to help them with her precious gift of seeing, from which she herself had never tried to profit? She saw good and

beauty in all men and all things, and loved them like - loved them *better than* - herself. And where have you heard such philosophy before, save from the lips of Christ?'

I was shocked a little, to have missed this clue. Humbly I waited for him to go on. He did so.

'Amber Maria looked with her eating eyes through her window, and after the blocked-up bricks and pins, she had the glass, and then, as you said, the trees, the air and the Lane. And next she ate up Steepleford with her eyes. And it would have gone on like this, like rings spreading from a pebble thrown into a pool, and God knows where it could have ended. But ended it must have done, at last. For in this world, along with all those who, despite their colossal failings, carry in them the seeds of goodness and beauty, there are a few, only a few, I trust, who have nothing like that inside them. Who are composed only of the grossest and most foul of atoms, who are, though human, like things of the Pit. In them there is not, I dare say, one hint of light. Perhaps there is no soul. And meeting one of these persons, Amber Maria, who fed on goodness and beauty and drained it to dust, fed instead upon the worst poison, that which would scald away the psychic core of any such vampire. It was Polleto, you see, Polleto, that little ghastly human demon, whose crime is so unspeakable that it is never spoken of, Polleto who had come to live in the town, placating it by helping it buy a bell, Polleto that at last her devouring eyes reached. Like everything else then, she tried to eat him up. And then she must have tried to spew him out. But it was too late. She had touched and tasted in a manner only vampires know. She who had once loved God and once loved others as herself, until they let her die in that atrocious manner. And after that she who hated and would have eaten the world, save in due course she came to Polleto and ate at Polleto. *Polleto*! And it killed her,

Frederick, in each and every way. It killed her, sending her to a death more deep than any grave, more cold than any stone.'