

THE SHRINE [02-05-4. 9]

By: James Herbert

Synopsi s:

COME WORSHIP AT THE SHRINE

If you are lustful, your most carnal desires will be fulfilled.

If you are greedy, wealth will be yours for the taking.

If you are holy, you will learn of a force greater than all your dreams of the divine.

If you are a disbeliever, you will be converted or you will be destroyed.

Bow before the shrine and little Alice, the angelic child who stands before it and casts her light over the world ...

... as the flames of hell leap up to conquer heaven

itsel f. . . .

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Red blood out and black blood in,

My Dannie says I'm a child of sin.

How did I choose me my witchcraft kin?

Know I as soon as dark's dreams begin

Snared is my heart in a nightmarish tfin;

Never from terror I out may win;

So dawn and dusk I dine, peak, thin,

Scarcely knowing t'other from which-

My threat grandma-She was a Witch.

was The Little Creature," Walter de La Mare

Alice! a childish story take,

And with a childish hand

Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined

In memory's mystic band,

Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers

Plucked in a far-off land.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis

Carroll

ONE

Down with the lambs, L'f) with the lark,

James Herbert - The Shrine

Run to bed children
Before it gets dark. Old Nursery Rhyme
the SMALL MOUNDS OF DARK earth scattered
around the
graveyard looked as though the dead were pushing their
way
back into the living world. The girl smiled
nervously at
the thought as she hurried from grave to grave. They
were
mole hills. Moles were difficult to get rid
of; poison one,
another moved into its lodgings. She had often
watched
the molecatcher, a round man with a pointed face,
and
thought he looked like a mole. He grinned as he
delicately
dipped stubby fingers into his baked-beans tin and
plucked
out a strychnine-coated worm from its wriggling friends
and relatives. He always grinned when she
watched. And
chuckled when he held it toward her and she jumped
away
with a silent shriek. His lips, ever wet, like his
dosed
worms, moved, but she heard nothing. She hadn't
for as
long as she remembered. A shudder as the
molecatcher
mimed eating the writhing pink meat, but she always
stayed to watch him push his metal rod into the earth
then
poke the worm into the hole he had created. She
imagined
the mole down there, snuffling its way through solid
darkness, hunting food, searching for its own death.
Digging
its own grave. She giggled and couldn't hear her
giggle.
Alice stopped and took withered flowers from a
mud-soiled
vase. The headstone against which the flowers had
rested was fairly new, its inscription not yet
filled with
dirt nor blurred by weather. She had known the
old
lady--was she just bones now?--and had found the
living
corpse more frightening than the dead one. Could you be
alive at ninety-two? You could move, but could you
live?
The time span was incomprehensible to Alice,
who was
just eleven years old. It was hard to imagine your
own
flesh dried and wrinkled, your brain shrunken
by years of
use so that instead of becoming wise and all-knowing you
became a baby. A hunched, brittle-stick
baby.
She dumped the dead flowers into the red plastic

James Herbert - The Shrine

bucket
she carried and moved on, her eyes scanning the
untidy
rows of headstones for more. It was a weekly task
for her:
while her mother scrubbed, dusted, and polished the
church,
Alice removed the drooping tributes left
by relatives who
thought those they had lost would appreciate the
gesture.
The flowers would be emptied into the groundsman's
tip
of rotting branches and leaves, there to be ritually
burned
once a month. When this chore was completed,
Alice
would hurry back into the church and join her mother.
Inside, she would find fresh flowers ready
to adorn the
altar for the following day's Sunday services, and
while her
mother scrubbed, she would arrange the glass vases.
Afterward, she would dust down the benches, skimming
along each row, down one, up the next, holding
her breath,
seeing how far she could get before her lungs
exploded.
Alice enjoyed the work if she could make it a
game.
Once this was accomplished, and provided her mother
had no other tasks for her, she would head for her
favorite
spot: the end of the front pew at the right-hand
side of the
altar.
Beneath the statue. Her statue.
More fading colors caught her eye and she
skipped
across a low mound--this one body-length and not
mole-built--to
gather up the dying flowers. Tiny puffs of steam
escaped her" mouth and she told herself they were the
ghosts of words that lay dead inside her, words that
had
never themselves escaped.
It was cold, although it was sunny. The trees were
mostly bare, their naked branches seen for the
twisted and
tortured things they really were. Sheep, their
bellies swollen
with slow-stirring fetuses, grazed in the fields
just beyond
the stone wall surrounding the churchyard. Across the
fields were heavy woods, somber and greeny
brown,
uninviting; and behind the woods were low-lying hills,
hills that were lost completely on misty days.
Alice stared
into the field, watching the sheep. She frowned, then
turned away.
More flowers to collect before she could go inside where
the air was not quite as biting. Cold--the church was

James Herbert - The Shrine

always cold--but winter's teeth were less sharp
inside the
old building. She wandered through the graveyard, the
tilted headstones no bother to her, the decomposed
corpses
hidden beneath her feet causing no concern.
The sodden leaves and branches were piled high,
higher
than her, and the girl had to swoop the plastic
bucket back
and swiftly forward for its wasted contents to reach the
top. She reached for stems that fell back down and
tossed
them once more, satisfied only when they settled
on the
heap's summit. Alice smacked her hands together
to dislodge
the grime on her palms, feeling the sting, but not
hearing the sound. She could once, but that was long
ago.
When she listened intently and there were no
distractions,
she thought she could hear the wind, but then Alice
thought
that even when no breeze brushed her cheeks or
ruffled
her yellow hair.
The small, thin girl turned and began to walk
toward
the ancient church, the empty bucket swinging
easily by
her side. Back, forward, back, forward,
gleaming red in
the cold sunlight. Back, forward, back--and
she looked
behind her.
The plastic bucket slipped from her fingers and
clattered
to the ground, rolling in a tight semicircle
until it came to
rest against a stained green headstone. Alice
cocked her
head to one side as though listening. There was a
puzzlement
in her eyes and she half-smiled.
She stood still for several seconds before allowing her
body to turn fully, staying in that frozen
position for
several more long seconds. Her half-smile
faded and her
face became anxious. She moved slowly at
first, making
for the rough stone wall at the rear of the churchyard,
then
broke into a run.
Something tripped her--probably the corner of a
flattened
gravestone--and she tumbled forward, her knees
smearing green and brown from the soft earth. She
cried
out, but there was no sound, and quickly regained her
feet, eager to reach the wall and not knowing why. She
kept to the narrow path leading through the

James Herbert - The Shrine

cluttered
graveyard and stopped only when she had reached the
wall. Alice peered over, the highest stone on
a level with
her chest. The pregnant sheep were no longer
munching
grass; all heads were raised and looking in the
same direction.
They did not move even when Alice clambered
over the
wall and ran among them.
Her footsteps slowed, her shoes and socks
soaked by the
long grass. She seemed confused and swiveled
her head
from left to right. Her small hands were clenched
tight.
She looked directly ahead once more and the
half-smile
returned, gradually broadening until her face
showed only
rapturous wonder.
A solitary tree stood in the center of the
field, an oak,
centuries old, its body thick and
gnarled, its stout lower
branches sweeping outward, their furthest points
striving
to touch the ground again. Alice walked toward the
tree,
her steps slow but not hesitant, and fell to her
knees when
she was ten yards away.
Her mouth opened wide and her eyes narrowed, the
pupils squeezing down to tiny apertures. She
raised a hand
to protect them from the blinding white light that
shimmered
from the base of the tree.
Then her smile returned as the light dazzled
into a
brilliant sun, an unblemished whiteness. A
holy radiance.
TWO
Another Maiden like herself, Translucent,
lovely, shining clear,
Threefold each in the other closed-- O,
What a pleasant trembling fear! "The Crystal
Cabinet," William Blake
the WHITE VAN SLID TO AN
abrupt halt and the driver's
head came uncomfortably close to the
windshield. Cursing,
he pushed himself back off the steering wheel and
smacked
the hardened plastic as though it were the hand of an
errant child.
The van's headlights lit up the trees on the
other side of
the T-junction and the driver peered left and right,
grumbling
to himself as he tried to penetrate the surrounding
darkness.

James Herbert - The Shrine

"Should be right, got to be right."

There was no one else in the van to hear, but that didn't bother him: he was used to talking to himself. "Right it is."

He shoved the gear lever into first and winced at the grinding sound. The van lurched forward and he

swung the wheel to the right. Gerry Fenn was tired, angry, and a

little drunk. The public meeting he had attended earlier

that evening had been dull to say the least, dreary to say

the most. Who gave a shit whether or not the more remote

houses in the area went on to main drainage? Not the

occupiers, that was for sure; a linkup with the sewage system meant higher rates for them. Nearly two

hours to decide nobody wanted drains. They preferred their cesspools.

As usual, Rent-a-Left had prolonged proceedings. A totalitarian

sewer network was good for the cause, Fenn supposed.

He hadn't intended to stay that long, hadn't even needed

to. The fact was, he had fallen asleep at the back of the

hall and only the noisy conclusion to the meeting had aroused him. "I' he agitators were angry that the

motion for had been defeated--good headline in that: Local sewer

MOTION defeated. Too pithy for the Courier, though.

Pithy. That wasn't bad either. He nodded his head in

appreciation of his own wit.

Gerry Fenn had been with the Brighton Evening Courier for more than five years now--man and boy, he told

himself--and was still waiting for the big one, the story that would make world headlines, the scoop that would transport him from the seaside town's local

rag to the heart of the journalistic world: Fleet Street!

Kermit applause for Fleet Street! Yeeaaay! Three years'

indenture at Feaastboume, five on the Courier. Next step: leader of the Insight team on

the Sunday Times. Failing that. News of the World would do.

Plenty of* human interest there. Dig up the dirt, dole out

the trash. File the writs.

He had phoned the newsdesk after the meeting, telling

the night news editor (who hadn't been amused by Fenn's

instruction to "Hold the front page!") that the meeting had ended in near riot and he had barely escaped with his vitals intact, let alone his notebook. When the news editor had informed him that the office junior had just resigned because of an emotional crisis in his sixteen-year-old life, so the vacancy was available, Fenn had modified his story, explaining that the meeting really had been lively and maybe he should have left sooner but when the wild-eyed Leftie had rushed the platform and tried to stuff a turd (it looked like a dog's, obviously just used for effect) into the nostrils of a surprised lady councillor, he figured. . . . Fenn held the phone away, almost seeing the spit spluttering from the earpiece. Excited pips brought the tirade to an end, and a fresh coin renewed the connection. The news editor had gained control by then, but only just. Since Fenn enjoyed the country route so much, there were a couple of little items he could cover in that area. Fenn groaned, the news editor went on. A trip to the local cop shop: find out if the Bov Scout impersonators (bob-a-job, once inside, pension books, loose money, small valuables, gone) were still impersonating Bov Scouts. Pop into the Focal flea-pit: were feminists still daubing the sexy posters outside with anti-rape graffiti and chucking runny tomatoes at the screen inside? On the way back, visit the trailer camp at Partridge (Ireen: see if they've got their power yet (the Courier had run a small campaign for the residents encouraging Seaboard to connect the site to the grid--so far it had taken six months). Fenn asked if the news editor knew what the bloody time was and was assured of course he bloody did and was Fenn aware that all his night shift had produced for tomorrow's editions was one RTA (road Traffic Accident) and one diabetic poodle who went for checkups in a bloody Rolls-Royce? And the R'FA wasn't even fatal.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Fenn got mad and advised the news editor of his agitated state and informed him that when he returned to the office he would show the news editor just how mad he really was by shoving his copy spike right up his tiny arse, wooden end first, and by stuffing the nearest typewriter into the fat mouth which was always full of shit but never kind shit, then brain-drain the Courier totally by handing in his resignation. He told the news editor good, but made sure the receiver was resting on its cradle before he did so. His next call was to Sue to tell her to expect him when he got there, but there was no reply from his flat. Then none from hers. He wished for Chrissakes she would move in with him permanently; it was a pain never knowing where she was likely to be. Thoroughly morose, he did what he was paid for. The Boy Scout impersonators were now impersonating jumble-sale collectors (one old lady had even lost her false teeth-- she'd left them on the kitchen table--but was understandably reluctant to talk about it). The flea-pit had been running Bambi for the past fortnight (expected trouble next week when Teenage Goddesses of Love and Sex in the Swamps were playing). He drove to Pat-ridge Green and saw only candlelight through the trailer windows (he knocked on one door and was toToday to piss off so didn't bother with any more). He scraped in to the nearest pub just five minutes before closing time and fortunately the landlord wasn't adverse to afs once the main crowd--two domino players and a woman with a cat in a wooden cage--was cleared. Fenn let it slip that he was from the Brighton Evening Courier, an admission that could have got him shown the door pretty promptly, or engaged in an informative after-hours drink. Landlords generally sought the good will of the local press (even the most drab were contenders for the Pub of the Year Award) unless they had some private reason for feeling bitter toward journalists (exposed marital upsets, too many voluptuous barmaids in the business, or reported

James Herbert - The Shrine

unhygienic kitchens was usually the cause for their distrust).

This one was okay; he even allowed Fenn to buy him a

rum and pep, a gesture that had the reporter mentally

scratching his head--shouldn't the landlord be cozying up to him, not the other way around? He wasn't in

to investigative

journalism tonight--Fleet Street and the world's wire services would have to wait until he was in the mood--so why the hell was he treating the landlord?

Oh,

yeah, so he could drink after time, that was it. Fenn was tired.

Three pints and forty minutes of unexciting conversation

Later, Fenn found himself outside in the cold night air,

bolts snapping behind telling him the drawbridge was up,

the public house was no longer a refuge but a stronghold,

built to resist the strongest invaders. He kicked the side of

the white van before throwing himself into the driver's seat.

The vehicle was an embarrassment. It carried his newspaper's name, white lettering in a brilliant red flash,

on both sides. Very discreet. Very undercover. The Courier had fallen out with their usual fleet hire company and now the journalists had either to use their own cars, for which

there was no gas allowance, or the one and only spare

delivery van. Great for tailing suspected arsonists or dope

peddlers. Great for keeping an eye on illicit rendezvous

between well-knowns who should well-know better. I deal

for secret meetings with your favorite grass. Would Woodward

and Bernstein have met Deep Throat in a fucking white van with Washington Post emblazoned on its sides?

The headlights barely pierced the darkness ahead and

Fenn shook his head in further disgust. Bloody things

were never cleaned. Christ, what a night. Sometimes the

late shift could be good. A nice rape or mugging. The

occasional murder. Brighton was full of weirdos nowadays.

And Arabs. And antique dealers. Funny things happen

when they all got together. Trouble was, many of the best

stories never got into print. Or if they did, they were

toned down. It wasn't the Courier's policy to denigrate the seaside town's image. Bad for business. Great for family trade, Brighton. Mustn't scare off the punters. Unfortunately his earlier calls had produced nothing of interest. He always made the standard calls when he came on duty: police, hospitals, undertakers, and fire stations were all on his regular list. Even the clergy merited a bell. Nothing much doing with any of them. The newspaper's Diary, listing events of the day (and night) which had to be covered, offered little to excite. If it had, he could have probably ducked out of tonight's council meeting; as it was, there wasn't much else to do. Lights ahead. What town was that? Must be Banfield. He'd passed it on the way out. Not a bad little place. Two pubs on the High Street. What more could anyone ask? If the weather was nice on Sunday he might bring Sue out for a drink. She liked country pubs. More atmosphere. Real ale. Usually a fair selection of gum boots, polo necks, and tweeds. With the odd diddicoi thrown in to lower the tone. He squinted his eyes. Bend ahead. So bloody dark. Whoops. Brake. Downhill. The van leveled out at the bottom of the hill and Fenn eased his foot off the pedal. Sure these brakes are going, he told himself. Sometimes he suspected the delivery men sabotaged the vehicle as a mild protest against it being used by journalists. One day, someone was-- Christ, what was that? He jammed his foot down and pulled the wheel to the left. The van skidded, turning almost a full circle, front end coming to rest on the grass verge by the side of the road. Fenn pushed the gear into neutral and briefly rested against the steering wheel. A sharp, quavering sigh later, his head jerked up and he swiftly wound down the window. He poked his head out into the cold night air. "What the bloody hell was it?" he asked himself aloud.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Something had run out from the darkness straight across his path. Something white. Small, but too big

to be an animal. He'd almost hit it. Missed by a couple of inches.

His hands were trembling.

He saw movement, a grayish blur.

"Hey!" he shouted.

The blur dissolved.

Fenn pushed the car door open and stepped out onto the

damp grass. "Hold up!" he called out.

Scuffling sounds came his way. Feet on gravel.

He ran across the road and was confronted by a low gate, one side open wide. His eyes were swiftly adapting

to the poor light, and the half-moon emerging from slow-moving

clouds helped his vision even more. He saw the

tiny figure again.

It was running away from him along a path that was

lined with trees. He could just make out some kind of building at the end of the path. He shivered. The whole

thing was spooky.

It had to be a kid. Or a midget. Fenn tried not to think

of Du Maurier's dwarf in Don't Look

Now. He wanted to

get back into the van. His jiggling sphincter muscle could lead to an embarrassment. But if it was a kid, what was it doing out at this hour? It would freeze to death in this

weather.

"Hey, come on, stop! I want to talk to you."

No reply, just slapping feet.

Fenn stepped inside the gate, called out once more, then

began to run after the diminishing shape. As he pounded

down the path and the building ahead grew larger and more visible, he realized he was in the grounds of a church.

What was a kid running into a church for at this time

night?

But the figure, still just in sight, wasn't going to the church. It veered off to the left just as it reached the

big cavern doors and disappeared around the corner of the building. Fenn followed, his breath becoming labored. He

almost slipped, for the path was mu.v now, and narrower.

He recovered and kept going until he reached the back of

the church. There he came to an abrupt halt and wished

he'd stayed in the van.

A dark playground of silent, still, grayish shapes spread

out before him. Oh, Jesus, a graveyard!

James Herbert - The Shrine

The blur was skipping among them, the only moving thing.
The moon decided it had had enough. It pulled a cloud over its eyes like a blanket.
Fenn leaned against the side of the church, its flint brickwork rough against his moist hands. He was following a bloody ghost. It would roll into a grave at any moment. His instinct was to tiptoe quietly back to the van and go on his uninquisitive way, but his nose, which, after all, was a newspaperman's nose, persuaded otherwise. There are no such things as ghosts, only good ghost stories. Walk away from this and you'll always wonder what you missed. Tell your friends (not to mention your pal the editor) you flunked out and they'll never buy you another drink. Go to it. Ace. His nose told him, not his brain, nor his heart. "Hey!" The shout cracked in the middle and the H was overpronounced.
He pushed himself away from the wall and strode boldly in among the gray sentinels. He blinked hard when he saw the conical-shaped mounds of dark earth at his feet. They're making a break for it!
He forced the explanation from himself. They're molehills, you silly bastard. His weak smile of self-contempt was perfunctory. Fenn caught sight of the wispy figure flitting through the gravestones once more. It appeared to be making its way toward the back of the churchyard where large squarish shapes seemed to be lurking. Oh, my God, they're tombs! Its a vampire, a midget vampire, going home to bed! Fenn didn't find himself too amusing.
He crouched, suddenly afraid to be seen. The moon was no friend; it came out for another peep.
Fenn ducked behind a tilting headstone and cautiously peered over the top. The figure was clambering over a low wall. Then it was gone.
Cold night air touched his face and he imagined lonely souls were trying to gain his attention. He didn't want to move, and he didn't want to stay. He didn't want to look

James Herbert - The Shrine

over that wall either. But he knew he was going to.
The reporter crept forward, his knee joints
already stiff
from the cold. Dodging around the graves, doing his
best
not to disturb the "not-dead-but-resting," he made for the
back of the churchyard, toward the tombs standing like
ancient, cracked supermarket freezers, their
contents allowed
to putrefy. He noticed the lid of one was
askew and
tried not to see the imaginary hand clawing its way
out,
skin green with age, nails scraped away,
bones glistening
through corrupt flesh. Cut it out, Fenn!
He reached the wall and knelt there, not overly
anxious
to see what lay beyond. He was shivering, out of breath
(kept forgetting to breathe in), and scared stiff.
But he was
also curious. Fenn raised himself so that his shoulders
were level with the top of the wall, head projecting like
a
coconut waiting to be shied.
There was a field, slate gray and flat in the
timid
moonlight, and near the middle, some distance away,
stood
a contorted black specter. Its multitudinous
twisted arms
reached skyward while the thicker lower limbs were
bent
in an effort to reach the ground from which it had sprung.
The isolated tree provided a demonic
relief in an otherwise
dull landscape. Fenn's eyes narrowed as he
searched for
the little figure. Something was moving. Yes, there it
was.
Walking directly toward the tree. It stopped.
Then walked
on. Then--oh, Christ, it was sinking into the ground!
No,
it was on its knees. It didn't move. Nor
did the tree.
Fenn waited and grew impatient. The beer he
had consumed
pressed against his bladder. He continued to wait.
At last he decided if he didn't make
something happen,
nothing would happen. He climbed over the wall and
waited.
Nothing happened.
He walked toward the figure.
As he drew near, he saw that it wasn't a
midget.
A little girl.
And she was staring at the tree.
And she was smiling.
And when he touched her shoulder, she said, "She's
so
beautiful."

James Herbert - The Shrine

Then her eyes rolled upward and she toppled forward.

And didn't move again.

THREE

"Who are you?" he said at last in a half-hearted whisper.

"Are you a ghost?"

"No, I am not," Mary answered, her own whisper half-frightened.

"Are you one?"

The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett

FATHER HAGAN LAY THERE IN the darkness, forcing his

senses to break away from sleep's gooey embrace. His eyes

flickered, then snapped open. He could just make out the

thin glimmer of night through the almost-closed curtains.

What had disturbed him?

The priest reached for the lamp on the bedside table and

rumbled for the switch. His pupils stung with the sudden light and it was several seconds before he could open

his lids again. He looked at the small clock, his eyes narrowing

to a shortsighted squint, and saw it was past midnight.

Had he heard something outside? Or inside the house? Or

had his own dream disturbed him? He lay back and stared

at the ceiling.

Father Andrew Hagan was forty-six years old and had

been part of the Church for nearly nineteen of those years.

The turning point for him had been two days after his twenty-seventh birthday when a mild heart

attack had left him dazed, frightened, and exhausted. He had been losing God, allowing the materialism of a chaotic

world to confine his spiritual self, to subdue it to a point where only he

was aware that it existed. Four years teaching history and

divinity in a Catholic grammar school in London, then

three years in a madhouse comprehensive in the suburbs

had slowly corroded the outer core of his faith and was

chewing on the innermost part, the very center of his belief which had no answers but merely knew. He

had to retrieve himself the closeness of death was like a prodding

mother who would not allow her offspring to stay under the bedclothes for one moment longer.

He no longer taught divinity in the

James Herbert - The Shrine

comprehensive school,
just history, and occasionally he took an English
class;
religion in that particular school was almost
defunct. Humanity
had replaced the subject and the young teacher of
humanity had been sacked in his second term for
blacking
the headmaster's eye. English had soon become
Hagan's
second subject. No longer able to discuss his
faith every
day with curious, albeit often bored, young minds,
his
thoughts of God had become more and more introverted,
restrained by shackles of self-consciousness. The
heart attack,
mild though it was, had halted the gradual but
seemingly
irrevocable slide. Suddenly he was
aware of what he had
been losing. He wanted to be among others who
believed
as he, for their belief would strengthen his, their
faith
would enhance his own. Within a year he was in Rome
studying for the priesthood. And now he wondered if
the
earlier corrosion had not left a seeping
residue.
A noise. Outside. Movement. Father Hagan
sat upright.
He jumped when someone pounded on the door below.
The priest reached for his spectacles lying on the
bedside
table and leaped from the bed; he went to the window.
He drew the curtains apart, but hesitated before
opening
the window. More banging encouraged him to do so.
"Who's there?" Cold air settled around his
shoulders and
made him shudder.
"Just us spooks!" came the reply. "Will you get
down
here and open up!"
Hagan leaned out the window and tried to see into the
porch below. A figure stepped into view, but was
indistinct.
"I've got a problem--you've got a problem--
here!" the
voice said. The man appeared to be carrying something
in
his arms.
The priest withdrew and quickly pulled on a
dressing
gown over his pajamas. He forgot about slippers
and padded
downstairs in cold, bare feet. Switching on
the hall light, he stood behind the front door for a
few moments,
reluctant to open it. Although the village was
close, his
church and presbytery were isolated. Fields and

James Herbert - The Shrine

woods
surrounded him on three sides, the main road
at the front
being the link with his parishioners. Father Hagan was not
a timorous man, but living over a graveyard
had to have
some effect. A fist thumping against wood
aroused him
once more.
He switched on the outside porch light before
opening
the door.
The man who stood there looked frightened, although
he was making an attempt to grin. His face was
drawn,
white. "Found this wandering around outside," the
man
explained.
He moved the bundle in his arms toward the
priest,
indicating with a nod of his head at the same time.
Hagan
recognized the frail little body in the
nightdress without
seeing her face.
"Bring her in quickly," he said, making way.
He closed the front door and told the man
to follow
him. He turned on the sitting-room light and
made for the
electric heater, switching it on.
"Put her on the settee," he said.
"I'll fetch a blanket.
She must be frozen."
The man grunted as he placed the girl on the
soft
cushions. He knelt beside her and brushed her
long yellow
hair away from her face. The priest returned
and carefully
wrapped a blanket around the still form. Father
Hagan
studied the girl's peaceful face for several
moments before
turning back to the man who had brought her to his
house.
"Tell me what happened," he said.
The man shrugged. He was in his late twenties
or early
thirties, needed a shave, and wore a heavy
thigh-length
corduroy jacket, its collar turned up against
the cold, over
dark blue trousers or jeans. His light-brown
hair was a
tangled mess, but not too long. "She ran across
my path--I
just braked in time. Thought I was going to hit her."
He
paused to look down at the girl. "Is she
asleep?"
The priest lifted one of her eyelids. The
pupil gazed

back at him without flinching. "I don't think so. She seems to be ..." He left the sentence unfinished. "She didn't stop when I called out to her, so I followed her," the man went on. "She ran straight up to the church, then round the back. Into the graveyard out there. It scared the bloody hell out of me." He shook his head and shrugged again as if to relieve tension. "Any idea who she is?" "Her name is Alice," the priest said quietly. "Why did she run in here? Where's she from?" Father Hagan ignored his questions. "Did she . . . did she climb over the wall at the back of the churchyard?" The man nodded. "Uh huh. She ran into the field. How did you know?" "Tell me exactly what happened." The man looked around. "D'you mind if I sit down for a minute--my legs are kind of shaky." "I'm sorry. You must have had a nasty shock, her running out at you like that." "It was the bloody graveyard that shook me up." He sank gratefully into an armchair and let out a long sigh. Then his face became alert again. "Look, hadn't you better get a doctor? The kid looks done in." "Yes, I'll call one soon. First tell me what happened when she went into the field." The man looked puzzled. "Are you her father?" he asked, keen blue eyes looking directly into the priest's. "I'm a father, but not hers. The church is Catholic, I'm its priest. Father Hagan." The man opened his mouth, then nodded in understanding. "Of course," he said, managing a brief grin. "I should've known." "And you're Mister . . . ?" "Gerry Fenn." He decided not to tell the priest that he was from the Courier for the moment. "You live here alone?" "I have a housekeeper who comes in during the day. Otherwise, yes, I live here alone." "Creepy." "You were going to tell me" "Oh, yeah. The field. Well, that was weird. I followed her in and found her just kneeling in the grass. She wasn't

James Herbert - The Shrine

even shivering, just staring ahead, smiling."

"Smiling?"

"Yeah, she had a big beam on her face. Like she was

watching something, you know? Something that was pleasing her. But all she was looking at was a big old tree."

"The oak."

"Hmm? Yeah, I think so. It was too dark to see."

"The oak is the only tree in that field."

"Then I guess it was the oak."

"What happened?"

"Then came the strange part. Well, it was all bloody--

sorry. Father--it was all strange, but this was the ringer. I

thought she might have been sleepwalking--or sleep-running

to be more precise--so I touched her shoulder. Just gentle,

you know? I didn't want to frighten her. She just went on

smiling and said, 'She's so beautiful,' like she could see

something there by the tree."

The priest had stiffened and was looking at Fenn so intently that the reporter stopped speaking. He raised his

eyebrows. "Something I said?" he asked.

"You said the girl spoke, Alice spoke to you?"

Fenn was puzzled by the priest's attitude. He shuffled

uncomfortably in the seat. "She didn't actually speak to

me. More like to herself. Is there something wrong, Father?"

The priest looked down at the girl and gently brushed

her cheek with the palm of his hand. "Alice is a deaf-mute,

Mr. Fenn. She cannot speak and she cannot hear."

Fenn's gaze turned from the priest's face to the girl's.

She lay there pale, unmoving, a rumpled frail figure, small

and so very vulnerable.

FOUR

"But I don't want to go among mad people,"

Alice remarked. "Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad.

You're mad."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

A 11AND LIGHTLY CUFFKD FENN'S shoulder.

"Hi, Gerry. Thought you had the graveyard shift this

week."

He glanced up to see Morris, one of the Courier's thirteen

sub-editors, moving past him, his body half-turned in

Fenn's direction but his stride hardly broken as he made for his desk.
"What? Yeah, you don't know the truth of it," Fenn answered without elaborating. He turned his attention back to the typewriter, quickly reading through the last line he had just two-finger-typed. He grunted in satisfaction and his index fingers rapidly stabbed at the machine once more. He ignored the apparent chaos around him: the clatter of other overused and badly kept typewriters, the occasional curse or even less occasional burst of raucous laughter, the hum of voices, machines, and odors. The hubbub would grow steadily through the day, building to a restrained frenzy which broke without fuss when the evening edition was finally put to bed at 3:45 P.m. Every trainee reporter soon learned the art of closing out the din, their thoughts, hands, and black type on paper spinning their own frail cocoon of insularity. Fenn's right index finger punched a last period and he ripped the paper with its three carbon copies from the machine. He read through it quickly, his smile turning into a broad grin. Shit-hot. Figure appearing like a white banshee in the night. Running out in front of the van. Chasing the apparition. Through the graveyard (could be a little bit more creepy, but let's not overkill). The girl kneeling in the field, staring at the tree. She's small, dressed in white nightgown. Alone. She speaks. Our intrepid reporter later finds out that she is--or was--a deaf-mute. Terrific! Fenn marched between crammed desks, his gleaming eyes on the news editor. He stood over the hunched figure and resisted the urge to tap a finger on the enticing bald dome before him. "Leave it there, I'll get to it," the news editor growled. "I think you ought to read it, Frank." Frank Aitken looked up. "I thought you were on the midnight shift, Hemmingway." "Yeah, I am. Just a little special for you." Fenn jiggled

the copy in his hand.
"Show it to the sub." The bald man returned
to his
penciling out.
"Uh, just look through it, Frank. I
think you'll like the
story."
Aitken wearily laid the pencil down and studied
Fenn's
smiling face for several moments. "Tucker
tells me you
didn't produce last night." Tucker was the
night newsdesk
editor.
"I came in with a couple of things, Frank, but not
much
happened last night. Except for this."
The copy was snatched from him.
Fenn stuck his hands into his pockets and waited
impatiently
while Aitken skimmed through the story. He
whistled
an almost soundless, self-satisfied tune.
Aitken didn't
look up until he read every word, and when he
did, there
was a look of disbelief on his face.
"What is this shit?" he said.
The grin disappeared from Fenn's face. "Hey,
did you
like it or not?"
"You've got to be kidding."
Fenn leaned on the news editor's desk, his
face anxious,
his voice beginning to rise. "It's all true,
Frank." He
stabbed at the paper. "That actually happened to me
last
night!"
"So what?" Aitken tossed the typed sheet across
the
desk. "What's it prove? The kid had a
nightmare, went
sleepwalking. So what? It's no big deal."
"But she was deaf and dumb and she spoke to me."
"Did she say anything to anyone else? I
mean, after,
when you took her into the priest's house?"
"No, but--"
"When the doctor got there? Did she say
anything to
him?"
"No--"
"Her parents?"
Fenn stood up straight. "The quack
brought her round
to examine her while the priest fetched her
parents. By the
time they got there, the kid was asleep again. The
doctor
told them there was nothing wrong with her--slight
temperature, that was all."
The news editor leaned his elbows on the desk and

said
with belabored patience, "Okay, so she spoke
to you.
Three words wasn't it? were those words normal
or
slurred?"
"What d' you mean?"
"I mean if the kid was a deaf-mute, she
wouldn't know
how to pronounce words too well. They'd be
distorted, if
not incomprehensible, because she would never have heard
them spoken before."
"They were perfect. But she hadn't always been a
deaf-mute.
The priest told me she'd only been that way
since
she was four years old."
"And she's what now?" Aitken looked at the
typed
copy. "Eleven? Seven years" is a long
time, Gerry."
"But I know what I heard," Fenn insisted.
"It was pretty late, you'd had a shock." The
news editor
looked at him suspiciously. "And probably
a drink or
two."
"Not enough to make me hear things."
"Yeah, yeah, so you say."
"It's gospel!"
"So what d' you want me to do with it?" He held
up the
copy.
Fenn looked surprised. "Print it."
"Get outa here." Aitken screwed the sheet of
paper into
a ball and dropped it into a bin by his feet.
The reporter opened his mouth to protest, but
Aitken
raised a hand.
"Listen, Gerry. There's no story.
You're big and ugly
enough to understand that. All we have is your say-so that
the girl, after seven years of being deaf and dumb,
spoke.
Three words, kiddo, three fucking words, and
nobody else
heard them. Only you. Our star reporter,
well-known for
his vivid imagination, renowned for his satire on
local
council meetings ..."
"Ah, Frank, that was just a joke."
"A joke? Oh, yeah, there's been a few little
jokes in the
past. The hang-glider who loved to jump off the
Downs
and float around stark-naked."
"I didn't know he was wearing a skin-tight pink
outfit.
It looked pretty realistic to--"
"Yeah, so did the photograph. The police

weren't too
happy when they tore around the countryside waiting
for
him to land the next time he was spotted."
"It was an easy mistake to make."
"Sure. Like the poltergeists of Kempton?"
"Christ, I didn't know that old lady had a
neurotic cat."
"Because you didn't bother to check, Gerry, that's
why.
The clairvoyant we hired sold his story to the
Argus. And
you can't blame them for going to town on the joke--
they're our biggest bloody rivals."
Certain reporters in the near vicinity had grins
on their
faces, although none looked up from their
typewriters.
"There's more, but I don't have time to go through the
list." Aitken picked up his pencil and pointed
it in the
general direction of the office windows. "Now will you
get
out there and come back when your shift begins." He
hunched down to his penciling and his shiny bald
pate
defied Fenn to argue.
"Can I follow it up?"
"Not on the Couriers time," came the
brusque reply.
For the benefit of his eavesdropping colleagues,
Fenn
waggled his tongue in the air and tweaked his ears at
the
preoccupied editor, then turned and walked back
scowling
to his desk. Jesus, Aitken wouldn't
recognize a good story
if it walked up to him and spat in his eye. The
girl had
spoken. After five years of silence, she'd said
three words!
He slumped into his seat. Three words. But
what had she
meant? Who was beautiful? He chewed his lip and
stared
unseeingly at his typewriter.
After a while he shrugged his shoulders and reached for
his phone. He dialed the local radio station's
number and
asked for Sue Crates.
"Where the hell were you last night?" he said as
soon as
she came on.
"Get off it, Gerry. We've got no fixed
arrangement."
"Okay, but you could have let me know."
He heard the long sigh. "Okay, okay," he
said quickly.
"Can you make lunch?"
"Of course. Where?"
"Your place."
"Uh uh." Negative. "I've got work to do

this afternoon.

"It'll have to be a short lunch."

"The Stag, then. In ten minutes?"

"Make it twenty."

"Deal. See you there."

He rang off, thought for a few moments, and went to

the office telephone directory. He flicked through the pages,

then ran a finger down a list of names, stopping when he

found the number he was looking for. He soundlessly repeated it as he hurried back to his desk, where he dialed.

No reply. He tried again. No reply. The priest must be

out on his rounds or whatever priests did during the day.

Housekeeper wasn't there either. St. Joseph's seemed like

a lonely place.

Fenn stood and pulled his jacket from the back of his

chair, glancing toward the windows, which ran along the

whole length of the large office. It was a sunny day of a

mild winter. He made for the door and almost bumped

into the sports editor coming in.

"How goes it. Ace?" the editor said cheerily, and was

surprised at the low-growled response.

Sue Gates was late, but he had to admit, she was worth

waiting for. At thirty-three, four years older than Fenn,

she still had the trim figure of a girl in her twenties. Her

dark hair was long, fluffed away from her face in loose

curls, and her deep brown eyes could gain a man's attention

across any crowded room on any enchanted evening.

She was wearing tight jeans, loose sweater, and a short

navy-blue seaman's topcoat. She waved when she saw him

and pushed her way through the crowded bar. He stood and kissed her when she reached him, relishing her

lips" moist softness.

"Hi, kid," he said lightly, enjoying the spreading glow

which swiftly ran through him and came to rest around the region of his groin.

"Hi, yourself," she said, squeezing into the seat next to

him. He pushed the already ordered lager in front of her

and she reached for it gratefully, raking a long appreciative

swallow.

"You eating today?" F'enn asked her. Sue often went a couple of days without touching a scrap of food. She shook her head. "I'll catch something tonight." "Going fishing?" "Idiot."

He popped the last of his cheese and pickle into his mouth and grinned through bulging cheeks. Placing a hand over his she said, "Sorry I missed you last night."

F'enn had to gulp down the food before he could reply. "I'm sorry I was ratty on the phone," he counterapologized. "Forget it. I did ring the Courier, by the way, just to let you know I wouldn't be there. They told me you were out on an assignment." "I rang your place, too." "I was out ..."

"I know."

"Reg took me to dinner."

"Oh, yeah." His voice was casual. "Good old Reg."

"Hey, come on. Reg is my boss--you know there's nothing in it." was "Course I know. Does Reg?"

Sue laughed. "He's as thin as a drainpipe, wears glasses that look like the ends of milk bottles, is losing his hair, and has a disgusting habit of picking his nose with his little finger."

"It's the last bit that makes him irresistible."

"On top of that he's married with three kids."

"I told you he was irresistible." F'enn drained his glass.

"I'll get you another while I'm up there."

"No, let me get you one," she insisted. "You can reflect on what a wimp you're being while I'm at the bar." She reached for his glass. "Another bitter?" "Bloody Mary," he said smugly.

He watched her weave through the crowd to the bar and told himself how much he admired her independence--he'd told himself, and her, many times--and wished he was convinced of his own admiration. Sue had been married and divorced before she was twenty-six, her ex being an advertising man in London--high-powered, high-living, hi, girls!--something on the creative side of the business.

After just one-too-many indiscretions on his part, Sue had sought a divorce. She'd had a good position with a film

E reduction company--she and her husband had met when her company was hired to make a TV commercial for his agency--but after her divorce came through, she decided she had had enough of advertising people, enough of London, and enough of men. The big problem was that the marriage had produced a child, a son named Ben. He had been the reason for moving down to the south coast. Her parents lived in Hove, which was the other half (some said the better half) of Brighton, and they had agreed to become semi permanent baby sitters. Ben stayed with his grandparents most of the time, but Sue made sure they got together nearly every day and he moved in with her on most weekends. Fenn knew that she missed having the boy around all of the time, but she had to make a living (her fierce independence meant refusal of any maintenance, even for Ben, from the errant husband; half the money from the sale of their Islington house was all she had demanded). She managed to get herself a job with Radio Brighton and had soon become a producer. But it took up a lot of her time and she was seeing less and less of Ben, which worried her. And she was seeing too much of Fenn, which worried her almost as much. She hadn't wanted to become entangled with another man; casual acquaintanceships were all she would allow, necessary only for those odd times when a weak body needed something more than a pillow to cling to. Those odd times had become more frequent since she had met Fenn. He had urged her to give up her flat, to move in with him. It was ridiculous that they should feel so close and live so far apart (three blocks away, to be precise). But she had resisted, and still did; Sue had vowed never to become totally dependent on one single person again. Ever. Sometimes, and secretly, it was a relief to Fenn, for it gave him his own independence. Guilt hit him occasionally (the bargain seemed to be too much in his favor), but when voiced, she always assured him that the boot was on the other foot and it was she who was getting the better

James Herbert - The Shrine

deal.

A man to lean on when the going got rough,
a body to
comfort her when the nights were lonely, and a friend to
have fun with when things were going right. A shoulder to
cry on, a lover to spy on, and a wallet
to rely on. And
solitude when it was needed most. What more could
any
woman ask for? Plenty, Fenn thought, but he
wasn't going
to prompt her.

She was back, handing him the thick red cocktail
with
an expression of mild disapproval on her
face. He sipped
the Bloody Marv and winced: Sue had told the
barman to
go heavy on the Tabasco. He noticed she was
trying hard
not to smirk.

"What are you doing here today, W caret
oodstein?" she asked.

"I thought you'd still be tucked up in bed after your
late
shift."

"I ran into a good story last night.
Well, it kind of ran
into me. I thought it might make the late edition
but the
Avatollah had other ideas."

"Aitken didn't like it?"
Fenn shook his head. "Like it? He didn't even
believe
it."

"Try me. I know you only lie when it's to your
advantage."

He briefly told her what had happened the
previous
night, and she smiled at the excitement that
gradually
began to blaze in his eyes as the story went on.

At one
point, when he was describing how he'd found the
little

girl kneeling in the field, cold fingers had
touched her
spine, making her shiver. Fenn went on to tell
her about

the priest, the doctor, then the arrival of the
distraught
parents.

"How old was the girl?" Sue asked.

"The priest said eleven. She looked younger
to me."

"And she was just staring at the tree?"

"She was just staring towards it. I got the
impression she

was looking at something else."

"Something else?"

"Yeah, it's kind of hard to explain. She was
smiling, you
know, like something was making her very happy.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Rapturous,
almost. It was as if she were seeing a vision."
"Oh, Gerry . . ."
"No, that's it! That's just what it was like. The kid
was
seeing a vision."
"She was having a dream, Gerry. Don't
exaggerate the
whole thing."
"How d'you explain her talking to me, then?"
"Maybe you were dreaming too."
"Ah, Sue . . . come on, I'm being
serious."
She laughed and linked his arm. "I'm
sorry, lover, but
you get so hot up when you think you're sniffing out a
good story."
He grunted. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I
did imagine
that part of it. The strange thing was, I got the
impression
it wasn't the first time. When the girl's parents
arrived, I
heard the mother mumble something about Alice--that's
the kid's name--going to the same place before. The
priest
nodded, but his eyes seemed to be warning her not
to say
too much in front of me. It was all kinda
cagey."
"Did he know you were a reporter."
Fenn shook his head. "He didn't ask, so I
didn't tell
him." He sipped his drink thoughtfully. "He
wanted me
out of the way, though. Couldn't wait to get rid of
me
once the mother and father got there. I pretended to be
more shaken up than I really was, so he
let me rest awhile.
Then, just before the parents took Alice away, he
went
through some ritual with her. Mumbled something or
other and made the sign of the cross."
"He blessed her?"
He looked at Sue quizzically. "If you
say so."
"No. That's what you're saying. He must have
blessed
her."
"Why would he do that?"
"A priest will bless a house, a holy medal, a
statue.
Even your car if you ask him nicely. Why not a
child?"
"Yeah, why not? Hey, how do you know all that?"
"I'm a Catholic--at least I used to be.
I'm not sure if I
still am; the Catholic Church doesn't actually
approve of
divorce."
"You never told me."
"It was never important. I don't go to church

James Herbert - The Shrine

anymore,
only at Christmas, and that's mainly for Ben's
sake. He
likes the ceremony."
Fenn nodded knowingly. "So that's why you're so
wild
in bed."
"Creep."
"Uh huh. That's why you're into flagellation!"
"Will you stop. The day I let you beat me--"
"Yeah, that's why I have to undress in the dark
..."
She groaned and pinched his thigh under the table.
Fenn yelped, almost spilling his drink. "Okay,
okay, I
lied, you're normal. It's a pity, but it's the
truth."
"Just you remember it."
He squeezed her thigh in return, but his touch was
gentle as well as higher and further in. "You're
saying,
then, that it would have been standard practice for him to
bless the girl?"
"Oh, no, it sounds unusual to me under those
circumstances.
But not especially so. It may have been
to reassure
the parents more than anything else."
"Yeah, could be."
Sue studied his profile, and was aware that she
loved
him some days more than others. Today was a more day.
She remembered when they had first met, over three
years
ago. It was at a party given by the radio station for
one of
their announcers, who was leaving to join the mother ship,
Great Auntie BBC, in London. Some of the
friendlier
press had been invited; Gerry Fenn was
considered aggressive
but friendly enough.
"You look familiar," she had told him when he
skillfully
got around to introducing himself. She had caught him
looking her way several times before he edged his way
around the room so that he could deliberately bump
into
her.
"Yeah?" he had said, eyebrows raised.
"Yes, you remind me of an actor . . ."
"Right. Who?" he was grinning broadly.
"Oh, what's his name. Richard . . ."
"F caret astwood. Richard Eastwood?"
"No, no. He was in that space thing . . ."
"Richard Redford?"
"No, silly."
"Richard Newman?"
"Dreyfuss, that's who. Richard Dreyfuss."
His smile disappeared and his lips formed an O.
"Oh, yeah. Him." He beamed again. "Yeah,
he's okay."

James Herbert - The Shrine

They had talked, and he had made her laugh with his swift changes of mood, his sudden intensity broken by a wicked grin that would leave her wondering if he were not joking when he looked so serious. That was three years ago and she was still never sure.

He turned to face her, that same wicked grin on his face. "You busy this weekend?" "Not especially. I'll be seeing Ben, of course."

"Could you keep Sunday morning free?"

"Sure. Any particular reason?"

His grin broadened.

"How would you like to go to Mass with me on Sunday?"

FIVE

"Well, I don't," said the mother. "I've got forebodings like there was going to be an almighty thunderstorm."

"The Juniper Tree," The Brothers Grimm

molly PAGETT LISTENED FROM "I HE bottom of the stairs.

It was a small, red-brick house, identical to all the others

on Banfield's public housing, and movement in any of its

rooms could be clearly heard from the bottom of the stairs.

The familiar bip hip of Alice's Galaxy Invader came to her

ears; her daughter spent hours playing the battery-operated

game, shooting down the descending green aliens with an unerring skill that both baffled and impressed Molly. She went into the kitchen and filled the kettle.

At least Alice had put away her crayons for a while.

Molly sat at the fold-away table, her face, already thin,

even more gaunt because of the increased anxieties of the past two weeks. Alice had been a constant source of concern

for Molly Pagett since the usual children's illness at

four years of age had left her daughter its unusual legacy;

the effects of mumps had turned Alice into a deaf-mute.

Molly drummed her fingers on the table and resisted the

urge to light a cigarette. Five-a-day was her maximum:

one, first thing in the morning; one, halfway through the morning; one, just before Len, her husband, arrived back

from work; and two, later in the evening while watching telly. Five-a-day was the most she could afford,

but sometimes

she smoked ten. Other times she smoked twenty.

It

James Herbert - The Shrine

depended on Len. He could be such a bastard.
Molly quickly crossed herself, an appeasement
to God
for the profanity, but not for the thought: that was
well-founded.
Her frown increased when she remembered the night
before. The priest had frightened her and Len, knocking
on their door in the middle of the night, then standing in
their hallway, his face white and anxious, a
black-garbed
messenger of bad tidings. Nonsense, she'd
told him when
he said Alice was up at the presbytery, a
doctor taking
care of her. Alice is safe in bed, Molly
had insisted. She's
been there since seven. Wanted to go up early
because she
was feeling tired.
Father Hagan had just shaken his head and urged them
to get dressed and come with him, but Molly had run
into
Alice's room, knowing the priest wouldn't lie,
just sure he
was making a mistake. Her bed had been
empty, covers
thrown back, her doll hanging halfway out of the
bed
staring lifelessly at the floor. Len and the priest
had followed
and it was Father Hagan, not her husband, who
tried to calm her. Alice was all right as far as
the doctor
could tell. She had probably been
sleepwalking, that was
all.
All the way to the bloody church? Len had
asked, not
caring that he was talking to a priest.
Father Hagan had told them to find warm clothing for
their daughter; she was only wearing a thin nightie.
By the
time they had both hurriedly dressed, Len's
mood had
turned into one of anger for, being an atheist, he
kept clear
of churches (although he enjoyed the occasional
funeral,
which he regarded as a social event) and to be
dragged out
to one in the middle of the night--and a bloody cold
night,
too!--was not much to his liking.
Alice had looked so pale when they arrived there.
Even
Len stopped his sullen muttering. Yet she
looked so peaceful.
The doctor told them he had found nothing wrong
with
her, but to keep her home for a day or two, make
sure she
got plenty of rest. If she acted strangely,
or appeared not

James Herbert - The Shrine

to be her usual self, give him a ring and he would come around. He was sure there was nothing to worry about, though. Young children often went for midnight jaunts, whether asleep or otherwise; Alice had just jaunted a little farther than most.

Molly was still frightened. Why had Alice gone to the tree again? She had been frantic when her daughter had been missing two weeks before. She had searched the church and its grounds, twice running down to the road to make sure Alice wasn't out there. In a panic she had run to Father Hagan's house and he had helped search the grounds again. It was the priest who spotted her daughter in the field kneeling before the tree. Alice had been smiling when they went to her, a smile that had vanished when she became aware of their approach. Then she had become confused, disoriented. They had led her back, and in sign language Molly has asked her why she had gone into the field. Alice had merely looked puzzled, as if she didn't understand. She had seemed fine after that (perhaps a little distant, but that wasn't too unusual for Alice; it was easy to get lost in a world of silence), and Molly had tried to forget the incident.

Now, because of the previous night, the anxiety was back with a vengeance. And the fear was mixed with something else. What was it? Apprehension? M. Something more. The faint glimmer of hope. . . . No, it was impossible. The man had been mistaken. He had seemed so certain, though.

She couldn't remember his name, the young man who had nearly run down Alice. He had been sitting in an armchair looking a little worse for wear when she and Len had arrived. The familiar stink of booze permeated the air around him (familiar to her because that same unpleasant odor was so much a part of her husband), although he didn't appear to be drunk. He said Alice had spoken to him.

The kettle changed its hissing tone and steam billowed out across the kitchen. Molly switched the gas jet off and

James Herbert - The Shrine

dropped a tea bag into an empty cup on the draining board. She poured undiluted lemon squash into another cup for Alice and filled both with boiling water. Molly stood looking down at the swirling yellow-green liquid, thinking of her daughter, her only child, thinking that miracles never happened. Not to the Molly and Alice Pagetts of the world, anyway. She put the cup and two biscuits into a saucer and made her way from the kitchen. As she mounted the stairs, her mind ran through a quick, silent prayer, but she dare not let herself hope. Alice would soon be back at the special school for the deaf in Hove, and Molly, herself, would be back at her part-time job as a home-help, and Len would be his usual disagreeable self, and everything would be normal again in the Pagett household. She prayed it would be so, yet she prayed also for something better. Alice did not look up when Molly entered the bedroom. Even though she couldn't hear, her daughter could always sense when someone had entered a room, but this time she was intent on her drawing. The Galaxy Invader now lay on the floor beside the bed and her crayons were near at hand in a box on the bedside cabinet. Molly stood over her with the hot lemon drink and still Alice did not look up from the sketchbook. Molly frowned when she saw the picture. It was the same one. The same one she had drawn day after day for two weeks. Molly had shown them to P'ather Hagan, who had dropped in earlier that morning and he, too, had made no sense of them. Molly placed the cup and saucer beside the crayons and sat on the edge of the bed. Alice looked surprised when the yellow crayon was removed from her hand. For an instant, it was as though she did not recognize her mother. Then she smiled. The rain was like tiny ice pellets striking at Father Hagan's face. He stood at the wall, looking into the field, watching

James Herbert - The Shrine

the tree; the sky, after a bright start to the day, was
now dark overhead, a thin haze of silver between the
distant horizon and the brooding clouds.
Nothing happened. Nor did he expect it to.
The tree was just a tree. A tired old oak. A silent
witness to passing time. He could see the sheep grazing in a far
corner of the field, their bodies yellow-gray and bloated,
concerned only for the next mouthful of grass and the growing heaviness
in their pregnant bellies.
The priest shivered and pulled the collar of his
dark-blue raincoat tight around his neck. His black hair
was damp, his glasses speckled; he had been standing
there for five minutes, paying no heed to the freezing
rain. There was a feeling inside him that he could not grasp, a
sense of unease that he could not define. He had not slept
well the night before, after the doctor had left with the
Pagerts and Alice, and the man called Fenn had gone. A
peculiar loneliness had descended afterward, leaving him feeling
vulnerable, isolated. In his years as a priest,
loneliness had become an acquaintance, and rarely an enemy.
But last night, the solitude was total, his room a
cell surrounded by impenetrable blackness, devoid of life, a
deathly vacuity separating him from the rest of humanity. He had the
terrifying feeling that if he left his bedroom and
walked out into that darkness he would never reach its edge, that
he would walk and walk and become lost in it, never
to find even his room again. The sensation was suffocating
and he was afraid.
He had prayed and prayer slowly forced back the
contracting walls of fear. His sleep had been restless, more
exhausting than if he had stayed awake, and the
barest glimmer of morning had been welcomed with immense
gratitude. He had shivered alone in his church,
his early-morning devotions fervent, intense, and later, at morning
Mass shared with four of his flock, he had begun
to shake off the nagging unrest. But not completely; it still
lingered through the day like an elusive tormentor, refusing
to be

James Herbert - The Shrine

identified, content to stab, then hide.
The tree was withered; the years had made it a
twisted
thing. It dominated that part of the field, a
gargantuan
guardian, innumerable arms thrown outward to warn
off
intruders. A grotesque shape disrobed of
summer leaves,
intimidating in its ugliness. Yet, he told
himself, it was
just a centuries-old oak, its lower branches
bowed, bark
scarred and dry, its vitality patiently stolen
by time. But
why did the girl kneel before it?
The Pagetts had always lived in the parish,
Molly Pagett
a staunch, if quiet, member of the Catholic
community.
She was paid for the work she did keeping the church
clean, but the wages were minimal; she would have
probably
worked for nothing if Father Hagan had asked her to.
He had not met Leonard Pagett often, and he
had reluctantly
to admit that he cared little for the man. Pagett's
atheism and ill-disguised dislike of the Church and
churchmen
had nothing to do with his feelings toward him, for
the priest knew and respected many such people. No,
there was something, well, not good about the man. On
the rare occasions when Father Hagan had called at
their
home, Pagett had always appeared sullen,
uncomfortable
in the presence of the priest. And in turn, the
priest felt
uncomfortable in the presence of Pagett. He was
glad
Alice's father had been absent when he called in
to see her
that morning.
Alice. A good child, a curious child. Her
disability had
made her a solitary one. She was frail, yet
seemed to carry
an inner strength within that small body.
She was happy
at the church, helpful to her mother, respectful of
her
surroundings. Alice didn't appear to have many
friends,
but of course, her silence was frustrating to other children
who had little pity for such things. She appeared to be
as
intelligent as any other child of her age despite
the cruel
affliction, although she was often lost in her own world,
in
her own dreams, an obvious result of her
disability. That
morning she had seemed almost completely lost in that

private domain, absorbed in her confused scribbles.

It was the memory of Alice's drawings that turned him back toward the church.

He walked through the bleak graveyard, his shoulders hunched against the stinging rain, his footsteps hurried.

Molly Pagett had shown him more pictures drawn by the

child over the past two weeks, and they had all looked similar to each other, mostly in yellow and gray, some with added touches of blue. Strangely, only one was

different, although not in style; the color had changed. It

was in red and black. All had looked vaguely familiar.

Alice was no artist, but her illustrations endeavored to

portray a figure, a person dressed in white, the blue used

infrequently, red just once. The figure was surrounded by

yellow and it had no face. It appeared to be a woman, though the overall shape was not clear.

He entered the church porch, relieved to be out of the rain. He fumbled for the key to open the big oak doors, for

the church was always kept locked nowadays because of increasing vandalism and theft. The holy sanctuary

available to those in need only at appointed times.

The

long key clicked in the lock and he swung one side of the

double doors open, stepping inside and closing it again.

The thud echoed around the walls of the gloomy church and his footsteps were unusually loud as he walked

to a

side aisle after genuflecting and blessing himself.

He paused before beginning the journey to the front of the church, gazing at the distant frozen figure

against a

wall to one side of the altar. Could it be? Father Hagan

became more certain as he approached the statue: the outstretched arms, the head slightly bowed to gaze

at

whoever knelt, sat, or stood before it. The drawings made

more sense when the image they represented was viewed.

Alice often sat here. Curiously, it came as no relief to

identify the object of her obsessive drawings. Instead, it was a mildly unsettling sensation.

The priest stared up at the compassionate but stone

face

ij of the Blessed Virgin and wondered at the acute sense of despair he suddenly felt.

SIX

"I say, how do you do it?" asked John, rubbing his knee. He was quite a practical buy.

"You just think lovely wonderful thoughts," Peter explained,

"and they lift you up in the air."

Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie

sunday. .morning. SUNNY. BUT COLD.

Fenn pulled his Mini in behind a long line of cars, most

of which were settled halfway on the grass verge beside the road.

"It's gone nine-thirty, Gerry. We're going to be late."

Sue sat in the passenger seat, making no attempt to get out of the car.

Fenn grinned. "They don't make you wear sackcloth

anymore, do they?" He turned off the engine.

"I'm not sure I want to do this." Sue's teeth chewed

anxiously on her lower lip. "I mean, it's a bit hypocritical,

isn't it?"

"Why?" Fenn looked surprised, although his eyes were

still smiling. "Prodigals always get a good reception."

"Cut it out, it's not funny."

Fenn changed his tone. "Ah, come on. Sue, you don't

have to become a born-again Catholic. I'd feel a bit lost if I

went in there alone; I wouldn't know what the hell to do."

"Admit it: you're bloody scared."

W""hat do you think

Catholics do to agnostics? Bum them at the stake? And

what makes you think you'd be noticed anyway?"

Fenn squirmed uncomfortably. "I guess I do feel like a

trespasser."

"A spy, don't you mean? And how do you think I'm

going to feel?"

He leaned forward and put a hand around her neck, gently tugging her toward him. "I need you with

me, disue."

She looked into his face, about to rebuke him for his

blatant small-boy expression; instead she groaned and pushed

her way out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

Fenn winced but couldn't repress the chuckle. He locked

James Herbert - The Shrine

the car and hurried after Sue, who was stamping along the tree-lined path leading to the church entrance. A few other

late arrivals hurried along with them, the sound of organ music speeding their footsteps.

"The things I do for you, Fenn," Sue muttered from the corner of her mouth as they entered the porch.

"Yeah, but they're not all bad," he whispered back, a

sharp elbow making his grin disappear.

The church was full and Fenn was surprised; he thought

clerics were complaining about the fast-diminishing number of churchgoers. There were plenty here. Too many, in fact; he and the other latecomers would have to stand at the back. He watched as Sue dipped her hand

into the font

at the top of the center aisle and admired her legs as she

quickly genuflected. Remember where you are, Fenn, he

told himself. He decided he would feel too self-conscious

to follow her act and discovered he felt self-conscious not

following it. Shuffling to one side, trying to look as unobtrusive

as possible, he glanced around the church interior.

The congregation ranged over all ages and all shapes and

sizes. Plenty of kids, some with adults, others just with

brothers and sisters or disfriends; plenty of women, mostly

middle-aged or older, a few teenage girls here and there;

and a good sprinkling of men, most of them family types,

one or two groups of teenage boys among them.

A hymn

was being sung and mouths opened and closed, many not forming words--just opening and closing. The tune wasn't

bad, though, and the overall effect of all the voices banded

together by the rich strains of the wheezing organ was not unpleasant. Fenn hummed along with them.

The hymn finished and there was the rustle of closing books and shifting bodies, a muffled sound like a

wave

soaking the shore. The congregation knelt and he wondered

what to do--the stone floor looked unreasonably hard. He snatched a look at Sue for

guidance and was

relieved to see her merely bow her head

slightly. He did

the same, but his eyes looked upward, roaming over the

heads of the people in front.

James Herbert - The Shrine

The priest's monotone litany drew his attention toward the altar and he barely recognized the man in his dazzling uniform of office, a white cassock and bright green and yellow vestment. Father Hagan had changed identity; he bore little resemblance in both character and appearance to the confused and anxious man in dressing gown and bare feet of a few nights ago. The transition was as dramatic as dark Kent changing into Superman. Or Popeye after spinach. He wore his robe like a suit of holy armor and it afforded him a calm strength. Fenn was just a little impressed, but cynically reminded himself that fancy dress was the most camouflaging disguise of all. Father Hagan's face was expressionless, his eyes cast down, almost shut, as he quickly went through the opening prayers. The congregation responded to his solemn supplications in an almost-incoherent drone. Then both priest and worshipers prayed as one; and as they did so, Fenn noticed the priest's eyes were fully open, his head no longer bowed. He kept glancing to his left as though watching someone kneeling on that side of the church. Fenn followed his gaze but could only see rows of bowed heads. He shifted his position to get a clear view down the side aisle; still he saw nothing unusual. He turned his attention back to the Mass, interested in the service, but deriving no sense of well-being from it, no spiritual uplift. Soon he became aware of a growing frustration, a slight resentment. Maybe he just didn't like being part of the gathering, part of a crowd that seemed--to him--to be mindlessly repeating words as though they were a magic formula, a collective petition of adoration. It began to unnerve him. Fenn neither believed nor disbelieved in the existence of God: either way, it meant little to him. Find your own morality, your own code, then stick with it. So long as nobody else got hurt (too badly), you were doing okay. If there was a God, He was big enough to understand that.

James Herbert - The Shrine

It was man, mortal bloody man, who created the myths.
What Supreme Being could encourage, let alone appreciate, this dogmatic repetitive ritual? What Almighty Power would encourage His own creation (whom, so the rumor went, He had created in His own image) to toady up to Him so they could have a slice of the heavenly action when their number was called? It didn't make sense.
Fenn glared defiantly toward the altar. There were lots of other things to toss in for debate. Like idolatry, theological misinterpretation, and naive symbolism. Like birth control, confession and penance and absolution. Like bigotry (who says you have to be a Catholic to get a foot in the gate?), ceremony, solemnization, and in-bloody-fallibility.
Original Sin, for Christ's sake! And not to mention the Church's view on fornication.
He began to smile at his own indignation. Nothing like a good church service to stir the emotions, for or agin.
As Father Hagan read from the Gospel, Fenn looked at Sue and surreptitiously reached for her hand, squeezing it softly; she ignored him, intent on the priest's words. He let his hand drop away, surprised.
The sermon began and Fenn paid scant attention, although he studied Hagan with interest. It was strange: the priest didn't look so invincible now. His face looked strained and he still glanced toward the side, at someone sitting in the front pew. Once again, the reporter tried to see for himself, and this time he could just make out the back of a woman's head between the shoulders of a man and woman sitting in the second row.
She was wearing a bright-pink scarf. Maybe the priest didn't like pink.
Fenn shifted his feet, becoming restless. If he were a smoker, he'd be dying for a cigarette. Was it sacrilege to chew gum in church? He decided it probably was.
The priest's words seemed hesitant, as though even he were not convinced. But as he spoke and developed his

James Herbert - The Shrine

theme, his words became stronger and Fenn could almost feel the sense of relief that passed through the congregation; they obviously preferred their sermons hard and unrelenting. Father Hagan's voice subtly rose in pitch, at one moment accusing and the next coaxing, then reassuring, returning to a more reproachful tone when things were getting too cosy. Fenn enjoyed his technique. The service went on (to Fenn, on and on . . .) and he regretted having arrived for the full Mass. His idea was to soak up the atmosphere of the Sunday service, maybe chat to some of the people afterward; but the prime purpose was to get to the priest. He intended to have a long talk with him when Mass was over, wanting to find out how the little girl was. Had she returned to the church? Had she spoken again? Now he wondered if he wasn't suffering too much for the sake of his craft. He sneaked another sideways peek at Sue, feeling a trifle embarrassed by her obvious reverence toward the surroundings. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. He hoped it didn't mean she was going to kick him out of her bed that night. The church became particularly hushed. Father Hagan was doing something with a highly polished chalice, breaking what looked like a white wafer into it. The Communion, that was it. Drinking of wine, breaking of bread. Christ's blood and body. What did they call it. . . his The Eucharist. All heads were bowed and the people standing around him sank to their knees as a tinkling bell rang out. He looked down at Sue in alarm and she motioned with her eyes for him to get down beside her. The stone floor hurt his knees. He kept his head low, afraid to offend anyone --particularly He who sees all--until he heard movement around him. Looking up, he saw that people were stepping into the aisles and forming a double-line queue leading up to the altar rail, where the priest waited with silver cup and Communion wafers. An older man wearing a

James Herbert - The Shrine

white cassock
attended him at one side. The procession of people
shuffled forward and the organ wheezed into life once
again.
Several people were sitting now and a few of those at
the back of the church had risen to their feet, not
prepared
to suffer bruised knees any longer. Fenn
considered their
judgment to be sound and rose himself; Sue remained
kneeling.
Singing began and the congregation moved down and
around, approaching the altar from the center aisle,
returning
to their places by the side aisles. Fenn saw the
pink
scarf moving along the bench toward the center and
instantly
recognized its wearer as the woman who had come
with her husband to collect the little deaf and dumb
girl
from the priest's house a few nights before. The
priest had
been looking toward Alice's mother throughout the
service.
The pink scarf joined the other bowed heads in the
slow-paced procession and disappeared completely from
view when the woman knelt to receive the host from the
priest.
It was then that a small figure rose from the spot
where
the woman had been sitting throughout the
Mass. She
stepped into the side aisle and looked up at a
statue before
her; then she turned and walked toward the back of the
church. Fenn recognized Alice. Her yellow
hair was parted
in the middle, two long plaits resting over her
shoulders;
she wore a maroon raincoat, a size too
big for her, and
long white socks. Her hands were clasped together
tightly,
fingers intertwined, and her eyes looked straight
ahead and
at nothing in particular.
Fenn stared, aware that something was wrong. Her face
was pale, her knuckles white. He realized the
priest had
been watching her, not her mother.
And Father Hagan was watching her now.
The Communion wafer hovered tantalizingly above
a
gaping mouth, the receiver's tongue, draped over a
lower
lip, beginning to twitch. Alice's mother,
kneeling beside
her fellow-communicant, was too lost in her
own devotional
prayers to notice the delay in proceedings.
The priest looked as though he was about to call out and
Fenn saw him visibly restrain himself. A few

James Herbert - The Shrine

other heads
were turning to see what was provoking such riveted
attention
from their priest, but all they saw was little Alice
Pagett, the deaf-mute, walking toward the back
of the
church, presumably to join the queue for Holy
Communion.
Father Hagan realized he was delaying the Mass
and resumed
the ceremony, but his eyes worriedly followed the
girl's progress,
Fenn was curious. He thought of stepping forward to
block her way but knew that would be stupid: she
might
just be feeling unwell and in need of fresh air.
Yet, although
she was pale, there was a look of happiness on her
face, a faraway joy in those vivid
blue eyes. She seemed
to see nothing, only what was beyond her physical
vision,
and the notion disturbed Fenn. Could she be in a
trance?
She bumped into no one, nor were her footsteps
slow or
dreamlike. He looked down at her as she
passed, and
half-smiled, not knowing why.
The organ played on and voices rose in
communal
worship, emotions high at this particular point in
the
Mass.
No one seemed to notice the other children leaving the
pews.
Fenn looked from left to right in surprise. The
kids--
some no more than six years old, others up
to twelve or
thirteen--were slipping away from their elders and
making
their way toward the church exit, the infant
exodus largely
unnoticed because of the throng of people in the center
aisle.
Unlike Alice, there was nothing trancelike about
these
children. They were excited, some giggling, as they
skipped
after the deaf and dumb girl.
A mother realized her offspring was trying to make an
escape (a common enough occurrence with this one), and
swiftly caught him. His howl of rage and
struggles to get
free shocked the mother. People around her, other parents,
began to realize what was happening. They were startled
at first, then confused. Then just a little angry. One
father
forgot himself and called out after his departing boy.
Father Hagan heard the shout and looked up. He
was
just in time to see the small girl in her maroon

James Herbert - The Shrine

raincoat and
long plaits pull open the church door and
disappear into
the bright sunlight. Other children rushed after her.
The voices grew weaker as people became aware that
something was amiss. Soon only the
plump nun at the
organ, lost in her own raptuous praising of
God's benevolence
toward mankind, was singing.
Fenn suddenly became alert. Christ, he had
almost been
in a trance himself; it had taken an effort of will
to snap
out of it. He moved swiftly to the door and pushed
one
side open. The light stung his eyes for several
moments,
but a few rapid blinks allowed him to see
clearly once
more.
The children were running through the graveyard toward
the low gray-stone wall at the back.
Fenn stepped from the porch and followed, his
footsteps
quickening when he saw Alice clamber over the
wall. The
other children began climbing over too, the smaller
ones
helped by their bigger companions.
A hand grabbed the reporter's arm.
"Gerry, what's going on?" Sue stared after the
children,
then at him as if he would know.
"No idea," he told her. "They're chasing
after the little
deaf-and-dumb girl. And I think I know where
she's going."
He broke away, running now, anxious to get
to the wall.
Sue was too surprised to move. Voices from
behind
caused her to turn her head; bewildered parents were
emerging from the church, looking around anxiously for
their missing children. The priest pushed his way into the
crowd, saw Sue standing on the path leading through the
graveyard, then looked beyond at Fenn's
retreating figure.
The reporter skipped over fresh molehills,
stumbling
once but managing to keep his feet. He
practically fell against the wall, his hands smacking
its rough top. There he stood, drawing sharp breaths
into his belabored lungs,
his eyes widening.
The girl, Alice, was kneeling before the
crooked oak,
just as she had on that dark chilly night less than
a week
ago. The other children were spread out behind her, some
kneeling as she was, others just staring. Several of the
younger ones were pointing at the tree, laughing,
jumping

little steps of delight.
Fenn's eyes narrowed as he studied the object
of their
attention. There was nothing else there! Just an old
tree! It wasn't even beautiful; in fact, it was
bloody awful. What was the fascination?
Someone bumped into him and he looked around to see
Sue had caught up with him once more.
"Gerry . . . ?" The question froze on her lips
as she saw
the children.
Hurried footsteps behind them, other bodies
brought to
a halt by the low wall. Fenn and Sue were jostled
as
parents pushed to see what had become of their
offspring.
A mild shock ran through the gathering
crowd. Then a
hushed silence. Even the organ had stopped
playing.
Fenn became aware that the priest was standing beside
him. They regarded each other for several moments and
the reporter thought he detected a touch of
hostility in
Hagan's gaze, almost as if he suspected
Fenn of having
something to do with the phenomenon.
Fenn looked away, more interested in the children than
the priest. He reached into his pocket and drew
out a
cheap, pocket-size camera; he clicked off
four rapid shots,
then leaped over the wall.
Sue, irrationally, tried to call him back; for
some reason
she was afraid, or perhaps just shocked, and it was the
sense of fear that kept her quiet. The people around
her
grew restless when they saw him enter the field, and
they
seemed reluctant to follow. Scared, like her,
or perplexed.
Perhaps both.
He approached the first child, a boy of eleven or
twelve
in duffel coat and jeans. The boy was smiling, just
as Alice
had smiled that first night. He appeared to be
unaware of
Fenn, and the reporter waved a hand before the boy's
eyes. A brief frown crossed the boy's
features and he
jerked his head aside, trying to get a clear
view of the tree,
Fenn left him, went on to another child. A girl
this
time, squatting in the damp grass, a look of
bliss on her
face. He crouched beside her, touching her shoulder.
"What is it?" he asked softly. "What can you
see?"
The girl ignored him.

James Herbert - The Shrine

He moved on and watched a five-year-old
clap his hands
together and sink to his haunches with glee; two
girls,
twins, holding hands, both smiling; a
boy of about thirteen,
on his knees, hands held together before his nose,
palms
flat against each other, lips moving in silent
prayer.
Another boy, this one in short trousers, his
knees smeared
with mud from where he had obviously fallen, stood
hugging
himself, shoulders hunched, a wide grin on his
face.
Fenn stood in front of him, deliberately
obscuring his
view. The boy stepped sideways, still grinning.
Fenn bent down so that his face was level with the
boy's. "Tell me what you see," he said.
One thing was sure: he didn't see Fenn.
Nor did he hear
him.
The reporter straightened and shook his head in
frustration.
The little faces around him were all smiling. Some
wept, but they still smiled.
He noticed the priest was climbing over the
wall, others
following his example. Fenn fumed and walked
swiftly
toward the girl in the maroon coat, the
deaf-and-dumb
child, who knelt some yards before the other children,
close to the oak tree. He moved in front of
her, but to one
side so that he did not block her vision of the
tree. Crouching
slightly, he aimed the camera and shot two more
frames. Straightening, he photographed the
rest of the
children.
Then he turned and photographed the tree.
The parents and guardians were among the children,
claiming their charges, taking them up in their arms
or
hugging them close. A girl, not six yards
away from Fenn,
swayed, then fell into a heap on the soft ground
before her
distraught mother could reach her. Another younger girl
followed suit. Then a boy. The
five-year-old who had
been clapping earlier broke
into hysterical tears as his mother and father approached him.
Many of the children
began to weep, worried voices dispelling the
uncanny silence
that had prevailed as the adults tried to comfort
them.
Fenn's eyes shone with bemused wonder; he had a
story,

James Herbert - The Shrine

a great story. He was witnessing the same kind of hysteria that had swept through a crowd of over three hundred children in Mansfield a few years before; there had been a mass collapse at the Marching Bands Festival. This wasn't on the same grand scale, but the events bore some similarity. These kids were being affected by whatever was going on inside Alice Pagett's mind. Somehow she was transmitting her own hypnotic state to them, making them behave in the same way! Jesus, some kind of telepathy! It was the only explanation. But what had induced her delirium--if delirium it be? Father Hagan strode through the concerned families and swooning children, making straight for Fenn. The reporter was tempted to snap off a quick picture, but decided it wouldn't be the right moment; there was something daunting about the priest, despite his worried manner. He slipped the camera back into his pocket. The clergyman disregarded Fenn and knelt beside Alice Pagett. He put an arm around her, his hand covering one shoulder completely. He spoke to her, knowing she could not hear, but hoping she would sense the kindness in his words. "Everything's all right, Alice," he said. "Your mother is coming, you're going to be fine." "I don't think you should move her. Father," Fenn interrupted, crouching low again so he could look into Alice's eyes. The priest looked at him in a strange way. "Weren't you the man who brought her to me the other night? Fenn, isn't it?" The reporter nodded east watching the girl. "What's your game, Mr. Fenn?" Hagan's voice was brusque. He rose, pulling Alice up with him. "What have you got to do with this business?" Fenn looked up in surprise, then stood himself. "Now look . . . dishe began to say when another voice spoke. "She wants us to come again." Both men were shocked into silence. They stared down at Alice. She smiled and said, "The lady in white wants us to come again. She says she's got a message, Father. A message for all of us."

James Herbert - The Shrine

Fenn and the priest were not aware that the crowd was hushed again, that everyone had heard Alice's soft-spoken words, even though it should have been impossible over the frantic hubbub of anxious voices. The priest was the first to speak, his words hesitant. "Who, Alice?" Could she hear him? She had spoken, but could she hear? "Who . . . who told you this?"

IF caret Herbert caret . The . , caret i, "The lady, caret fc pointed toward the oak. caret his caret re told n caret caret caret caret caret urned, caret caret caret So caret caret fe caret caret every , 8ness less strong- , caret , z? IIIw r . IS-AISo caret 3-: 2"" ut tears pouHis"" caret 2 nd hair. . -caret caret caret caret s223aret pieces, wr*caret caret jun'p caret letterLt' rddoRather caret OT caret g6"8caret 103aret "caret seSnds aSE caret iSS-SSS caret So?"---- concaret h, , dd. d*caret , , , * , that.. 8dv caret caret spddl te. i coff caret His (lib as IW-. MGGCARET caret caret , day. "e i bbd with the ted not g0"1-acaret caret "ron8 "caret Jv"dis-. """" caret caret caret So caret caret caret caret caret Have caret caret caret caret s caret Sbs caret gs caret caret 0" that much oi oer caret caret i Let sssssess over in hls InIn I 59

Alice pointed toward the oak. "The lady, Father. The lady in white told me." "But there's . . . no one there, Alice." The girl's smile wavered for a moment, then returned, but was less strong. "No, she's gone now." "Did she say who she was?" The priest still spoke slowly, keeping his voice low, gentle. Alice nodded, then frowned in concentration, as though trying to remember the exact words. "She said she was the. Immaculate Conception." The priest stiffened, blood draining from his face. It was at that moment that Alice's mother, her bright-pink scarf hanging loose at the back of her head, rushed forward and threw herself on her knees, pulling Alice to her and hugging her tight. Molly Pagett's eyes were closed,

James Herbert - The Shrine

but tears poured from them to dampen her daughter's face and hair.
As the mother took the little lad and chopped him up in pieces, threw him in the pot and cooked him in the stew. "The Juniper Tree," the Brothers Grimm
he CLOSED THE DOOR, NOT forgetting to lock it. Then he switched on the light. It took no longer than two seconds to cross the small room and slump onto the narrow bed.
Kicking his shoes off, he laid his hands across his chest and stared at the ceiling.
"Fucking people," he said aloud. Treating me like scum,
he added silently.
His job as busboy in a trendy Covent Garden restaurant had not gone too well that day. He had spilled coffee, returned to tables with wrong orders, rowed with the barman--who was a fucking poof, anyway!--and locked himself in the staff toilet for twenty minutes, refusing to come out until he had finished weeping. The manager had warned him for the last time-- "any more scenes and you're out!"-- and the joint owners--two fucking ex-advertising men not that much older than himself!--had agreed. Well, he wouldn't go back! Let's see how they get on without me tomorrow! Bastards.
He picked his nose and wiped his finger under the bed. He tried to calm himself, repeating his mantra over and over in his mind, but it had little effect. Visions of his mother (as always, whenever he was angry) flashed into his mind, rudely elbowing his chosen soothing word aside. It was because that cow had thrown him out that he'd had to accept such menial labor. If he had still lived at home, he could have afforded to live on the dole like the other three million or so unemployed.
After a while he got up and went to a white-painted chest of drawers on the other side of the bed-sit. Opening the bottom drawer he took out a scrapbook and carried it back to the bed. He turned the pages, and although it did not relax him, a different mood descended. He liked reading about them. Even now, nobody really knew why they

James Herbert - The Shrine

had done it. The fact was: they just bloody
well had!
He studied their newsprint faces, an
impatient hand
brushing away the thick lock of blond hair that
fell over
his eyes. He thought that one of them even looked like
him. He grinned, pleased.
All you needed was the right person, that was all. It
was
easy if you found the right one. Someone famous,
that's all
it took.
He lay back on the hard, narrow bed, and as he
considered
the possibilities, his hand crept to his lap,
where it
fondled his own body.

SEVEN

How cheerfully he seems to yin,
How neatly spread his claws,
And welcome little fishes in
With gently smiling jaws!
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis
Carroll
Monday, late afternoon
tlckf.r lj SKD TO LOVF. EAMONDAY
stock-taking. Every empty
shelf meant money in the bank. Every empty
carton meant
his bills could be met. Every empty freezer meant
his
smile was a little broader. But shelves,
cartons, and freezers
were never so empty nowadays. Recession didn't
stop
people eating and drinking--they just didn't do it so
well;
the punters became careful with their money and
particular
in their choice, the profit margin on a can of
asparagus
was higher than on a can of peas, but the peasants were
more
interested in substantiality than taste. He
understood their
problem, for he was marking up new, higher prices
on
virtually every product each week, but it didn't
mean he
sympathized. He had to eat, too, and when his
customers
ate less well, then so did he.
Maybe not yet, but eventually
he would have to.
However, there was still one small joy left
to Monday
stock-taking, and that was Paula. Paula of the
lovely bum
and thrusty rits. The face was a bit too
fleshy, but when
you poke the fire you don't look at the
mantel piece, he

James Herbert - The Shrine

always told himself, the old adage a serious consideration to him, never an excuse or a witticism. Rodney Tucker owned the one and only supermarket in Banfield's High Street, a smallish store compared to the usual chain supermarket, but then Banfield was a smallish town. Or village, as they liked to call it. He had moved there from Croydon eleven years before, his grocery shop having been forced out of business by the big combine superstores of the area. Not only had he learned from the experience, but the money he had made by selling the premises had enabled him to join the competition. Banfield was ripe for exploitation just then: too small for the big chains, but just right for the big individual (he had always considered himself a big individual). The two grocery stores in the town had suffered in the way he had suffered, although not as badly--only one had been forced to close down. Strangely enough, that particular shop had been turned into a laundromat, as had his own shop in Croydon. Recently, he had driven past his old premises and had noted that it had now become a porn video center; would that happen in Banfield now that washing machines were as common as toasters? He doubted it, somehow; the planning committees of such places were notoriously hard to impress with the changes in twentieth-century retailing requirements. Streuth, it had been hard enough getting planning permission for his supermarket eleven years ago! Such towns and villages had their own way of carrying on. Even having lived in the area all these years, he was still considered an outsider. He knew most of the important men of Banfield, having dined with them, played golf with them, flirted with their wives--no matter how ugly--but still he wasn't accepted. You didn't just have to be born and bred in the area to be considered one of them: your father and his father had to be born there! It wouldn't matter one iota to him, except that he would like to have been elected to the parish council. Oh, yes, that would be

nice. Lots of land going spare around Banfield, and he had many contacts in the building trade. They'd be very grateful to any council member in favor of giving certain plots over to development. Very grateful. One hand rubbed his bulging stomach as though his thoughts were food set before him. "Running low on grapefruit segments, Mr. Tucker!" He winced at the shrillness of Paula's voice. Add fifteen years and another four stone and Paula would be a replica of Marcia, his wife. It would have been nice to imagine that his attraction toward Paula was because she reminded him of his wife when she was younger, before years of marriage had exaggerated the weakness rather than realized the promise. Nice, but not true. Pat, thin, buxom, titless--it made no difference to Tucker. Pretty (he should be so lucky), plain, experienced, virginal (he could never be that lucky)--Tucker would take them all. Age? He drew the line at eighty-three. Most of the bits he pursued had one thing in common with Marcia, though. They were all fucking dumb. It wasn't a qualification he demanded, far from it; it just helped his bargaining position. He was realistic enough to know that physically he didn't have a lot to offer: his girth was broadening by the month (despite lack of sales), and his hair, it seemed, was thinning by the minute (his parting was now just above his left ear, ginger strands of hair, some nine inches long, swept over and plastered down onto his skull). But he had a quick mind, a quick wit, and the eyes of Paul Newman (a bloated Paul Newman, granted). Most of all, and an attraction he had to admire himself, he had a few bob. And it was an attraction he was never modest about. Expensive suits, made-to-measure shirts, Italian shoes, and a change of socks every day. Chunky gold jewelry on his fingers and wrist, chunky gold fillings in his teeth. A flash bright yellow X-Js Jag to drive, a beautiful mock-Tudor house to live in. A fifteen-year-old daughter who won rosettes for horse riding and certificates for swimming, and a wife--well, forget the wife. He had a

James Herbert - The Shrine

bit of cash and it showed. He made sure it showed.
Tucker knew how to give the women in his life a good time (forget the wife again), and because they were all fucking dumb, that was all they wanted. He could spot a schemer a mile off and had sense enough to stay well clear:
no way did he want his comfortable boat rocked. The dummies were just right: give them a good time in Brighton--a tasty meal, a spot of gambling in a casino or the dogs, disco afterwards--and round off the evening in his favorite motel on the Brighton road. If they were worth it, a trip up to London would be in order, but they really did have to be worth it. Paula merited two stays in the motel so far, but not a trip up to town. Shame about the face.
"Stacks of cannelloni!"
The voice didn't help, either.
Tucker sauntered down the rows of shelves, the smell of cardboard and plastic bags strong in his nostrils. Paula was on a small stepladder, clipboard in one hand, her other hand reaching up to examine the contents of a carton. The fashionable split at the rear of her tight skirt revealed the backs of her knees, not always the most sensual of sights, but on a late, wet Monday afternoon, enough to tug a nerve in the shadowy regions below the overhang of his belly.
Sidling up to her, he placed a chubby hand against her calf muscle. His fingers slid upward and she stiffened, annoyed because his heavy gold bracelet had snagged her tights.
"Rodney!"
He pulled the bracelet free and let his hand travel upward once more. He stopped where the panty hose joined in the middle, forming, in collaboration with her panties underneath, an unbreakable seal, a nylon scab over a soft, permanently moist wound. The man who invented panty hose should have been strangled with his own creation,
Tucker thought soberly. His fingers played with the round buttocks.
"Rod, someone might come in!" Paula pushed

at his
hand beneath the skirt.
"They won't, love. They know better than
to interrupt
while I'm stock-taking." His voice still held
faint strains of
a northern whine, hinting at his origins before
Banfield,
before Croydon, and before London.
"No, Rod, we can't. Not here." Paula
began to descend the ladder, her lips pursed with
resolution.
"It's never bothered you before." He snatched his hand
away lest his finger get crushed in the vice between
her
thighs.
"Well, it's a bit tacky, isn't it?" She
turned away from
him, clutching the clipboard to her breasts like a
cha/y
shield and looking thoughtfully at the shelves around
her
as though concentration, too, was a protective force
field.
"Tacky?" He looked at her in surprise.
"What's that
bloody mean?"
"You know perfectly well." She moved away,
ticking off
items on the clipboard.
Paula was Tucker's
secretary-cum-supervisor-cum-easy-lay
ever since the Christmas Eve after
the-store-closed party.
He'd taken her on three months before because she
could
type, add up without using her fingers, organize
staff (she
had worked one season for Butlin's as assistant
to the
entertainments manager), and had thrusty tits and
looked
knockout against the three spotty-faced youth
congrater-than and one
failed double-glazing representative who had
applied for
the position. Paula was twenty-eight, lived with
her
widowed, arthritic mother, had a few boyfriends but
no
steady, and wasn't bad at her job.
Since the Christmas
Eve after-the-store-closed party, their relationship
had
been highly pleasurable: drinks after work, a few
nights in Brighton, a couple in the motel, swift
titillating gropes whenever the occasion allowed. Like
Monday stocktaking.
What the fuck was the matter with her today?
"Paula, what the fuck is the matter with you
today?"
His words were whispered so that the cashiers in the shop
could not hear, but his exasperation raised the tone to a

James Herbert - The Shrine

squeal.
"There's no need for that kind of language, Mr. Tucker,"
came the stiff reply.
"Mr. Tucker?" He touched his chest pointing at himself
in disbelief. "What's all this Mr. Tucker? What happened
to Rod?"
She whirled on him and the disdain in her eyes was
intimidating. "I think, Mr. Tucker, we should
keep our
relationship on a strictly business
basis."
Why, Paula? What's happened? We've
naa run togerner, haven't we?"
Her voice softened, but he noticed her eyes
didn't.
"Yes, we've had a lot of fun together,
Rodney. But ... is
that enough?"
Alarm bells began to clang in his head. "How
d' you
mean exactly?" he asked cautiously.
"I mean perhaps I think more of you than you do of me.
Perhaps I'm just a good screw to you."
Oh, yes, he thought, here we go. She's
building up to
something. "Of course you're not, love. I mean,
you are,
but I think more of you than just that."
"Do you? You never show me!"
He raised his hands, palms downward. "Keep
it quiet,
love. We don't want the whole shop to know
our business,
do we?"
"You may not; I'm not particularly
bothered who knows.
I wouldn't even care if your bloody wife found
out!"
Tucker sucked in his breath and felt his heart go
thump. Oh, no, he may have misjudged Paula.
Maybe she wasn't
so dumb. "We could have a night up in London,
if you
like," he said.
She looked at him as though he had slapped her
face.
Then she threw the clipboard at him.
He was more concerned with the clatter as it bounced
off and then fell to the floor than any injury
to himself. He
bent to retrieve it, one hand flapping at her in
a keep-thenoise-down
gesture. A silent grope was one thing, a
hysterical
row that could be heard outside was another: it could
demean his position as ownerstmanager--and word could
also get back to Marcia.
He staggered against the shelves as Paula pushed
by.
"You can finish the bloody stock-taking

yourself!" she told
him as she marched toward the door leading into the main
shopping area. She paused at the door as if
to adjust her
emotions before stepping through. As she looked back
at
him, he was sure there was calculation in those
tear-blurred
eyes, just behind the distress. "You'd better think
about our situation, Rodney. You'd better
decide what
you're going to do about it."
She disappeared through the door, leaving it open
wide.
Tucker groaned inwardly as he straightened.
He'd misjudged
her. She wasn't so dumb. Her next ploy
would be
conciliation, get him panting again; then wham
right-brace --more
histronics, only more so. Something to really frighten
him. Bitch! He knew the name of the game--he'd
played
it once before--but not whether the blackmail would be
emotional or financial. He hoped it
wouldn't be financial.
He emerged from the stockroom an hour later and his
mood was even blacker than before. He had already
known
the weekend take was bad, but the untouched cartons
piled high on the shelves always mocked him with the
fact.
Not much to reorder this week, and the way things were
going, there wouldn't be much the following week, nor
the
one after that. Streuth, Monday, bloody
Monday!
The sight of his customerless shop and his three
cashiers
huddled together at one checkout increased his gloom.
His
shelf-loader was sitting in a corner reading a
comic, index
finger lost up to its first joint in his nose.
Tucker turned
away in disgust, too gloomy even to shout at the
boy. He
looked up at the office and saw through the long
plate-glass
window that it was empty; Paula had
obviously gone
for the day. Just as well. He was in no mood.
"Come on, ladies," he said loudly, forcing himself
to walk briskly toward the cashiers. "Back to our
tills, get
ready for the rush."
The three women in their green overalls looked
up with
a start. Hubble bubble, toil and trouble, he thought
as he
approached them. God, there were some ugly women in
this village!

"Ten minutes to closing time, ladies. Word

might get
around there's threepence off the double-pack Kleenex
this
week, so be prepared for the stampede."
They giggled self-consciously at his oft-repeated
joke--he
changed the product from time to time to keep the humor
fresh--and one of the cashiers held something up in the
air. "Have you seen the early Courier, Mr.
Tucker?"
He stopped before them. "No, Mrs.
Williams, I haven't.
Been far too busy to read newspapers, as you
well know."
"We've made the big time, Mr. Tucker,"
another cashier
said enthusiastically, causing her companions
to giggle like
croaky school girls.
"Your syndicate's come up on the pools, has
it? I hope
this doesn't mean you're going to leave the security
of a
good job just because you've become millionaires."
"No, Mr. Tucker," Mrs. Williams
chided. "It's about
Banfield. We're on the map now."
He looked at her questioningly and took the
newspaper.
His lips moved as he silently read the main
story.
"It's the church just up the road, Mr. Tucker.
Didn't
you hear about it yesterday? My sister's boy was
there,
you know. I don't go to church much myself, nowadays,
but my--"
"You've seen the little girl, Mr. Tucker.
Alice Pagett.
She's often in here with her mother doing the weekly
shop. Deaf and dumb, she is . . ."
"Used to be deaf and dumb, Mr. Tucker. They
say she can talk and hear now. Some kind of
miracle, they
reckon . . ."
He walked away from them, quickly scanning the
columns. It was a good story, although the reporter
had
obviously got carried away with himself. But it
claimed to
be an eyewitness account, that the reporter was
present
when it happened. miracle cure banfield
girl the
headline screamed. And underneath, the subhead
asked:
Did Alice Pagett see vision of Our
Lady?
He climbed the three steps to his office,
studying the
article, and closed the door behind him. He was still
rereading the story when the three cashiers
and the shelf-loader

James Herbert - The Shrine

left.

Finally he reached into his desk, took a cigar from its pack, lit it, and stared thoughtfully at the exhaled smoke.

His gaze returned to the paragraph which compared the alleged "miracle" cure to the "miracle" cures of Lourdes in the French Pyrenees. Tucker wasn't a Catholic, but he knew about the holy shrine of Lourdes. A gleam came into his eyes, and for the first time that day, excitement pierced his gloom like a laser through fog. He reached for the phone.

* * *

Monday, early evening

The priest left the Renault and walked back to the white swing-gate he had just driven through. He pushed it shut, gravel crunching beneath his feet, wind, spiked with drops of rain, whipping at his face. He stepped back into the car and drove slowly up to the presbytery, eyes constantly flicking toward the gray-stone church on his right. The

drive ran parallel to the church path, trees, shubbery, and a small expanse of lawn between them. It seemed appropriate that there should be a division between the two, one path leading directly to the House of God, the other leading to the house of His servant. Father Hagan sometimes wondered if his gate should bear a tradesmen only sign.

He stopped the car and cut the engine. The church was just over a hundred yards away and its stout, weathered

walls looked bleak, so very bleak, in the gray weather. Its image was mirrored in the newspaper lying on the passenger

seat. It was a bad reproduction, blurred at the edges, a hurriedly taken photograph blown up as if to emphasize

the photographer's ineptitude. Below it was an even fuzzier shot of Alice Pagett kneeling in the grass.

Father Hagan looked away from the church and down at

the Courier. He didn't need to read the article again, for it

seemed engrained on his mind. The story, so coldly objective in its telling, seemed wrong, distorted; yet it reported

exactly what had happened yesterday. Perhaps

sensationalism

substituting for passion confused its truth. Had there

been a vision? Had everyone gathered at the church witnessed

a miracle? Was Alice Pagett really cured?

He smiled, but it was a guarded smile. Of the last

question there was no doubt: Alice was no longer a deaf-mute.

Hagan had just driven back from the Sussex Hospital in

Brighton, where the girl was still undergoing tests. Alice's

sudden ability to both speak and hear had elevated her

from being an interesting case to an extraordinarily interesting

case. Years before, specialists, unable to find any physical

malformation in Alice's ears or throat, had informed

her parents that they believed the girl's condition was purely psychosomatic--her mind told her

body she could

neither hear nor speak, therefore she neither heard nor spoke. Now her mind was telling her she could.

So, to the

medical profession, there had been no miracle; just a change of mind. If there had been a

"miracle"--and there had been cynical smiles when the word was mentioned to the

bewildered parents--then it was whatever had caused the change of mind. Even though the remark was

flippant, it

was something Father Hagan could accept.

The newspaper article had likened Alice

Pagett's experience

to that of a young French girl, Bemadette

Soubirous,

who claimed to have had a series' of visions of the Blessed

Virgin in 1858. The grotto, just on the

outskirts of the

small town of Lourdes, where the visions had

allegedly

taken place, had become a place of worship

with four or

five million pilgrims visiting the shrine

each year. Many

suffered from illnesses or disabilities and

journeyed there

in the hope of being cured, while others went

to reaffirm

their faith or merely pay homage. Of the former,

more

than five thousand cures had been recorded,

although after

stringent investigations by the Catholic Church's own medical

bureau, only sixty-four had been proclaimed

as miraculous.

James Herbert - The Shrine

But so many other pilgrims, not just the sick,
were blessed by another kind of miracle, one ignored
by medical recorders, but noted by the Church itself:
these people received a renewal of faith, a calming
acceptance of what was to be, an inner peace which enabled them to
cope with either their own disability or that of loved
ones.

That was the true miracle of Lourdes.
Intangible, because it was an intimate, spiritual realization, an
enlightenment that could have no meaning to clinical registers,
to medical score sheets.

Alice Pagett had undoubtedly undergone a
profound emotional, perhaps spiritual, experience, which had
caused repressed senses to function normally once more.

That, in itself, was the miracle. The real question for Father
Hagan

was whether or not it was self-or
divinely induced; no one
was more wary than the Church itself of so-called
"holy" miracles.

He folded the newspaper under his arm and left
the car.

The evening sky had grown considerably darker in the
last

few minutes, as if the night was in a rude
hurry to stake its
claim; or had he sat in the car for longer than
he imagined? His verger would be arriving soon to light
the church for evening service and the priest would welcome
the company. He let himself into the presbytery and went
straight through to the kitchen. If he had been a
drinking man--and he

knew many priests who were--a large Scotch
would have

been very welcome; as it was, a hot cup of
tea would do.

He flicked on the kitchen light, filled the
kettle, then

stcxxl watching it on the gas ring, only
vaguely aware that
the longer he watched the longer the water would take
to

boil. His thoughts were of Alice.

Her mother was thrilled and tearful over the incredible
recovery, her father still in a state of disbelief.

Not only could Alice speak and hear perfectly, but there was
a

special radiance about her that was due to something more
than just her physical mending.

Father Hagan needed to speak with the girl
privately, to

question her closely on her vision, to gain her

James Herbert - The Shrine

confidence

so that there would be no invention in her story; but privacy had been impossible that day. The local

doctor

had whisked the Pagett family off to hospital

late Sunday

afternoon. So stunned was he at the abrupt change in

her

condition that he insisted on an immediate examination by specialists. Alice had been kept

overnight for observation

and further examinations had been carried out all through the next day.

For someone who had been given back the power of speech, Alice wasn't saying much. When the

doctors questioned

her on the lady in white she professed to have

seen,

her happy face became serene and she repeated

what she

had told the priest.

--The lady in white said she was the Immaculate

Conception

(the difficult title had become easier for

Alice to

pronounce)--

--What did she look like?--

--White, shiny white. Like the statue in St.

Joseph's,

but sort of glowing, sort of ... of sparkling--

--You mean shimmering?--

--Shimmering?--

--Like the sun does sometimes when it's a hazy

day--

--Yes, that's it. Shimmering--

--And what else did she say to you, Alice?--

--She told me to come to her again--

--Did she say why?--

--A message. She has a message--

--A message for you?--

--No. No, for everyone--

--When must you go back?--

--I don't know--

--She didn't tell you?--

--I'll know--

How?--

--I just will--

--Why did she cure you?--

--Cure me?--

--Yes. You couldn't speak or hear before.

Don't you

remember?--

--Of course I remember--

--Then why did she help you to?--

--She just did--

A pause then, thoughtful, bemused, but good-willed.

The medical staff was obviously pleased for

Alice, but

something more was affecting them. Her quiet serenity

was infectious. A psychologist,

familiar with Alice's case,

broke the silence.

--Did you like the lady, Alice?--

--Oh yes, yes. I love the lady--
Alice had wept then.
Father Hagan left the hospital, confused,
hardly touched
by the elation around him. By that time the story had
broken and he was stunned when he saw the banner
headline in the Courier. It wasn't just the
attention his
parish church would now undoubtedly receive that worried
him so much, nor the publicity that would pursue
Alice--it was a small price for her to pay
weighed against
the loss of her affliction--but it was the comparison with
the miracle cures of Lourdes. Hagan
dreaded the circus
such news would create. And there was something more.
A sense of foreboding, He was afraid and did not
know
why.
The kettle was steaming when he left the kitchen and
went to the phone in the hallway.
Monday, late evening.
"How was the lamb, Mr. Fenn?"
Fenn raised his wineglass toward the
restaurateur. "Carre
cfagneau at its best, Bernard."
Bernard beamed.
"And yours, madam?"
Sue made approving noises through the Crepe
Suzette in
her mouth and Bernard nodded in agreement. "And a
brandy with your coffee, Mr. Fenn?"
Normally he allowed his clients plenty of time
to relax
between courses, but by now he knew Gerry Fenn could
never relax until the whole meal was over and a
large
brandy was placed before him.
"Armagnac, Sue?" the reporter asked.
"No, I don't think so."
"Come on. We're celebrating, remember?"
"Okay. Er, Drambuie, then."
"Very good," said Bernard. He was a small, neat
man,
who took a genuine interest in his customers.
"You're
celebrating?"
Fenn nodded. "Haven't you seen the evening
edition?"
The restaurateur knew that Fenn was referring to the
Courier, for the reporter had
written a small piece in the
newspaper on his restaurant. The French
Connection, a
few years before, when he and his business partner (who
was also the chef) had first opened in Brighton. It had
provided a good boost for business at that time, for the
seaside town was saturated with restaurants and
pubs, and
from that time on the reporter had become a favored
client. "I haven't had a chance to look at the
papers today,"
he said apologetically.

"What?" Fenn feigned surprised horror.
"You've missed
my big scoop? Shame on you, Bernard."
"I'll catch it later." The restaurateur
smiled, then disappeared
upstairs to ground level, where the small bar
was.
Almost as if they were working on pulleys, a waiter
descended
to the basement area to clear away the dessert
plates.
The restaurant was on three floors, sandwiched
between
a picture framer's and a public house, such a
narrow
building that it looked as if it had been hammered
into the
position it occupied. To Fenn it was the best
restaurant in town, to be used only on special
occasions.
"You're looking pretty smug, Gerry," Sue
said, one
finger running around the rim of her wineglass.
"Yep," he acknowledged with a grin. The grin
disappeared
when he saw she was frowning. "Hey, it was a
good story."
"Yes, it was. A little over the top, though."
"Over the--to Christ, what happened was over the
top!"
"I know, Gerry, I know. I'm sorry, I'm
not getting at
you. It's just that, well I can see the whole thing
getting
blown up out of all proportion."
"What do you expect? I mean, that was a weird
thing
that happened out there. A deaf-mute suddenly
cured,
claiming she had a vision of the Immaculate
Conception.
Some of the other kids say they saw something, too,
when
I spoke to them afterwards. That is, the ones
I could get
to--their parents scooted them away so fast I
had a hard
job catching any of them."
"I was there, remember?"
"Yeah, I do. You didn't look too clever,
either."
Sue toyed with the napkin in her lap. "I had the
strangest
feeling, Gerry. It was ... I don't know . .
. dreamy.
Almost hypnotic."
"Hysteria. Didn't you notice it was flying
around
yesterday? The kids picked it up from
the girl. Do you
remember that story a few years back? The
Marching
Bands Festival in Mansfield? Three

hundred kids collapsed together in a field while they were waiting to take part in the contest; after a pretty thorough investigation the authorities put it down to mass hysteria."

"One or two of the investigating doctors disagreed. They said the children could have been suffering from organic poisoning. And traces of malathion were found in the soil."

"Not enough to cause that kind of result, but, okay, let's call that an open-ended conclusion. Anyway, there are plenty of other cases of crowd hysteria to prove it happens, right?"

She nodded, then said, "So you think that's what this is all about. Mass hysteria."

"Probably."

"That didn't come over too strongly in your story."

"No, it was more implied. Look, people want to read about the paranormal nowadays. They're sick of wars, politics, and the failing economy. They want something more to think about, something that goes beyond mundane human activities."

"And it sells more copies."

Fenn was prevented from voicing a sharp retort by the return of Bernard.

"Armagnac for sir, Drambuie for madame."

Bernard's smile wavered as he sensed the sudden icy atmosphere.

"7' hanks, Bernard," Fenn said, his eyes not leaving Sue's.

Bernard melted away to inquire how things were on the next table.

"Sorry again, Gerry," Sue said before Fenn could form his reply. "I don't mean to pick a fight."

Easily appeased, Fenn reached across the table for her hand. "What is it, Sue?"

She shrugged, but her fingers entwined in his. After a few moments, she said, "I think it's that I don't want the whole thing cheapened. Something wonderful happened out there yesterday. Whether or not it was some kind of miracle isn't important; it was just something good. Didn't you feel that? Didn't you feel something warm, something peaceful washing over you?"

"Are you serious?"

Anger blazed in her eyes. "Yes, damn it,

I am!"

Fenn gripped her hand more tightly. "Hold it.

Sue,

don't get upset. You saw I was busy; I

didn't get the

chance to feel anything. I noticed one thing, though:

one

or two of the people--those not worried about their

kids--

were pretty cheerful over what had happened. They

were

grinning all over their faces, but at the time I

thought it

was just general amusement at the kids skipping

Mass.

They weren't laughing or joking, though, just standing

around looking happy. Maybe they felt what you

did."

"Hysteria again?"

"I'm not ruling it out."

"You don't suppose this little girl, Alice,

really did

witness a visitation?"

"A visitation?" The word startled Fenn

momentarily. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat,

then reached for the

brandy. He sipped it and allowed the liquid

to singe the

back of his throat. "I'm not a Catholic,

Sue. When it

comes down to it, I guess I'm not anything

religious-wise.

I'm not even sure there's a God.

If there is. He must be

tuned to another channel. Now, can you really

expect me

to believe the girl saw God's mother?"

"Christ's mother."

"Same thing to Catholics, isn't it?"

Sue let it go, not wanting to confuse the debate.

"How

do you explain Alice's words? The

Immaculate Conception.

Not many kids could pull that one together, particularly

if

they'd been deaf for most of their lives."

"She shouldn't have been able to pronounce anything

coherently after all those years, but that's another

argument.

She could have picked up that label in any

religious

textbook."

"And the drawings. In the paper, you say that

Alice's

mother had told you her daughter had been drawing

pictures

of Our Lady over and over again since her

previous

vision."

"Yeah, she said that. That was about all I got out of

her before the priest interfered. He whisked them

away

before I could get much more. But that doesn't prove

anything, Sue, except that Alice was obsessed by the image. And that she could get from any book on Catholicism. There's even a statue of Mary in the church itself." Fenn paused, drinking his brandy as the waiter poured coffee. When they were alone again, Fenn said, "The point is this: Alice had a vision, to her it was real; but that doesn't make it real for everyone else. My personal view is that she's a sui table case for a psychiatrist." "Oh, Gerry..." "Wait a minute! For her to speak so clearly and so well after all these years, she must have been hearing words, sounds, for most of the time." "Unless she remembered them." "She was four years old when she was struck deaf and dumb, for Christ's sake! There's no way she could have remembered." Diners on the next table were looking their way, so he leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Look, Sue, I'm not trying to knock your religion--although I didn't know you cared so much until now--but have you any idea of how many cases there are each year of people claiming they've seen God, angels, or saints? Yeah, and even the Blessed Virgin. Any idea?" She shook her head. "No, neither have I." He grinned. "But I know it's on a par with UFO'S. And there are plenty of murderers who commit the act because "God told them to." Look at Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper. It's a common-enough phenomenon." "Then why are you building it up to be something else?" He flushed. "That's journalism, babe." "It's sickening." "You're in the media business too." "Yes, and sometimes I'm ashamed. I want to go home now." "Ah come on. Sue, this is getting out of hand." "I mean it, Gerry. I want to leave." "What's got into you? I'm sorry I took you to the bloody church now; you're going holy on me." She glared at him, and for one gulp-making moment, he thought she was going to hurl her glass at him. Instead she

wiped her lips with her napkin and stood. "I'll see myself home."
"Hey, Sue, cut it out. I thought you were staying with me tonight."
"You must be joking."
Fenn looked at her amazed. "I don't believe this. What's got into you?"
"y caret caret Knowledge caret
78 James Herbert
"Maybe I'm just seeing you for what you really are."
"You're being bloody ridiculous."
"Am I? Perhaps you're right, but it's how I feel at the moment."
"I'll get the bill." Fenn drained the brandy, then began to rise from the table.
"I'd rather see myself home." With that she pushed her way past the table and clumped up the stairs.
Fenn sat, too confused to protest anymore.
He reached across the table for the untouched Drambuie, raised it toward the other diners, who obviously found him fascinating, and drained it in two swift gulps.
Footsteps on the stairs made him turn in the hope that Sue had relented.
"Everything all right, Mr. Fenn?"
Bernard asked anxiously.
"Terrific."
Monday night
He puffed his way up the hill, occasionally muttering to himself about the perplexing instability of the female character. His "celebration" dinner had started out well enough, but the more he discussed the Alice Pagett story with Sue, the quieter she had become. She had a changeable temperament, volatile at one moment, tranquil, or even indifferent, the next. The trick was to predict her moods (and he cared enough to make the effort) and bend with them. Tonight, though, he had been unprepared for her attack. Unprepared and still mystified.
Why the hell had she been so offended? Had going to Mass on that particular Sunday morning brought about the resurgence of her past religious ideals? Why should it?
She took Ben to Mass at Christmas, and there was never any sudden religious metamorphosis then. So why now? It had to be because of the kids; maybe she just didn't want

James Herbert - The Shrine

to see them exploited. And maybe she was right.
But it was his job to report news, right? And
Jesus
Christ, that was news. Even the nationals wanted
it. There
was no question: the story would be his ticket to Fleet
Street.
With relief he finally stopped outside one of the
street's
rising (or descending--it depended on which way you
were going) terraced houses, a two-story,
excluding basement,
Regency house, walls painted flaky white,
window-frames and door flaky black.
Fenn inserted the key, his hand shaking slightly from
pent-up frustration rather than the few pints he had
consumed
in the pub next door to The French Connection.
He closed the door behind him and trudged
up the staircase
to his flat, hoping that Sue would be waiting for
him,
more than sure that she wouldn't.
The ringing phone hurried his steps.
EIGHT
"Will you, won't you, will you, won't you,
will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you,
won't you join the dance?"
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis
Carroll
the SIZE OF THE CROWN Hotel was in
keeping with the
village itself; small, intimate, the kind
favored by weekend
lovers. The plaque on the reception wall
told Fenn it was
once a sixteenth-century coaching inn which had
been
extensively refurbished in 1953, when
additional bedrooms
were added. The oak-beamed dining room comfortably
seated fifty people and the hotel's sixteen bedrooms

all well-appointed, some with private
bathrooms and all
with television and radio. The sign also informed
Fenn
that the management knew he would enjoy the good food
and friendly service and had great pleasure in
welcoming
him to the Crown Hotel. Thank you, he
acknowledged
silently, but I don't think I'll be here that
long.
He noticed the bar to his left was open and
decided that
10:35 was a little too early for a beer. The
smell of morning
coffee wafted through and the occasional elderly couple
wandered in from the street and disappeared into the
bar, the aroma a subliminal siren's song for
geriatrics.

"Mr. Fenn?"

Fenn turned to see a gray-haired but
youngish-faced
man smiling at him from a doorway farther down the
hall.

"Mr. Southworth?"

"I am indeed." The gray-haired man stepped
into full
view, one arm raised toward the open doorway as
an
invitation for the reporter to join him within. Fenn
gave an
appreciative nod toward the pretty
receptionist who had
summoned the hotel manager for him, considering a
wink
a little too frisky in full view of her
employer.

"Very good of you to come, Mr. Fenn." Southworth
offered a firm hand to the reporter, which he shook
briefly
before entering the room. Another man rose from his
seat
and stuck out his hand toward Fenn's midriff. He
shook
the chubby hand and resisted wiping the transferred
dampness
against his trouser leg.

The hotel manager quietly closed the door,
walked around

a large, leather-topped desk, and sat.
He wore a black suit
with a light gray waistcoat and gray silk tie;
on closer

inspection his face did not look so young, although the
skin was smooth save for giveaway line clusters
around his
eyes and the corners of his mouth. Fenn and the second
man sat on two straight-backed chairs facing
the desk.

"This is Mr. Tucker," Southworth said.

Mr. Tucker nodded and for one uncomfortable moment
Fenn thought he would have to shake the sweaty hand
again, but the paunchy man merely nodded in his
direction,
his smile having little affiliation with the gimlet eyes
shrewdly sizing up Fenn.

Southworth continued the introduction: "Mr.

Tucker
has been a resident of Banfield for . . .
what, Rodney . . .
ten years now?"

"Eleven," Tucker corrected.

"Yes, eleven years. A very highly regarded
member of

the community, if I may say so."

Tucker preened and Fenn secretly winced at the
ingratiating
smile on the blubbery lips. He noted the
heavy gold chain
on the thick wrists, the rings, one a sovereign,
on the
fleshy fingers, and wondered how many extra pounds

they

added to the already overweight load.

"Very nice of you to say so, George." There were the barest traces of a northern accent in Tucker's voice. He

turned to the reporter. "I own the local supermarket."

"That's wonderful," Fenn replied.

Tucker eyed him for a moment, not quite sure how to take the appreciation. He decided the reporter was sincere.

"I read your marvelous story in the Courier last night, Mr.

Fenn. First-rate bit of journalism."

"Obviously that's why you wanted to see me this morning."

"Yes, quite," Southworth said. "As you can imagine,

the news was all around town by Sunday evening, but it was your report which has given the news a greater prominence

in the region. For that, we are grateful."

"That may be premature."

"I'm sorry?"

"You may find a lot of unwelcome visitors to the town

in the next few weeks now that the nationals have got hold of the story too."

Fenn noticed the look that passed between the two men.

Tucker's eyes gleamed briefly, but Southworth's remained

impassive.

"Weeks, Mr. Fenn," the hotel manager said, "but

unfortunately, not months."

"Unfortunately?"

Southworth leaned back in his chair and picked up a

fountain pen lying on the desktop; he coolly appraised the

reporter while he toyed with the pen.

"Let me be perfectly

frank with you, Mr. Fenn. I had heard of what took place

up at St. Joseph's, of course, but had not given the story

much credence, or even, I'm afraid, too much attention. I

had, naturally enough, assumed that the story was wildly

exaggerated or just--to put it bluntly--misinformed. But

when Mr. Tucker rang me yesterday evening and I took

the opportunity to read your account of the occurrence, I

must admit to giving the matter further thought. In the subsequent meeting with Mr. Tucker, I

became convinced

that this event might well develop into major proportions."

James Herbert - The Shrine

"Give it a couple of weeks, as I said, and it'll blow over.

The public is pretty fickle when it comes to news; they like it fresh."

"That's precisely the point."

Fenn raised his eyebrows.

Southworth leaned forward, his elbows resting on the desk, the pen still held between the fingers of both hands like a delicately poised bridge across a ravine. His words

were slow, measured, as though it were important that their meaning be received in the correct spirit. "The world,

I need hardly tell you, is in grave recession. Economic

problems are not just confined to individual countries anymore; the concern is global. But it's individual people who are suffering, Mr. Fenn, not continents, nor countries. The common man has to bear the brunt of world management failure."

Fenn shifted in his seat. "Er, I don't see the connection . . ."

"Of course not, Mr. Fenn. I do apologize. Let me be

more direct. We are a small town--a village, really--in a small country, and it's we, the small villages and towns,

that suffer under unfortunate government economic policies.

Nobody subsidizes our local industries or businesses

because, individually, their loss is insignificant when compared

to the big combines or nationalized industries. Our (cal businesses are dying, Mr. Fenn.

Banfield itself is slowly dying."

"It can't be that bad."

"No, I may be overemphasizing to make my point. It

isn't that bad, but, given a few years, it will be. Unless the decay is stopped."

"I still don't see what this has to do with what happened

on Sunday." But Fenn had begun to; the idea was just

starting to glimmer through.

Tucker moved his bulky figure around in his seat and

drew in a deep breath as though about to speak.

Southworth

hastily cut in, as though fearing his colleague's expression of their thoughts.

"You may have seen enough of Banfield by now to have formed some opinion of the place, Mr. Fenn."

"I can't say that I have. I've driven through it once or

twice before, but until a week or so ago when

I almost ran
down the Pagett girl, I hadn't really given
it a second
thought."
"And now?"
"It's a nice-enough place. Quite pretty . . ."
"But unexciting."
"Yeah, you could say that. There are plenty of other
towns and villages in the south that are prettier,
more
traditional."
"And more attractive to the tourist trade?"
Fenn nodded.
"That's exactly it. We, as a community, really
don't
have too much to offer. In summertime this
hotel is quite a
busy place, but my guests use it only as a
base for traveling
around the Sussex countryside or visiting
Brighton and
the other south-coast resorts. The benefit
to Banfield is
minimal. Yet, I personally, would be willing
to invest
more money in the village if I thought it would
yield a
reasonable return. I know Mr. Tucker
feels the same way,
but is also reluctant to throw away good money."
"It's not just us, Mr. Fenn," Tucker spoke
up at last.
"There are plenty of other businessmen around here
looking
for a good investment."
"I'm sorry, I'm not with you. What kind of
investment
are you talking about?"
"For myself," said Southworth, "I would very much like
to open a new hotel. A modern one, with more
amenities
than the Crown can offer. Perhaps even a motel on
the
outskirts; that would be most suitable for the amount of
passing trade we receive."
"And I'd like to open more shops," said Tucker
enthusiastically,
"maybe a couple of restaurants--you know,
the cheaper kind where parents on a day trip can
afford to
take their kids."
"And there is plenty of local land waiting to be
developed,"
said Southworth. "The village could grow, spread
outwards, become a real town."
And make you and your friends some money in the
process, Fenn thought ruefully. "Okay," he
said, "I see
what you're getting at. I'm still not sure what
all this has
to do with me, though. When my news editor rang
me last

night he said you, Mr. Southworth, wanted to see me personally, that you had more information on the Banfield 'miracle--your words, I believe, not his. As you wouldn't pass anything on to him, he decided it might be important for me to turn up this morning. Was he right?"

Again, a look passed between the two men; this time it was cautious.

"We found your account of what happened at St. Joseph's

a first-rate piece of journalism, Mr.

Fenn. Accurate in

detail, and imaginative in the questions it posed."

Tucker made agreeing noises.

Oh, yeah, Fenn thought. "What questions?"

"Well, comparisons really. It was that which caused Mr.

Tucker to contact me in my role as chairman of the parish

council. You compared Banfield to Lourdes. In fact, you

posed the question: Could Banfield be another Lourdes?"

He placed the pen on the desktop and smiled sweetly at the reporter.

"I admit I got a little carried away."

"Not at all, Mr. Fenn. On the contrary, we feel it was a

very perceptive remark."

The metaphorical light bulb above Fenn's head flashed

brightly. He could see where it was all leading, but wondered

what part he was to play. "There's been more than one so-called miracle at Lourdes, Mr.

Southworth. In all seriousness, I hardly think Banfield qualifies, do you?"

"Oh, I think it does. Look at Walsingham and Aylesford,

both towns in England. They have become shrines to many thousands of pilgrims each year. As for

Aylesford, nobody is quite sure whether or not a visitation from the

Blessed Virgin ever took place there at all;

many believed it happened in France. Also, there have never been

any spectacular miracles in either of these towns, yet the mystique is there, the people flock

to them in the true belief that they are holy places. At least we have

evidence that something quite extraordinary happened at St.

Joseph's, something that enabled a little girl to hear and speak after

years of silence."

"Extraordinary, yes, but not necessarily a miracle," Fenn

broke in.

"Do you know one of the best definitions of a miracle:

'A divinely ordained exception.' I think that's rather appropriate in this case."

was "Divinely ordained"? Don't you need some evidence of that?"

"The Church does, of course. But the girl claimed she

saw the Immaculate Conception. Why should she lie?"

"And why should you believe her?" Fenn came back quickly.

"I think it's irrelevant whether we do or do not. Perhaps

as a Catholic myself, I'm more ready to believe than Mr.

Tucker here is, but as I say, that's besides the point. The

fact is, many thousands--who knows, perhaps millions if

the story is circulated wide enough--will believe. And

they'll want to visit St. Joseph's."

"Giving a dying village a new life."

"Is that so wrong?"

Fenn paused before he answered. "No, it may not be

wrong. But you'll forgive me if I say it sounds a little

cynical on your part."

Tucker could contain himself no longer. "This is the real world we're living in, Mr. Fenn.

Opportunities come

along, you have to grab at them."

Southworth looked embarrassed. "Come now, Rodney,

it isn't quite so black and white as that. I deeply believe,

Mr. Fenn, that something--I hesitate to use the word, but

I feel it's necessary--something divine has taken place at the

church. Something ordained by God. And if that is so,

there has to be a reason. Perhaps the real miracle is that

Banfield has been given the chance of a rebirth, an opportunity

to save itself from oblivion. And a chance for the people themselves to regain their beliefs. It was Shaw who wrote, "A miracle is an event which

creates faith"; why

shouldn't faith be created or renewed here?"

Fenn was confused. Southworth appeared to be sincere,

yet openly admitted he would benefit financially if Banfield

became revitalized. The fat man. Tucker, made no bones

about his motives: he was in it for the money. But

what,
exactly, did they want of him?
"I appreciate your frankness, Mr.
Southworth, but I'm
still not sure why you're telling me all this."
"Because we would like you to write more on what will
become known as the Banfield Miracle."
Southworth's
eyes fixed on Fenn's and his expression was
serious, almost
grave. "Your story has already created enormous
interest.
I don't know if you've had a chance to visit
St. Joseph's,
this morning . . . ?"
Fenn shook his head.
"I went to see Father Hagan myself earlier,"
Southworth
continued. "He wasn't there, but his house was under
siege from a small army of your journalist
colleagues."
"From the nationals?"
"I believe so. I spoke to them, but
unfortunately, I'm
very much in the dark about this incredible event. There
wasn't too much I could tell them."
I'll bet you managed somehow, Fenn mused
to himself, "Well, you can be sure the
Banfield Miracle will get good
coverage now. Maybe too much." He was a
trifle aggrieved
that the big boys were muscling in on what he
regarded as his scoop, but knew--and had known--it
was
inevitable.
"I'm sure it will--for a day or so. As you say,
the public is fickle when it comes to news, and so
is the press itself."
Tucker broke in once more: "This is too
wonderful a
story to be allowed to die in a couple of days,
Mr. Fenn."
The reporter shrugged. "There's nothing you can do
about it. Unless, of course, something else happens
...
Unless something happens, unless something happens!
What
was wrong with this idiot? Tucker's left heel
did an impatient
jiggle on the red patterned carpet. He had
tried to
persuade Southworth to deal with the biggies, not
mess
around with the local rag. The nationals could give
maximum
publicity now, when it was hot; Southworth was
too worried about declining interest afterward, when nothing
more happened up at the church. He'd insisted that a
steadily built and maintained awareness would give
more sustenance to the long-term plan, whereas massive,
sensationalist coverage would only benefit in the
short term. By
patronizing the Courier they would, hopefully,

ensure
that sustained interest. The newspaper was, after
all, a
reflection of local affairs: it had a duty
toward its audience
(and to itself in terms of circulation figures)
to consistently
report (and, of course provide) any such
newsworthy stories
that would generate interest (and trade) in the area.
But was this man Fenn taking the bait or was he
too
pea-brained to see the possibilities?
"There's the problem," Southworth was saying. "There
is no guarantee that anything else will
happen at St. Joseph's.
Which is why we felt the Courier will give the
incident and
caret 0
its consequence more coverage than any of the other
media.
We can promise you, personally, Mr. Fenn, every
cooperation,
any assistance, you might need."
Fenn was silent.
"We do realise," said Tucker, "that your paper
probably
isn't overgenerous with your expenses, so we would
expect
to help you out ..."
His words trailed off at the icy glares he
received from
both the reporter and the hotel owner.
"I'm sorry, Mr. Fenn," Southworth said
quickly. "What
Rodney is trying rather clumsily to say is that
we would
not want you to be out of pocket on this matter.
Indeed, as
a member of the parish council, I shall
propose the setting
up of a special fund to cover any expenses
on the development
of this, um, project. It could cover initial
promotional
material, personal expenses incurred
by council
members, and any extra miscellaneous
costs."
"And I'd come under any "extra
miscellaneous" costs?"
asked Fenn.
Southworth smiled. "Precisely."
To Fenn, it didn't smell any sweeter than
the way the
fat man had put it. He leaned forward, elbows
on knees.
"Look, Mr. Southworth, Mr. Tucker, I
work for the Courier, it pays my salary, and my news
editor tells me
what stories to cover. If he wants me
to write obits for a
month, that's what I'll do. If he wants me

to cover garden
fetes for the next month, I'll do that,
too. If he wants me
to spend time delving into the strange happenings at the
local church of a little country village, I'll
be only too
happy." He took a deep breath. "What
I'm saying is, my
editor calls the tune. He pipes, I dance.
I'm independent
to a degree--and that's a small degree--but
there's no way
he'll let me waste time on a story he
considers to be
defunct. Now, like I said, if something more
happens,
then I'll be back like a shot."
Southworth nodded. "We appreciate your
position.
However--"
"There are no howevers to it. That's it, that's the way
it
is."
"I was merely going to say that the girl, this
Alice
Pagett, mentioned that the figure she allegedly
saw has
asked her to return."
"She didn't say when."
"But if she has another . . . another
visitation, you would
consider that newsworthy."
"I'm not sure. A prepubescent girl's
hallucinations don't
warrant too much attention."
"After what happened on Sunday?"
"That was Sunday. Today's Tuesday. Tomorrow will
be Wednesday. Things move on, Mr.
Southworth, and we
live in an apathetic age. What you need is
another miracle,
then maybe you've got a continuation of the story.
For the
next few days Banfield will get all the
attention it needs, so
my advice to you is to make the most of it now.
Next
week, it will be dead news."
Fenn rose to his feet and Southworth rose with
him.
Tucker remained sitting, a mixture of
disappointment and
ill-disguised contempt on his face.
Southworth walked to the door and opened it for the
reporter. "Thank you for coming by, Mr. Fenn,
and thank
you for being so frank."
"Right. Look, if anything does happen, I'd
like to know."
"Of course. Will you be Ebboing up to the church?"
Fenn nodded. "And I'll have a look around the
village,
get some reactions from the people."

"Very good. Well, I hope we'll see you again."

"Right"

Fenn left the room.

Southworth closed the door and turned to face the fat man.

"So much for involving the bloody local press,"

Tucker

said scornfully.

Southworth crossed the room and sat at his desk once

more. "It was worth a try. I'm afraid he got the impression

we were trying to bribe him into writing the story."

"Weren't we?"

"Not in the true sense of the word. We were just offering financial assistance."

Tucker grunted. "What now?" I

"We--I--make sure the parish council becomes interested in our scheme. If not, all we can do is hope--as Mr. . Fenn put it--something else happens."

"And if it doesn't?"

The sun shone through the window in dusty rays, highlighting

one side of Southworth's face in a golden hue.

"Let's just pray it does," he said simply.

NINE

And see ye not that braid braid road,

That lies across that lily leven?

That is the Path of Wickedness,

"I'ho" some call it the Road to Heaven.

"Thomas the Rhymer," Anon

bi shop CAINES REGARDED THE PRIEST with concerned

eyes. "I have grave misgivings about this whole matter,

Andrew," he said.

The priest found it difficult to look directly into his

bi shop's face, as though his gaze would see what lay beyond

his own eyes. "I'm worried too. Bishop.

And I'm confused."

"Confused? Tell me why confused."

It was dark in the bishop's study, for the two windows

which overlooked the, tiny garden faced away from the morning sun. The deep wood paneling of the

walls added

to the room's somberness and even the glow from the fire seemed muted.

"If--he struggled with his own words--"if the girl really did . . . really did see . . ."

"The Blessed Virgin?" The bishop frowned at the priest.

Father Hagan looked up briefly and said,

"Yes. If she

did and was cured because of it, then why? Why

Alice,

and why at my church?"

Bishop Caines' tone was clipped, impatient. "There is no evidence, Andrew, none at all."
4.
"The other children--they saw something."
"No evidence," the bishop repeated slowly, and his fingertips pressed against the polished surface of the desk.
He forced himself to relax, aware that the parish priest somehow irritated him, and was even more vexed, not contrite, because of it. "The Church must tread warily in such matters."
"I know. Bishop, that's why I was so reluctant to bring it to your attention. When I read the newspaper report yesterday I knew I had no choice. Foolishly, I had imagined that the incident would be contained."
"You should have contacted me immediately." The bishop stroved to keep the harshness from his rebuke, but did not succeed.
"I phoned you as soon as I saw the Couriers article. It seemed so exaggerated."
"Was it? The girl was cured, wasn't she?"
"Yes, yes, but surely not miraculously?"
The priest looked at his superior in anxious surprise.
"How do you know that, Andrew?" The bishop's words had softened, for he had no desire for the man before him to be afraid. "The child claimed to have seen the Blessed Virgin, after which an incredible transformation took place.
The girl could speak and hear."
"But you said that was no evidence of a miracle." The priest looked away again.
"Of course it isn't. But while we have to reject the proposition as we see it now, we must not close our minds to the faint possibility. Do you understand that, Father?"
He didn't wait for a reply. "It has to be looked into thoroughly before a judgment can be made. There are strict guidelines for such matters, as you well know." The bishop smiled thinly. "Some say our guidelines are too strict, that we eliminate all aspects of faith. But that isn't entirely true; we endeavor to eliminate doubts. The rules we follow for the discernment of a miracle date back to the eighteenth century, and they were laid down by Pope Benedict XIV, a man who had many progressive interests.

He realized the jeopardy in which the Catholic Church could place itself by proclaiming miracles that later could be proved false by scientific means. In an age such as ours, where technological advancement is continually explaining phenomena in rational, scientific terms, the need to follow those rules is even greater."

The priest's eyes were too intense and Bishop Caines wondered why. There was something wrong with the man, something--what? Unbalanced, perhaps? No, too strong a word. Father Hagan was disturbed by the peculiar happening in his parish, on his own church's doorstep, no less. And he was--yes, just a little frightened. The bishop forced a smile, an encouragement for his priest to open his heart.

"Would these rules apply to Alice Pagett?" Hagan asked.

"They would have to, should we decide to take the matter further," Bishop Caines replied, maintaining the smile.

"Please tell me what they are. Bishop."

"I don't think it's necessary at this stage. This whole matter will be forgotten within a month, I can assure you."

"You're probably right, but I'd like to know."

Bishop Caines curbed his impatience, then sighed. His eyes searched the ceiling as though scanning the corners of his own memory. "The affliction or illness has to be very serious, impossible or extremely difficult to cure," he began.

"The health of the person concerned should not be improving, nor should the nature of the illness be one that might improve by itself. No medication should have been given. At least, if it has, its inefficacy must be clearly established. The cure has to be instantaneous, not a gradual improvement." His eyes dropped toward the priest again. "The cure shouldn't correspond to a crisis in the illness brought about by natural causes. And, of course, the cure should be complete; there should be no recurrence

of that particular illness." He stopped speaking and
Father

Hagan nodded his head.

"It would seem almost impossible to establish a
miracle,"

the priest said.

"Yes, it would, but I have to admit the rules have
been

stretched just a little in the past. Generally though, they
are adhered to." He smiled again, and this time his
warmth

was genuine. "That's why some of our best miracles
get

away."

The priest did not respond to the humor. "Then
it

would be too soon to make any judgment on the
child?"

"Much too soon, and very unwise. Father, I'm a
little

perturbed by your seriousness. Is there something else
troubling you?"

The priest straightened in the chair as though
surprised

by the question. He did not answer
straightaway. He

shook his head, then said, "It's just the change in
Alice

herself. Not the fact that she can now hear and speak, but
in her manner, her disposition. Her personality

has
changed."

"And so it should after such a wonderful cure."

"Yes, yes, I know. It's something more, though,
something . . ."

His words trailed off.

"Something you can't define?"

Father Hagan's body seemed to slump into itself.
"Yes.

it's more than just elation. She's serene--as though she
really has seen the Mother of God."

"It's not an uncommon apparition, Andrew.

Many have

claimed to have seen Our Lady and, of course, there
is a

great cult of Mariologists. But psychologists
say that children

can often see what is not there. I believe the term
is

"eidetic imagery." his

"You're convinced she was hallucinating?"

"At the moment I'm not convinced of anything, although

I tend to lean towards that theory. You say the
girl's favorite statue in your church was that of

Mary. If

her affliction truly was psychosomatic, then
perhaps it was

a hallucinatory vision which effected her cure.

Even the

Church cannot deny the power of our own minds."

Bishop Caines glanced at his wristwatch and
pushed his

chair back, his portly shape making the action

an effort.

"You'll have to excuse me now, Father; I have to attend a meeting with our financial committee. It's the time of

month I dread." He gave a short laugh.

"It's a pity the Roman Catholic Church cannot run on faith alone."

Father Hagan stared up at the bulky figure, aware for the first time that black cloth hardly symbolized holiness.

He was embarrassed by the thought: he knew his superior

was a good man, infinitely better than he, himself. Why,

then, had the thought jumped into his head? Was it just part of his own self-doubt, the unease that was insidiously

gnawing on his beliefs? His head ached, buzzed with thoughts that were unformed, fleeting--attacking. The urge

to lie down and cover his eyes was almost overwhelming, What in God's name was happening to him?

"Andrew?"

The voice was soft, tender almost.

"Are you all right. Father Hagan?"

The priest blinked, seemed bewildered for a moment.

"Yes. I'm sorry. Bishop, my thoughts were miles away."

He stood as Bishop Caines approached around the desk.

"Are you not well, Andrew?"

The priest tried to calm himself. "I may be coming down with a cold, Bishop, that's all. The weather is so

changeable."

Bishop Caines nodded understandingly and led the way to the door. "You're not too worried over this matter?"

"I'm concerned, naturally, but no, I think it's just a

chill." Or a sense of foreboding. "Nothing to worry over."

He stopped before going through the open door into the outer office and faced his bishop. "What shall I do. Bishop?

About the girl?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Bishop Caines attempted

to look reassuring. "Keep me informed of developments,

watch over the situation carefully. But have no pan in the

hysteria that may well arise during the next few days. And

keep away from the press--they'll exploit the situation to

the full without your help. I'll need a full report for the

Conference of Bishops, which will be held within the next

James Herbert - The Shrine

two months, but only as a matter of record.
I'm sure it will
all have been long forgotten by then."
He patted the priest's arm with an affection he
hardly
felt. "Now you take care, Andrew, and
remember to keep
me informed. God bless you."
He watched the priest walk through into the outer
office
and ignore the secretary, who bade him
good-bye. He
waited for the other door to close before he said,
"Judith,
would you be a dear and find me Father Hagan's
file. And
then let the finance committee know I'll be five
minutes
late."
Judith, his secretary, a quiet but capable
woman in her
early fifties, was not even curious about the
request. She
never questioned anything her beloved Bishop
Caines
asked of her.
The bishop sat at his desk again, fingers drumming
on
the desktop. Was it all nonsense? Had
Father Hagan exaggerated
the situation? The priest had joined the diocese
thirteen years before as an assistant priest in
Lewes, and
then on to Worthing as active assistant priest.
Banfield was
his first parish as senior priest. Was it proving
too much?
His work had been exemplary, and while his devotion
to
the Church was not remarkable among his peers, his
conscientiousness
was; where every secular priest would try if
possible to visit at least four or five
parishioners during the
day, and spend ten or fifteen minutes with each.
Father
Hagan would visit the same number, but spend
at least a
half-hour with them; he taught for two
mornings at the
local convent school; he joined in the many local
organizations
such as the Self-Help Group, the Liturgy
Group, the
Youth Group, as well as attending the monthly
fraternal
meetings of all the Banfield ministers--the
Baptists,
Anglican, Evangelical Free Church,
and the Christian Fellowship
(quite a few for such a small place). And these
were just fringe activities outside his normal
duties. Perhaps

James Herbert - The Shrine

it was too much for a man with a weak heart.
A light tap on the door, and Judith was
placing a buff
file on the desk before him. He smiled his
thanks and
waited until she had left the room before opening
the file.
Not that there were any guarded secrets contained within;
it was just that peering into a man's background was like
peering into his soul, and both should be done in
private.
There was nothing surprising, nor anything he'd
forgotten
in the file. The schools he had taught at,
six years in
Rome studying for the priesthood after his heart
attack,
ordained in Rome, returned to England. Then
Lewes,
Worthing, Banfield. But wait--there was something
he
had forgotten. Father Hagan had spent six
months in a
parish near Maidstone on his return from Rome.
His first
assignment, as it were. Six months as
assistant priest in
Hollingbourne. Only six, then moved on. It
wasn't
significant; young priests made frequent
shifts to where
they were most needed at any particular time. Why
did it
concern him now? Had he already begun to lose
confidence
in his priest's ability to cope with a
difficult situation,
one which could so easily escalate into a major
phenomenon . . .
if handled correctiv? A miracle cure in his
diocese.
Something extraordinary, proven beyond all doubt.
Bishop
Caines was a pragmatist; the Holy Roman
Catholic Church
would not be greater-than every harmed by such a miracle
in these cynical
and antireligious times. The Holy Roman
Catholic Church
would benefit by it.
Imagine: a holy shrine in his diocese
He pushed the thought away, ashamed of his own
vanity.
But it lingered. And soon he knew what he had
to do. Just
in case . . . just in case it really had been a
miracle

TEN

Once he was across the water he found himself at the
gates of
Hell. It was all black and sooty in
there and the Devil wasn't at
home, but his grandmother was sitting there in a big

armchair. "The Three Golden Hairs of the Devil,"
The Brothers Grimm
bip U1P BIP-DIP . . .
Molly Pagett's eyes flickered. Opened.
What was the
sound?
Her thin body lay stiff in the bed, her husband
sprawled
leadily beside her. She held her breath, listening,
wanting
to hear the sound again, but dreading hearing it.
. . . bip bip bif) bid-dip hip . . .
It was faint. And familiar.
She drew the covers back, careful not to wake
Len. Her
dressing gown was laid across the end of the bed and she
drew it across her shoulders to keep away the chill
of the
night. Len grunted, turned over.
. . . bid-dip . . .
The sound, the familiar sound, was coming from Alice's
room. Molly sat on the edge of the bed
for a few moments,
collecting her thoughts, shooing away the remaining
dregs
of a restless sleep. The day had been long, a
confusing
mixture of joy and anxiety. They had wanted
to keep
Alice overnight in the hospital again, but
Molly would not
consent to it. Somehow she felt their tampering, their
tests, their probing--their endless questions--would undo
the miracle.
. . . bif greater-than bip . . .
And miracle it was. There was no doubt in her
mind.
The Blessed Virgin Mary had smiled on their child.
. . . bip . . .
Molly rose from the bed, pulling the dressing gown
tight around her. Quietly padding to the open
door, fearful
of waking Len, she stepped into the hallway. She
had
left the door open just in case Alice cried out
in the
night--the joy of having Alice cry out
in the night! It was a
sound Molly had not heard since her daughter was
very
small. How she had listened in those early days,
alert for
the slightest whimper, the beginnings of a cry.
Molly would
scamper up the stairs, or rush along the
hallway, in a panic
which her husband could only scoff at. But then he
had
never appreciated just how much the new baby had
meant
to Molly. Alice had filled a barren, empty
life, an answer

James Herbert - The Shrine

to years of prayer. God, through the divine
intercession of
Mary, Mother of Jesus, to whom Molly had
fervently
prayed, had blessed her with marriage and child.
How cruel, then, to smite the child so young. (and how
disappointing the marriage.)
. . . hip bid-dip . . .
Now once again. Our Lady had intervened. The
affliction
had gone, just as suddenly as it had come. Molly's
faith in the Blessed Virgin had not wilted during
the years
of trial, and she had encouraged Alice
to worship Mary as
she did. If anything, her daughter's adoration
for Christ's
Mother was even greater. And the years of devotion had
been rewarded.
Molly stood outside Alice's door.
Silence for a while
then--
. . . hid-dip bid-dip bip bip . . .
The excitement of the last two days had been too
much
for Alice: it was the middle of the night and she could
not sleep. She loved to watch the luminous green
invaders descending the black screen of the microchip
toy, destroying
them with a quick stab at the red button, flicking a
switch with the other hand so that her spaceship
scuttled
from side to side, dodging the invaders' deadly
bombs.
Now she could hear the machine, hear the
computered
pipes of victory when the last invader had been
vanquished
from dark plastic space. It must seem like a new
toy again to her.
. . . bip btp . . .
But she had to sleep. The doctors had insisted that
she
rested. And Molly did not want a relapse.
That would be
too harsh of God . . .
. . . hip . . .
She pushed open the door.
. . . bi--
Molly was not sure that she had seen the small
green
light vanish on the far side of the room. It had
been just a
flicker in the corner of her eye, and it could have
been
nothing at all. She looked toward Alice's
bed, expecting to
see her daughter sitting up, eyes wide and
happy. Galaxy
Invaders in her hands. All she saw in
the streetlight shining
through the curtains was the little shape beneath the
bedclothes.

"Alice?" Molly realized how naturally she had called her name, how swift was the acceptance of her daughter's returned senses, as though she had never really accepted their loss. "Alice, are you awake?" There was no sound. Nothing from the child, nothing from the machine. Molly smiled in the gloom and moved toward the bed. Little faker, she scolded silently, teasing your mum. She bent over her daughter, ready to tickle her nose and end the pretense. She stayed her hand. Alice really was asleep. Her breathing was too deep and her face too much in repose for her to be faking. "Alice," Molly said again, softly, touching her shoulder. The child did not stir. Molly lifted the covers, searching for the electronic toy, expecting it to be cuddled in Alice's arms. It wasn't there. And it wasn't on the floor beside the bed. But it had to be nearby; Alice couldn't have scooted across the room to get back into bed before she had entered. It wasn't possible. Molly knelt and ducked her head to floor level, peering beneath the bed. No plastic shape lurked there. She remembered the green fading light. No, that was ridiculous. Just not possible. But she looked anyway. The electronic game was lying on the small dressing table on the other side of the room, its switch in the OFF position, its screen black and lifeless. Molly knew she hadn't imagined the familiar sound. She also knew it could not have been in her daughter's hands. And there was no one else in the room. Just shadows and the sound of Alice's steady breathing. "Could you keep a secret, if I told you one? It's a great secret, I don't know what I should do if anyone found it out. I believe I should die?" "I've Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett fenn ROLLED OVER IN THE bed and his own groan brought him awake. His head seemed to continue rolling. "Oh, Jes ..." He winced, one hand fumbling toward the throbbing lump that common sense told him really was

his forehead. His fingers hardly eased the pain at all.

Turning onto his back, a hand over his closed eyes, he endeavored to control the spinning sensation. Another groan

developed into a low, self-pitying hum, a sound which was

in perfect harmony with the higher-pitched hum melodying

around inside his head. A full minute later, the cadence

began to ease and slowly, experimentally, he eased back

the shutters over his eyes. It was another half-minute

before he lifted his hand.

The ceiling settled down when he stopped blinking and

he considered sitting up in the bed. Consideration over, he

lay there and groped a hand toward the bedside table, careful

not to lift his head from the pillow, nor turn it in any

direction. The searching fingers could not find his wristwatch

and he cursed his necessary habit of keeping the alarm clock as far away from the bed as possible

(necessary because it was much too easy to turn off the bell and go

back to sleep; he found the distance covered to find the bastard was enough to arouse him from his usual

morning-zombie state). Where the hell was his watch? He couldn't

have been that drunk last night. On the other hand, he

could well have been.

Fenn sighed, screwed up his courage, and let his head

slide toward the edge of the bed. Head hanging over,

blood beginning to pound at the slab of concrete inside like

waves against a sea wall, he stared at the floor. No watch

there. But one arm was hanging over the edge too, hand bent back limply against the floor.

"Stupid, stupid," he muttered when he spied the leather

strap around his wrist. He twisted his arm and squinted at the watch face. Six minutes past

eleven. It had to be morning; that was light coming through the closed curtains.

He drew himself back toward the center of the bed, resisting the urge to lie down again. Head resting

against the headboard, back propped up by the pillow, he tried to remember how he had come to this state.

Beer and brandy was the answer.

He scratched his chest and mentally--the physical act

would have been too painful --shook his head at himself.

James Herbert - The Shrine

You gotta cut it out, Fenn. A young drunkard could be fun, an old one just a bloody bore; and you're not getting younger. Journalists had the reputation of being big drinkers, and it wasn't true. They were enormous drinkers. Not all of them, of course; just those he knew personally. Fenn tentatively pushed himself farther up in the bed. He called this slow method of reclaiming the day "gradual resurrection." Memories of the night before came filtering through and he grinned once or twice, but ended up frowning and lifting the bedclothes to inspect his lower body, as though suspecting something might be missing. He grunted relief--still there, although it was making no big thing of it. What the hell was the girl's name. Boz, Roz, something like that. Or it might have been Julia. He shrugged, not really caring. So long as I'm not pregnant, he told himself. He eased the covers away, using his feet to kick them toward the end of the bed. Then slowly, and ever so carefully, he teased his body from the bed. His head weighed more than the rest of him and the trick was to keep it balanced on his shoulders as he made toward the window. He drew the curtains, sensible enough to keep his eyes closed against the glare which he knew would hit the room; the sun was especially partial to his bedroom at that time of day. He stood there, allowing the rays to warm his body, the worst of the day's coldness blocked by the glass. When he finally opened his eyes he saw a woman trudging up the hill outside, pushing a supermarket trolley laden with shopping before her, staring up open-mouthed at his naked body. Her stride did not break, although her progress was slow, and her head swiveled around in an almost Exorcist rum. Fenn faded back into the room, smiling sheepishly and giving the shopper a friendly little wave to show there was no menace in him. He hoped her head would not lock into its unnatural position.

Once out of the sunlight, coldness staked its

claim with
tiny, itchy goose pimples, and Fenn grabbed
his dressing
gown from the end of the bed. It was short and loose,
ending well above his knees, and looked much better
on
Sue. It had looked pretty good on Boz,
Roz--or was it
Anthea?--last night, too, but not as good as on
Sue. Even
that drunk he had noticed and noted.
He went into the kitchen and filled the kettle,
staring at
the running water as though fascinated, but not really
seeing it. He switched the kettle on and then
ran both
hands through his rumpled hair. I need a
cigarette, he told
himself, and was relieved he didn't smoke. The
note was propped up against the com-flakes packet
and he pulled
out a chair and studied the message for a few
seconds
without touching it. It was a telephone number and
signed
"Pam." Oh, yeah, that was her name. He
briefly wondered
whether she had tried to wake him before leaving
the flat. Probably had, not knowing it would take
a major
earthquake to rouse him after a drunken binge.
Only Sue
could do it with sneaky groping hands, but then
she had a
technique all her own. He laid Pam's
note down on the
table and tried to remember what she looked like.
He
remembered remarking to Eddy, his drinking buddy from
the sports page of the Courier, "nice face,
shame about the
legs," when they saw her and a friend in the club, but
couldn't recapture her image. The legs,
though. Yeah,
they were coming back. They'll crush your little head,
Eddy had warned him; and Eddy hadn't been far
wrong,
he now recalled. He gingerly touched his ears and
wondered
if they were as red as they felt. Could ears
bruise?
He went into the bathroom to check.
When Eenn returned to the kitchen, satisfied at
least
that his ears had not been pressed flat against the
sides of
his head, but not too pleased with the bleary-eyed
reflection
that had sneered at him from the bathroom mirror,
the room was filled with steam. He had taken time
to ease
the punishment on his bladder, senses suddenly sharp
for

James Herbert - The Shrine

any strange tingling sensation as the liquid flowed;
you
could never be too sure with girls you didn't know.
And
some that you thought you did.
Jesus, he missed Sue.
He poured the boiling water into a cup, only
remembering
to add coffee when he was settled down at the
kitchen
table again. It burned his lips when he sipped, but
at least
it was a clean, stinging pain, not like the droning ache in
his head. He dipped his hand into the com-flakes
packet
and ate some, reflecting somberly that it was just as
well
he was working the night shift; he was in no fit
state this
morning.
He looked around the small kitchen and shuddered.
He
would have to make an effort today; he couldn't go on
living in such a pigsty. Maybe he was a little
untidy, but
this mess was ridiculous. Time to get yourself back
together,
Fenn. No woman was worth it. Are you kidding?
he
answered himself. Every one was worth it--well,
maybe
with just a few exceptions.
Fifteen minutes later he was still brooding over
his third
cup of coffee when the doorbell rang.
He leaned out of the kitchen window and saw Sue
standing in the street below. Either his hangover cleared
instantly or racing emotions swamped the
ill-effects. She
looked up and waved.
He found it difficult to speak for a few moments,
then
stuttered, "Use your . . . your key. Sue."
"I didn't like to," she called up.
She fumbled in her shoulder bag, then
stuck the key
into the lock. Fenn drew his head inside,
scraping the hair
on the back of his head painfully against the frame.
He
rubbed the skin and couldn't stop smiling. He
hadn't seen
her for nearly three weeks, not since she'd
walked out of
the restaurant. They'd had several strained
telephone
conversations, but that was all. It had taken her
absence to
make him realize how hooked he was on her.
He leaned
against the cooker, still smiling, relieved,
expectant.
"Oh, shit!" The smile vanished.

Fenn scooped up the note still lying on the kitchen

and considered swallowing it; he shoved it into his pocket

instead. Running into the living room, he did a quick

survey of the room. No incriminating evidence there. Then

into the bedroom, lunging at the bed, scouring it for fallen

hairpins, strands of hair colored differently from his own,

smudges of lipstick or eyeshadow on the pillows. He made

sure there were no other stains either, sighing with relief,

he allowed himself a few moments to collect his thoughts.

Then: Christ, did she smoke? He couldn't remember. No

ashtray beside the bed. The living room! There'd be cigarette

butts smudged with lipstick in the living room! He

ran back in just as Sue opened the flat door.

"Sue," he said, sniffing the air for the stale aroma of

cigarettes. The air seemed to be okay if just a little alcoholic.

"Hello, Gerry." Her smile was not a full one.

"You look terrific," he said.

"You look awful."

He rubbed his unshaven chin, feeling awkward.

"How've you been?"

"Fine. You?"

"Pretty good."

He stuck his hands into the pockets of the robe.

"Why the hell didn't you return my calls?" He tried to keep his

voice level, but the last word was on the ascendant. "For

Christ's sake, three weeks!"

"Not quite. And I've spoken to you a couple of times."

"Yeah, you just haven't said anything."

"I haven't come to argue with you, Gerry."

He stopped himself from a retort, then said quietly,

"You wanna coffee?"

"I haven't got long. I'm on my way to the university to

tape some interviews."

"A quick one." He went into the kitchen and reboiled the kettle. He was fortunate

to find one cup that was clean at the back of the cupboard.

Her voice came through from the living room. "This place is a mess."

"The maid's day off," he called back.

When he returned, she was sitting on the

settee, calmly
watching him. He felt a tightness in his chest;
she looked
good. He placed the two cups on the glass
coffee table,
then eased himself down into the other end of the small
sofa. A two-foot gap separated them.
"I called round once or twice," he told
her.
"I've been spending a lot more time at my
parents' with
Ben."
He nodded. "How is he?"
"Boisterous as ever." She sipped and pulled a
face.
"Your coffee hasn't improved."
"Nor has my disposition. No shit. Sue,
I've missed
you."
She stared into her cup. "I needed a break from you.
You were becoming . . . a little too much."
"Yeah, I know. It's a habit of mine."
"I needed a breather."
"You said. Nothing personal, right?"
"Stop it, Gerry."
He chewed on his lip.
"And maybe you needed a break from me, too," she
said.
"No, babe, I didn't."
She couldn't help asking. "Have you been seeing
anyone?"
He looked squarely into her eyes. "No. I
haven't wanted
to." His ears tingled sorely for a few guilty
seconds. He
cleared his throat and said, "How about you?"
Sue shook her head. "I told you, I've
been busy with
Ben." She sipped her coffee again and he moved
closer.
He took the cup from her hand and placed it back
on the
saucer. His fingers traveled to her neck, beneath her
hair.
He kissed her cheek, then turned her head with his
other
hand to reach her lips.
She was soft, yielding against him, returning his
kiss
with an emotion that matched his; but then she was
pulling
away, one hand held against his shoulder.
"Please don't. That's not why I'm here." She
seemed to
have difficulty in breathing.
He ignored her and tried again, a feeling that was more
than just desire strong within him.
"No, Gerry!" In his time there was anger.
He stopped, having problems with his own breathing.
His
Sue . . .
Her glare stopped his words. And further action.
Fenn

struggled to contain his own anger. "Okay, okay."
He turned away from her in a heavy sulk. "What the hell have you come for. Sue? Just to collect some of your things?"
He heard her sigh. "Not to upset you, Gerry, I didn't want that," she said.
"Who's upset? I'm not upset. I may break out in pimples any moment now, but that's just late puberty. Christ, how could you upset me?"
"You're such a bloody baby!"
"Go ahead, turn on your charm."
She had to smile, despite herself. "Gerry, I came to tell you about the church. The church at Banfield."
He looked at her curiously.
"I've been back. I've taken Ben there on Sundays."
He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find anything to say.
"It's wonderful, Gerry." Now her smile was full and her eyes were shining with excitement. The transition was so swift it took Fenn by surprise.
"So many people are flocking to St. Joseph's," Sue went on. "People are bringing their children, their sick, their handicapped. It's almost like a pilgrimage to them.
And the happiness--it seems to hit you before you even reach the church grounds. It's unbelievable, Gerry."
"Hey, now wait a minute. I thought it had all died down. I've rung the priest there--this Father Hagan--and he told me nothing more has happened. No more miracles, no more apparitions. Certainly nothing newsworthy or the nationals would have been swarming over it like flies over a shit heap."
"You have to be there to see it! Of course there's no more physical miracles, but the miracle is the atmosphere itself. That's why I came today, Gerry. I want you to see it for yourself. I want you to experience it."
He frowned. "But I'm not a Catholic, Sue."
"You don't have to be, that's the joy of it. You only have to feel to know it's a holy place."
"But why should the priest lie to me?"
"He didn't lie. Nothing is happening in the material sense; he told you the truth. He doesn't want the situation

exploited, can't you see that?"

"And do you?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you telling me?"

She took his hand and clasped it tightly in both
of

hers. "Because I want some of that cynicism
knocked out

of that silly head of yours. If you could just see for
yourself the effect the place has on people, I know
you'll

begin to have some beliefs yourself."

"Wait a minute. You're beginning to sound like a
religious

freak. You're not trying to convert me, are you?"

She surprised him by laughing. "I don't think
the Holy

Ghost Himself could do that. No, I just
want you to bear

witness--"

"Oh, definitely a religious--"

"Just see for yourself." Her voice had become
quiet.

He drew in a deep breath and sank back against
the

sofa. "What about the girl, Alice? Is she still
going to the
church?"

"That's the other thing you have to see."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to say." Her words were slow,
deliberate, as though her thoughts were deep. "She
seems to have
changed."

"In what way?"

"It's difficult to describe. She seems--
I don't know--

older, more mature. There's a special kind of
aura around

her. Some people weep when they see her."

"Ah, come on. Sue. It's just some kind of
hysteria.

They've heard the story--their minds are
doing the rest."

"See for yourself."

"Maybe I should." He had to admit, he was
becoming

curious about the whole affair once more. The
contact

with Sue might bring them back together again, too.
"I

could go there this afternoon," he said.

"No. Wait till Sunday."

He looked up questioningly at her.

"Come to the Mass with me, when the crowds will be
there."

"You know it could have fizzled out by then. The place
might be empty."

"I doubt it. But there's another reason I
want you to

come on Sunday." She got to her feet, looking
at her

watch. "I've got to go or I'll be in

trouble."

"What? What are you talking about? You can't just leave."

Sue walked to the door. "I'm sorry, Gerry, I really do have to go. Pick me up on Sunday morning at my place.

Ben will be staying with me so we can all go together."

She opened the door.

"But what was the other reason?" he asked, still sitting perplexed on the sofa.

"There's a rumor that Alice has told the priest and her mother that the Lady wants to see her again. On the twenty-eighth. That's this Sunday."

Sue closed the door quietly behind her.

TWELVE

You parents all that children have,
And you that have got none,
If you would have them safe abroad,
I'll ray keep them safe at home.

Old Nursery Rhyme

this SUNDAY WAS DIM' -I -. rf. nt.

It was cold, drizzling, and miserable. But Fenn's senses keened to the excitement

in the air as a rat's nose twitches at the scent of distant blood.

Sue had been right: it hit you before you reached the church grounds. The first signs came as he drove through

the village High Street: there was a bustling activity that

was unusual for a Sunday morning in any town, village, or

city, particularly on a cold and damp one. And most of the

people were heading in the same direction. Traffic, too,

was far heavier than normal.

Ben, in the backseat, had become quiet, which was a

relief at any time. His arms were resting against the back

of the front passenger seat, his face close to his mother's.

Fenn quickly glanced at the eight-year-old boy and saw an

expectant look in those large brown eyes;

Ben's mouth was

open and half-smiling as he stared ahead through the windshield.

"Are you beginning to feel the atmosphere, Gerry?" Sue

asked, looking past her son's head at the reporter.

Fenn muttered noncommittally. He wasn't prepared to

admit anything yet. He slowed the car as they approached

James Herbert - The Shrine

a zebra crossing and the gathering on the pavement
waved
acknowledgments as they scurried across. Small children
clutched their parents' hands, the elderly hung on
to sturdier
companions. A middle-aged man in a
wheel chair came
last, pushed by a younger man: their similarity in
appearance
indicated they were father and son. The cripple
smiled
at Fenn, then looked over his shoulder at his
son, urging
him to push faster.
Once the road was clear, Fenn eased his foot
down on
the accelerator, aware that traffic had
built up behind him.
The traffic moved off in convoy, Fenn's Mini
at its head.
He glanced into his rearview mirror,
surprised at the
swift buildup he had caused. "I hope
we're not all going to
the same place," he commented.
"I think you're in for a surprise," Sue
replied.
He was passing groups of people along the roadside
now, the houses on either side becoming fewer
until there
were only fields and trees. Even the steady
drizzle could
not dampen the cheerfulness that seemed to exude from
the walkers.
Soon there were cars parked by the roadside, all
driven
half onto the grass verge.
"I don't believe this," Fenn said as they were
forced to
drive past the church entrance.
"I said you'd be surprised." There was no hint of
smugness
in Sue's voice.
He scanned each side of the road, looking for a
space.
"Has it been like this every Sunday since?"
"No. It's been crowded, but not like this. The
rumor
has obviously spread."
"You didn't tell me how you heard about it."
He swerved
the Mini to avoid an opening door. Two metal
sticks
stretched out from the other vehicle's interior,
followed by
two ill-controlled legs. The driver was just
emerging to
assist his invalid passenger as Fenn's car
passed.
"I was here at the evening service last
Wednesday. I
overheard some parishioners talking."
Fenn risked a quick look at her. "You were at

evening

service? In the week?"

"That's right, Gerry."

"Right."

He pulled in behind the last vehicle in the line.

"I guess

this'll do," he said ironically. The Mini

bumped onto the

verge and another car pulled up in front almost

immediately.

"Okay, Ben, time to get wet."

The boy was already pushing at the back of his mother's

seat, eager to get going. Sue stepped out and

pulled the

passenger seat forward, allowing Ben to scramble

through.

Fenn slammed his door shut and pulled up the

collar of his

raincoat. "Fine day for a bloody carnival,"

he muttered

under his breath. He tucked his hands into the coat's

large

pockets, conscious of the bulky object in one:

this time,

after moans from the Couriers picture editor, who

hadn't

liked his last pocket-camera effects, he had

borrowed an

Olympus. If (and it was a big if)

anything happened, he

was going to be prepared. In his other pocket he

carried a

microcassette recorder, a Christmas gift

from Sue. They

set off toward the church, Sue's arm linked through

his,

Ben racing ahead.

More vehicles were slowing, then stopping just beyond

his. "I he gate to the pathway leading up to the

church was

crammed with people and Sue had to grab Ben, holding

him close to prevent him from being jostled. Fenn

stared

around at the eager throng, bemused and becoming

excited

himself with their mood. Even if nothing spectacular

happened--and he was sure it wouldn't--he now had

a

nice follow-up story to the previous one. It

might take a

little exaggeration on his part to say that St.

Joseph's was being besieged by pilgrims,

believers, and the just-plain-curious, but it wasn't

too far from the truth. He shook his

head in wonder: what the hell did they all

expect to see?

Another miracle? He suppressed a

chuckle, delighted now

that Sue had persuaded him to come. It wasn't

going to be

a complete waste of time.

The three of them, Fenn, Sue and Ben,

squeezed through

James Herbert - The Shrine

the open gateway, bunched together by the shuffling crowd.
Fenn noticed that a young girl on his left, no more than fifteen or sixteen, was trembling visibly, then quickly realized her spasmodic movements were something more than just excitement. The tight drooping of one side of her mouth gave him a hint, for he had seen the disorder before. Her movements were clumsy, her hands and arms twitching uncontrollably; she was flanked on either side by a man and woman, presumably her parents. If he was right, the girl was suffering from a form of chorea, most probably St. Virus's Dance, for he had seen exactly the same symptoms in a young woman he'd interviewed in a Brighton hospital when covering the story of the hospital's imminent closure because of government cuts. It was an assignment he hadn't enjoyed, for the sick always made him feel unhealthy, but at least his article, with its many poignant interviews from the patients, had helped cause a stay of execution for the hospital. Its future was still uncertain, but that was better than positively no future at all.
He stood aside, allowing the small group more room for maneuvering, and the father smiled gratefully. Once through the gate, the queue thinned out, although the line stretched up to the church doorway itself. There were several among the throng who, like the young girl, were helped along by others. He passed a small, emaciated-looking boy in a wheelchair, chattering happily to his surrounding family, his eyes, large and bulging, shining with some inner exhilaration. Fenn saw the smiling sadness in the face of the boy's mother; and there was hope in her expression, too, a desperate hope. It made Fenn feel uncomfortable, as if he were voyeur into the private misery of others. Not just that, though: he was about to be a witness to their disappointment. He could sympathize with their desperation, but could not understand their gullibility. What had happened

James Herbert - The Shrine

to little Alice Pagett had been a fluke of nature, an accidental triggering off of something in her brain that had overridden other, disobedient nerves, returning senses that she had never really lost physically; these people now thought the same chance process could happen again to themselves or those in their care. It was, he had to admit, strangely moving. And he began to feel anger, for he resented having his protective wall of cynicism breached by such blatant stupidity, and that anger was turned toward the Church which nourished and encouraged such ignorance. His rancor had become seething indignation by the time they reached the porch. Inside the church it was crowded, the rows of pews full to capacity. Fenn had expected it to be so because of the activity outside, but was nevertheless surprised by the size of the congregation. And the noise, the steady murmur of whispered conversations. A peaceful silence, he had always assumed, was the prerequisite of any church when not responding to the service taking place, but it seemed today the collective tenseness was difficult to contain. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was still sixteen minutes before the start of the Mass. If they had come any later, they would never have got inside the door. Sue dipped her fingers into the font, making the Sign of the Cross in a quick, fluid movement and encouraging Ben to follow suit. The boy reached into the receptacle, but his ritual was slower, more solemn. One of the men obviously designated as ushers to control the inflowing crowd, politely gestured for the three of them to move to the left of the church toward a side aisle where those unable to find seats were standing. Fenn resisted, for he already knew from which vantage point he wished to view the proceedings. He took Sue's elbow and guided her toward the right. Caret he usher opened his mouth to protest and decided it really wasn't worth it. Sue looked at Fenn in surprise as he urged her toward the spot they had occupied on his previous

James Herbert - The Shrine

visit. There
were a few disapproving stares as they jostled their
way
through, Ben anxiously clinging to his mother's coat,
but
they reached the right-hand aisle without hindrance. She
was puzzled as Fenn stood on tiptoe, craning
his neck
toward the front of the church, then realized he was
looking
for Alice Pagett, whom he no doubt
assumed would be
sitting beneath the statue of Our Lady again. There was
no way of telling if she was there, for the aisle was
too full.
Sue noticed there were more wheel chairs alongside
the
benches and emotion swept through her, feelings aroused
in her that had been held in check for many years.
Those
emotions had been growing over the last three
weeks and
now she felt them unleashed, flowing through her and
outward, joining with others, uniting. She wasn't
sure
what these feelings were, but they had much to do with
compassion, love for others. She felt like crying and
knew
she was not alone in that feeling. There was an
anticipation
inside her that exulted yet frightened her.
Even now, she was still uncertain as to whether or not
Alice's cure had been miraculous, although she
wanted to
believe with all her heart. After years in a
spiritual
wilderness, clinging by only a thin thread to her
religion,
something had happened here at this church which had
drawn her back, the absorption
gradual at first, the link
still tenuous, until her own will had strengthened the
renewed acceptance. She had witnessed something
extraordinary,
be it caret a miracle or not, and that impression
had
rekindled her trust. And that was the feeling she shared
with so many others gathered in St. Joseph's
church. Trust. It pervaded the air like the
accompanying smell of
incense.
She hugged Ben close and tenderly touched
Perm's arm,
loving them both and wanting their love.
Fenn turned and winked and a small unpleasant
shock
made her hand drop away. The rushing compassion
coursing
through her almost stumbled to a halt, tripped by his
wink of reality. No, not her reality, but Ay.
His insensitivity,
his mocking attitude. His only reason for being
here was

James Herbert - The Shrine

because there might be a story in it, a sequel to a feature that had enhanced his journalistic reputation. She thought he had come because he loved her and wanted to please; she had persuaded him because of her feelings towards him, wanting him to share her own acceptance. That one small gesture of his had dispelled her sentiment, made her realise they were two very different people, for it had contained the destructive contempt, no matter how lightly or how humorously disguised, of the detractor, the person who would never believe--never trust--because to do so would influence their own self-seeking opportunism. At that moment--and this was why her emotions had stumbled--she despised him. He frowned as she stared at him, recognizing the sudden hostility in her eyes and confused by it. Sue averted her gaze, leaving him wondering. More people were crowding in from behind, forcing them to move further down the aisle. Fenn tried once more to see the front bench, but there were still too many heads blocking his view. His initial excitement was now beginning to fade, the waiting and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the packed church taking effect. The tension was still around him, but he no longer shared it, or at least, not its particular brand of tension; his feelings were more of sharp curiosity. He examined the faces of those sitting in the benches. were they all from the village or had word spread further afield? He recognized some, for he had spoken to them before on the day Alice had been cured. His gaze stopped on a particularly familiar face, this one seen only in half-profile, for the figure sat on the other side of the center aisle, near the front. It was Southworth, the hotel owner. Well, Mr. Southworth, it seemed he had been wrong: interest hadn't completely died away. Maybe it would after today, though. The punters were expecting too much, and they could only be disappointed. In fact, he wouldn't be at all surprised if there were some angry scenes after the service. Fenn looked for the fat man. Tucker, whom he had met with Southworth at the hotel, but he was either hidden from view or not present. A disturbance at the back of the

James Herbert - The Shrine

church drew his attention.
The doors were being closed, much to the annoyance of those still outside. Heads were turning as the dispute grew louder and a dark-suited man, wearing the unobtrusive collar of the modern-day cleric, rose from the front bench and strode purposely up the center aisle towards the source of the trouble. He was tall, well over six feet Fenn estimated, even though his shoulders were stooped, and he was painfully thin. Yet his face, with its high forehead and prominent nose, showed strength, a fact further confirmed by his vigorous stride. The priest's cheeks were sunken, his cheekbones high ridges on shadowed valleys, and his skin had a jaundiced look that betrayed a past illness; yet even that failed to detract from the strength. When he reached the end of the aisle, he raised a hand as if to gently scythe a way through the crowd gathered there, and Fenn was surprised at its size; from where the reporter stood, it looked as though the priest's fingers could easily wrap themselves around a football. It may have been an exaggeration in Fenn's mind, but the congregation back there seemed to agree, for they parted before the advancing limb like the sea heeding Moses. He followed the tall man's progress, for he was easily seen above the heads of others, and wondered who he was and why he was there. Within seconds, the priest was walking back down the aisle, the disturbance behind having settled, the doors of the church left open wide, despite the chill, and Fenn had a chance to study the man's face in more detail. His eyes were cast downwards, the lids heavy, giving the appearance of being completely closed. His jaw was firm, though not prominently so, and the upper lip slightly protruding, spoiling what otherwise would have been dauntingly strong features. His brow was furrowed in deep lines, and further wrinkles were etched sharply around his eyes, curling both upwards and downwards like the splayed ends of a wire brush. His eyebrows were

James Herbert - The Shrine

gray and
full, like his hair, shadowing his eye sockets.
His stoop
was more than fatigue or negligent posture; the
spine was
curved unnaturally, though not badly. The priest
genuflected,
then took his seat once more. Fenn had the distinct
feeling of just having witnessed a magnetic storm
in human
form. He realized, too, that the buzz of hushed
conversation had come to an abrupt halt while the
priest
was on the move. The whispers began again now that the
intimidating figure had disappeared from view.
The crowd at the rear swelled into the center
channel
and the three ushers forced their way through to form a
human barrier, preventing the overflow from filling
the
aisle completely. Fenn was intrigued by everything
that
was happening and already regretting not having followed
up his story in the ensuing weeks. Evidently an
undercurrent
of interest and speculation had developed
in the area,
culminating in today's little turnout. They wanted
to see
the trick done again. Maybe a bit more this time,
though.
We've had the triple somersault, now let's
see the quadruple.
That was why they had brought their sick along. Great
trick last time, but what's in it for me? Or,
sorry, missed
the last show--can we have a repeat?
His story, the angle, the view it would take, was
already
forming in his mind and it had much to do with gullibility,
superstition, avarice--and yes, maybe even
duplicity. The
meeting with Southworth and Tucker, whose motives
leaned
more than overtly toward exploitation, gave a good
indication
of what could be behind the spreading rumors. They
had tried to recruit him into their campaign and had
been
disappointed, but probably not discouraged. And how
culpable was the Catholic Church itself?
Just how much had
they done to dispel the story of a miracle? Or had
they
encouraged it? Fenn felt grimly satisfied:
there was the
makings of some nice investigative journalism
here. Not
enough to set the world on fire, but controversial enough
to sell a few extra copies in the southern
counties. Then he
glanced at Sue and ringers of guilt pushed at his
thoughts.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Her head was bowed, her hands clasped tightly on Ben's shoulders. She was praying silently, a small frown of concentration on her forehead. Even Ben was still, lost in his own thoughts.

Fenn was perplexed. Sue was no fool and certainly not naive as far as religion was concerned. At least, not since he had known her. So why this change? What had happened to bring her back to the Church so swiftly and with such conviction? And how would she react to the expose he was already planning? He tried to shrug off the uncomfortable guilt: perhaps his story would bring her to her senses. He hoped so, because there was no way he could back off now he'd bitten the bait.

The tinkling of a bell startled him and a general movement swept through the church as those in the congregation lucky enough to have seats stood, and those already standing came to reverential attention. A door to the left side of the altar had opened and Fenn could just see movement between the heads of those standing at the front. The organ sounded its first chords, a brief clue as to which key the hymn was to be sung in, and throats were cleared and breaths drawn in. The start of the hymn was ragged, but quickly gained a unified momentum.

The priest mounted the two steps to the altar and turned to face the congregation. Fenn was surprised and a little shocked by the change in Father Hagan's appearance. The man seemed to have aged, to have become almost bowed. His eyes had the strange luminous quality of someone who was near death through hunger, and his skin had become sallow, stretched across his cheekbones. His tongue flicked across his lips in a nervous gesture and Fenn noticed that the priest's less-than-beyes flitted around the church in swift movements as though the very size of the congregation was unsettling to him. Hagan's vestments were no longer a shield; they merely emphasized the frailty beneath them.

Fenn leaned closer to Sue to make a comment on the disturbing change in the priest, but realized she was too absorbed in the service itself to notice.

Throughout the long Mass--drearily long, to him--he studied Father Hagan, gradually becoming

James Herbert - The Shrine

aware that the man's deterioration was not as drastic as he had first supposed (or it could have been that the priest was regaining more of his previous stature as the Mass continued). It might also have been the fact that Fenn had not seen him for some time, and the sudden confrontation had heightened the aspects of change. At the sign of peace, when everybody present shook their neighbor's hand and bade them, "Peace be with you," Fenn offered his hand to Sue. She looked at him coldly before taking it and her grip had no firmness. When she released him, he held on, squeezing her palm in an effort to make some mental contact. Her eyes dropped downward and it seemed as though a shadow crossed her features. Fenn could only stare until a tiny hand tugged at his raincoat and he looked down to see Ben thrusting his hand upward, waiting to shake. "Peace be with you, Ben," Fenn whispered, glancing again at Sue. She was watching the priest at the altar. The Mass continued, and after the Eucharist Prayer, Fenn's interest switched to the congregation itself. Those wishing to receive Communion surged forward with undignified (and perhaps unholy) haste, causing a bustling bottleneck in the center aisle. Invalids in wheelchairs, others on crutches, came forward, and Fenn could not help but feel sorry for them. Their desperation was obvious and it renewed his anger to see them exploited so. There were children in the queue, none younger than seven years old, but several not far past that age. They were eager and wide-eyed, probably not understanding exactly what was going on, but caught up in the excitement of it all. A youth of seventeen or more was being led toward the altar as if he were a five-year-old, and his shuffling gait explained why. The boy was severely retarded and Fenn could see the brimming hope on his mother's face. Father Hagan's expression was one of anguish as he surveyed the long treble line of worshippers and the reporter grudgingly sympathized. He felt sure that none of it

James Herbert - The Shrine

was the priest's doing and that Hagan was just as
appalled
as he himself.
There were several nuns among the slow-moving
procession,
their heads bowed, hands clasped tightly together.
The hymn being sung reached its conclusion, the
verses
running out long before the queue, leaving only the
noise
of scuffling feet and echoing coughs. Returning
communicants
were pushing their way along side aisles to their
seats, causing those standing to crush against their
neighbors
to allow them through. A small figure suddenly
appeared
before Fenn, and the reporter winced when he saw
the boy's hands were covered in unsightly
verrucae. In the
center aisle another child, this one a boy also, was
being
carried toward the priest, his legs wrapped in a
heavy
blanket. It was the same child whom Fenn had seen
in the
wheel chair on the path leading to the church. The
boy,
coaxed by the man holding him, opened his mouth to
receive the Host and the priest's eyes were filled with
fresh
sadness.
The procession went on, a constant human stream
that
seemed to have no end, and twice there was a delay
while
Father Hagan prepared more wafers.
Finally, his reserves
were depleted and the priest was forced to announce the
fact to those still waiting.
Fenn took a grim amusement in their
disappointment as
the remains of the queue shuffled mournfully back
to their
places. It was like a bloody pub with no beer,
he told
himself.
The Mass ended soon after and the congregation looked
around at each other as if expecting more. The
priest and
his white-frocked entourage disappeared into the
sacristy,
and the sense of anticlimax was almost tangible.
Murmurs
ran around the church and heads peered toward the
right-hand
side of the altar, to the pew beneath the statue of
Our Lady. The whispers came back over the
rows of seats:
the little girl wasn't there. Alice Pagett had
not attended
Mass that morning. There were a few
audible moans, a

James Herbert - The Shrine

few muttered complaints, but because they were in the House of God, most of the congregation kept their grievances to themselves. They left the church, clearly feeling

they had been let down, but having no recourse to take

(which increased their frustration).

People were pushing against Fenn, and Sue looked up at him questioningly, ready, herself, to leave the church.

"Take Ben out with you. Sue, and I'll meet you back at

the car," he told her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked as she was jostled

from behind.

"I just want to have a few words with the priest."

"You can't go into the sacristy, Gerry." She was almost

forbidding him to.

"They gonna bum me in oil? Don't worry, I won't be

long."

Before she could protest further, he eased past her into

the advancing crowd.

It was hard going, but churchgoers were not generally arrogant as a crowd and they made way for him where they could. The benches were emptying and he used one as a channel to reach the center aisle. He stopped

briefly to

catch a closer look at the statue of the Madonna, the stone

image that had fascinated Alice Pagett so, and briefly

considered taking a quick photograph. Deciding i't might

be better to snap a few later when the church was empty--he

didn't want to upset anyone present, especially the clergy--

Fenn resumed his journey.

Once in the main aisle, the going was easier, for the crowd was more concentrated toward the church exit by now. He crossed the front of the altar, heading

for the

door at its side. Finding it slightly ajar.

He hesitated before

entering. There were voices coming from inside.

"dis . . . why, Monsignor, why do they listen to these

rumors? What have they expected--"

"Calm yourself, Father. You must behave as on any

normal Sunday by going to the door of your church and conversing with your parishioners. If you wish to discourage them from such idle wishful-thinking, then show them that everything is normal." The second voice was

deep,

commanding.

Fenn pushed open the door, deciding not to knock first.

Father Hagan's back was to him, but the other cleric, the

tall dark-suited man with the hunched shoulders, was facing the doorway. He stopped in mid sentence, staring at

the journalist over the smaller priest's shoulder. Hagan

turned and his features stiffened when he saw Fenn.

"What do you want?" he asked, the hostility evident in his voice.

Not one to be easily intimidated, Fenn stepped inside.

He smiled in pretended apology and said, "I wondered if I

could have a few words. Father."

"I'm sorry, but you're not allowed in here," the priest snapped back.

The altar servers, three boys and a man, who had been

busy removing their cassocks, stopped and looked at the

priest in surprise, his sharpness alien to his normally mild

temperament.

Fenn held his ground. "It won't take a minute."

"I want you to leave right now."

The reporter's smile dropped away as he returned the

priest's icy glare. It was the older priest, the tall one, who

quickly stepped in to break the deadlock. "I'm Monsignor

Delgard," he said. "Is there something we can help you

with?"

"He's a reporter," Hagan interrupted as Fenn began to

reply. "It's largely due to him that this fuss has been

created."

The older priest nodded and said pleasantly, "You are

Mr. Fenn? The man who found Alice in the church grounds

when this affair began? I'm very pleased to meet you, young man." He offered his huge hand, which the

reporter took cautiously. In fact, the cleric's grip was firm

but surprisingly gentle.

"I didn't mean to barge in . . ." Fenn said, and the priest

smiled at the lie.

"I'm afraid we are rather busy at the moment, Mr.

Fenn, but if we could be of some assistance later?"

"Could you tell me why you're here at St. Joseph's

today?"

"Merely to assist Father Hagan. And to observe,

of

course."

"Observe what, exactly?"

"You saw how many people attended Mass today. It would be silly for the church to pretend the congregation has not placed some special significance on this particular Sunday."

"But have you, Monsignor?" The tape recorder in Fenn's pocket was running, flicked on by his thumb.

The priest hesitated, but he was still smiling.

"Let me

just say we did not expect any phenomenon to occur. We

are more concerned with our parishioners--"

"There's more than parishioners outside," Fenn broke

in. "I'd say they've come from a larger area than Banfield."

"Yes, I'm sure that's the case," Hagan said coldly, "but

that's because your newspaper ran a grossly exaggerated

story which played on the public's susceptibility."

"I only reported what happened," Fenn retorted.

"With some of your own speculation. And I might add,

speculation that barely hid the cynicism behind it."

"I'm not a Catholic, Father. You can't expect --"

"Please." Monsignor Delgard stood firmly between the

two protagonists, his big hands held at chest level as if to

hold back their remarks. His voice was not raised, its tones

barely hardened, but it was a voice to take notice of. "I'm

sure this discussion should continue--you must have your questions answered, Mr. Fenn, and you, Father, may benefit from listening to a more objective view of this whole affair--but now is neither the time nor the place. I

suggest you leave, Mr. Fenn, and return some time later

today."

It was hardly a suggestion, more of a command, and one which the reporter reluctantly decided to obey.

It would

be better for the sake of his story to have Hagan's cooperation

rather than his antagonism, and their conversation at this point was going nowhere useful. However, always one to turn a situation to his advantage, no matter how small,

Fenn said, "If I come back this evening, will you give me

an hour of your time?"

Father Hagan opened his mouth to protest, but Monsignor

James Herbert - The Shrine

Delgard spoke quickly. "As long as you like,
Mr. Fenn. We won't restrict your time,"
Fenn was taken aback. He'd expected half
an hour,
maybe twenty minutes. "It's a deal, I he
said with a grin,
then pulled open the door.
The church was almost empty and it seemed much
darker. He realized that the rainclouds
had become heavier,
the light outside shining through the stained-glass
windows
poor and diffused, having no thrust. He closed
the
sacristy door and crossed the front of the altar
toward the
statue of the Madonna. The pupilless eyes of the
white
statue gazed sightlessly down on him, its stone
lips bearing
the slightest traces of a benevolent smile. The
sculptured
hands stretched downward, palms outward, symbol
of the
Madonna's acceptance of all who stood before
her.
It was just a block of stone to Fenn, a skillful
effigy but
one that had no meaning for him. The blank eyes were
disturbing because they were blind; the look of compassion
was meaningless because it was handmade, not heartfelt.
He narrowed his eyes. And the statue was flawed.
There
was just the faintest hairline crack
barely visible in the
poor light, running from beneath the chin down one side
of the neck. Nobody's perfect, he silently
told the Madonna.
He was reaching inside his raincoat pocket for the
camera,
having decided it was as good an opportunity as
any to
photograph the statue, when running footsteps
made him
turn. A young boy of fifteen or sixteen was
hurrying down
the center aisle, making for the altar. He did not
seem to
notice Fenn as he swung around the front bench
and
headed for the sacristy door. He thumped against the
door
with the flat of his hand, then burst in.
Fenn quickly hurried over and was just in time to hear
the youth breathlessly say, "It's Alice
Pagett, Father. She's
here."
"But I instructed her mother to keep her away
today,"
came Father Hagan's voice.
"But she's here. Father. In the field, by the tree!
And

everybody's following her. They're all going into the field!"
"The Magic is in me--the Magic is in me. It's in every one of us."
The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett
when FENN ENTERED THE SACRISTY, he caught just a glimpse of the two priests and the boy departing through another door leading to the outside. The altar boys and the older altar server were still too surprised to move. The reporter ran through the room, following the three who had just left. Outside, he found himself in the section of graveyard at the back of St. Joseph's; the two priests and the youth were hurrying along a narrow path between the graves toward the low wall dividing the church grounds and the field beyond. He hurried to catch up, the eager gleam back in his eyes. He veered off when he saw that the wall was crowded with people, many of whom were anxious to see into the field, but reluctant, for reasons of their own, to enter it. A section of wall toward the corner of the graveyard was clear, and it was this he made for. The two priests were trying to push through the jostling onlookers, but were having difficulty in reaching the wall. Fenn scuffed the top of a molehill with his shoe as he raced toward his chosen spot. The grass was damp and slippery and twice his feet nearly slid from under him. He was soon at the wall, leaning over it, catching his breath. Then he was on the wall, balancing on its rough, uneven top, fumbling for the camera in his pocket, fingers" trembling. Alice, wearing a blue plastic raincoat, was standing before the tree, staring up at its twisted branches, the light rain spattering against her upturned face. The clouds were dark and heavy, their full load having not yet been shed; the horizon was silvery white in contrast. The others stood farther back from the girl as though afraid to approach her, afraid to go too near the oak. They stood in small groups, silent, watching. More were climbing over the wall,

James Herbert - The Shrine

cautiously
moving forward, but never beyond the groups
behind the girl. Fenn saw the crippled boy, the
one who had
received Holy Communion earlier, being lifted
over
the wall, then carried through the waiting people toward
the little girl. Just five yards from her, his father
knelt and
gently laid the boy on the ground, adjusting the
blanket
around the frail body to keep out the dampness.
A young girl was led forward and Fenn recognized
her
from her clothes: she was the same girl he'd made
way for
at the church gate, the one suffering from chorea.
Others were pushing their way through, bringing children
with them or supporting adults. Soon the groups
were less obvious as the space around them filled,
and the
sick were laid on the grass, no one caring about the
ground's
wetness or the chill in the air,
Fenn estimated there had to be at least three
hundred
people present, many now in the field itself, the rest still
nervously lingering behind the wall as though it were a
shield. All were hushed.
He could feel the tension and almost wanted to shout
against it. It was building, passing from person
to person,
group to group, a rising hysteria that would reach a
peak before breaking. He shivered, for it was
uncanny, eerie. He focused the camera, trying
to keep his hands steady.
His vantage point on the wall gave him a good
overall view
and he hoped he had chosen the correct aperture
for the
dim light. The Olympus had a built-in
flash unit, but he
was reluctant to use it: he felt that the sudden
light might
somehow upset the mood of the crowd, might break the
spell they appeared to be under. Spell? Get a
hold of
yourself, Fenn. It was no more than the atmosphere
cre-
ated at football matches or pop concerts.
Just quieter, that
was all, and that was what made it so spooky.
He clicked the button, first photographing
Alice and the
tree. Then her and the crowd behind. The people at the
wall next... Good shot, you could see the
apprehension on
their faces. And something more. Fear. Fear yet. .
. Longing.
Christ, they were yearning for something to happen.
He saw the two priests climbing over and took
a quick
shot. The picture could be great when blown up and

James Herbert - The Shrine

cropped in around Father Hagan's head, for he had rarely seen such an expression of pure anguish on another man's face before. The priests moved through the gathering, but even they did not go beyond the fringe of people forming a ragged semicircle around the girl. Fenn jumped to the ground and made his own way toward the oak tree, approaching from the side, affording himself a good view of what was taking place. His shoes and the ends of his trouser legs were soaked by the time he reached the edge of the crowd, yet he did not feel the discomfort. He, like the others, was too fascinated by the diminutive figure standing perfectly still, gazing up at the tree. From his position he could see Alice's profile and her expression was one of sheer happiness. Many of the children were smiling too, their joy not altogether shared by the adults with them, although even they were not showing the same fearful apprehension of moments earlier. At least, those nearest the girl were not. Fenn caught sight of Alice's mother kneeling close to the group who had brought the crippled boy into the field and wasn't sure if it was just rain on her face or if she was crying. Her eyes were closed and her hands were gripped tightly together in a gesture of prayer. The scarf she wore had fallen back onto her shoulders and her hair hung damply over her forehead. Silent words formed on her lips. And then everything became unnaturally still. Only the falling rain convinced Fenn that the world had not ground to a stop. There were not even any sounds. No birds, no bleating of sheep on the far side of the field, no traffic noise from the nearby road. A vacuum. Until the breeze ruffled the grass. Fenn shivered, for the sudden draft of air was more chilly than the drizzle. He pulled his raincoat collar tight around his neck and nervously looked around, the feeling of some unseen presence unreasonably strong. There was nothing there, of course, just the field and its bordering hedge. To his left was the crowd, the wall, the church; to

his right the tree . . . the tree. . . . Beyond .
. . the tree . . .
He could not focus beyond the tree.
The wind--for it was no longer a breeze--was
rustling
through the bare branches, stirring the deformed limbs,
making them sway as though they were slumbering
tentacles
suddenly come to life. The rustling became a low
howling as the grotesque limbs shifted.
The onlookers' clothes were whipped by the wind and
they clung to each other or held up their arms
against it.
Several began to back away, plainly frightened,
while
others stood their ground, also afraid yet
curious--and for
some, desperate--enough to stay. Many dropped to their
knees and bowed their heads.
Strangely, Fenn felt his own legs grow weak
and it
became an effort to keep himself erect. He saw
F'ather
Hagan begin to stumble forward in an attempt
to reach the
girl, but the other priest caught his arm and held
him
back. Words passed between the two clerics, but they
were too far away and the wind was too loud for the
reporter to hear. He lurched, feeling as though
something
had pushed him from behind. He could feel muscles in
back stiffening and his windblown hair had become
brittle.
But it passed. The low howling ceased, the wind
died.
The rain continued its drizzle, no longer blown
off course.
The people looked relieved, several blessing themselves.
They looked around at their neighbors, each
seeking comfort
from the presence of others, turning to their parish
priest for reassurance. Father Hagan could offer
none. His
skin looked even more pallid as he stared at
Alice Pagett.
Her arms were stretched out toward the now-still oak
and she was speaking, although no one present could catch
the words. She was laughing too, joy almost
visibly radiating
from her small body. Yet there was nothing at the
tree,
no form, no movement, nothing at all. A gasp
ran through
the onlookers, a gasp that became a moan.
Alice's feet were no longer on the ground. She
hovered
two or three inches above the tallest blade of
grass.
Fenn blinked, not believing what he was seeing. It
just
wasn't possible. Levitation was just a trick

James Herbert - The Shrine

performed by
conjurers under contrived conditions. But there were no
such conditions here, just an open field. And no
conjurer,
just an eleven-year-old girl. Jesus Christ,
what was going
on?
He felt an electricity running through him, a
sharp,
tingling flush that somehow jumped from his body to
others, linking them all in a binding blanket of
static. He
was mesmerized by the girl, not sure if he were
hallucinating,
still refusing to accept the evidence before his eyes.
Vaguely, somewhere in the more sane region of his
mind,
he was reminded of the camera in his pocket, but he
could
not find the strength nor, more important,
the desire, to
reach for it. He shook his head, partly to clear it,
partly to
feel some physical sensation. The dream, the
hallucination,
the telepathic illusion, was still there in front of
him,
refusing to obey that part of his brain that insisted it was
all unreal. Alice Pagett was standing above the
ground and
the grass was gently swaying beneath the soles of her
feet.
Minutes passed and nobody dared move or
speak. There
was an aura around Alice that, although it could not be
seen, could be felt. A radiance that, if it were
visible,
would be brilliantly white, golden-hued at its
periphery.
Her position did not fluctuate: she neither
rose nor
descended. And her body was immobile, arms still
outstretched,
only her lips moving.
Not many of those gathered there remained standing.
Fenn's legs began to give way completely and
it was not
reverence for what was taking place that caused him to
sink to the ground. It was weakness, a peculiar
tiredness
that assailed him; it was as though his body were being
drained of energy. He felt so numb, so cold.
He crouched on one knee, a hand resting on the
earth to
keep himself balanced. The priests were still standing,
although the monsignor had Father Hagan's arm
tightly
gripped as if supporting him. They appeared
confused,
bewildered by the incredible spectacle, and Fenn
thought
with some grim satisfaction, they too now looked
afraid.

James Herbert - The Shrine

He turned his head to look at Alice once more
and saw
that she was sinking, slowly, slowly descending,
grass
blades bending beneath her feet, a pliant
cushion before
she touched earth. She was down and she
turned to look at
her audience, a rapturous smile on her
face.
At which point the miracles began.
A tiny boy ran forward, his outstretched hands a
mass of
gray-black lumps. He fell at Alice's
feet, holding his hands
aloft so that those watching from behind could see their
ugliness. His tearful mother tried to join him, but her
husband held her back, not knowing what was going to
happen, just praying that it would be good for his son.
The girl smiled down at the boy and the blackish
verrucae,
with their edges of gray, began to fade.
The mother screamed and broke free, rushing to her
son
and hugging him close, tears streaming from her eyes
to mingle with the rain in the boy's hair.
A cry from the crowd and all eyes turned in the
direction
of the teenage girl whose facial muscles could not
be
controlled, whose limbs twitched spasmodically and
incessantly.
She had been kneeling with her family group, but
now was on her feet, her expression serene.
Although she
moved cautiously, there was no trembling, no
twitching;
she stared down at herself, examining her hands, her
legs.
The girl came forward, slowly but surely, her
chest beginning
to heave with her joy. She knelt at the feet of
Alice
Pagett and wept.
A man stumbled forward, pushing through the kneeling
people, his eyes clouded with cataracts. They cleared
a
path for him, guiding him forward with gentle
pressure on
his arms, urging him on, praying for him.
He fell before he reached the girl and lay sobbing,
his
face wretched with longing. The opacity in his eyes
began
to clear. For the first time in five years he began
to see
color. He began to see shapes. He
began to see the world
again, only his tears now blurring his vision.
A young girl, who attended the same hospital
as Alice
and whose parents had been given new hope ever
since the

James Herbert - The Shrine

latter's sudden cure, asked her mother why the man
on the
ground was crying. The words were not too clear, but the
girl's mother understood them. To her they were the most
beautifully formed words she had ever heard, for her
daughter had not spoken in all the seven years of
her short
life.

Many in the crowd were collapsing, sprawling on the
ground, or falling against those nearest to them, like
marionettes

whose strings had been cut. Fenn was forced to sit,
his supporting knee giving way. His eyes were
wild, looking

from the girl to the crowd, the girl to the crowd, the
girl ... to the tree

Another cry, becoming a wail, from among the
rain-soaked
people. A woman's moan of anguish.

Fenn's eyes scanned the crouched bodies and
came to

rest on the blanket-wrapped bundle lying on
the fringe of

the semicircle. The boy was sitting upright; his
eyes shining

with some newfound understanding. He pushed the
blanket aside and hands reached to help him. He
didn't

need their help, though. He was rising, his
movements

stiffly awkward like a newborn lamb's. He was
on his feet

and the hands steadied him. He moved forward,
ill-balanced

but coping, staggering and eager to reach the girl. His
father and another man quickly stood beside him, taking
his arms. He walked, using the adults for

support, but the
motion coming from his own legs. They helped him forward
and it was not until he was within touching distance
of Alice Paggett that he allowed himself to sink

to the
ground. He half-sat half-lay there, his
knees together, thin

legs almost hidden in the grass, his upper body
upright,

his father holding on to his shoulders.

They gazed at the girl with adoration on their
faces.

Fenn was stunned. His strength was returning although
he did not yet feel steady enough to stand. Jesus
Christ,

what happened here? It just wasn't possible!

He looked toward the two priests, one dressed
totally in

black, the other in the robes of the Sunday
service, green

and yellow, white beneath. Father Hagan had already
fallen to his knees, and the tall priest, the

monsignor, was

slowly collapsing beside him. Fenn could not be sure
if

r

James Herbert - The Shrine

Let
they were suffering the same debilitating weakness that
had assailed his own body or if their gesture was
one of
homage. Father Hagan bowed his head into his hands
rocked backward and forward. Monsignor
Delgard could
only stare wide-eyed at the girl standing in the
field, her
small body so vulnerable beneath the black twisted
tree
that towered over her.
"She's as tender and sweet as a fat little lamb.
Yum, yum! She'll
make a tasty dinner!" She drew out a bright
sharp knife, which
glittered quite dreadfully.
"The Snow Queen," Hans Christian Andersen
riordan WEARILY SHOOK HIS HEAD. It
made no sense.
In his thirty-eight years as a farmer, nothing like
this had
ever happened before. Not to his livestock. He
motioned
the lorry to back farther into the field, then nodded
to his
farm laborers to get busy with their shovels.
The vet came over and stood by him, saying nothing,
his face haggard. The call from Riordan had come
in the
early hours of the morning, and when he, the vet, had
arrived, he knew there was only so much he could do.
Even those he had cut from their mother's stomachs, those
he believed were well-formed enough to cope with
premature
birth, had not survived. It was inexplicable.
Why
should it happen to all of them at the same time? There
had been a disturbance in the field the day before--an
incredible event, from all the confused accounts he had
heard--but the pregnant sheep had been far away
from it
all, in a different section of the field. He
sighed and wiped
a hand over his tired eyes as the laborers
scooped up the
tiny glistening corpses on the shovels and tossed
them into
the back of the lorry. The sheep, the mothers the vet
had
not been able to save, were picked up by stiffened legs
and
swung onto the waiting vehicle.
Riordan looked at the gray church in the distance
wondered how people could worship such an ill-natured
God. P'anning was a hard life: you expected
failures,
misshaps--even tragedies. Crops could be
ruined, animals
could, and always did, have accidents or illnesses from
which they perished. It happened to farm workers, too.

James Herbert - The Shrine

But you never expected, could never be prepared for,
something like this. There was just no sense to it.
He turned his back on the field and watched the
heavily
laden lorry pull away.
"I wonder if I've changed in the night?
Let me think: was I
the same when I got up this morning? I almost
think I can
remember feeling a little different. But if I'm
not the same,
the question is. Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the
great
puzzle!"
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis
Carroll
"When I used to read fairy-tales, I
fancied that kind of thing
never happened, and now here I am in the middle of
one!"
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis
Carroll
"good LORD, ARE YOU UNWELL, Andrew?"
Bishop Caines stared at the priest, shocked by the
change
in the man. He had looked ill when the bishop
had spoken
to him just a few weeks before, but now his physical
appearance had deteriorated alarmingly. Bishop
Caines
moved forward and took the priest's hand, then
indicated
toward an armchair opposite his desk. He
looked questioningly
at Monsignor Delgard, but the tall
priest's expression
remained impassive.
"I think perhaps a small brandy might do you some
good."
"No, no, I'm fine, really," Father Hagan
protested.
"Nonsense. It'll give you back some color.
Peter, the
same for you?"
Delgard shook his head. "Perhaps some tea?" he
said,
looking directly at the bishop's secretary,
who had shown
them into the study.
"Yes, of course," said Bishop Caines,
returning to his
seat behind the desk. "Both for me, I think,
Judith. I may
need it." He smiled at his secretary and she
left the room.
The smile dropped as soon as the door closed.
"I'm extremely disturbed, gentlemen. I would
have preferred
that you came to me yesterday."
Monsignor Delgard had walked to the study's
leaded
window overlooking the secluded garden. The weak,
late-February

James Herbert - The Shrine

sunlight settled into the far side of the neat, partly shadowed lawn, unable to draw the moisture from it, sparkling off the dew. It had rained heavily during the night and throughout the preceding afternoon; the sun had

looked as though it were still recovering from the soaking. He turned toward the portly bishop.

"I'm afraid that was not possible." His voice was low,

but the words filled the dark, wood-paneled study. "We

couldn't leave the church. Bishop, not after what had taken place. There was too much hysteria."

Bishop Caines said nothing. He had assigned

Monsignor

Delgard to watch over the younger priest and his church,

to control any situation that might arise over this girl and

her apparitions; his role was to observe, influence, and

report. Peter Delgard was a priest not unused to incidents

of the alleged paranormal or supernatural, his reputation

for bringing sanity to insane situations renowned in ecclesiastical circles. He was a quiet,

remote man, sometimes

intimidating in his intensity; yet one knew instantly

that he was a man of compassion, someone who shared the suffering of others as if the burden were his own. His

authoritative quietness did little to reveal this side of his nature, but it was present in his aura as clearly as it must

have been in Christ's. The bishop trusted

Monsignor

Delgard, respected his judgment, acknowledged his wisdom

in matters that were often too bizarre for his own sensibilities to accept, and he was a little

afraid of the tall priest.

Delgard was looking out of the window again. "I thought, too, that Father Hagan needed some rest," he said.

Bishop Caines studied the priest in the armchair. Yes,

he could see that: Father Hagan looked as though the shock had been too much. His flesh was grayer

than the

last time; his eyes were dark, a look of desperation in

them.

"Father, you look drained. Is it because of what happened

yesterday?" he asked.

"I don't know, Bishop," the priest answered, his voice

almost a whisper. "I haven't been sleeping too well over

the past few weeks. Last night I hardly slept at all."

"I'm not surprised. But there's no need for it

to cause
you such anxiety. Indeed, there may be much
to celebrate." The bishop became aware of Delgard watching
him.
"Don't you agree, Peter his
A brooding silence, then, "It's too soon
to know." The
monsignor's stoop seemed more pronounced as he
slowly
strode from the window and sat in the study's other
armchair. He regarded Bishop Caines with
eyes that saw
too much. "What took place is quite
inexplicable, beyond
anything I've ever witnessed before. Five people were
cured. Bishop, four of them no more than
children. It's
somewhat early to say how complete were their cures,
but
as from two hours ago, when I checked with each
one,
there had been no relapses."
"Of course, we cannot accept these cures as
miraculous
until the medical authorities have made a
thorough
examination of those involved," Bishop Caines
said, and
there was a carefully subdued eagerness in his tone.
"It will be a long time before the Church can even
accept them as cures, let alone
'miraculous,'" was Delgard
replied. "The procedure before such a proclamation
is
made is lengthy, to say the least."
"Quite so," the bishop agreed. "And properly so."
He
found Delgard's stare disconcerting. "I managed
to reach
the cardinal archbishop last night after you
telephoned me.
He has reiterated my own feelings that we must
tread
warily: he has no desire for the Roman
Catholic Church in
England to look foolish. He wants a full
report before
anything is announced to the media, and any
statements
must come directly from his offices."
Hagan was shaking his head. "I'm afraid it's
beyond our
control. Bishop. The reporter, Gerry Fenn,
was there
again yesterday. We haven't yet seen the early
edition of
the Courier, but you can be sure the event will receive
full
coverage."
"He was there? Good Lord, the man's intuition must
be
incredible."

"I think not," Delgard put in. "Apparently the rumor that Alice was to receive another "visitation" was spread around Banfield Long before Sunday."
"I forbade her mother to bring her," Hagan said just as the door opened and Judith entered with a tray of drinks.
"I think that was unwise." Bishop Caines nodded for his secretary to leave the tray on a small table at the side of the room. He waited for her to leave before he spoke again.
"Most unwise. You cannot forbid people to come to church, Father."
"I thought it best that Alice stay away for a while."
"Best for whom?"
"For Alice, of course."
Delgard cleared his throat. "I think Father Hagan was concerned over the traumatic effect the child's obsession was having on her."
"Yes, that was one reason. The other is that I don't want St. Joseph's turned into a fairground!" His voice had become strained, almost strident, and his two colleagues looked at him in surprise. Delgard appraised him with troubled eyes.
Bishop Caines rose with an audible sigh and went to the tray of drinks. He handed the brandy to the pale priest.
"It's a little early for this kind of beverage, I know, but it will do you good, Andrew." He noticed the priest's hand was trembling as he took the drink and quickly looked across at Delgard. The monsignor's face was impassive, although he, too, was watching Father Hagan.
Bishop Caines turned back to the small side table. "No sugar for you, Peter? No, I remember." He gave the tea to Delgard, then placed his own and the brandy on the desk.
"Tell me more about this reporter," he said as he took his seat once again. "Just how much did he see?"
Hagan sipped his drink, hating the taste and the burning it caused to his throat. "He saw everything. He was there from the beginning."
"Well, no matter. The news would have soon

got out.

What we must consider now is how we should proceed.

Where is the girl, this Alice Pagett?"

Delgard spoke. "I thought it best that she and her mother should move into the convent in the village for a few days;

there she cannot be bothered by the press."

"Her mother agreed?"

"She's a devout Catholic and willing to follow our

guidance. Her husband, I'm afraid, is another matter. I

doubt he'll let us keep Alice there for long."

"He's not Catholic?"

Father Hagan managed to smile. "Most definitely not.

An atheist."

"Hmm, that's a pity."

Delgard wondered at the meaning behind the bishop's remark: was it a pity that the man did not believe in God,

or that as a non-Catholic he could not be so easily manipulated

by the Church? Delgard did not enjoy having such suspicions about Bishop Caines' motives, but he knew the

man was ambitious. Even men of the cloth were not without

that stain.

"I think perhaps I should see the child and her mother," the bishop said, sipping his brandy thoughtfully. "If Alice

really has been blessed, there could be certain consequences

to the Church in England."

"An upsurge of religious fervor?"

Delgard said bluntly.

"A return to the faith for thousands,"

replied the bishop.

Father Hagan looked quickly from one man to the other.

"You mean St. Joseph's could become a shrine?"

"Surely you realized that?" said Bishop Caines. "If this

girl really did have a vision of the Blessed Virgin, then

pilgrimages will be made from all over the world to worship

at the place of the visitation. It would be a most wonderful thing."

"Yes, it would," said Delgard. "But as I said earlier,

there is a long and extremely thorough process to be gone

through before any such declaration can be made."

"I'm well aware of that, Peter. The first thing I must do

is bring forward the Conference of Bishops and place all

the information we have before them. I shall ask for the

apostolic delegate to be present so that the matter can be brought to the Pope's attention without delay and perhaps discussed at the next Synod in Rome."

"With due respect, Bishop, I feel we may be moving too fast," said Hagan, clenching his brandy glass tightly. "We have no proof at all that Alice really saw Our Lady, or that the cures were miraculous."

"That is what has to be ascertained," the bishop quickly replied. "Whether we like it or not, the news will spread rapidly. I dread to think of the sensation this man, Fenn, will make of it. Five cures, Andrew, five. Six counting Alice Pagett's own recovery. Do you not realize the excitement it will cause, not just among Catholics but in the hearts of all people who believe in the Divine Power?"

Whether or not St. Joseph's rs declared a holy shrine will be quite irrelevant; people will flock to the site in thousands out of sheer curiosity. That is why the Catholic Church must control the situation from the beginning."

Father Hagan seemed to shrink into himself, but the bishop would not relent. "There are many precedents," he continued, "the most famous being Lourdes. There was tremendous resistance by the Church authorities in accepting that Bernadette Soubirous had truly seen the Immaculate Conception, and it wasn't just the overwhelming evidence of miraculous cures and Bernadette's obvious integrity that influenced their final judgment: it was public opinion itself. The Church could not disregard the situation because the people--and they were not just local people--would not allow it. Do you realize how many thousands flock to the shrine to Our Lady in Aylesford each year? And there is no evidence at all that an apparition of the Virgin Mary appeared there. In fact, the Church authorities do not even suggest it. Yet pilgrims visit every year from all over the world. The same applies to the other shrine at Walsingham. If people want to believe, then no edict from the Church will persuade them otherwise."

"Are you saying we should acknowledge Alice's story?"

asked Hagan.

"Absolutely not. The whole matter will be carefully looked into before any official statement is made.

What I am saying is that we must act swiftly to govern whatever

else happens at St. Joseph's. Don't you agree, Peter?" He

glanced at the tall priest, whose eyes were downcast.

He spoke slowly, his words measured. "I agree that the

situation will develop of its own accord. We have already

had experience of that with the large crowd that gathered at the church yesterday. Even this morning, before the news has broken in the press, and on a working day, there

was a large gathering. In a way, it's a relief to be here

away from them. Nevertheless, I feel we must not yet

offer any encouragement."

"No, no, of course not."

"We must first interview each one of the persons apparently

cured yesterday. Their individual doctors must also

be approached for permission to examine their medical records. I think we will easily gain permission from the

patients themselves, so the doctors in question should have no objection. I propose the immediate formation of a medical

commission, one that is independent of the Catholic Church, which can investigate fully the medical histories

of these six fortunate people--I include Alice, of course.

With the enormous interest that will generate from yesterday's

spectacular"--a wry smile--"I see no problem in that

respect. Indeed, I imagine an inquiry would be instigated

without our bidding."

Bishop Caines nodded and avoided looking directly into

the monsignor's penetrating eyes.

"Also," Delgard went on, "if we are to follow the example

of Lourdes, I feel we must consider organizing our

own medical bureau on the site of the shrine."

Bishop Caines could no longer contain his eagerness.

"Yes, that would be sensible. So many alleged miracles

have been dismissed in the past because of lack of scientific

or medical data."

"We must be fully aware, Bishop, that therein

lies the danger to the Church itself. It could leave us open to ridicule if logical and sound reasons are found for what happened. At this very moment one of the Catholic Church's greatest mysteries may well be explained away by science, and the beliefs of millions will suffer because of it."

"You mean the Shroud?"

"Yes, the Turin Shroud. Thermographic investigation, infrared spectroscopy, radiography, electronic microscopy, and chemical analysis--all these scientific means have been used to prove or disprove that the image on the length of linen discovered in 1356 is that of Christ. As yet, nothing conclusive has emerged from any of those tests. Needless to say, the Church is regarded with some suspicion for not allowing a further vital--according to the scientists--test. I refer to carbon dating."

"But that would require destroying a fairly large section of cloth," Bishop Caines protested. "We could never allow that."

"Methods of testing have been considerably improved since permission was last sought. No more than twenty-five mg. of material would be needed. Yet still we say "no" and the public wonders just what it is that we're afraid of."

"All the more reason we should not suppress our findings on this matter. I think we have nothing to fear, although I'm in full agreement about proceeding cautiously."

"I ... I think we're making a grave mistake."

The two clerics turned toward Father Hagan. He was leaning forward in his seat, hands clasped tightly together. Bishop Caines was alarmed at the distress on the priest's face. "Why do you say that, Andrew? What is it that's troubling you?"

The priest rubbed a hand against his temple. "It's just a feeling. Bishop. I don't know why, or what it is, but I feel things are not right. There's an atmosphere about the church ..."

James Herbert - The Shrine

"Do you feel this . . . this atmosphere, Peter?" the bishop asked.
Delgard paused before answering. "No, I'm afraid I don't. At least not the kind that Father Hagan is evidently referring to. Yesterday there was a tension in the air that was almost tangible, but it was caused by the congregation itself. I've experienced mass hysteria before, but cannot positively say it was the same. I'm sure scientists will theorize on mass hypnosis, collective hysteria, mass suggestion, and they may well prove to be correct. I know I fell to my knees to worship what was before me."
"The child"
"What she represented. Or appeared to represent."
"Then you felt her holiness?"
"I can't be sure. A weakness seemed to overcome the whole crowd, not just Father Hagan and myself, but I just cannot remember my emotions. I can only remember the weakness, the incredibility of what had just taken place.
Perhaps a psychologist could explain the phenomenon. Or a parapsychologist."
"I meant the atmosphere at St. Joseph's," said Father Hagan quietly. "It feels so cold."
The bishop gave a little laugh. "It is winter, you know.
The church is bound to feel cold."
"No, it's not just a physical coldness. And it isn't confined to just the church; it's in the grounds, in the presbytery."
"You appeared to be under some strain the last time I saw you, Andrew," Bishop Caines said not unkindly. "It was one of the reasons I asked Monsignor Delgard to help you--that, and because of his experience in such extraordinary matters. Frankly, your health seems to have suffered considerably since last we met. Are you sure your general disposition does not account for these strange feelings you have?"
"I'm sure. I admit I haven't been in the best of health lately, but I think that, in itself, may be due to present

circumstances."
"I don't see how, unless it's the publicity
that's upsetting
you. If that is the case--"
"No!"
The bishop blinked in surprise.
"I'm sorry, Bishop," the priest
apologized. "I didn't
mean to raise my voice. Please forgive me.
But there is
something more, something happening that I don't understand."
"We are all aware of that, Father," said Bishop
Caines,
keeping the irritation from his voice.
"I don't just mean with Alice Pagett. There
is something
more ..."
"Yes, yes, you have already said that. Can you explain
exactly what you mean?"
The priest slumped back in his seat and closed his
eyes.
"I wish I knew," he said after a while.
"Then I think it best--" A gentle rapping on
the door
interrupted his words.
"Yes, Judith?" the bishop called
out.
The secretary peered around the door. "A call
from
London, Bishop. It's the Daily Mail,
I'm afraid. They say
they would like a statement from you on the incident at
St. Joseph's in Banfield yesterday."
"Well, gentlemen," the bishop said, "it seems
the story
has broken nationally. Put the call through, my
dear, then
contact His Eminence for me when I've finished."
He lifted the receiver and Delgard was not sure if
his
smile was one of resignation or anticipation. As
the bishop
began to speak, Delgard noticed that Father
Hagan's hands
were clenched around the arms of his chair. Clenched so
tightly that the knuckles showed gleaming white through
the pallid skin.
"I can't explain myself. I'm afraid, sir,"
said Alice, "because I'm
not myself, you see."
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,
Lewis Carroll
Tuesday, midmorning
SOUTHWORTH SMILED AS HE Poured himself
a sherry. He filled the glass almost to the top.
Normally a half-glass
was adequate, a private midmorning treat he
occasionally
allowed himself, but today there was something to celebrate.
An emergency meeting of the parish council had
been
called the previous evening because of the new
"Banfield

Miracles," the astonishing cures that had taken place at St. Joseph's on Sunday. And not just cures: many claimed they had seen Alice Pagett levitate. Southworth, who had also been there, wasn't certain of that aspect, for his view had been somewhat restricted by those in front of him, but he was ready to believe almost anything after the breathtaking cures. The child's levitation could have been imagined, such was the intense feeling running through the crowd, but there was no imagining the healing of the invalids. Even now, even though he was an eyewitness, it was difficult to accept. Fortunately, there was no question of fraudulence. The five who had been cured had genuine illnesses, all confirmed by their own doctors, and further guaranteed by the medical records from the hospitals they had attended. Those illnesses and debilities had disappeared completely in all but two cases: the man whose cataracts had cleared still did not have perfect vision, although the morning report was that his sight was steadily improving; the crippled boy still had difficulty in walking unassisted, but this could hardly be otherwise with his wasted leg muscles-- his condition was expected to improve as his legs grew stronger. Southworth sipped the dry sherry and glanced over the newspapers spread before him on his desk. The story was now worldwide news. Banfield was literally crawling with media people. Press, television, magazines-- all wanted the story. The village was bustling in a way it never had before, nor had ever expected to. It was alive! The residents were bewildered, but the world knew of their existence! And they, the villagers, were responding to the sudden attention. Not just responding, but thriving on it! Of course, there were those who found the publicity unwelcome, those who preferred their cosy, stagnating privacy, but they were in the minority. An indication of the high excitement generating through Banfield was conveyed at the council meeting on Monday evening. Never had he seen his fellow members so

active! And so willing
to listen to plans of expansion.
There was no question but that St. Joseph's would
become a shrine after last night's news
broadcast and this
morning's headlines, even if the Catholic
Church refused
to proclaim it as such. The publicity alone would
undoubtedly
attract pilgrims, tourists and
thrill-seekers to the area
in their thousands (one councillor, the manager of
one of
Banfield's two national banks, was carried
away with the
whole idea enough to estimate the number in
millions, a
reckoning that drew guffaws from his fellow
members,
although secretly not entirely rejected by them).
Southworth
ventured that the Church would be forced into making
concessions and might even relish the situation.
What more
could any religion ask for than a
present-day miracle to
perpetuate the faith? He knew the bishop of the
diocese,
Bishop Caines, personally, and would arrange for a
meeting
to discuss recent events. He would also broach the
subject of how they could combine forces to meet the
human deluge that must surely descend upon the
area.
Southworth had spoken with the bishop that morning
and had been surprised at the eminent cleric's
general
receptiveness to the council's proposition.
Yes, he understood
absolutely the need for agreement between the parish
council and the Church in the coming months, and he
would endeavor to cooperate fully with any plans
put
forward by them provided they did not entail cheap
exploitation
or pertain to any activities which would infringe on
the dignity of the Catholic Church itself.
Southworth was
more than pleased with the statement, albeit somewhat
pompous, and assured Bishop Caines
that the council had
no intention of commercializing what must be considered
a
most holy event. The bishop warned him without
hesitation
that it could not yet, and perhaps never would, be
proclaimed a "holy" event. Indeed, the whole
matter would
require lengthy examination to determine the
validity of
Alice Pagett's vision and the cures that had
ensued within
a religious context. His Eminence, the cardinal

archbishop,
had expressed deep concern and urged caution.
Bishop Caines went on to suggest that a meeting
between
members of the council, Monsignor Delgard,
whom
the bishop had appointed overseer at St.
Joseph's, and
Father Hagan might prove fruitful at this
early stage.
They would report back to him and he in turn would
report to the Conference of Bishops.
Southworth had thought that to be an excellent
idea. In
fact, he would stage two meetings: one informal,
between
him and the two clergymen in which he could appraise
their attitudes (and perhaps he would invite the
reporter,
Fenn, along too); another, larger meeting
involving the rest
of the council. In that way he could smooth the path
first--certain colleagues on the council were a little
too
earnest with their ideas. Like Rodney Tucker, they
were
non-Catholics and inclined to forget the
sensitivities of the
religious. Most of the councillors were long-standing
members
of the community, their family histories, as did
his,
tracing back through the centuries to the beginnings of the
village itself, somewhere in the fourteenth century.
It had
been known as Banefeld then, a community formed
by
those who had fled the horrors of the Black Death,
which
had become rife in the more densely populated
towns.
Those early settlers had thrived on the rich
agricultural
land of the area and had stayed, content to ignore the
changing face of England, like so many other small
communes. Nothing world-shattering had ever happened
in Banfield; perhaps a few minor misdeeds through
the
centuries, but nothing of any great consequence. But
now
the village had the opportunity to rise from
obscurity, a
chance to save itself from the oblivion it was slowly and
surely sinking into. And the council members
knew it--
even the old keep-the-world-away-from-our-door
diehards
were aware. Those with family names entwined with
Banfield's inglorious and uneventful past
saw the chance,
not just to revive the moldering corpse, but to inject
with a life far more brilliant than it had ever

James Herbert - The Shrine

experienced,
and so to reestablish their own history.
And all were excited by the prosperity this dramatic
and
awesome incident could bring them.
Southworth smiled again. It was difficult not to.
Wednesday, early evening
She pulled the covers up to her neck and lay there
staring
at the ceiling, waiting for him to come out of the
bathroom.
That was one of Rodney's good points: he was
clean. He
always washed himself before and after. His mind wasn't
as clean, but that didn't bother Paula too much;
her own
thoughts could be just as raunchy.
She rubbed her hands over her stomach, the feeling
sensuous, almost as enjoyable as if it were another's
fingers
probing the flesh. Paula, still single, knew
well the pleasures
of her own body. She checked her nipples
to see if
they were erect, wanting to be at her most
desirable for
her employer, tweaking them both for full
projection. The
toilet flushed and she became a little impatient
with Rodney's
ritual. Keep cool, Paula, she told
herself, tonight wasn't
the night for upsetting him. Tonight was progress
night.
She'd given him enough to worry about over the past
few
weeks, now was the time for a little mercy, a little
loving,
a little giving on her part. It was a fine balance,
keeping
him anxious and keeping him interested.
He was in a buoyant mood, for his plans were
going
well. The village was stirring, at last
awakening to the big
world beyond its semi-rural confines. Things were moving
and Tucker was moving with them.
Paula's fingers probed lower, sliding their way
through
tough dark hair like snakes through undergrowth, middle
finger, the leader of the pack, finding the dip below.
She
opened herself, knowing Rodney liked to find her wet
and
waiting, and caught her breath at the stab of
pleasure.
There was something sordidly exciting about making
love
in a motel bedroom, the kind of self-abasement
that went
with self-abuse, and Paula was partial to both.
She would
have preferred a candlelight dinner for two,

James Herbert - The Shrine

followed by a
night of love in a plush hotel suite, energy
and ideas
sustained by an ice bucket containing Dom
Perignon (there
were several things she could do with a linen towel packed
with ice). But failing that, a gin and tonic and a
motel fuck
had some merit.
She heard Rodney splashing at the bathroom
sink and
worked a little more vigorously at herself, only too
aware
that her employer was not the most lingering of lovers.
Too many times she had lost the climax race
to him;
nowadays she made sure she had a head start.
She moaned
a little and closed her eyes.
Tucker watched her from the open doorway, enjoying
the view. He loved her to do it to herself, so long as
she
held back on the best bit for him. It saved
him a lot of
preliminary work.
Paula confused him, for her moods seemed
to change
from day to day. It was worrying, too: on her really
bad
days there was more than just a hint of hysteria in her
actions. When she shouted at him, she didn't
seem to care
who heard and twice she had suggested that it might
be
better in the long run if Marcia found out about
their
affair. She was fed up with being treated like a
trollop.
He wondered how the hell else you treated a
trollop.
But today and yesterday she had been all sweetness and
light and genuinely pleased at his personal good
fortune (or
imminent good fortune). Maybe she had just caught
the
village's carnival atmosphere. Or maybe
she wanted a part
in his new schemes.
Tucker's freshly washed penis indicated its
impatience by
pressing uncomfortably against his underpants. Never
one
to keep a personal friend waiting, he made for the
bed,
where Paula's movements were becoming a little too
frantic.
She opened her eyes and smiled lasciviously
at him, her
hand slowing to walking pace.
"Enjoying yourself?" he said, unbuttoning his shirt
placing it nearly over his trousers draped on the
back of a

James Herbert - The Shrine

nearby chair. The ginger hair on his floppy chest stuck

through his string vest like stuffing from an old sofa.

"Just waiting for you, lovey," she replied, and slowly

drew back the covers for him. She allowed him a titillating

glance at her naked body, then let them fall back over her.

"Take your vest off, lovey," she said as he clambered in

next to her. Paula didn't relish having the crosscross pattern

all over her breasts and stomach.

He squatted in the bed and struggled out of his vest, the

released blubber swimming around the waistline of his underpants for a second before finding its level.

My God,

Paula thought, it was like being fucked by a whale.

Switching off the wall light on his side of the bed,

but leaving hers on, he wriggled down under the blankets.

Without preamble a cold hand closed around her right breast like a metal claw in an amusement

arcade's lucky dip.

"Wait, Rod," she said pleadingly, "there's no rush."

Paula squirmed against him to make sure he realized there

was no rebuke or rejection in her words.

"Besides"--she

giggled--"I've got a little treat for you."

Tucker's ears pricked up and his penis took a new

interest. Paula's "little treats" were usually worth delaying

the action for.

Her hand roamed around his chest, over his belly, then

around to his fleshy back. Delicate fingers surfed through

the tidal wave of fat to swoop down beneath the stretched

elastic of his underpants and splay out over his buttocks.

He nuzzled her neck in appreciation.

She murmured something and he said, "What?"

"I said, did you see Southworth this morning?"

Her teeth chewed his nipple.

He grunted and she took it as an affirmative.

Paula drew away when he said nothing more and looked

into his face.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

"What happened at the council meeting? What was decided?"

"Oh, bloody hell, I don't want to talk about that now."

James Herbert - The Shrine

He yelped when she dug in her long fingernails.

"You know I'm interested in your affairs, Rodney."

"You are my affair, precious."

He yelped again.

"You know what I mean," she scolded. "You've got

ideas. Rod. You could do things in this town."

"That's true enough. Anyway, I think it's all set." He turned onto his back, sex forgotten for the moment, ambitions elbowing the physical need aside.

"They've given the go-ahead for another shop?"

"No, no, they don't move that fast. But they're listening

to Southworth now; he's shifting them off their backsides.

And the way it's going, my lovely, it might mean more than

just another shop. It might mean a bloody big supermarket,

bigger than the one I've already got." He chuckled and she

joined in.

"So you'd probably need me to run this one on my own,

then, so you could get on with organizing everything," she

said slyly.

"Uh. Well, yes ... I suppose I would.

It's early days,

though, pet. You know, anything might happen."

She

couldn't see the frown on his face.

Too bloody right it could, Paula

thought. Tourism was

going to hit the town in a big way if this shrine business

came off, and a lot of money was going to be made.

She

knew Tucker well enough to realize he would be at

the

front of the queue, arms spread wide to receive the benefit.

And she intended to be there right alongside him,

Marci a

Tucker or no Marci a Tucker.

His frown was replaced by a smile as he went over the

meeting with Southworth in his mind. The hotel owner wasn't one for overexuberance, but even he couldn't contain

his delight. New development plans would be pushed

forward to the Horsham District Council over the next

few months with an incautious speed that had never before

been allowed. Expansion--rapid expansion--was a necessity.

The village was already jammed solid with sightseers and

even if another "miracle" never occurred again,

the legend

was already born. The incredible amount of worldwide publicity had seen to that.

He chuckled again. It was only because the motel manager

knew Tucker would not require the room all night

that he had kept it free for him. The motel was packed,

almost every room taken by media people, the rest by tourists, and he and Paula had to be out by ten so that

a camera crew from Holland could move in.

"What are you laughing at?" Paula asked, giggling herself.

"Just the thought of glories to come, my darling.

Banfield

won't know what's hit it."

She wasn't cold, but Paula shivered. It was almost as if

something icy had touched her. She shrugged off the peculiar feeling.

"You won't be too busy for me, will you. Rod?"

Her

voice was wheedling again and her hand was tugging at his underpants.

"You, my love? No way. I'll always have time for you."

He moaned as she yanked the pants down and lifted his fat

bottom so that they would go all the way.

Physical need

was back on top again. "Hey, what's my special treat?" he

reminded her.

Paula sat up, her thrusting breasts bouncing together

with the sudden movement. Tucker couldn't resist nipping

at her well-rounded bottom as she turned from him and

stretched down beside the bed. She gave a little screech

and wriggled her rump; he kissed it better, wondering

what she was reaching for.

She came up with a paper-wrapped bottle and he guessed

its contents immediately. He couldn't stop grinning as Paula unwrapped the Freezomint. "Have you

been raiding

the store again?" he asked without malice.

"I know you don't mind me helping myself to this, Rodney. Not when it's for your benefit.

She unscrewed the top and took a deep swig of the creme

de menthe, gargling it around her mouth and throat until

they were coated with the green liquid. She swallowed,

then drank again, her tongue burning as she wriggled it in

the cold, stinging liquid. Her eyes were

James Herbert - The Shrine

seductively half-closed
when she placed the bottle on the bedside unit
and
Tucker's were wide open in anticipation.
His penis, short but stocky, was already tingling, but
he knew it was nothing like the shocking tingling it would
feel when her lips and tongue closed around it.
He was smiling again as she lowered her head toward
his body. All in all, it had been a
good day.

Thursday, early morning
Alice stood in her nightdress staring out of the
window.
The sun hurt her eyes, although there was little warmth
from it. Behind her, the bedclothes on the nun's cot
were "rumpled as though her sleep had not been easy.
As yet, there were no other sounds in the convent, for the
sun had
not long risen. Soon, though, the nuns would be
gathered
for prayer in the room used as a chapel, and
Alice's mother
would be among them, thanking God for the honor he
had
bestowed upon her and her daughter.

There was no expression on Alice's face.
Only twelve nuns lived in the convent, for it was
merely
a large house, acquired ten years before from a
retired
theater actor who had moved abroad to sunnier
climes. Its conwalls were painted cream, doors and
window frames white. A high brick wall kept
the nuns their privacy and beyond
the heavy black gates, which were as high as the wall
itself, was a spacious yard where they parked their
Morris

1100 and minibus. The minibus was used during the
week
to collect the village children who attended the
Catholic
school four miles away, in which the nuns
taught.
The high gates, solidly forbidding, and the
surrounding wall had been a formidable defense against
the hordes of
reporters that had descended upon Banfield
during the
past week, for it had soon become known that little
Alice
Pagett was being kept at the convent for her own
privacy
and protection.

The convent was situated at the southern end of the
town, close to a sharp bend where the main road
turned
left for Brighton and another, minor road continued
straight
on into the Downs. A garage was on the
bend itself and
the nuns knew the proprietor was hiring out the
offices
above to camera crews and photographers so that they

James Herbert - The Shrine

could film over the convent wall. There was little the
nuns could do about the situation but pray that Alice's
mind would not be too disturbed by the frantic attention.
Alice's spartan room overlooked the courtyard
at the front of the convent. Apart from the small bed, it
contained only a chair, a straw rug, and a small sink
in the corner. A plain wooden crucifix hung on
the wall. Two of Alice's favorite dolls shared her bed at
night, but each morning her mother found them thrown into the far corner
of the room.
Molly Pagett slept next door, close
to her daughter, and had spent most nights since moving in with the sisters
lying awake mumbling prayers and listening
for any disturbance in Alice's room. Her eyes were red-rimmed
through lack of sleep and her face and stance seemed to have
aged ten years since the miracles had begun. A
woman always devoted to the Church, it had now become her
obsession.
Alice did not appear to feel the chill as she
stood at the window, nor did the birds that swooped into the
courtyard interest her.
She hated the convent, hated its sparseness, its
lack of comfort. And she disliked the dull grayness of the
nuns' habits. She was frightened of the doctors who tested
and probed her, who examined her body and asked her
questions, questions, questions. And she was tired of the
questions from the priests, from the nuns, from . . . from
. . . just about everybody who spoke to her.
She wanted to leave this place.
She wanted to go back to the church.
She wanted to see the tree.
A movement below caught her attention. The cat
had leaped from the high wall into an empty flower bed
at the courtyard's side. It stalked lazily across the
damp cobbles, the birds having already flown. It stopped.
Looked up.
Saw the small figure in white watching it.
It sat and gazed upward.
For the first time in days Alice smiled. Her hand
unconsciously touched her side and rubbed at the small lump
six inches below her heart. The doctors had shown great

James Herbert - The Shrine

interest in the strange protuberance at first and her mother had explained it had always been there, although very tiny, and nothing to worry about, so her local doctor had said. They had agreed it was nothing to worry about and did not mention nor probe it again. But it itched now and was bigger, though not much, than before. Alice rubbed at it as she watched the cat and her smile did not seem that of an eleven-year-old.

SEVENTEEN

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
William Wordsworth
"HEY, COME ON, SUE, OPEN UP!"
Fenn put his head against the door and listened. He knew she had to be in there because he had rung from the call box on the corner just a few minutes earlier and put down the phone as she'd answered. Twice that week Sue had hung up on him and twice she had been out when he'd gone to her flat. It had given him no satisfaction to hang up on her in return, but he wanted to see her. It was time to stop frigging around. If she really wanted to end it, fine--but she would have to tell him to his face. It had been a heavy, glorious week. The Courier had syndicated his personal story of the "Banfield Miracles" to most of the nationals both in Britain and abroad, while magazines, periodicals, and television companies were offering substantial amounts for follow-up stories and interviews. In just four days he had become what could only be termed a "media figure," the Alice Pagett phenomena inextricably linked with his own name, for it had been his firsthand coverage of both extraordinary events-- the first vision and miracle experienced by Alice herself, and the subsequent five miracles on the second Sunday-- that had caught the attention of millions around the world. He was riding high and enjoying the journey. There was movement inside. "It's me. Sue." Only silence. "Come on, Sue, I only want to talk."

The door chain being slid back, the latch being turned.

Sue peering through a six-inch gap.

"I here's nothing much to say, Gerry."

"Oh, yeah? That's your considered opinion?"

"Have you been drinking?"

"Sure."

It looked as if she was going to close the door again, so

he put his hand against it.

"Sue, let's just talk a little. I promise to leave within ten

minutes if you want me to."

For a moment she was undecided and he lifted his eyebrows in a silent "please?" Sue

disappeared from view

and with relief he pushed open the door. He followed her

down the short hallway into the living room. As always

the room was comfortably neat, lit by a small lamp which

cast intimate shadows. He saw she was in her dressing gown.

"Bed so early?" he asked. "It's only just gone ten. His

"It's late to call on someone," she replied, sitting in an

armchair. He realized she had carefully avoided the sofa.

He was about to sit on the arm of her chair when she shook her head and pointed at the sofa opposite.

With a sigh, he obeyed.

Neither one spoke for several moments, then Sue said,

"You're making quite a name for yourself."

He cleared his throat, hating the awkwardness.

"I was

lucky enough to be on the spot. It's a reporter's dream."

"I'm glad you're reaping the benefit."

"We went through this before, Sue. It's my job."

"I'm not being sarcastic, Gerry. I really am pleased for

you. And I like the way you've written your features;

they've been factual, no gloss, no exaggeration. Not like

your first story."

"There was no need for exaggeration. The truth was spectacular enough." He leaned forward, resisting

the urge

to kneel at her feet. "So what is it, Sue?

Why haven't you

wanted to see me, to speak to me? What the hell have I

done?"

She looked into her hands. "I'm not sure if it's you or

just me. I've found my faith again, Gerry, and I don't have

time for anything else."

"You mean being a Catholic excludes being in love with someone."

"Of course not. I just think you're probably not the right one."

"Oh, terrific. Excuse my wicked ways, but we seemed to get along pretty fine until you started with this Church business."

"That's just the point! I've changed. But you haven't."

"Why the hell should I? I'm not a bloody Catholic!"

"You were witness to one of the most shattering and marvelous things that could happen on this earth. Why hasn't it meant anything to you?"

"How'd you know it hasn't. You haven't seen me all week. Today's Thursday; I could have sent in my convert's application forms since Sunday!"

"Stop joking, Gerry. I read your articles. I know nothing's changed."

"You said you liked them."

"Yes, and I said they were factual. Cold and factual, an impartial observer's account."

"What did you expect?"

"I expected you to be moved by what you saw! I expected you to be spiritually moved!"

Fenn's eyes widened in surprise. He shook his head. "I don't get it."

Her voice softened. "That's just it. You really don't understand, do you?"

He remained silent.

"Everyone else present that day underwent some deep, emotional experience; I know, I've spoken with many of them since. They believe they witnessed a divine act of God, healing miracles that proved His existence beyond any doubt, and their lives have taken on a new order because of it. Yet you feel nothing. You can't deny what took place, but it has no effect on you. What's wrong with you, Gerry? What makes you so ... so unreachable?"

"I'm not so sure it's just me. I haven't had a chance to get near Father Hagan during the last few days --he's avoided all contact with the press--but he doesn't look too happy."

"Couldn't you see the poor man was overwhelmed by it all? Six wonderful miracles. The levitation of a young child who saw the Blessed Virgin. In his parish! Have you any idea at all of the magnitude of what's happened?"

Father Hagan is still in a state of shock and his own humility will see he stays that way for some time to come.

So don't dare compare his reaction to yours--because with you there's been no reaction at all except to seize the opportunity to make a name for yourself."

"That's unfair."

"I know it's unfair and I'm not blaming you for that. I

just wish there was something more, some indication that your cynicism had been, if not broken, then at least pierced."

She was weeping freely and he felt a flush of irrational

guilt- He went to her, kneeling on the floor, gently taking her wrists and pulling her hands away from her face.

She

looked at him and there was sheer misery behind the tears.

"Oh, Gerry ..." she said, and then was in his arms,

head buried against his shoulders, her body shaking.

His throat felt sticky and there was a heaviness dragging

at his chest. Sometimes a woman's crying could make him

cold, could numb his emotions so that he was accused of

having no feelings, an accusation that was often true but

only in relation to that particular woman or situation.

Fenn had learned to guard himself, to protect his own sensitivities against the demands of

others, past hurts, rejections, perhaps forgotten but their marks indelibly made.

With Sue there was no such protection. He hugged her

tight, close to tears himself.

"I'm sorry," was all he could think of to say.

"It's not your fault, Gerry," she said softly. "You can't

help the way you are. Maybe I'm wrong in wanting you to

be different."

"I love you. Sue."

"I know you do, and I wish you didn't."

"It's impossible not to."

"Have you tried?"

"All the time. It's no good, though, I'm hooked."

She pulled away slightly. "Gerry, I'm not

sure anymore
how I feel about you."
That hurt. God, it hurt. He hugged her
back to him.
"It's because of everything that's happening, Sue.
Things're
moving too fast, it's confusing. Just don't make
me into the
anti-Christ, eh?"
"It's just that I'm seeing you differently. Oh,
I've known
your failings--"
"Failings? Me?"
"I've known them and chosen to ignore them. Now,
though, we seem to be in conflict with each other
..."
"Not me with you, babe."
"Then why can't you feel the same way? Why is
it just a
launching pad for your own career, a way to make
money?"
This time it was Fenn who pulled away. "Let me
tell
you somethinn," he said. "I'll agree I'm
taking full advantage
of a fantastic story that just happened to fall
smack
into my lap. Any reporter worth his salt would
do the
same. But there are others using the Banfield
Miracles for
their own purposes too. You know, after Alice
saw her
first vision and I wrote the feature, a guy
called Southworth
contacted me. He's the owner of the Crown Hotel
in
Banfield, a councillor, and from what I can
gather, owns
quite a lot of property in the area. He and someone
called
Tucker--another of Banfield's fat cats--
wanted to hire me
to exploit the situation with follow-up articles,
keeping the
place in the public eye, drumming up more
interest than
was warranted at that time. Oh, they were a little more
subtle with their proposition than that, but that was the
strength of it. They wanted to start the carnival there
and
then."
He rested back on his heels. "You might be
pleased to
know I turned them down."
"It doesn't mean anything. Two men
out of a--"
"Have you been into the village lately?"
"Of course. I've been to St. Joseph's--"
"No, not the church. The village itself. All the
mer
chants can talk about is the money that's going to come
pouring in. A lot of the property owners are

James Herbert - The Shrine

applying for
planning permission to turn their premises
into souvenir
shops, tea shops, restaurants,
bed-and-breakfast--anything
that will bring in money from the tourists that are already
flocking in."
"Now you are exaggerating." *
"Am I? You should take a close look. A
kind of insanity
has hit Banfield, and it's easy to see why.
For the first time
in its history, the village is the focus of world
attention.
Maybe it's because we're all sick of hearing
nothing but
violence, wars, and depravity, maybe it's because
when
something good happens, something that restores our faith
in
goodness itself, we go overboard. Everybody loves
a miracle
because it transcends this rotten stinking world we live
in. Don't forget this is the age of science, where
everything
is becoming explainable. Religion is nothing but
wish-fulfilling
stories for the masses, love is only body
chemistry,
art is a surge of conditioned reflexes. And now
we've got
something that really is inexplicable. Something today, in
this time!"
"But you're saying the village only wants
to make money
from it."
"Sure it does. It doesn't mean they don't
believe in the
miracles."
"But they can't all be thinking that way."
"In cash terms? No, of course not. There are
plenty who
love what's happening for its own sake,
who feel proud
their Banfield's been chosen to play host to the
Madonna."
She listened closely for a hint of sarcasm, but
found
none.
"Yeah, they're happy and more than overawed.
Stunned--
and grateful. There'll be the few who'll want
nothing to do
with it, maybe some who'll move away, but they'll
be in
the minority. The rest, I figure, will wallow in
the glory."
"There's nothing wrong in that."
He shook his head. "No. But wait and see the
competition
to tell the media their own personal stories. How
they've known Alice Pagett since she was a
baby, how she

James Herbert - The Shrine

came to their shop once a week for sweets, how
they're
distant cousins, twice-removed, how their piles
miraculously cleared up one day when they
passed St. Joseph's,
how their migraine disappeared when Alice smiled
at them.

You may think checkbook journalism is an
overworked
phrase, but wait and see just how many personal
accounts
of the Banfield Miracles are sold to the
newspapers. And
wait and see how many "close" friends the
Pagett family are
going to have, all with intimate details of their
private Fives. The whole personality of the
village is going to change, Sue, as well as its
appearance.

She was staring at him, for the first time realizing the
commercial aspect of the mystical experience. For
someone
whose profession was journalism, she had been
remarkably
naive, or perhaps too spiritually involved.
Fenn hated to disillusion her further, but went on,
anxious to vindicate his own motives.

"Pretty soon, you
won't be able to get near the church without
being bombarded
with religious junk. Madonnas in snowstorms,
Madonnas that light up, Cindy Doll
Madonnas, rosaries
by the thousands, postcards, crucifixes,
medallions . . .
you name it, it'll be on sale."
"The Church wouldn't allow it--"
"Huh! The Church will be part of it."
"That's not true."

"Do you really think the Catholic Church, with its
steady loss of followers and general disenchantment
among
its worshippers, can afford not to take advantage
of something
like this? Young priests are leaving, some to get
married,
women are demanding to be allowed into the priesthood,
the Vatican itself is criticized for hoarding its
vast wealth
and not using it to feed the starving, to help the
underprivileged,
criticized for not condemning the violence
in Northern Ireland more strongly, openly mocked

its outdated views on birth control,
divorce, and plenty
of other topics which seem to have no relevance to today's
society. The Church needs its miracles
to bloody survive!"

Sue flinched and he checked his growing anger.
"Look,

James Herbert - The Shrine

when Pope John was shot in '81--shot six
times, mind, an
old man pumped with bullets--Catholics by the
millions
turned back to their faith. Even nonbelievers
felt grief.
When he lived, when he miraculously
recovered, everyone--
everyone who was not insane or just plain evil--had
a new
respect for the papacy. The world was reminded of the
ultimate triumph of good. Well now the
Church has got
something even more grand: six cures, all witnessed,
a
possible levitation, and a visitation. There's no
way they
won't take advantage of it."
"Father Hagan won't allow it to be
exploited."
"Father Hagan will be overruled. I don't know
too much
about Bishop Caines, who's the governor of the
diocese,
but from what information I've managed to gather this
week he appears to be an ambitious man.
Oh, yeah, they
have that kind in the Church hierarchy, you know.
Apparently
he's already sought authorization to buy the field
next to the church and the farmer who owns it is willing
to sell. Seems he's been down on his luck
lately."
"It makes sense to make the field where Alice
had the vision part of St. Joseph's."
"Yeah, makes perfect sense. Church ownership
of the
field will be necessary to accommodate all the
visitors who've going to flood the place. I'll
bet you the bishop will be accommodating in other ways,
too, as this thing
snowballs. He's already arranged a
press conference for
tomorrow."
"That's hardly surprising with all the public
interest."
"Well, we'll wait and see how he handles
it. How much
he refutes, how much he evades, and how much
he
encourages. It should be pretty telling."
"You'll be there?"
"Would I miss it?"
She sighed and lay back in the chair, wiping at
her
damp face with the back of her hand. He
straightened his
legs and leaned over her, conscious of her knees
against his
groin. "Sorry for the diatribe, babe, but I
wanted you to
understand that I'm not the sole passenger on this
particular

bandwagon. "
Her hand cupped his cheek. "I still don't trust
you,
Gerry. "
He groaned aloud.
"Perhaps the miracles have changed us," she said.
"Brought out the worst in some, the best in others. "
"Maybe some are more gullible than others. "
Her hand froze on his face. "Meaning?"
He shrugged. "Maybe some have been taken in by a
phenomenon that has no mystical basis
whatsoever. "
was "The Power of the Human Mind" theory again?"
"Could be. Who's to say otherwise?"
"Your ten minutes are up. "
"There you go again, not prepared to listen to any other
argument. Does all that's happened suddenly
make me an
enemy, Sue, a child of Satan you have to close your
ears
to? We used to have long, rational debates at
one time, for
Christ's sake. With all this deep, religious
feeling you're
going through, shouldn't you love me even more?"
She didn't answer.
"Okay, let's forget the other alternative for
now and
accept that the so-called miracles have a
religious context.
Seems to me that Jesus Christ hired twelve
pretty good PR
guys to spread the Word, four of whom wrote a
worldwide
best-seller. His life story. I guess you
couldn't call
me a twentieth-century disciple, but isn't there
some kind
of saying in the Good Book about using the best
tools
available? Could be I'm one of the tools." He
raised his
eyebrows.
Sue was frowning, but Fenn knew he'd scored a
point.
After a while she pulled his head down toward her
and he
was grinning against her chest.
"I'm confused, Gerry, still confused. But maybe
I've
had my head in the sand. It could be that our beliefs
are
not allowed to be insulated or introspective
anymore." She
kissed his hair. "Your cynicism might even be
a healthy
thing, who knows? It's so easy to get carried
away with it
all. "
He held his tongue, not wanting to spoil the
mood.
Raising his head to look into her eyes, he said,
"All I ask is

that you don't lock me out. You might not approve of my approach to the subject, or my appraisal of it, but you can be sure it's honest. And I think that's something you can at least respect." He kissed her chin. "Right?" She nodded, then kissed his lips, and he was acutely aware that her abstinence had made her very, very hungry.

It was dark, the curtains drawn. Fenn lay there, puzzled for a few seconds. Where the hell was he? Then he remembered and relaxed. He smiled in the darkness, remembering their lovemaking. Christ, Sue had been almost frightening in her intensity. Her physical need for him had seemed to surprise even herself. He wasn't complaining, though--exhausted, but not complaining. He felt her moving in the bed. Had she disturbed him with her restlessness? He moved toward her, touched her back, and was alarmed at how hot she felt. He pushed close, his arm going around her and becoming damp with her stickiness. Her body jerked and her head twisted into the pillow. "Sue?" he whispered. She murmured something, but did not waken. Her limbs were trembling. Fenn gently shook her shoulder, wanting to wake her from the nightmare, but not wanting to frighten her. She twisted toward him, still asleep, her breathing rapid, shallow. "It isn't . . ." she murmured. "Sue, wake up." He felt her face, her neck, and her breast. She was soaking. He quickly reached over and switched on the bedside lamp. She pulled her head away from the light, still murmuring. He could hardly hear the words, but it sounded like, "it isn't . . . her . . . isn't . . . isn't . . ."

"Sue, wake up!" He shook her more fiercely and suddenly her eyes were wide open. Staring. The fear in them was alarming. Abruptly, they seemed to cloud over and she blinked several times. She recognized him. "Gerry, what's wrong?" He breathed a sigh of relief. "Nothing, babe," he said.

"You just had a bad dream."

He switched off the light and settled down again, holding

her in his arms. She was asleep almost instantly.

But he stayed awake for quite some time.

"The devil told you that! The devil told you that," shrieked

the little man, and in his fury he stamped his right foot into the

ground, right up to his waist, then, foaming at the mouth, he

grabbed his left foot in both hands and tore himself apart right

down the middle.

"Rumpelstiltskin," The Brothers Grimm

DAILY MAIL: Has the Vatican an "official"

statement concerning the Banfield Miracles?

BISHOP CAINES: The only "official" statement we

can issue at this very early stage

is that the Holy Roman Catholic

Church acknowledges that a series

of what can best be described as

extraordinary cures have taken

place in the grounds of St. Joseph's--

DAILY MAIL: Forgive me for interrupting. Bishop,

but you just said in the grounds of

St. Joseph's. Surely it was in the

field next to the church?

BISHOP CAINES: That's quite correct, but in such

close proximity that it could be considered within the church property.

I should perhaps inform you

that agreement for the purchase

of the land by the Church has already

been reached and that the

necessary documents will be signed

within the next day or two. However,

to return to your original

question: The six extraordinary

cures--alleged cures, I should

say --which have occurred at St.

Joseph's will be scrupulously examined

by a specially formed

medical bureau and their findings

passed on to the International

Medical Committee. No announcement,

proclamation, and no assertions

will be forthcoming until the

international committee is satisfied

that every aspect of the six

individual cases has been fully

investigated.

REUTERS: Will the international committee

you refer to be the same committee

that examines the cures at

Lourdes?

BISHOP CAINES: Yes.

CATHOLIC HERALD: But the committee can only

recommend

that' the cures be declared
miraculous.

BISHOP CAINES: That's correct. As
bi shop of the

diocese in which the cures took
place, the final decision as to
whether or not the cures are declared
miraculous is mine alone.

THE TIMES: Have you a view right now?

BISHOP CAINES: I have not.

THE TIMES: None at all? Even after having
talked with Alice Pagett and the
others most closely concerned--
your own parish priest, for instance?

BISHOP CAINES: I find the whole matter
intriguing,

to say the least, but I cannot possibly
make any judgment at this
stage.

WASHINGTON POST: What would, then, Bi shop
Cai nes,

constitute a miracle in the eyes of
the Church?

B1S1 KggP CAINES: A cure that is
medically inexplicable
in the present state of science.

DAILY EXPRESS: When will the medical
bureau be organized?

BISHOP CAINES: It's being organized right
now.

D. mly EXPRESS: And how will it operate?

BISHOP CAINES: Well, it will consist of at
least

twelve medical men--

JOURNAL OE

GENEVA: All Roman Catholics?

BISHOP CAINES: No, most certainly
not.

D. mly EXPRESS: But will it lie
an independent body?

BISHOP CAINES: Absolutely, although the
director

of the bureau and several members
will be employed by the
Church. Others will be gathered
from interested medical and scientific
research units. Medical records
of each cured person will
be examined and the individual's
own GP and the hospital under
which they are receiving treatment
will be consulted. They will,
naturally, undertake their own
thorough medical examination of
each cured person and a dossier
will be kept. Their findings will
eventually be passed on to the
international committee, who will
make the final recommendation.

ASSOCIATED PRESS: What will be the
criteria? For a
miracle, I mean.

BISHOP CAINES: Perhaps Monsignor Delgard would

like to answer that?

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: I think it should be clearly stated;

the medical bureau and the international committee will only be concerned with whether or not the cure is inexplicable, not if it's a miracle.

ASSOCIATED PRESS: Is there a difference?

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: Bishop Caines said earlier that the

cure must be medically inexplicable in the present state of science.

The committee will decide upon that aspect, not whether the cures had a religious or mystical connotation.

What is considered medically inexplicable today might be perfectly logical a few years hence.

It is the bishop and his advisers who must examine the spiritual aspects of the cures and decide if divine intervention is the cause of the recoveries.

The bureau and the international committee have to satisfy themselves on the following points:

Was the cure sudden, unexpected, and without convalescence?

Is it complete?

Is it lasting? That, ladies and gentlemen, means a certain amount of time--say three or four years--must elapse before the cure can be confirmed.

How serious was the illness?

Was it due to a specific disease? Infirmary due to a mental disorder, for instance, would rule out any acceptance of a miracle cure.

Had the illness been objectively proved by tests, X rays, or biopsies?

And was the medical treatment previously given responsible in any way, even if in part only, for the cure?

These are the criteria on which the bureau and the international committee must be satisfied. There are others, more technical, but I think those I've listed will give you the general idea.

PSYCHIC NEWS: Can you tell us, Monsignor Delgard, just what is your involvement in this matter?

BISHOP CAINES: Perhaps I should answer that. At the time of the first cure--when, in fact, Alice Pagett was able to hear and talk again after seven years of being unable to do so--

an enormous amount of public interest was created. I felt then that Father Hagan would need some support and guidance in dealing with the crowds who would inevitably descend upon St. Joseph's.

PSYCHIC NEWS: But you've been involved in certain

cases of unusual phenomena in the past, Monsignor Delgard?

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: Yes, that's correct.

PSYCHIC NEWS: Would you describe them as paranormal.

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: (pause.) They could be termed as

such, I suppose.

PSYCHIC NEWS: In fact, haven't you performed

several exorcisms?

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: Yes.

PSYCHIC NEWS: Did you and do you now suspect

that Alice Pagett might be possessed: (laughter.)

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: By the devil? (laughter.)

PSYCHIC NEWS: Or evil spirits.

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: I would think that's most unlikely.

The child seems well-balanced enough to me.

PSYCHIC NEWS: Then why--

BISHOP CAINF. S: I've already explained why Monsignor

Delgard was temporarily appointed to St. Joseph's. While it's

true to say he has investigated many strange incidents over the years for the Church and has made a study of psychic phenomena, Monsignor Delgard's role usually has been--if I might use the term--devil's advocate rather than devil seeker. (Laughter.)

You see, the Catholic Church often has to undertake the examination of unusual incidents on behalf of concerned parishioners and clergy. We live in a peculiar world, you know, where human logic is not always applicable to certain events, Monsignor Delgard looks at both aspects of such happenings--natural and unnatural--and usually manages to provide the correct balance. At St. Joseph's we have circumstances that are, without doubt, unnatural, so it's perfectly sensible to ask for the assistance and advice of someone who has had experience in such

matters, and who can also provide a more material assistance in dealing with the public interest. The fact that Monsignor Delgard has performed exorcisms is quite irrelevant in this case.

May we have another question?

DAILY TELEGRAPH: It's rumored that Alice Pagett's illness could have been psychosomatic. Is it true?

BISHOP CAINES: That's for the medical authorities

and the bureau to decide. But, of course, it's doubtful that all five of the other illnesses were due to psychosomatic causes.

LE MWOE: What is the Catholic Church's

opinion on faith healing?

BISHOP CAINES: Jesus Christ was the greatest faith

healer of all time. (Laughter.)

GAZETTE (kent): I have a question for Father Hagan.

Some years ago you were assistant priest near Maidenstone.

FATHER HAGAN: (pause.) Yes, in a place called Hollingbourne.

GAZETTE (kent): You weren't there for very long, were you, Father?

FATHER HAGAN: About six months, I think.

GAZETTE (kent): You left rather suddenly. Could I

ask the reason why?

FATHER HAGAN: (pause.) As assistant priest I went

where I was needed most. Often the need was urgent and my departure from one parish to another could be abrupt.

GAZETTE (kent): There was no other reason, then,

for you to leave Hollingbourne, apart from being required elsewhere?

FATHER HAGAN: As far as I can remember the parish

priest of St. Mark's in Lewes had fallen ill and assistance was badly needed.

GAZE-N' Every (kent): No other reason?

BISHOP CAINES; Father Hagan has answered your

question. May we move on to the next?

DAILY TELEGRAPH: Could this whole business of the

miracle cures be a hoax?

BISHOP CAINES: A rather elaborate one, don't you

think? And for what purpose?

DAILY TELEGRAPH: Isn't Banfield

liable to make a considerable amount of money from tourism?

BISHOP CAINES: Yes, I suppose it's conceivable. "The village is already the focus of

world attention and I suppose sightseers will flock to St. Joseph's even before the results of our investigations are made known. But unless you believe that all the children and the one adult involved in these cures are swindlers and liars--not to mention marvellous actors--(laughter)--then I hardly think your suggestion has any merit. And, of course, the children's parents and their general practitioners would also have to Iggenge involved in the fraud.

L' AUIGE: Alice Pagett claims to have seen a

vision of the -Madonna. Can you comment on this, please?

BISHOP CAINES: Not at this time.

NEW YORK TIMES: Did anyone else see anything? Father

Hagan, you were present on two occasions when the child claimed she saw the Virgin Mary-- did you see nothing at all?

FATHER HAGAN: I ... no, no, I can't say that I did.

NEW YORK TIMES: But did you sense anything strange going on?

FATHER HAGAN: There was certainly atmosphere, yes, a highly charged atmosphere, but I can't account for it.

OBSERVER: Surely it would have had something to do with the mood of the crowd, wouldn't it?

FATHER HAGAN: Yes, I suppose so.

OBSERVER: Sorry, Father, I didn't catch that.

FATHER HAGAN: I said I suppose so. Certainly on

the last occasion. Several of the other children present seemed entranced in the same way that Alice was, but they could remember nothing when questioned later.

DAILY MIRROR: What steps are the Church taking

to ensure the situation isn't exploited?

BISHOP CAINES: Exploited?

DAILY MIRROR: Commercially exploited.

BISHOP CAINES: I believe we dealt with that in a

previous question. There is very little the Church can do prevent local traders and businessmen from, shall we say, taking full advantage of the situation. But

James Herbert - The Shrine

that is hardly our province and we can only hope that proper restraint and discretion is used.

MORNING STAR: But won't the Catholic Church

itself exploit the situation?

BISHOP CAINES: Why should we do that?

MORNING STAR: For publicity.

BISHOP CAINES: I hardly think God needs publicity.

(Mugher.)

STANDARD: But it wouldn't harm the Church.

BISHOP CAINES: On the contrary, such publicity

could be most damaging. Many churchgoers might have their illusions shattered if what they believe to be genuine miracles performed at St. Joseph's are later proved by the medical authorities to be nothing of the sort. That is one of the reasons the Catholic Church is extremely cautious in such matters.

ASSOCIATED PRESS: Almost to the extent that miracles

are harder to prove to the Church than to the layman?

BISHOP CAINES: Yes, in most cases that's true. In

fact, the medical bureau at Lourdes dismisses nearly all Lourdes cures as nonmiraculous. I believe that there have been only sixty or so miraculous cures officially recognized at Lourdes since 1858.

OBSERVER: Many people claim they saw Alice levitate last Sunday. Could I

ask Father Hagan and Monsignor Delgard if it really did happen?

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: I can't be sure. I wasn't as close

to Alice as some of the others. To be perfectly honest, I have no clear recollection.

OBSERVER: Father Hagan? (silence.)

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: Father Hagan and I were standing

together, so we both had the same view. I don't

FATHER HAGAN: I think Alice did levitate. (disordered questioning.)

ECHO DE LA BOURSE: You actually witnessed this?

FATHER HAGAN: I can only say I think that's what

happened. The grass in the field is long--perhaps she was merely standing on tiptoe. I just can't be sure.

OBSERVER: But other witnesses say her feet actually left the ground.

FATHER HAGAN: It's possible. I can't be

James Herbert - The Shrine

sure, though. (general conversation.)

STANDARD: If it is proved that the cures were miraculous and that Alice Pagett really saw the, er, Virgin Mary, will the girl be proclaimed a saint?

BISHOP CAINES: How do you prove such a thing?

And before someone can be considered for canonization they have to be dead for some time. (laughter.)

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: Why is Alice Pagett being kept

hidden away?

BISHOP CAINES: Ah, it's Mr. Fenn, isn't it? Well,

Alice isn't being kept "hidden away," as you put it. Judging by the amount of media people surrounding the Our Lady of Sion convent in Banfield I certainly wouldn't have said her whereabouts are secret.

Alice is resting. She has been through an extraordinary experience and, as you can imagine, is quite exhausted both physically and emotionally. She needs peace and quiet--her own doctor is adamant that she receive just that.

And, of course, she's there with the full agreement of her parents. Alice is a delicate child and, until recently, classed as an invalid. She has to be treated with great care.

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: Is she undergoing medical tests?

BISHOP CAINES: Yes, very stringent tests.

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: And interrogation by the Church authorities?

BISHOP CAINES: Interrogation is far too strong a

word. Obviously she is being questioned, but I promise you she is under no pressure. I think her only danger at the moment is that she might be smothered by kindness. (laughter.)

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: How long will Alice be kept at the convent?

BISHOP CAINES: She is under no detention order,

Mr. Fenn. She is at perfect liberty to leave when her parents want her to and when her doctor thinks it will be in her own interest.

CATHOLIC HERALD: Has Alice had any more visions

since last Sunday?

BISHOP CAINES: She hasn't spoken of

any.

DAILY MAIL: Will she attend Mass this Sunday?

At St. Joseph's, I mean.

MONSIGNOR DELGARD: (pause.) Alice has expressed a desire to. We must consider the consequence to herself, however.

We're rather worried that with all the publicity these, er, incidents have been given, St. Joseph's will be swamped with sightseers--and obviously the media itself. As Bishop Caines has just said, Alice is a fragile child and the continued excitement might be t less-than it greater-than much

for her. She has to be protected.

INTERNATIONAL But she'll have to face the public HERALD TRIBUNE: sooner or later.

BISHOP CAINES: That's true, but I suppose that at this stage the medical team studying her case, her own doctor, and the Church, would rather it were later. However, nothing yet has been decided regarding this coming Sunday.

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: But Alice does want to go to Mass this Sunday?

HIS 10P CAINES: Alice is somewhat confused at the moment. I think that's quite understandable.

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: But she does want to.

BISHOP CAINES: As the monsignor said, she has expressed a desire to.

BRIGHTON EVENING

COURIER: So it's a strong possibility?

BISHOP CAINES: I believe I've already answered that question. (disordered questioning.)

BISHOP CAINES: I'm afraid we must bring the press

conference to a close, gentlemen.

Thank you for your questions and I hope we've been able to clarify a few points. I'm sorry, no more questions. Our schedule is tight and we now have television and radio interviews to do.

Thank you for your time, ladies and gentleman. (press conference ends.)

u If thy mother only knew, Her heart would surely break in two."

"The Goose Girl," The Brothers Grimm

he COULDN'T SLEEP.

His hair itched, the sheets on the narrow bed felt soiled, stiff, and unwashed. He wasn't hungry, he

James Herbert - The Shrine

wasn't thirsty;
he certainly wasn't tired. It was his own
fault for staying
in bed most of the day. He should have gone to the Job
Centre, but what the fuck? They would only have
offered
him some poxy job waiting on tables like his last
one, or
digging bloody holes in roads, or working some
machine
in a factory. Or worse, Community
fucking Service! Sod
"em! He'd have to blag the old lady for money
tomorrow.
Christ, how he hated going back there! Look
at you! Why
don't you get your hair cut. You'll never get
a decent job
like that. And look at your clothes. When was the last
time
that shirt was ironed? And can't you at least polish
your
shoes?
Worst of all: When was the last time you went to
church? What would your poor father say if he were still
alive?
Shit on her! If he didn't need the bread,
he would never
go back.
He turned in the bed, a crease in his undershirt
irritating
his skin.
He stared out the window into the dark night. Christ,
if
only he could get a bird up here; that would warm
him up,
all right! They didn't want to know, though. If
you didn't
have money, then they just weren't interested. If you were
a nobody, you were bloody nobody! He turned
again and
thumped the lumps from the pillow with an angry
fist.
He'd had a guy up there once, but that hadn't
been too
good. The jerking off was okay, but all that rucking
kissing had made him want to puke.
He stared at the ceiling and pulled the end of the
undershirt
over his bare stomach.
It was all a big bucket of shit. You fell
into it and the
bastards wouldn't let you climb out. You just went
round
and round in the slime until you had to eat it to stop
drowning. And then it poisoned you and killed you dead
anyway.
But at least they had kicked back! Those three
had
swallowed the shit and spewed it right back into the
onlookers' faces. They had found a
way, and that was all it
took.

James Herbert - The Shrine

He grinned in the darkness. Yeah, they had found a way.
He yanked back the covers and padded over to the wardrobe in stocking feet. Standing on tiptoe, he reached up to the top of the wardrobe and found the box he was looking for. He brought it down, then took a small key from his jacket hanging over the back of the room's only chair.
Climbing back into the bed, he inserted the key and opened the lid. He took a dark object out and pressed it to his cheek, smiling in the darkness. He placed the open box on the floor and covered himself.
Lying there in the darkness, he pushed the object beneath the bedclothes so that its cold metal lay between his inner thighs. He sighed as he felt himself grow hard.
Here lies the Devil--ask no other name.
Well--but you mean Lord--his Hush! we mean the same. "On a Lord," Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Fenn YAWNED AND CHECKED his watch at the same time. 7:45. Jesus, so this was what the dawn was like.
Another car was approaching him from the opposite direction and he gave the driver a tired wave as though they were both members of the same exclusive club. The other driver looked at him as if he were mad.
Fenn hummed a tuneless tune, only the fact that he was tone-deaf making the noise bearable to himself.
He glanced at the South Downs to his left; the clouds were heavy over them, soft woolly bottoms scraping against the hillocks. It was going to be another cold, overcast day, the kind that dragged at the keenest optimism, muffled the most ardent enthusiasm. The kind of day to stay in bed until positive nighttime darkness overrode the negative dullness.
The houses on either side of the road were few and far between, mostly big and set back with high hedges or walls protecting them from unsolicited attention.
The road was normally quite busy as one of the main routes from the coast to the larger Sussex towns, scything through country villages like wire through cheese; but on a chilly damp Sunday morning-- chilly, early Sunday morning-- birds and rabbits were a more common sight

James Herbert - The Shrine

than motorists.

Fenn's humming droned to a stop when he saw the outskirts of Banfield ahead and the dregs of tiredness evaporated

as if vacuumed from his head. He grinned, ready to

enjoy the special privilege he had been allowed and to

forget about the warm bed he had just left. It was regrettable

that Sue's naked body had not been in that bed (given though it would have been even harder to leave), but they were still not the close lovers that they had been. When they had slept together just three nights before, Fenn had

imagined their relationship would be back on the same footing and had been disappointed to find on the

following

morning her new aloofness had suffered only a slight relapse.

While not as cold as before, and certainly not as contemptuous,

she had made it plain that she needed more time to think. She loved him, of that there was no doubt,

but the confusion was still there and their lovemaking had not cleared it. Okay, it's up to you. Sue. You

know my number.

Fenn was angry and frustrated at her change of moods,

particularly at a time when things were happening for him, when he shouldn't have had such distractions. He cursed himself for not being able to cut her from his mind. Christ, he was buying his ticket

to Fleet Street and she

acted as though he had forged the money! The invitation for

that Sunday morning was an indication of just how far he

had advanced in prestige in a matter of a few short weeks.

Only he and five other reporters shared the privilege, his

colleagues chosen from the cream to represent the media

world. So maybe he was overrating his own importance a

little, but the position he now found himself in was no mean thing.

He eased off the accelerator as he entered the speed-restricted

zone. The road swung sharply to the right, joined by another minor road from the left, the round white bump of a tiny "Mickey Mouse"

traffic circle helping

(or hindering) the merging traffic. The Convent of Our

Lady of Si on was almost opposite, just to the left, and

Fenn brought his Mini to a halt, checking that the circle

was clear. From his position he could see the upper

James Herbert - The Shrine

win
dows of the large cream-colored house, and for one
brief
moment thought he caught a small pale face
peering down
at him. Then it was gone and he wasn't sure that
it had
been there.
A lone policeman stood outside the gates,
his car parked
half on the curb farther down the road. To one
side was a
group of reporters, damp and miserable-looking.
They
eyed Fenn's car suspiciously as he drove
over the circle in
the road. Fenn pulled into a nearby empty
garage forecourt
and parked. The garage was closed, and as it was
Sunday, he guessed it wouldn't be open at all
that day. He left the car and walked back to the
convent.
The journalists and cameramen, pasty-faced,
shoulders
hunched, feet stamping the pavement, made ready
to receive
him into their midst, any newcomer welcome
to break the monotony of their cold vigil.
was "Morning, hacks," he said, grinning and
winking as he
strode past them. He ignored their muttered
replies as he
walked up to the gates. The policeman on
duty raised a
hand.
"I'm Fenn, Brighton Courier."
The uniformed man produced a folded piece of
paper
from his tunic pocket and quickly scanned the list of
names.
"Okay, in you go." The policeman pushed open
one half
of the gates just enough for Fenn to slip through. He
chuckled at the indignant voices and groans
of the other
reporters.
Across the courtyard and at the top of
three broad steps
was a black door, open and somehow forbidding. Fenn
crossed the yard and took the first two steps in
one. He
stepped into a dark hallway and a hooded shape
loomed up
from the shadows.
"You are Mr. . . . ?" the nun asked.
"Gerry Fenn," he told her, his heart
skipping just a
little, either from the leap up the stairs or her sudden
appearance. "Brighton Evening Courier."
"Ah, yes. Mr. Fenn. Shall I take
your coat?"
He slipped off his raincoat and handed it to her.
"There's

James Herbert - The Shrine

no money in the pockets," he said.
She looked at him, startled, then returned his smile. "If you'd like to go through, you'll find nearly everyone has arrived." She pointed to a door near the end of the hallway.
He thanked her and walked down the hall, his steps sharp against the shiny bare floorboards.
The room beyond the door was large and on a sunny day would have been light and airy; today its natural brightness was muted gray. It was filled with people and hushed voices.
"Mr. Fenn, glad you could come."
He turned to find George Southworth approaching him.
"Glad I was invited," Fenn responded.
"Your other colleagues have already arrived."
"Oh?"
"A rather small selection of elite journalists. You're the sixth."
Fenn enjoyed being among the elite.
"Associated Press, Washington Post, The Times--that sort of thing. I'm sure you know them all."
"Oh, yeah, sure." Fenn shook his head.
"I'm puzzled, Mr. Southworth. Why me?"
Southworth smiled disarmingly and patted Fenn's arm.
"Mustn't be so modest, Mr. Fenn. You've covered this story from the start. More than that, you brought it to the attention of the world. We could hardly have excluded you."
"Hardly."
"O. Would you like some tea?"
"No, thanks."
"I'm sure you'll appreciate our reluctance in allowing young Alice to attend Mass at St. Joseph's this--"
"Your reluctance?"
"Well, to be honest. Bishop Caines' reluctance. And the doctors, of course--they feel the hullabaloo might prove too much for her. The cameras, the television, the crowds, people wanting to get near her, to touch her--that sort of thing."
Fenn nodded. "So you decided on a private service, without the fuss."
"Precisely."
"A lot of people are going to be disappointed."
"I'm sure. Frankly, if I had had my way, I would have let Alice go to the church today as she wanted. But

her

well-being must come first."

"She wanted to go to St. Joseph's?"

"Apparently so." Southworth lowered his voice.

"I heard

she became quite upset when Reverend Mother told her she couldn't. Still, I'm sure it's for the best."

"So you just invited certain members of the, er"--he scanned the room--"public and the media here."

"Yes. My idea, actually. And the bishop concurred.

We're well aware, you see, that the public has to know

what's going on. That's their right. This way, they'll see

that Alice is being properly cared for."

"And they'll know the Catholic Church isn't

locking her

away, and that she's not going through some modern-day Grand Inquisition."

Southworth chuckled. "That's very astute of you, Mr.

Fenn. In fact, that was my argument to the churchmen.

With the chosen few here, representatives of the people, as it were, and an excellent cross section of the world

media,

public interest can be catered for without unnecessary but inevitable pandemonium."

And without loss of maximum publicity, Fenn guessed.

It seemed that Southworth (and Fenn was sure other local

businessmen were involved) had to walk the tightrope between exploitation (and so risk the resulting criticism)

and ensuring that Alice Pagett was sheltered from the public eye (and making sure they were seen to be doing

so). He, Fenn, was necessary to the idea not because he was a brilliant journalist, but because as

instigator of the

story, his articles were followed more closely than any

other reporter's. He was also "local," therefore perhaps

more in tune with local opinion. Well, don't knock it,

Fenn. It made sense. And it had got him here today.

"In a moment," Southworth was saying, "I'll introduce

you to a few people. Your colleagues are already well into

them, but I'm sure they will want to speak to you as the man who was 'on the spot.'" Mass will begin at

eight-thirty

so you'll have just"--he checked his watch--"just under half-an-hour to interview."

"Will I get to talk to Alice?"

"We plan to have a brief question-and-answer session after Mass. Only twenty minutes, I'm

afraid, and only if

Alice feels up to it. I'm sure she will."

James Herbert - The Shrine

He moved closer to

Fenn and said in a conspiratorial whisper,
"I'd like to
invite you to dinner tomorrow evening. I think you'd be
most interested in coming along."
Fenn raised his eyebrows.

"I still haven't forgotten our little chat at the
beginning

of all this business, Mr. Fenn. By the way,
it's Gerry, isn't
it? Do you mind if I call you that? It's far
less formal. I

think at the time you said the story would probably
die

out."

Fenn grinned wryly. "Someone once said that about
Lennon and McCartney."

"I think your opinion was very fair. But you
remember

my offer? Yes, well, I think you may have
suspected my

motives at that time. You can see now that the
publicity

machine is in motion of its own accord and needs
absolutely

no impetus from myself, or the parish council. It
may need just a little steering from the inside, though, and
I think you could be helpful in that respect."

"I don't understand."

"We have enough confidence in you, having read all
your articles in the Courier, to invite you to write
the

complete story of the Banfield
Miracles."

"For my newspaper?"

"For any newspaper you care to work for. Or for a
book. We would make you privy to all council
meetings

and any other decisions, discussions, and plans
concerning

this whole affair."

Fenn's eyes gleamed. It was too good to be
true. The authorized chronicler of the Banfield

Miracles. Any newspaper editor would jump
at serialization rights and any

publisher would give his right arm (or his marketing
manager's right arm) for the rights to the book. There had
to be a snag. "Why me?" he asked.

"I believe you asked that question before, or something
like it. The answer's simple: because you were there at the
beginning. You already have more inside knowledge than
anyone else in this matter apart from the clergy. And

even

they--Father Hagan and Monsignor Delgard--

were not

there at the very Beginning."

"Would the priests be agreeable?"

"I've already broached the subject
to Bishop Caines.

He's interested but wary."

"Oh?"

"He's pragmatic enough to realize the story has
become

James Herbert - The Shrine

almost exclusive to you. However, he is not altogether sure that, to use an old-fashioned phrase, your

'intentions are honorable." His

"Are his?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It doesn't matter."

"That's the reason for my invitation to dine with us tomorrow evening."

"Bishop Caines will be there?"

"Yes, along with Father Hagan and Monsignor Delgard.

Our meeting initially is to talk about the development of a

shrine at St. Joseph's and Banfield's part in it. Bishop

Caines is insistent that there should be full cooperation and

liaison between the parish council and the Church."

"It's moving things pretty fast for them, isn't it? I thought

it took years for the Church to allow a shrine to be authorized."

"Normally it would. Fortunately or unfortunately, whichever

way you care to look at it, the pilgrims are going to

come and nothing will stop them. The bishop wants to be prepared. Officially, the Church cannot declare St.

Joseph's a shrine, but that won't prevent the public from regarding

it as such."

"Do the two priests know I've been invited?"

"Yes. Bishop Caines, himself, told them."

"And they agreed?"

"Reluctantly. I suppose you could say the bishop gave

them little choice. I hope, after all this, you are interested?"

"What do you think? Where and when?"

"My hotel, eight-thirty."

"I'll be there. His

"Fine. Now, let me introduce you to a few people."

Fenn spent the next twenty minutes talking to assorted

"guests," among them the local Tory MP, who was not

himself a Catholic but professed a deep interest in all

religions; several members of the clergy, whose titles he

instantly forgot; certain leading members of the local

community; the Reverend Mother of the convent; and most interesting of all, the Apostolic

Delegate to Great

Britain and Gibraltar. Fenn understood that this clergyman

was the official go-between for the Catholic Church in Britain and the Vatican. A quiet-spoken,

unassuming

James Herbert - The Shrine

man, he seemed genuinely pleased to be introduced to Fenn and gently Ted him to one side so that he could question him on the articles he had written and what he had personally witnessed. Soon the reporter began to feel like the interviewee, but he enjoyed the priest's frank questioning and the deference with which his answers were treated. When the audience was over, for that was what it felt like, Fenn realized he had asked hardly any questions himself. He was puzzled by the priest's accent and one of the gray-garbed nuns who was flitting through the crowded room urging more tea or coffee on the assemblage provided the answer: The Most Reverend Pierre Melzak was from Belgium. Fenn accepted a coffee from the sister and wished he'd declined the ginger biscuit which resisted all attempts to be bitten. He left it on the saucer, his teeth groaning after the battle, and was sipping the lukewarm coffee when a husky voice said, "Hi." He turned to see a dark-haired woman smiling at him; at least her lips were smiling--the eyes were too calculating to be easily happy. "Shelbeck, Washington Post" she told him. "Yeah, somebody already pointed you out to me. How's Woodward?" "Redford was better. You're Gerry Fenn, aren't you?" He nodded. "I liked your copy. Maybe we can get together later?" "That'd be nice. What for?" "Compare notes?" Her accent was pure New York. "I'm ahead." "You could benefit." "How?" "Financially, how else?" The smile had finally reached her eyes. "Okay . . ."

The buzz of conversation stopped as sliding doors covering one side of the room were drawn back. Another room, white-walled and low-ceilinged, lay beyond. Fenn guessed it had once been a double garage attached to the house that the Sisters of Our Lady of Zion had had

converted into a small chapel. The altar was simple, no more than a rectangular table covered in a spotlessly white cloth on which stood a crucifix. Small benches stood before it, enough to accommodate the nuns who lived in the convent. "If you would please take your places," Bishop Caines told the select group, "the Mass will begin in a few moments. I'm afraid there isn't room for everybody to sit, even though our kind sisters have volunteered to stand throughout the service, so could the male journalists please take a position at the back of the chapel." People began to move into the next room and Shelbeck winked at Fenn. "I'll talk to you after the show," she w-hispered. "The name's Nancy, by the way." He watched her push her way into the chapel, heading for a seat near the front. Her age could have been anywhere between thirty and forty, though he guessed it was at the higher end, say thirty-six or comseven. She wore a sensible gray tweed suit, the kind native New Yorkers managed to make look businesslike yet attractive. Her figure was slim and, from the back, her legs were good (which was the real test for legs). At a quick appraisal, she was abrasive, brittle, and more than a little shrewd, the kind of woman who could intimidate the more easily intimidated of the male species (which was most of them). She could prove interesting. "Um, could we leave the front bench free for myself, Reverend Mother, Alice, and Mr. and Mrs. Pagett?" Bishop Caines said, a beaming smile on his face. "Monsignor Melzak, would you please join us at the front?" The small Belgian priest did as requested and the bishop turned his attention back to the rest of the congregation. "Alice will join us presently. The service will be kept short and she will be the first to take Communion. May I ask our friends from the media to refrain from asking any questions of the child when she enters the chapel. I promise you'll have the opportunity as soon as the Mass is finished. Only twenty minutes, of course, but you must

remember

she is under considerable strain." He tried a disarming

smile. "I need hardly add that no pictures will be allowed

and members of the press have been invited on that

understanding. So if any of you have cameras hidden about your person, please keep them that way--hidden and unused."

Soft chuckles greeted his last remark, and there were

one or two embarrassed smiles among the pressmen.

Everyone soon became settled and Fenn found himself

standing to one side of the room at the back. He was above

the congregation, for three steps led down from the general

room into the chapel itself. He thought the drawn doors might be a good spot to lean against if the service

wasn't as short as the bishop had declared. There was an

air of expectancy, the same excitement present at St. Joseph's

on the previous Sunday. The nuns of the convent knelt

around the side walls, heads bowed, rosaries entwined

between fingers. The politician and some of the other dignitaries looked uncomfortable, not sure of the

ceremony, anxious not to offend. He caught a glimpse of Nancy

Shelbeck as she turned her head to study, and no doubt to

make note of, her surroundings. Whispered conversation

faded and the congregation settled into an uneasy silence.

Fenn turned as a door behind him opened. A man walked awkwardly into the room and Fenn quickly

recognized him as Len Pagett, Alice's father. He

wore an ill-fitting suit, one that had seen better days, its

obviously recent dry-clean giving it a short-term

smartness. He looked

with trepidation across the room into the chapel and Fenn could see resentment in his eyes. He stood back

from the door, revealing the small figure of Alice.

She emerged from the darkness of the hallway, a nervous, doelike

creature, her face pale, eyes wide and darting. She

wore a pale-blue dress and her blond hair was tied back at one

side with a white bow. Her father muttered something and she moved

James Herbert - The Shrine

more quickly into the room. Her glance went immediately to the large patio windows overlooking the convent's garden

and Fenn felt she was like a young caged animal, yearning to be on the outside, away from the smothering kindness of captivity.

Immediately behind came Molly Pagett, an uncertain

smile on her face as she urged Alice onward into the

chapel. A nun was the last to enter; she turned to close the

door, then stood with her back to it as though a guard.

All heads turned as Alice approached the steps; she

stopped for a moment to take in the scene before her.

She

seemed even younger than her eleven years, yet there was

a subtle change in her features, a look that made her less of

a child than before. Fenn could not define the change.

Maybe it was in the eyes . . .

She turned toward him as though suddenly aware that he, in particular, was watching her. For a brief

moment,

something chilled him. Then it was gone, had passed, and

he was only looking into the face of a small, timid child.

Something lingered with him, though, and it was a feeling he could not understand.

Alice stepped down into the chapel as Bishop Caines

beckoned her forward. She genuflected before the altar,

then disappeared from view as she sat with her parents on

the front bench.

Once again, the door behind Fenn opened, the nun who

had been standing in front of it quickly stepped to one side

as the handle turned. Father Hagan entered, dressed in the

bright robes of the Mass, followed by Monsignor Delgard,

who wore his customary black garb. The first priest carried

a covered chalice as he swept through the room into

the chapel, his eyes downcast. Monsignor Delgard gave

Fenn a brief nod of recognition as he passed.

Both men made their way to the altar and stood behind it, facing the congregation. Fenn assumed Delgard

was

there to assist Father Hagan in the absence of altar servers.

Again, the expression on another's face disturbed the

reporter, for Hagan looked desperately tired and unwell.

He placed the chalice on the altar and even from where

Fenn stood, his unsteadiness was evident.

Though he was

still leaning forward over the altar, the priest's attention

was taken by someone seated in the front row. Fenn knew

that Feather Hagan was staring into the face of Alice Pagett.

The priest became still for several seconds, then appeared

to remember where he was, and the service began.

Fenn was getting used to the Mass by now and was relieved it was to be a short one. Short though it was, he

was soon looking around, totally unmoved by the service

itself. Daylight, gray and depressing on such a morning,

flooded the small chapel through a broad skylight, presumably

built into the roof when the garage had been converted.

The walls themselves were still of rough brick but painted gleaming white, and the floor was carpet-tiled. There were

no windows, just a heavy, locked door leading out into the

courtyard. The congregation, led by the nuns and the invited clergy, responded to the priest's

intonations and

Fenn tried to follow the proceedings in the Mass book

handed to him by the same sister who had served him

coffee. He lost his place several times and eventually gave

up. He found it difficult to understand the appeal of such

a weekly ritual to someone like Sue, who was a level-headed,

sensitive, and capable woman. She was also pretty smart,

certainly nobody's fool. So how come she was hooked on

all this?

Something caught his eye. A sudden movement above.

He looked toward the skylight and smiled. The shadowy

form of a cat was moving across the slanted, frosted glass.

It stopped and the ghostly head grew larger as the cat tried

to peer through the unclear glass. It rested its front paws

against the pane, head weaving from side to side as if frustrated. Its body appeared to stiffen, then it

eased back

down the slope and sat, only the shadow of its upper body

visible.

Fenn and the other reporters knelt when the rest of the

James Herbert - The Shrine

congregation knelt, stiffened to attention when those seated stood, and generally responded to the service in a superficial way. He realized it wasn't out of reverence, but more out of respect for the sweet-looking nuns, who he felt might have been upset if the correct movements were not adhered to. A tiny bell rang and heads bowed. Fenn, kneeling uncomfortably, knew it was almost time for Holy Communion. He eased himself upright, sure that he wouldn't be noticed at this crucial point. The silence in the room was disconcerting. In a church, atmospherics and general rustling of restless bodies, moaning children, and muffled coughs were enough to combat any true silence, but here in the little chapel, even a rumbling stomach had no camouflage. Father Hagan stood before the altar, the chalice and Communion wafer in his hand. His eyes were almost closed. Fenn saw Bishop Caines lean over and whisper something to Alice. For a moment she did not move and he had to whisper again. She stood, her hair bright yellow, the white bow like a butterfly nestling in wheat. She looked frail, too small, and Fenn found himself concerned, caring about her. She had been through so much, this little squirt, and he wondered how she had remained so calm throughout. She was looking at the priest, still not moving. Her mother touched her arm, but Alice did not look at her. Eventually it was the Reverend Mother who rose and led Alice toward Father Hagan. The priest looked down at the little figure and his eyes widened. His hand was visibly trembling when he held the Host forward. Fenn frowned, aware of the tension in the priest. My God, he thought, he's frightened. Something's scaring him bloody silly. Alice's head tilted backward slightly, as though she were offering her tongue to take the Communion wafer. The priest hesitated, then seemed to resolve something in his

own mind. He placed the wafer on Alice's tongue.

Her head bowed and for a moment both she and the priest were still.

Then her small body began to shudder. Alice fell to her

knees as the retching sound screeched from her.

Vomit

splattered onto the floor. Onto the shoes of the priest.

Onto his white robes.

Then out has she taken a silver wand,

An' she's turned her three times round and round;

She mutter "d sic words till my strength it failed,

An' I fell down senseless upon the ground.

"Alison Gross," Anon.

"father, YOU'VE HARDLY TOUCHED YOUR soup.

Is there

something wrong with it?"

The priest looked up, startled. "I, uh, no, of course not.

I'm afraid I'm just not very hungry."

Southworth looked

relieved.

Bishop Caines laughed jovially. "I swear you're wasting away before my eyes, Andrew. Come on, man, you must

eat, especially if you're going to cope over the next few

months."

Father Hagan picked up his spoon once more and dipped

it into the mushroom soup, his movements slow, distracted.

Bishop Caines and Monsignor Delgard exchanged concerned

glances.

"Are you still unwell?" Delgard asked quietly. The others

on the table were watching the priest with interest.

The man's decline in health had spanned the past few

weeks, but the overnight change had been more dramatic.

Father Hagan sipped from the spoon. "It's just a chill, I

think," he said unconvincingly.

"Would you like me to take you home?"

"No. Our discussion tonight is important."

Bishop Caines dabbed at his lips with a serviette. "Not

important enough to keep you from a nice warm bed. I'm

sure that's where you'd be better off, Andrew."

"I'd rather stay."

"So be it. But I insist you see a doctor tomorrow without

fail."

"There's no need--"

"Without fail," the bishop repeated.

Father Hagan nodded, then laid down his spoon.

James Herbert - The Shrine

He sat
back in his chair, feeling strangely detached from
his
surroundings. Occasionally it was like viewing the scene
through the wrong end of a telescope. Even the
conversation
sounded distant.
He looked across at the reporter who was sitting
on the
opposite side of the round dinner table,
between the hotelier
and Bishop Caines, and again he asked himself the
silent question: why had they involved this man? Fenn
wasn't a Catholic and didn't appear to have
any sympathy
at all toward the Catholic
religion. Objectivity, Bishop
Caines had said. They needed someone like Fenn, an
agnostic, to write objectively on the
Banfield Miracles,
someone without bias who would be more credible because
of it. He would report the untainted facts, and
after
all, that was all that was necessary here, for the facts alone
would convince and perhaps convert.
Would the young reporter listen to him? Would he want
to hear? And what could he, Hagan, really tell
him? That
he was afraid? Afraid of a child? Afraid of .
. . his What?
Nothing. There was nothing to fear. Nothing at all
.. "dis . . Alice is fine." Bishop Caines was
speaking. "I'm
afraid all the excitement yesterday was a little
too much
for her. Her own doctor gave her a thorough
checkup and
said there was nothing to worry over. She had a
slight
temperature, but that was all. A few more
days of peace
and quiet is all she needs."
"I'm pleased to hear it," Southworth said. "She
had us
all worried yesterday. Mercifully it didn't
happen up at
St. Joseph's in full view of the crowds. Very
wise of
you, if I may say so, Bishop, to keep the child
at the
convent."
"Yes, much as I understand the need for people to see
Alice, her own best interests must be considered."
"Does that mean you won't let her return to the
church
for some time?" asked Fenn.
"Oh, no, no. It would be quite wrong to keep
Alice
from her beloved St. Joseph's. She's known the
church all
her young life, Mr. Fenn; it's a second
home to her. In

fact, you could say she was practically born there."

"You mean she was baptized--"

"I think it would be wise to keep Alice away from St.

Joseph's permanently."

The interruption surprised everyone sitting at the table.

Bishop Caines studied his parish priest with evident impatience.

"Now, Andrew, you know that would be impossible.

Reverend Mother tells me she has found the child weeping

in her room because she misses the church so much.

We

can't keep her locked away forever." He quickly

looked at

Fenn. "Not that we are keeping her locked up, you understand. Alice is free to leave at any time

her parents

wish her to."

"But she wants to leave," Fenn said.

"Of course it's no fun for a little girl to be shut away in a

convent, Mr. Fenn. Naturally she would like to be seeing

her friends, playing with them, carrying on with

all the

usual activities young children indulge in. And

she will,

before very long."

"Don't let her come back to the church. Not

yet."

"Andrew, I cannot understand your attitude in this matter." The soothing amiability had left the

bishop's

tone, although his words were still softly spoken. "Just what is it that disturbs you about the girl?"

Fenn leaned forward, elbows on the table, interested

in

the priest's reply.

Father Hagan looked uncertainly about at the

dinner

guests. "... I'm not sure. It just . . .

doesn't . . ."

"Come now, Father," said Bishop Caines. "I

think it's

time you shared your unwillingness to accept these rather wondrous events with us. Don't worry about our

Mr.

Fenn here--we will have no secrets from the press.

If you

have doubts, please voice them so that they can be discussed."

The door opened and the headwaiter unobtrusively entered

the room. He quickly surveyed the dinner table,

then nodded at someone just outside the door. A

waitress

hurried through and began to gather up the used dishes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Father," she said, about

to take the

priest's soup bowl.
"It's all right, I've finished."
The dish was taken away. Nobody spoke until the waitress had left and the headwaiter had closed the disdoor, abruptly cutting off the noise from the public restaurant and bar below. Southworth had deemed it wise to hold the dinner in a private banqueting room on the first floor, away from the hotel's other guests, who that week were mainly visiting journalists.
"Andrew?" the bishop prompted.
"It's difficult. Bishop," the priest said quietly.
"I beg your pardon?"
"I said it's difficult. Difficult to put my feelings into words."
"Do try." It was said kindly.
"Something . . . something is wrong. I can't say what it is, but something doesn't feel right. The church . . . St. Joseph's . . . somehow seems . . . empty."
"Empty? I don't understand."
"I think I know what Father Hagan means," said Monsignor Delgard. All eyes turned toward him.
"I've been concerned over the atmosphere inside St. Joseph's for a few days now and I believe I understand what Father Hagan is trying to say."
"Then perhaps you'd enlighten us," said Bishop Caines.
"It seems to me the church has become spiritually devoid."
"I'm very surprised at you, Monsignor," the bishop said coldly. "That remark could be regarded as sacrilegious.
The House of God can never be spiritually devoid-- it's impossible, contrary to all our beliefs to hold such a view."
"A church is just a building made of stone."
Bishop, " the monsignor replied calmly.
Bishop Caines' face reddened and Fenn hid his smile behind his wineglass.
"It might be better to confine our discussion tonight to the more, er, "material" aspects of the situation," Southworth cut in. "Don't you agree, Gerry?"
"Well, no. I--"
"Yes, you're absolutely right," Bishop Caines said, not wishing to hold a theological debate now in

front of the
reporter who could so easily
misinterpret everything. "We
can talk of this later." He looked meaningfully
at the two
clergymen.
"As you wish," Delgard responded stiffly.
Father Hagan opened his mouth to say more, but on
seeing the stern expression on his bishop's face,
he refrained.
Fenn was disappointed.
Southworth allowed no respite. "One thing
I'm sure the
media will want, Bishop, is a statement on
Alice's health at
this present moment ..."
"Haven't I already told you?" The bishop was still
watching
his two priests, but he turned to give
Southworth a
warm smile.
"Yes, but I meant her state of health generally.
Yesterday
was an exception."
"Yes, that it was. A culmination of events, if
you like. It
had to catch up with the child sooner or later.
The monsignor
has the latest information from the medical team."
"A medical report is generally private to the
individual,"
said Delgard. He nodded toward Fenn. "Why
should it be
made public by the press?"
"We have an understanding with Mr. Fenn," Southworth
said.
Fenn looked at him in surprise. "Now wait
a minute.
The only understanding that we have is that I'll write
the
truth." Then he added, "As I see it."
"Naturally, Mr. Fenn," Bishop Cairnes
assured him. "We
would not expect otherwise. However, we would
expect,
er, discreet journalism."
"Oh, I can be discreet. It's secrets I
can't keep."
He caught the glance that passed between the bishop and
Southworth.
"Okay," he said, raising a hand, "I understand
your
dilemma. You want the story told without
frills, without
exaggeration, and truthfully. That's good, that's what
I
want to do. On the other hand, you want personal
privacy
respected and anything that could cause embarrassment
smoothed over, if not scrubbed out." He paused
to take a
breath. "I'll go along with you on the first count.
No

exaggeration, no exploitation. As for personal privacy, I'm afraid that went out the window when Alice saw her first vision. Not just for her. For you. And for the whole of Banfield. On the third count--revealing anything that could cause embarrassment--well, you have to leave that to me."

"I'm not sure that's good enough," said the bishop.

"It'll have to be." Fenn grinned. "Look, I know Alice's father is a drunken old sot, but at this stage, I don't think it's essential to the story. It's not exactly a state secret, but I don't intend to make anything of it.

Discretion, right?"

"Yes, Mr. Fenn, but not much of a concession on your

pan."

"True enough. But it's all I can offer."

It was Southworth who saved the situation. "Why don't

we rely on that good old journalistic standby, "off the

record?" That way you can be intimate with the situation

as a whole, but professionally bound to keep certain items

to yourself."

It's either that, or be blown out entirely, Fenn told

himself. "Okay, so long as there aren't too many off-the-records,"

he said.

"Agreed, Bishop?" Southworth asked.

Bishop Caines was thoughtful. "You understand, Mr. Fenn, that we do not want to veil

anything. The Church

doesn't work that way."

Oh, no? Fenn said silently. Get the Pope to tell the

world the third secret of Fatima. Or disclose all the Church's

financial assets, exactly what companies and properties they're

into. And any other items of world interest that the Catholic

Church is keeping to itself.

"We want only the truth to be written,"

Bishop Caines

continued, "but we do not wish any person to be harmed

by it. If you take our view, then I'm sure there will be no

problems between us. I'm sure there are many other journalists

who would be only too pleased to understand."

You wily old bastard. You know I can't refuse. "All

right. But one proviso: if I really believe you're holding

back on something that needs to be told--
I mean, if I
think it morally wrong not to publish--then I go
ahead
and do so."
"Are you suggesting we would lie?"
"Not at all. But you might want to withhold
information
that doesn't suit the Church's image."
"Then we'll let you be our conscience, Mr.
Fenn."
"Okay."
Southworth breathed a sigh of relief as Bishop
Caines
and the reporter relaxed in their chairs. "You were
going
to tell us the medical team's findings to date,"
he urged the
monsignor.
"Their report is very detailed and extremely
technical in
parts, so I'll try to break it down as concisely
and simply
as possible. If you require the full text,
Mr. Fenn, I can
obtain a copy for you. I He sipped
his wine, then set it to
one side. "First, let me deal with the findings on
Alice's
previous infirmity. There has been no
physical change in
the organs of her ears and throat, which
consolidates the
long-standing opinion that her handicap had
psychological
origins. There never had been any discernible
damage to
the auditory nerves, no apparent disorder to the
ossicle,
cochlea, or eardrum of either ear. There may
well have
been some infection due to her illness seven years
ago, but
there were certainly no signs that it had lingered. There
had been no hardenings or formation of bones in the
inner
ear, no inflammation of the membranes.
Mastoiditis, otitis
media--I'm sorry, that's middle-ear infection
--had been
discounted long ago. As for her vocal
cords, there was no
damage or disease to the laryngeal nerve. Her
condition
was always thought to be a result of hysteria."
"You're saying Alice was just suffering from prolonged
hysteria all these years?" Fenn asked
incredulously.
"It's not quite that simple, not is it as unusual as
your
tone suggests. There may very well have been other
infections
present that were not detected by her family doctor

when Alice suffered mumps at four years of age, infections that could have been the root cause of her condition. The doctor considered it to be a routine childhood illness and looked no further in the early stages. Tests came later when the disastrous consequences became evident. I should add that there is no criticism leveled at the GP in the medical report--at the moment we're dealing purely with conjecture."

"Has the family doctor seen this report?" Fenn asked.

"No. And, of course, he would undoubtedly deny any suggestion of negligence on his part. But I would hate you to draw any hasty conclusions--this is partly theory now, just an attempt to offer reasons."

"May I remind you of our discussion a short while ago," Bishop Caines' said, looking directly at the reporter.

was "Discretion" was the favored word, I believe."

"Don't worry, I've no intention of getting into a lawsuit with an aggrieved general practitioner over something that couldn't possibly be proved after all these years. Anyway, the medical team could be entirely wrong."

"Yes, they could well be," said Monsignor Delgard.

"The point they are trying to make, however, is that the shock of being unable to hear or speak was sustained psychologically by Alice in her own mind. The more afraid she was of her handicap, the worse her mental block became. Medical records are full of similar case histories: fears growing into phobias, phobias into physical infirmity. The subconscious mind has its own peculiar logic. It took an altogether different kind of shock to break down the mental block Alice had imposed on herself. The vision--be it imaginary or real--released Alice from her self-inflicted illness."

"You're saying categorically, then, that there was no miracle cure in Alice's case?" said Fenn.

"After seven years of silence she can speak, she can hear. Whether or not her disability was due to a mental or physical disorder, the result is still the

same . . . "

. . . the church . . . the church . . . everything that happened

to Alice was centered around the church . . .

Father Hagan put a soothing hand to his temple, pressing

the thin flesh there, gently rubbing. The voices sounded

distant again, somehow hollow, as if they were all in a vast

cavern, the others far away on the other side.

Or in a

church . . . a vast, dark church. He was beginning to hate

. . . the church.

No! The church was the House of God! No one could

hate it! Especially not a priest . . .

"dis . . . general health?" Bishop Caines was speaking. "How

is she?"

"It can be summed up very simply and without any medical jargon," Delgard replied. "Alice

is a perfectly

normal, healthy child. A little tired

perhaps, and somewhat

withdrawn, but that's to be expected after all she's been through. There is one small abnormality,

however,

but it's something she's had since she was a baby, according

to her own doctor."

Fenn, with his hand halfway from the table to his lips, asked,

"What's that?"

Delgard hesitated, regarding the reporter warily. "This

has to be off the record. It's not very important, but it

could cause the child some personal embarrassment. I

promise you it has nothing to do with her cure."

Fenn considered for no more than a second. "I wouldn't

want to hurt the kid."

"Very well. Alice has a small growth on her body. It's

on the left side of her body, a few inches below her heart."

"A growth? Good Lord . . ." Bishop Caines began to

say.

"Don't worry, it's nothing serious," Delgard reassured

them. "It's what's known as a supernumerary nipple . . ."

. . . Supernumerary nipple . . . a third nipple . . . he

knew something about that . . . had read something somewhere

. . .

oh. God, what was it . . . his

"dis . . . nothing at all to worry about. It has increased a

little in size since her doctor examined her

last, but then
her body is developing naturally. There's no
reason to
believe that it will grow any larger." Monsi gnor
Delgard
sipped his wine once more. "And there you have it.
Alice
Pagett appears to be healthy in every way,
except for this
slight, er, blemi sh. "
"That's very good news indeed," asserted Bi shop
Caines.
"Thank you for your lucid report,
Monsi gnor. Do you
have any questions, Mr. Fenn?"
At that point the door opened and two
waitresses entered
laden with dishes.
"Ah, our main course," said Southworth. "The
hotel is
rather busy tonight, gentlemen, hence the slight delay.
A
foretaste of the coming months, I believe," he said,
beami ng
happily. And hopefully, the coming years, he
thought.
The conversati on concerned itself with generalities as
the food was served and Fenn found himself looking into
the haunted eyes of Father Hagan. The priest
averted his
gaze and Fenn was puzzled. It was obvious that the
priest
was ill: there was a light sheen of perspirati on on his
sallow face, his eyes were dark and shadowy; there was
something brittle in the movement of his long,
delicate
fingers. Bi shop Caines should make the
man take a rest.
What was it they went into? Retreat. That's what
he
needed, a complete break away from all this. And the
goi ng was only going to get worse once the
publi ci ty
machine was rolling. That, he understood from
Southworth
when he had spoken to him earlier that evening, was going
to be one of the items on the agenda. Fenn smiled
down at
the medallions of veal in herb sauce placed before
him and
sipped his wine while waiting for the vegetables to be
served.
He listened to Southworth as the hotelier
tentati vel y
broached the subject of publi ci ty.
"I'm sure we all realize by now. Bi shop,
that we have a
situati on here that private entrepreneurs from all
over the
country will endeavor to make money from. I really do
think it's time for us to seriously consider the setting
up of
an official publi ci ty machi ne to monitor

"... somewhat premature ..."
"... no, not at all. VV-EVERY must plan ..."
"dis . . . Lourdes is not the best example
to follow, George . . ."
" . . . I cant eat. The bi shop shoul dn' t have
insisted . . ."
"dis . . . hired for the papal visit to England in
"82 . . ."
"dis . . . but, goodness, that organizati on took something
like twenty percent of profits ..."
"... worth every penny ..."
" . . . each night, the feeling gets worse . . .
. even with the
monsignor nearby . . . the feeling of being alone
. . . empty
. . . yet there is something there!
"dis . . . statues, T-shirts, records of the
services . . ."
"Andrew, you must try to eat. It will do you good."
"What? Yes, Bi shop . . ."
"Entrecote Roquefort is one of the chefs
special ties,
Father. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."
"Of course . . ."
"... we cannot be seen ..."
"... I understand your feelings. Bi shop, but the
Church
has to keep a shrewd eye on the commercial world
... as
it has always done in the past ..."
" . . . her eyes . . . why did she look at
me in that way . . . why
was the Host unacceptable to her . . . his
" . . . findings from the Institute for the Works of
Religion,
the Vatican itself. Bi shop ..."
" . . . think not ..."
"dis . . . bank itself . . . I'm sure they'll
accept a modest
collateral from the Roman Catholic Church .
. . . already
spoken with the manager . . . member of the parish
council ..."
" . . . meat . . . no taste . . . must eat,
Bi shop says must eat . . .
her eyes. . . she knew . . . what are they
saying . . . his Must stop
them . . .
" . . . design a centerpiece, something like the one
designed for the papal visit to Phoenix Park in
Ireland . . .
stunning simplicity ..."
" . . . can't swallow . . . the meat . . . can't
swallow . . . oh,
my God . . . it's growing . . . the meat is
growing . . . in . . . my
"Father!"
Delgard rose from his seat, the chair clattering
backward
onto the floor. He reached for the choking priest,
alarmed
at the bluey-redness of the man's face, the wheezing

breath
squeezed from his open mouth.
Fenn ran around to the other side of the table.
"He's
choking!" he cried. "For Christ's sake, he's
choking on
something!"
. . . disfilling me. . . can't breathe . . .
growing, growing . . . I
Father Hagan twisted in his chair, hands tearing at
throat. He tried to speak, tried to scream, but
his words
were blocked by the meat that was expanding in his gullet.
He fell forward on the table, his wineglass
tipping, cutlery
jumping with the impact. His dinner plate crashed
to the
floor as his upper body straightened and fell
back into his
chair, a terrible, anguished rasping sound coming from
his
throat as he tried to suck in air.
"He's having a heart attack!" Bishop
Caines cried. "His
heart is weak. Quickly, he must have his pills on
him!"
"No, he's choking!" Fenn insisted. "Get him
forward so
I can reach his back."
Delgard held on to the squirming priest and
Fenn brought
his fist smashing down between the priest's shoulder
blades.
Father Hagan jerked with the force. Only a retching
sound
came from him. Fenn hit him again.
"It's no use, it won't shift!" said
Delgard.
"I'll get an ambulance." Southworth ran from
the room,
glad to be away from the priest's agony.
"It's a heart attack, I tell you," said
Bishop Caines.
"Okay, let's get him back and his mouth
open." Fenn
reached for the priest's forehead and hauled him back
into
the chair. Monsignor Delgard cupped a hand
beneath his
colleague's chin and held his mouth open. The
priest tried
to twist away, the pain, the yearning to draw air
into his
starved lungs, unbearable.
Fenn looked into the open mouth, down into the darkness
of the throat. "There's something there, I can see it!"
He stuck his fingers into the priest's mouth, probing
deep, desperate to reach the object lodged there.
It took
all his and Delgard's strength to keep
Hagan from rolling
to the floor.

James Herbert - The Shrine

"I can't reach it! Christ, I can't reach it!"
. . . hands . . . hands on me . . . can't .
. . . can't breathe . . .
help me. God . . . eyes, her eyes . . .

His throat muscles were jerking spasmodically, but still
the lump of meat would not dislodge. Instead it sank deeper. And grew larger inside him.
His body arched in a paroxysm of fear and pain and choking. He fell to the floor, taking the two men who were
trying to save his life with him.
"Get his head down! Maybe we can dislodge it that way!"
. . . no good . . . it is too late. . .
oh. God, the pain . . . in my chest . . . in my arms. . . oh, Jesus, they should he told . . .
"I've got it, I've got it! Hold him, I can . . ."
The priest screamed and the sound was just an agonized gurgling, a clogged scream of mortal dread.
His body thrashed wildly, his face took on a bluish tinge . . .
. . . into Thy hands . . .
. . . hi-s eyes reflected the fear of approaching death . . .
. . . I commend . . .
. . . the noise from his throat was continuous, a wet, rattling sound . . .
. . . my spirit . . .
. . . that died just seconds after he died . . .
. . . forgive me . . .
And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?
"Jerusalem," William Blake
cold. BLOODY BALLS-CI11LLLNC
COLD.
Fenn locked the car door and pulled the lapels of his dark overcoat tight around his neck. Vapors from his mouth spread a small round mist over the side window as he stopped to insert the key into the lock. He straightened and looked toward the church.
For once the entrance to the grounds wasn't crowded with pressmen. Probably yesterday's funeral had satiated their appetites for a while.
He trudged toward the gate, the earth verge beside the road, long since trampled of its grass, hard and brittle.

Jagged ridges crumbled beneath his boots. A solitary figure watched him warily as he approached. "Cold morning," Fenn called out. The man nodded. "I'm Fenn, Brighton Evening Courier" the reporter said when he reached the gate. "I know you," replied the man, a volunteer helper to St. Joseph's, "but I'd better see your press card." Fenn fumbled for his wallet, his fingers already stiff with the chill. He flicked it open and produced his identity card. The man grunted, satisfied. "I've come to see Monsignor Delgard." The man opened the gate. "Yes, he left word." Fenn stepped through. "Not so busy this morning." The man carefully closed the gate, then looked at the reporter. "They'll show up later. Most are down at the convent." He pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "I've just passed it. There's a few there, not many." "I suppose they had their fill yesterday. Leeches." He stared at Fenn, no apology in his gaze. "Did you know Father Hagan well?" the reporter asked, ignoring the slight. "He was a good man. A good, hardworking man. This was all too much for him, I suppose, with his weak heart. We'll miss him." Fenn moved on, leaving the man shaking his head, blowing his nose. He went to the house and the door was opened by a young priest, one that the reporter either hadn't seen or hadn't noticed before. There were several at St. Joseph's now, acting as clerks, secretaries, crowd controllers. The priest smiled and said in a soft, Irish accent, "Mr. Fenn? Ah, yes, Monsignor Delgard is at the church. Will I fetch him for you?" "It's okay, I'll go over." Fenn turned away and the priest watched him walk toward St. Joseph's for several moments before quietly closing the door. The reporter shivered. "I here was a faint mist rising up against the old building and swirling around the scattered green-stained headstones. He knew the freshly

James Herbert - The Shrine

dug plot

was on the other side, a secluded place in the graveyard close to the boundary wall, and felt no desire to see it.

Watching Father Hagan's coffin lowered into its frigid pit

had disturbed him as much as when his parents, both dying within weeks of each other, one of cancer and the other, like the priest, of heart disease, were buried.

It was

as though the covering of earth were really the final and irrevocable consummation of life, the moment of death itself just the first phase. He had known others whose deaths were premature (didn't death always seem

premature,

even among the aged--not many were ever quite ready), but none had affected him in this way. It had been

understandable

with his mother and father, for they had died when he was still in his teens and their mutual

parents's affection

had not had time to sour; but the priest had been

almost a stranger, had even seemed to dislike

Fenn. Perhaps

it was because he had tried, and failed, to save the priest's life, that he felt the loss so much.

But then there

was little he could have done anyway, for the postmortem had revealed that Hagan had died of a heart

attack; the

meat he had swallowed may have started the priest's

initial

panic, but it was hardly big enough to have choked him.

So why his own guilt which compounded the sense of loss? It was a question to which Fenn had no answer.

The church doors were closed and he twisted the

heavy

black metal ring to open one side. It was

bitterly cold

outside, but the church interior had a special

chill to it. He

closed the door and walked toward the altar, toward

the

black Figure sitting near the front.

Monsignor Delgard did not turn

around at the reporter's

approach; his eyes studied the stained-glass

window above

the altarpiece, but his gaze was inward.

Fenn sat next to the priest. "Monsignor

Delgard?"

The priest continued to stare. "What is happening here?"

he said, and the words were not directed at the reporter.

"Sorry, what was that?"

The priest blinked and said, "I don't understand

what is

happening to this church, Mr. Fenn. I don't

understand

why Father Hagan died, why he was so afraid."

"Was he afraid?"

"Oh, yes. He was in mortal fear."

"He was ill."

"Yes, he was ill. But something more. Something else took his strength."

"I'm not following you."

The priest sighed and lowered his face. He turned to the

reporter. "Do you believe in God, Mr. Fenn?" he asked.

Fenn was surprised at the question and a little embarrassed

by it. "I think so. I'm not sure. Guess I haven't

given it enough thought."

"Everybody gives it enough thought, Mr. Fenn.

Are

you reluctant to offend me because I'm a priest?"

"No, it isn't that. I'm really not sure, that's all. I can't

believe in this great Father figure in the sky, if that's what

you mean."

"There's no need to. In fact, it would be rather naive to

think of Him as such. Let me ask you this, then: are you

afraid not to believe?"

"I suppose most people are."

"But you?"

"Count me in with the crowd."

"Do you fear death because of past transgressions?"

"No. I just hope when I get up there, He'll accept my

apology. Look, what's all this got to do with Father Hagan?"

The monsignor returned his gaze to the altar.

"He was a

devout priest, a truly good man, yet he was afraid of

dying."

"Maybe he had secrets you didn't know of."

"Yes, we all have our secret shames.

They're usually

trivial; important--shameful--only to ourselves. Strangely,

I heard Father Hagan's confession just the night before he

died and I know he had nothing to fear."

P'enn shrugged. "Just death alone is enough. It's a big

leap and no guarantee of a soft landing. Or any landing at

all. It doesn't matter how strong your beliefs are, how

deeply religious you may be, there's no guarantee been

given, right?"

"Not quite true, Mr. Fenn, but I take your point."

"So when it came to it. Father Hagan was no different

from the rest of us--scared of the pain and a little

apprehensive

of the Great Moment of Truth."

"Father Hagan was afraid of what he would leave behind."

Fenn looked puzzled.

"He was afraid of what was happening to his church."

The big priest turned to face the reporter once again,

leaning one elbow on the backrest of the bench, his long

fingers clasped together. "You know, he hardly slept at all

after the first so-called miracle. For some reason he no

longer felt secure in his own church grounds."

"I noticed his appearance was getting worse each time I

saw him; I put it down to general ill-health, though."

"You met him for the first time when you found the child in the field, didn't you?"

"Yeah. And he didn't look the picture of health then.

But like I say, he grew worse each time I saw him. I

thought it was all the pressure that'd been laid on him."

"He was undergoing great mental stress long before that, I'm afraid. During my stay here we had

lengthy

discussions about St. Joseph's, the child, Alice Pagett, and

her visions. And about Father Hagan himself. He was a

troubled man."

"Did his, er, assignment in Hollingbourne have anything

to do with his troubles?"

Delgard's features sharpened. "Who told you of that?"

"Nobody. I just remembered the uncomfortable silence

at the press conference when a reporter from that area asked him about it. What was the problem, or is it

still a

big secret?"

The priest sighed. "With your tenacity I'm sure you

would find out sooner or later. It's all in the past and really

not very important."

"So if it isn't, tell me."

"On the understanding it will go no further?"

"Absolutely."

Delgard was satisfied. If he refused to tell, Fenn would

be even more interested and would dig around until he raked up something; this way he was sworn

to secrecy

because of their off-the-record agreement a few

nights

before.

James Herbert - The Shrine

"Father Hagan was young, a novice, when he was sent

to Hollingbome," he began. "He was uncertain of himself,

but hardworking, eager to learn. And he was vulnerable."

Delgard fell silent and Fenn grew impatient.

"Are you trying to tell me he had an affair with one of

the parishioners?"

"Not exactly. Not exactly an affair and not with one of

his parishioners." Delgard shook his head sadly. "He . . .

he formed an attachment towards his senior priest."

"Oh, Jes--"

"There was no sexual involvement, let me make that

quite clear. If that had been the case, then neither one would still be in the priesthood."

"Then why--?"

"Rumors spread. A small place where things are noticed.

Affection--deep affection--couldn't go unnoticed. It came

to the attention of the bishop of that particular diocese and

he quickly stepped in, fortunately before the situation

could develop."

"Forgive me for asking, but just how do you know it

hadn't?"

"Both priests would have confessed the moment they were confronted."

"You've got a high opinion of human character."

"They wouldn't have lied."

"So Father Hagan was assigned elsewhere."

"Yes. The other priest--his name isn't important--left

the parish some time later. I know what happened had tortured Father Hagan throughout his ecclesiastical

career, and I also know such temptation was never succumbed to

again. He buried himself in work and prayer."

"But the guilt was always there?"

"He was a sensitive man. I don't believe he ever purged

himself of the guilt."

"That's something your religion dotes on, isn't it?" It

was difficult to keep the rancor from his voice.

"An unkind remark, Mr. Fenn, and not true.

However,

a debate on the theosophical ideals of the Roman Catholic

Church would be rather pointless at this moment. Let's confine ourselves to the topic of Father Hagan and his

fears

for this church."

"That's something that's been puzzling me since the

James Herbert - The Shrine

night he died. He said there was something wrong with St. Joseph's and you seemed to be in agreement."

"Look around you, Mr. Fenn. Does it seem dark in here to you?"

"Well . . . yeah. But it's misty outside, the light's pretty poor."

"Now close your eyes, tell me what you feel."

Fenn closed his eyes.

"What do you feel?"

"Stupid."

"Don't. Just think of the church, think of where you are."

He didn't like it. He didn't like having his eyes closed

inside the church.

"No!"

His eyes snapped open and he looked at the priest in

surprise. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what made

me shout." He shivered. "I . . . I don't know what happened."

"Did you feel an atmosphere?" Delgard prodded gently.

"No, I felt nothing." He frowned.

"Christ, that was it! I

felt nothing. It's empty in here. I don't mean it's empty of

people . . . but what was it you said the other night.

Something about the church being spiritually devoid . . ."

"I . . . I don't know. It's cold, and it's creepy, let's face

it. But there's something creepy about any empty church."

"Not to a man of the cloth. A priest finds only tranquillity

in an empty church, a place to pray, to meditate.

There is no such peace here, just a sense of desolation."

Delgard shifted from his position, sliding forward to the

edge of his seat and resting his clasped hands over the seat

in front. Fenn studied the man's profile, the high-bridged

nose, the firm chin, the deep furrows on his brow. Only

one heavy-lidded eye was visible from that angle and there

was a sadness in its gaze, a weariness reflected from within.

When the priest spoke again, his voice was strong, deep,

but the inner sorrow was somehow contained in its timbre.

"If Alice truly had a visitation, then the presence of the

Holy Spirit would be overwhelming inside this place."

"You said yourself a church is just a building made of stone," Fenn said.

"I mean that it was a physical container that could be drained of its contents just like any other container.

Bi shop

Caines should have understood that. This church has been drained."

"I don't get it. How can you tell?"

"You only have to feel. Just as you did a few moments

ago. Father Hagan had been going through the same trauma

for many weeks, only his perception was greater, his feelings

stronger. You noticed yourself how he was changing physically, how his vitality was being sapped."

"The man was ill. His heart . . ."

"No. His life-force was being drained just as the spiri-
tual essence of his church was being drained. I should have

been aware sooner, I should have realized what was happening

when he told me of his doubts. He didn't believe

the cures were miraculous, Mr. Fenn. Nor did he believe

Alice saw the Blessed Virgin. At first he wasn't sure. Alice

had always been such a good child, an innocent who liked

nothing better than to help her mother in her work at St.

Joseph so. He'd known her since she was a baby--"

"Before she was struck deaf and dumb?"

"Oh, yes. He arrived in the parish just before she was born. He watched her grow, gave her her First Communion,

encouraged her to play with the other children despite the disability. Yet, towards the end . . . these last

few weeks

. . . he was afraid of her."

"Afraid of an eleven-year-old kid?"

"You were there at the convent last Sunday."

"Sure. She was sick."

"Before that. The way Father Hagan looked at her."

"You're right, he was scared. With everything that's happened since, I'd forgotten. He looked terrified." Fenn

tapped thoughtfully on the bench. "But he was cracking

up," he said. "Sorry, Monsi gnor

Delgard, I don't mean to be disrespectful to him. But you know yourself his hinges were loosening. He was just about ready to fall apart."

"That may be so, but for good reason. The stress he was

suffering would have been too much for any man."

"You mean the publicity--"

"I mean nothing of the sort. That was only part of it.

I'm talking of the mental anguish he was going through, knowing his church was being raped, knowing a child was being used--"

"Hey, wait a minute. This is all getting a little farfetched, isn't it?"

The priest smiled, but it was a grim smile.

"Yes, Mr.

Fenn. Yes, you would think so, and I can't say that

I blame you. You're a born cynic and I think it's probably

the cynics who suffer least in this world." He regarded the reporter with eyes that held pity in them. "Or perhaps

they suffer most, who can say?"

Fenn swung around in the seat, facing the altar, away from the priest's gaze.

"It's your very cynicism that may help in this matter,

Mr. Fenn," he heard Delgard say.

He slowly turned his head to look at the priest again.

"You're not a great believer in anything, are you?"

Delgard

said. "You've no deep religious beliefs, you have no family,

no wife--"

"How do you know that? You don't know anything about me."

"Oh, but I do. I've had a long discussion about you with

Miss Gates, you see."

"Sue? She wouldn't . . ." His words trailed off as the

priest nodded.

"Susan is a regular visitor to the church

nowadays. I'm

afraid she's very confused about you at the moment, Mr.

Fenn."

"Yeah, I'd noticed. But why should she tell you about

me?"

"Because I asked." Delgard's voice became

brisk. "I

need your help. I found out as much as possible about you--first, because of the association you now have with the Church under Bishop Caines' edict, and

second, because

I think you may be able to help in other ways."

"You're losing me again."

"Your employer tells me you're a good journalist. A

troublesome one, but basically sound. Apparently you have an inquiring mind or, as your news editor

puts it, a

snooper's nose. He wasn't very complimentary

about other
aspects of your character, unfortunately, but that does
not

concern me greatly."

"I can imagine what he said."

"Good. So you and I are both aware of
your faults."

"I didn't--"

"It was Susan who told me you had a
clinical, open
mind towards most things, especially where your work
was concerned. I must admit, having read your first
article

on Alice and St. Joseph's, I thought you rather
too

emotional, hardly objective at all. But she
explained that to

me, in fact made me realize just how
objective you could

be. It was somewhat perverse, but I suppose I
should

respect your opportunism in some way. You
didn't believe in what you wrote, although you wanted
your readers to

believe. You very skillfully sensationalized the
story without

giving any clear credence to what happened. It's
only

on second reading and with some knowledge of the author
that one can detect the deliberate ambiguity of
your

statement. That was your objectivity: you wrote a
crude,

yet on the surface, sincere piece of
journalism to promote

your own interests. In other words, you wanted a
scoop.

And that you surely got."

"Maybe you're giving me more credit than I
deserve.

That's if you are giving me credit . . . I'm
kinda confused."

"You have a sharp mind, Mr. Fenn. And that's what
I

want. I need your objectivity also."

"Can you get to the point of all this?"

"The fact that you're cynical about the Church could
mean you're also cynical about its opposite. It
could give

you an advantage."

"Over what?"

"Over the evil that's surrounding us now."

Fenn grinned. "Oh, yeah?"

"You see, if you don't believe, then you won't
be so

afraid. Evil is a parasite that
breeds on people's beliefs."

"I thought it bred on ignorance."

"It's often the ignorant who have unreasonable
beliefs.

But yours is not that kind of ignorance. You would
believe

something if it was proved conclusively to you and,

furthermore, you would seek that proof; the ignorant would not. And that's what I want you to do, Mr. Fenn. I want you to seek."

Fenn tucked his hands into his overcoat pocket. He wasn't sure if it was the conversation or the church itself that made him feel so cold. "Just what is it you want me to seek, Monsignor Delgard?"

"I want you to find out about this church." Fenn looked at him in surprise. "Surely that'd be easier for you to do."

"Objectivity, Mr. Fenn, and practicality. I shall be too busy in the next few months organizing St. Joseph's itself, preparing for pilgrims, supervising the building work that will have to be carried out. As for objectivity, I'm too ensconced in the dreadful atmosphere of this place, too involved with the tragedy of Father Hagan, to see any thing in a pure, objective light. More than that, I want you to find out about the village. It needs a researcher's eye, someone who can dig deep, find answers. You've already reached an agreement with Bishop Caines and George Southworth; this would merely be part of that work. All I ask is that you look for something more, something that could have happened here in the past."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. That's for you to find out."

Fenn shrugged. "Okay. As you say, it would be part of the job anyway."

"And one more thing: I want you to find out more about Alice Pagett. And her parents. There's something missing and I've no idea what it is. I only know we must find out."

"I think you may be coming a little unhinged yourself, Monsignor."

Delgard studied him coldly for a moment, then said,

"That's good. I want you to think that way. But before you leave, I want to show you something." He rose from the bench and Fenn quickly followed suit, stepping into the aisle so the priest could get through. Delgard genuflected before the altar, then walked toward the right-hand side of the church. He turned back toward Fenn when he was below the statue of Our

James Herbert - The Shrine

Lady.

"Would you please come here?" he said.

Fenn, hands still tucked into his pockets, followed. He looked curiously into the face of the tall priest, who indicated the statue with a nod of his head. "Father Hagan

told me Alice loves this statue, that she used to spend long periods sitting before it. You could say it was almost an

obsession. If her visions were merely the hallucinations of

a disturbed mind, it's not improbable that they would take

the form of something she was fascinated by. Take a good

look at the statue."

He remembered studying the statue just two weeks before, on the Sunday of the miracles. He had noticed a

flaw then, the faintest crack running from beneath the chin down one side of the neck.

Now the effigy was a mass of black lines, a crazy

network of thin jagged veins that covered almost every inch of white stone. Cracks running from the corners of

the Madonna's lips gave her a grotesque smile, an obscene

leer. Even her sighness eyes were cruelly scarred.

Instead of a finely sculptured and compassionate image

of the Madonna, it seemed that a hideously wrinkled harri dan

stared down upon the two men, her ravaged palms a mocking gesture of supplication.

Fenn stepped away, as if fearing the stone figure might

reach down and touch him.

Dame, dame! the watch is set:

Quickly come, we are all met.

From the lakes and from the fens,

From the rocks and from the dens,

From the woods and from the caves,

From the churchyards, from the graves,

From the dungeon, from the tree,

That they die on, here are we!

Come she not yet?

Strike another heat! "Three Witches"

Charms," Ben Jonson

he WALKED DOWN THE GRAVEL path toward the gate.

Overhead, the branches of the leafless trees pined, forming

a weblike canopy. Thin, winter-brittle branches snapped

against each other, the cold breeze that shifted the mist

causing their movement. His footsteps were unnaturally

loud, as they had been inside the church, but now there

was no echo, no hollow sound to reflect the emptiness of the sanctum. It was dark beneath the trees, almost as dark

as inside the church.

The whole business was crazy! Bloody stupid crazy!

What was Delgard trying to pin on the kid? An eleven-year-old,

for Christ's sake! How the hell could she cause any harm? And why should she? Was he implying she was

in some way responsible for Hagan's death? She hadn't

even been there!

He stopped for a moment, breathing fiercely.

Delgard was becoming as neurotic--as paranoid--as Father

Hagan. He just couldn't be serious! He had almost

begun to believe the priest. Christ, he was nearly as crazy

as the two of them.

He continued walking, shoving his hands deep into his overcoat pockets.

But the statue. What the fuck had happened to the statue? A flaw in the stone? Huh! That was a new one!

Running cracks like ladders in panty hose.

Maybe someone

had been secretly pounding away at it. No way. It

would have been chipped. The statue had scared him. It

was somehow . . . repulsive! Jesus, Delgard was to blame.

He was the one making him jittery.

He jumped when something stepped out of the shadows.

"All finished, Mr. Fenn?"

"Jes--. You gave me a fright."

The man chuckled as he opened the gate for the reporter.

"Sorry about that. I was just keeping out of the breeze. Bit chilly."

"Yeah." Fenn stepped through the gate, glad to be outside

the church grounds.

"Hey, Fenn," a familiar husky voice called out. He

turned to see the journalist from the Washington Post approaching. "What gives?" she said. "You look white as a

ghost."

"It's the weather," he replied, heading for his car.

"Funny. I usually get a red nose." She kept pace with

him.

There were one or two cameramen loitering by the side of the road, but they lost interest when they saw it was only a fellow journalist who had emerged from St. Joseph's.

"I saw you drive past me in the village," the woman at

his side told him. "Figured you were on your way up here.

How about a lift back to the hotel?"

He opened the car door, then straightened. "It's Nancy, isn't it?"

"Yup. Shelbeck. We met last Sunday."

He nodded. "Jump in."

With no further heeding, she ran around to the other side of the car. Fenn climbed in and opened the passenger

door. She joined him inside and smiled her thanks.

"You're right," he said. "You do get a red nose." He started the engine.

She waited until he had pulled out into the road, reversed

back, then headed the Mini in the direction of the village, before asking, "How come you get into St. Joseph's

when nobody else can?"

"You could have got in through the field next door."

"You wanna bet? They've got a couple of priests posted out there."

He took a quick glance at her. Even though her nose was red, she was an attractive woman. He noticed she had green eyes.

"So you were going to tell me?" she said.

"Tell you what?"

"Why you were allowed in."

"The Pope's inv uncle."

"Come on, Fenn, give."

"You could say I'm there by, er, papal appointment."

I've been officially authorized to write the story of St.

Joseph's and the Holy Miracles."

"Shit, how did you manage that?"

"I hey know an ace when they see one."

"Forgive me for saying so, but you don't seem so happy

about it. Money not too good?"

He laughed humorlessly. "D'you know, I forgot to mention money."

"How remiss. I'm sure you'll make it in other ways, though."

"I'll do my best."

"As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you

about. Remember I mentioned it last Sunday."

"You dissd something about comparing notes."

"Uh huh. Look, why don't we stop and have a drink?"

"At this time of the morning?"

"It's past ten. Nearly half-past, actually. Your country

pubs opm early here. Come on, you look as if you need a

snort, "

"You don't know how right you are," he said, shaking his head.

They had almost reached the edge of Banfield, where the first of the village's two public houses stood. He indicated left and pulled into its courtyard. There were several other vehicles already parked even at that early hour, but

he knew many of the locals used the pubs as coffeeshops that early in the morning, as they did the Crown Hotel

farther along the High Street.

The White Hart had just one L-shaped bar; polished brasses and hunting horns adorned the walls, and the

heavy beams set in the low ceiling gave the interior a

feeling of ancient solidity. A freshly lit fire blazed in the huge inglenook fireplace. There were no more than a

dozen people drinking, some of whom were vaguely familiar

to Fenn. He recognized them as pressmen.

"What'd you want to drink?" he asked the Washington

Post reporter.

"No, let me. It was my invitation."

Fenn acquiesced. "Make mine a Scotch, no ice, no water."

He found a seat by a window while she ordered the drinks from a tall, bearded, and bespectacled barman, and

settled into it with a silent sigh. Jesus, his legs felt weak.

The statue ... it was hard to clear the hideous image

from his mind. How could something like that happen?

He could understand the stonework cracking into such a fine network over the years--and it would take a good many years for such results--but to reach that state in

just under two weeks? It was impossible! And what was

Delgard insinuating? What was--his

"I got you a double. You could use it."

He stared blankly at the woman, then at the glass she

was offering. "Thanks," he said, taking the whiskey and drinking half in one gulp.

"I was right," she observed. She sat next to him and

sipped her drink from a half-pint glass.

"Bitter?" he asked in surprise.

"Sure. I like to try your beer. Want to tell me what's on

your mind?"

Fenn studied her closely, taking in more than he had on

their first meeting. Her dark hair had a reddish tinge to it, not one that came from a bottle, though (at least, not obviously so). It was still difficult to determine her age, for she was one of those women who could be either younger than she looked or older, but never guessed exactly. Her eyes, which were alert, watchful, said older--maybe approaching forty--but her skin, which was pale and smooth, and her lips, which were not full but were well-defined, said younger. Her nose was a little too straight to make her pretty, but it gave her an appearance of attractive strength.

She had removed her topcoat and her figure was trim, if not particularly shapely, beneath the roll-topped sweater and straight-legged trousers. He had noticed the high-heeled boots she wore earlier and they were of thin burgundy leather, stylishly cut.

"I feel as though I'm under a microscope," she said.

"I was just thinking," he said. "You fit the image."

"Hmm?"

"The hard-bitten New York reporter lady."

"Thanks. You must have a way with women."

He laughed. "Sorry, I didn't mean that nastily. As a

matter of fact, it was a kind of compliment."

"Yeah? I'd hate to hear your snipes." She sipped her

bitter again, then reached inside her bag for cigarettes. She

offered him one first and he shook his head. She lit her

own with a slim Dunhill lighter. "What's the problem,

Fenn?" she said, blowing blue smoke across the small

table.

"My name's Gerry," he said evenly.

She smiled. "I think I prefer Fenn."

He returned her smile, beginning to enjoy her company.

"I think I do too."

"Is it the death of the priest, this Father Hagan, that's

upsetting you? I understand you were actually there when he had his heart attack."

He nodded. "The postmortem said it was a heart attack,

but I was sure he was choking. I tried to save him." He

took another long swallow of Scotch. "I'm certain I saw

the meat in his throat. Christ, I even tried to yank it out."

"But the coroner would have known if it was asphyxiation."

"Maybe it was both, I don't know. Maybe he just imag-

ined he was choking. The priest was in a pretty hysterical

state towards the end."

"That's likely when your heart is seizing up."

"No, I didn't mean then. He was in a highly strung

state for weeks before."

She was thoughtful for a moment. "I noticed there was something peculiar about him that Sunday at the convent.

Are you saying, in your sweet way, that he was bananas?"

"No . . . just, well, neurotic. He was upset by what was

happening at the church."

"But that had to be fantastic for any priest. He actually

witnessed the miracles himself. What was it he didn't like?

The publicity?"

Fenn realized he was saying too much. As a reporter

himself, he should have known better. He quickly changed the subject. "Have you got a deal to offer me?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Where's your British reserve?"

Okay, to business. How'd you like to form a partnership

with me in this little enterprise. We work together, you supply the information, I write the story for my

paper, I get you a fat fee. I also get you your name

alongside mine."

"Are you kidding? Why the hell do I need you?"

"Because I'm a better writer."

He put his empty glass down. "I need another drink."

"At this hour of the morning? Hey, wait a minute, don't

get sore. Look, you're good, but I hate to say it--you're

Provincial. Come on, don't get up, just listen. You haven't

had the experience of working on a national yet. I know,

I've checked. You haven't the experience of working under

a good editor, I mean, someone who's going to kick your

butt 'till you get it right, someone who's going to show you

how to get it right-- His

"My butt's been kicked plenty of times," he said in weak

defense.

"Yeah, but there's different ways to kick different

asses.

All I'm saying is that you haven't had the right guidance yet. Sure, you're good to a degree, and okay, you're going to get a lot of offers, but I can make whatever you do with this thing better. Believe me, much, much better.

And if

you want to get down to figures--"

Fenn was no longer paying attention. He was looking

toward the door, which had just opened. A figure stood

there, staring around the pub as if looking for someone. Two men immediately rose from their seats at the bar and hurried toward the man.

"That's Len Pagett," Fenn said, more to himself than to the woman.

"Pagett? Oh, yeah, Alice's father."

Fenn was already out of his seat, quickly making toward the three men, who were now shaking hands. Nancy Shelbeck soon followed.

"Mr. Pagett?" Fenn said, barging into the group and

offering an outstretched hand. "You've met me before.

I'm

Gerry Fenn, Brighton Evening Courier"

One of the other men quickly stepped in between Fenn and Pagett. "On your bike, Fenn," the man said, his voice

almost a snarl. "Mr. Pagett's ours.

We've made an arrangement."

"Who've you?" Fenn asked, but he had already guessed.

He now recognized one of the men as a reporter from one of the heavies.

"He's signing an exclusive contract with the Express," the

other man, who was just as belligerent, told him.

"And

that means he doesn't talk to any other papers."

"Don't be bloody silly. You can't--"

"Piss off." A hand shoved him, and the first man took

Pagett by the arm. "Let's go somewhere quiet, Mr. Pagett,

where we can talk. We've got the contract ready for you."

Pagett looked confused. "Can't I have a drink first?"

"We've got plenty where we're going," the first reporter

assured him. "It's not far." He guided him toward the door.

The few other journalists in the bar who had been taking a sneaky morning nip (purely to keep out the cold

for when they took up their vigils outside the church and

the convent) were converging on the shuffling group.
"What's going on, Fenn?" Nancy asked when she reached his side.
"These bastards have done a deal with Alice's father. They won't let him talk to anyone."
The second Express reporter blocked the doorway. "That's right, he belongs to us now."
"Wait a minute," the New Yorker said.
"Has he signed any agreement yet?"
"That's none of your business."
Fenn smiled thinly. "I just heard you say you had the contract ready. That means he hasn't signed."
The Express reporter wasted no more time with words.
He whipped open the door and sped through, slamming it hard behind him.
"What's going on here?" the tall, bearded barman blinked through his glasses as the crowd barged through the doorway in pursuit. He welcomed the business, but wasn't too keen on the rowdiness of the journalists.
Outside in the car park, a silver-gray Capri was revving up its engine and the Express reporter was running toward it. He pulled open the passenger door as the car moved off and jumped in.
Fenn and those who had followed him from the pub had to step back to avoid being hit.
"Where're they taking Pagett?" Nancy Shelbeck yelled.
"Probably to some nearby hotel. They'll keep him locked away for a few days where no one can find him."
"That can't be legal."
"It is if he agrees to it." Fenn broke away, heading for his Mini. He climbed in, thankful that he hadn't locked the doors. Through the windshield he saw the other journalists scurrying for their own vehicles. The Capri was disappearing into the High Street. His passenger door swung open as he started the engine.
"This is ridiculous," Nancy said, and she was laughing.
"It's like the goddamn Keystone Cops!"
Fenn didn't have time to enjoy the humor, nor to tell her to get out of his car. He shoved it into first and roared across the car park, swinging left into the High Street, barely looking to see if the coast was clear. He

was in luck:

the Capri carrying Len Pagett and the two
journalists had
been forced to stop at a zebra crossing while
two old

ladies, lost in conversation, ambled across.

He slapped the steering wheel in triumph.

"Got the

bastards! They won't lose me now."

Nancy laughed aloud. "I don't believe
this!"

Tires burned the road as the Capri screeched
off. Heads turned as Fenn pushed his foot down and
followed suit.

"Take it easy, Fenn. It isn't worth
getting killed for!"

Both cars roared down the High Street as
others, driven

by the slower journalists, began to emerge from the car
park. Vehicles were parked on both sides of the
road,

making its center a narrow channel and forcing the two
cars to slow down when they met others coming from the
opposite direction. Fenn was aware that it would be
tougher

to keep up once they were through the village
and out on

the open road, but he had an advantage: he
knew the

roads. He guessed they were heading for Brighton,
using

one of the many hotels there as a hideaway, and
cursed

them (although he didn't blame them) for their
opportunism.

Somehow, because of his involvement, he felt that he was
proprietor of this story and that the other
newspapers were

infringing on his territory. From what he had
learned of

Len Pagett, and from what he had surmised of the
man

himself, he wasn't surprised he had sold out
to checkbook

journalism. No one had to be famous anymore
to make

money from selling their own personal story; they just
had

to know somebody who was.

The Capri was fifty yards ahead, approaching
the end of

the village. Fenn could see the road junction in
the distance,

the small roundabout, the garage next to it, the
convent.

Clear of parked vehicles, he increased his
speed, desperate

to keep up with the Capri, guessing it would turn
left at

the roundabout, keeping to the main road rather than
carrying straight on into the minor one. The High

Street

was busy with shoppers, many of whom shook their heads

James Herbert - The Shrine

in disgust at the racing cars, perhaps resigning themselves to the advance symptoms of what their once peaceful village was about to become.

Next to him. Nancy Shelbeck bit into her lip, amused

by the chase but a little alarmed also.

They were nearing the roundabout. Shoppers were hurrying in and out of a grocery shop on the left, bags full,

purses not so full. A huge yellow-and-green tanker stood

in the garage forecourt on the right, shedding its load into

the tanks beneath the pumps. Fresh virgin cars gleamed in

the large showroom windows by the side of the service bay. A green, single-decker bus negotiated

the tiny

roundabout, rolling over the white-painted bump in the road as it headed into the village. The driver was

accelerating

as his bus straightened up.

The Capri barely slowed as it approached the roundabout.

Fenn did not know why he glanced ahead at the cream

walls of the convent; the compulsion was just there.

He saw the small white face at the window, blackness

behind giving it prominence. Instinctively he knew it was

Alice. Watching the High Street. Looking at the cars.

Too late he saw the car in front weaving from side to

side as though the driver had no control. He was almost

upon it. Nancy was screaming. He was trying to turn the

wheel, trying to avoid crashing into the erratic Capri. But

the wheel had no say in what direction the vehicle took. It

moved in its own wild direction.

He jabbed hard on the brake, but it was too hard, too

panicked. The wheel locked, the car skidded.

The green bus, horrified faces peering from its windows

like a row of peas in a split pod, turned to avoid the wildly

spinning Capri, but there was only one direction the driver

could take. Into the garage forecourt. Where the tanker

was emptying its contents.

The Capri smashed into the front corner of the bus, its

hood buckling instantly, its engine rising up and sheering

through its own windshield into the screaming faces of the two men in front. The bus driver went forward with the impact, through the large front glass of his

cab, hurtling
beneath the tanker a split second before his bus hit
it.
Mercifully he was dead before he could realize what
was
going to happen.
As the long tube pumping fuel into the underground
gas
tanks was sheered by screeching metal, sparks
flew in all
directions showering into the spilling volatile
liquid.
Fenn saw the crash and cried out as his own car
smashed
through the showroom window. He was only vaguely
aware of the blinding flash and the thunderous whoosh as
the gas tanker exploded.
"Your life is finished," and he threw her down,
dragged her
into the room by her hair, struck off her head on
the block and
chopped her into pieces so that her blood streamed
all over the
floor. Then he threw her into the basin with all the
others. "Pitcher's Bird," The
Brothers Grimm
someone WAS SHAKING HIM. He groaned, but the
effort to open his eyes too much. His cheek rested
against something hard.
A single voice began to filter through the
cacophony of
sounds, sounds which he wasn't sure were inside or
outside
his head. He groaned. Christ, his head hurt!
Tentatively he forced his eyes open, the effort
exhausting,
like trying to will himself awake from a nightmare. A
face
was nearby, a woman's face, someone he
vaguely recognized.
"Fenn, are you all right?"
He wasn't ready to reply.
Hands reached around his shoulders and he was pulled
off the steering wheel back into his seat. He
felt his jaw
clutched and his head shaken. He opened his eyes
again
and this time it was hardly any effort at all. There
was
something wrong with Nancy's face, but he
couldn't figure
what. It was smeared red; thick cherry juice,
dark-red ink.
No, blood. Her face was bleeding. He
struggled to sit
upright.
"Thank God," he heard her say.
"What happened?" he managed to gasp, and it
all flooded
into his head before she replied. The careering
Capri, the
green bus, the gas tanker--oh, Jesus, all
those people. His

mind snapped into instant attention.
The Mini's windshield was a spider's silver
web of shattered
glass, but through the side windows he could see the
gleaming body work of that year's models. Yet
there was a
darkness out there that puzzled him until he realized
it was
swirling black smoke. A figure rushed by the
window,
arms waving, shouting incoherently. Fenn turned
to the
woman next to him.
"You okay? Your face . . ."
"It's okay. I hit the windshield when we
went through
the showroom window." She put a hand to her forehead
and brought it away smeared with blood. "It
doesn't hurt;
I think it's just a gash." She clutched his arm.
"We've got
to get out of here, Fenn. The tanker . . . the
tanker out
there exploded. The whole place is going up in
flames . . ."
He pushed open the driver's door and the heat hit
him
immediately, even though the car showroom was partially
shielded by a side wall. The smoke was growing
thicker
by the second and he began to cough as the acrid
fumes
poured into his nose and throat.
"Come on, quick!" he urged her.
"My door's stuck! It's jammed up against a
car you hit!"
He pushed his own door open as far as it
would go,
denting the side panel of the new Rover standing
next to
the crashed Mini. He jumped out, then reached
back
inside to help her across. Nancy came
scuttling through,
almost throwing herself into the open. Fenn held her
steady
and quickly took in his surroundings.
Not much was left of the showroom window his car had
smashed through; huge, lethal-looking shards of
glass hung
from the top like transparent stalactites. Smoke
poured
through the opening, filling the area with its choking
denseness, and fire was already spreading across the width
of the broken window. Flames tilted the glass
doorway by
the side of the window and this suddenly exploded inward
with the heat. Fenn realized burning gasoline must have
spread all over the garage forecourt and was
attacking
anything flammable.
He pulled Nancy back, closing the
door of the Mini so

James Herbert - The Shrine

they could squeeze through the cars toward the rear of the showroom. "Keep low!" he yelled at her.

"Try to keep under the smoke! His

To the rear of the display area was a glass partitioned office and he quickly ascertained that there was no back exit from it. The office was empty of people, the figure he had seen rushing by moments before obviously the salesman or manager who had occupied the room. Nancy doubled over, her body racked by choking coughs. Holding her tightly, giving her support, Fenn looked around for some other means of escape. He thanked God when he saw the door to his left.

Nancy almost collapsed to her knees when he tried to drag her toward the door. He allowed her to sag for a few moments, kneeling beside her, waiting for her coughing spasm to cease. Her eyes were streaming tears and her face was now a red mask from smeared blood.

"There's a way out, just over there!" he shouted over the rumbling, burning sound and the splintering of glass, the cracking of burning wood.

"Okay," she gasped, at last controlling the seizure. "I'll be okay! Just get me out of here!"

Fenn half-lifted her to her feet and she leaned against him as they made for the door. Such was their momentum that they stumbled against it and Fenn pushed out a hand to cushion the impact. He quickly pulled his hand away.

The wood was scorching hot. He pulled Nancy to one side, his back against the wall beside the door frame. She looked at him questioningly, but all he said was, "Keep back!"

Crouching, he reached for the door handle. It, too, hot and he ignored the pain as he gave it a twist and flicked the door open.

Nancy screamed as flames roared through, bursting into the showroom as though exhaled from the jaws of a dragon.

They both fell back to escape the intense heat and lay panting on the floor in a tangled heap as the fire withdrew to lap around the edges of the opening. Within seconds the door itself was blazing.

They rose and staggered away, collapsing against the

hood of a Maxi. Both were retching now, their vision blurred by smoke-caused tears. Fenn tore off his overcoat and pulled it over their heads as they lay half-across the hood.

"We'll have to go out the front way--through the window!" he yelled.

"it's too hot there! We'll never make it!"

"We've got no choice! There's no other way!"

But by now, even that choice was not open to them. They raised their heads from the overcoat and stared in disbelief at the wide showroom windows. The broken one, the window Fenn's Mini had smashed through, was totally filled with yellow-red churning flames, tongues of fire licking inward to scorch the ceiling. A thick column of concrete separated it from the adjacent window, where the glass was already beginning to crack with the heat. The fire had spread across at least half its surface, the ground outside molten hot as the gasoline gushed forth and flowed burning across the concourse outside.

"Oh, my God, we're trapped," Nancy moaned.

Fenn looked around wildly. There had to be another way out! The ceiling, a skylight. Through the billowing smoke he could tell the ceiling was solid as he realized there were offices above, not a roof. A stairway then, there had to be a way up. No stairway. It had to be through the doorway behind him, which was now no more than an opening into the furnace beyond. The fire was moving in, greedily pouncing on the hard plastic tiles of the showroom, creating fumes that were more choking and more lethal than the smoke above.

The display windows were the only way out. He pulled the reporter upright and bent close to her ear.

"We're going out the front way!"

She shook her head. "We'll never make it!"

Fenn wiped his sleeve across his eyes, then reached for a handkerchief, spreading it across his mouth and nose. He tugged at her roll-neck sweater, unfolding the material at the neck so it covered her lower face. Yanking her off the hood and holding the overcoat before them as a

shield, he
led her toward the front of the showroom in a
stumbling
run. He left her crouched between his own Mini and the
Rover parked next to it and raced toward the
still-unbroken
window. He ducked as a long jagged crack
appeared in the
glass and a sound like a gunshot rang out. For one
long,
dreadful moment he thought the window would shatter
inward to flail his body with shards of daggerlike
glass,
but the huge panes held. He went forward again,
one arm
holding his coat out to protect himself from the terrible
heat. The display windows were the type that slid
back
into each other, depending on which side the salesman
wanted to drive a car through, and Fenn went to the far
corner, to the side that had been farthest from the fire,
only now the scene outside was almost obliterated
by the
spreading flames.
He pulled at the handle and cried out as the
red-hot
metal burned his fingers. Using the material of the
overcoat
to protect his hands, he tried again, but to no
avail:
the window was either locked, or the metal frame had
swollen with the heat, jamming it solid within its
housing.
He swore, more of a scream of frustration than a
curse.
The heat and fear of the glass exploding inward forced
him back. He returned to his companion, who
was slumped
against the door of the Rover.
"It's no good! The window won't open!"
She looked at him fearfully, then yelled,
"Shit!" She
grabbed his lapel and pulled him down to her.
"Can't you
break the goddamn window?"
"Even if I could the fire out there would roast . . ."
she broke off. "Prick!" he called himself.
He shoved her away from the car door and
swung it
open, groaning with disappointment when he discovered
there were no keys in the ignition. Quickly he
stood, then
rolled over the Rover's hood to the Marina standing
next to
it. He yanked open the door and was once again
thwarted:
no keys. He went back over the hood and landed
next to the woman.
"The keys must be in the office!" he shouted. "You
wait
here!"
Then he was running back, crouching low behind a car
as he passed the open doorway where the fire

James Herbert - The Shrine

raged,
noticing the floor around it was now blazing. Coughing
and spluttering into the handkerchief, Fenn reached the
rear office. He hurriedly pulled open
drawers, spilling
their contents onto the floor in his haste. No
keys, no
keys, no bloody keys! He looked around
wildly, desperately.
Where the fuck . . . his He groaned
aloud when he saw the
hooks in a cork bulletin board on the wall;
labeled keys
were hanging from each hook. He rushed to them,
examined
the labels, found two ragged "Rover." Taking
both
sets, he dashed back into the showroom.
The suffocating heat hit once more and he knew that
soon the whole area would be in flames. His
breathing was
labored, drawn in in short, sharp gasps. The
oxygen was
being eaten by the heat and what remained was
smoke-filled.
He was staggering by the time he reached the
woman.
He climbed into the Rover, Nancy crouching at
the
open door beside him. "There won't be any gas in
it!" she
shouted.
was 'Course there bloody will! How d'you think they
get
them in here?" He jabbed in the first key,
praying it
would be the right one. It was. The engine roared into
life. "Jump in the back and keep down!" he
screamed at
her over the noise.
Without further bidding, she slammed his door shut,
opened the one behind, and leaped in. The car was moving
forward before she had slumped into the backseat. She
tucked in her legs just as the Rover's momentum
swung
the passenger door shut.
Tires screeched against the plastic floor as he
stuck his
foot down hard on the accelerator. The car
zoomed toward
the window and Fenn raised his arm to protect his
face,
hoping nothing solid was just beyond the flames
outside.
Nancy screamed as the Rover burst through the huge
panes of glass.
Shards flew back at the windshield, but it
withstood
their onslaught. The car was engulfed by the fire and
Fenn
kept his foot down, holding the steering wheel
straight,
expecting the vehicle to explode into flames at

James Herbert - The Shrine

any moment.

It could have been little more than two seconds before they broke free of the fire, but for both of them it seemed

like an eternity. The smell, the heat--the fear--was

overpowering, and the sight of blinding, twisting flames all around was a nightmare that they would never forget.

Self-preservation rather than coolness kept Fenn's foot down.

He yelled in triumph as they emerged from the inferno,

the cry turning into one of panic as he saw the stationary

car immediately in his path. He swung the wheel hard to

his right and the Rover went into a curving skid, smashing

sideways into the other vehicle. His body bounced off

the driver's door to be thrown across the passenger seat.

Crushed metal made fierce rending sounds and the car

jerked violently as its engine cut out. One of Fenn's hands

was still on the steering wheel and he used it to pull himself upright. Without thinking, he switched off the ignition.

He drew in deep mouthfuls of air, the burning stench

still present but not to the same overwhelming degree. His

eyes widened as he stared at the carnage before him. Balls of flame were rolling upward into the

smoke-filled

air, their very brightness, let alone the heat, stinging his eyes. The tanker itself was completely engulfed in

fire,

only brief glimpses of its shape visible as the flames shifted

and weaved; most of the garage forecourt was alight, the burning liquid still spreading. Still greedily

devouring anything

in its path. The car showroom was totally hidden behind a blazing wall, the top part of the building,

where

the offices were, already scorched black. There were faces

at the open windows, terrified, screaming faces, with eyes

that beseeched the people below to help them, please, please help"

The very ground shimmered with the heat and there were people crawling, dragging themselves away from the devastation. The green bus was embedded in the side

of

the gas tanker, half its length a mass of flames; most of the

windows were shattered and there were still some passengers left, those who had not been instantly burned

to death

or made incapable of moving by the initial blast,

James Herbert - The Shrine

struggling
through the flames, bodies cut by remaining glass
fragments,
flesh seared by the intense heat. The silver-gray
Capri was
several yards away from the two burning vehicles
as though
it had rebounded on impact, but there were flames
all
around, licking at the metal body, melting the
glass of its
windows.
Fenn blinked his eyes against the glare. Had he
seen
something move in the back of the car?
Everywhere there were people running, staggering away
from the destruction, but one or two moving toward it
as
if fascinated by the danger, the mayhem. Those who
were
paralyzed by fear crouched against walls or covered
behind
cars.
A face was suddenly next to his, a
tear-streaked, blood-smearred
image that for a moment, through shock, he failed
to recognize.
"You did it, Fenn!" Nancy shouted, her
voice cracked
and almost tearful. Her arm went around his neck and
she
pressed her cheek against his in a hug that made him
wince. It also helped bring him to his senses.
He pulled
himself free and reached for the door handle. "We've
got
to get away!" he shouted back at her.
"There'll be other
petrol tanks below ground that the fire hasn't
touched yet!
When the heat reaches them ..." He left the
sentence
unfinished, but Nancy understood the implication.
The dry, scorched air hit them like a blast from
an open
furnace as they emerged from the car and both put up
their arms to protect themselves. It was difficult
to breathe,
for the atmosphere was filled with choking fumes.
Fenn
turned his head away from the scene in a reflex
action and
immediately wished he hadn't.
The village grocery was to his left and its
huge, plate-glass
windows had shattered inward. Bodies of women
who had been thrown against the windows by the blast lay
scattered among the wreckage inside, cans and
packaged
goods littered around them like fallen pieces of
masonry.
One lay still, others squirmed in pain. He
wondered why

the legs of one woman failed to move in conjunction with her twisting torso, then realized they had been almost severed at the thighs by the shattered glass. Another woman, young and who would have been pretty were her face not contorted in agony, sat upright before the window, back resting against the wall below the frame, her hands clutching a wide rent in her throat, desperately trying to squeeze the sides together to prevent her life's blood from gushing out. Red liquid began to pump between her fingers as he watched.

The noise, the confusion--the screams for help--battered against his reeling brain. He put a hand against the Rover to steady himself and the metal was hot. A hand tugged at his shoulder and Nancy was shouting, "Fenn, there's someone moving in the other car!" He turned, shielding his eyes, looking over at the bum-wrecks. She was right, and he had been right a moment or two before: there was someone moving in the back of the Capri, a pair of hands beating at the rear window.

"Oh, Christ, it's Pagett." It came out as a low moan, for the knowledge struck a new fear into Fenn. Nancy was staring at him and he knew what she was going to say. "You've got to help him!" "It's no good! I'll never get near it!" "You can't just let him burn!" "What can I do?" He was shouting at her, almost screaming. What the hell did she want of him? "Something! Just do something!" "There's a woman over there!" He pointed desperately toward the supermarket window. "She's bleeding to death!" "I'll take care of her!" Nancy pushed him roughly away from the Rover. "Please try, Fenn," she pleaded. "So much for woman's fucking lib!" he yelled at her, then was running toward the fire, angry at her and shit-scared for himself.

As he drew closer to the burning vehicles, an even more intense wall of heat hit him, forcing him to whip off his jacket and hold it in front of him. He thought he could smell singeing material. Fenn moved in, feeling stifled, his

skin dry and hot. Breathing was difficult,
walking was
agony. Not just his legs felt on fire, but so
did his lungs.
He lowered the guard just enough to steal a glance at the
Capri.
Pagett's face was pressed against the rear
window, his
features flattened, the palms of his hands white
against the
glass. He was trying to push himself through the
tailgate,
which was obviously locked, his mouth open to suck in
scant oxygen, his eyes bulging with terror.
Fenn was forced to bring his jacket back up over his
head, but even that made little difference. He felt
hot air
rushing around him, then he was in darkness as heavy
black smoke swilled down to cover the
forecourt in a dense
fume-filled fog. Even the winter wind was
playing its part in the havoc.
He stumbled, his eyes streaming tears, his lungs
heaving
as they expelled the poisonous smoke. He
fell and his back
was scorched as he rolled over on the ground,
exposing it
to the worst of the heat. The skin of his face and hands
felt
incredibly tight as if it were shriveling in on
itself. He had
to get away. It was no use. He
couldn't get any closer. He
would be roasted alive if he tried.
He pushed himself back, digging his heels against the
concrete, using an elbow that was quickly rubbed raw
to
gain momentum. The jacket was held before him
to protect
his face, but it was smoldering fiercely as though
about to burst into flames. After a few feet he
raised
himself to one knee and risked another look at the
burning
Capri. What he saw was so horrific he
forgot about his
own searing pain.
He only caught brief glimpses through
patches of swirling
smoke and at first he could not understand what was
happening. A strange, unclear shape was emerging
from
the back window of the Capri. It seemed to be
blurred, as
though its form were distorted by Fenn's own tears.
He
blinked his eyes and realized they were already
dry from
the scorching heat. Then he understood.
Pagett was pushing his way out of the car, but the
glass
had not broken. It was melting, clinging to his face

and
hands like thick, viscous liquid, burning and
molding itself
into his flesh, becoming a part of him. Pagett
had become
a writhing, ill-formed monster, a human larva
prematurely
struggling free from its shiny, clinging chrysalis,
demented
in his agony and that madness driving him on. His
head
twisted and his eyes were looking toward Fenn, but they
saw nothing for the liquid glass had already burned
its
way through to the retinas. Part of his face and nose
was
still flattened, molded into that shape and transfixed
by
the sticky covering. As he slowly, twistingly,
emerged, the
glass stretched, becoming thin, beginning to tear. A
gaping
rent appeared near his neck and shoulder, and
smoldering
smoke from his clothes mingled with steam from his
body. He was screaming, but the sound was muted by the
soft transparent screen covering his mouth.
It wasn't just the heat that made Fenn cover his
eyes.
He tried to rise, but was too giddy and too weak
to gain
his feet. He began to crawl away, choking and
sobbing as
he did so. He had to get away from the horrible,
dying
creature in the car.
It was too much; the heat was drowning him. His hands
gave way beneath him and he rolled onto his back.
Pagett was ablaze now. His arms thrashed in the
air,
one hand banging against the Capri's trunk as though
in
frustrated anger. His hair burned and the glass
on his face
was running-down his skin in red-glowing
rivulets into the
flames from his clothes. He fell forward and was still
moving, climbing from the window, an automated,
charcoaled
figure that had no reason, no clear driving
force
anymore, just movement caused by pain.
The gas tank of the Capri exploded and the
hideous
sight was no more.
The fresh wave of torrid air flattened Fenn
and he
quickly rolled onto one side, pushing with his legs
in a
frantic pedaling motion, expecting to burst
into flames
himself. There were others around him, those who had
leaped from the bus windows, those who had been-caught

James Herbert - The Shrine

walking near the garage, those who had come too near the fire to help others. All were crawling or staggering away, all trying to reach some safe point where the heat could not touch them, where they could breathe fresh, moist air.

But the fire was not diminishing. It had found fresh sustenance, more material to burn, more inflammable liquid to reinforce its energy. Vehicles within the garage itself began to explode; cans of oil and gasoline flared into incandescent balls of fire. The heat in the remaining tanks below ground was building up to the point where combustion was inevitable.

Fenn cursed himself for not having run away, for not ducking into cover until the danger was over. He pushed feebly against the ground. The cold air hit him and seemed to close every pore on his body. The heat was gone from his skin, the stinging from his eyes. He raised his shoulders from the ground, fumed over onto one elbow to see what was happening, looking back at the flames, not believing what he saw.

Smoke swirled down and across the scene, forced by the wind, obscuring everything one moment, lifting to reveal all the next. The flames were dying. -They seemed to be shrinking, becoming small patches of fire, losing their strength by the second. Wavering. Disappearing. The wrecked vehicles were just burnt-out, smoldering shells, the gas station a blackened, smoking ruin.

And through the swirling smoke came a tiny figure, a small girl with blond hair who walked slowly, unafraid, through the carnage. Her yellow dress was ruffled by the wind as she held out her hands, and what was left of the flames cooled and died completely.

Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread,
With bitter tidings laden,
Shall summon to unwelcome bed
A melancholy maiden!
We are but older children, dear.
Who fret to find our bedtime near.
Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll
And like a ravenous beast which sees
The hunter's icy eye,
So did this wretch in wrath confess
Sweet Jesus mastery. "The
Ogre," Walter de la Mare

Television broadcast from ITN, all regions, early Sunday evening:
. . . disthe ONCE-PEACEFUL VILLAGE OF
Banfield in West
Sussex today. Thousands gathered at the Roman

James Herbert - The Shrine

Catholic

Church of St. Joseph's, hoping to catch a glimpse of Alice

Pagett, the eleven-year-old school girl who has been proclaimed

a miracle worker. There was a two-mile-long queue

of cars and coaches from both directions into the village

and extra police had to be called in from the surrounding

area to control the crowds. For an on-the-spot report we

go over now to Hugh Sinclair, who has been at the

church since this morning . . .

HUGH SINCLAIRE: The scenes here today have been quite extraordinary. People began to gather outside St.

Joseph's in the early morning hours--devout Catholics,

many, but others who were just sightseers, curious to catch a glimpse of this little girl whom, it's claimed, can

perform miracles. And perhaps they expected to see more

miracles today.

Alice Pagett came to world attention just a few weeks . . .

Television broadcast from BBC 1, late Sunday evening:

. . . cured five people who were suffering from various illnesses. Three were said by the medical profession to be

incurable. Alice herself was deaf and dumb until --she

claims--she saw a vision of the Immaculate Conception.

Although there has been much skepticism over her claim,

particularly from the Catholic Church itself, the fact that

she and five others have been cured cannot be denied.

It's estimated that at least two thousand people went to

St. Joseph's this morning and that the numbers doubled

throughout the day. Trevor Greaves is still in the village of

Banfield tonight . . .

TREVOR GREAVES: Although the crowds have thinned considerably, there is still a vigil being kept around the old

church of St. Joseph's tonight. It's as though the crowds

were waiting for the same apparition that Alice Pagett

alleges to have seen. Earlier today the atmosphere among

the many pilgrims could only have been described as electric.

There was no mass hysteria--something the authorities

James Herbert - The Shrine

feared among such a gathering--but there was much fainting, much weeping, and much praying.

When Alice arrived for the Sunday service at nine-twenty

this morning, accompanied by her mother and a bodyguard of priests and policemen, she found it difficult

to get anywhere near the church, let alone inside.

The

Mass was delayed for forty-five minutes as her protectors

struggled to get this diminutive child, palefaced and dressed

in white, obviously distressed by the loss of her father, so

tragically killed last Thursday

Radio broadcast from LBC, after midnight:

. . . further interest in Alice Pagett was aroused only last

Thursday when eyewitnesses say she quelled a fire which

threatened to devastate a large part of Banfield village. The

fire was started when a car in which Alice's own father was passenger collided with a bus and a petrol tanker. The

fire was spreading, fueled by escaping petrol from the

damaged tanker. The tanker itself had been refilling tanks

beneath a garage's pumps, and the danger was that the fuel

below would ignite too, when Alice appeared and, eyewitnesses

say, put out the fire. Ironically, Leonard Pagett

was killed before his daughter arrived on the scene.

How Alice Pagett could have stopped the fire nobody

knows, but those who were there claim that the flames just seemed to extinguish themselves as soon as she

appeared.

Accident and fire-prevention officers who have made a

thorough examination of the wreckage maintain there is no

logical explanation for the incident. There was little rain

that day, although it was bitterly cold. Apart from the initial explosion when the petrol tanker was

hit, there were

no others big enough to have blown out the fire. The investigation officers found half-burned timber which

should

have been totally charred had the fire followed a natural

course, and petrol still awash on the ground which had not

burned. Only small, scattered, and relatively harmless fires

were still alight when the local fire brigade arrived. A

fuller report is expected within the next day

James Herbert - The Shrine

or so but, for
the moment, the experts are saying very little.
Yesterday I spoke with people who had traveled from
all
over the country to St. Joseph's in
Banfield, many of
whom were infirm themselves, or had brought along sick
relatives or friends to the place they now consider
to be a
holy shrine
Extracts from interviews on Today, BBC
Radio 4, UK, early
Monday morning:
"We couldn't get near the place. Somebody said
the girl
was there, but we didn't see her . . ."
"Yes, we were inside the church. There weren't
supposed
to be cameras in there, but there were, going off all
the time. The priests couldn't control the newsmen,
so I
suppose they gave up in the end . . ."
"She's a saint. I saw her. She looks like
an angel. I suffer
from chronic arthritis, but as soon as I saw her
I felt
better. It's her, I know it's her. She did
it, no question . . ."
"Well, we got into the field by the side of the
church.
We weren't supposed to be there, the priests were
trying
to turn people back, but there were too many, you know?
I carried my sister, I wanted to get her
inside the church.
She's crippled. We couldn't get anywhere
near, though.
Even the graveyard was swamped with people . . ."
"Oh, no, I'm not a Catholic. No, I just
wanted to see
what all the fuss was about. I saw her in the car
going up
to the church, but that was all. Just a flash as
she went
by. Still it was a day out, the kids enjoyed it . . ."
"The village is chock-a-block. I couldn't
even get out of
my shop doorway earlier for people. Business was
good.
As a newsagent I was open till lunchtime.
Had to close up
long before, though--ran out of stock. I think the
other
traders were upset. Couldn't open up, you see,
not licensed
to. All the same, business should be good for the
rest of the week . . ."
"I camped out all night. Myself and a few
hundred
others. We all wanted to get into the Sunday
service. I managed to, me and the wife. Yes,
we saw Alice. She's got an aura about her,

you know, like a saint ..."

"She's a holy child, you can tell just by looking at her. She smiled, even though she must have been dreadfully

unhappy over her father. I'm sure she smiled directly

at me. I felt her love go right through me, it seemed to fill

every part ..."

"I'm still blind ..."

Extracts from interviews on World at One, BBC Radio 4, UK,

Monday Lunchtime:

"People were pushing, shoving. A girl in front of me fainted. It was terrible. Just like the Beatles all over again ..."

"Everyone felt peaceful, everyone was serene. It was

wonderful, like a wave of love flowing over us all ..."

"Somebody stood on my foot. I think a toe's broken ..."

"We didn't want to leave. We just wanted to stay there

and pray. Even though we didn't get inside the church we

could feel the Holy Spirit's presence ..."

"I brought my father down from Scotland. The journey

was terrible for him--he's got cancer.

We only caught a

glimpse of Alice, but Father says he feels better, better

than he has for months ..."

"Everyone--well, nearly everyone--in the home wanted

to come. They insisted. As it's a private nursing home,

they paid for the trip. Three coaches in all.

Only those

who didn't want to come and those too ill to be moved

were left behind ..."

"She was only tiny, but somehow, somehow she stood above us all. She seemed to shine with an inner radiance ..."

"We were packed solid lunchtime and the evening trade

is just as bad--just as good, I should say. Look around,

you can see for yourself. I hear all the pubs in the area are

just as busy ..."

"Perhaps people will now understand there is only one true faith. Alice is showing them the way ..."

Standard, Tuesday, late edition:

miracle GIRL'S father BURIED

The funeral of Leonard William Pagett, father of Alice

Pagett, the proclaimed "Miracle Worker of Banfield," was

held today. He was not a Roman Catholic and so

was buried in a public graveyard just on the outskirts of the village. Pagett, 47, was killed in a car crash on Thursday of last week. His widow, Molly Pagett, 44, was visibly distressed, not just over the tragic loss of her husband, but over the hordes of onlookers and Pressmen who besieged the cemetery. Alice stood silently by the graveside, seemingly oblivious to the crowds and obviously shocked by the second tragedy in her short life within a week--a few days before her father's death, her parish priest, Father Andrew Hagan, to whom she was very close, died of a heart attack . . .

Transcript of interview on Nationwide, BBC still, all regions, Tuesday, early evening:

Q: Surely, Canon Burnes, after what happened last week, the Catholic Church cannot deny there is something rather extraordinary about the child?

A: I wasn't there, so I can't verify what took place.

Q: Yes, but there were many witnesses who say Alice

Pagett stopped the Fire. Some even say she walked through the flames.

A: The reports are confusing, to say the least. Different

witnesses claim to have seen different things. Some say she appeared to walk through the flames while others say the flames died out as she approached them.

And there are a few who say that Alice didn't appear until

the fire was almost extinguished.
Q: Nevertheless, she does seem to have an extraordinary effect, wouldn't you say?

A: It would be hard to deny.

Q: And has the Church now reached any conclusions over the miracles Alice performed?

A: The "alleged" miracles. They are still under investigation.

Q: Well, do you think the Church is the correct body to carry out such an investigation?

A: I'm sorry, I don't know.

Q: Perhaps parapsychologists should be looking into the matter. Or at least there should be one or two included on your committee of inquiry.

James Herbert - The Shrine

A: We have several members of the medical profession--

Q: That's hardly the same thing.

A: Our findings will be open to scrutiny from any recognized scientific institution that may be interested.

Q: But not to parapsychologists?

A: We would not wish to exclude any respectable organization.

For the moment, however, we prefer to deal with the matter on a more rational basis.

Q: Why do you think there were no more miracles last

Sunday?

A: I haven't acknowledged that there have been any miracles

at any time. Unfortunately, the media is creating a

huge burden for this poor child. It's they who are creating this image of a thaumaturge.

Q: A thaumaturge?

A: A miracle worker. People have come to expect it of her.

Q: Indeed, it seems St. Joseph's has become a holy shrine

to many. But that's hardly the fault of the media--we can only report on events that have happened.

A: And speculate.

Q: It's certainly a matter for speculation. How will you cope with the thousands that are bound to visit the church after all this publicity? I gather there was a near riot on Sunday.

A: "That's nonsense. The crowd was very well behaved,

even though many must have been disappointed that they didn't actually see Alice.

Q: Are you expecting a larger gathering this Sunday? And

if so, will you be better prepared this time?

A: I think I must emphasize to the public that it would be

quite pointless to travel to St. Joseph's. There really will

be nothing to see.

Q: But it's true that there is construction work in progress

at this very moment.

A: Yes, yes, that is true. Although we are asking the public

to stay away, we must be ready for any contingency.

Q: Then you are preparing for--forgive me--a siege?

A: I hope not a siege. But, yes, we are making preparations

for a large number of visitors, although we are doing our utmost to discourage them from coming.

Q: Thank you for answering my question. Can you tell us

the kind of, uh, preparations you're making?

A: We're simply constructing an altar piece in the field

adjacent to St. Joseph's--

Q: Where Alice claims to have seen the Blessed Virgin?

A: Er, yes. Seating for as many as possible will be arranged around a central altar, but I'm afraid many will have to stand and endure the muddiness of the field itself. The Sunday service will take place there instead of inside the church.

Q: And one last question. Canon Bumens: will Alice Pagett

attend Mass this Sunday?

A: That I can't say.

Conversation between building contractor and Monsignor Delgard, Wednesday morning:

"Does the tree stay, Monsignor? Shall we cut it down?"

"No. You mustn't destroy anything in this field. You

have the plans. Build the platform around the tree."

Telephone conversation between Frank Aitken, editor of the Brighton

Evening Courier, and Head Office, London, Wednesday morning:

AITKEN: I don't know where the hell Fenn is. He rang

in last Friday, said he'd been burned slightly

in the fire at Banfield the day before. Yeah, he saw the whole bloody thing--he was there, for Chrissakes! No, I don't know why he didn't bring in the story. I told you that last week. He said he had some leave coming, so he'd decided to take it. Bloody-minded?

Sure

it is. You want me to fire him, I'll do it gladly. You don't want me to fire him?

Didn't

think you would. No, I've tried his home.

No reply. I even sent someone 'round there.

No one home. No, not since Friday.

Hospitals?

He wasn't that badly burned, but yeah, we checked. He's just disappeared, gone, vanished.

Maybe he's moonlighting on an offer he couldn't refuse. Sure I raised his salary,

soon

as the story got big. I guess it wasn't enough.

Christ, I've had to instruct our switchboard to politely tell all our "friends" in the business

trying to contact him to go to hell. No, Fenn didn't say how long, but I'll break his

bloody legs when I see him. No, Mr.

Winters,

I won't break his bloody legs when I see him.

Yes, sir, I'll kiss his arse. Thank you.

I'll let

you know soon as I hear.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Extract from LBC interview, Brian
Hayes Phone-in, London
area, Thursday morning, with T. D.
Radley, Professor of Eastern
Religions and Ethics, University of
Oxford:

... of course, western religions emphasize
God's uniqueness
and regard him as a supernatural being.
Miracles can
be worked by Him alone, although mere mortals may
entreat Him by prayer to perform them on their behalf.
Usually this is done through the personages of saints
or
mystics. Now, the eastern religions generally
dismiss mira-
cles altogether and this is because they tend not to draw
the same distinction between God and mankind. To them,
such happenings are all part of the total reality and
obey a
kind of cosmic law. But, of course, that
cosmic law is
outside the material order. Although the--let's
call them
miracles, then--are exceptions to our laws of
logic, our
nature, if you like, their source is from beyond and of
course, the logic of beyond is not of our
understanding,
but nevertheless logical in itself . . .

Extract from article in the Guardian,
Thursday morning, VISIONARY, fraud, OR
self-deluded by Nicola Hynek,
author of Bernadette Soubirous: The Facts
Behind the Fallacy (hodder ebStoughton,
1968):

... in his book Vraies et Fausses clans
l'EGLISE, Dom Bernard
Billiet gives a complete list of Marian
visions reported to
have taken place around the world between March 1928
and June 1975. There were 232 in all, two of
which were
in England (stockport, 1947, and
Newcastle, 1954) . . .

From the Universe, Friday:
BISHOPS TO DISCUSS banrel'd miracle
girl

The curious events surrounding the 11-year-old
school girl,
Alice Pagett, will be discussed by cardinals and
bishops in
Rome next month. With unprecedented
swiftness the Holy
See has decided the conference must take place
before
completion of the Church Committee's special
inquiry. It
is thought that there is some apprehension over the
hysteria
being caused by the girl's claim to have received a
Visitation, and her alleged ability to perform
miracles.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Several high-ranking members of the clergy have stressed the urgency for such a conference, among them the controversial Cardinal Lupecci, prefect of the Congregation for Doctrine, who issued a statement yesterday in Rome: "In an age where religious values are under constant attack, the Roman Catholic Church must take a firm lead in maintaining, or restoring, the beliefs of its followers. The Church must constantly seek divine guidance, and ignore any sign or portent from God at its own peril. To disregard the latter, or to fail to determine whether or not they are genuinely God sent would be to put the Holy Church, itself, at risk."

Extract from Psychic News Leader, Friday,
Is it really
EVOLUTION?:

. . . many prominent geneticists believe that we have now developed the biological capacity to carry ourselves forward to the next level of evolutionary achievement, and that Alice Pagett is merely a forerunner, an advance representation of that progress. Their contention is that genetically conditioned educability, which has always been mankind's most consistently favoured quality in the process of natural selection, is now our most effective biological adaptation to our culture. In a rapidly changing environment where cultures can adapt within a generation, whereas biological changes require thousands of years, man's psychic senses are developing in a rapidly proportionate degree, conferring upon us such mental powers as witnessed in Banfield over the past few weeks. It should be clearly stated that Alice Pagett is not exceptional, or will not be thought to be so within the next generation or two. There have been thousands of other authenticated cases of mental phenomena involving psychokinesis, parapsychology, psychometry; and, of course, faith healing and levitation have been with us through the centuries. Her experiences have been cunningly presented in a religious context, to which those disillusioned with the overwhelming materialistic aspects of today's society and the spiritually deflating

discoveries
of modern-day science have clung . . .
Extract from conversation heard in The Punch
Tavern, Fleet
Street, Friday, early evening:
"dis . . . it's all a load of shit . . ."
TWENTY-FIVE
"I thought you were a caret host or a dream," he
said. "You
can't bite a ghost or a dream, and if you scream
they don't
care. his
The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson
Burnett
it HAS PAPI -. R.
ROUGGBBH-1bbDggb1:D, yellow parchment, the
leaves filled with faded script. They were
everywhere,
floating in the air, scattered on the floor,
filling his vision,
everywhere, everywhere . . .
It's okay, he told himself. I'm dreaming. I
can stop this.
I only have to wake.
But the ancient pages were beginning to curl, the
edges
beginning to smolder. Brown stains caused
by small flames
crept inward.
Wake up.
It was dark in there. Tomb-dark. But the flames
were
growing higher, throwing light, casting dancing
shadows.
He turned, fell. Smooth stone bruised his
knees. He reached
out and his hand touched rough-grained wood. He
pulled
himself up, half-sitting on the bench that he had
grabbed.
In the flickering light he saw other benches,
plain wood,
functional, no elaboration. He saw the altar
and he
shuddered.
Wake up, Venn!
The flames grew larger, snatching at the old
manuscripts
in bursts of fire. The church was St.
Joseph's . . .
yet, it wasn't St. Joseph's. It was somehow
different . . .
smaller . . . newer . . . but older . . .
He had to get out! He had to wake up! He was
conscious
of the dream, so he had to be awake! But the
flames
were beginning to burn him and the smoke was filling his
head. His outstretched foot was being singed.
He pushed himself erect and the fire rose with him.
He
backed away toward the altar, and as he did so,
he looked

James Herbert - The Shrine

down at the burning paper. One sheet lay at his feet, as yet untouched by the flames, although it was beginning to curl inward. There were no lines of ancient script on its surface, just one word, written boldly, without embellishment.

It said:

MARY

And the letters were being eaten by the flames and he saw that all around the other sheets of parchment bore the

same inscription and these, too, were burning and the flames were ecstatic with their consummation.

Wake up!

But he couldn't because he knew he wasn't dreaming.

He looked beyond the flames, down the aisle of the church

that was St. Joseph's yet wasn't, toward the door that was

slowly opening. His skin was beginning to blister with the heat, but he could not move; he was locked into his fear.

He knew he was burning, but he could only stare at the small white figure that had stepped through the door,

watch her as she approached, her face passive, her eyes

closed. She walked through the flames and they did not harm her.

And now her lips were smiling and her eyes were smiling.

And she was looking at him and it wasn't Alice, it was--

"For Christ's sake, Fenn, wake up!"

He wasn't sure if he screamed in the dream, or screamed

when he awoke. A face was peering down at him, long,

dark hair resting over naked shoulders.

"Jesus, Fenn, I thought I'd never wake you.

Sorry for

the shock, but I don't believe in letting people sleep out

their nightmares."

"Sue?"

"Oh, shit, you're terrific." Nancy rolled away from him

and reached for cigarettes lying on the bedside table.

Fenn blinked his eyes and focused on the ceiling, the

dream fading rapidly. He turned his head apprehensively

toward the sudden flare as a match was lit. "Hi, Nancy,"

he said.

She blew a stream of smoke as she shook out the match.

"Yeah, hi," she said moodily.

Fenn's body felt sticky with perspiration and his

James Herbert - The Shrine

bladder
ached. He sat up and rubbed a hand over his neck
and
then his face. The stubble on his chin made a
scratching
sound. Lifting the covers, he swung his legs out
onto the
floor, then sat for a moment on the edge of the bed.
He
squeezed his eyelids tight and opened them again.
"Excuse me," he said, almost to himself, then
stumbled
off into the bathroom.
Nancy puffed on the cigarette while she
waited for him
to return, the bedside lamp bathing her naked
arms and
breasts in a soft glow. What the hell was wrong
with him?
This was the second time that week she'd had to pull
him
out of a nightmare. Had the fire in Banfield
frightened
him that much? And what the hell had he been doing
all
that week, disappearing during the day, not
letting her
know where he was going, turning up late each
night,
half-drunk? She had let him move into her
rented Brighton
apartment because he wanted to get away from other
newsmen--particularly from his own newspaper--to work
on something special, something to do with the miracles in
Banfield, but he wasn't letting her in on the
act. Sure, he
was paying his way, but she had hoped they would be
sharing the project by now. When she mentioned teamwork,
he would just shake his head and say, "Not yet,
babe."
She was being used and that was all wrong; she should be
using him.
The toilet flushed, and after a few seconds he
appeared
in the doorway, scratching at an itch just below his
armpit.
She sighed and flicked ash into the ashtray beside the
bed.
He flopped down next to her and groaned.
"Want to tell me about it?" she asked, no
softness in her
"Uh?"
"Your dream? Was it the same as before."
He raised himself on his elbows and studied his
pillow.
"It was something to do with fire again, I know that. It's
a
bit fuzzy now. Oh yeah, there were lots of
manuscripts--"
"Manuscripts?"
He realized his mistake. She was staring
curiously at
him, the cigarette poised a few inches from her

James Herbert - The Shrine

lips. Fenn

cleared his throat, wishing his head could be cleared as easily. His mouth felt like something rancid had curled up

inside and he silently cursed the demon booze. He made a

quick decision, aware that Nancy was the kind of woman

who would allow herself to be left out in the cold for only

so long before snapping. He was sure she tried his briefcase

every night (a case with a combination lock that he'd

bought for the specific purpose of keeping snoopers out)

when he was asleep, wondering what he had been up to

during the day and just what was so precious that it had to

be kept locked away. Well, the truth was, after a week of

tedious research, there was nothing precious to be locked

away. It was time to come clean with her, an easy decision

because there was nothing to give away.

He sat up, resting his back against the headboard, pulling

the covers over his naked stomach and legs. "Do you want to get my briefcase?"

"Oh, you mean your portable wall safe?" she replied,

confirming his suspicions.

Nancy jumped out of bed without further bidding and padded over to the briefcase leaning against a compact working desk. The apartment was really a holiday

studio, one of the countless off-season empty apartments that

winter months bestowed upon the seaside resort, and ideal

for the likes of Nancy, whose stay in the country was to be

fairly brief, but too long to make a hotel financially viable.

She came back to the bed and he winced as she dumped

the case on his belly. She squashed out the cigarette and

jumped in beside him, the pointed brown nipples of her

small breasts as eager as the expression on her face. "I

knew you'd level with me sooner or later," she said, smiling.

He grunted, working the dials of the briefcase locks

with his thumbs. When the six-digit combination showed, he flicked back the locks and opened the lid.

The inside of the case brimmed with pencil-scribbled notes.

Nancy reached in and took out a handful,

turning back
to the light with them. "What the hell is this,
Fenn?" She
saw dates, names, short notes.
"That's the fruits of one week's solid
research. And
partly the cause of the nightmares."
"How d'you mean?" she asked, sifting through the
notes
and reaching for more.
"When I was a student, I worked one summer in a
restaurant. In a fairly high-class
tearoom, to be exact; you
know, the kind matrons and aunts go to for afternoon tea
and scones. It was a busy place and the work was
pretty
new to me. In the first couple of weeks, all I
could
dream of at night was silver teapots and scalded
fingers.
This week I've been dreaming of old parchment
papers.
Tonight--and the other night--a little extra was thrown
n
in.
"But what's it all for. You writing the history
of Banfield?"
"Not quite. I'm looking into it, though. You know the
Church is paying me to write about the Banfield
miracles--"
"That doesn't mean you can't write for us as
well."
"We've been through all that, Nancy. It
doesn't exclude
me from writing for anybody, but for now, I want
to get
the whole story straight in my own head."
"You've been acting kinda strange since the
fire." She
touched the discoloration on his forehead; the swelling was
gone but the mark was still ugly. "You sure the
damage
wasn't permanent?"
He took her hand away. "You want to listen or
not? I
needed to get the whole historical background on
Banfield--"
"Come on, Fenn. I don't buy that. You could
get all the
background from the local library. That's
what I did, and
so did the other reporters."
"I wanted some in-depth material."
"Okay, treat me like a hick, I'll go along
with you for
now."
He sighed in exasperation. "Just listen, will you?"
"Sure."
"The local library was the first place I went
to. It doesn't have too much--just a book written
by a guy who
used to be the vicar to the village in the thirties,
and a

couple of volumes on the history of
Sussex. "

"Yeah, no meat."

"So I went to the village hall, the public
records office.

The parish clerk was helpful, but their records
only went

back to the 1960's. From there I went to the county
records

office in Chichester and that's where I've spent the
past

week. I think the archivist who helped
me is sick of the

sight of me by now. I've been through every piece of
paper

on Banfield from the eighth century onwards--not
that I

understood much of the earlier stuff. Most of it was either
illegible or written in Latin. Even the later
scripts were

difficult, all those 'fs instead of 's's, you know
the kind of
thing."

"What were you digging for?"

He looked away. "I can't tell you."

"Why not? What's the big secret?"

"There is no big secret."

"Then why are you in such a state?"

He fumed to her once more. "What?"

"Have you seen how you look?" She brushed her hand
roughly against his chin. "Aren't you aware of how you've
been acting? Getting back here each evening
juiced up,

keeping your goddamn papers locked away like they
were

state secrets, your nightmares, mumbling in your
sleep--

screwing me like you were a goddamn zombie!"

"You don't like my technique?"

"Shaddup! What d'you think when we're in the
sack,

that you're just paying your dues on the use of this
pad?

What the hell d'you think I am?"

He put a hand to her shoulder, but she slapped it
away.

"I thought maybe we could get together on this thing,"
she

said angrily. "I've stood back and let you
get on, waiting

for the time you'd open up to me. Just now you could've,
but you chose different. Okay, my friend, since we
have

no deal, it's time for you to scoot."

"Hey, there's no need--"

"Get out!"

"It's . . . it's . . ." He scrabbled for his
wristwatch lying

beneath his pillow. "It's after three . . ."

"Tough shit! Get moving."

"I can improve my style," he said, brushing
hi; ; palm

against her nipple.

James Herbert - The Shrine

"I'm not kidding, Fenn. Out!"

His hand slid beneath the covers and around her waist.

"I'll shave."

She pushed against his chest. "Get lost."

He gently ran his hand down her thigh.

She punched his shoulder. "I mean it, you fucker."

He rolled on top of her and her legs clamped tight together.

"You think," she hissed, "you're suddenly a hot lover?"

You think I'm going to swoon away, you little shit?"

He slumped against her, defeated, then rolled over onto

his back and stared at the ceiling. "Jesus," he breathed,

"you're rough."

Nancy sat up and looked down at him. "I'm rough and I

mean it. You've used me, Fenn, and given me nothing in

return--"

"Okay, okay, you're right."

"I guess it's your style using people, situations. But not

with this lady."

"Aren't you the same. Nancy?" he said quietly. "Aren't

you the same kind of animal?"

She hesitated. "Sure, it takes one to know one. That's

why I'm wise to you. That's why I know I'm not getting

anywhere--"

"Hold it. I said you're right and maybe I'm beginning to

feel guilty. I've felt strange this week, almost . . . well,

almost obsessed with this kid Alice. Ever since the fire,

ever since she came through those flames . . ."

Nancy was silent, fuming still, and he looked at her as

though seeking an answer. Her body was thin, her breasts

not as firm as they probably once had been, faint lines

around her neck betraying the passing years. The hardness

in her face was softened by the dim light, but the fierceness

in her eyes could not be muted. Even when she was younger he felt sure she had never been classed

as beautiful,

yet she had the attractiveness that any woman would

envy, that would make most men want her (maybe just for

one night, perhaps two--she would prove too hard to

handle for much longer).

"I was there, too, you know," she said, disturbed by his gaze. "Alice didn't have the same effect on me."
Fenn lifted himself up on one elbow so that his face was closer to hers. "Tell me what effect she did have on you."
"Wha--his Hey, you're sneaking out of this, you're changing the subject."
"No, tell me. I promise I'll come straight with you after you tell me."
She looked at him doubtfully, then shrugged. "What the hell do I have to lose?" She thought for a few seconds, thinking back to the Thursday of the fire. "Okay. She had absolutely no effect on me at all. Nothing. Zilch. I didn't believe what was happening and I still don't."
"But you saw it."
"Yep. And I still don't believe it."
"That's crazy."
"Sure. I saw her arrive on the scene, I saw the fire die out. But something in here"--she tapped her temple--"won't, or can't, put the two together."
He shook his head. "And how about Alice herself? Do you have any feelings about her?"
"She's just a kid. A skinny, undersized kid. Quite pretty, but nothing special."
"A lot of people say she has a radiance about her, a kind of holiness."
"Maybe to some she has--not to me, though. In fact, if I have to be perfectly honest, she leaves me a little cold."
"Why?"
"Well, I guess it's because she doesn't seem to sparkle like other kids. I know she's been through a lot, but there's something ... I don't know ... something flat about her."
It's as if her emotions are locked away somewhere deep inside. She was obviously upset by the death of her father, but I didn't see her shed a tear at his funeral. Maybe she cried herself out in private."
He sank back down in the bed. "Lately I've had the same feeling about her. When I first saw her, the very first night I chased her into the field, she was just a scared, vulnerable little girl. Now . . . now she seems

different.

She probably saved me getting badly burned last week,

yet I can't seem to find any gratitude towards her. And

. . . oh, Christ, I remember now! I saw her just before the

car crashed! I'm sure it was her." He was sitting up again,

arms over his raised knees. "She was standing in the window of the convent, watching. Just before the cars went out of control."

"What are you saying, Fenn?"

"The cars. Don't you remember? The Capri in front

went out of control, then so did mine. The steering just went."

"I don't remember. I thought the Capri went into a skid

and you tried to avoid it."

"That's what I thought--until now. It just came back to

me. Nancy. I couldn't control the bloody car. And she

was watching all the time."

"I don't get you. What the hell are you trying to say?

That she was responsible?"

He nodded slowly. "Maybe that's exactly what I'm

saying."

"You're insane." She reached for her cigarettes again, lit

one. "If she can control a fire, she can interfere with a car's

steering."

Nancy opened her mouth to speak, then just shook her head.

"Strange things have been happening around her,"

Fenn

insisted.

"Shit, that's an understatement. But there could be other factors involved, psychological reasons for

these so-called

miracles. And besides, her father died in that fire.

The kid

wouldn't have had anything to do with that."

He rubbed a thumb across his lower lip. "No," he said

slowly. "No, of course not." He became lost

in his own

thoughts.

Nancy ran a hand up his back toward his shoulder.

"You were going to level with me."

Fenn relaxed against the headboard and Nancy withdrew

her hand, letting it rest on his thigh.

"Simply, it's this," Fenn said. "Monsignor Delgard is

seriously concerned over what's happening at the church--"

"That's hardly surprising."

"Let me finish. He feels something wrong is going on there--"

"With all those miracles? He should be jumping for joy."

"Perhaps he should be, but he isn't. He's worried about

Father Hagan's death--"

"That was a plain old coronary."

"Will you shut up and listen. He's also worried about

the atmosphere of the church. He feels it's-- to put it in his

own words--'spiritually devoid.' his

"What does that mean?"

"I suppose it means the sanctity has disappeared."

"You can't be serious. You're not trying to tell me the

place is possessed by demons?" She gave a short laugh.

"No. St. Joseph's is empty. There's nothing there at all.

Father Hagan felt the same before he died."

"Hey, I can't write this kind of junk."

"For Christ's sake, I don't want you to write about it.

I'm telling you in confidence, because you wanted to know.

You've baled me out this week, you've helped me stay away from the scavengers so I could get on with all this.

I'm returning the favor by letting you know what I'm up

to, but I don't want it broadcast to the bloody nation."

"Don't worry, that won't happen. My chief would bury

me. Now if you're saying there's some kind of fraud going

on, then I'm with you all the way."

"Yeah, maybe it is all some elaborate fraud, who knows?"

"Why go into this, uh, 'spiritually devoid' shit, then?

You're spoiling the chance of a good story, Fenn, probably

the biggest that'll ever come your way, by going off on that tack."

"It's hard to explain, but I feel there's something wrong,

too."

"You're a cynic. It's natural for you."

"Thanks, but I mean deeply wrong. Like you, I think

there's something strange about Alice."

"I only said she didn't have much personality."

"You implied more."

"All right, you and the priest think something wicked

this way comes. So what's the point of all this research?"

"Where's it going to get you?"

"Probably nowhere, but I might uncover something in the church's history that could shed some light."

"You mean root out some dark secret from St. Joseph's

past. Fenn, I don't believe this of you. I thought your flat

feet were firmly on the ground and your grubby little fingers always ready to grab the golden egg. I'm not knocking

you. From me it's a compliment, it's how I operate

myself. But now you're beginning to disappoint."

"Monsignor Delgard sees me the same way

--that's why he hired me."

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense."

"It does in a crazy way. He wanted someone to look at

the whole business coolly and logically, someone who

wasn't wrapped up in religion and someone who would

scoff at bad vibrations."

"Until a few moments ago I would have said he'd chosen

the right boy. Now I'm not so sure."

Fenn sighed and his body sank lower against the headboard. A smile slowly formed on his lips.

"Yeah," he

said, "could be I was getting carried away. The crash, the

fire--maybe it just scared the shit out of me, enough to

make me think too much, anyway. I could have panicked

and imagined the car's steering had gone. There may have been oil on the road--that would account for the other car losing control. Anyway"--he emptied the

suitcase full of

notes onto the floor--"I found nothing nasty in the history

of Banfield or St. Joseph's. Nothing, at least, that hasn't

happened in every other village, town, or city in England

over the past few hundred years. I guess it should be a

relief."

Nancy looked down at the scattered paper.

"D'you mind

if I go through your notes sometime?"

"Help yourself, there's nothing there that'll interest you."

She settled down closer to him and her hand moved toward his inner thigh. "What about us, Fenn?"

"Us?"

"Working together."

"I thought you wanted me to leave."

"That was before. Now you've told me what you've been up to."

"There wasn't much to tell, was there?"

"No, but at least you confided in me. What about our deal?"

"I'm working for the Church, Nancy."

"Come on, Fenn. You're working for yourself--you're using the Church. It's a way of being right up there in front and getting all the inside information you need. Whatever they're paying you, you'll make triple, probably quadruple, from other sources when your job for the Church is done. Isn't that why you accepted in the first place?"

His smile was slow to surface, and when it did, it was strained. After a while, he said, "I won't work with you, Nancy, but I'll pass on information, try to get you a ringside seat for any special occasions, and generally help in any way I can."

"Up to a point, right?"

"Yeah, up to a point."

She groaned, giving up the fight. "I guess it's gonna have to do. I think you're a foot, though--I could have improved anything you wrote, given it style. I mean it, I could have. And I could have gotten you a good deal from the Post."

He reached over and kissed her neck, the pressure of her hand having some effect. "When do you have to get back to the States?" he asked.

"Soon as I figure I've got all I'm going to get on this miracle thing. I can't stay forever, that's for sure. Maybe a couple weeks--unless, of course, even bigger things break."

"It's hard to imagine anything more mind-blowing happening." He wondered, though. Just a few weeks ago he had been saying the whole affair would fizzle out and Banfield would sink back into anonymity once more. For his own personal motives, he didn't want that to happen, but some small instinct which became elusive when he tried to focus upon it warned him that it might have been for the best.

Nancy nuzzled her cheek against his forehead.

"What I'm saying, Fenn, is if you're going to help me, it's gotta be soon. No keeping it to yourself Okay?"

"Sure," he agreed, not believing himself He'd help her but, as he had already said, up to a point. Newsmen

James Herbert - The Shrine

were
generally selfish creatures where their work was concerned
and he was no exception to the rule. Her hand had
moved
upward and her fingers began to close around his
stiffening
penis. For the first time that week (and much to his
own relief) his desire became much more than just the
need to fulfill a bodily function. He
squirmed when her
movement gained a pleasurable rhythm.
He kissed her lips, turning toward her
to press close,
but she did not relinquish her possession, nor
break the
rhythm. Her palm, her fingers, were soft, knowing just
the right pressure, knowing when to tighten, when to
release. His kiss became hard, his lips
moist. She bit
down on his lower lip, gently, just enough to excite and
not enough to hurt. Her tongue sought his and his
whole
body became tensed, the area of excitement
spreading
from his loins to his arms, his thighs, the muscles of
his
buttocks, his nipples. His own fingers slid
over her hips,
reaching for her breasts, caressing them, each one in
turn,
pressing and pulling at the erect nipples,
flattening his
hand to encompass every part, discharging hard one
moment,
fondling tenderly the next.
She could feel his passion and it was unlike any
of the
other times during the week. It was as if he had
finally
roused himself from a semi drugged state. She smiled
inwardly. Or she had roused him from that state.
Nancy pushed him onto his back, using her
shoulder to
do so, not wanting to release him yet. She kept
her fingers
there, stroking, moving the soft skin against
its rigid core in
a steady motion, occasionally increasing the pace
to heighten
his excitement, then slowing the movement before it
became
too late for them both.
His hand slid down to her stomach, the muscles there
quivering, then tightening, at his touch, but she pushed
it
away when it sought to reach lower. She raised herself
to
her knees, releasing his penis so that her hand could
ex-close
more of his body. Both hands felt their way across
his stomach, moving upward in small circular
motions,
gently kneading his skin, the pressure spread with

James Herbert - The Shrine

open
palms and outstretched fingers. She ran them across
his
chest, spending a little time around his nipples, bending
to
kiss, to suck, to make them wet, gently blowing
on them
before moving onward, her hands smoothing
themselves
over his shoulders, around his neck, touching the backs
of
his ears with her thumbs.
He was smiling and she kissed his smile, shifting
her
body so that it was over him. She stretched herself
down,
resting her body against his, their skin touching and
molding
together in a fusion that was comforting as well as
exquisite, as though the pores of their flesh were
opening
themselves to each other, drinking in each other's
juices.
Nancy writhed against his hard body, her own
pleasure
beginning to rise, feeling the sensation deep between her
thighs, the moisture there beginning to flow. Her
legs
opened, her thighs spreading around him. His penis was
against her stomach and he shifted his hips so that it
moved against her. She took his hands that were clasped
around the small of her back and pulled his arms
upward,
fingers curling through his, holding tight, pushing his
hands over his head, pressing them into the pillow,
pinning
his body down with her own. She moved herself
upward so that her opening rested against his testicles,
the
risen root of her own pleasure pressing hard
against the
swollen base of his rod. She moaned as she
squirmed and
he used his body to give her more pleasure.
She brought up her knees as the sensation grew, but
still
crouched over him, still pinned his arms back. She
stroked
her vagina, so moist, so alive, along the length
of his penis,
then down again, her whole body shivering with its
sensuality. She moved upward again until his
tip touched
hers, and there she lingered, bringing on her own
excitement,
the tremor quickly becoming unbearable, but too
good to release.
Her fingers untwined from his and reached down.
She
raised her body, touched his penis more firmly
against
herself, one hand pushing his protective skin down and
up

in the coaxing, teasing--exhilarating--movement of moments before; she teased herself with him, allowing his body only partial entry, using him to titillate the outer lips of her vagina. He groaned, pushing himself upward, but she went with him, a deep-throated chuckle that was almost a moan escaping her. She allowed him more, her own wetness making the entry smooth, no pain involved, only pleasure. Inner muscles tightened, closing around him, holding him there, her hand still fondling the rest of him, touching between his legs, curling around his testicles, and gently squeezing. Her hips moved in a circular motion and his hands clutched at her thighs, spreading around them, reaching upward, along her body, touching her breasts, holding them together, releasing them, running back down, touching the top of her opening with his thumb, teasing her, but pleasing her as she teased and pleased him. It was too much for her. She sank lower and he rose into her, every part of his erection surrounded by warmth, by wetness, by muscles that sucked at the juices within him, drawing them out, skillful contractions that needed little movement from the rest of their bodies. They were both covered in a light sheen of perspiration, Nancy's hair hanging limply over her forehead. Her eyes were half-closed, the pupils rolled upward, and her lips were parted just enough to show her teeth, her smile almost a grimace of agony. @yenn looked at her and the sight increased his own sensations. He moved against her, but she controlled everything; the final pleasure would not be his until she was ready, until her own climax was ready to be fulfilled. And that would be soon. She gasped, the sound almost a tiny scream. Her whole body was moving now, pushing him into her, as much as she could take, which was all. He helped her "movements, hands around her hips. He lifted her from the bed, his heels digging into the sheets, and she moaned sharply, wanting more, more. Her hands closed around his sides and pulled him upward. He felt the juices deep within begin their turmoil, erupting, pressure building for the moment they would break free.

James Herbert - The Shrine

She felt the change in him, the even stronger
stiffening,
his whole body becoming more forceful, more rigid, more
intense. And she was ready for it. The tumult
inside was
ready to explode.
Her body tightened as though every sinew, every
nerve,
had drawn itself inward. She could no longer draw
in
breath and her heart was straining with the exertion, its
pace matching the rhythm of her own movements. And
then the peak was reached and she was floating and soaring,
reaching one great height and then another, the climax
not
just a single, exquisite burst, but a series of
senses-reeling
eruptions, the first two or three expanding in her
mind so
that it touched all of her, making each nerve part of the
whiteness, part of her mind, its intensity diminishing
slowly,
leaving her panting, sensuously drained.
Her shoulders slumped forward, her arms bent,
barely
supporting her, long dark hair hanging down
into his face.
She gave a low, smiling sigh as the pleasure
ebbed away
until it was replaced by a deep satisfaction.
She slowly pulled herself free and lay down beside
him,
his fluid seeping from her to rest on her inner thigh.
"That
was better," she sighed.
"You did all the work," he told her, wiping
clinging
strands of hair away from her damp brow.
"Yeah, but your cooperation this time helped."
They were silent for a while, their bodies relaxing,
their
thoughts beginning to drift. Nancy heard Fenn's
breathing
become deeper, more regular, and she knew he was
sleeping.
She carefully eased herself from his arms and went to the
bathroom, walking lightly, not wanting to disturb
him.
She washed herself and put on a bathrobe, then
poured
herself a glass of cold milk in the kitchen.
Returning to the
bedroom, she gathered up Fenn's fallen
notes, taking them
through to the living room and placing them on the sofa.
She switched on a lamp, then went back into the
bedroom
to retrieve her cigarettes.
Nancy settled down on the sofa, lit a
cigarette, shuffled
the notes into three neat piles beside her, and began
to
read.

James Herbert - The Shrine

There was a little girl, and she wore a little curl
Right down the middle of her forehead
When she was good, she was very, very, good,
But when she was bad, she was horrid.
"Jemi ma," Anon.
monsignor DRLGARD' S STRIDE HAD
LOST much of its
briskness and his tall figure was more stooped than
usual.
The High Street was dark and quiet, the two
public
houses not having yet regurgitated their
Saturday-night
trade onto the pavements; his footsteps sounded
harsh and
lonely along the concrete. Not many shop windows were
lit, the lights from the few lamp posts along the
roadside
feeble, creating shadows that were more menacing
than
natural darkness. It was bitterly cold again,
no significant
change in climate noticed as the borderline between
February
and March fast approached. The priest hugged the
lapels of his overcoat tight around his neck,
wondering if it
was more than just age that allowed the night chill to
penetrate his bones. He shuddered, feeling cold
fingertips
touch his nerves.
He could see the lights of the convent ahead, his
eyes,
beneath their heavy lids, usually keen, still having a
clear
vision that only disturbed thoughts or aching temples
could
sometimes blur. His head ached, the cool air no
panacea,
and his thoughts, too, were disturbed. The lights of the
convent shone like a beacon, as though guiding him
toward a friendly refuge, a place of retreat,
away from the
brooding church. But was it a false
refuge? What did he
fear within its sanctuary? He shrugged off the
doubts.
There was only a child safely lodged within those
walls, a
frightened, bewildered child. But perhaps a child that was
being used . . .
Delgard had encountered the phenomenon termed as
"possession" many times in the past, had helped
victims
conquer the evil inside themselves, had helped their
minds
break free of schizophrenic emotions which chained
and
tormented. In later years, the effort of such
psychological
battles had been almost too much for his drained
body, his
mind (or soul) taking longer each time

to recuperate. But then it took broken bones longer to heal as age crept into them. He suddenly turned his head as though a disembodied finger had tapped his shoulder. An empty street. The sightseers had left for the day and the reporters and cameramen had retired for the night, eager for tomorrow, Sunday, a day of labor. He looked toward the convent once more, his pace becoming faster, refusing to accept he was fleeing from a frightening uncertainty behind to a disturbing uncertainty ahead. He passed the burned-out shell of the garage and thought of Gerry Fenn. Delgard had received one agitated phone call from the reporter the day after the terrible accident, telling him what had happened, what Fenn had witnessed, then . . . nothing. The reporter had disappeared, informing no one, not even his editor, not even Susan Gates, of where he could be reached, what he was up to. Delgard was concerned for the reporter. Had he led the man into something he could not comprehend and so could not regard with the respect (and fear) it demanded? The man was no fool and his very cynicism afforded him some protection. But only up to a point. Beyond that point he was as vulnerable as anybody else. Delgard breathed in the frosty air and expelled a white mist as if it were an escaping soul. The panda car was parked half on the curb outside the convent and the policeman inside watched the tall priest as he approached the gate. Headlights dazzled Delgard, freezing him in their glare like a paralyzed rabbit. "Sorry," a voice said from the window. "It's Monsignor Delgard, isn't it?" The headlights died, leaving the priest sightless for a few moments. He heard a car door open and could just make out a dark shape as the policeman approached him. "Didn't expect any visitors this time of night," the voice said. The convent gate was pushed open and the policeman stood to one side to let the

priest

through.

"Thank you," Delgard said as he entered the courtyard.

"No journalists tonight?"

The policeman chuckled. "No chance. It's Saturday.

They're either in the local pubs getting stoned or tucked

up in bed waiting for the big day tomorrow. The former mostly, I'd say, knowing that crew."

Delgard nodded and crossed the courtyard, mounting the three steps to the main door as the gate scraped closed

behind him. He rang the doorbell and waited.

It seemed like a long time before the door was opened, the coldness reaching into him with deliberate intensity, punishing him because he dared to be still when

only

movement could keep the chill at bay. The nun

peered out

at him, her face barely discernible because of the light behind, her attitude cautious.

"Oh, Monsignor," she said with relief. The door swung

wide.

"Reverend Mother is expecting me," he told her, stepping

into the hallway.

"Yes, of course. Let me show you into--"

"I'm glad you could come, Monsignor

Delgard," said a

voice from the other end of the hallway. Mother MarieClaire,

the reverend mother of the convent as well as

headmistress of the convent school, walked toward them,

the silver cross she wore outside her gray tunic briefly

flashing as it caught the light from overhead. She was

a

small woman, thin, and vulnerable in the way most

nuns,

even the more robust, seemed to be. Light-framed spectacles

perched on a narrow nose and her unplucked

eyebrows

gave her a severity that Delgard knew was not in her nature. Her hands were clasped low before her as

they

always seemed to be; it was as if she were constantly praying, and he thought that that probably was the case.

She stopped before him and he could see her anxiety behind the thin lenses.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Reverend Mother,"

he said. "There

was much to do in preparation for tomorrow."

"I understand, Monsignor. It was good of you to come at this hour."

"Is she in her room?"

"Yes, but not sleeping. She appears desperate to see

you."

James Herbert - The Shrine

"Then she knew I would come?"
Mother Marie-Claire nodded. "May I offer you something hot to drink before you see her. You must be frozen."
"No, thank you. I'm all right. I think I'll go straight up."
"You wouldn't rather see her down here? In my study, perhaps?"
Delgard smiled. "No, she may feel inclined to speak more freely in the privacy of her own room, temporary though it may be."
"As you wish, Monsignor. I'll take you up."
He raised a hand. "I know where her room is. Reverend Mother. Please don't trouble yourself." He made for the stairs, unbuttoning his overcoat as he went and handing it to the sister who had opened the door.
"Monsignor?"
He paused and turned back to the nun.
"Do you think it wise to allow Alice to attend Mass tomorrow?"
"It's what she wishes. Reverend Mother. She insists upon it."
"She's just a child . . ." The nun let the words trail off.
"One who must be treated with great care," Delgard said kindly.
"But the crowds. So many . . ."
"We cannot keep her locked away. The public would believe some sinister motive, I'm afraid."
"But for her own good."
"How upset she gets when we try to keep her away from the church. I'm of the same mind as you. Reverend Mother, but this matter is not entirely in my hands."
"Surely Bishop Caines--"
"No, it isn't just the bishop who wishes Alice's exposure to the public. None of these decisions are made by one man anymore. Please, don't concern yourself for her safety; she'll be well-protected."
"It's her peace of mind I'm concerned with, Monsignor."
There was no criticism, nor harshness, in her tone, just a caring sadness.
"We all are. Reverend Mother. I promise you, we all are." He began to climb the stairs, his footsteps slow, almost as though he were reluctant to reach the upper floor.

Mother Marie-Claire unconsciously fingered the silver cross dangling from the chain around her neck, then walked back toward the tiny chapel beyond the hallway where she had been deep in prayer before the priest arrived. The nun who had opened the door to Monsignor Delgard now locked it and followed her superior down the hallway, stopping on the way to hang the priest's overcoat on a coathook beneath the stairs. She glanced up at the tall, ascending figure before it disappeared into the gloom of the upper level, then returned to her duties in the convent's kitchen. Delgard paused at the top of the stairs, allowing his eyes to adjust to the poor light. There were doorways on either side of the corridor, each one a nun's private, sparse cell. The room he sought was halfway down, to his right. He wondered why it was so urgent for her to see him that night and told himself he would soon know. He walked toward the door and tapped lightly on it. There was no sound for a moment or two, but then a voice said, "Who's there?" "It's Monsignor Delgard," he replied, his voice soft, not wanting to disturb those sleeping. The door opened almost immediately and the pale, tired face of Molly Pagett was peering out at him. "Thank you so much for coming," she said, and there was a tremor to "Mother Marie-Claire said you needed--" "Yes, yes, I needed to see you. I'm sorry you've had to come out so late. Please come in." The room contained a single cot bed, a sink, a hardback, uncomfortable-looking chair, a tiny wardrobe, and no other comforts, except a black crucifix on the wall. After the gloom of the corridor, the single ceiling light was harsh, ugly. Molly Pagett sat on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped together in her lap, and Delgard took the chair from its position by the wall, placing it near to her. He sat, allowing himself a small groan of pleasure, pretending his bones ached more than they actually did, knowing

she had some fear of him and wanting to appear less daunting.

"I'm afraid the cold weather stiffens these old joints of mine," he told her, smiling.

She returned the smile, but it was short-lived, nervous.

He felt too tired for preamble, yet felt her need to be

put at ease. "How are they treating you here at the convent,

Molly? Not very comfortable by the looks of it."

She looked down at her hands and he saw they were clenched tight. "They're very good to us here, Father .

I'm sorry, Monsignor."

He reached forward and patted her troubled hands, his own large hand covering hers completely. "It's all right.

There's no real difference between a monsignor and a priest; one's just a fancier title, that's all.

You look tired,

Molly. Haven't you been sleeping?"

"Not very well, Monsignor."

"Well, that's understandable; you've been through so much. Hasn't your doctor prescribed something for you?

Something to relax you, help you sleep."

"Yes, yes, he gave me some pills. I don't like to take them, though."

"I'm sure they wouldn't do you any harm. Your doctor

would only give you something if he thought it was for the best."

"No, it's not that," she said quickly. "It's Alice, you see.

She might need me in the night. She might call out."

"I'm sure one of the nuns would tend to her."

"She'd want her mother. If she woke up in the middle of the night, she'd be frightened. She'd want her mother . . ."

He saw the tears beginning to well in her eyes before

she bowed her head.

"Don't upset yourself, Molly," he said kindly. "I know

there's a huge burden on you at the moment, but I promise

you it will ease. The loss of your dear husband, this strange thing that's happening to Alice"

She looked up and her eyes were shining through the unshed tears, an inner glory that she could not, nor tried

to, conceal. "It's a wonderful, holy thing, Monsignor. Leonard"

Leonard . . . he couldn't understand it, couldn't appreciate what's happening to my Alice.

He didn't believe

in God, Monsignor, so it had no meaning for him."

He was shocked by the distaste in her voice when she spoke of her late husband.

James Herbert - The Shrine

"He just thought he could make money out of it, did you know that, Monsignor?" She shook her head as though disbelieving her own statement. "He wanted to make money out of my little girl."

"I'm sure he was as concerned for her welfare as you are, Molly. I don't think he would have exploited her."

"You didn't know him" the way I did. He hated everything that was happening at first, scolded her, as if it were her fault. He didn't want us in this convent, didn't want us surrounded by these good sisters. Then he realized little Alice could make him less-than noney. Everybody else was cashing in, he said, so why shouldn't he, her own father? He was going to tell everything to the newspapers, to the highest bidder, everything about Alice, everything about me and him. He was wicked, Monsignor, wicked!"

"Please calm yourself, Molly." His voice had become firm, but was still low. "You've been through too much, you don't know what you're saying."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean . . . dis8Her body rocked back and forth on the bed and now the tears fell onto her lap.

"Would you like me to fetch you some tea, some water?" She shook her head and continued to look down, her rocking motion slowly becoming more steady. Delgard was annoyed at himself for allowing her to become upset, the exact reverse of his intentions, but the outburst had been so sudden, so unexpected. He decided there was little point in attempting to redeem the situation.

"Why did you want to see me, Molly? Was it about Alice?"

Her body seemed to hunch into itself and she did not answer immediately. Finally she pulled a crumpled handkerchief from the sleeve of her woolly cardigan and dabbed at her eyes before looking up. "It's more to do with me and Len," she said, her voice unsteady.

He leaned forward in the chair. "What is it that's troubling you?"

"I . . . I never even told Father Hagan. In all those years I never confessed to him. Now it's too late."

"You can make your confession to me, Molly. You know whatever you tell me will be between ourselves and God."

"I was always too ashamed to tell him, Monsignor."

"I'm sure Father Hagan would have understood. He

James Herbert - The Shrine

wouldn't have judged you, Molly."

"I just couldn't . . . dis8A shudder went through her, but she seemed to make an effort to gain control.

"What couldn't you tell your parish priest?"

Delgard

quietly urged.

She would not look at him and her words faltered as she

spoke. "He . . . Father Hagan knew I was pregnant when

he married Len and me. I told him that, I confessed that. . ."

Delgard remained silent, his own large hands clasped together.

"But I didn't tell him everything." The words came in a

rush, and none followed.

"What did you omit to tell your priest?"

Delgard was

forced to ask. "You know there can be no complete forgiveness

if you have not confessed everything."

Molly gave a small moan. "I know, I know, but I

couldn't say it, I couldn't tell him!"

"You can tell me now, Molly. There's no need to punish

yourself further."

She sniffed and raised her head slightly, but her eyes

were still downcast. "It's . . . it's just that the field . . . the

field next to St. Joseph's . . . it's become sacred ground,

Monsignor. It's a holy shrine."

Delgard waited patiently.

"Len . . . Leonard used to wait for me outside the church

before we were married. He wouldn't come inside, said he

didn't feel right there. I didn't realize then just how much

he hated religion. Perhaps I would never've married him if

I'd known." She dabbed at her damp cheeks with the

handkerchief. "I used to work for the church even in those days, Monsignor. I loved the place, just as

. . . just as

Alice loves it. And Len . . . he'd wait for me, like I said."

She took a deep breath, as though resigning herself to

the confession. "One day he was there, just beyond the wall, watching me--I was collecting the dead

flowers from

the graves. He called me over. We'd been going out together

for a couple of months by then, but . . . but nothing had really happened between us. You know what I mean,

nothing . . . nothing really serious . . ."

James Herbert - The Shrine

Declaringard nodded slowly.
"But that day . . . that day, I don't know what
got into
us both. It was evening--dusk really--and it was in the
summer. Warm, the end of a fine day. We kissed
across
the wall, sure no one could see us. And then he
lifted me
over. He was so . . . so strong, so demanding. And
I
couldn't resist, Monsignor, I couldn't help
myself." Her
breasts rose and fell almost in a panting
movement, as if the
memory of her passion was still alive
inside her. She flushed
red, embarrassed by her own emotions. "We lay
down by the
side of the wall, in that field, in that sacred
ground, and
we made love. I don't know what possessed
me! I'd never
gone that far with anyone before, please believe me,
but
that day I was helpless, I was swept away. We
both were.
It was as though we were different people, almost strangers
to each other. There didn't even seem to be any
love
involved, just . . . just passion, just lust! Oh,
God, can I
ever be forgiven?"
His hunched shoulders seemed even more pronounced
as he spoke. "Of course you are forgiven.
You've been
foolish to hold on to this unreasonable guilt all
these years.
If you feel you need absolution, I--"
"Alice was conceived in that field, Monsignor,
don't you
see? And now there's a shrine to the Blessed Virgin
". . ."
He suddenly felt nauseous. But it was
ridiculous! Such
a sin so long ago had no bearing on what was
happening
today! Yet his head reeled with the notion. He fought
to
conceal his dismay. "You . . . you confessed your sin
to
Father Hagan all those years ago."
"He was new to the parish. I was too timid
to tell him
where it had happened, so near the church and all."
"That wasn't important."
"But it was on sacred ground."
"No, Molly, it was beyond the church boundary. And
even now, even now a service is to be held in
the field
tomorrow, the land hasn't been consecrated. There is
no
need for your confession." He searched for the right words,
needing to be sure, but aware of her distress. There

was
no delicate way to ask, though. "Why
. . . why are you so
sure Alice was conceived there? were there no other
occasions--"
"No, no, Monsignor. It was just that time. I
felt so
ashamed afterwards, so very ashamed. And I was
pregnant,
I knew almost right away. Don't ask me how
I knew--I
just did. I never allowed Leonard to touch me after
that,
not till after we were married. But I was happy
to be
pregnant. I wanted my child. Despite our
sin, I felt my
baby was a gift from God. And she was, she
is, don't you
see? I wasn't young, Monsignor, I could have
remained a
spinster." She gave a choked laugh. "I'd
almost resigned
myself to that. Spinster of the parish! Perhaps that's why I
devoted so much time to the church. It had become my
life. But God gave me something for myself, something
to
cherish in the way I cherished the church. But that can't
be right, can it, Monsignor? My sin shouldn't have
provided
such a gift, should it? God doesn't reward
sinners."
Delgard sighed inwardly, saddened by the woman's
confusion, depressed by his own. If only there were
simple
answers. A priest had to conceal his own doubts,
his
own confusions; he had to appear strong in his
beliefs,
convinced that God's way was always right, never allowing
the perplexity of those ways to infringe on his own
faith. How to reassure this woman when her question
pricked his own uncertainty? And when her words
caused
a peculiar revulsion within him. The revelation could
have
no special significance, yet why did it
distress him so?
"You were blessed with a child," Delgard found himself
saying, "and for that you must be grateful. You need not
look beyond that." It was inadequate, but what more
could he have said? "Don't concern yourself with
what
happened all those years ago. You raised a fine
child in the
ways of the Church, as God knew you would. Be
content,
Molly, look no further. God can reward now
for what will
come to pass later."
She smiled, tears still sparkling in her eyes.
"I think I
can understand what you're saying, Monsignor.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Yes, Alice
is a very special gift; He chose me to be the
mother of ...
of ...
"Hush now. The miracles have still not been proven.
You must not be so convinced, not yet."
Her smile broadened, telling him she was sure,
she knew.
Her face clouded for an instant. "Then . . .
then there was
no desecration of hallowed ground?"
"How could there be? It was more than eleven years
ago, long before the field was thought of--he paused
--"as
sacred. Your sin was one of passion, not irreverence,
and
for that you've already been forgiven."
A weight seemed to have been lifted from her.
"Thank
you, Monsignor. I'm sorry if you think
I'm foolish."
He patted her hands. "Not foolish, Molly.
Recent events
have put concerns into your mind that are not so
important
as you may think. I can only urge you to put such
worries
behind you; the coming weeks, months, will impose their
own new burdens. Would you like to say a short
prayer
with me?"
"A penance?"
"No, not a penance. I told you that the sin you
spoke of
has long since been forgiven. Let's both
pray for strength
to sustain us in whatever the future may bring."
Delgard bowed his head and for a few quiet minutes
they prayed together. He made the Sign of the
Cross
before her, then rose to his feet. She smiled up
at him, and
he could see there was still ill-concealed anxiety in
her
eyes. "Thank you, Monsignor," she said.
"Peace be with you." He turned back to her before
opening the door, not sure what prompted the question.
"Is there anything you'd like to tell me about
Alice?"
Molly looked startled. "Alice? What do you
mean,
Monsignor?"
He stared at her for several seconds before turning
away
again. "It doesn't matter, Molly." He
opened the door.
"But if you ever need to speak to me, if anything at
all
about your daughter gives you cause for concern,
please
don't hesitate to tell me." He closed the
door behind him
and stood in the dark hallway for several moments,

James Herbert - The Shrine

collecting his thoughts. Alice, conceived in the field where she now saw the visions! It could have no meaning. Surely it could have no meaning? Her illness, when she had been struck deaf and dumb--had she been in the field then?

No, no, that had nothing to do with it. It had just been a perverse legacy from a child's normal illness. There could not possibly be any connection. Why the unease in his mind? Why did what Molly Pagett had just revealed trouble him so? His fingers went to his brow, moving to a point below, between his eyes, squeezing the bone there to relieve the pain. He had never been so unsure. In all the days of his ecclesiastical career he had never been quite as uncertain as now. Perhaps the sudden death of Father Hagan had unsettled him more than he knew.

He began to walk quietly down the corridor toward the stairs, still careful not to wake those sleeping beyond the doors on either side. Father Hagan had seemed so--

He stopped abruptly, a rush of blood causing his heart to beat rapidly. A dark shadow moved from the other shadows toward him.

"Who--?"

"It's me, Monsignor Delgard, Mother Marie-Claire. I'm sorry if I alarmed you."

Delgard let his breath go. "Reverend Mother, a man of my years shouldn't be subjected to such frights."

He endeavored to keep his voice light. "A tired old heart doesn't enjoy the shock."

"Forgive me, but I want you to hear something."

Her words were whispered.

"What is it, Reverend Mother?" he asked, immediately concerned.

She drew him back along the corridor. "Every night since Alice has been with us I, or one of the sisters, has stopped by her room to see if she is sleeping soundly. On two separate occasions I've heard her voice beyond the door. Sister Theodore has also heard her."

"Is Alice having difficulty in sleeping? Many children talk to themselves when they're alone."

"Oh, no, Monsignor, she has no problem in sleeping. In fact, I would say the child sleeps too much and

too often.

However, the doctor thinks it's just as well considering the stress she's under."

"You mean she's talking in her sleep?" His voice was too

loud and he adjusted it as he said, "It's nothing to be

alarmed over. Reverend Mother. It's just a symptom of the

turmoil she is going through. The loss of her father --"

"It's the words she says that concern me, Monsignor.

They're . . . strange, unchildlike."

Intrigued, Delgard moved closer to the door beyond

which he knew Alice slept. "What kind of words?" he

whispered. "What does she say?"

"Hear them yourself, Monsignor." The nun turned the

handle quietly and slowly opened the door a few inches.

They listened. Delgard looked at Mother

Marie-Claire

quizzically, and although she could not see his face in the

gloom, she sensed his puzzlement. "She was speaking just

a few moments--" Her voice broke off when they heard

the murmurs from the bed. The nun pushed the door open

farther and slipped through, Delgard following close behind. A night-light on a small table standing against

the wall threw a dim glow around the sparse room, revealing the

small, white-sheeted bed, the bundle lying beneath the

covers. The figure stirred and the priest and the nun held

their breath.

"O do not deny me, sweet . . ."

Delgard tensed. It was Alice's voice, soft-spoken, mumbled

almost, but there was a difference to it. He strained to hear the words.

"... let thy passion fill me ..."

The voice was heavily accented, the vowels broadened,

almost coarse.

"dis . . . mad, exceeding mad . . ."

Almost unintelligible, sometimes too soft to hear, sometimes

too . . . too strange to comprehend.

"... have used me unmannerly ..."

It wasn't a foreign accent, but one of an English county

that he could not quite place. West Country, yet not quite.

Too thick, too heavy . . . She said a name, but Delgard

James Herbert - The Shrine

did not catch it.
"... passion that flails my body ..."
He made as if to move toward the bed and felt his
arm
held lightly by Mother Marie-Claire. "Best
not to disturb
her, Monsignor Delgard," the nun whispered.
He hesitated, wanting to hear more. But
Alice's voice
had deteriorated into a droning mumble, the words
slurred
and joined almost into one continuous sound. Even as he
watched, she seemed to drift off into a deeper
sleep and
soon there were no more words, just a regular deep
breathing.
The nun beckoned him to follow her from the room
and, reluctantly, he did so. She closed the
door quietly.
"What manner of speech is that, Reverend Mother?"
Delgard asked, remembering to keep his voice low.
"Is it the same each time?"
"It seems to be, Monsignor," she replied.
"Please come
with me--there is something more I'd like to show
you."
Delgard glanced once more at the door before
following
the dark shape down the corridor. As they
descended the
stairs, the nun said, "It's hard to understand what it
is she
is saying. At first I thought it might be an
impediment of
speech working subconsciously in her sleep.
All those
years of deafness--it would have had to have had some
effect."
"No, I'm sure that would be impossible. If the
situation
were reversed, if she spoke with an impediment
while
conscious and perfectly when asleep, there might be
some
sense to it. Not this way, though."
"I agree, Monsignor. It was just a silly
first thought, and
quickly dismissed. Besides, I believe the words are
well-formed,
though strange to our ears."
"Are they a dialect?"
"I believe them to be so, but one I can't
place."
"Nor me. Cornish, perhaps, but not quite."
"No, not quite. Unfortunately, Alice talks
in her sleep
only in brief snatches, never enough to identify the
source
of her accent or the meaning of her words."
They reached the bottom of the stairs and Mother
Marie-Claire
crossed the hallway and opened the door to her
private study. She indicated a chair for the

priest to sit in.

"May I offer you a hot drink now, Monsignor Delgard?"

He shook his head. "No, no. Perhaps in a moment. You

said you had something to show me."

She turned away and went to a chest of drawers.

Before

opening the top drawer, she said, "Alice has been forced to

spend a lot of time alone in her room. Perhaps too much

time for one so young. There isn't much the convent can provide to keep her occupied, but she appears

to enjoy

working with paints and crayons." She opened the drawer

and drew out a folder. "I've kept her discarded work since

she's been with us."

She returned to her desk and laid the folder on the top.

"Her fascination is for one subject alone."

"Ah yes," Delgard said, leaning forward. "Father Hagan

showed me some of her pictures before he died. Her mother had allowed him to take them from the house.

They were all of one person, a person we surmised to be

the Blessed Virgin."

"Yes, Monsignor, that's right. Alice has no real skill as

an artist, but she has a certain . . . enthusiasm for her

subject. To the point of obsession, I would say."

"The child worships Mary." He allowed himself a smile.

"I think that's obvious to all. I think her devotion may . . ."

"Devotion? Is that what you think, Monsignor?" Mother

Marie-Claire opened the folder and held the first sheet toward him. He took it and the sheet trembled in his grip. "It can't . . ."

"The same figure throughout, Monsignor." The nun

spread other sheets of paper from the folder on the table.

All bore the same crude workmanship, the same garish

colors, the same broad, slashing strokes of the paintbrush.

Even the painted-in obscenities were the same, although

an erect phallus in one might be different in size and color

from the next, the shape of the breasts different from another, the grinning red mouth more distorted than the one next to it.

Their belief in the Magic was an abiding thing.

The Secret Garden, Frances

Hodgson Bumett

James Herbert - The Shrine

ben SCOOTED ALONG THE ROWS of benches,
Indiana Jones
fleeing from hundreds--no, thousands--of screaming
Arabs,
ready to turn and whip swords from the hands of any
who
got too close, his imaginary bullwhip
settled comfortably
over his left shoulder and no weight at all.
Up one row,
down the next, slipping once on the damp
grass, but up in a flash, pausing only to gun
down the seven-foot-tall,
black-clothed assassin brandishing a long,
curved sword,
laughing at his scream of surprise, speeding on
in his race
to find the Lost Ark before the dirty Nazis got
to it and
used its power to win the world. Indiana Jones was
better
than Han Solo (even if it was the same man)
and Han Solo
was better than Luke Skywalker.
Run, out of breath,
mustn't stop, mustn't catch me, out of breath,
got to keep
going, mustn't--somebody's foot!
He sprawled on the ground and hands reached down
to
pick him up. It hadn't hurt, just jarred his
knee. He
rubbed at the earth on his jeans and a voice said,
"Careful,
son, you're going to hurt yourself if you tear around like
that."
He said nothing, remembering he was still Indy, a
man
of few words. The hands released him and with one bound
he was free.
The field was fast filling up with people, the benches
nearer to the scaffolded centerpiece--not those
specially
roped off for particular Church and non-Church
dignitaries,
nor those reserved for certain religious
associations--
becoming more and more full, the crowd spreading outward
like a blossoming flower. It was still early,
two hours
before the Mass was due to begin, but already the people
were pushing through the newly constructed entrance gate
to the field, eager to find a seat near the altar,
many
wanting just to see the Miracle Girl, others
wanting to be
close so that her holiness would wash over them,
fearful
that it wouldn't stretch too far back.
The sun was just a dull glow in the hazy sky and
there
was a harshness in the air that was particularly unkind
to

the invalids in the crowd. The buzz of conversation, of excitement, and of a certain fear increased as the numbers swelled; the well-organized stewards, ushers, the young priests called in to help marshal the expected huge congregation, could not help but feel a trembling of their own senses as the intoxicating atmosphere spread. Voices were hushed, reverential, as though the gathering were inside a cathedral, only their multiplicity giving them an overall loudness. Wheel chairs, their passage through the field not easy because the soft earth had been churned up by too many feet, were already beginning to obstruct the aisles and the ushers made mental notes that an area would have to be sectioned off for such invalids on future occasions. Ben ran on, this time careful to avoid booby-trap feet, keeping to the less occupied benches, a seven-year-old enjoying his game, oblivious to the gathering tension, lost in the excitement of his own mind's creation. A truckload of dirty Nazis was tearing down on him and he rolled over the bench to his right, shooting the driver in the face as he went by. Then he was up again, running on, fearless and to be feared. He was dimly aware that the game would have to end soon, that his mother had made him promise to return to the church before the field became too full. If she wasn't there, she would be in the priest's house. It wasn't too full yet, there were plenty of empty benches, plenty of dark, Arab alleyways, plenty of-- The man had just entered that particular row and Ben's hurtling body caught him momentarily off balance, knocking him onto the bench on which he was about to sit. He held the boy's shoulders to steady him and Ben, startled and breathless, looked up into his face. The man cinged inside when he saw the boy's eyes widen in shock, his mouth drop open, his body become rigid. The man could only smile to reassure him, but even that made his physical mask more grotesque. He released his grip and the boy slowly shrank away,

never taking his eyes off the man's ulcerated mouth
and nose, the terrible disfigurement of facial
tuberculosis. He
lifted the silk scarf, dislodged when the boy had
cannoned
into him, to his face again, the mask natural enough
on
such a cold day. He shouldn't have been here, not with
this terrible affliction; people were afraid of him, friends,
so-called loved ones, afraid his disease was
contagious. In
the old days lupus vulgaris was known as "dog's
muzzle" and
the description was appropriate; sometimes they
treated
him warily, like a crazy dog, afraid he would
bite them
and they would become as he. The skin disease was rare,
but that gave him no feeling of distinction, just a
sense of
hopelessness, a feeling of impotent fury that he
should be
chosen to bear the hideous brand which, for him, no
antibiotics
could clear. One last hope. Today, one last
hope. If
not, if he could never again feel another's lips
against his,
never look into another's eyes without seeing the
barely
hidden revulsion therein--never hold a child without
feeling
its muscles tense to run away--then there was no
point to it all, no reason to go on. What was so
precious
about life that you felt obliged to live it?
Better cold,
senseless oblivion than a scorned existence.
He watched
the boy run from him and tried to retain the numbness
in
his mind, his only barrier against the seeping
self-pity.
Ben ran on, afraid now of this big field,
these people
pouring in, all strangers, all suddenly a
threat. Time to find Mummy; Indiana
Jones had faded without final credits.
"You'll have to move on. Nowhere to park here."
"Press." Fenn leaned across and flashed his card
at the
constable.
"Yeah, you and eight thousand others. Keep
moving."
Fenn forced his car back into the slow-moving
traffic.
"Bloody carnival day again," he muttered.
"What?" Nancy asked.
"It's amazing how many'll turn up for a free
show, isn't
it?"
"I think a lot of them have stronger motives for

coming than that, Fenn."

"Maybe."

They were nearing the drive to the priest's house and Fenn saw even that was blocked with vehicles, presumably

those of visiting clergy and helpers. He swore.

"I should

have cleared it with Delgard to get parking space.

I'm

supposed to be 'official.'" his

"the guess we should have gotten here earlier."

Nancy

studied the shuffling people, the queue spilling into the road, police and stewards at various points endeavoring to

keep some kind of order, preventing the thoroughfare itself

from being swamped. The bus in front of Fenn's hired car

came to a halt and he reluctantly eased his foot down on

the brake pedal. Nancy poked her head out the window on

her side to see what was causing the holdup.

"There's an ambulance up ahead--by the entrance to the field, I think," she told him. "Yeah, it's unloading.

Jesus, couple stretcher cases."

"Doesn't surprise me. They'll be bringing their dead along next."

Nancy rummaged in her bag for cigarettes.

"I'm not

sure why you're still so cynical," she said as she lit up.

"You gotta face it, there's been results."

"I know, but look, look over there." He indicated to the

opposite side of the road where makeshift stalls were set

up on the grass verge. Through the gaps in the crowds

around the stalls they could see small statues and holy

trinkets hung from wire frames, while flimsy posters of the

Virgin Mother, the Virgin and the Christ Baby, the Virgin

at the Crucifixion, hung limply from long strings tied

to the branches of trees behind the stalls. They caught a

glimpse of a poster of the Pope in a cowboy hat, another

blurred one of him being shot. The traders looked sullen,

even though business appeared to be brisk. A Mr. Whippy

van looked busiest of all, and Fenn wondered if Madonna

popsicles were on sale.

"I'm surprised your police allow it."

"Probably too busy keeping the crowds under

control to
worry about unlicensed traders," Fenn
replied, moving the
car on again as the coach in front advanced.
"Looks like nobody's getting into St.
Joseph's today,"
Nancy said as they approached the church gate.
He saw the policemen moving the queue along
past the
locked gate, patiently explaining to the more
insistent that
the service was to take place in the field today, not
the
church. "They don't look too happy about it."
"I'm not surprised--it's goddamned cold
outside."
"It's not going to do some of those invalids much good."
Fenn shook his head. "I can't understand their
doctors
allowing it."
"You can't stop human nature, Fenn. If they
think
they're going to get cured, nothing'll keep them
away.
How would you feel, say, if you had an incurable
disease
or a terminal illness? Wouldn't you take one
last desperate
chance, even if you thought the possibility of being
cured
was a thousand--or even a million--to one?"
He shrugged. "Who knows?"
"You'd have nothing to lose."
"Except to feel pretty stupid."
"What's stupid against a chance to live again?"
He remained silent, accepting the point. Then
he said,
"There's the entrance to the field. Look, it's
jammed solid."
They could now see that the queue converged on the
gate from both directions, forming an untidy
mass at the
entrance.
"If only I were selling tickets," Fenn
muttered.
They drove on, the journey slow, cars, vans,
and buses
now parked bumper to bumper along the roadside,
only
the immediate area around the church and field entrance
kept clear by the police. "You want to jump out
here while
I find somewhere to park?" Fenn suggested.
"You're going to see Delgard, aren't you?"
He nodded.
"Then I'll stick with you."
"Suit yourself."
"Like glue."
"Okay."
Ahead, he saw the driver of a bus parked half
on the
grass verge having a heated argument with a
policeman.

Guessing what the dispute was over, Fenn swung in toward the vehicle's rear tire and stopped. Angry blasts from horns behind greeted the maneuver as other drivers were forced to swing around and squeeze through the gap between his hired Fiesta and approaching traffic. "What the hell are you doing, Fenn?" "The road isn't wide enough for parking so the bus driver's being moved on now that his passengers are unloaded." "It doesn't look like he's moving to me." "He will be." Fenn was right. With a last gesture of disgust the driver disappeared back inside and the bus throttled into life. He pulled out into the traffic without signaling and without waiting for space. Fenn whipped in quickly, two cars behind following his strategy. "There you go," he said triumphantly as he pulled on the handbrake. They left the car and began the walk back to St. Joseph's, keeping to the opposite side of the road from the shuffling queue. "There's gotta be thousands upon thousands here today," Nancy remarked, pulling her scarf around her throat to keep out the cold. "There were thousands last week." "Yeah, but not this many. Even the Pope couldn't haul in these kind of numbers." Soon they were forced into the roadway to avoid the people clustered around the traders' stalls. They stopped for a closer inspection of the wares. "Unbelievable," Fenn said, shaking his head and smiling at the same time. "Look, over there." He pointed. "Flasks containing Holy Soil from the field of the Madonna. Jesus wept!" Nancy picked up a small dome-shaped transparent container filled with water in which an ill-defined plastic version of Mary stood. She shook it and snowflakes almost obliterated the image. Fenn shook his head again in amused dismay when he saw a seven-inch shrine, again made of plastic, small red candles in holders on either side of an inset photograph of Alice which had obviously hastily replaced another kind of holy picture. The black-and-white shot had been reproduced from a newspaper, for the blow-up revealed the fine printed dots to a crude degree.

Nancy pointed out a white-painted grotto whose lights flashed on intermittently to reveal a Madonna and what could only have been Bernadette of Lourdes. They watched as a pilgrim picked up a tiny doll which bore the faintest resemblance to Alice Pagett, and a mechanical parody of a child's voice said, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is"

"I don't believe it," Fenn said. "How can they manufacture these things so fast."

"They call it enterprise," Nancy said, not amused by any of the trivia on display. "They're just quick and simple adaptations of junk that's been selling for years. I'd bet under some of those labels saying "Alice, the Miracle Worker" or "Our Lady of Banfield" you'll find others referring to something totally different."

They moved on, passing medallions of all shapes and sizes, crucifixes plain and gaudy, chinaware, handbags, even umbrellas, somehow alluding to the fact that they were all touched by holiness. They were approached by a man selling postcards of Sussex villages, Banfield itself not among them. Fenn declined the offer to buy with a bemused wave of his hand.

They crossed the road when they were opposite the gate leading to St. Joseph's, dodging between the slow-moving cars and plunging into the queue. The policeman they had spotted earlier directing the crowd barred their way.

Fenn took out his press card. "Monsignor Delgard is expecting me."

The policeman turned toward a steward who was lurking beyond the entrance. "D'you know anything about a Mr. Gerald Fenn?"

The small man, who had spoken with Fenn on a previous occasion, nodded his head. "He's okay, you can let him through."

The gate swung open and Nancy made as if to follow her companion.

"Sorry, miss, Mr. Fenn only."

"But I'm with him." Nancy opened her bag and

took
out her card. "Look, I'm press too."
"Miss, er, Shelbeck?" The policeman had
scrutinized
the card and turned toward the other man again.
"No, don't know anything about her."
"Sorry, miss, you'll have to use the other entrance
farther
down. Only authorized persons allowed through
here."
"But I told you, I'm with him." She pointed
at Fenn,
who was trying not to grin.
"I'd like to oblige you, miss, but I'm afraid
I can't."
"Fenn, will you speak to this guy?"
"Sorry, Nancy. I guess orders is
orders."
"You bastard! You knew this would happen."
Fenn held out his hands in mock denial. "How
could I?"
Nancy's mouth became a straight line across her
face.
"Now, look, officer, I'm from the Washington
Post. I'm
here to cover this--"
"I'm sure you are," came the polite but firm
reply, "but
if you'll just join the queue. You can go straight
to the
front, just show your press card."
"But--" She saw there was no point in arguing.
"I'll see
you later," she snapped at Fenn before shoving her
way
back into the crowd.
Fenn passed through the gate, the grin broad on his
face. It slowly faded as he walked along the
shadowed path
toward the church. He felt uncomfortable, as though
the
old building itself were watching him, the black open
doorway waiting to devour his soul. If there was
such a
thing as a soul. He wasn't sure (he'd reached
no definite
conclusions--and how could anyone?), but he thought he
believed in the "spark" of life, an essence
inside which
gave man his drive, generating energy as well as
thoughts,
through chemically derived impulses. A tiny
pilot light, if
you like, that was necessary to set everything else in
motion. So what was God? A bigger spark? were
his and
all the others just offshoots from the big one? Or was
God
everything the different religions wanted Him
to be? And
did it really matter? Not to Fenn. And maybe not
even to
God.

James Herbert - The Shrine

But the church puzzled him. There was a coldness to it that seemed to be more noticeable each time he visited-- unless he himself was absorbing the fears of first Hagan, and now Delgard. "Spiritually devoid" was a strange expression to anyone who had no particular beliefs in that direction, so why did it seem so apt to him? He had been disappointed that his week's research had uncovered no deep mysteries or scurrilous activities surrounding St. Joseph's or the village, but only because it would have provided an interesting, perhaps intriguing, storyline. Yet had he been that cynical when he had first undertaken research, or was it just rationalization after discovering no hidden skeletons? He remembered that his attack on the archives had been almost obsessive. The fire, the deaths of the priest and Alice's father, the strangeness of Alice herself, and the veiled insinuations of Monsignor Delgard, had instilled doubts and suspicions in his own mind, had kindled a peculiar fear within himself, one that he had not understood and could not ignore. Perhaps the week of relentless research had purged the fear from him, the multitude of mundane historical facts and dates overwhelming the real purpose of his searches. He stood outside the worn building and gazed up at the small tower. Its origins dated from way back --no one was sure just how far back its history went--and he wondered at how much the ancient stones must have witnessed, how times had changed beneath its spire, those changes escalating with each passing century. It had stood, or parts of it had stood, from premedieval England to the era of microchips and space rockets, through sorcery and superstition into the age of the realist. If the church were human, if stone and mortar were flesh and blood, the window its eyes, the altar its brain, how would it absorb those vast changes, what effect would they have on its living being? And would its spiritual aura survive the debasing onslaught of materialism? Or would the wisdom-giving

years
pass on a new perception that far surpassed the
achievements
of scientific knowledge?
He shook himself. Jesus, Fenn, a
philosopher yet. It was
just a pile of stones standing before him, with no
feelings,
no brain, and no soul. Manmade, stamped and
packaged
by the Roman Catholic Church. End of profound
philosophical
contemplation. Footsteps made him turn
sharply.
"Can I help you?" It was a different priest to the
young
Irishman that Fenn had spoken to in the church
house
more than a week before.
"Ah, yeah. My name's Fenn. I'm looking for
Monsignor
Delgard."
"Oh, yes, Mr. Fenn, I've heard all
about you. I've just
left the monsignor up at the presbytery."
"Thanks." The reporter turned in that
direction.
"He's rather busy now, preparing for Mass."
"I won't take up much of his time," Fenn
replied over
his shoulder.
The priest went into the church.
As he walked, Fenn could see the gathering in the
field
just beyond the graveyard. He paused and squinted his
eyes, looking toward the distant oak tree,
noticing with
interest the platform built before it, the raised
altar.
"Showtime," he muttered, and went on.
He knocked on the door of the presbytery, then
rang the
doorbell too, his usual method of announcing
his arrival
when given two options, and raised his eyebrows in
surprise
when Sue answered.
"Hi," he said.
"Hello, Gerry."
"You on the team now?"
"Just helping. So much is going on." She stood
aside so
that he could enter. "Did you want to see
Monsignor
Delgard?" Sue asked, then added pointlessly,
"Of course
you did."
"It's good to see you." And it was, even though she
looked tired, dark shadows under her eyes, hair
not as
springy and vibrant as usual. "You been losing
sleep,
Sue?"

"What?" She brushed a wisp of hair away from her face and looked away as though embarrassed. "Oh, no, no, I'm fine," she said with false lightness. "Working too hard, I suppose."

He moved closer. "Doing two jobs: the radio station and the church."

"St. Joseph's doesn't take up too much time, not really."

"What do you do here?"

"It's not just me, there's a few women from the village who come in to help. We clean the church, the house. Buy food in for the monsignor--he's terribly busy, you know. This morning I've been answering the phone for him --it seems to have been ringing nonstop."

"And answering the door?"

"Yes, that too."

"Is Ben with you?"

"He's around somewhere, in the field, I think. I tried to call you lots of times this--last--week." She looked at him with concern.

He smiled, pleased that she had. "I got snowed under. Thought I needed to keep away from people for a while."

"You weren't at the Courier."

"No, I was doing some digging for Monsignor Delgard. Sorry you couldn't reach me, but then I didn't think you wanted to."

"After the accident last week, the fire? You didn't think I'd care? I heard you were involved, heard it from others."

Her eyes glistened softly.

"Oh, Chri-- I really am sorry. Sue, but you know you've been kinda funny towards me. I didn't even know if you wanted to see me again." He reached out and put a hand on her arm.

She looked down and was about to say something when the phone, nearby in the hallway, rang.

"I'll have to get that." She turned away from him and picked up the receiver.

"Oh, Bishop. Yes, did you want the monsignor? No, I haven't been out there myself for a while, but one of the priests told me it's getting very crowded ..."

Delgard emerged from a door just off the hallway. He smiled and gave a small wave when he saw Fenn. Sue handed him the receiver and whispered, "It's Bishop

Caines,

wants to know how everything's going."

Delgard nodded and took the phone. Sue came back to Fenn. "It's pretty hectic just now," she said, speaking

quietly so that the priest would not be interrupted.

"Can I see you later?" Fenn asked, feeling slightly ridiculous having to ask.

"Do you really want to?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Where were you last week? I mean, where did you stay?"

The lie came easily. Only he decided not to tell it.

"We'll talk about it later." He was surprised himself that

he had not immediately told her he had stayed in a Chichester hotel, near to John Dene House, where the

historical records of Sussex were kept.

"You're not keeping something from me?"

He decided honesty couldn't run too deep.

"Nothing," he replied.

Detgard had replaced the receiver and was coming toward them. "Gerry, I'm certainly glad to see you again. I

thought perhaps I'd frightened you away."

She looked at the priest sharply, but said nothing.

"You don't know how much you got me to chew off,"

Fenn said. "I haven't crammed so much since I left school."

He added as an afterthought, "Although I didn't cram too much then."

"You can tell me on the way over to the church. I have

to get into my vestments for the Mass."

"You're taking it?"

"I seem to have inherited a parish, at least temporarily.

Susan, will you look after Alice and her mother while we

go to the vestry?"

"Alice is here? In the house?" Fenn's voice rose in

surprise.

"I thought it best we install her in here early. That way

she won't have to fight her way through all the people who have come to see her. We'll just go through the churchyard into the field."

"Seems like a good idea. Could I see her?"

"I really must make ready for the service now and I'm

anxious to hear what you've uncovered. I'd rather you came over to the church with me."

"Sure. Maybe later?"

The priest did not answer, but glanced at his watch and

said to Sue, "Bishop Caines is on his way from

Worthing,
he should be here in twenty minutes or so, unless the traffic holds him up. Will you wait here with Alice and the Reverend Mother until he arrives, then take them to their places five minutes before Mass begins?" She nodded.
"I think the bishop may arrive with an entourage."
"I'll take care of them, Monsignor."
He smiled his thanks and led Fenn outside. As they walked back toward the church, he said, "You look tired, Gerry."
"You know, I was just about to say the same thing to you. And so does Sue. I think she's taken on too much."
"Perhaps we all have." He turned his head to study the reporter's face. "She's a good woman, very able, very sincere. She told me her faith had wandered for a while, but now it seems to have returned with a renewed vigor."
"Because of Alice?"
"They say the true miracle of Lourdes is not the sick that are cured, but the replenishing, the strengthening, and even the beginning of faith for the pilgrims."
"Sue appears to have caught the bug."
The priest laughed. "I think that's an appropriate description. It is rather like catching a bug, although there are no ill effects, just good ones."
"That's a matter of opinion."
"Ah, yes, I understand your relationship is under some stress. But do you really blame Susan for that, Gerry?"
"Not entirely."
Delgard thought it best to leave the subject alone; there were far more important issues to concern himself with at that time. Fenn was an impulsive and certainly selfish young man. Some aspects of his skepticism were healthy and clearly intrinsic in the profession he'd chosen, while others were somewhat destructive. He had an air of ruthlessness about him, although it was often disguised beneath an apparent nonchalant attitude; yet Delgard suspected the reporter was a compassionate man, again that sensitivity concealed beneath an indifferent exterior. It was the priest's understanding of the human character through years of listening, delving, consoling, that allowed his harsh assessment--not judgment--of Fenn to be tempered by

more kindly impressions. The man was complex but
uti-

imately likable, someone whose faults could
irritate but

could be soon forgotten.

"Have you discovered anything of interest, Gerry?"

Delgard asked.

Fenn took a deep breath. "Nothing that
relates to our--

your--particular problem. I'll type out my
notes for you

in some kind of order, giving correct dates and
names, but

I can give you a brief rundown now."

They had reached the church door and Fenn shivered
when they entered the gloomy interior. "It's
cold."

"Yes," was all the priest said.

The church was empty, the priest that Fenn had
passed

earlier either in the vestry or having left to join the
congregation
in the field.

"Let's sit here." Delgard pointed to a bench.

"I thought you were in a hurry."

"There's time to talk. Please proceed."

They sat, Fenn on one bench, Delgard in
front, his

body twisted to face the reporter, his back to the
altar.

"Okay, here goes," Fenn said, taking out a
notebook

from his pocket. "I'm afraid this place isn't
famous for

much. I'll amend that: it isn't famous for
anything. It gets

its first official mention as far back as A. d.
770, when the

Saxons had a castle nearby at Stretham.

The lord of the

manor was granted a charter by Osmund, the King
of the

West Saxons, to assign fifteen hides of
land to endow the

church in Banefelde. Presumably it was this
one, St.

Joseph's, since there's no record of any
other churches

existing at that time. The village seems to have had
a variation in spelling over the years, by the way.

Banefelde, Banedryll, Banefeld without the
"e" on the end, Banfield

got to be the final handle.

"Before the coming of the Saxons, prehistoric men had

track right across the county, east to west, and it went
right through the settlement which eventually became this
village. You've got to remember this part of the
country

was nearly all forest land; the settlement was
probably just

a clearing in the forest.

"Its second earliest official mention was in the

James Herbert - The Shrine

Domesday

Survey in 1085, when William wanted to know just how much the kingdoms were worth and who exactly was in them. Not much seems to have happened since. A little excitement around Reformation time and the Civil War

in the following century. Sixty-two villagers died of the plague

in the seventeenth century. Not much of any importance

until it became a staging post on the LondontoBrighton

turnpike in the eighteenth. Oh, yeah, that's when it got its

own workhouse, too, for the parish destitutes. The villagers

also got their own railway line around 1880 and kept it

until the cuts a hundred years later. It could be the line

will be reestablished with all the attention Banfield's getting

now.

"A few familiar names keep cropping up over the years,

some going right back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Southworth's one of them. Two

others, Backshield

and Oswald, are with him on the parish council today.

There's a Smythe who gets several mentions, Breedehame,

Woolgar, Adams, and a Charles Dunning, who seems to

have been of some note. He was knighted in the time of Henry VIII. Most were independent landowners

or farmers.

There was conflict between some of the families during the Civil War--some supported Charles I,

others hung in

with Cromwell. Knowing village

feuds, they probably resent

each other to this day. A few of the villagers have been involved in smuggling. I suppose it was an

open road

from the coast with plenty of places to hide along the way.

That was about all the skulduggery that went on, or at

least was recorded." He smiled at the priest.

Delgard waited for him to continue and frowned when he didn't. "That's it?" he asked in

surprise.

"That's the bones of it. You'll get the details in my

typed notes. Sorry I couldn't provide you with murders,

pagan sacrifices, or witch burning, but they're just not

there."

"It's something of an anticlimax."

"Especially when you've been through just about everything

written on the place since Saxon times.
Dead ends
are never fun."
"The church itself. There must be more on the
church."
"There is. Not much, though. In England, Sussex
was
one of the last pagan strongholds. It was cut off
from the
north by forests, on the east and west by marshes, and the
south by sea. Augustine and his Christian
followers from
Rome got short shrift from the natives at that
time. It took
a bishop called Wilfred, who was driven onto
the Sussex
coast by rough seas, to make the breakthrough. He was
appalled by the barbarism and resolved to come back
and
convert the savages. He did, twenty years
later, and got
his way. The story goes that Banfield, or
Banefelde as it
was known, was one of the last settlements to hold out.
The interesting thing is that the first Christian church--
and we can only assume it was St. Joseph's--
was built
over the pagans' place of worship. And their
burial grounds."
There was an iciness in Delgard's stare that was a
reflection
of inner thoughts and not directed at Fenn. He
said,
"That's probably not significant; many
churches have been
built over pagan altars as a firm and
symbolic rebuttal of
what previously took place. And burial
grounds have always
been sacred in the minds of men, Christian or
pagan."
"Sure. It's just a statement of fact from me, not
an
insinuation."
The priest nodded. "Please go on."
"The first curate to get a mention here was"--he
consulted
his notebook--"a John Fletcher. That was in
1205.
The church records, by the way, only go back as
far as
1565, and they deal solely with marriages and
deaths. I got
the information on Fletcher from a book on
the village."
"Are you sure?"
"Yeah. But I discovered something else that I'll
get to in
a minute. As I said before, Banfield was
particularly resistant
to Bishop Wilfred and his followers when they began
converting the Sussex people. A lot of blood was
spilled.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Once the church was established, though, there were no more problems--at least, none that have been recorded. Some trouble with Charles II--THE minister here was a Royalist and was involved in sneaking the king across the Downs to the coast where he took a boat to France.

Cromwell had the priest executed. Apart from that, the

clergy have kept a low profile in Banfield: no scandals, no misuse of church funds, and no anarchy.

"But the records only date to the late sixteenth century.

We don't know how this church was affected with the spreading of Lutheranism in England. Those were troubled times for Catholics.

"The Reformation brought change and problems to all the churches in this country, but I couldn't find anything

specific to St. Jos'eph's. One or two dignitaries in the area

got into heavy trouble when they wouldn't swear allegiance

to Henry VIII as head of the English Church, but most decided to go along with the idea for the sake of peace. Besides, many were benefiting from the transformation;

Henry was selling off the lands available with the dissolution of the monasteries, and the gentry were the recipients."

Something was nagging at the back of Delgard's mind, a

teasing, darting thought that dissolved like a disturbed dream each time he tried to focus on it.

"There were opposing factions in Banfield,"

Fenn

continued, "and the controversy was probably used to continue feuds that had been going on for some time.

Anyhow, there are no church records touching that period

in the archives. And that leads to the matter I mentioned

earlier."

Delgard leaned toward the reporter as though hearing his confession.

"Is there an old chest somewhere in the church?"

Fenn

asked.

The priest looked at him in surprise.

"An old chest made of thick elm or oak?"

Fenn went on.

"It's held together by bands of Sussex iron.

And, oh,

yeah, it has three locks."

The priest shook his head slowly. "I don't know of any

such chest. I haven't seen it."

"Could it be stored away somewhere?"

"There's only the vestry and the crypt. I'm sure it isn't

in either."

"In the house? The attic?"

"What size is it?"

"I'm not sure. Something like five feet by two. It's ancient, dates back to the fourteenth century."

"No, it's not in the presbytery. Why is it important?"

"Because that's where old documents, church valuables, books, and records were kept. I found mention of it in the

archives. Henry VIII ordered that every church had a

strong coffer, paid for by the parish, in which records were to be kept. That was in fifteen-something-or-other, but according to the archives, Banfield already had its own chest dating back two centuries before. We may be able to

find more about St. Joseph's from it."

It was important. Somehow Delgard knew the chest was

important. It tied up with the elusive thought he had had

moments before. "I can check the crypt later, after Mass."

"I can do it now."

Delgard hesitated, looked at his watch, and said, "Very

well. Come with me into the vestry and I'll give you the

key; the entrance to the crypt is outside."

He rose, a tall, dark-clothed man, his eyes in shadows.

Fenn, still sitting, looked up at him and remembered how

indomitable the priest had appeared when he had first laid

eyes on him; now some of that strength seemed to have waned as though Delgard were drawing into himself, his vibrancy not gone but diminished. Although the change was barely discernible, Fenn was sure it wasn't just in his

own imagination.

"Is something wrong?" the priest asked.

Fenn pulled himself together. "Uh, no, just thinking. Let's get the key."

As they walked toward the vestry, footsteps unnaturally

loud in the empty church, Fenn glanced over at the statue

of the Madonna. There was no whiteness left to it.

Then a child's puzzled voice was clearly heard.

"He's got

nothing on!" "The Emperor's New Clothes,"

Hans Christian Andersen

ben JIGGLED HIS BUTTOCKS ON the hard wooden bench,

one cheek to the other, hands cammed beneath his legs. His

mother sat beside him, eyes closed, oblivious to the noise

around her.

Ben was over his earlier fright, having seen a lot more

worse sights than the man with the funny face:

James Herbert - The Shrine

men with
no legs; children with heads too big and silly
wobbly eyes;
women with lumps and bumps and jelly limbs; and
nervous
eyes peering out of rag bundles in wheel chairs.
"I'm cold, Mummy," he complained.
"Hush," Sue told him. "Mass'll be starting
soon." She
looked around, amazed at the vast numbers. Here
and
there banners waved above the sea of pink faces,
proclaiming
districts and religious associations. Many in the
row
she sat in wore small badges denoting the
wearers as
Pilgrims to Lourdes. A smart young man
directly behind
her bore a plastic identity card boasting that he
was Anthony
Roberts of St. Peter's Tours. Others around
him
sporting different-colored badges than those on
her bench.
A leaflet lay in the churned earth at her
feet, discarded
with some disgust by a pilgrim farther along who had
received it from a young girl as he had entered the
grounds;
it asked for contributions toward the followers of the
Rev.
Sun Myung Moon in order that the Unification
Church
might become an important economic force.
A muddy
heelmark had sullied the moon face of the man
beaming
from the leaflet, reducing the image to that of a soiled
oriental Mr. Happy. A contingent of
white-robed figures sitting a few rows back
had puzzled her at first, their
bright ribbons and cloaks unfamiliar to any
ecclesiastical
order that she knew of, until the woman sitting
next to her
had noticed her gaze and given her a nudge.
"They're just
a lay society," the pilgrim had confided.
"Knights of the
Holy Sepulcher they call themselves. We often
see them at
Lourdes."
She and Ben were fortunate enough to be seated close
to
the recently erected altar piece, its platform
raised five feet
above the ground so that all the congregation could witness
the ceremony; a young priest, acting as usher and who
knew Sue as a voluntary helper, had made
the pilgrims
shuffle along the bench until there was room for her
and

her son. The only reserved area was the benches in front of her and that was now filled with a mixture of clergy, nuns and civilians, some of whom in the latter group she recognized. The man called Southworrh was one and she could see him chatting and laughing quietly with Bishop Caines, giving the impression that they were waiting for an open-air concert to begin rather than a holy service.

Across the center aisle from her a wide area had been

left clear for stretchers and wheel chairs; members of the

St. John's Ambulance Brigade, crisply dressed young women

who were obviously private nurses, and relatives of the

invalids, sat on benches directly behind them.

The press

had been given no special privileges, apart from being

allowed early entry, and most had managed to find places

near the front, where they grouped together, some with notebooks poised, others who had seen it all

before (though

nothing quite like this, they had to admit) passing wry comments and wondering if it would be sacrilege to smoke.

Cameras were squeezed onto ends of benches, and many squatted on the grass in the central

aisle, having

already been moved back from directly beneath the altar.

Television cameras had not been allowed inside the grounds,

but cranes leered over the tall hedge along the roadside,

zoom lenses focused on the twisted oak tree and the simply

decorated rostrum before it.

From certain sections of the congregation voices raised

in gentle hymn could be heard; the chanting drone of prayers came from other groups.

Sue was tense and she sensed the people around her felt the same. If anything, the excitement that Sunday was at a

higher pitch than on the previous week. The expectancy

had somehow increased. Even Ben's eyes were shining, his

usual boredom with just "hanging around" not voiced, nor

even hinted at. He was cold, but she felt his shivering was

more akin to hers than to the chill; it was pure exhilaration,

a feeling shared with everyone present. There was a

James Herbert - The Shrine

sudden
hush, and then a low, wondrous moan rippled through
the crowd. Alice had been seen emerging through a
newly
created opening in the church's boundary wall.
Molly Pagett held her daughter's hand and the
Reverend
Mother from the convent led the way to the seats in front
of the altar. There was white apprehension on
Molly's
face, yet Alice was expressionless, her gaze
only on the
tree, not once looking at the crowds who watched
her with
reverent awe. Total silence descended.
Ben jumped to his feet, anxious to see what the
grownups
could see, but was too small to get a clear look
over the
heads and shoulders in front. Before his mother could stop
him, he clambered onto the bench. He saw
Alice and was
unimpressed.
Fenn descended the short flight of steps,
careful not to slip
on the moss-slimed surfaces, and inserted the
long key into
the door's rusted lock. Surprisingly, the key
turned easily.
He pushed open the door and stood there for a few
seconds,
allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom
inside, remembering the old TV program he
used to watch
as a very young kid. Inner Sanctum it had been
called, and
the credits each week always began with an old
crypt door
slowly swinging open, the creaking sound
classically drawn
out. He'd had bad dreams about that door and the
unknown
thing that lay beyond, but morning had always
brushed the memory aside like a hand sweeping
back a
drape. Only now it was morning and this wasn't a
dream.
A damp, musty smell lurched out to greet him.
He smiled at his own nervousness. Delgard had
assured
him that St. Joseph's no longer kept its dead
belstairs.
His hand groped around the wall just inside the door,
feeling for the light switch. He found it, clicked
it on.
"Wonderful," he muttered. The poor light
barely reached
the chamber's four walls.
He moved in and felt a fresh--no, a dank--
coldness
creeping under his skin. Something scuttled away
into
some dark recess. Cardboard boxes littered the

James Herbert - The Shrine

floor. An
old table with heavy Michelin legs and battered
surface
stood in the center, a wooden, paint-blotched
ladder leaning
like an inebriate against it. Other gray shapes
loitered
just beyond the circle of light.
Fenn looked around, hoping to find the chest without
searching. A low, squarish object covered by a
dust sheet
caught his eye and he cautiously headed toward
it. The
floor was uneven and his shoes became wet as he
walked
through puddles that had formed in the dips. He
squatted
and reached toward the mildewy cover.
Monsignor Delgard turned to the congregation, his
large
hands resting on either side of the lectern, eyes
looking
into the expanse of expectant faces rather than the
missal
before him. He drew in a sharp breath, his stooped
shoulders
almost straightening.
Dear God, there are thousands, thousands.
Why have they come here? What do they want of the
child?
His heart grieved for the sick among them, the
cripples
and invalids who regarded him with shining eyes, with
lips that were parted, smiles of anticipation
lightening
their haunted features. Oh, dear Lord, please
help them in
their faith; don't let disappointment taint it.
What happened
before with the child cannot be repeated, they must
realize that. Let today be the end of all this! Show
them
there are no miracles here.
The two microphones skillfully fitted into the
lectern
whined disconcertingly for a few moments.
A small breeze licked at the pages of the
missal.
The emotions of the congregation seemed to sweep over
him in euphoric waves and his head felt light
with its
directed energy. Flushed faces spread out before
him, pink
pebbles on an undulating beach, reaching back,
beyond
the point where there were no more benches, the change
in level resembling a tide-caused step,
stretching to the
entrance of the field, the high hedges that bordered the
road a green, containing seawall. It's madness,
he told
himself. A foolish delusion in which the Catholic
Church

James Herbert - The Shrine

should take no part. Bishop Caines was smiling encouragingly below him. Southworth had his head turned, watching the crowds. There were many other priests out there, their presence giving credence to the deception. But, no, there was no deception. Alice Pagett was a sincere child. There could be no deep, grievous sin on her young soul. Perhaps it was he, the priest, who was in sin with this doubt, this refusal to accept that which he himself had witnessed. Perhaps he lacked the humility to believe that a child could evoke such spiritual power. Perhaps . . . He raised his hands to shoulder level, palms outward, and began the service. Alice was watching him intently, her eyes staring yet somehow glazed, expressionless, looking right through him . . . Looking . . . Looking not at him . . . but at the tree . . .

The cover felt clammy to his touch and Fenn had to force himself to grip the material and pull it away. A wooden box lay beneath and tiny black things fled across its surface from the exposing light. He knew immediately that it wasn't the chest he sought--it was too small and not ancient enough--but decided to open it anyway; the relevant documents might well have been transferred to it some time in the past. There was no lock; he lifted the lid. Swirling dust particles caused him to sneeze and he looked down at the old books and papers with watery eyes. The lid fell backward as he reached inside and grabbed a book. It was a well-worn parish Mass book, the words inside in Latin. Dead. Defunct. Only to be used by religious diarchs since the Vatican had decided that modern-day native language was flavor-of-the-month. The book beneath was the same, the one below the one beneath also the same; the box was full of them. The papers were yellowing hymn sheets, nothing more. He closed the lid, disappointed. That would have been too easy. Fenn stood and, hands on hips, scanned the underground chamber once more. Christ, it was cold! He moved to the center, the light bulb, with its heavy metal shade, just six inches above his head and casting

James Herbert - The Shrine

black shadows
beneath his brow and nose. Two insects flickered
around
the light, unknowingly seeking death in their personal
sun.
How many ancient bones were beneath this floor? Fenn
wondered. Pagan bones, heathen remains. Did
their spirits
linger when their bodies were done? He realized he
was
spooking himself unnecessarily and mentally kicked
his
own shin. Get on with it, Fenn, and then get out!
He followed his own advice and strode over to a
pile of
boxes behind a stack of chairs in one corner of the
crypt,
whistling tunelessly as he began pulling at them.
A quick
look-through should suffice, no need to examine
anything
too closely, it was an old chest he was after, quite
big, too
big to hide itself away easily. A discarded
radiator, disturbed
by his searching, began to slither down the wall it
had been leaning against; it crashed to the floor with a
thunderous clang, the noise echoing off the damp
stone
walls.
Fenn froze, shoulders hunched, until the
reverberations
died away. Sorry, he apologized to the
ghosts, then continued
looking.
He went over to the gray shapes that had been
silently
watching throughout. They stood like stunted specters,
and he winced at their disfigurements as he drew
close.
There were four of them and two still had some faded
color left in their chipped plaster clothes; the
other two
had begun life as white, but now were almost as
black as
the darkness around them. You've got a pal
upstairs who'll
be joining you soon, he silently told them,
thinking of the
crazy-paved Madonna. The nearest was
a noseless/chinless Christ, who appeared to be holding
something in one
curled arm; its other arm was broken off at the
elbow.
Fenn bent slightly, curious to see what was the
strange
looking object he held. "Nice," he
murmured when he
discovered it was a stone heart with a little cross
protruding
from the top like a faded strawberry stalk.
The statue behind was taller, its surface
discolored and

grimy. This one was presumably a sculpture of Jesus too, although, without a head and just part of a beard above a ravaged neck, it was hard to tell. The next was as small as the first and its form was slightly bent, the man depicted carrying a child on his shoulders. The staff was missing and both faces, the child's and the bearer's, had been mutilated, but Fenn easily guessed it was St. Christopher and the Christ boy. He turned quickly toward the light as it dimmed momentarily. "Don't you bloody dare," he snapped. It grew bright instantly. Fenn returned his attention to the damaged statues. There was something familiar about the one at the very back. He narrowed his eyes, wishing the light were stronger; the metal lampshade cutting out half its beam didn't help much either. Squeezing past the first statue, he peered between the two blocking his way. The face that stared back sightlessly was the same as the face upstairs in the church. It was Mary and she looked serene. He frowned in puzzlement. From across the chamber, this figure had looked in as bad shape as the others, soiled, cracked, and parts missing; it must just have been the poor light throwing deceptive shadows, for no mutilations or grime were evident that close. He tried to get nearer; there was something about the blind staring eyes . . . Resting one hand on the headless statue to his right, he leaned forward. The white face was smiling. And he had the uncanny feeling that the eyes could see him. His other hand touched the St. Christopher and the child-burdened figure wobbled dangerously. He steadied the statue and eased his body closer to the shadowy Virgin. It had to be a trick of the light: the smile on the stone lips seemed to have broadened. He blinked. They seemed to have parted, too. There was a numbness in his mind as though pain freezer had been sprayed onto certain brain cells. The pupilless eyes were mesmerizing. Fenn's breathing was shallow, but he hardly noticed. He had to get closer, had to touch the statue, had to touch those parted lips.

James Herbert - The Shrine

The light was dimming. Or did it appear to be, because he could only focus on those moist lips, those piercing eyes? There was a faint sputtering noise behind, but he barely registered the sound or noticed the flicker. He was only a foot, perhaps just inches away, and he could get no farther; the other two statues held him in check. He stretched forward, craning his neck toward the soft lips, the two guardians beginning to tilt. He could not move any nearer, but just before the light disappeared, the statue of Mary moved toward him. PRIEST: My brothers and sisters, to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins. The wind stirred headscarves and banners and ruffled the hair on uncovered heads. People coughed above the silence. Somewhere a baby howled. PRIEST: Lord, we have sinned against you: Lord have mercy. RESPONSE: Lord, have mercy. On top of a crane overlooking the field, a cameraman looked quizzically at his machine. "Hey, what's going on down there?" he shouted, heedless of the Mass in progress. "The power's fluctuating. Do something before the whole thing's messed up!" PRIEST: Lord, show us your mercy and love. RESPONSE: And grant us your salvation. A press cameraman quietly cursed the motor on his Nikon. "What a bloody time to pack up." He didn't notice that several of his colleagues were having the same problem. PRIEST: May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life. RESPONSE: Amen. A woman reporter who had been quietly talking into her microcassette recorder shook it impatiently when the cogs slowly stopped turning. "Fuck," she cursed, keeping her voice low and smacking the machine against the palm of her hand. PRIEST: Lord, have mercy. RESPONSE: Lord, have mercy. PRIEST; Christ, have mercy. RESPONSE; Christ, have mercy. PRIEST: Lord, have--

James Herbert - The Shrine

Monsignor Delgard clapped his hands to his ears as the microphones shrieked violently, then went dead.

Through half-closed eyes he saw Alice rise from the bench and come toward him.

The statues on either side of Fenn crashed to the floor and he fell with them. He cried out, suddenly aware he was in total darkness, the smashing of stone joining the cry. Something.

crushed his fingers, but the pain was hardly felt. A heavy weight fell on his shoulders, bearing him down,

stunning him with the blow. Instinctively he tried to roll

away and something to his right prevented him. He thrashed

out, terribly afraid, remembering the Madonna statue,

how it had moved, how it had wanted him . . . the desire

in her eyes . . .

"No!" he shouted, his voice ringing around the corrupt-smelling

chamber, and the sound increased his panic. He kicked out, pushed, shoved, heaved. The statue was unreasonably

heavy, pressing hard against him. He managed to half-turn and his hand grasped at the cold stone.

It was wet with slime and his fingers slid along its surface; at

points his hand ran into what could only have been lichen

but which felt like soft, rotting flesh.

He could almost feel hot, fetid breath warming his skin.

Fenn managed to pass an arm beneath the cumbersome weight and roared as he pushed. The statue slowly slithered

off his body, a grating noise as it hit the floor. He turned,

elbows beneath him, gasping in the foul air, his chest heaving. He had to get out, the very darkness was closing

in. Reason told him the cellar was filled with

dead, inani-

mate things; imagination insisted they could move, could breathe, could see, could touch.

His feet slipped in wetness as he scrabbled

to rise. He

blinked against the blackness, afraid he would be smothered

by it. The doorway, there was gray daylight coming from the doorway. He had to reach it.

He began to crawl over dead, mutilated

figures, through

the sticky puddles formed on the uneven floor like stagnant

underground lakes, knocking aside boxes, anything

James Herbert - The Shrine

that got in his way, trying to gain his feet but still
too
unsteady, desperate to reach the light, desperate
to get
away from cold, lifeless fingers that stretched toward
him
from the darkness
Only the light could return those fingers to stone.
But
now there was a shadow in that gray rectangle of
open
doorway, a mass of blackness that devoured the
light as it
moved closer to Fenn. As it reached out for him.
There were no more sounds from the crowd, no more
coughs, no more children wailing, no more mumbled
prayers. It was as if the thousands present were
holding
their breath as one. Even though only those nearest the
raised platform could see what was happening, some
mass-consciousness
sent the tension eddying around the congregation
like widening ripples on a disturbed
pond. They
held their breath and looked toward the centerpiece.
Then a hushed coalescent "aaaah" escaped them
as the
tiny figure of the child mounted the steps to the altar.
Wonder and excitement brimmed in their eyes. The
television
cameramen, on top of their cranes, could only
groan
with frustration at the untimely breakdown of their
generator, none of them aware that their rivals were
experiencing
the same problem. A policeman outside the
gate,
oblivious to what was taking place inside, could
only frown
at the static from his hand radio as he tried
to call in
reinforcements. The crowds were fast becoming
uncontrollable
as they tried to push their way through the jammed
entrance to the field.
Delgard felt his legs trembling as the
rapturous little
face approached him up the steps. She
was so tiny and so
frail, and her eyes saw something that was visible
to no
one else. Alice passed him and his body
drained of vitality
as though she were a strange spiritual magnet
attracting
energy. He swayed and had to reach for the lectern to
steady himself. The oak tree rose up behind the
altar, a
black twisted giant, a looming creature that
seemed to
beckon the child.
Alice's eyes half-closed when she stood before
the tree,

James Herbert - The Shrine

white slits only showing between the lids. Her
face slowly
tilted upward as if she were looking into the upper
branches
and a smile drew back over white teeth. Her
yellow hair
fell low between her shoulders and her hands rose
away
from her sides, ready to embrace. Her breathing
came in
short, sharp gasps, quickening so that her chest moved
rapidly, gradually slowing, becoming even,
deep, steady.
Stopping.
The air shimmered around her and the clouds seemed
black overhead. But then the sun broke through and the
field, the altar, the tree, were bathed in a pure
light.
Alice slowly turned to face her spellbound
audience, her
small body trembling, shivering with some inner
ecstasy
which the onlookers could feel growing within themselves.
Alice suddenly gasped as though an invisible
blade had
pricked her flesh; the smile remained, though, and
became
even more serene. And now the crowd gasped as she
began to rise into the air.
"Fenn, what the hell is the matter with you?"
He stopped struggling, stopped trying to kick himself
away from the figure stooping over him. His mind
began
to clear, although the panic still remained. "Who . . .
. who
is it?" he asked, voice shaking.
"Who the shit do you think it is, you idiot? It's
me,
Nancy." She reached down for him again and this time
her hand wasn't slapped away.
"Nancy?"
"Yeah, remember? The friend you unloaded at the
church
gate."
He scrabbled to his feet and she had to hold him
back as
he tried to break for the door.
"Take it easy," she snapped. "There's a
lot of junk lying
around here--you'll break your goddamn neck."
Nancy
kept her arm through his, restraining him as they
made for
the open door. The last few steps were too much for
him;
he tore himself loose and rushed through. She found
him
leaning against the church wall outside, a stream of
saliva
running from his mouth as though he had just been
retching.
She gave him a few more moments to recover, then
said, "You gonna tell me what happened down

there?"

His shoulders heaved as he tried to regain his breath.

"I was on the other side of the wall," Nancy said, concerned at his condition. "I just caught a glimpse of you through the graveyard going down the steps to the door back there. It took me a little time to sneak over without

the holy mafia stopping me." Her voice softened. "What happened, Fenn? You look as though you've seen the proverbial ghost."

He let out a long sigh and turned to her. His eyes were

watery. He said breathlessly, "I ... I ... think I may have seen it."

Nancy chuckled, and now that he was outside in the daylight, in the open air, it seemed almost ridiculous to

himself. Only he had been there; he had seen it.

"There . . . there was a figure . . ."

"You mean a statue. I heard the crash when you knocked it over, only it sounded like more than one."

"There were four of them. But one . . . one at the back,

the one of Mary wasn't. It wasn't a statue. It moved."

"Hey, Fenn, are you serious? You just bumped into it

and it toppled. I saw you from the doorway scrabbling around like a maniac. Why were you stumbling around in the dark anyway?"

"There was a light. It must have blown."

"Yeah, scaring you to death when it did. That must have been when you tripped and knocked over the statues."

She chuckled again. "Nice going."

He shook his head; it all seemed so unreal.

"What were you looking for?" Her eyes were sharp, the amusement gone.

"Uh? Oh, a chest, an old chest we thought might be

down there. It could have some early church records inside."

"Let's go back and see if we can find it."

She turned away and Fenn grabbed her arm.

"No, it's not there, I would have seen it."

"Sure you're not just chicken?"

"I would have seen it!"

"Okay, okay, I believe you. Look, the service has already

started, so let's get over there before we miss too

much. You never know, it might just be another miracle

day." She took his hand and pulled him away from the wall. "You're shaking," she said in surprise,

James Herbert - The Shrine

stopping to
face him squarely. "Jesus, you were really
frightened."
"I'll be okay in a minute." But would he be
okay when it
was time to close his eyes and sleep?
"Sure." Nancy touched fingertips to his
cheek. "Take it
easy for a moment. We'll take a slow
walk to the field."
She led him away from the church, away from the
black
hole in its side that was the crypt. Every so often,
she
sneaked a look at his face and frowned. She could
understand
his fright, his crashing around down there in the
dark; it had scared her, for Chrissakes, just
hearing the
racket! Tripping through the graveyard with its
crusty old
tombs and tipping slabs had made her
uneasy, even though
it was broad daylight. The little mountains of earth
scattered
around didn't lighten the atmosphere, either. By the
time she'd reached the steps leading down into what
looked
like a murky pit, she was more than a little edgy! It
was
only because she thought Fenn had fallen and hurt
himself
that she had ventured inside. Still, scary or not,
he was
panicked to a ridiculous degree. Strange,
he hadn't seemed
the type to be scared of bogeymen.
Something felt wrong as they neared the recently
created
gap in the low boundary wall, and Nancy couldn't
quite figure just what. Fenn was too preoccupied with
his
own thoughts to notice. It dawned on her slowly
as they
drew nearer to the field. It was the silence. In a
nine-or-ten-acre plot crammed full with people, there
was total, blanket silence.
She came to a halt and Fenn looked up in
surprise. He,
too, finally noticed the absence of sound. When they
looked
toward the raised altar, they understood.
Monsignor Delgard sank to his knees, one
hand still grasping
the top of the lectern. Those watching, those who
could tear their eyes off the child hovering five feet
in the
air, would have thought it was a gesture of homage and
not just a sapping weakness in the priest's
limbs. The altar
servers, who had been kneeling just moments before, were
now half-sitting, half-lying on the platform,
arms and elbows

James Herbert - The Shrine

outstretched to support them.
Delgard's eyes felt misted; it was like watching
the girl
through a fine veil. He wiped his free hand across
his
brow, his arm leaden with its own weight, and told
himself
that what he saw was impossible. He wasn't
dreaming,
though; she was there above him, her face still tilted
toward the sky, her arms slightly outstretched, the
breeze
ruffling her skirt. His lips moved in silent
prayer.
One by one, the momentum gathering, people began to
slip from their seats onto their knees, their action
one of
worship and not involuntary. Soon it was like a
vast moving
wave as the reaction spread, the shuffling sound
curiously
muted. There were tears on the faces of many,
smiling adoration on the faces of others; some had
to close
their eyes against the glare that emanated from the girl,
while others only saw a tiny, still form that
appeared to
glimmer and fade in their vision. All were humbled
by the
miracle child.
Delgard tried to rise and the strength just wasn't
there.
He watched openmouthed as Alice bowed her head
and
her eyes, her gloriously blue eyes, opened
fully. She smiled.
And slowly, singularly, many of those who had been
lying
on stretchers on the ground or who had sat
helplessly in
wheelchairs, raised themselves to stagger and limp
toward
the altar. They gathered there, supporting each
other,
faces looking upward, their eyes beseeching, a
growing
cluster of shattered, shriveled bodies.
Quiet, throaty murmurs
came from them as they praised the child and the
Madonna for what they felt was happening to them.
There was a sudden cry as a man with a hideously
swollen and marked face pushed his way through the
throng of invalids and collapsed on the steps
leading up to
the altar.
He stretched out a wavering arm and implored,
"Help
me! Help meeeee . . ." the sound dying in a
high-pitched
moan. His uplifted hand shot to his face and he
screamed;
when he took his hand away, bubbles of pus were
bursting

James Herbert - The Shrine

from his cheeks, mouth, and chin.
Only Ben, who could see clearly, for he stood
while
others knelt, could not understand what was happening.
"How do you do?" she chirped. "st"w so glad it
isn't yesterday,
aren't you?"
Pollyanna, Eleanor H. Porter
riordan CAREFULLY CLOSKD THK DOOR
to the cowshed,
not wanting to disturb the creatures inside; they were
tetchy
enough already. He crossed the yard, making for the back
door of the farmhouse, lights from the windows guiding
him
toward the warmth within. He shook his head and mumbled
something under his breath. Times were hard enough
without livestock playing up. He stopped for a
moment,
listening, coldness clamping tightly around him like a
blood-pressure
cuff around an arm. That bloody dog was howling
again like a banshee in the night. It was the usual
mutt, old Fairman's, starting it all off.
His own, Biddy,
would be next, then the Rixby's in the house farther
down
the road. Three nights they'd been at it and there
wasn't
even a full moon for them to be making a fuss
of! As if on
cue, his Labrador, Biddy, began to whine and
then to
howl from inside the house.
Mebbe it was that floodlight they kept on all
night in the
field yonder. It looked eerie enough, the way
it lit up that
blasted oak; mebbe Fairman's animal could
see the glare
from its kennel, the light being unfamiliar
en' all. Riordan
had never liked the tree when he had owned the
field it
stood in, although he had never understood why--it was
just ugly, he supposed--but the field was only
used for
grazing so the oak was doing no harm, wasn't
worth bothering
with. Still, the land belonged to the Church now,
and a nice price they'd paid for it. Why they thought
a
dead oak was special just because a little girl was doing
some peculiar things in front of it, he couldn't
fathom. But
it was a bloody nuisance having it lit up like that,
scaring
the dogs.
He heard his wife cursing Biddy inside the
house, shouting
for the animal to keep quiet. Some chance, once
she'd
started.

James Herbert - The Shrine

And it was a bloody nuisance having all those people
clomping through the field on Sundays! That's what
his
cattle were afeared of; they kept well away from
that area,
cowering at the far side of their own field as if
they
thought the crowd might harm them, rolling their eyes
at
him when he came to herd them in, trembling as
though
there was thunder in the air.
He stood in the middle of his yard looking back
past the
covered siage pit and machinery store, studying
the beam
of light cutting through the indigo blue sky two
fields
away. Somehow it made even him feel
uncomfortable. It
was a silvery intruder, unfamiliar and
unwel come, di sturbi ng
the stability of the country night. He looked up
at the
stars, the sky clear, no clouds to smother the
shimmering
clusters; yet there was thunder in the air, an
electricity that
made his senses tingle. It was unearthly and he
didn' t like
it, not one little bit. When dogs howled at night,
it was
usually a forewarning of death; tonight, standing there
alone in the yard, coldness and darkness embracing
him
like sisters of oppression, he felt the howling was a
warning
of something more. Much more.
Oh, bloody hell, not more trouble! He
studiously finished
filling the pint glass, ignoring the raucous
voices from the
other end of the bar for the moment. He took the money
for the round, rang it up, then casually sauntered
toward
the source of trouble, sighing wearily when he saw
it was
three locals who were causing the disturbance.
He was a big man, though not a rough one, and his
mere arrival on the scene of trouble was usually enough
to
pacify even the most belligerent of customers.
He'd had to
make his presence felt twice the night before, and
once
(unfortunately to no avail) the night before that.
While he
appreciated the extra trade all the
publicity had brought
in, the aggravation that came with it wasn't so
wel come.
The White Hart had always been a peaceful pub
--at least,

relatively so--and he intended to keep it that way.

"All right, lads, keep it down now."

They regarded him resentfully but, he thought, respectfully.

The glass that whistled past his head had no respect

at all. He could only stare after the three figures, stunned,

as they pushed their way through the crowded bar and disappeared outside, an obscenity their good-night bidding.

All conversation had ceased when the glass shattered against the optics behind the bar, and now the customers stood watching the tall barman, as surprised as

he. A barmaid rushed forward to mop up the spilled beer and

Eick up the broken glass; the barman could only shake his

head in bewilderment.

"What's got into everybody?" he said, and his customers

could only shake their heads in sympathy.

Conversation

returned, a trickle breaking into a flood, and the barman

turned his back on the bar and poured himself a double Scotch, breaking his own rule never to drink before

ten o'clock. Those three are barred, he told himself sullenly.

He had never known them to cause trouble before, but he was sure as hell they would never cause trouble in

there again. What was Banfield coming to? It had been alive,

buoyant, over the past few weeks, but the mood seemed to

be changing. At night there seemed to be a heaviness

hanging over the village, like in summer when broody

black clouds lay low and threatening; yet the air outside

was oddly crisp and there were no clouds.

He gulped the Scotch, pulling a face, but grateful for

the sudden rush of warmth.

"You promised, you bastard!"

Tucker put up a stubby hand as if to soothe her temper,

his eyes staying on the road ahead.

"It's early days yet, Paul a," he said placatingly. "I don't

know if the plans are going to go through yet."

"You know, you bastard. Everything's going through

now! Everything!"

"No, no, we have to wait for the district council to give

the go-ahead and you know how slow they are. And even if they granted planning permission, it'd take

another year

to have a supermarket built, maybe more."

"You said you were going to buy out a couple of shops in the High Street and knock them into one."

"I would have, but no one's selling now there's likely to

be a boom on." That wasn't true, for he'd put in tentative

offers for two shops side-by-side, the owners ageing and

fearful of extra trade rather than eager for it.

No point in

mentioning it to Paula until the sale was a certainty. What

a pain in the bloody arse she was becoming!

"Even so, even if you build a new supermarket, why

can't you say yes to me running the old one? At least I'll know where I stand."

"Paula, there's a lot more to running--"

"You promised!"

The X-Js swerved as she punched his arm.

"For fuck's sake, Paula, what's wrong with you? You'll

have us off the road."

He squealed as she lunged for the wheel.

"Paula!" Pushing

her back with one hand and steering the car with the other, he silently cursed the day he had got

involved with

her. He'd misjudged Paula, he realized.

She was dumb,

but she was conniving, too. The Jaguar slowed down and

he pulled off the main highway into a side

road. He

stopped the car, switched off the engine and lights.

"Now

look, pet," he began to say.

"You don't care about me! You just want me for one thing!"

True enough, he thought. "Don't be daft. You know

how much I think of you."

"You don't care! What have you ever given me?"

"There were those earrings at Christmas--"

"Bastard! You don't even know what I'm talking about."

Although the car was stationary, his hands still gripped the wheel and his eyes still watched the road ahead. A

frantic bird or bat fluttered darkly across the windshield.

His grip stiffened and his words came out through tight lips. "Just tell me what you are talking about, Paula."

"I'm talking about my life! Me! My future! I've helped

you--your business and you. I've worked for you night and day, never complained ..."

His eyes rolled upward.

"dis . . . always been there when you needed me. I've

always

been available, for business or pleasure.

I've given up
so much for you."
"What are you bloody talking about? I've given
you a, bloody good job, I've given you
presents, I've taken you
out--
"To a sodding motel! That's just about your mark! And
you give better presents to your wife! I've
seen her parading
'round the village in her stinking fur coat and
jewelry!"
"You want a fur coat, I'll give you a
fur coat!"
"I don't want a fucking fur coat. I
want something
more!"
"Just tell me what!"
"I want the supermarket!"
There was an astonished silence in the car for a few
moments. Then he said disbelievingly, "You want
the
supermarket."
She turned her head away.
"You want the bloody supermarket?" His voice
had
risen several octaves. "You're fucking mad!"
"I don't want all of it, just part. I want
to be a partner." Her voice had sunk several
octaves.
Tucker was just as incredulous. "And how d' you
suppose
I'd explain that away to Marcia?"
"You could tell her you need a partner for business."
"Need a partner? You? You must be fucking joking!"
He tried to laugh, but it came out as a dry,
rasping sound in his throat. "You're a good screw,
Paula, and not bad with figures and ordering stock.
But running a business--
actually running a business--and being a partner? I
love
your snatch, darling, but I don't worship it.
You can take
a running fucking jump!"
She was on him, scratching, slapping, punching,
grabbing
his hair, spitting on him, screaming at him.
Tucker
tried to grab her wrists, but her arms flailed
at him viciously,
hysterically.
"Paula!"
The car was rocking with her strength.
"Paula!"
"I'll tell her, you bastard! I'll tell her
everything! You're
not treating me like a piece of dirt!
She's going to know
everything, you bastard!"
"Paula!"
His hands found her throat and the fit was snug,
pleasing.
He squeezed.
"You bastard, I'm going to--"

James Herbert - The Shrine

Oh, that was good! That was keeping her quiet! Her neck was soft, mushy. He could feel the beginnings of an erection. Yes, that was good!

"You . . . you . . ."

It was dark, but he could see the whiteness of her eyes, and he could smell her fear. Try to blackmail him, would

she? Thought he was that stupid, did she? Stupid of her, fat

slug of a cow! Muscles in her neck were trying to resist the pressure and that felt good too; he wanted it to take time.

Her hands were on his chest, squeezing the fat there, and even that wasn't unpleasant. In fact, it was rather nice.

He could see her tongue beginning to protrude from the whiteness of her face, like a beak hatching from an eggshell.

Now a funny sound was coming from her, a whining, gurgling noise. That's better, you bitch, that's better than

all those nasty, blackmailing words. That was a much sweeter sound. He increased the pressure.

Funny how

small a neck can become when you squeeze hard enough.

Probably one hand could go around it at the death .

. . . at the death . . .

Oh, my God, what am I doing?

"Paula!"

He released her throat and she fell away like a rag doll.

"Paula, I'm sorry, I'm sorry . . ."

Her eyes were staring at him and there were still gurgling noises coming from her.

He leaned toward her. "I didn't mean . . ."

She cried out, but the sound was still strange, as though

still squeezed from a flattened aperture. He touched her

arm and she flinched violently. What had he been trying

to do, what had come over him?

He tried to touch her again and this time she thrashed out wildly. Tucker jumped back, fingernails

raking his

cheek before he was out of reach. She was scrabbling around, searching for the door lock. She found it,

pushed

the door open, the light exposing rounded buttocks as she

tumbled from the car. She lay in the road, the squealing

sounds still coming from her, and he reached over the automatic column shift, his own eyes now wide with fear.

"Paula!" he said yet again.

She was on her knees, panty hose torn
by rough concrete.
She staggered to her feet, was running, stumbling,
gasping
for breath.
"Paula!" he called after her. "Don't tell
anyone ..."
She was gone, swallowed by the night, and he sat
there
for a long time afterward, door closed, in his own
cocoon
of darkness, wondering what had come over him, why
he
had tried to strangle her. It just wasn't like him.
Southworth closed the accounts book, a smile of
satisfaction twisting his lips. He flexed his
narrow shoulders and placed his elbows on the desk,
steeped fingers resting
against his chin. Then his smile broadened and he
relaxed
back into the chair.
Everything was going well, marvelously well.
Banfield
had changed almost overnight, the merchants flushed
with
new trade as tourists packed in, the pubs and
restaurants
packed tight each day and night. And his hotel
had been
overbooked since the miracles had
begun. Morale in the
village was high, the excitement sending waves of
adrenaline
coursing through its inhabitants, bringing them alert
again,
the sluggish burden of decline thrown off. All
this achieved
in just under two months, an incredible escalation of
events,
miraculous in that context alone.
In the coming months, when the clerics had stopped their
predictable dithering and the shrine had become truly
established, trade would increase tenfold, for
pilgrims would
journey from all over the world to see the scene of the
visitation. Southworth was already negotiating with the
village's only travel agent, a small
concern whose revenue
had been slowly sinking with the country's economy,
to
form a new partnership. St. Joseph's Tours
was to be the title of their joint venture, Southworth
himself supplying the capital (his credit was
particularly good with the bank
these days) to buy a fleet of buses which
would cover the
British Isles, the agent's connections
abroad helping to
form alliances with other, foreign, travel
companies. Such
a partnership, apart from the obvious financial gain
in the
tourist business itself, would prove extremely

beneficial to

his own hotel trade.

Soon work would begin on a new hotel, one that was more modern, easier to run, and geared for a fast turnover.

There were other properties, also, that he secretly owned

in Banfield, shops that he had acquired cheaply over the years

when their owners had given up trying to make a decent

living in the lackluster village, bought by him under a

company name, his solicitor handling all negotiations so

that no one else knew who the true purchaser was, not

even--especially not even--his fellow members of the parish

council. The tenants he leased the properties out to would

have something of a shock when their rents were doubled, probably trebled, within the next few months.

They could

hardly appeal, not with the way business would be booming,

and if they refused to pay, well, then, there would be plenty of others eager to move in. And their rents

would

be even higher.

Southworth rose from the desk and walked to the drinks

cabinet. He reached for the sherry bottle, then changed his

mind and took out the brandy. The brandy glass chimed

pleasantly as the bottle touched its lip. He sipped slowly,

pleased with himself, pleased he had been the first to see the opportunity and seize upon it.

Father Hagan had been a problem, the bishop much more susceptible to Southworth's

persuasion, but then

Bishop Caines had his own private ambitions.

Of course,

Southworth regretted the priest's untimely death, but it

had meant the removal of what could have proved to be a

minor stumbling block. Yet would he really have?

Bishop

Caines, a shrewd politician as well as a respected man of

the cloth, would surely have stepped in and gently eased

the doubting priest from the situation. In fact, in his many

private discussions with Southworth, the bishop had hinted

that Father Hagan might soon need a long rest, the fuss

much too draining for a man of such ill health.

Monsignor

James Herbert - The Shrine

Delgard, a priest who had much experience of what might be termed as "phenomenal," would have acted as both investigator and overseer. Southworth knew the bishop had no other choice but to send in a man with such unique qualifications, and he wondered how skillfully he had balanced his briefing to Delgard. Skepticism well to the fore, no doubt, but with enough receptiveness for a message from God to keep Delgard's mind open. And now nobody, nobody could deny the miracles. On Sunday, before thousands and thousands (eight to ten thousand, it had been estimated, had traveled to St. Joseph's, most of whom had not been able to get into the field for the service), more miracles had been performed. None could yet be confirmed, of course, for they could have just been temporary improvements, the sufferers deluded by their own hysteria: the boy whose condition was known as postencephalitic dementia (brain damage caused by a virus infection) could just be experiencing a brief spell of normality; the young girl whose asthma was an almost constant companion, and whose attacks could send her close to death, might find it returned within a week or two; the man whose multiple sclerosis confined him to a wheelchair might find that nerve tissues had not been impossibly regenerated and he would soon need his wheelchair again. There were others, many others, some trivial, some literally deadly serious, the victims claiming they "felt better" or that they felt "uplifted." There was one case, though, that was indisputable. A certain man had come alone to the field next to St. Joseph's, a man who, through shame, had kept his face hidden from the crowd. His Tower jaw, lips, and nose had been infested with open sores and scabs, much of the flesh eaten away. Lupus was the medical term for the condition: tuberculosis of the face. As he stood below Alice, whose small body had risen into the air (there were those among the vast congregation who swore they had not seen her rise, but these were far away, some near the back, and

James Herbert - The Shrine

their view would have been impaired), the man's face had suddenly begun to blister, the scabs falling away and the sores closing upon themselves. His face had healed in full view of all those present, for he had turned to the crowd so that they could witness the miracle. By the end of the service were completed with such incredible emotion, the child taking her place back among the congregation, her face white, skin taut) the deep pits in the man's flesh were being covered by rapidly growing skin. The most cynical of men could not repudiate what had physically happened in front of thousands. Even Monsignor Delgard could not reject such an astounding thing. Southworth returned to his desk, taking the brandy with him. He sat, his mind alive with the new prospects that the Miracle Girl had opened up for him. That was his miracle: the revitalization of his own expectations. The Southworth name would not sink with Banfield into the mire of obscurity but, like the village, would again become a name to be noted, would enhance its centuries-old heritage. The village would grow, and he, his name, his wealth, would grow with it. He raised the glass to lips and wondered why an awful instinctive fear had begun to nag at these happy thoughts. The priest rose wearily from his kneeling position by the bed, his compline, the last prayer of the day, completed. His knee joints cracked with the effort and he stretched his stiff back, feeling old, spent. He turned and sat on the edge of the bed, too tired for the moment to go through the before-bed toiletries. A hand that trembled slightly brushed against his forehead as if it could wipe away the weariness. There had not been many times in his life that he had felt this depleted; usually it had followed particularly wearing exorcisms--rare occasions but not as rare as some people might think--and times when he had witnessed the world at its most dreadful--Biafra, Bangladesh, Ethiopia. At the age of twenty-one he had helped in the aftermath of Nagasaki, and perhaps that was worst of

James Herbert - The Shrine

all;
the nuclear weapon exemplified man at his most
potent
and most loathsome. It was at those times that his spiritual
being had sagged, then plummeted to despairing depths
awash with hopelessness, but the human spirit had a
buoyancy
of its own. On each occasion, though, the upward
journey took longer, the years and events making
the
burden more cumbersome. But why the spiritual fatigue
now?
Father Hagan had not needed to speak of it before he
died; it was evident in his appearance, the weariness
of his
soul reflected in his lusterless eyes. Why was this
depression
hovering over the church, over the house? Why,
when the sick were being miraculously cured, when a
dramatic religious interest, perhaps even
revival, was spreading
throughout the country and, it was reported, throughout
the world, was he so afraid? The Episcopal
Council
had convened that very day to question Alice further and
the child had remained calmly resolute in her
conviction
that she had conversed with Mary. Why the
miracles?
they had asked. And why did the Mother of God
choose
to appear to her, a mere child? What had Alice
done to
receive such grace? And what was the purpose of the
visitations? Alice had just one answer to all the
questions:
the Lady would reveal the purpose in time; now was
too
soon to know.
It was an unsatisfactory reply.
The bishops had been divided, some believing the child
really had received a divine vision, others claiming
there
was no evidence at all that the visions had been
divine. It
was still too early for the cures to be claimed
miraculous,
and as for the levitation, it was an illusion that could be
seen in theaters all over the world. When it was argued
that Alice could not possibly have used trickery in
front
of so many people and in such an open setting, it was
counterargued that Indian fakirs also
performed such feats
in similar circumstances with the use of mass
hypnosis. To
strengthen their claim, those churchmen who were
"anti,"
stressed that not everyone present had seen Alice
levitate,
and furthermore, not one television or still camera
had recorded the phenomenon. It seemed their
mechanisms had

James Herbert - The Shrine

been mysteriously interfered with; only blank film had emerged. That in itself, those "pro" claimed, was evidence of paranormal influences at work. Quite, the others scoffed, but that did not deem it holy. The debate had gone on late into the evening with no conclusions drawn. The bishops would reconvene tomorrow, in London, and the inquiry would continue until some kind of official proclamation could be given to an impatient world, although it would be a carefully worded avoidance of any specific acknowledgment by the Church.

Delgard was puzzled by the failure of the cameras and the lectern microphones, wondering if it was linked in some way with his own sapping of energy that Sunday. He had fallen to his knees with the weakness that had come over him and those in near proximity had done the same, although they might now claim they were merely paying homage. Could there be some strange parasitical force at work which drained energy from the body and power from manmade machinery? It didn't seem possible, but then, neither did levitation nor miracle cures. Yet levitation and miracle cures were not unknown. The Catholic Church had its own levitators such as St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Joseph of Cupertino, as well as many blessed with the miracle of the stigmata, the appearance of bleeding wounds on the hands, feet, and side, resembling the wounds of Christ on the Cross. Some even bled from the head as if a crown of thorns had been placed there. And miracle cures had become almost religious lore. As well as that, perhaps the most stunning miracle of all had been at Fatima, in Portugal, when nearly seventy thousand onlookers had witnessed the sun spiral in the sky and descend toward the earth. Mass hallucination? Was that the explanation for Fatima and for what had happened in England on that Sunday? It was a logical man's reasoning, a scientist's smug answer. But even so, what had caused the hallucination? Alice was just a child.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Delgard walked to the window and gazed out into the night sky. He could see the bright floodlight in the field beyond, accentuating the twisted form of the oak tree. Its visibility disturbed him; he would rather it were hidden by the darkness. Vandals--perhaps just worshipers who cherished what the tree represented, in the same way that the Church cherished the wood of the Cross--had begun to strip the bark, wanting the aged wood for souvenirs or their own personal sacred relic, and now the tree had to be guarded, the light itself acting as a deterrent. The tree dominated the field as it had never before. He drew the curtains together, the sight somehow distasteful to him; but when he was undressed and in bed, his eyes unable to close against the shadows around him, the light still glowed through the material, reminding him the tree was still there, a sinister sentinel. Waiting. Alice's head twisted from side to side, slamming into the pillow with a force that would have stunned, had it connected with anything solid. Her lips moved constantly and her pale body was damp with perspiration, even though the room was winter-cold. The words whispered--anguished, tormented--were said in a voice which scarcely resembled that of an eleven-year-old child. The bedclothes lay loose and rumpled around her ankles, and her thin legs were stretched and trembling. "dis . . . aye, good Thomas, fill me with thy seed" Her pelvis jerked spasmodically, her cotton nightdress thrown high upon her chest. "dis . . . dear in heart, of such good strength . . ." Her small chest sank and heaved with her dream. "dis . . . disperse thysel f into me" She moaned, a long, howling moan, but there was an ecstasy in the sigh that followed. For a moment, her body became still and her eyelids fluttered but did not open. She moaned again and this time the sound was languid. "... more filling than e'er it was . . ." The moaning became deep breaths of pleasure, sighs that exalted the joy to her senses. Something small and black moved against her white stomach. Outside, in the hallway leading to the nuns' cells, a dark-clad figure stood listening, breath held, tensed fingers

James Herbert - The Shrine

on the door handle.
"dis . . . allay their tongues, my priest . . ."
Alice's eyes snapped open, but her body had
not woken
from the dream.
"dis . . . cursed Mary . . . cursed Mary
. . ."
The nun's eyes widened in shock, her grip
tightening on
the door handle.
"dis . . . cursed Mary . . ."
Alice's body stretched upward, her heels and
shoulders
digging into the bed. The black creature
on her stomach
was almost dislodged and the girl cried out in pain as
sharp
needles pierced her tender flesh. But she did not
wake.
She fell back to the bed and lay still, no longer
making
any sound.
The nun. Mother Marie-Claire, Reverend Mother
of the
convent, one hand unconsciously clutching the
crucifix
that lay against her chest, pushed the door open,
slowly,
quietly, as if afraid for herself. The beam of
light from the
hallway broadened as the door opened wider, the
nun's
shadow an elongated specter on the room's
floor. Coldness
flew out at her and it was unnatural, almost
painful.
She moved in, footsteps slow and soft.
"Alice?" she
whispered, reluctant to wake the child but not
sure if she
slept. There was no reply from Alice, but
another sound
came to the nun's ears, a strange yet not
unfamiliar noise.
It was vaguely repellent, a sucking sound. The
nun's forehead
creased into a puzzled frown. She approached the
bed and looked down at the near-naked form lying
there.
Saw the small, bristling shape hunched on the
child's
stomach.
Raised the crucifix to her lips in horror when
she discovered
it was a cat.
Felt nauseous when she realized it was suckling
at Alice's
third nipple.
Look out! Look out, hoys! Clear the track!
The witches are here! They've all come back!
They hanged them high--No use! No use!
What cares a witch for the hangman's nmse?
They buried them deep, but they wouldn't lie still,

James Herbert - The Shrine

For cats and witches are hard to kill,
They swore they shouldn't and wouldn't die--
Books said they did, but they lie! they lie!
"Look Out, Boys," Oliver Wendell

Holmes

the TWO MEN EMERGED FROM the crypt into the
daylight,
the shorter one leading, bounding up the stone steps as
if

relieved to be away from the musty chamber. Fenn
stood

in the graveyard, hands in his topcoat pockets,
and waited

for the priest to join him.

Delgard's progress was slower, his legs moving
as though

they were tied with weights, his shoulders more hunched
than usual. Fenn was concerned for the priest: his

pallor

and demeanor were similar to Father Hagan's before he
had died.

The priest reached him and they walked through the
gravestones toward the boundary wall.

"That's that, then," the reporter said,
deliberately, scuffing

the top off a molehill as they passed.

"No chest, no

information on the church's history."

They had searched through the underground chamber
with a fine toothcomb, Fenn's nerves jangling every
moment

they were down there, only the tall priest's
presence

keeping him from running out into the open. The light
bulb had been working, even though Fenn had insisted

it

had blown the previous Sunday; nevertheless, both
men

were armed with flashlights just in case the power failed
again.

"That may not be so." Delgard's voice was
heavy, his

eyes focused on the ground before him. "The chest
wouldn't

have been lost, not if it contained documents referring
to

St. Joseph's earliest days. It must be
elsewhere."

Fenn shrugged. "It could have been stolen or
destroyed."

"Possibly. His

"Well, where else can we look?"

They had reached the wall and both men looked toward
the centerpiece in the field.

"That tree gives me the shudders, d'you know
that?"

Fenn said, not waiting for a reply to his previous
question.

Monsignor Delgard smiled grimly. "I can
appreciate

your feeling."

"You too, huh? It's hard to reconcile it with a
place of

worship."

"You think this ground is sacred?" the priest asked,

nodding toward the field.

"You're the priest: shouldn't you be telling me it's so?"

The priest gave no answer.

Workmen in the field were carrying in benches, the rows of seating spreading outward, as yet barely covering

half the field. Refinements to the centerpiece were in

progress, the makeshift altar of the previous Sunday replaced by a large and more ornamental carved-wood version; close by was a small uncovered credence table. Posts which

would eventually carry banners were being put up along

the aisles and a low rail had been erected around the raised

platform for the congregation to kneel at while the priest

or priests administered Communion. The activity gave a

normality to the scene which belied the extraordinary events

that had taken place there just a few days before.

Delgard thought of Molly Pagett and the irony of the

less-than-immaculate conception that had happened here.

His conversation with Mother Marie-Claire earlier that morning made him wonder just what the illicit

coupling

nearly twelve years before had spawned.

"I feel it's vital that we locate the church chest, Gerry,"

he said, his hands resting on the cold stone of the wall.

"I'm not so sure; what could it tell us? It's probably filled with Old Mass books and hymn

sheets, like the box

in the crypt." His flesh seemed to tighten around his bones

when he thought of the underground chamber.

"No, I'm sure it's important."

"How can you be? I think we're cluthing at straws."

"It's just a feeling--a very strong feeling. The other

records you found go back to the late sixteenth century.

Why not before that, why should it begin there?"

"Who knows? Maybe that was the first time they thought of keeping any documentation."

"No, the idea of keeping records goes way beyond that

period. It could be that they've been purposely hidden."

"I think you're guessing. I can't believe--"

"Still disbelieving, Gerry? Last Sunday you believed a

statue of the Virgin Mary--a white

James Herbert - The Shrine

unblemished statue--
moved toward you. You said its lips and eyes were
alive,
that they even tried to seduce you. And today? What do
you believe today?"
"I don't know what happened!"
"But a few moments ago in the crypt. There was
no
such statue, just a broken and old stone carving,
almost
unrecognizable as the Virgin, lying behind three
other
equally disfigured statues."
"I fell against it, knocked it over."
"The breaks were grimy with age, not fresh at
all. And
there was no face on the virgin." Delgard's
voice was
reasoning, no hint of criticism in it. "Can't
you believe
something happened there that you cannot logically
explain?"
It was Fenn's turn to remain silent.
Eventually he said,
"What makes you so certain the answer's
in past records?"
"I'm not sure, not at all. But the reverend mother
of the
convent came to me this morning. I'm afraid she
was a
little agitated." That was an understatement: the nun
had
been frantic with worry. "Alice has been
speaking in her
sleep again. Last night, Mother Marie-Claire
listened out
side the door as I had just a few days ago.
She couldn't
catch much of what Alice said, but it was in the
same form
as we had both heard before. She recalled some of the
words, one or two of the phrases. "Fill me
with thy seed"
was one. 'Alay their tongues" was another. Mother
Marie-Claire also heard the word "priest." his
"Old language. Sounds like Shakespeare."
"That's precisely what it is. It was the
peculiar accent
that puzzled me before; it made Alice's words
sound garbled,
nonsensical. Today I remembered a new
treatment of
Shakespeare's plays at the National I saw
several years
ago. I should say an "old" treatment; all
the actors spoke in
Elizabethan English, but not just using
Elizabethan dialogue.
An authority on the subject had tutored them
in the accent
used at that time. It was quite different, not just in form,
to the language we speak today. It was the same
language used by Alice as she slept."

"She was quoting Shakespeare in her sleep?"

Delgard smiled patiently. "She was speaking the language

of that period, possibly before that time, in its correct idiom."

Fenn raised his eyebrows. "You can't be sure of that."

"I'm not. However it gives us a basis to work from.

How can a child of Alice's years--and remember, one who

has been profoundly deaf for most of those years--know of

a language she has never heard or probably even read before?"

"What are you getting at? Possession?

Demonic possession?

Speaking in tongues?"

"I wish it were that simple. Perhaps we could call it retrogression."

"You mean reliving a past life? I thought Catholics

didn't go in for reincarnation."

"Nobody has ever proved that retrogression has anything

to do with reincarnation. Who knows how much race memory is retained within our genes?"

Fenn turned to sit on the wall, his hands still tucked

deep into his pockets. A light drizzle had started while

they were talking. "No wonder you're anxious to see what

records are in that old chest. You know, a couple weeks

back I would have laughed at all this.

Now all I can

manage is a halfhearted chuckle."

"There's more, Gerry. Something else I should have remembered before." The priest squeezed his

temples with

thumb and fingers of one hand as if trying to press away a

headache. "The night Father Hagan died, the night we

had dinner at the Crown Hotel."

Fenn nodded, urging Delgard on.

"Remember I was talking of Alice's general state of

health at that time? I said she was fine except for feeling

tired and being a little withdrawn."

"Yeah, I remember."

"I also said the doctors had noticed a small growth in

her side, beneath her heart."

"You said it was a--what was it?--an extra nipple of

some kind, nothing to worry about."

"A supernumerary. I happened to be watching Father

Hagan when I mentioned that and noticed he became

James Herbert - The Shrine

even

more agitated than he had been earlier during the evening.

It slipped my mind because of the tragedy that followed. I

think it struck a chord somewhere in him, something that was in the back of his mind and that he could not bring to the fore. I was a fool not to have known myself."

"Forgive my impatience, Monsignor, but I'm getting wet.

Are you going to tell me what it is you've remembered?"

Delgard pushed himself away from the wall and looked back toward the church. The light rain had created small

speckles of dew on his face. "Reverend Mother told me she

had found a cat in Alice's room last night.

It was resting

on her sleeping body and it was drinking from her."

Fenn's head, kept tucked in against the drizzle, snapped

up. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The cat was suckling at Alice's supernumerary nipple."

Fenn's face crinkled in disgust. "She was sure? She

actually saw it?"

"Oh, yes. Mother Marie-Claire was certain.

When she

told me I realized what I had previously forgotten." He

looked away from the church and directly at the tree in the

field beyond the wall. "I remembered the ancient folklore

concerning witches. It was generally believed that such women bore a mark on their bodies. It could be a blue or

red spot, the flesh sunken, hollow; it was known as the

Devil's Mark. Naturally enough, in such superstitious times,

scars, moles, warts, or any natural excrescences on the

body of a suspected witch could be given diabolical

significance, but there was another protuberance or swelling

which established the guilt of any person bearing the deformity beyond question."

"The supernumerary nipple?"

Delgard nodded, his eyes still on the tree. He asked,

"Do you know what is meant by a witch's familiar?"

"I'm not sure. Isn't it something to do with a guide from

the spirit world?"

"Not exactly. You're thinking of a spiritualist's familiar,

a spirit who helps the medium contact souls on the other

side. A witch's familiar is alleged to be a gift from the devil, a spirit-beast which helped in divination and magic.

Usually it was a small animal, anything from a weasel, rabbit, dog, toad, or even a mole."

"But more often a cat, right? I've read the fairy stories."

"Don't dismiss such stories out-of-hand; they're often

based on folklore passed down through the centuries and

can contain some element of truth. The point is this: such

spirit-beasts were sent on mischievous and often malicious

errands by the witch and rewarded with drops of the witch's own blood. Or they were fed from the witch's

supernumerary nipple."

The reporter was too stunned to scoff. "You're talking

about witchcraft, here, now, in the twentieth century?"

Delgard smiled thinly and finally tore his eyes away

from the oak. "It's by no means unusual nowadays; there

are many witches' covens throughout the British Isles. But I believe I'm speaking of something much more. You

associated witchcraft with fairy tales.

What if such myths

were based on a reality, something which the people of that time could not understand, could only perceive in terms of sorcery? Witchcraft would have been something

they could not understand, but could accept. We laugh at such ideas today because it's comfortable for us to do so, and our scientific technology precludes such notions."

"You're losing me. Are you saying little Alice Pagett is a

witch, or that she's not? Or that she's the reincarnation of some ancient sorceress?"

"I'm saying none of those things. But I think we must

delve into the past for some link with what is happening here today. This force must emanate from somewhere."

"What force is that?"

"The force of evil. Can't you feel it around us?"

You

yourself experienced it last Sunday in the crypt.

The same

force weakened, then destroyed, Father Hagan."

He did

not add that he felt that same pressure bearing down on

himself.

"There's nothing evil about the miracles," Fenn said.

"That," Delgard replied, "we do not yet know.
We don't know where or what all this is leading to.
We must keep searching, Gerry. We must find clues.
We have to find the answer before it's too late, while there's still a chance to combat this force."
Fenn let out a long sigh. "You better tell me where else I can look for the chest," he said.
Fenn was a dumbhead. He should have seen the connection.
Maybe all the research he had been doing had addled his brain. Guess it was easy to be objective when all the work had been done and you only had to read through the notes. But still, she could be wrong: it might not be here at all.
Nancy stood before the heavy-looking door inside the porch, its wood painted and marked with time, wondering if it would be locked. She twisted the metal handle and her eyes glinted with satisfaction when it turned and the door opened easily. No reason for it to be locked in such an isolated place.
It was when Fenn had told her that the old church chest he was looking for wasn't at St. Joseph's that she realized the possibility. If he hadn't played so cagey with her, she'd have told him. That's what you get, Fenn, for trying to cut me out.
She pushed the door open wider and stepped in from the porch. The light inside was dull, diffused by the thick, leaded windows.
The chest dated back to the fourteenth or fifteenth century and must have disappeared some time during the sixteenth, for that was as far back as the records Fenn had found went. That had been her clue.
The door made a low growling noise as she closed it, a muffled thump disturbing the stillness inside when it shut completely. Nancy looked around the miniature church, loving its quaintness, impressed by its tradition.
A leaden font stood before her, the dark, letter-ornamented metal speaking of another time, a different era. Nearly

James Herbert - The Shrine

all the
pews were boxed in, the panels chest-height,
narrow doors
allowing entry. Whole families probably
sat in each one,
Nancy assumed, cut off from their neighbors,
enclosed in
their own small islands of worship. The wood
paneling
was stripped of any varnish, its bareness
somehow complementing
the character of the chapel itself. No more than
thirty to forty feet away, at the head of the narrow
aisle,
was the tiny altar.
So this was where the lord of the manor came to pray,
Nancy mused. Cute.
She moved around the font into the chapel and at
once
gave a small cry of triumph. There it was.
It had to be the
one!
The chest stood against a wall to her right, immediately
below a large polished-wood board, the names of
all the
clerics who had served the church from 1158 to the
present
day inscribed on its surface in gold. She
stared at the long,
low chest, scarcely believing her eyes, but almost
certain it
was the one Fenn had been searching for. It matched the
description in his notes perfectly: made from
planks of
thick elm or oak, bound together with
metal bands, the
wood battered and marked, an indication of its
antiquity
and there were three unusual-looking padlocks on
its facing
side.
Nancy squatted beside it, still smiling in
triumph, and
handled all three locks. "Great!" she said
aloud. "Now all I
need is the goddamn keys."
She pushed herself erect and looked around. Where
would the priest be? He obviously wouldn't be
resident,
there was no house, only the large mansion some
distance
away. The board in front of her said that the
priest since
1976 was a Father Patrick Conroy of
Storrington. Ah, that
was it. The priest obviously bused in from the
neighboring
parish to run the show here. She would have to go to the
town or village of Storrington to locate him.
But then,
would he allow her access to the chest? Probably
--no,
definitely--not. Fenn might get permission,

James Herbert - The Shrine

though, with
his Church connections. Shit, she would have to tell
him.
Unless.
Unless the keys were kept in the church.
Improbable,
but worth a look. Maybe in the vestry.
She strode down the aisle toward the front of the
nave,
her footsteps brisk. Shadows of light passed
across the
high windows, heavy, low clouds moving
by outside. The
sound of wind whistling through a gap somewhere in the
church roof. A small scratching sound, a mouse
working at
wood somewhere in the shadows.
Her footsteps faltered as some subliminal
change in her
awareness told her she was not alone in the church.
She stopped for a moment and listened. The scratching
had stopped as though the mouse also knew
there was an
extra presence nearby. The clouds outside
thickened, the
light diminishing.
Her footsteps were slower, more cautious, when she
moved on. She peered over the tops of the high
box pews,
almost expecting to find someone praying in one. To her
right, by the side of the altar she could see the closed
vestry door. To her left was a corner, the
interior flanking
out in that direction possibly to form a side
chapel. Yet the
unvarnished wood paneling indicated it had to be
another
pew, this one set apart from the rest. That would be
where the lord of the manor sat with his family, she
reasoned.
No sound came from that direction, but apprehension
stabbed at her chest like a thin, sharp icicle.
Get a hold of yourself, asshole. There could be
someone
there, but why not? It was a church, for Chrissake!
She
coughed, loudly, hoping for some reaction
if there was
somebody praying in there. A shuffling of knees or
a
returned cough would do. Anything to show that whoever
it was wasn't skulking. There was no other sound.
It would be stupid to leave, Nancy told herself.
Stupid
and childish. She walked on, her footsteps
deliberately
loud on the stone floor.
The first thing she saw when she drew level with the
chest-high partition was a picture on the far
wall. It was a
painting of the Madonna and Child in the style of
Perugino,
and it hung above a fireplace. The recess, in

fact, was a
small room, obviously built for the comfort of the
squire
and his family from the huge Tudor manor house
which
shared the estate with the tiny church. She moved
closer.
The door in the paneling was open.
A figure sat on one of the benches
inside, a small,
dark-clad figure.
Nancy almost whistled with relief when she saw it
was a
nun.
But the habit was strange. It wasn't the
two-toned gray
she had seen the nuns in the village wearing, and the
skirt
was longer. The black hood was pulled forward,
well over
the face.
She was sitting sideways to Nancy, her back
hunched
over, hands hidden deep within her lap, the loose
black
material flowing around her.
"Excuse me," Nancy said quietly,
tentatively, standing
in the doorway of the pew, one hand on top of the
paneling,
fingers curled around it.
The nun did not move.
"I . . . I'm sorry to bother . . ." Nancy's
words trailed
away. There was something wrong. Oh, God,
there was
something wrong. She moved as if to back away, not
knowing why she was afraid, only aware that she was
irrationally, inexplicably, in mortal dread of
this thing
sitting there; but her limbs would not react, would not
take her away from the dark, hidden figure.
Her legs sagged and a small trickle of urine
dampened
her inner thighs as the nun slowly turned to face
her.
"Who knocks?" "still, who was beautiful,
Beyond all dreams to restore. I, from the roots
of the dark thorn am hither.
And knock on the door."
"The Ghost," Walter de la Mare
rain SPATTERED AGAINST THE WINDSHIELD as
Fenn
drove through the tall iron gates. He slowed the
car,
expecting to be challenged, but there was no one on
duty.
Must be out of season, he explained to himself. The
estate
was probably closed to the public until the
spring. He picked up speed, ignoring the sign
indicating that 10 mph
was the approved pace.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Outside, the clouds were low and dark, overloaded
with rain, the speckles on the windows just the
appetizer for what was soon to come. Trees rushed by on either
side, their barren branches like petrified arms thrown out
in alarm. A flicker of movement to the left caught
his eye and abruptly he was braking as a deer bounded across the
narrow road. He watched it disappear into the
trees, a fleeting light-brown specter, and envied its
skittish grace. It was gone from view within seconds, swallowed up
by the stark arboreal sanctuary.
The hired car resumed its journey, slowing again
when it reached an open gate, rattling its
way across the deer grid. He frowned at the dullness in the air, the
dismal weather making the late afternoon seem like evening.
Winter in England could be bearable if only it didn't
drag itself through eight or nine months of the year. The road
curved, emerging from the trees to be confronted by a sweeping
panorama of lush green fields, the misty South Downs in
the distance a rolling backdrop merging into the puffy
gray sky.
The drive dipped easily, then separated, the
main arm going on toward the gray-stone manor house; the
other, narrower, arm branching off to the left, toward a
levelled compound behind a group of elms, a nonobtrusive
car park for sightseers to the estate. Beyond the car park, no
than a quarter of a mile away, stood a small
church. Stapley Park, Barham. The big Tudor
house was Stapley Manor. The little twelfth-century church was St.
Peter's. Fenn silently swore at himself for being such a
jerk; he really should have made the connection. It was all laid
out for him, all there in the notes he'd taken from the
archives. The trouble was he'd become too swamped in the
history to give full attention to details that had not
seemed relevant.

Well, it didn't matter that much now; he was

James Herbert - The Shrine

pretty sure
the chest in the little church was the one he had been
searching for. Earlier that day, after leaving Delgard,
and
on the monsignor's advice, he had gone to the
cathedral at
Arundel, hoping to find further documents concerning
St.
Joseph's, and it was there that he had learned of
St. Peter's
at Stapley and of Stapley Manor itself.
The Catholic Church had owned the Stapley
estate, in
whose ground St. Peter's stood, before being
dispossessed
of such lands and properties at the time of the
Reformation
in England.
In 1540, with the Dissolution of the Monasteries,
when
the lands and properties of the Church were being
"legally"
acquired by the Crown, Henry VIII granted
the manor
house at Stapley and its entire estate
to Richard Staffon, a
mercator of London. He lived there with his family
until the
counter-Reformation under the new Catholic queen
began
its short-lived but fearsome reign of terror.
Staffon was
fortunate; he and his family were driven
into exile with
many fellow Protestants, whereas almost three
hundred
others were burned at the stake as heretics.
By devious means, the estate was passed on
to Sir John
Woolgar as a reward for his loyalty to the
Catholic Church
in Henry's time. Woolgar was a wealthy
Sussex businessman whose only son was the priest
at St. Joseph's in
Banfield.
Fenn had stopped the car and was surveying the
panorama, allowing the information to assemble itself in
his mind. He had learned of the connection between
Stapley
Manor and Banfield from his research into the
Sussex
records, the warden at Arundel merely
prompting the
recall; the further information concerning the Reformation
had been added by the priest he had just left at
Storrington.
This priest, Father Conroy, as well as serving his
own
parish at Storrington, also served weekly
Mass at St. Peter's
in Stapley Park; apparently it was a duty
handed down to
each new priest to that particular parish. He had

confirmed that there was, indeed, a large ancient chest in St. Peter's, the description matching Fenn's, and a phone call to Monsignor Delgard (for whom Father Conroy had undisguised respect) gave him the authority to hand over the keys to the reporter. Fenn also gained permission to take away any documents he might find useful, provided he made a complete list, signed it, and allowed Conroy to examine those he had taken. The priest would have accompanied him to St. Peter's himself, but various duties dictated otherwise. That suited Fenn fine: he preferred to snoop alone.

The priest had filled in other details concerning the Stapley Park estate and St. Peter's. There had originally been a small village around the church, but it had become regarded as a source of infection after a mysterious plague had broken out in the early 1400's killing off most of the villagers; subsequently, the houses around the church had been destroyed. Much alteration and restoration had taken place over the years, each new lord of the manor contributing financially to the work, whether they were Catholic or not, for, like the mansion itself, St. Peter's was of historic importance and an attraction for the many tourists who flocked to the estate during the summer months.

Father Conroy recalled reading somewhere that the chest had been taken to St. Peter's from Banfield in token acknowledgment of a stained-glass window that Sir John Woolgar had donated to St. Joseph's.

A crow landed in the roadway, twenty yards ahead of the car, and seemed to challenge its further progress. It was a breed of bird Fenn found hard to admire: too big, too black. He allowed the car to move slowly forward, the tires crunching against the gravel road. The bird calmly walked to the side and watched Fenn with one eye as he

James Herbert - The Shrine

drove past.

The vehicle gained momentum as the road dipped.

Herds

of black-backed deer, settled in the grass beneath trees,

gazed on with stiff-necked curiosity as he

approached, the

stags among them, antlers high and menacing, glaring as if

daring him to come closer. He drove into the branch-off,

making for the empty grass car park, and the deer in that area rose as one to move away, their flight

unhurried,

cautious but unafraid.

The grass in the compound was cut short, the parking areas neatly marked by straight, narrow lines of

soil, unobtrusive

and neatly patterned. Bullocks in a field

nearby

bawled at him, the sound echoing around the trees, as if

they, too, did not welcome his presence.

Fenn grabbed a holdall from the passenger seat and

pushed open the door. The wind tore into him as he

stepped from the car; it swept over the Downs from the sea, carrying with it a damp chill and an

unrestrained

force. Pulling his coat collar tight around his

neck and

blinking against the wind-driven rain, he set off

for the

church, the strap of the holdall over one shoulder.

A long, straight path led from the, car park to the

medieval

church; to the right, about a quarter of a mile away,

stood the daunting manor house, an

impressive structure

of Tudor design, yet curiously

empty-looking, lifeless.

Indeed, it probably was at that time, for Fenn had

learned

earlier that the owner had died some years before and his

family only stayed at the house for certain

months of the

year, preferring sunnier climes in the winter

months.

As he trod the narrow path, the church loomed up

like

an image framed in a slow-moving zoom lense,

and he

began to feel very lonely and very isolated. Like the

manor

house in the distance, St. Peter's was constructed of

gray

stone, green-stained with age; one section of the roof

covered with large moss-covered slates, the rest

with red

tiles; the windows were leaded, the glass thick and

smoothly

rippled as though each pane had been placed in

its frame

James Herbert - The Shrine

still hot and melting. He saw now how oddly shaped
the building was and could imagine the various segments being
added at various times through the centuries, each
portion reflecting its own period. The path led past the
church,
presumably to where the entrance had to be, for he could
see no doors as he approached. The expanse
he had just
crossed had been bare; now there were trees,
mostly oak,
around the church, and the wind rustled through the
empty branches, an urgent, rushing sound that
increased
his sense of isolation. Small branches broke
away and
scuttled in the air before reaching the earth; stouter
branches
lay scattered, victims of previous, stronger
gusts, resembling
twisted human limbs. The horizon, just above the
distant Downs, now glowed silver in a strip that
was held
level by the dark, laden clouds above. The contrast
between
broody clouds and condensed sky was startling.
Fenn stepped off the path into rough grass to get
near
one of the church windows and, cupping a hand between
brow and glass, peered in. There was an
unappealing
gloom inside and he could just make out the empty
pews
enclosed by wood panelling. At first glance it
reminded
him of a holy cattedled. He took his hand
away and
twisted his neck, nose almost pressed against the
glass, in
an effort to see more. There were other windows
opposite
that threw little light into the interior, but he could just
make out the shape of a font and more
enclosed benches
nearby. A movement caught his eye and it was so
sudden
that he drew back a few inches. Then he
realized, the
blood vessels in his throat seeming to constrict,
that the
action was not inside the church, but was a reflection
in
the glass.
He turned quickly and saw there was nothing there.
Just a swaying branch.
Creepy, he told himself. Creepy, creepy,
creepy.
Hoisting the holdall back onto his shoulder, he
rejoined
the path and headed for the front of the church. When he
reached the corner, the wind tore into him with fresh
force, driving the rain into his face like ice

James Herbert - The Shrine

pellets. A
square tower rose above him, too short and stubby
to be
majestic, reaching no more than forty feet into the
air, its
rampart top almost as gray as the clouds
above it. A mat,
rust-colored door stood beneath the tower, the shade
drab
and unimaginative, paying no dues to the history
it guarded.
An unlocked iron gate protected the door,
only inches
away from the wood surface like some early
misconceived
idea of double glazing.
Before entering the church, Fenn took a walk to the
other side. Beyond a flint wall was a small
graveyard, the
gravestones crammed in as though the corpses had
been
buried standing up. Here and there were more spacious
plots and some headstones that appeared to have been
regularly scrubbed clean; there were also one or
two rotting
wooden crosses laid in the grass, marking the
resting
places of those who could not afford better.
Opposite the
church was a two-strutted fence; beyond that,
waist-high
undergrowth; beyond that--nothing, it seemed. The land
obviously dropped steeply away into a small
valley, woodland
rising up on the other side toward the slopes of the
Downs.
Fenn turned back to the doorway, his hair
flat and wet
against his forehead. He opened the iron gate, then
the
heavy door, and stepped into the church, glad to be
away
from the hostile weather. The door closed behind him and
the wind outside became just a muted breathing.
As in all churches he had visited, which wasn't
many,
he felt uncomfortable and intrusive, as though his
presence
showed a lack of respect rather than a mark of it.
The
interior was certainly unusual with its enclosed
pews, low
barrel ceiling, and tiny altar. A raised
pulpit stood near the
altar, behind it a door he assumed led to the
vestry. Would
the chest be in there? The priest at Storrington had
omitted
to say.
Then he saw it, no more than five feet away
to his right.
His eyes lit up and he smiled ruefully. You
better be

James Herbert - The Shrine

worth it, you bugger, he said to himself, remembering the experience of searching the crypt at St. Joseph's. Above it was a plaque of highly polished wood, names and dates inscribed on its surface. He took a closer look, realizing it was a list of clerics who had served at St. Peter's. He found one that was familiar:
REV. THOMAS WOOLGAR

Thomas would be Sir John's son, the priest from Banfield. Presumably he arrived after his father had been granted the estate, so if he had died in 1560, the service had been only for a few years. He quickly worked out the priest's age at the time of death: thirty-five; young by today's standards, but reasonable for that period. Rain lashed at the windows with a new intensity, beating at the thick glass as though demanding entry. Fenn rummaged in his pocket for the keys that would open the three locks. He hesitated before inserting the first one. Maybe this is crazy, he told himself. How could something that had happened--if anything significant happened--over four hundred years ago have any relevance to what was happening at St. Joseph's today? Just because a kid used an old, outdated language in her sleep and had a blemish on her body that used to be thought of as a witch sign, it didn't mean the answer lay somewhere in history. Was Delgard truly convinced of it, or was he just desperate? Alice, the Miracle Worker, was a modern-day phenomenon; why should the past play any part? The wind outside became louder as it battered against the old church walls; a fresh squall of rain threw itself at the windows like thousands of tiny shrapnel pieces. A noise somewhere near the front of the church made Fenn turn his head. He straightened, uneasy. The noise came again. "Someone there?" he called out. No reply and no more noise. Just the wind and rain outside. He walked to the center of the aisle and waited. The sound again. A small scraping sound. Could be anything, he reassured himself. A mouse, a trapped bird. Then why was he so sure that there was someone else in the church? He felt he was being watched

and automatically his eyes went to the pulpit. It was empty.
The sound again. Someone or something near the front of the church.
"Hey, come on, who's there?" he called out with forced bravado.
He began to walk toward the altar, refraining from whistling a happy tune, eyes searching left to right at every pew he passed. All were empty, but the last one disappeared around a corner, the building jutting out in that direction. He was certain that was where the sound had come from. He reached the corner and stopped, for some reason reluctant to go farther. He had the distinct feeling that he really did not want to see whatever was lurking there. The noise came again, louder this time, startling him.
He took several quick paces forward and peered over the enclosure.
Empty.
Fenn breathed a sigh of relief.
It was a strange room, a fireplace at the far end, a picture of the Virgin and Child hanging above the mantel.
Cushioned benches stretched the full length on either side.
He heard the sound again and saw the tree branch outside, buffeted by the wind, scraping at a window. He was too relieved to even smile at himself.
Going back to the chest, he knelt and turned the first key. When nothing happened, he remembered the short metal rod Father Conroy had given him. As instructed, he inserted it into a small hole at the side of the padlock, pressed a lever, then twisted the key again. The padlock came away in two parts.
He repeated the procedure twice more and laid the separate sections on the stone floor. His tongue flicked nervously across dry lips as he prepared to open the lid.
The porch door rattled as though someone were banging their fists against it. It was the wind, he told himself, just the wind.
The lid was heavy and at first resisted his efforts. Then it came slowly up, hinges groaning at the unfamiliar movement. Fenn swung the lid right back so that it rested

against the wall behind. He looked down into its depths, a musty odor leaping out at him like a released animal.

Old vestments lay scattered on top, their colors faded, the material no longer springy soft. He pulled the clothing out, draping them over the side of the chest. Beneath lay sheaves of yellowed paper and various books, worn and wrinkled with age. He took the latter out one by one, quickly leafing through the pages, placing them on the floor when he discovered they did not date back far enough.

He felt some of the various papers would have proved interesting to a historian, but to him they were useless.

Next he drew out several loosely bound books, the covers in hide of some sort, the paper inside thin and rough-edged.

He opened one and saw it was a form of ledger, an accounts book for St. Peter's. In neat script it listed payments

made to workmen for tasks carried out for the church. The first page gave the year: 1697. The other

books dated back farther, but none to the century he sought.

There were more scattered papers, several Latin Mass books, and then he found what he had been looking for.

There were three of them, each book roughly measuring twelve by eight inches; the covers were of stiff yellow

vellum, the inside leaves bound together by twisted vellum tackets, braided through hide strengthening pieces. The

writing on the pages was forceful in style, each letter

precisely angled, the ink brown and, unfortunately, very

faded. Even more unfortunate was that it was all in Latin.

But the date said 1556.

Eagerly he looked at the other two, and the dates ran in

consecutive years. As he handled the third book, a sheaf of

loose leaves fell from the back into the chest. He reached

for one and noticed it was undated. The writing was in the

same brown ink, and although similar in style to the previous handwriting, it was scrawled, less

tidy, the lettering

spidery and undisciplined. It, too, was in Latin. Fenn

gathered up the other scattered pages, quickly

James Herbert - The Shrine

scanning

them for a date, smiling when he found one.

The roof groaned loudly as the wind pounded on it;
something broke away, probably a

slate, and slid down, its

fall muffled by the soft earth around the church. Fenn

looked up anxiously and assured himself that the
church

had stood up to such battering for centuries and was
unlikely to collapse around him now. Nevertheless,

he

quickly opened the holdall and put the three

vellum-covered

documents inside, first placing the loose leaves

in the back

of the book they had fallen from.

The church door was rattling insanelly and nothing

could

be seen through the windows, so fierce was the rain. He

began stuffing the other books, sheets, and vestments

back

into the chest, unwilling to search any further, the

urge to

be away from the church too great. He had the same

sense

of black oppression that he'd experienced in the

crypt of

St. Joseph so. The lid closed with a heavy

thump and Fenn

stood, relieved that it was done. Back to the car

now, away

from this godawful place, with its tearing wind and

dark,

dark church. . . . He hadn't noticed before just how

dark it had become.

He stepped into the aisle, averting his eyes from the

altar. The howling wind outside sounded like the wailing

of lost souls. The door before him shook

violently and

something made him back away. The lift bar above

the lock jiggled up and down as if some neurotic

hand outside

were playing with it. The wood trembled within its

frame

and he could sense the pressure behind it, the gale

screeching

for entry.

An awareness crept upon him with dank, scaly

fingers.

Something else, not just the wind, wanted to get into the

church. Something wanted to reach him.

He was still backing away, his eyes on the

agitated

porch door, drawing closer to the altar,

passing pews

one by one, the partitions screens behind which things

could hide. The pulpit came into the periphery of

his

vision, rising over him like a tensed predator.

To his

right was the strange segregated room, with its

empty

fireplace, its picture of the woman and the

James Herbert - The Shrine

Christ child,
with its window, the branch tapping and scraping at
the glass like a hand begging for admission . . . with
its dark-clad figure sitting by the empty
grate . . .

He stopped, his legs paralyzed, his throat
constricted.

The figure was hooded, the head crouched low over
its
knees. It began to straighten, to turn toward
Fenn.

And the porch door burst open with a force that shook
everything inside the church.

There never more she walks her ways
by sun or moon or stars;
she dwells below where neither days
nor any nights there are. "Shadow Bride,"

J. R. R. Tolkien

fenn WAS THROWN BACKWARD, MORE by shock
than

force. He stumbled, fell. The floor was hard
against his
back, but he felt no pain, only a jolting
numbness.

The wind howled around the church, a banshee let
loose, so that even the leaden font seemed
to tremble

against its wrath. Fenn's clothes were buffeted by the
wind, his hair swept back, coat collar
flapping against his

cheek. He was forced to turn his head aside from the
initial onslaught, his eyes squeezed tight
against the blast.

Rain was carried in, dampening the walls, the
pews, an

ally to the whirlwind. The roar of air was
amplified by the
tight confines of the stone building, assaulting his
ears

with its frenzied screaming.

Something was moving to his right, something
black,

small, rising from the seat in the side room, standing
in the

opening. Bending to touch him.

He dared not look. He sensed its presence,
glimpsed the

dark shape only on the edge of his vision. He
did not want
to see.

Fenn scrambled to his knees, swayed there for a
few

moments, the circling wind rocking his body. He
tried to

rise, found his legs were not strong enough to support
him, even though the gale was not as fierce, its force
deflected by the walls into confused and separate
currents.

He began to move forward, dragging the holdall
along the

floor with him, fearful of the storm bursting through the
open doorway, but more fearful of the hooded figure
that

James Herbert - The Shrine

watched him.
He flinched as though he had been touched, but
reason
told him he was not within reach of the thing that stood
there. It seemed that cruel fingers had raked his
arm,
leaving the flesh beneath his clothes torn and branded.
The same sensation clawed at his cheek, and he
gasped,
the pain searing, yet unreal. More heat--for that was
what it
felt like, raw, white heat against his skin--touched
his
outstretched hand, and when he glanced down, he saw
the
red weals already beginning to rise. His head was
snapped
up as though long fingers had tangled themselves in his
hair and pulled. His body arched as jagged nails
scored
bloody tracks down his back.
Yet the figure was still beyond touching distance.
He staggered to his feet, fear lending him
strength, and
stumbled along the aisle, fighting the wind as a
drowning
man fights an undertow, forcing himself toward the gray
light of the doorway, collapsing against a
partition, clasping
its ridge, pushing himself away, feeling
malignant eyes
on the back of his neck. He fell again, the wind
shoving
him with giant, unseen hands, knocking him to the
floor.
The large wooden door swung on its hinges,
banging
into the wall, cracking the plastered stone.
Outside, the
driven rain had turned the landscape into a hazy,
moving
pattern of muted greens.
Fenn was still afraid to look back, not understanding
where the dark-cloaked figure had come from, only
knowing
it was there, an unearthly presence that burned with
malice. He crawled again and something tugged
at
his ankle. He screamed as the scorching grip
tightened and
dragged his leg backward.
His hand reached for the corner of a pew, the other
scrabbling at the cracks in the uneven
floor. His heart felt
it would come loose in his body, so wildly was it
beating.
He was shouting now, ranting at the thing that drew him
back, tendons in his wrists high and rigid against
the flesh
as he struggled to pull himself free. Then he was
kicking,
frightened yet enraged, eyes blurred with the tears of
his

James Herbert - The Shrine

own anger and frustration. Kicking, kicking, his
knees
scraping raw against the stone, globules of blood
collecting
beneath the fingernails of the hand that scratched at the
rough floor, kicking, kicking, eyes closed with the
effort
but mouth open to force out the shouts.
He was suddenly free, thrusting at empty air.
He found
himself moving forward once more, the wind still pressing
against his shoulders, whipping his face with rain
icicles.
He was on his feet, staggering toward the door, still
refusing
to look over his shoulder, hot, corrupted breath
warming
the back of his neck. His footsteps slowed . . .
. . . slowed
. . . slowed . . . the compulsion behind dragging at
him,
creating the nightmare of legs in quagmire . . .
. . . the childhood
dreams of . . .
. . . the Frankenstein monster ploddingly catching
up, arms
outstretched to grab, huge clubfoot boots
shuddering the
ground . . .
. . . the grinning Fe-Fi-Fo-Fum giant
swinging his ax . . .
. . . the slush-slush of the creature emerging from
the
Black Lagoon . . .
. . . the dead son returning from the grave,
thumping
against the other side of the bolted door for his mother,
who clasped the monkey's paw, to let him in
. . .
. . . the thing that was always waiting in the
dark at the
bottom of the cellar stairs . . .
. . . the green-faced bogeyman tapping at the
bedroom
window in the middle of the night . . .
. . . Norman Bates, dressed as Mother, behind
the shower
curtain . . .
. . . the white shape at the foot of the bed who
would not
let him wake from the nightmare until it had
dissolved
back into the night . . .
. . . the hand that would coldly curl around his
ankle
should he let it slip from beneath the bedsheets . . .
. . . all the nightmare companions of his
childhood were
gathered there behind him in the church, every late-night
dread creeping up on him, their images the
tentacles that
bound him . . .
And like a nightmare, it had to break when the terror

James Herbert - The Shrine

became too much.
The release was like being blasted from a
cannon. He
burst through the doorway, skidding and falling
heavily
onto the path outside the church. He rolled
over, resting
on one elbow, and the rain beat against his upturned
face
with such force he was sure it would leave indentations
on
his face. The arched door loomed over him, the
interior a
murky cavern of gargoyles; the stunted tower
rose above,
and for one brief moment he imagined he was looking
down from the ramparts at his own prone figure lying
on
the path. He blinked his eyes against the rain and
against
the confusion.
He began to push himself away from the threatening
doorway, using heels and elbows, his clothes and
skin
already soaked, the holdall dragged across the path with
him. Chill softness brushed his back as he slid
into the
rough grass. He stared back at the ancient
church, his eyes
wide and face deathly pale. His brain screamed
at him to
get up and run. As he pushed himself upright, he
saw a
fleeting figure just on the other side of the
perimeter fence.
It had risen from the sea of green like a swimmer
breaking
surface, and then it was running, pushing a path
through the foliage, heading away from Fenn, away from
the church.
The figure looked familiar, but his thinking was
too
haywire to allow recognition for a moment or
two. When
he finally realized who it was, he was even more
bewildered.
Grabbing the holdall and tucking it under his arm, he
ran
to the fence, used one hand to leap untidily over, and
fell
into the foliage on the other side. The figure
had disappeared
by the time he regained his feet.
A low gust tore across the undergrowth creating a
sweeping
ripple that reached him and made him unsteady.
"Nancy!" he called out, but the storm smothered
any
reply. He pushed through the foliage, gathering
speed as
he went, shouting her name. He wasn't just
afraid for her;
he needed her. He was frightened for himself.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Fenn ran on through the rain, the wind, almost blinded, recklessly crashing through the undergrowth. Then he was falling, slipping, tumbling over and over, rolling into an abyss he hadn't realized was there. Stalks and brambles snapped at his face and hands, and he thought the slide would never end, that the world would never restabilize itself. He came to a cushioned halt at the bottom of the slope and leaves closed over his eyes like mischievous hands. He sat up and tried to shake the dizziness from his head. The movement only made it worse and the world continued to tumble for long seconds after. When the spinning finally settled, he searched for her running figure. He was in a narrow valley, woodland rising up on the opposite side. A rough, earth roadway led through the valley, disappearing in the distance around a jutting slope. Directly in front, no more than two hundred yards away, was a barn, the likes of which he had never before seen. It was very old and obviously no longer used, such was its disrepair; immediately below a thatched roof supported by stout beams were openings, the covered sides of the barn itself reaching only to a certain level. The wood was faded and weatherworn, the thatch still thick but dark with age. Fenn knew she would be in there. He got to his feet and picked up the bag. Then, hunching his shoulders against the pounding rain, he lurched toward the barn. The wind in the bottom of the dip was weakened, its rushing sound softened. He turned quickly to look back up the hill and saw that St. Peter's was out of view, not even the tower showing above the false horizon; the foliage at the top of the slope swayed back and forth, bowed but resilient to the elements. There was no door to the barn, just a vast opening running half the length of its side, a post from floor to roof dividing the entrance. From where he stood he could see the interior was crammed with old logs, wood planking, and some rusted machinery. He had no desire to enter, for it looked even darker and just as foreboding as the church.

Only the whimpers above the noise of the muted wind

James Herbert - The Shrine

urged him in.
He found her crouched behind a pile of wood at the back of the barn, her frightened sobbing guiding him to her. Her head was buried into her knees, arms clenched tightly around herself, and she shuddered violently when he touched her shoulder.
"Nancy, it's me, Gerry," he said softly, but she would not look at him.
He knelt beside her and tried to take her in his arms;
with an animal yelp she pushed against the side of the musty barn, scrabbling to get away from him.
"For Christ's sake, Nancy, calm down. It's me." He gently pulled her back to him and rocked her in his arms.
"It's me," he kept telling her, his voice falsely soothing, for the hysteria was not far from his own mind.
It took some time before he could lift her head and force her to look at him. And when he did, the expression in her eyes frightened him almost as much as the thing inside the church.
Wake all the dead! What ho! What ho!
How soundly they sleep whose pillows lie low,
They mind not poor lovers who walk above
On the decks of the world in storms of love.
No whisper now, nor glance can pass
Through wickets or through panes of glass;
For our windows and doors are shut and barred
Lie close in the church, and in the churchyard.
In every grave make room, make room!
The world's at an end, and we come, we come.
"Wake All the Dead!" Sir William
Davenant
delgard PUSHED THE READING GLASSES up from the bridge of his nose and rubbed at the corners of his weary eyes. The reflection from the ultraviolet light cast a bluish-white comtinge over his features, the stark, artificial glare ruthlessly exposing lines of fatigue. The faded papers lay spread on the table before him, parchment edges rough and flaky through time; to one side was a thick, heavily bound book, an aid to the translation of the ancient but enduring language on the parchments. He clicked off the fluorescent tube, no longer needing its peculiar light to enhance the faded script, and quickly scribbled more notes onto his writing pad. Then he laid the pen

down, held his
spectacles with one hand, and massaged his forehead
with
the other. His shoulders appeared even more hunched, his
chest even more sunken.
When he took his hand away, his eyes were
haunted,
filled with disbelief. It couldn't be true, the
papers had to
be a madman's dream, the guilt-ridden
imaginings of a
man born nearly five hundred years before.
Delgard's mouth felt dry and he
flicked his tongue uselessly
across brittle lips. There was a tightness to his
skin,
a stiffness to his joints, the tension of the last few
hours
the cause. He craned his neck toward the
reporter, who
lay slumped in a nearby armchair, and imagined
he could
feel his own bones grind against one another as he
turned.
Fenn was fast asleep, exhaustion, and perhaps even
boredom,
stealing him from the late-night vigil with the priest.
He should rouse the reporter, tell him what he
had
learned, but for the moment Delgard felt a stronger
need.
A need to cleanse himself, to pray for spiritual
strength
and guidance. And to pray for the defiled soul of one
who
had perished centuries before.
Delgard rose and his large frame was unsteady.
He had
to rest his hands on the desk for several moments before
he
felt able to stand fully erect. The room
settled around him once more, but his strength and
vitality were still fading. He pushed back the chair and
walked to the door, pausing to look back at Fenn
before going through.
"Gerry," he said, but not loudly enough.
The reporter slept on and it was hardly
surprising; his
mind was taking refuge from the terrors of the day.
When
Fenn had brought the old manuscripts to the
priest's house
earlier that evening, his whole demeanor had been one
of
bewildered nervousness. A cynic who did not
believe in
ghosts believed--knew--he had now seen such an
apparition. It had taken two hastily swallowed
whiskeys before he was calm enough to tell the story
coherently.
Delgard regretted having let the reporter go
to the church
at Barham alone; he should have realized

the danger sooner.

After the incident at St. Peter's--an incident which

Fenn had described in great detail, as though needing to

rationalize it with the spoken word--he had found the American reporter. Nancy Shelbeck,

hiding nearby. She

had refused to be taken to a hospital where Fenn hoped

she might be treated for the obvious shock she was in, and

he had been too afraid to leave her alone in his or her own

apartment. So he had taken her to Sue Gates, in whose flat

she had fallen into a dazed sleep.

Sleep. The tiredness was upon him, too. It was as though the unseen presence, the presence that had

emanated here, in these church grounds, was parasitical, taking its strength from the human

psyche. The weakness he had

felt at the onset of the miracles, the interference with

electrically operated machinery, the strange atmosphere,

the vibrancy in the air itself, all suggested a reaction was

taking place, perhaps a sapping of existing energy to create

a new form. And, he now felt sure, the catalyst, both

physical and spiritual, was Alice Pagett.

He glanced back at the faded manuscript papers. The

answer lay there, written in Latin, the ancient language

common to priests since the Christian religion began. It

was incredible, but then he had witnessed the unbelievable

as reality many times before. The link, centuries old, was

in those papers, the tortured, quirky handwriting giving

evidence of the tormented, even demented, man who had written the shame-filled words. And that man had

been a

priest, a sixteenth-century cleric who had sinned not just

against his faith, but against humanity itself.

And what made the priest's iniquity even more unforgivable

was that he had the gleamings of understanding in an age of superstition and ignorance. He had been

aware of

parapsychological forces, had been capable of differentiating

them from misguided concepts of sorcery; yet he had

encouraged and used his fellowman's false perceptions for

his own purposes and, in so doing, had invoked a

far

worse power against himself. The people of that time believed they had destroyed a witch under the authority

and incitement of their ruler, a queen called Mary. Mary

Tudor. But they had destroyed something more than a mythical invention: they had destroyed someone whose extraordinary mental powers could transcend her own death.

And eventually, when certain psychical elements came

together, could possibly recreate her own physical being.

Witchcraft, the name of Mary, the mental energy released

by religious fervor: these were the strange, intrinsic

ingredients. The latter-day priest who had sinned, the

child who had been conceived in sin: these were the catalysts.

And it was Alice who played the most important part in the metamorphosis, for she had been created in the same

field where the nun had been butchered then burned to

death almost five hundred years before.

Delgard leaned against the door, incredible, insane theories

rushing into his head.

Could a centuries-late metempsychosis, the migration of

a soul at death into another body, have taken place? Had

Alice been taken at the very spark of her existence? She

had grown into a child, guided by her mother, devoted to the church, worshipping the name of Mary, becoming severely

handicapped at the age of four, an infirmity her doctors could not satisfactorily explain,

to be inexplicably

released from that disability seven years later. Miraculously.

The cures to others had appeared miraculous, too. But

were they really psychically induced?

He shook his head against the jumble of thoughts.

Alice had spoken in a tongue alien to her own, the voice

mature, the words old English, the content . . . disturbed,

lustful. Had she been possessed? Or . . . or was she a

reincarnation? As a Catholic priest, the idea should have

had no validity to him, but it was a nagging thought he found impossible to push away.

Yet even this was quelled by the question that overrode all others: what was the purpose of it all?

Foreboding dragged at him with such intensity that his

James Herbert - The Shrine

body sagged and he was forced to cling to the door for support. The premonition of disaster was nothing new-- the feeling of dread had been with him for weeks--but now he knew it was imminent. The brief insight was like a physical blow, striking at him and vanishing instantly, so that all he was left with was a feeling of total desolation, a distressing cognizance of ... nothing. A void, absolute in its emptiness. It was the most frightening thing he had ever perceived. The need to be on hallowed ground sent Delgard staggering from the room. He had to pray, had to seek spiritual guidance to combat the impending evil. He threw open the front door, and outside, the night seemed as black as the void he had just briefly borne witness to. A cold draft of air found its way down the hallway and into the open room where the reporter slept. Fenn changed position restlessly as the drop in temperature touched him, but he slumbered on, his dreams no refuge, merely extensions of the daytime nightmare. The corners of the faded papers on the small desk stirred with the chill breeze. Sue glanced at her watch. Nearly eleven. What was taking Gerry so long? Was he going to leave Nancy Shelbeck here all night? He said he'd get back. She stirred the coffee and took it from the kitchen into the living room. The door to her bedroom was slightly ajar and she stopped to listen for a few seconds. Nancy's breathing seemed more regulated, deeper, the earlier disturbed panting having faded to small childlike whimpers before a more natural sleep had taken over. Sue went to the sofa and sat, placing the steaming mug of coffee on the coffee table before her. She sank into the soft cushions and closed her eyes. Abruptly she opened them and stood up; she walked to the window and drew the curtains together. For some reason she had felt the night intrusive. She returned to the sofa and absently stirred the coffee. What had happened to make them both so frightened? Earlier that evening Gerry had garbled something about

James Herbert - The Shrine

finding the American at a church in Barham, in a state of shock, then pleaded with her to take care of the woman until he got back. He had hurried out, clutching his bag as if it contained his year's salary, telling her he had to see Monsignor Delgard, that he had something important to show him. What could have been so important? Why had he and this woman gone to the church at Barham in the first place? And what were they so afraid of? Sue tapped at her chin in frustration. Why bring her here of all places? Was he so insensitive to the situation? It was obvious that something was going on between them. Yet Sue knew that Gerry's insensitivity was often a put-on, that he was fully aware of the emotions he aroused in others, that he preferred reaction to inertia. But this time there was a desperation in him that dismissed any notion of lovers' games; he needed Sue's help and that it involved another woman with whom he had a relationship had no relevance. She sipped the coffee. Damn him! She had tried to fall out of love with him, had even tried to despise him for a while, but it had been no use. Her religion, the work at the church, the time spent with Ben, had all contrived to compensate, but the fulfillment had been short-lived and, if she were to be completely honest with herself, never entirely realized. She had found renewed spiritual awareness, but still it could not fill her emotional needs, could not replace or dispose of a different kind of love, the love of one person for another. At first, just weeks before, she had thought such physical love unnecessary; its traumas, the dependence on another (particularly when the other person wasn't so dependable), the jealousies, the responsibility, were trials she would be better off without; but it had gradually dawned on her that to love and be loved on equal terms, with all its hang-ups, was essential. For her, anyway. Sue frowned as she held the mug in both hands, her elbows resting on her knees. She had been trying to escape, thinking she had found another refuge, an

alternative, only
to discover that both were equally important. The
realization
had been there for the last few days, but it had taken
their meeting earlier that evening for the fact to hit
home.
Perhaps it was his new vulnerability that had moved
her.
Or perhaps it was the thought that this other woman
might mean something to him. The fear of losing had
always been a prime motivator.
Just what was she to ...
The scream caused her to spill the coffee over
her hands.
Quickly Sue slammed the mug onto the coffee
table and
ran for the bedroom. She fumbled for the light
switch,
flicked it on, and stared aghast at the woman who
was
trying to bury her head into the pillow. Sue went
to the
bed. "It's okay, you're safe, there's
nothing to worry--"
Nancy thrashed out, pushing her hands away.
"Nancy! Stop! You're all right now."
Sue's voice was
firm as she tried to pull the American around
to face her.
"Don't, don't . . ." Nancy's eyes were
unfocused as she
struggled away from Sue.
Sue grabbed her wrists as long nails tried
to lash her
face. "Calm down. Nancy! It's me.
Sue Gates. Don't you
remember? Gerry brought you here."
"Oh, God, don't touch me!"
Sue pinned the frightened woman's arms to her chest
and leaned heavily on her. "Calm down.
Nothing's going
to harm you. You were dreaming." She spoke steadily,
repeating the words, and eventually Nancy's
struggles became
weaker. Her eyes began to lose their glazed
look and
came to rest on Sue's face.
"Oh, nooooo!" Nancy moaned, and
then she was weeping,
her thin body racked by the sobs.
"It's all right. Nancy. You're perfectly
safe."
Nancy threw her arms around Sue and clung
to her as
an upset child would cling to its mother. Sue soothed
her,
stroking her hair, feeling awkward, but
compassionate
enough not to pull away. Laughter drifted up from the
street below, late-night revelers returning
to their homes.
The bedside clock ticked away the minutes.
It was some time before Nancy's sobs ceased and her

hands relaxed their tight grip around her comforter's shoulders. Her body trembled as she mumbled something.

"What?" Sue pulled away slightly. "I didn't hear you."

Nancy drew in a shuddering breath, "I need a drink," she said.

"I think I've got some brandy. Or gin. Would

prefer that?"

"Anything."

Sue left her and went into the kitchen, opening the larder, where she kept her meager supply of alcohol. She

took out the squat bottle of brandy, then reached into

another cupboard for a glass. On reflection, she brought

down two glasses. Her nerves were jumpy too.

She took the two brandies into the bedroom and found the American sitting upright against the headboard.

Her face was white, its paleness made grotesque by the streaks of running mascara. She was staring blankly at the wall

opposite, her hands twisting the edge of the bedsheets into a crumpled roll.

Sue handed her one of the glasses, which she grabbed with both hands. The amber liquid almost spilled over the

sides as she raised the glass to her lips.

Nancy drank and

began to cough, holding the brandy away from her. Sue

took the glass from her and waited for the choking to subside.

"Try it more slowly this time," she said when Nancy reached out again. The reporter followed her advice and

Sue sipped at her own drink.

"This--thanks," Nancy finally gasped. "You don't . . .

you don't have a cigarette, do you?"

"Sorry."

"It's okay. There's some in my bag."

"I'm afraid you didn't have a bag with you when Gerry

brought you here. You must have left it in his car."

"Oh, shit, no. It's back there at the church, probably

somewhere in the undergrowth."

"What happened? Why did you leave it there?"

Nancy looked at Sue. "Didn't Fenn tell you?"

"He didn't take time to. He said something about St.

Peter's at Barham, asked me to take care of you, then

dashed out. What were you doing at the church?"

Nancy took a swallow of the brandy and leaned her head back against the wall, closing her eyes.

"I was searching for something. I assume he came looking for the same thing." She told Sue about the chest and the historical records they had hoped to find inside. Her voice still shook with tension.

"That's what he must have had in his bag," Sue said. Nancy's head came away from the wall. "He found them?"

"I think so. He said he had to take something to Monsignor Delgard."

"Is that where he's gone--to Delgard, to St. Joseph's?"

Sue nodded.

"I know this sounds odd," Nancy said, clutching Sue's arm, "but what did I tell him? I ... I just can't remember anything after running from that goddamned church."

"I don't know. You were in a state of shock."

"Yeah, I must have been." Her whole body shuddered.

"My God, I think I saw some kind of ghost."

Sue looked at her in surprise. "You don't look the type."

"Uh-huh, that's what I thought. But something scared the shit out of me inside that church." She closed her eyes once more, trying to relive the memory. Her eyes snapped open as the image came to her. "Oh, no," she said, then wailed, "Oh no!"

Sue shook her gently. "Take it easy. Whatever it was, you're safe now."

"Safe? That was a fucking dead thing I saw back there. How can you be safe from something like that?"

Sue was stunned. "You must have imagined it. You couldn't possibly have--"

"Don't tell me that! I know what I saw!"

"Don't get upset again."

"Upset? I got a right to get fucking upset. I'm telling you, I saw something that's never gonna leave me, something I'm never gonna forget." The tears were flowing again and the brandy glass clattered against her teeth as she attempted to drink. Sue steadied her hand for her.

"Thanks," Nancy said when she had managed to swallow more of the alcohol. "I didn't mean to yell. It's just ... you don't know what the hell it was like."

"Do you want to tell me?"

James Herbert - The Shrine

"No, I don't want to tell you, I want to erase it from my mind. But I know I never will."
"Please, it might help you."
"Do I get another drink?"
"Take mine." They exchanged glasses. It took two more sips--but at least they were just sips--for Nancy to speak again. Her words were slow, as though she were trying to control them, to rationalize them in her own mind.
"I was inside the church--St. Peter's on the Stapley estate. D'you know it?"
"I've heard of it. I've never been there."
"Give it a miss. I'd found the chest--"
"You said you were looking for some historical records."
"Right. Fenn said a certain parr of St. Joseph's history was missing. We tracked down the chest they might have been kept in. It was at St. Peter's."
"You went there together?"
"No, separately. Fenn didn't want me in on the deal.
You know how he is."
Sue said nothing.
"I'd found the chest--I was sure it was the right one.
Then I heard--maybe I just felt--someone else in the church. I walked down toward the altar to take a look.
There was someone sitting behind a kind of alcove, in a closed-in pew affair. It looked ... it looked like a nun."
She gulped back more brandy.
"Only it wasn't a nun," she continued. "It wasn't a nun ... " Her voice trailed off.
"Tell me. Nancy," Sue urged quietly.
"She was wearing one of those hooded cloak affairs, a habit of some kind, but not like those you see nowadays. It was old, I'm sure it was goddamned old. I couldn't see her face at first." She was trembling again. "But she ... it ... turned toward me. Oh, God, oh. God, that face!"
Sue could feel the bristling of her own hairs on the back of her neck, the sudden rising of goose pimples down her spine and arms. "Tell me," she said again, horrified but peculiarly fascinated.
"It was just a charred, cindered mess. The eyes were black, just slits with burned gristle poking through. I he

James Herbert - The Shrine

Lips and nose had been scorched away, the teeth were just burned-out stumps. There was nothing left to it, no features, nothing human! And I could smell the burning, I could

smell roasting flesh. And she began to move.

She was

dead, but she began to move, to rise, to come toward me.

She touched me. She touched my face with her burned

stubble of a hand. And she tried to hold me there.

She

breathed onto my face. I could feel it, I could smell it. Her

fingers, just withered stumps, touched my eyes. And she was laughing, oh. God, she was laughing. But she was still

burning! Do you understand? She was still burning!"

And sleep shall obey me,

And visit thee never,

And the curse shall be on thee

For ever and ever.

"Kehama's Curse," Robert Southey

when FENN AWOKE, HE WAS shivering. He rubbed at his

eyes, then peered around the room.

"Delgard?" he called out. The door was open, cold air

sweeping into the room. He wearily pushed himself from the armchair and crossed the floor. Peering into the dark

passageway, he called the priest's name again.

There was

no answer. Fenn noticed the front door was open. Had

Delgard gone over to the church? He stepped back into the

room and checked his watch. Jesus! Nearly one in the

morning!

His eyes fell on the small writing desk and the scattered

papers on its surface. With a final glance into the hall, he

closed the door and went to the desk. He picked up a few

sheets of the old parchment paper, realizing they were the same papers that had fallen from the vellum manuscript

inside the church on the Srapley estate. He studied them

for a few seconds as though the words would translate

themselves, then returned them to the desk. The top pages

of Delgard's notebook were folded over as if the draft had

disturbed them. He flicked them back and scanned the

lines on the first page. He slowly sat, his eyes never

leaving the words before him.

Leafing through the pages, he saw that the monsignor

had translated most, if not all, of the ancient papers, adding and initialing his own notes as he went along. His tiredness quickly dispersed as he read Delgard's first note: (the script is unclear in parts, much of the writing almost illegible. The handwriting is erratic, scrawled, unlike the neat hand of the manuscript these papers were found in, even though author seems to be same. Translation will be as close to the original as possible, but own interpretation and meaning will have to be used to make sense of certain sections of text. Also, Latin is not correct in parts--may be due to disturbed mind of writer. D.) Fenn picked up a single sheet of parchment once more and frowned at the scrawl. A disturbed mind or a frightened one? He looked over at the door and wondered if he should find Delgard. How long the priest had been gone, he had no way of knowing, but the translation must have taken hours judging by the amount of notes. Fenn was annoyed at himself for having fallen asleep. It was a strange time for Delgard to have gone into the church, but then he, Fenn, knew little of the lives of such men: perhaps it was normal for him to make his devotions at such a late hour. On the other hand, Delgard may have just gone out to check on the two young priests whose duty it was to keep an all-night vigil in the next-door field. With some of the crazy people around, it would have made more sense to bring in Securicor, but he supposed, the Church had its own way of doing things. It was still cold in the room, even though the door was now closed. He noticed the fire was low, almost out, the burned logs charcoaled with patches of white ash breaking the blackness. He went to the fireplace and threw on two more logs, cinders briefly flaring as they landed. He rubbed his hands together to clear the wood dust and willed the logs to ignite, the chill beginning to sink into his bones.

The wood sizzled as gas escaped and small

James Herbert - The Shrine

flames began
to lick at the underneath. He grunted with
satisfaction and turned toward the desk. For some
reason his eyes were drawn toward the window and at the
long narrow gap
between the curtains; he drew them tightly closed
as if the
night outside were a sinister voyeur. He sat
once more and
pulled Delgard's large notebook toward him.
He began to
read, and he was still cold.
Seventeenth Day of October in the year 1560
She is dead yet dwells not in the underworld. At
night I see her
before me, a vile thine from Hell that cannot rest,
nor yet let
me be, a rotting creature of the grave that once
I cherished.
But then, her beauty was unspoiled. Now
sweet, Damnable,
Einor will not leave, not until she has me with her
amongst
her corrupted brood.
"Tis true I deserve such fate, for my
Sins cry out and are not to
be forgiven by Our God in Heaven. Mayhap my
madness is an
earthly Penance and this makes better choice than
the Hell to
which she draws me. But she has bid me, and she,
my Einor,
will surely take me.
My hand trembles for she is here! Her corpse's
presence surrounds
me and makes foul the air!
(script impossible to read here and no meaning can
be guessed
at. D.)
My father, that noble Lord, forbids that I confess
to my
Bishop, for he sees only madness in my eyes
and would mute my
madman's utterings. Thus he keeps me
prisoner in this mean
Chapel where only the servants and landsmen bear
witness to
my decline. No longer am I a freeman, for
I have fallen in his
eyes and no blame to him for that. Yet how long
must I hear
his Chaucer jibe:
'That if gold rust, what then will iron do?
For if a Priest be foul m trust
No wonder that a common man should rust!"
For all his scorn, still I know he understands not the
depths of
my Sin. Haste now! Though my brow be fevered
and my hand
trembles as if with ague, this must be set down that
others may
read of she whose vengeance is boundless nor leashed
by earthly time.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Give me strength. Dear Lord, and deny me not the
courage to
carry out this duty, that others shall know her vile ness and
be
warned. My guilt lies open in these my words.
You who read
them dismiss them not as a madman's
ravings. But keep close
hold of the vision of Our Saviour that is within you,
lest your
Soul be tainted by this Confession.
(scrawled lines at this point and many deletions.
As if writer
cannot put his thoughts on paper. D.)
still served long years at the Church of St.
Joseph's in Banefeld and
there I knew joy. The village was my house,
the villagers my
trusting children. Disputes I settled and they had
Faith in my
Word for they believed it the Word of God.
"I" he womenfolk
unburdened their worries upon my shoulders and I
was pleased
to give counsel to these simple people, for it gave
purpose to my
life and Grace to my Soul. "I" he children had
some small fear of
me for my countenance is not pleasing. Yet fear of
God's
Servant on Earth is proper to the young. My
Holiness was
revered and the True Faith was kept in my Parish
throughout
all those troubled Heretical times.
(he refers to the Reformation and the establishment of the
Church of England during the reign of Henry
VIII. D.)
to right-brace 'o man betrayed my trust, though
Evil entered my Soul and
yet holds sway.
It was the Prioress who brought Eignor to me,
unknowing that
she did the Devil's work. Eignor, this Cursed
Nun, was fair and
gentle to look upon; a child, an innocent, whose
treachery to
God and Mankind I did not perceive. Blacker
than jet was her
Soul, her mind full of guile and her
personage well-armed with
deceit. Her mistress considered her spirited, but
her own cheveril
conscience could not perceive Eignor's subtle
wickedness.
She was to be of help in the (church, an aid much
needed, for
my duties were plenty. Then was I stirred
by carnal desires,
urgings of the flesh that could not be subdued, unholy
dreams
that betrayed my Cha/y. And it was as though
straightway

James Herbert - The Shrine

she had Knowledge of my hidden Sinfulness, for her eyes
saw
clearly into my very Soul. Such was her Mystery.
I no soon I
knew that Einor was as no other woman and that her
Holy
Vocation was but the aberration of a perverse mind.
Yet it was
her mind that first distracted me from my duties.
My studies
have encompassed astronomy, medicine, physics,
and even the
ancient esoteric craft of alchemy; and of
medicine and alchemy
her knowledge was by far the greater.
I was soon to become fascinated by her Knowledge and thus
captivated.
(as the son of a wealthy nobleman, his learning may
well
have included such diverse subjects. But how could
this nun
know of such things? D.)
From the beginning, she was like no other Religious of
my
acquaintance; in truth, like no other woman.
Kinor fulfilled
her duties pleasingly well, but always there was the
smile that
held some veiled secret, the gaze that lingered
too long on my
own. I was soon Bewitched and was later to deem that
term
rightly used. In those first days I saw only
guileless innocence,
not the true self which made fool of me. We
prayed together
and her adoration inclined most towards the Blessed
Mother of
Christ, daughter of Still Anna. 'I' here was at
this time a sickness
in the village, no plague this, but illness that
sent many to
their beds. 'I'wo children died, yet these were frail
from birth,
so God was praised for His Mercy and for sending so
skilled a
mortal in the tending of the sick. 'I'or her powers
of medicine
were soon made manifest and even our
physician, a pompous
though well-meaning fellow, ventured his admiration.
'I' we
other young Holy Sisters joined us in our work.
Novices these,
whose names were Agnes and Rosemind, and they
remained at
the Church when the sickness was passed. It was said
that a
Divine Hand guided hers, that by gazing upon a
man, he he reeve
or hay ward, she could tell if he were dry or
cold, moist or hot.
(a person's body was conceived of being composed of the

James Herbert - The Shrine

four elements: Earth, Water, Air and Fire.
Earth--cold and
dry; Water--cold and moist; Air--hot and
moist; Fire--hot
and dry. Sickness was an imbalance of these
qualities. D.)
'I'hus would she administer her restorative
simples and cures.
She also used images
(effigies. D.)
to be worn about the neck when the planets were
favourably
inclined; energies descended into the image with great
benefit to
the dependent. I had cause to scold Kinor for
such practices, but she would smile and say it was
Faith that offered the cure and
nothing more. If I found this sacrilegious, I
would keep my
peace because of the deep interest it aroused in me. Such
then
was my initial Enchantment with Einor that I did
not consider
to consult with the Prioress. It was when a mysterious
malady struck down my own body that pending
illfortune had its consummation. Einor was sent by her
Prioress to tend me
and, in my delirium, I felt her hands upon my
body, soothing
my pains, bathing away fever's moisture; and
kindling a desire
that had been smouldering. Perchance it was her own
potions
which aroused my passion. Thus ensnared was I, and
once so, became her willing captive. My
abandonment was complete, my taste for her delights
insatiable. I am too shamefaced to
relate all that took place in our sinful
fornication; suffice to say
that our carnal acts plunged into bestiality of such
low nature
that I fear my Soul is perished, never more to be
reborn in God's light.
(more incoherent writing here, much of it
indecipherable.
Although priest has stated he will not detail
his indecencies
with this woman, it appears he has done so to a
certain
extent. Unclear whether it is guilt that has
subconsciously
made writing almost illegible, fear, or his own
reawakened
excitement. Much sacrilege and the use of holy
objects seems
to be involved. Names here and there, but can
make no
sense of them. D.)
As Einor opened her flesh to me, so too did
she open her mind.
She spoke of things ancient and of matters not yet
of this Earth.
She spoke of voices that were from the dead, and of

James Herbert - The Shrine

forces that
rode the air like silent thunderstorms; forces
perceived only by
the Chosen. She likened these incorporeal powers
to great unsighted
tidal waves that sought entry into the shallow world of
men, Furies that if unleashed would destroy and
recreate in
their own image. I would ask her if it was the
Devil's power
she spoke of and she would mock me and tell me there
was no
greater power than the Will of Man. I cowered at
such
blasphemy and believed her to be a sorceress;
but in the passage
of time I learned that she was much more. To her, magic

but a product of the Will, and potions, poisons and
transmitters
the tools of alchemists and physicians, not of the
sorceress.
I was irrevocably lost in her; this wretched
Nun dominated my
existence. My frail body, so exquisitely
scourged by her
instruments, lived only to gratify itself with her
pleasures. As well I sought her; yet still am
I mystified. From whence does your Evil come? I
would ask of her. And
from where your Goodness? For still she cured the sick.
Why do
you venerate the Holy Name of the Sacred Virgin,
yet blaspheme
her presence by fornication before her Image? Why
choose the righteous path of handmaiden of Christ when
your
secret deeds are not to His Way? And why have you
made
prisoner of this poor Soul? These questions I asked
many times,
but she answered them not until one year had gone
by and, I
think, until she was sure that the invisible chains which
girdled
my Will could not be loosed. She cured the sick that
her name
should be exalted as was the name of .mary; and she
exalted
Mary's name that she, Eignor, be as the Virgin
Mother, an
intermediary of power, though not yet fully tested,
if am a
Nun, Eignor told me, because I seek position
over others, that I
may be revered and obeyed. As Prioress, I
shall gain that trust
and 'tis you, sweet Thomas, who will help me in
this, for has
not your noble father great influence with the Church?
As I write the Chapel goes colder, swift
dissolving breath
clouds falling to the page below. I he wind

James Herbert - The Shrine

shakes windows and
doors, and Demons seek me out. Stay away,
Einor." This
ground is Sacred, its Sanctity inviolate.
Still my fingers grow
numb with the freeze and become brittle as if
fit to snap. O
God have Mercy on this miserable creature and
allow my
Chronicle to be written.
Methinks I hear a voice that calls my name from
without.
Would that it were the mewlings of some night animal, but
I
fear 'tis the voice of my dead mistress. The
Chapel is dim and
the lamp cannot light up the dark places. There is
no peace for
me here, nor will be until she is laid to rest.
But who will do
that deed? Not if, that I know.
In truth then I knew Einor, but still could not
resist her will.
She laughed at my words and scorned my
horror. She spoke of
poison for the Prioress: Orpiment or
Realgar would be the
insidious assassin.
(trisulphide of arsenic and disulphide of
arsenic. D.)
The poisoning would be slow that no suspicion would
arise.
The Prioress would suffer a long and wasting
sickness and it
would be seen that even the skilful and tender
administrations
of Sister Einor would not prevent the aged Nun's
death. O
cunning Witch." Yet Witch you are not. No
sorceress you,
sweet. Damned Einor; something more, something much
more.
Too late I learned of these ambitious, poor
debauched fool that I
was. Weak, lecherous disciple of Sin! Help
me. God, before my
dying comes.
Yet so lost to her own lust was Einor that her
downfall was of
her own doing. And Blessed be to Jesu for that. My
people
revered her for they considered her pure of heart and
she had
cured many an ailment. They brought to her gifts,
some mere
trinkets and others of value. The latter kind
she stored secretly
in the Crypt of Still Joseph's lest the
Prioress discover them, and
those of little value she gave to the Priory. And
all thought her
most fair and generous.
The children flocked to Sister Einor, this vile

James Herbert - The Shrine

creature of
depravity, adoring her, beseeching her Blessing, for
they knew from their elders that here walked a Saint on
Earth; and her black heart welcomed them, for they were
as lambs to a wolf.
What makes a Soul thus? There is no answer
in this World,
but lies in a place of darkness, where shadowed spirits
conspire
with devils to destroy Mankind's peace.
In Church she prayed long hours, her body
prostrate before the
altar, that all might witness her devotion. At
night, when
observers were none, then would she defile that same
altar in
practices that now cause sickness in
my throat, for I was her
willing accomplice. Still I know not what led me
to this
disgrace, what Spirit released this carnal lust in
me. I reason
that her Will governed mine, her thoughts controlled my
own;
but in my heart I know the Will had first to come from me.
Her temptations were so cursedly sweet, the
torture upon my body so cursedly glorious!
Her child's face, her white flesh, that
Devil's gateway between her thighs from which she
bade me
drink, these were too wondrous to forswear.
Yet I wander, my thoughts no longer gathered.
My father,
that steadfast patron of the Church, thinks me mad;
and
perhaps 'tis so. Still I have not the madman's
escape into
delirium and there is no comfort in my dreams.
But in the second year of my Knowledge of Eignor,
suspicions were whispered abroad. My demeanour
bad changed. I had never been a robust man, but
there was a weakness upon me, a
stoof) to my stature that was plain to see. My
obsession with the
young Nun would no longer be disguised. Worse
yet was the
disappearance of the children, lost over several months in
the
nearly forests, never to be seen again. Three children in
all, whose names I have already set down.
(set down? D.)
How these simple peasant children had believed in
sweet Sister
Eignor, and how I had to stifle their screams when
her punishment
was visited upon their small bodies. Dear dud,
there can
be no forgiveness for my part in these foul deeds. I
could not
even pray over their hidden graves.
(the names must be those mentioned in the earlier unclear
passage. The priest and the nun killed the children!
D.)

James Herbert - The Shrine

The Prioress had become weakened, her life's
spirit ebbing more
each day. Stealthy was her demise, for Einor would
not allow
that any should say the hand of another played part in the
old
nun's death. Bolder became this Devil's
Daughter and more
demanding in her excesses. My endeavours were no
longer
sufficient for her lusts and less often could my
tortures satiate
her appetite. As well, it had become
dangerous to take more
children from the district. Her appetites were turned
upon the
two young novices who came daily to Still
Joseph's. One accepted
her debasement willingly, for her heart was already
lost to
Einor; the other submitted but fled shamefaced
afterwards.
His novice took her own life in remorse,
but first Confessed her
Mortal Sin to the ailing Prioress.
Outrage gave the Mother Superior a newfound
strength. But
so too was she cunning, for my father's coffers were ever
open to
the Church. His loyalty to our Holy Roman
Pope had not
wavered during the Heretical time of Henry's
Mithensm, nor
during the confused reign of the young Edward. Now my
father
was favoured by good Queen Mary and justly rewarded
for his
fortitude and loyalty. To have him as enemy would not
have
been wise for the Prioress, who had oft times
benefited from his generosity.
This wise woman sent for me and, knowing all was
lost, I
threw myself on her mercy. The blame lay all
with the vile
temptress. Sister Einor, whose magic potions
had robbed me of
my reason. I wept and scourged myself before the
Prioress; I
confessed my most grave and sinful fornication with
Einor and begged forgiveness. But I did not tell
all, for I was afraid for my life.
' though she looked upon me with loathing in her eyes,

Prioress gave me her forgiveness. Einor's
spirit was darkened
by spectres who rejected the Christian Path.
She was a child of
Satan whose sorcery had overcome my W. A
mere mortal, I
could offer scant resistance to the leeching of my
strength and
the magic potions she fed my body. I eagerly

James Herbert - The Shrine

accepted these
judgements, well knowing they were my Salvation,
willing to believe I was but helpless victim
to Entrancement. That day we discussed the punishment of
Sister Einor.

The Prioress doubted not that Einor was Witch and
Profaner

and, ' though I knew she was more, I readily
agreed. Good

Queen Mary had decreed that both Witch and
Dissenter should

be driven from her Realm and from this Mortal World.

Rumour had it that two hundred and more Heretics
bad

already been burnt at the stake, and the County of
Sussex had

played part in many of these burnings. I myself had
witnessed

two in nearby Lewes. The Summoner was sent
for and I

denounced Sister Einor as Heretic and Witch.

(summoner: someone paid to bring sinners to trial
before an

ecclesiastical court. D.)

The Prioress was well pleased with this and seemed
satisfied

with my Contrition. When the Summoner had left us
to make

arrangements for Einor's confinement, she bade me
warn my

congregation of the Nun's evil-doings lest more
suffering ensued.

There was a gleam to her eyes when she hinted that
Einor

might lie too well at her trial, and my own
person would be

brought to book. I well knew that the truth would
indeed

bring this about, and I suspect the Prioress, my
new found

guardian, knew this too. I journeyed
back to Banefeld with much haste, my brow as
fevered as when the true fever had been upon me. I
was mindful of my own safety and wished to

protect the good name of my father. In the village
I quickly

told certain members of my Congregation of what
the Prioress

and I had discovered of Einor, and word spread like
flames in a

forest fire. These good people were full of wrath, for to have
their Faith abused and in such a manner was more than

they

could hear. "Those whose children had been lost
screamed for

vengeance and their cry was taken up, along with
sticks and

cudgels, by their fellow-iss. 'They hastened
to the Church of Still

Joseph's, a vehement, threatening muh, and I
followed, spurting

them on, enlivened with their passion, for had I not
been

James Herbert - The Shrine

unwittingly Seduced into her Wickedness? There were
children
amongst us, those who had once revered this
Holy Nun and
who now despised her. So sudden was our descent
upon the
Church that Eddinor was found by the altar, beneath the
statue of Our Lord's blissful Mother, there
embraced in the arms of the novice, Rosemund, who
had so easily succumbed to her
wiles. As had I. Einar was dragged screaming
from the Church,
her protesting companion in desire thrown to one
side. O how I
cowered when Einar's eyes met mine, it seemed
poison-tipped
daggers had plunged into my heart. She knew at
once that I
was her betrayer and such was the malevolence in her
eyes that
I fell to the ground. My flock believed me
Spellbound and tore
at her eyes with fingers and sticks. Even when she
wailed
piteously, sightlessly, they gave no mercy but
flailed her for her
witchcraft. She cried out that if, their spiritual
leader, was
partner to her iniquity, and I denied her charges
most absolutely,
bidding them pay no heed to the Heretic's lies,
urging them to
look for the Devil's Mark about her person, for
secretly I knew
that upon her body was a third nipple, an
aberration that the
ignorant believed to be a suckling breast for a
witch's Familiar.
(alice! D.)
"They stripped her of her Nun's robes and
found the Accursed
Mark. Their rage all but consumed them. The
menfolk beat
her relentlessly, their women and children urging them on,
until her naked body ran with blood. And all
the while they
besecched her to Confess to Witchcraft. But still
she did not;
curses were her only words. They pulled hair,
greased with her
own blood, from her body, until she was an
obscene, hairless
figure; yet still she would not admit
to Sorcery. O the torture
they inflicted upon her! And yet my pleas for the
punishment
to end were feeble and went unheard. They broke her
limbs,
these Christian men, and dragged her through the mire as
the
children and women stabbed at her with pointed sticks. I
could
not stop them and I no longer tried.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Ei nor implored mercy but still did not Confess to the
crime of
which she comwas accused. So angered were they that they
dragged
her to a nearby ditch, the river too far for their
seething
passion. The water ran scarlet when they put her
to the Test and
her tortured body gave way at last to the
agony. She Confessed
to Witchcraft, and such was my nun fear and need for
vengeance
that I almost believed this to be true. May He that
Harroved Hell forgive me, but this I wanted
to be true.
They carried Ei nor to a young oak nearby and there
they tied a
rope about her neck and hoisted her aloft. Still she
screamed,
and those screams filled my head until I felt
my skull must
needs burst. And when they lit the fire beneath her
naked, dangling feet, it seemed her agony
consumed my own flesh. Those blood-filled
sockets, once the holders of the softest of eyes,
stared at me through the mob each time her twisting
body
turned in my direction, and her broken lips
poured Curses upon
my head, and upon all those present, each man,
woman and
child, and their descendants. And she cursed the name of
Mary. I knew not whether she meant Christ's
Holy Mother, or our own doud Queen Mary, and I
wonder if by then this demented
creature knew herself. Even when the carpenter, a
strong man
this with no weak stomach, cut into her bowels and
drew down-her
organs so that they sizzled and roasted upon
the fire below,
her Curses still filled our heads.
At her death I knew that this woman was indeed more
than
Witch, for the sky darkened and the ground trembled beneath
our feet. Those that could ran, whilst others cowered
in the
mud. I thought my Church nearby would topple,
but its sturdy
build held fast, though several stones fell.
So afraid was this
poor Mortal Soul that I believed I saw
spectres rising from the
graveyard. I know not what foul force from Hell
had been
released by Ei nor's death. The very earth appeared
to open
beneath my feet and I stared into a Black Pit and
there I saw
the twisted creatures of the lower world, wretched
Lost Souls,
whose sins so foul were irredeemable, whose anguished
moans

James Herbert - The Shrine

rose up in torment to pervade the darkened
landscape. What
manner of creature she to invoke such horrors!
Now fallen,
crawling on my belly like a worm, I turned
my head from this
Hellish sight and looked upon the black-charred
carcase of she
who once had been my sweet, wicked
mistress.
The rope from which she hung broke and its gruesome
burden
dropped into the fire below where it did seethe and
hiss until it
was as charcoaled wood. I thought that I heard from this
blackened thing one last howling screech, but this could
only have been my own tortured imaginings for, in
surety, there was nothing human left of that once
fair body.
It became as night, though day was not spent,
darkness
falling upon darkness, and I ran from that Infernal
Place, the
vile stench and inhuman cries rising from the
Black Pit to
assail my senses. I fled, unsteady on my
feet, for the ground
still shook, and beseeched the Lord Christ to save me
from
Satan's Anger. The Church Crypt comwas
my refuge, my Sanctuary,
and I covered my eyes against the demons that rose
and
beckoned me from their disturbed resting places.
Three days I
bid in that tomb of darkness, curled in the
blackest corner, my
head covered by coarse sacking, my eyes closed
tight against the
shadows. Mayhap the time spent in that lonely
dungeon loosed
my reason completely, for when my father's
servants found me
at last, no words of meaning came from my lips.
They took me from there and my eyes were blinded by the
light
of day. It was well, for I had no desire
to look upon that
ravaged scene again. I was locked in a room in
my father's
house and physicians endeavoured to soothe my
rumblings with
medicines and kind words. When at last my ravings
had
calmed, my Bishop came and spoke auietly
with me, my father
at his side, a staunch rock of reality. They
told me that the
people of Hanefeld, the Landsmen, their womenfolk,
their children,
would not speak of that Evil day but to say that Elmr
had
Confessed to Witchcraft and the slaughter of three

James Herbert - The Shrine

children, and
had Cuned them in her dying breath. A thunderstorm
had
shaken the land and dark clouds had gathered low
overhead,
though no rain had fallen. But they did not tell
of rising
demons, nor black openings to Hell. I
implored my father and
the Bishop to believe me, but their reply was
gentle admonishment:
Einor had poisoned my mind with her drugs and
I had
seen that which was not, had lived only in the
realm of my
own thoughts. At this I further ranted and two
servants were
summoned to strap me to my bed.
Weeks passed, though I know not how many, and in that
time
it was decided between my father and the Bishop that my
health, by which they meant the condition of my mind,
might
be better served if I stayed away from St
Joseph's and Banefeld.
I suspect the hand of the Prioress was in this, for
while she
would not condemn me before my father, her (conscience
mould
not allow my tainted person within her Province.
Thus my
days would be spent at the small Church of Still
Peter's, on my
father's estate, where my babblings would be ignored
by his
servants and the tenants. I would serve as
Pastor. Here I
would stay safe, locked in my own cell of
madness. Money was
given to Still Joseph's by my father for repairs
to fallen
stonework--ha! Struck by lightning they said, and a
new
stained-glass window was set into the south wall.
He brought to me several items from my old Parish,
vestments and such like. 'The Church chest was also
carried to St Peter's and I believe it was of this
he was most mindful. Methinks private words had
passed between my father and that wily Sister of the
Cloth, the Prioress, for he seemed eager
to obtain this chest in
which were kept all records of St Joseph's
and the parish of
Banefeld. He need not have been thus concerned,
for if had not
been foolish enough to set down my carnal acts with
Sister
Einor, nor any statement which would speak foul of
her. How
he must have pored over these letters and scripts,
searching for
that which would bring down shame on the Woolgar crest,
and

James Herbert - The Shrine

how he must have sighed when none was found.
How then
would he view this paper that I know scribe for
future reading,
which will remain well-hid until God deigns it
shall be found?

Hark now! I he door rattles once more, but
already she is
within. Her stench grows stronger and I will not look
at the
dark shadow that lingers at the edge of my vision.
My body is
stiff with cold and the quill with which I write
scratches deep
into the page. Yet my fear will not let me rest!
I must finish
this task quickly lest my courage fail and others
be not warned!
I have served my days here with diligence and with
Godliness,
knowing my Soul is forever Damned. After a while,
many
months to be sure, I learned to keep dread
contained within me,
giving vent only when alone to the anguish
and remorse that
tortured me. They thought me still mad and their gaze
avoided
mine. But no longer were they burdened with my
runtings, my
impassioned pleas against unseen forces. Once more
our Holy
Pope in Rome is denied now that Elizabeth
has come to the
throne, but that concerns me little, for I am left
alone in peace
here. In peace! What insanities I write!
Yet would I gladly exchange persecution from our
new Queen for the vile pursuance of this soul-less
spirit. I have not seen the Prioress since I
was ensconced here and she ignores the messages
I send through
my father's servants (it may be that he intercepts
them). His
reeve had told me that Sister Rosemund was
cast out of the
Priory after Minor's death and took to living in
the forests near
the village. 'I'bis may well be true;
I care not. My pity is for
myself alone. None is to spare for that unfortunate.
Elmir
breathes upon me and it is the fetid breath of
Death! She wills
me look into those blood-filled eyes, to fall
into her lover's
embrace. A withered band touches my shoulder and still
I will
not look! Not yet, dear Einar. Not 'til this
task be done, these
words set down that others may learn. Doubt not
these words,

James Herbert - The Shrine

reader; denounce them not as the ravings of a
madman, but
pay them heed! Her Evil is not yet done and
her malignant
Spirit is not yet at rest.
The door is irrtggened and the howling wind enters the
Church. It
shrieks at these papers, seeking to tear them from my
hand. But
I will resist. She shall not have them. They will be well
kept,
hidden away, and then shall I turn to my Eignor.
And I shall
embrace her as I have embraced her in dreams of
late, for my
desires are still of her. I see only her
beauty, not this scarred, blackened creature who stands
over me, whose lipless mouth stays close to my
cheek, whose
Enough of this! She has me, for there are no lies between
us
now. I still fornicate with her in my thoughts and it is
my
Sinful lust that binds us forever. I leave this warning
for those
who seek it. She touches me and I am hers
once more!
Guard your soul. With this script I may find
some Redemption.
Guard your Soul and Pray for one who is already
lost.
(end of document. Beyond doubt Thomas
Woolgar, priest of
Still Joseph's, Banfield, and latterly of
Still Peter's, Barham, son
of Sir Henry Woolgar, is author. D.)
Questions:
1. Was Thomas Woolgar insane?
2. What did he mean: Eignor more than just a
witch?
3. Is curse coming true??
4. Father Hagan/mollv Pagett:
catalysts?
5. Is .mice Kignor?!

D.
Fenn sat back in the chair, his eyes never
leaving the
papers. He let out a long sighed breath.
Jesus Christ! Was
it possible? were these words just the rantings of a
madman
or were they the truth? Could this event, this terrible,
misguided witch burning that happened nearly
five hundred years ago be the cause of everything that
was happening at St. Joseph's today? No, it had
to be superstitious
mumbo-jumbo! Witches were from fairy tales,
folklore,
legends that parents loved to tell their kids around
a cheery
fire on a dark night. But then Woolgar
wasn't claiming
that F''ddl nor was a witch. In fact,

he disclaimed it. But was
the supernatural any more real than fairy
tales or folklore?
Even though he, Fenn, had witnessed events in
Banfield
that could only be called paranormal, his logical
mind
found it difficult to accept such a term as fact.
But how
could he dismiss what had happened to him that very day?
There had been something in that church with him, something
that threw out a malignant aura of evil. It
had scared
Nancy half to death and it less-than xggsened his
own bowels somewhat.
So what the hell was it? The ghost of poor
Sister Fiddlor?
"Aaah," he said aloud in disgust. It just couldn't
be.
There were no such things. "Keep telling yourself that,
Fenn," he muttered. Fie studied his hand and there
were
no weal marks on it, no demon marks on the
skin. Yet
there had been inside the church, for he
had seen them
appear. And there were no other marks on his body
save
where the foliage had lashed him during his tumble
down
the slope.
He wondered what Delgard's opinion would be.
As a
priest, the supernatural was part of his dogma,
and the
concept of life after death was the basis of his
religion.
But the manifestation of an evil woman's curse
from another
era? How would that grab him? If he believed in
all
this, maybe he'd gone over to the church to pray for
help!
Fenn shook his head. It was all too incredible.
And yet
it was happening.
He pushed back the chair and stood, suddenly
realizing
how stiff and cold he was again. The fire had
burned low
once more. He reached for his topcoat and shrugged it
on,
pulling the zipper all the way up to the neck.
Better find
Delgard, talk it out with him. The priest was no
fool,
despite his vocation; if he felt there was some
relevance to
the document, then there sure as hell was. And if
that was
the case, the problem would be what to do about it.
Fenn left the room, pulling the neck of his
coat tight

James Herbert - The Shrine

around his cheeks, not sure whether it was the coldness
of
the night that made him shiver or the faded script
lying on
the desktop.
He closed the door and walked the length of the
hallway,
an icy draft greeting him from the doorway
ahead. He
stepped out into the night and automatically looked
up at
the sky: it was clear, as if freshly
scrubbed of clouds by
the winds of the day, its blueness deep, almost
black, the
star clusters sharp, vivid. There was a light showing
dimly
through the windows of the church and Fenn walked
briskly along the path toward it. His pace
quickened until
he was almost running. There was something strange about
St. Joseph's, something he could not understand. It
seemed
totally black, darker than the night around it, no
starlight
reflected from the flint walls, no relief in
its shape, no
shades of gray. Unnaturally black, just a
dim light glowing
from its windows. He could feel his heart pounding and
suddenly he did not want to reach the church; he
wanted
to turn away, to run from the grounds, away from this
malevolent place. He felt as he had at
St. Peter's earlier in
the day: afraid and lggewilded.
But he knew Delgard would be in there,
alone, unguarded,
unaware of the transformation that had occurred.
Fenn had to warn the priest, to get him away from
there,
for he suddenly understood that St. Joseph's was
no longer
the house of God, but the sanctum of something
unholy.
When he touched the door, it felt repellent
to him, as
though the wood itself were unclean. He was badly
frightened, but he forced himself to push the door open.
"But I want my payment too," said the witch,
"and it's not a
small one either ..."
was The Little Mermaid," Hans Christian
Andersen
monsignor DRLGAR-N' So WRISTS
RKSTF.D AGAINST the low alter rail and his head was
bowed into his chest, his
back arched into an unpleasant shape. His lips
moved
silently in litany, yet there was an
immobility about his
face, as though his features had been
carved from gray

stone. He had no idea of how long he had prayed at the altar in St. Joseph's--an hour, perhaps less. His fear and confusion had not yet subsided, nor had any solutions to the imminent problem presented themselves. He had no doubts that the ancient words he had translated had been written in truth and he was equally sure that the curse was coming true. He believed that the power of the human mind had no limits on this earth, and neither did the human psyche. Einor had possessed a power far beyond the knowledge or understanding of her fellowmen; she was of a breed that was rare, unique, a development in genetic terms that most men could barely perceive let alone strive to attain. She had had the ability to draw the wills of others, their energies, their beliefs, into a collective power that could transcend mere human forces. She had not cured the sick; they had cured themselves. Fddlnor's role had been one of psychic "director." That power was now acting through Alice and in a more potent way than in the nun's own lifetime. Had death, that entry into the spiritualistic world where no physical restrictions controlled the mind's energy, enabled her power to increase to this awesome degree? Something more had occurred to Delgard. He had reasoned that Father Hagan and Molly Pagett might have been the catalysts for unleashing these terrors: now he also wondered if it had taken Fddlnor's spirit this long to develop her strange powers in the "other" world (what were a few centuries to infinity itself?). And it was this thought that frightened him most for, if Einor really had returned, how strong would her psychological forces be and to what purpose would she put them? He felt inadequate and defenseless. How could he combat something he could not even fully comprehend? Through his bishop he must seek the help of those skilled in such matters, laymen some, while others were men of his own calling; perhaps together they could control this evil. But mostly he would seek God's help, for only the omnific could truly vanquish such a creation. A sharp sound made him raise his head. He looked

around and the church interior was dim, the lights fading.
He could see no one else in the church. His attention turned back to the crucifix on the altar and his heavy eyelids closed as he resumed his prayers. His joints felt brittle, and once more, as it had frequently over the past few weeks, his body reminded him that age and weariness of mankind's ills were taking their inevitable toll. Perhaps, when all this was done, he would seek his own peace, a retreat into--
The sound again! A sharp, cracking noise. It had come from his right.
He looked over at the disfigured replica of the Virgin Mary and his lips moved, this time caused by an old man's trembling rather than prayer.
Delgard pushed himself upright, the effort seeming to take more than it should have. His footsteps were slow, almost a shuffle. He approached the statue and stood beneath it, looking up with curious eyes at the grotesquely cracked face. The Virgin Mother's hands were spread slightly outward as if to welcome him, but her smile was no longer the tender expression of maternal love: the cracked stone had distorted it into a sinister leer.
His eyes widened as the once-beatific face seemed to change expression and he quickly realized that the cracks were deepening, running into longer jagged lines. Several pieces of stone dropped away, falling to the floor to crumble into dust. The smile became broader, malevolent. Its lower lip fell and it was as though the mouth had opened to silently laugh. The surface plaster began to move, currents moving through it, and Delgard tried to back away, but found himself transfixed, fascinated by the change in its structure.
He stared up into the statue's eyes and powdered dust slid from them so that they became hollow, empty. His mouth opened in horror and he began to raise a trembling hand to protect himself, as it suddenly became aware of what was going to happen.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Fenn stumbled into the church and immediately saw the tall priest at the far end, near the altar.
Delgard was looking up at the statue of the Madonna, one hand half-raised.
And there was something else in the church. A small hooded figure, sitting in one of the pews just a few rows behind the priest.
The dark coldness that enveloped Fenn was now a familiar sensation. He felt his stomach muscles grip together and his hair stiffened. He tried to call out to the monsignor, but just a hissing sound escaped his lips. He began to move forward, but was already too late.
The statue exploded and thunder roared through the church. Thousands of stone pieces tore through Delgard's exposed body like metal shrapnel, lacerating his flesh, cutting through his face, chest, hands, groin, throwing him backward so that he fell over the first bench into the next row, fragments that had found entry through his eyes already lodged deep in his brain, destroying cells so that the incredible pain was only momentary. His body, now unfeeling, twisted and twitched in the narrow confines between the benches, and one large torn hand raised itself as if pleading with something unseen. It gripped the back of the bench and tightened, closing around the wood in death's grip, a last contact with the material world.
Fenn ran toward the fallen priest. He stopped in the aisle, his hands on the backs of benches, looking down at the bloody, twisted figure, Delgard's face ripped open, his white collar stained crimson. He screamed Delgard's name even though he knew the priest would not hear, nor ever hear again.
With eyes filled with enraged tears, he looked toward the dissmall black-garbed figure. But there was nothing there. "The church was empty. Apart from himself and the dead priest."
"But is there nothing I can do to get an immortal soul?" asked the little mermaid.
"The Little Mermaid," Hans Christian Andersen
hr LOCKI - "disD THK BOX, TESTING the lid to make sure it was secure. Satisfied, he picked it up from the table and crossed the tinv room to the wardrobe, taking no more

than three paces; stretching his l greater-than
ody, he placed the box on
top of the wardrobe and shoved it hard so that it slid
to the
back out of sight. He presumed his snooping
landlady had
already discovered it, but saw no reason to rearouse
her
curiosity by letting her eyes fall on it each
time she inspected
the room. He smiled, imagining what her
reaction
would be if she ever discovered its contents. But that was
his secret. He was sure even his mother did not know it
was missing; or, if she did, had not reported the
loss to the
police, for it was, after all, an illegal
possession.
He sat on the narrow, single bed, brushing away
the
blond hair that fell over his eyes. The
newspaper lay
spread on the floor at his feet and once more he
quickly
scanned the article he had t greater-than een
reading. A local Sussex
reporter had tried to discredit the little saint, had
maintained
that the priest had not been killed by a bomb
planted by some fanatical anti religious
movement, had
made himself a laughing-stock by denouncing all that
had
happened at Banfield as some crazy witch's
curse!
He looked thoughtful, nodding his head several times
as
he read the article, A bishop, in turn, had
denounced the reporter as a sensation-monger who was
trying to make as much mileage out of the story for his own
financial gain.
Although the Church could not yet acknowledge the St.
Joseph's cures as miraculous, they could most
certainly
issue a firm rebuttal to the idea that they were the
work of
some ludicrous "fairy-tale witch."
He smiled.
Furthermore, the little saint had asked that a
special
service should be held for the murdered monsignor
and the
parish priest who had died earlier. She had
told the Church
authorities that the Lady of the Vision had asked
for a
candlelight procession through the village in
memory of
the good priest and that a Revelation was to follow. The
Church was to comply with her wishes, for it was
felt
that, while they did not cpect to receive any such
revelation,

James Herbert - The Shrine

the priests, one of whom had been a courageous
victim of those who denied Christ's work here on
earth, merited
such a tribute.
He was not smiling now.
He lay back on the bed, his head and shoulders
resting
against the wall behind, his teeth chewing at a
thumbnail
that had already been bitten to the quick. Three faces,
cut from old newspapers and Scotch-taped to the
wardrobe
door, stared back at him. Pasted across the
dot-printed
photographs was the name of each man. Soon he
would
take the images down and put them back among the
other newspaper articles he had kept in a
scrapbook dedicated
to them.

But for now he silently mouthed the three names, his
faraway smile returning:

CHAPMAN

ACBBCA

H1NCKLEY

The Hag is astride

This night for to ride;

The Devil and she together:

Through thick, and through thin,

Now out, and then in, Though ne'er so foul be the
weather.

The storm will arise,

And trouble the skies;

This night, and more for the wonder,

The ghost from the Tomb

Affrighted shall come,

Called out by the clap of the Thunder. "The Hag,"

Robert Herrick

IT WAS MADNESS. SHEER BLOODY madness.

Fenn brought the Mini to a halt and wound down the
window. "What's the holdup?" he called out,
gesturing

toward the snarled traffic ahead.

The policeman, who was trying to bring some order
to

the chaos, strolled over, the slow walk a
disguise for his

agitation.

"You won't get through the village," he said
brusquely.

"Not for some time, at any rate."

"What's the problem?"

"The High Street's chock-a-block. The
procession starts
from there."

"It's only seven; I thought it didn't start
till eight."

"They've been arriving since six o'clock this morning
and pouring in all day. God knows how many there are
in

the village by now, but it's a good few thousand,
that's for
sure."

"Less-than xggk, I'm from the Courier. I need to get through to the church."
"Yeah, well we all have our problems, don't we?" The policeman scowled at the cars that had stopped behind Fenn's, several farther back tooting their horns. His arm lifted toward them like a conductor's baton bidding silence. You could try the backroads. Go around through Flackstone; it'll get you nearer at least."
Fenn immediately put the car in reverse and backed as far as he could go toward the vehicle behind. When he felt the gentle touch of bumpers, he pushed into first and cased the wheel around. It took four backwardstforward shuttles, even though he used the grass verges on either side of the road, but eventually he was pointed away from Banfield and heading into the dazzling lights of oncoming traffic.
He should have realized it would be this bad; the media had been full of the story over the last few days. Why hadn't the bloody fool of a bishop listened to him? Fenn banged the steering wheel with the flat of his hand, his anger boiling over. He soon reached the sign pointing toward Flackstone and swung into the unlit country lane. It was a winding road, few houses on either side until he reached the hamlet itself; even here there were just one or two country cottages and flint stone houses set on a blind bend. To his left, he could see a strange glow in the sky and he knew it was from Banfield, the village lit up as it had never been before. He swore under his breath. And then aloud. Fenn reached another main road shortly after and groaned when he saw the amount of traffic all headed in the same direction. He made a quick decision and pulled over onto the grass verge. He locked the car and started walking, knowing that the traffic moving slowly past him would soon be brought to a halt. It was at least a mile to the church, but walking was the only way to get there before everything, even pedestrians, came to a standstill. Madness, he kept repeating to himself as a rhythm to his

James Herbert - The Shrine

walking. They've all gone bloody crazy.

A strong white light shone high into the night, a beam

that was separate from the diffused glowing of the village. It was the main searchlight of the shrine itself and it seemed to him like a siren beacon luring wayfarers to some

devious destruction. The eerie whiteness made him shiver.

There were heavy rolling clouds above, their fringes occasionally

caught by silver moonlight, briefly accentuating

their ragged and turbulent form.

The pilgrims he passed, in their coaches, minibuses,

cars--and even on motorbikes and bicycles--all seemed in

good humor despite the long delays in any kind of forward

movement. Hymns of praise came from many vehicles, the

low intonations of prayer from others. Yet it soon became

obvious that there were groups among them whose journey derived from curiosity only, those seeking thrills, the

unusual, the inexplicable. And there were others who had

made the trip because there was nothing much on TV.

Again, as Fenn drew nearer to St. Joseph's, he felt the

peculiar vibrancy in the air. It was akin to the atmosphere

in London in the summer of '81, on the day of the Royal

Wedding, or Pope John Paul's visit the following year. Yet

the coming together of this conscious energy had a peculiar potency of its own, a heady surging of impulses that he

knew would find its peak in the area around the shrine.

He

knew now that this was Alice's source of power, just as it

had been Einar's so many years before.

He knew this as

surely as if dead men had whispered the secret to him.

The omnipotent mind-energy that transcended the physical,

which allowed disabilities in the physical form to be overcome

in those who would allow the scavenging of their own psyche. In those who truly believed. And that, he was

convinced, was the gift of all faith healers: the ability to

direct the psychic energies of others. The words of the

wretched sixteenth-century priest had provided the key;

the dream-whispers of latter-day priests who, like

their

early predecessor, no longer lived, had provided the answer.

But Bishop Caines had not listened to Fenn. A sensationalist reporter's beleaguered dreams had meant nothing to the clergyman. Proof, Fenn, it was proof that was needed.

Where was the manuscript he spoke of?

Dust on the floor of the priest's house.

Where was the late monsignor's translation?

Dust on the floor of the priest's house.

Where, then, was the proof?

Dust, like the statue of the Virgin Mary inside the church.

Fenn's shoulders were stooped, his eyes pouched through nights of disturbed sleep. He had known when trying to

convince the bishop that his intensity was near-demented and his words frantic, too emotive for Caines to regard

him seriously, but in truth, he had felt a shade too close to

insanity for his own liking. He had even less luck with

Southworth, the businessman behind the scenes, whose greed had skillfully engineered the commercial aspect of

the shrine. And no luck at all with the head of the Catholic

Church in England. It was hardly the eminent cardinal's

fault, he knew, for Bishop Caines' warning of a lunatic

reporter on the loose had preceded his own attempts to

reach the cardinal archbishop. His alternative was to turn

to his own profession and it, too, had shunned him. Even

the Courier, still miffed that he had turned his back on the

newspaper but desperate for his story anyway, had balked

at his revelation. They had compromised with an interview,

a piece written by one of his own colleagues very. with the same

skepticism he would have allowed himself just a few weeks

before had he been the interviewer. It was a comeuppance

that was hard to take, and yet he could see the ironic

humour of the situation. The cynic was being paid for his

past cynicism; the sensationalist was disbelieved because of

his past sensationalism.

Fenn could almost smile at himself. Except it hurt when he tried.

James Herbert - The Shrine

A car's horn made him jump and he realized he had wandered into the path of a slow-moving vehicle. He kept to the side of the road, his breathing heavy now, but his pace faster than the traffic traveling alongside him. He reached a T-junction and there was the church far there down to his left. The main road was jammed with people and vehicles, the hubbub tremendous; There were more stalls than ever by the roadside, selling food, drinks, and all kinds of trinkets, as well as the usual religious paraphernalia; the police were obviously having enough trouble coping with the crowds to deal with the flagrant infringement of trading laws. He pushed his way into the shuffling mob, heading for the side entrance to the church, and it took a good twenty minutes to cover no more than five hundred yards. He reached the gate, now brightly lit, and attempted to push it open. "One moment," a voice said from inside. He recognized the man whose whole life seemed to be devoted to guarding the church entrance. This time he was flanked by two priests and a constable. "It's okay," Fenn told him. "It's me, Gerry Fenn. I think you know me by now." The man looked embarrassed. "Yes I do, sir. But I'm afraid you can't use this entrance." "You're kidding." Fenn showed his press pass. "I'm working for the Church on this." "Er, that's not what I've been informed. You'll have to use the other entrance." Fenn stared at him. "I get it. Persona non grata, right? I must have really pissed off the bishop." "There is a special press entrance now, Mr. Fenn. It's just farther along." "Yeah, I passed it. Looks like I'm no longer among the privileged." "I'm just following instructions." "Sure, forget it." Fenn moved off, knowing there was no point in arguing. He made his way back to the small entrance marked PRESS, which had been cut through the hedge surrounding the field, and was relieved when his pass got him through

James Herbert - The Shrine

without further hitch; he wouldn't have been at all surprised if the ban had extended to all entrances, including the public one. He stopped just inside and his tired eyes widened. Jesus, he thought, the beavers've been busy. A network of benches beill but covered the field like a carefully constructed spider's web, at its center the spider itself. The twisted oak may have been inanimate, but to I'enn it now had all the sinister predatory aspects of the creature he had likened it to. The altarpiece below the tree was more ornate than before, although there were no statues, no images of Christ and His Mother that would mean the Catholic Church was fully committed to the popular belief that this was hallowed ground. The religious authorities had been subtle: there were no extravagant displays of crucifixes, save for the solitary cross on the altar itself, but there were many such symbolisms woven in the cloths that covered certain sections on and around the main platform. The centerpiece itself had been broadened to allow for more seating above congregation level, with a deep-red canopy on either side to protect the worshippers from the more inclement weather; a special tiered section had been constructed to the left to contain, he guessed, a choir. Banners were nixed at intervals along the side aisles, their bright reds, greens, and golds giving a rich, though dignified, cast to the vast arena. He noted PA systems at strategic points in the field so that no one should miss the words of the service. And the cameras-were no longer confined to the outer limits, for platforms had been erected inside the boundary hedges where a congregational view could be taken of the proceedings. The overall lighting was dim, enhancing the startling vividness of the centerpiece with its bank of flo less-than xllights and dramatic single searchlight, which gave the tree and its upper branches a peculiar flatness against the night sky. This central blaze of luminescence dominated the field, a focal point to which every worshipping mind would be drawn. As he watched, two figures in white cassocks mounted the platform and began to light rows of tall

James Herbert - The Shrine

devotional

candles that had been placed behind the altar. The question struck him again, as it had repeatedly over the past two days: why had the Church acquiesced

to Alice's strange

request for a candlelight procession through the village of

Banfield? She had told them that the Lady had asked for

this to be done in memory of Father Hagan and Monsignor

Ddgard, and (that a divine revelation was soon to

come. Bishop Cairns had been restrained in his announcement

that a procession was to take place, playing his now-familiar public role of reluctant

advocate. He had

stressed that the ceremony was more in the way of a tribute

to two fine priests, one of whom had been assassinated by

what would appear to be an anti-religious fanatic's bomb,

than compliance with the wishes of a young girl who may or may not have had a vision of the Sacred Virgin.

But

why had the bishop been so vehement in his attack on Fenn when the reporter had tried to persuade him that

there was no goodness in what was happening, only evil?

Ambition--for oneself, for one's cause--could be a great

blinker to truth, and a formidable disclaimer of argument--

religions and ideals had succumbed to its influence throughout

time--yet he had expected more of this Church representative. He, the unbeliever, wanted

more from those

who professed to believe. At any time, the disillusionment

would have been bitter, but could have been accepted with

a cynic's shrug; now it provoked a deeper resentment, a

desperate anger whose root cause was fear.

He moved down the aisle as if attracted by the bright

light, the soft layer of churned mud beneath his feet sucking

weakly at each disstep.

The field was filling up fast and he vaguely wondered

how so many people--those in the vehicles that he had passed, those who were to walk in the procession, and those still milling around the entrance, eager for a ringside seat--were to be accommodated. And where would they all run to?

"Fenn!"

He stopped and looked around.

"Over here."

Nancy Shelbeck was rising from a bench in a section

marked PR1-: SS.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Fenn said as she approached.

"I wouldn't have missed it." There was an excitement in her eyes, although trepidation was just behind it.

"After what happened to you? Didn't it scare you off?"

"Sure, I got spooked. I still have to make a living though.

Can you imagine what my chief would say if I flew back without a report on the main event?"

"The main event?"

"Can't you feel it? The tension? The air's thick with it. It's like everybody knows something big's gonna happen."

Fenn's voice was low. "Yeah, I can feel it." He suddenly

clasped her arm. "Nancy, what did you see in the church the other day?"

They were jostled as people pushed by, eager for seats near the front.

"Didn't Sue tell you?"

"I haven't seen her since I took you to her flat. I've been pretty busy the last few days."

"She tried to reach you--we both did. No reply to our phone calls, no one there when we went to your place.

Just what have you been up to?"

"I've been trying to get this show called off. Now answer my question."

She told him and was surprised he wasn't shocked. "Is

that with you saw, too, in St. Peter's?" Nancy asked when she had finished.

"I guess so. To tell the truth, if didn't take too close a look. But it all fits."

"Fits into what?"

"It's t less-than it greater-than complicated to explain now." He looked around and was surprised to see just how full the field had become

in the few moments he had been speaking to the American.

"Is Sue here?" he asked her.

"I saw her just a little while ago. She had her kid with her. They're somewhere near the front, I think." She

pulled his face around toward her. "Hey, are you okay?"

You look kinda rough."

He managed to smile. "A couple of restless

nights, a few
bad dreams. I've got to find Sue and Ben."
She held on to him. "I had a long chat with
Sue, Gerry;
she knows about us."
"It's not important."
"Thanks."
"I didn't mean it--"
"That's okay, I know what you mean. She
wants you,
schmucko, you know that? I think she's reached some
kinda decision about you."
"It's taken a long time."
"It would have taken me longer. And then I think
I'd
have dumped you."
"You trying to make me feel good again?"
"I figure it'd have been hard to live
with you; we'd be a
bad combination."
He shrugged. "I'm relieved I didn't ask
you to."
"I'm not saying I couldn't change my mind, you
understand?"
He held her and kissed her cheek. "Take
care of yourself,
Nancy."
"I always do." She returned his kiss, but on the
lips.
Fenn broke away and she watched him disappear
into
the crowd. The tension showed in her face once again.
She
was frightened, badly frightened, and only her
professionalism
had brought her back here. She knew that she would
never have returned to the other church, St.
Peter's, not
for a million bucks or her own network chat
show. For
those around her, the atmosphere must have been vastly
different; their faces revealed only shining
expectancy, a
willingness to believe that the Holy Virgin had
blessed
this field with her presence and that, if they wished it
enough, she would appear again. Or, at least, the child
would perform more miracles.
Nancy stood aside to let an old woman,
assisted by a
younger one, both bearing a vague resemblance
to each
other--mother and daughter perhaps--shuffle by. The
reporter
turned away, desperate for a cigarette but not
sure
it was proper in such a place, and made her way
back to
the press section. To hell with it: Alice had
given these
people a new hope in a sick world where optimism was
considered banal, trust in a higher goodness
misguided.

James Herbert - The Shrine

While it was true that the shrine had proved a rewarding commercial venture for opportunists, it had also succored the faith of thousands--maybe even millions throughout the world. But the nagging doubt persisted: should the word have been suckered"- Nancy sat in the reporters" bench and pulled her coat tight around her; the desire for a smoke took second place to her yearning for a stiff bourbon on the rocks. Paula helped her mother down the aisle, hoping to get her as close to the aharpicce as possible. She had been told at the gate that spaces had been provided beneath the central platform only for the very sick, those brought on stretchers and in wheel chairs; those who could walk, whether assisted or not, had to take their place among the other members of the congregation. An arthritic hip and hypertension were not considered severe-enough ailments, even as a combination, so her mother could be given no special treatment. Having seen the number of walking wounded that had turned up, Paula wbbled hardly surprised. God, it made a person feel ill just to look at them all. "Not far to go, Mother," she coaxed her burden. "We're quite near the front row now." "What's all the bright lights" came the querulous response. "Hurts my eyes." "It's just the altar. They've lit it all up with floodlights and candles. It looks lovely." Her mother tutted. "Can't we sit down now? I'm tired, dear." "Nearly there." "I want to see the girl." "She'll be here soon." "I've suffered enough." "Yes, Mother. But don't expect too much." "Why not? She's cured all them others; what's she got against me?" "She doesn't even know you." "Did she know them others?" Paula groaned inwardly. "This'll do. Mother. We can sit on the end of this bench if this gentleman will kindly move up a bit." The gentleman seemed reluctant, but the

James Herbert - The Shrine

squinty stare
of Paula's mother encouraged him to do so.
The old lady groaned aloud as she sat,
assuring those in
close proximity of her disability. "This cold
weather isn't
going to do my hip any good, is it? When's it
all start,
when's it all over?"
Paula was about to give an impatient reply when
a
familiar face caught her attention. Tucker was
standing by
a bench just a dozen or so rows ahead and he was
calling to
someone. Paula's eyes narrowed when she saw a
plump
hand tugging at his elbow, obviously urging him
to sit
down. She half-lifted herself from the seat to peer
over the
heads of those in front, and her eyes frosted when
she recognized the bulky fur-coated shape next
to Tucker. So
the Fat slug had brought the fat she-slug along
with him.
Dear, pampered Marcia. Trust her not to want
to miss
anything! Well, maybe tonight she'd learn something
new
alggou the pig she was married to. A little
confrontation
between them, mistress and wife, might offer some
compensation
for the scare she, Paula, had suffered under
Fucker's podgy hands! She hadn't been into the
supermarket
since--hadn't even sent in a sick note--and
her boss
was too much of a coward to ring and find out how she
was. Well, tonight, in front of Miss
Piggys ugly sister, she
would tell him exactly how she was! Ioot's
see how he
coped with that.
Paula's mother was muttering something about the dampness
from the ground creeping into her boots and the man
beside her hadn't moved up far enough and she was being
squashed and wasn't that Mrs. Fenteman in
front who
never went to church except at Christmas and
Easter and
wasn't she carrying on with the man in the hardware
shop?
Paula did not even look at her mother. She said
slowly
and evenly, "Just . . . shut . . . up."
Tucker ignored his wife's tugging and pushed his
way
past knees to reach the side. "What are you doing
here,
Fenn?" he said loudly when he reached open
space.

Fenn turned back and recognized the fat man.
"My job," he said, ready to walk on.
"You're not working for the Church anymore, I hear."
"No, but I'm still working for the Courier."
"You sure of that?" The question was accompanied by a sneering smile.
"Nobody's told me otherwise."
"Well, you're not very welcome here with all the lies you've been spreading."
Fenn moved nearer to him. "What're you talking about?"
"You know very well. George Southworth gave me a personal account."
"Yeah, Southworth and the bishop must have had a good laugh between them."
"We all did, Fenn. Pretty lunatic, wasn't it? Witchcraft, nuns coming back from the dead. Did you expect anyone to believe it?"
Fenn waved his hand toward the altar. "Do you believe all this?"
"It makes more sense than what you've been saying lately."
"Financial sense, don't you mean?"
"So some of us are making a nice profit. It's good for the village and gggKggd for the Church."
"But particularly good for you and Southworth."
"Not just us. There are plenty of others who've reaping the benefit." Tucker's sneer became more pronounced.
"You haven't done so badly yourself, have you?"
The reporter could think of no adequate reply.
He turned away, forcing himself to ignore the chuckle of derision from behind.
He drew nearer to the centerpiece, the bright lights causing his eyes to narrow. A broad section before the platform had been kept clear and stewards were directing stretcher bearers and those pushing wheel chairs into it.
He stopped beneath a squat, scaffold tower where a cameraman was aiming his television camera into the invalid section. Fenn was jostled from behind and he reached out toward the metal scaffolding to keep his balance.
He quickly withdrew his hand as a tiny static shock tingled his fingers.
He frowned and, as an experiment, touched the metal frame

of a passing wheel chair. Again, a tiny shock crackled at his fingers. He knew that every possible safety precaution would have been taken with all the electronic machinery in the field, particularly bearing in mind the damp soil that the insulated cables would be buried beneath. He looked up into the night sky, at the dark, thunderous clouds, now so low and menacing. A storm was in the air, its charge already in the atmosphere. Sudden feedback from several of the amplifiers spread around the field made the gathering congregation gasp and good-humoredly rub their ears, laughing and smiling at their neighbors. Fenn could see no humor in it at all; in fact, the peculiarities in atmospheric increased his dread. He looked ahead at the tree, the twisting of its gnarled limbs accentuated in the glaring light, and remembered the first time, just a few weeks before (it seemed a lifetime), when patchy m less-than x8tion-light had exposed its grotesqueness, hovering over the kneeling child like a monstrous angel of death. The sight of the oak had frightened him then and it frightened him even more at this moment. He eased his way through the long line of invalids until his path was blocked by a man wearing a steward's armband. "Can't go through this section, sir," he was told. "Invalids only." "Who are those benches for?" Fenn asked, pointing at the rows behind the open space. "They're reserved for special people. Can you move back please; you're blocking the way." Fenn spotted Sue sitting on the end of one of the privileged benches, the small figure of Ben next to her. He produced his press card. "I just need to speak to someone in there--can I go through?" "I'm afraid not. You reporters have got your own section back there." "Just two minutes, that's all I need." "You'll have me shot." "Two minutes. I promise I'll come back then." The steward grunted. "Make it quick, mate.

I'll be watching you."
Fenn was through before the man could change his mind.
"Sue!"
She spun around and he saw relief flush across her face.
"Where've you been, Gerry? My God, I've been so worried."
She reached out for him and Fenn quickly kissed her cheek.
"Hi, LJ-NCIC Gerry," Ben greeted him cheerfully.
"Hi, kiddo. Good to see you." He tweaked the boy's nose as he squatted down by Sue. The rest of the bench was occupied by nuns from the convent and they looked down at him disapprovingly. He drew Sue close and kept his voice low.
"I want you to leave," he said. "Take Ben and get out."
Sue shook her head, consternation in her eyes.
"But why? What's wrong, Gerry?"
"I don't know, Sue. I can only tell you something bad is going to happen. Something nasty. I just don't want you two around when it does."
"You've got to tell me more than that."
His grip tightened on her arm. "All these things, Sue, these strange events, there's something evil behind them. Father Hagan's death, the fire in the village, these miracles.
Alice isn't what she seems. She caused Monsignor Delgard's death ..."
"There was an explosion ..."
"She caused that explosion."
"She's a child. She couldn't possibly--"
"Alice is more than just a child. Delgard knew; that's why he had to die."
"It's impossible, Gerry."
"For God's sake, all this is impossible!"
The nuns began to whisper among themselves, gesturing toward him. Several began to look around for a steward. He glanced at them and tried to keep his voice calm.
"Sue, please trust me."
"Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you ring?"
He shook his head. "I just didn't have time. I've been too busy trying to stop this thing."
"And I've been bloodv frantic! I've been so worried . . ."
"Yeah, I know, I know." His hand brushed her cheek.
"Nancy told me what had happened at

Barham. That

wasn't true, was it, Gerry? It couldn't have been."

"It was true. She saw something there--we both did.

It's all connected with the past; this whole business is the

result of something that happened centuries ago."

"How can I believe you? It ('ust doesn't make any sense.

You say something evil is happening, but look around you.

Can't you see how good these people are, how much they believe in Alice? AlThat the good she's done?"

He held both of her hands in his.

"We found an old

Latin manuscript in the church on the Stapley estate.

Delgard translated it and found the answer. I hat's why he

was killed, don't you see?"

"I don't see anything. Nothing you say makes sense."

"Then just trust me. Sue."

She raised her eyes slowly and looked deeply into his.

"Is there any reason why I should? Are you really that

trustworthy?"

He knew what she was referring to and became silent.

Then he said, "If you love me, Sue, if you really love me,

you'll do as I ask."

She jerked her head away angrily. "Why now? Why

have you left it so late?"

"I told you: for the last couple of days I've been running

around like a lunatic trying to get this whole thing stopped. I didn't get home till early this morning, and then I just slept and slept. And the dreams were clearer than ever."

"What dreams?" she asked wearily, wanting to believe in him again, wanting to forget his opportunism, his

unreliability, his infidelity, but telling herself she would be a fool to.

"The priests, Hagan and Delgard, spoke to me. I saw

them in my sleep. They warned me about this place."

"Oh, Gerry, can't you see you're deluding yourself?"

You've become so wrapped up in this thing that you don't know what you're doing, what you're saying."

"Okay, so I'm going nuts. Humor me."

"I can't leave ..."

"Just this once, Sue. Just do as I ask."

She studied him for long seconds, then grabbed Ben's

hand. "Come on, Ben, we're going home."

Her son looked up at her in surprise and

James Herbert - The Shrine

Fenn's head
slumped with relief. He kissed her
hands, and when he
lifted his head again, his eyes were sparkling with unshed
tears.
Fenn stood and pulled her up with him. It was at
that
very moment that a hush fell over the crowd. The
voices
became whispers, the whispers fading, the settling
of a
breeze. Fenn was listening intently.
Voices could be heard in the distance. Voices
singing in praise of God and the Virgin Mary. The
strangely haunting sound grew in strength as the
procession from the
village approached.
Fenn looked back at the oak and he closed his
eyes as
though in anguish. His lips moved in silent
prayer.
But the old "woman" may only be pretending to be
friendly. She was
really an evil witch.
"Hansel and Gretel," The Brothers Grimm
"okay CAM-LIKE-WAS' RA ONE., LET'S
GK. T a nice close up. Slow
zoom in on Alice. That's good. Keep it
slow. We'll cut to
Two in a moment for the overall disshot. Keep the
CU
coming. Two. Good, it's a good one of the girl--
what's
happening, One? Picture's breaking up. Oh,
for Christ's
sake, cut to Two. That's better, keep on
that. What's
happening. Camera One? Where's the interference coming
from? Okay, sort it out. Stay on two.
We'll cue Richard
in five. Camera Three, that's good on
Richard. Slow pull back
to show congregation in field as soon as he starts
speaking. I want a good shot of the altar and that
bloody
tree in the background. Okay,
Richardfourthree-two-Camera Three."
"As the procession approaches the Field, now
called by
many "The Field of the Holy Virgin," the
lights around
are dimmed. Soon, the procession will
enter this, what has
become, open-air temple, led by the Bishop of
Arundel,
the Right Reverend Bishop Caines, followed
by priests,
nuns, and of course, little Alice Pagett herself.
It seems
that thousands have joined this holy march, many from
the village of Banfield, while others have
journeyed from
far and wide to be here today. Not all have held

deeply
religious beliefs before; indeed, when I spoke
to many of
them earlier in the day, they told me (static) in
this small
Sussex vill--Banfield that has made--
realize a deeper
truth--"
"What's happening with sound out there. John,
we're losing Richard's voice. Keep talking,
Richard, we're having
problems, but still receiving."
"Perhaps, then, this vast gathering this evening is a
symbolic gesture of people's faith in a
world--turmoil (static)--(static) prevails--"
"Oh, God, we're losing picture now!"
"dis . . . in memory (static) priest who was
cruelly struck
down--Thursday by (static) explosion--the
perpetrators of
such--(static)--knows, but----"
"Jesus bloody Christ! Everything's gone!"
F'enn turned with the rest of the congregation as the
leaders
of the procession entered the field. Flashlights were
popping from all points, casting strobe effects
on the chanting
leaders. Even from that distance he recognized
Bi shop
Caines, who was flanked by robed priests on either
side.
The first candles were thick and high, held by young
altar
servers, their small flames flickering with the
breeze. The
singing grew louder and the people already in the field
joined in. Voices broke oft as Alice
entered and the worshipers
and the curious alike rose to catch a
glimpse of her.
Fenn stood with them trying to peer over their heads.
It
was no use: all he could see were the raised
candles and
banners carried by the marchers. Sue stood by his
side and
Ben clambered onto the bench for a better
view.
The emotions of the crowd seemed to swell like an
ocean tide as the singing grew louder and the four
lines of
marchers drew deeper into the field, the bobbing
candles a
dazzling display of warm light. Fenn scanned the
faces
around him: even in the darkness he could see their
eyes
shining, their lips smiling in some deep-felt
rapture. The
same expression was on Sue's face. He
touched her hand
and flinched as another tiny spark snapped at him.
Staring

James Herbert - The Shrine

at his fingers, he thought, The whole bloody field's alive. He shook her gently, this time touching only the cloth of her coat.

"Sue," he said quietly. "We've got to leave now."

She looked at him blankly, then turned away.

Ben stifled a yawn.

Fenn tugged at her arm once more.

"No, Gerry," she said without turning, "it's too wonderful."

The head of the procession had reached the centerpiece and Bishop Caines was mounting the steps, smiling down

at the invalids spread out on blankets and in wheel chairs

below. Alice Pagett followed him, her mother close behind,

hands clasped tight together, head bowed in prayer.

Voices all around rose in a crescendo of sound, the

hymn soaring into the sky as if to push back the low, brooding clouds. Fenn thought he heard the rumble of

distant thunder, but couldn't be certain. Bishop Caines

took his seat by the side of the altar and beckoned Alice

and her mother to sit next to him as priests and servers filed onto the platform. In the benches in

front of Fenn

began to fill and many of the faces were familiar to him.

Some were those cured by Alice in previous weeks, while

others were local dignitaries and clergymen. He watched

as Southworth took his place and saw the hotelier cast a

long sweeping look around the congregation; his smile seemed to be one of satisfaction rather than blissful worship.

A movement on Fenn's bench caught his attention: one

of the nuns had fainted and her companions were gently lifting her onto her seat. He felt Sue beside him sway and

he held her steady. Others here and there in the congregation

were silently collapsing, their neighbors catching them

before they could harm themselves.

Fenn drew in a breath. Hysteria was in the air like a

rampant germ hopping from person to person.

The hymn singing reached its height, the voices ecstatically

unified in the repetitious refrain. He felt strange:

there was a lightness in his head, an unsettling in his stomach. This time it was he who felt dizzy and he clutched

at Sue. She almost fell, but instead they both

James Herbert - The Shrine

sank to the
bench.

Ben knelt on the seat and put his arms around his
mother's shoulders, one outstretched hand brushing
Fenn's
cheek. Immediately, the dizziness left the
reporter; it was
as though the uncomfortable weakness had been discharged
into the boy. Yet there were no visible signs of
distress in
Ben.

The hymn came to its end and the sudden quiet was
almost stunning in its effect. The silence
was soon broken

as the congregation sat, but it returned once they
had settled.

There were no coughs, no whispers, no shuffling of
bodies.

Just a hushed, reverential quiet.

The young priest who was to take the service stepped
forward to the lectern with its array of microphones.

He

raised his arms toward the congregation, then made the
Sign of the Cross in the air.

"Peace be with you," he said, and the vast crowd
responded

as one. The priest spoke for a few moments of

Father Hagan and Monsignor Delgard,
dedicating the special

Mass to the two late priests, paying homage
to the

exemplary work they had carried out in the name of the
Holy Catholic Church. He was forced to stop
several times when the microphones whined and hummed, and
seemed relieved when the preliminaries had been
completed. He nodded toward the choir, which had taken
its position in the specially erected tiers, and a
fresh hymn began.

Candles all around the field were lit, creating a
myriad

star cluster around an effulgence that resembled the
sun.

In the village of Banfield, less than a
mile away from the

church of St. Joseph's, an old man stumbled
along the

curbside. It had been a long walk for him,
ten miles or

more, but he was determined to reach the shrine before
the service was over. Although walking had been his
sole

occupation for the past fifteen years--tramping the
quieter

roads of southern England, surviving on the
kindness of

others, embittered by the noncaring of yet others--
his feet

were sore and blistered, his breathing labored.

Brighton

was his base, for there were enough churches and charitable
organizations in the seaside town to keep his

belly fed

and his body warm on the coldest of

James Herbert - The Shrine

nights. Never too
well-fed, never too warm; enough to keep him
alive, though.
What had brought him to this level of existence was not
important--not to him, anyway. At that moment,
he was
what he was; dwelling on the past would not make
him or
his circumstances different. On the other hand,
dwelling
on the future might do so.
The belief that he was not completely irredeemable
had
come to him only that morning when the word had spread
along the reprobate grapevine, the efficient
word-of-mouth
communications system of his kind that never failed to
report "easy pickings." He had been told
of the little
miracle girl, of the service that night where
thousands
were expected to turn up, people of goodwill who would
not reject the entreaties of those less fortunate
than
themselves. But curiously, it was the
miracles of this child
that the old man was interested in, not the chance to beg
from others.
He had knocked on the door of a priest, a
man of God
who knew him, who had always shown kindness without
reprimand toward him. The priest had told him it
was
true, that there was a young girl in Banfield who
had
performed certain acts that could be described as
miracles,
and that tonight there was to be a candlelight procession
through the village. The old man had resolved that
he
would be there, that he would see this child for himself.
He knew, as any man who was dying
instinctively knew,
that his death was not far away, yet he did not want
the
miracle of further life. He craved
salvation. One last chance
to witness something that was beyond this mortal and
despicable world. A chance to believe once again, a
positive
sign that "atonement would not be in vain.
Like thousands of others who flocked to the shrine, he
sought the means of his own redemption, a physical
symbol
of the immaterial. A living saint who disproved
omnipotent
evil.
But would he get there in time to see her?
He leaned against a shop window, a hand resting against
the cold glass. The High Street of the
village was dimly
lit, but there was a beacon in the distance, a bright
light

James Herbert - The Shrine

that pierced the sky, striking out from a suffused glow
around its base. He knew that this was his first
glimpse of
the shrine, a brightness in the night that called him to
observe the greater goodness.
And as he leaned there against the window, gathering his
strength, a new gleam in his rheumy old eyes,
something
touched his soul and passed on. Something cold.
Something
that produced a shudder in his brittle bones.
Something
that made him sink to his knees, leaving him bowed.
Something whose destination was his own. Had been his
own.
His head sank to the pavement and he wept. It was
some time before he crept into a dark doorway and
curled
up into a fetal position. He closed his eyes
and waited.
The tall, bearded barman of The White Hart
blinked
glumly at his only customer. He sighed as he
leaned on the
bar. A bloody pint of mild and a packet of
pork rinds
would last the old trouper all night. I we
barmaids stood
idly chatting at the far end of the bar, enjoying the
quietness of the usually busy Sunday evening.
Still, the barman thought, the service can't go on all
night. They'll be piling in here in an hour or
so, desperate
for a drink, and he certainly couldn't complain about the
recent trade: his turnover had not just doubled--it
had
tripled! If he had had a bigger pub
it would have quadrupled!
The brewery could hardly refuse to put up the
money for an extension at the back now. What a
great little
miracle worker that kid was.
He wiped the bar for the eleventh time with a damp
cloth, then poured himself a bitter lemon.
Cheers, he
saluted the absent crowds. Don't stay away
too long.
Lifting the bar flap, he crossed the floor and
retrieved
two glasses left by earlier customers.
"Judy," he called to one of the barmaids,
placing the
glasses on the counter. Let the lazy cow do
something for
her money, he thought.. He turned and, hands in
pockets,
strolled to the door. Standing in the opening, one foot
jammed against the door, he surveyed the High
Street.
Empty. Not a blessed soul where, less than an
hour before,
it had been packed with marchers.
Banfield was like a

ghost town, nearly all its residents gone to the shrine. The village was empty without them, all right, he thought, then chuckled at his own irrefutable logic. The chuckle ceased and the smile froze as something cold passed by him. It was like standing in a chilly draft, except that it seemed to cling to his body, searching out hidden crevices, covering every part of him like cold water before being sucked away, journeying onwards to who-knew-what destination. 'I he lights in the pub behind him seemed to flicker momentarily, then gain their normal brightness. He looked down the road toward the church and saw the sudden breeze as a shadow creeping toward the light. The tall man shivered and quickly went back inside. He resisted the urge to lock the door behind him. To the north of St. Joseph's, little more than a mile away, a motorist kicked at the deflated rear tire of his Allegro. Nearly there and this had to happen, he complained bitterly to himself. "Is it flat?" a woman's voice asked from the passenger window. "Aye, it's a bloody flat. All the way from Manchester and we get a blowout now. The place must be just down t' road." "Well, you'd better just get crackin" then. Our Annie's fallin' asleep already." "Better that she is. It's been a long journey for her. I just hope it's worthwhile." "Our John traveled to Lourdes with cancer." "Yes, an a lot of bloody good it did 'im," the woman's husband muttered quietly. "What did you say, Larry?" "I said he didn't last long afterwards, did he?" "?" "gg"hat's not the point; he made the effort." Aye, and it finished 'im off a lot bloody dissooner, the man thought. "Bring the flashlight out, will yuh?" he said aloud. His wife rummaged around the glove compartment and found the torch. "What's wrong. Mummy," a voice came from the backseat.

"You just hush now, pet, and go back to sleep.
We've got a puncture and your father's going t' fix it."
"I'm thirsty."
"I know. We'll be there soon, never fear."
"Will I see Alice?"
was 'Course you will, pet. An' she'll sec you
and make you better."
"An' I won't need sticks no more?"
"That's right, pet. You'll be runnin' like
t' others."
Their daughter smiled and snuggled back down beneath
the blanket. She pulled Tina Marie's
plastic cheek close to her own and she was smiling as
her eyes closed.
The wife left the car, guiding the flashlight
toward her husband as he opened the trunk and reached inside
for the jack.
The errant wheel was off the ground when the light
beam began to fade.
"Hold bloody light steady," he told her.
"It's not me," she replied testily.
"Batteries must be going."
"Eh? They're fresh uns in."
"Bulb, then."
"Aye, "appen. Get a bit closer, will
yuh?"
She bent toward him and he searched for a wrench in the
car's tool kit.
Suddenly she dropped the torch.
"Aw, flamin' "eck!" he groaned.
Her hand clasped his shoulder. "Larry, did you
feel that? Larry? Larry!" She could
feel him trembling.
At last, he said, "Aye, I felt it. It
must have been the wind."
"No, it wasn't the wind, Larry. It went
straight through
me. Right through me hones."
His reply was slow in coming. "It's gone," he
said,
looking toward the glow in the sky just about a mile
away.
"What was it?"
"I don't know, lass. But it felt like someone
walking over me grave."
From the car came the whimpers of their daughter.
In the Riordan farmhouse, on the land adjoining
the field
in which the night-time service was taking place, a
dog
yelped and ran helplessly around the kitchen. At
the end
of each circuit, Bidy would hurl herself at the
door,
desperare to get out into the open. Her owners had
left
her to guard the place--"too many strange people
wander-ins;

James Herbert - The Shrine

around the area because of that blessed shrine"--while they themselves took part in the Mass--"better then going to the pictures"--and now the dog sensed the agitation from the cows in their stalls. Sensed and heard, for they were frantically kicking in an effort to break free, and their piteous bellowing was driving the dog into a frenzied fit.

Biddy scratched at the door, raking the paintwork with her claws, howling with the outside ululations, matching their pitch. Around the kitchen the dog ran, back to the door, jump, scratch, push, bark, yelp, howl, around the kitchen once more. Round and round, and round and-- 'I he commotion had stopped. Had stopped more suddenly then it had started.

The dog stood in the center of the darkened rggxggm, one ear cocked head to one side. She listened. There were no more sounds. She sniffed the air. I here were no strangers outside.

She began to whine.

Something was moving through the farmyard, quietly, stealthily, some-thing that had no smell, that made no sound, that had no shape. The dog's tail dropped and her legs bent, her back bowed. Biddy whimpered. She whined.

She shook. The dog crawled beneath the kitchen table.

And one eye watched the kitchen door, fearful of what was out there.

It crept through the night, unseen, intangible, a thing of no substance, which existed, but only in the deep corridors of the mind. Now it was drawn inward, focusing toward a center induced by a kindred power, slithering through the darkness like an eager reptile toward a helpless insect, guided by someone, something, that had transcended the natural.

It was sucked into the vortex to be absorbed and used.

But evil belongs to the individual and, as any one marching soldier can upset a platoon's rhythm, so individual evil

can disrupt the purpose of the whole.

"I did it" he said, reflecting. "When ladies used to come to me in dreams, I said, 'Pretty mother, pretty mother.'" Rut when at last

James Herbert - The Shrine

she really came, I shat her."
Peter Pan, . be. Barrio
the. THIRD HYMN WAS DRAWING to its close
and he
tucked his hands between his thighs so that those around
him would not see how much they trembled. His head
was bowed, lank, yellow hair falling across his
forehead,
curling inward and almost touching the tip of his nose.
He
stared into his lap and there was a shiny brightness to his
eyes that was not akin to the brightness in the eyes of other
worshippers. His vision was not focused on his own
body; it was focused on the future.
Pictures of his own
destiny flashed before him: he saw his name written
in
large, black headlines, his face, smiling,
flashed on screens
all over the world, his life, his motive,
discussed, dissected
and wondered at by knowledgeable persons, by eminent
persons, by . . . everybody!
He could hardly contain the shuddering expansion of his
inner self, the blinding whiteness that pushed outward
against his chest. The sensation left him so weak he
could
hardly breathe.
He had traveled down the night before, sleeping
rough
inside a bus shelter near the village, feeling
certain he
would freeze to death with the cold, only the thought of
what was to come sustaining him, giving him comfort. He
had hardly slept, his brief dozes
fitful and full of bad
images.
He had been dismayed at the size of the gathering
outside the church of St. [oseph's next
morning, thinking
he would be first there, wanting to find a prime
position
on the benches inside the field. To his further
dismay, no
one was allowed into the shrine that early; work was still
in progress to accommodate the expected
crowds, and entrance would not be permitted until early
evening. So he
had queued with the rest of them, joking with his fellow
pilgrims, playing the good guy, pretending
interest in
boring stories of their little lives, feigning
devotion to the
Church and all its works, secretly laughing at
these insignificant
fools who had no idea who they were standing
next to.
At last they were granted entry and he faced what
he
imagined might be the severest test. But
although bags and
containers of any kind were glanced into for security
purposes, no body searches were made; so the

James Herbert - The Shrine

object tucked
into his underpants and taped against his groin, and which
caused a semi-erection whenever he was conscious of
its
weight (which was most of the time), was not found or
even suspected. Even if they had asked him
to unbutton
his old gray overcoat, the shirt he wore
outside his trousers
would have covered any unnatural (or unseemly)
bulge
around his fly area.
Although it was hours before the benches were filled
and the procession started, he was not bored with the wait;
too many visions screamed into his mind for that.
Like everybody else, he craned his neck to see
the girl
when she arrived with the procession, and because he had
chosen a seat right on the center aisle, as near
to the
altar as possible, Alice passed within feet of
him. The urge
to do it there and then--no one could have stopped him--
was almost overwhelming, but he knew it would be
better,
more spectacular, to wait. He wanted them all
to see.
And now the third hymn was almost over. He had
watched her at the beginning of the service, had soon
found he could not study her small, enraptured
face for
too long; her goodness, her divinity, seemed
to spread
outward and it made him uncomfortable. The words of
the Mass were just a mumble in the back of his chaotic
thoughts, and although he stood when the congregation
stood, knelt when they knelt, sat when they
sat, he did it in automated fashion, a robot
response to the activity around him. And all the
while he kept his head bowed.
The singing suddenly began to fade, taking a short
while to die completely, for not everyone saw
Alice rise to
her feet and walk to the center of the platform at the
same
time.
He looked up, puzzled by the
interruption to the background
wall of noise, and he saw the little girl in the
middle of the stage, her face pointed upward, her
glazed
eyes looking at something no one else could see.
Behind
her was the altar and, behind that, the brilliantly
illuminated
and grotesquely twisted oak tree.
The field was quiet, all eyes on the small
figure in
white, breaths held in excited anticipation.
There was tear
also in their expectancy, for the unknown always
generates
such emotion.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Alice lowered her head and looked down at the crowd,
scanning the multitude of adoring, tearing faces. She smiled
and to most it was enigmatic.
In the distance, thunder rumbled.
She spread her arms outward and began to rise into the air.
He left the bench and nobody saw him unbutton his coat, lift his shirt, and reach into his trousers, for everyone was transfixed by the small figure in white rising above them.
He strode down the aisle to the altar, the German Luger, the Pistole '38, a relic of the last big war when half the world had gone mad with bloodlust, held down by his side, barrel pointed toward the churned earth.
When he was directly below the platform and just a few feet away from the girl in white who hovered at least eighteen inches in the air, and before anyone could realize what he wadds about to do, Wilkes raised the gun and fired point-blank into Alice's young body.
He kept firing until the fifth of the Luger's eight bullets jammed between chamber and magazine.
And it was only a moment before she opened her eyes, raised up the lid of the coffin, and sat up ulive again.
"Little Snow White," The Brothers Grimm it WAS A SCF. NF. FROM a nightmare, a sluggishly unfolding drama of horror.
Fenn saw but could not understand, Alice had walked to the center of the platform and the hymn had faltered, then died on the people's lips.
Her face had been beatific--even he, knowing what he did --had been enchanted. She had lless-than xggkcd skyward and then slowly down, scanning the crowd; and that was when he had shuddered. She had smiled. And it seemed that her eyes has found his. He saw her smile as a rictus grin, wide, malevolent, and somehow, greedy. It mocked him personally and sneered at the crowd generally.
Yet it was just a child's sweet smile.
The crowd was mesmerized, and to him, it was the fascination of a fear-paralyzed rabbit staring into the deadly eyes of a snake.
Yet it was just a child standing there.
He felt weak once more, his vitality drawn from

James Herbert - The Shrine

him

and those around him, drawn into this malignant thing standing in a blaze of light.

Yet she was just a child too young to know evil.

The lights had flickered, dimmed, and then

Alice was

moving up, rising above them in a slow but steady ascent,

her arms stretched out, as though beseeching their love.

Their trust.

The crowd moaned as if in rapture, and there were gasps and cries from different parts of the field.

Fenn felt

his throat constricting and dizziness invaded him once

more. It was difficult to breathe, difficult to keep on his

feet.

He was only vaguely conscious of the thin, blond person

striding down the aisle toward the altar and did not understand

when that person raised his arm and pointed something at the small figure floating above him.

He did not even hear the gunfire--at least, the four

sharp reports did not register in his brain--but he saw the

blood spurt from four points in Alice's chest, gushing out

in separate fountains to fall back onto the whiteness of her

dress, a crimson dye scattered on a field of snow.

There was shock, disbelief, and finally pain in her small

face, before she fell to the platform to lie in a crumpled

heap. The blood spread outward, finding the edge of the

platform, flowing over in two sickeningly plentiful streams.

There was no sound among the crowd. The pilgrims, the sightseers, the believers, the unbelievers,

all stood in

total uncomprehending silence.

Until thunder roared directly overhead, and pandemonium

erupted in the field.

Fenn caught Sue as she slumped against him.

The rush of noise was terrifying, a chaotic babble of

screams and shouts that soon became a wailing lamentation,

the anguish affecting groups, individuals, in different ways;

many--men as well as women--were reduced to hysterics,

while others merely wept quietly; some just stood in numbed

silence, too shocked to do or say anything; the anguish of

others quickly turned to rage, shouts of

vili fication against
the assassin passing from person to person, joining in
a
vehement chant for revenge. There were yet others
among
them who had not seen the brutal act and who pulled
at
their neighbors, demanding to be told what
had happened.
Ben was frightened and grabbed at his mother's limp
body. Fenn put a protective arm around him
while still
holding Sue upright.
Figures broke from the mass to rush at the
blond man
who had shot Alice Pagett and who still held the
German
pistol at his side. He went down under a
tumult of bodies
and screamed as he was flailed by fists and feet.
Sharp
fingernails raked his face, a lower eyelid was
pulled down
and torn, bones in the bridge of his nose were
crushed,
and he felt the crushed fragments pour from his
nostrils
with the blood. The gun was torn from his grasp
and the
fingers on that hand were caught awkwardly beneath
someone's weight. The snapping sound was lost in the
cries of the mob, but the sharpness of the pain could not
be lost to his own consciousness.
He shrieked as his limbs were pulled and joints were
stretched free of their sockets. His tears ran
into his own
blood as impossible, suffocating, weight pushed
against his
chest. Something was giving way there and he could not
quite reason what. "The bones in his chest slowly
caved in,
pressing against his heart and lungs, restricting the
pumping
organ and squeezing life-giving air from the
delicate
sacs. It slowly dawned on him that perhaps he had
made a
mistake.
Nearby, a young girl who had come to the shrine
to pay
homage to the little miracle worker for the gift she had
bestowed on her, stared at the still, bloodstained
bundle
before the altar. The girl's face suddenly
twitched. One
side of her mouth moved downward, grotesquely
twisting
into a gargoyle's grimace. An
eyelid flickered once, twice,
and then would not stop. Her arm jerked, then shuddered;
it began to move spasmodically. Then her leg
joined in the
unsightly and uncontrolled dance, the girl

James Herbert - The Shrine

screamed and
collapsed to the ground.
--As did the boy in another part of the field, who
had
come to the shrine in adoration of the child called Alice,
the living saint who had restored the use of his
legs. Their
strength was gone and he floundered between the benches,
calling out in frustration, afraid to be a
cripple once more--
--Elsewhere, a man's vision rapidly began
to fade, the
blaze of light in the middle of the field becoming
a hazy
cloud, the cataracts which the child had caused to clear
returning with a speed that was unnatural and
inexplicable--
just as their disappearance had been. He cupped his
hands
to his face and slowly sat down on a
bench, a low moaning
sound coming from him--
--While in a different part of the field a young
girl
found once more that sounds emitted from her throat
could not be formed into words and that her distressed
mother did not understand her when she asked what was
happening--
--And a boy in the crowd whose hands had began
to fill
with ugly verrucae could only wail and beat his
fists
against the bench in front--
--A bench where, farther along, a man felt his
face
exploding into open sores, his skin cracking like
parched
earth. He gasped, not just because the opening wounds
hurt, but because he knew he was becoming a freak
once
more, a man wearing a dog's muzzle of hideous
lacerations
and dripping ulcers.
From all over the field came such moans and
cries of
piteous despair, for there were others who fell to the
ground, others whose limbs became useless, others
whose
afflictions suddenly and cruelly returned
to dominate their
lives. They had thought, had prayed, that their
cures were
permanent, that Alice Pagett had granted them
a new and
lasting hope, a divine manifestation of God's
caring that
would not be erased with time. Now they were betrayed,
lost. Defeated.
From no longer felt weakened, and the dizziness
had left
him. His nerves were taut, tightened, so that his
actions
were swift, his senses aware. He huddled Sue

and Ben

close to him, protecting them from the confusion all around.

Sue began to revive and her legs took her own weight.

"Gerry?" she said, still dazed.

"It's okay. Sue," he replied, his head nestling hers. "I'm

here; so's Ben."

"Is she ... is she dead?"

He closed his eyes for a second. "I think so. She must be."

"Oh, Gerry, how could it happen?" She was sobbing.

"How could someone do that to her?"

Ben clutched at his mother, wanting to comfort her, upset but still not understanding everything that was happening. "Let's go home, Mummy. I don't like it here

anymore. Please let's go home."

Fenn looked over the sea of moving heads toward the

altar. "Christ," he said, "nobody's gone to her yet. They're

all too shocked." And he knew that they were all too

afraid, even her own mother, to approach the inert body.

Afraid, possibly, to discover that Alice really was dead.

"I've got to get up there," he said.

Sue's grip tightened on him. "No, Gerry. Let's just get

away from here. There's nothing we can do."

He looked down at her. "I've got to make sure . . ." He

could only shake his head. "out wait here with Hen; you'll be okay."

"Gerry, it's not safe. I can feel it's not safe."

"Sit here." He gently lowered her to the bench.

"Ben, keep hold of your mother; don't let go." He knelt beside

them both, oblivious to the chaos around them. "Stay here

and wait for me. (ust don't move from this spot."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he quickly kissed

her forehead and then was gone, climbing over benches, pushing his way through the disoriented crowd.

Fenn found himself in the clearing before the platform, the ground littered with beseeching invalids, a

battleground

after the war had passed. To his right was a mot) of shouting, tearing people, and he knew what lay

beneath

their stomping feet, sure that the man with the gun could no longer be alive. They had always been

impotent over

past publici ty-bl azed assassinations and assassinations attempts,

James Herbert - The Shrine

torced to contain their anger, their spite, against the perpetrators, frustrated in their grief, despising those who mocked and flaunted the very rules of civilization. But now the aggressor was within their reach, one of the devil's Legion lay beneath their feet; tor once, the people had the power to take revenge. He kept clear of them, making for the stairs at the side of the platform. A man, visibly distressed and wearing a steward's armband, made a halfhearted attempt to bar his way, but the reporter easily brushed him aside. Fenn was almost at the top of the steps when he stopped. Most of the altar servers were weeping; some were on their knees praying, their faces wet with tears, while others could only rock their bodies to and fro, heads buried in their hands. The priest who had been conducting the service, ashen-faced, his lips moving in silent prayer, supported Molly Pagett; she was obviously in a state of extreme shock, for her eyes were wide, her mouth open, and her movements stiff. Bishop Caines, in all his Finery, had the same unsteady awkwardness, the blood drained from his face. Fenn shared their grief and wondered if he had l ggeen wrong about her. It was impossible to believe that evil could exist in that tiny, prone body, in a child that had brought so much happiness and renewed faith. He climbed another step and the lights--even the candles--began to dim. He fell to one knee, a hand dropping to the platform to steady himself. Giddiness struck him once again and he fought against nausea. He was faintly conscious of the lightning flash, followed by rolling thunder. He shook his head and looked toward the group on the stage. Bishop Games, the priest, and others around them were sinking to their knees. Only Molly Pagett stood transfixed, one hand outstretched toward the bloodied bundle that had been her daughter. The bundle that was beginning to stir, beHinni nu to sit up. The daughter who had been shot four times and wlio was rising slowly to her feet. The daughter whose face no longer resembled nny earthly

James Herbert - The Shrine

child's, who looked around with malevolent intent and smiled. And grinned. And chuckled.

We spelled our loves until close of day.

I wished her ifood-ni caret ht and walked

away,

But she put out a tongue that was Innif

and red

And swallowed me down like a crumb of bread.

"The Two Witches," Robert Graves

wereby "F. ns-l. umpi -di sD AGAINST "I

HE STF. PS, one elbow supporting

his upper body, a hand still on the platform itself.

He

wanted to run; if not to run, then at least

to slither down

the steps and crawl away from this monstrosity that

stood

in the center of the sanctified stage. But there was little

strength in him. He could hardly move. He could

only

watch.

Her head was turning in his direction and every nerve in

his body tensed; it seemed as though a deeply

cold shock

were running through him, paralyzing his muscles,

scraping

the inside of his skin, working its way into his

bloodstream

so that even his life's fluid was almost frozen,

moving slowly, nearly stopping. He tried

to draw in breath,

but his lungs would hardly stretch, would hardly

expand

to take in air.

Her eyes found him. But there were no eyes, just

deep,

black holes. Her flesh was burned, charred,

her body

misshapen. Her head was at a strange angle,

almost resting

against one shoulder, and her neck was scarred, a

tight

restricting band of indented flesh cutting across her

windpipe.

Thick oozing blood still poured from the wounds in her

body and the child's dress was no longer white: it was

a

red, blood-smearred rag. And then the hideous

doll-like

figure was smoldering, curls of smoke rising from

the cloth

and flesh. Her face began to blister, the skin

began to tear.

Her skin turned black.

And she was Alice once again.

Confused, lost, a small child who had

experienced death's

advent and could not understand why she did not lie

dying.

"Alice, Alice!"

The girl turned, her eyes wide, afraid,

to face her

mother.

"Oh, God," Fenn moaned softly as he saw her features change once more. Her voice was low, rasping. "Rosemund." Molly Pagett, who had found strength to move toward her daughter, stopped and her mouth opened in a scream that tried to deny the sudden perception. "No, no!" Molly fell, yet her eyes would not leave the little figure standing before her. "No!" she screamed. "I'm not Rosemund! Not her!"

The steps on which Fenn lay seemed to reverberate with the thunderclap, but the trembling did not stop. He clung to the wooden stairs as they shook, the agitation becoming more jarring, more violent. An explosion to his left as a floodlight popped, sparks leaping outward like dragon's breath. A fluctuation of light as other lamps dimmed, became bright, exploded. Cries of panic from the crowd as an earth tremor ran beneath their feet. The ruffling of his hair and clothes as a wind swept across the platform, bending the candle flames before extinguishing them. A crash as the crucifix on the altar fell to the carpeted boards. Sue and Ben huddled together as panic-stricken people rushed by. The nuns, with whom they had shared the bench, were filing into the center aisle, the vibrations from the ground causing them to lurch from side to side. They held on to each other as though they were a blind group being led to safety. Others of the crowd were clambering across the benches, shoving their way through fellow worshippers who were too shocked to move, or who could not flee fast enough. Those who had brought along invalid relatives or friends struggled with them through the thronging mass, desperately trying to keep up with the human tide, falling with their charges when the merciless crush became too much, pleading for help, protecting their sick with their own bodies, disappearing under a welter of thrashing arms and legs.

The bench on which Sue and Ben clung to each other was toppled over and they found themselves on the shuddering ground, the narrow crevasse between fallen bench and the one behind affording them some protection against

James Herbert - The Shrine

the frenzied mob. Sue pulled the boy close,
a hand against
his cheek, an arm around his shoulders, while he
closed his
eyes against the terror and tried to shut out
the noise, the
screams, the cries, the low rumbling that came from
underground.
Television and film cameramen were leaping from their
perches into the throng, their machines and the very platforms
they were mounted on live with dangerous power,
the current running through the technicians"
bodies in
swift waves, not strong enough to kill or maim, but
enough
to shock their systems rigid. Photographers,
many who
had steadfastly continued to shoot the bizarre scene
on the
central platform despite the panic around them,
were forced
to drop their instruments as the metal casing scorched
their fingers.
The congregation which had come to worship,
to idolize,
to witness, fled toward the field's three exits,
converging
on these points to form their own human blockade.
Many
were squashed against the tall locked
gates that had been
erected at one side of the field, a wide
entrance meant for
lorries bringing in construction materials and film
equipment,
before the heavy lock gave way under the strain. As
they burst open, those people pressed against them fell and
others fell on top, and still more fell onto the
scrambling
heap.
Police at the central entrance gate tried
to control the
fleeing mobs, but were swept away with them. Children
were held high by their parents and many suddenly felt
themselves adrift on moving waves of heads and
shoulders.
The less fortunate slipped into the smallest
openings to be
drowned in the pulverizing human current. Those
who
managed to escape the field, bruised, battered
and almost
demented, fled into the road, many running toward the
lights of the village, others just fleeing in all
directions,
into the darkness of opposite fields, along the
road heading
toward open country, dragging helpless companions
with
them, thanking God that they were safely away from the
dreadful place, that ground they had thought to be
hallowed,
sacred. And they thanked God that the earth no

longer
shook beneath them.
The press entrance was too narrow to take the
deluge; it
was totally blocked. The pile of crushed bodies
grew higher
as more and more people tried to scramble over and became
entangled themselves in the mass of writhing bodies.
Others were lacerated as they attempted to force
themselves
through the tough bramble hedges surrounding the field,
the natural barrier acting as hundreds of
barbed-wire
coils
Those who had been outside the shrine throughout the
service--the stallholders, the police, the
pilgrims and sightseers
who had arrived too late to be allowed entry
into the
already overcrowded compound--could only stare aghast.
They had heard the rumbling thunder overhead and had
glanced anxiously at the troubled clouds, somehow
aware
that the atmosphere had changed, that there was danger
close by. They could not explain the feeling and had
looked at one another with uncertainty; something had
seemed to pass through them, a frigid coldness, a
nerve-tingling
icyness, and their apprehension became an overt
fear. Many of the stallholders had begun to pack
away
their goods, all good-natured bantering between them
gone.
Disappointed worshippers and tourists suddenly
felt relieved
that they had not gained access; they began
to hurry
back to their vehicles, not sure of their feelings,
but wanting
to be away from this place. Their anxiety increased
when the engines of their cars, vans, and minibuses
whined
and refused to start. The police and officials
outside the
grounds were alarmed and a uniformed sergeant tried to
radio through to his chief inspector who was inside
the
field keeping an eye on proceedings. The
sergeant received
only static on the handset.
Despite their concern, nothing untoward had
occurred
until the third hymn was drawing to a close.
There had
been a long silence, then four unmistakable
gunshots had
rung out, followed by pandemonium. Even though they
had heard the clamor from within, they did not
realize the
extent of the panic until the congregation had come
pouring
out, sweeping over the uniformed men who stood in
their way.

James Herbert - The Shrine

But not everyone inside had tried to escape.
Certain individuals fell to their knees and clasped their hands together in prayer, their eyes raised upward to the turbulent skies; some were collected in groups, quavery voices raised in hymn, afraid but stalwart; others cowered on the shaking ground, clutching grass and mud as though afraid they would slide off the face of the earth. And yet others lay there never to move again, life pressed from them by trampling feet.
Paula was pulling her gibbering mother to her feet, for they had both fallen in the initial rush.
Bewildered, she looked around; everything was in gloom, confused, chaotic.
She could hear singing above the cries for help, but it was faraway, remote. Brittle, claw-like fingers scratched at her throat and her mother's fear-struck, tremulous pleading filtered through to her. She pulled the feeble hands away and tried to see more clearly.
The only light came from the altar, the bright beacon still shining high into the sky, lighting the misshapen tree whose branches quivered and oscillated as though it were a living creature. There were silhouettes in front of the light, a black drama acted out on the stage. She understood, even in her confused state, that the fear stemmed from that centerpiece: the people were not just running because the ground shook beneath them, but because they were repelled by the abhorrent thing that stood before the altar and had looked at each one of them personally and mockingly invaded the intimacy of their very souls. It had scorned and reviled each man, woman, and child, and had known each one's cruelty, every sin and iniquitous desire they held. It knew them and made them recognize themselves.
Paula put her arms around the frail shoulders of her mother and led her unsteadily along the row toward the center aisle. They staggered and nearly went down several times as the ground lurched; it was exhausting, dragging her mother along, pushing her way through those who had become paralyzed with terror, fighting off others who were desperate to get by. They made it to the end

James Herbert - The Shrine

of the
bench and paused, gathering strength to join the
mainstream
of struggling people.
Somebody collapsed against them and they fell,
rolling
over the bench behind to crash into soft earth. Paula
scrabbled onto hands and knees, feeling for her
mother, a
moving jungle of legs passing within inches of her
face.
She touched her mother's body and tugged at it, but it
did
not move. Her fluttering hands moved along the
shape
toward her mother's face: they found it and the
mouth was
gaping open, the eyes closed.
"Mother!" she screamed, and the tremoring earth became
still. The surrounding cries of terror quietened with
the stillness of the earth. People stopped and looked around.
Whimpers came from everywhere, but they were soft, the
moans of animals after a harsh beating. Even the
hymn
singing had stopped. Even the praying.
On the altar, something burned.
Paula knew instinctively that her mother was dead,
even
though she pushed a hand beneath the old woman's coat
to
feel her chest. The heart was as still as the air around
them. She felt no grief, only a numbness.
And in a way,
a release.
But the numbness dissipated when she saw Rodney
Tucker
collapsed against a bench nearby. Hatred seethed
within
her, a fury that quickly devoured the numbness and
sent
emotion soaring through her.
And then, just as an uneasy calmness began
to settle
over everyone, the earth opened.
* * *
George Southworth had fled toward the church
wall, all
dignity shed, naked terror revealed.
Everything had gone so well, his dreams easily
within
his grasp. The shrine--hidds project--had
become a huge
success, a fantastic money-spinner. He, and
others in the
area, those with the foresight to invest, to deal themselves
in at the very beginning, were about to see their shrewd
business acumen rewarded. Indeed, the rewards
had already
been made apparent; now they could only increase.
The village of Banfield was no longer dying;
it flourished
and would continue to do so, just as had the French
village

James Herbert - The Shrine

of Lourdes, now a bustling town, a thriving
community
that was known worldwide.
But she, that thing, that bl less-than xggdi cd
monster who had
impossibly risen from the dead, had looked at
him, just
him, and seen the greed in his heart. And she had
laughed
at it, and had welcomed it, for it was part of the evil
that
gave her existence.
He was running even before the earth had begun to
tremble. Those around him were too blind to see, too
horror-struck to realize the meaning of this
unholy resurrection.
He knew, but did not understand how he knew,
that this creature was the manifestation of their own
evil,
that she existed on the power she drew from their own
blackened souls. The awareness had struck him because
she willed it so. That instigation was this creature's
torment:
the realisation of one's own infinite vileness. I
he guilt that
the Church taught all men to suffer was founded on
actuality: the culpability was real because the
wickedness
had always been there in each and every person. Even in
the innocent, the children. Children like Alice.
He brushed by those who could only gaze up at the
altar
and he fought the weakness and dizziness that assailed
him, knowing that catastrophe was to follow this new,
obscene miracle.
Vaguely, somewhere in the far distance, he heard the
hunched thing speak, one word, perhaps a name, and the
echo in his mind was drowned by thunder, a sound dis
s loud, so shattering, so near, it seemed to rip
into his heart.

But he was still moving, staggering among the invalids
stretched out on the ground.
"I hen there were others fleeing with him, screams
breaking
loose from terrified souls, entreaties from those
too
crippled to move. A hand grabbed at his leg and
he looked
down to see a wasted, skeletal man wrapped in
a heavy red
blanket, begging him with wide, frightened eyes
to carry
him away from the disorder. He knocked the yellow,
withered hand away and staggered onward, the ground
vibrating beneath him, the low rumble seeming to rise
up
through the soles of his feet to shake him like a rag
doll.
It was an eternity before he reached the low wall
surrounding
the church grounds, and the oscillation had grown
more violent. I here were others with him, those who

James Herbert - The Shrine

realized the exits would be blocked, and they, too,
climbed the wall, leaping into the graveyard beyond.
He fell heavily and lay panting in the rough
grass, hands
clenched into the earth. He was kicked as others
scrambled
over and a blow caught him on the temple, sending
him
reeling. Southworth pushed himself back, rolling
close to
the wall and lying there gasping for breath,
cautiously
waiting like a dislodged jockey under a jump.
High-heeled boots scraped off his shoulder and
he vaguely
recognized the American journalist who had
been at the
convent when Alice's stomach had refused the
Communion
wafer. He called after her fleeing figure,
needing
help, too dazed to move, but she was gone,
disappearing
between the gravestones.
He had no record of time, no knowledge of how long
he
lay there, for his senses were jumbled, both fear and the
knock he had received combining to confuse. He
became
aware that the ground was no longer trembling and that a
quietness had descended. He wiped a palm
across his face
and found it came away wet; he hadn't realized
he had
been weeping.
Southworth groaned as the pandemonium broke
loose
again. The tearing, wrenching sound felt as if the very
earth was erupting. Everything shook: the trees, the
ground,
the gravestones. Lush, fresh soil trickled in
rivulets down
the tiny pyramid mounds. As he watched,
a gray slab no
more than eight feet away tilted, then fell.
The stone lids
on the tombs reverberated; one was jolted in quick
shuddering
movements so that it slid from its perch, breaking
into fragments when it landed, leaving the tomb gaping
open.
He had to reach the church. There he would find
sanctuary
from this bedlam. He tried to rise, but the quaking of
the earth would not allow it; he staggered forward bent,
sometimes on all fours like an animal, sometimes
flat on
the ground propelling himself with arms and legs.
Figures around him stumbled through the graveyard,
falling against the headstones, leaning on trembling
tombs
for support.
Occasionally, the rolling clouds allowed a

James Herbert - The Shrine

glimpse of
moonlight, its brightness sparing and soon
gone.
A mound of earth near Southworth moved and he
stared
spellbound, telling himself it was the earth tremors
causing
the disturbance to the grave. But the soil was being
pushed
upward, from within, as though something beneath it
wanted to breathe the air of the living once more.
More shifting of soil nearby. An urn containing
fresh
flowers tipped over. Earth beneath it began
to bulge,
began to break.
A trickle of soil touched his outstretched fingers
and he
pulled his hand away, tucking it beneath his chest. He
saw
the small grave nearby, a child's grave--or
perhaps a dwarfs.
A tiny hillock was forming, rising from the flatness
around
it, and before the moonlight was swallowed by the heavy,
thunderous clouds again, little white things pushed through
the soil. Little white things that could have
been worms.
Worms that were stiffened, upright. Five of them.
Joined
by five more.
Southworth screamed and staggered to his feet. He
ran,
stumbled, crawled, to the door of St.
Joseph's, aware of
the moving shapes in the ground around him.
He slammed into the old wood, whimpering, his
legs
drenched and stained with his own excrement, his eyes
blurred by tears. He scratched at the wood as
if to claw his
way through, scrabbled for the metal ring at waist
level,
twisted it, once, twice, pushed the door open,
and stum-
bled inside. He slammed it shut and stood there
in the
dark church, his back against the door, his chest
heaving,
gasping for breath.
Until he froze, his lungs half-filled.
And listened to the scratching against the wood
outside.
Where have the dead if one? Where do they live now?
Not in the grave, they say, Then where now?
"Grave by a Holm-oak," Stevie Smith
ff. nn RAISED HIS HEAD FROM the platform's
surface and
tried to take in a deep breath. The air was
fetid, though,
full of corruption and the stink of burning; he
choked, his
stomach heaving in short gut-wrenching spasms.

James Herbert - The Shrine

He was vaguely aware of the turmoil below, the
panic-stricken
people staggering toward the exits, earth tremors
causing many to fall to the ground where they lay and
were trampled. But it was dark out there and virtually
impossible to make out more than a confused melee of
struggling bodies; it was the screams and piteous
wails that
revealed the true horror.
Somewhere in the channels of his fuddled mind, reason
told him he had to get away, that he had to go
back and
find Sue and Ben and lead them away from the
danger, for
this abhorrence meant to destroy, to devastate.
He had no
strength; his muscles felt sluggish even though his
nerves
were tautly stretched. He wanted to look away
from the
smoldering, bloody monstrosity, but the vision
held his
gaze, held his debilitated body, held him
there as if chains
restrained any action.
He heard her speak and there were other voices
inside
his head that told him he must resist her power.
Her
strength was his strength, was the strength of all those
present, was accumulative potency drawn from the
evil of
others, the negative force torn from the
positive, creating
an imbalance over them all. But resist.
Resist! [he voices
repeated the word and they were the same voices and the
same words as in his dreams. EITHER-NOR could only
exist through
the kinetic energy of those living. Resist her!
She could not
govern those who opposed.
Was it mere self-delusion that the voices in his
mind and
dreams were those of the two dead priests?
Fenn moaned and he tried to resist, but the effort
was
too much. He could not even look away from the
disfigured
creature. In the church at Barham he had run
from
his nightmares, refusing to confront them, denying their
reality; now he had no option in the confrontation.
His
will was too weak to leave.
Every person on the stage around the altar was in a
state of near collapse. Bishop Caines was on
his knees, one hand against the flooring, the other waving
feebly in the air in
an uncoordinated movement that vaguely
resembled the
Sign of the Cross. His lips moved
ceaselessly, and spittle

drooled from them to glisten against his chin.
The words
were almost inaudible, but they were clear in Fenn's
mind:
"dis . . . Holy I caret ord, Almighty
Father, Everlasting God and
Father of our Eord Jesus Christ.
"Who once and for all consigned that fallen tyrant
"
The priest who had been conducting the service lay
prostrate on the floor, his arms outstretched as
if in
supplication. He was motionless and Fenn could see
his
eyes were rolled back into his head, only
whiteness showing;
the priest's mouth was open but there was no indication
that he was breathing.
"dis . . . to the Hames of Hell.
"Who sent your only begotten Son into the world to
crush that roaring lion; hasten to our call . . ."
Some of the altar servers were crouched over, their
knees drawn up, foreheads pressed against the
rich carpet
of the centerpiece, hands tucked around their heads as
if to
shut away the evil that had manifested itself; others
swayed
as they knelt, white, draining horror in their
expressions,
but eyes riveted on the small, unclean
figure.
"dis . . . for help and snatch from ruination and from the
clutches of the noonday Devil this human being
made in
Your image . . ."
Only Molly Pagett stood.
Yet even she was sinking, her arm still raised toward
her
daughter.
"Aliiiiicccc!" she moaned.
And the malevolent voice hissed back, "Your
daughter is
in death, sweet Rosemund. She, our
devil's spawn, is
between this place and the underworld, her service to me
almost complete. None can save her. Nor save
you." The
scarred, bent creature turned her head toward the
blackness.
"Nor those who slew me and denied my
right."
"dis . . . and likeness.
"Strike terror. Lord, into the beast now laying
waste
Your vineyard. Let Your mighty . . ."
"Noooooo!" Molly Pagett stumbled forward,
sinking to
the floor, moving toward the smoldering thing, both
hands
reaching out.
And the creature who was Alice, who was Eignor,
laughed,

James Herbert - The Shrine

and Fenn saw a shape hanging from a lower branch
of the
tree, and it was burning and twisting, and its neck was
stretched, its feet twitching and turning black,
and substance
was dripping from its body to fall steaming onto the
altar below, and its head was aflame and its flesh
burnt,
and as it turned it was Alice
"dis . . . hand cast him out, so he . . . he . . . she
. . . may
no longer hold captive this person . . ."
With a screech of sheer despair,
Molly Pagett lunged
forward and touched the charred and rotted body of
Ei nor,
then screamed in pain as rivulets of fire ran
along her
fingers, along her arms, engulfing her head and
shoulders.
There was a silence. A silence that was as terrifying
as
the clamor preceding it.
Bi shop Cai nes became quiet.
Molly Pagett blazed but did not move.
Fenn felt his senses beginning to fade.
And the image-corpse of the sixteenth-century nun
chuckl ed
as thunder suddenly roared and the field began to open.
* * *
Paula let go of her mother's dead body.
The deep rumbling noise reverberated in her
head as the
earth wrenched itself apart, the cacophony of screams
and
shouts beginning anew. She watched mesmerized as
a
gaping wound appeared in the soil; it
wi dened, ran jagged
along the center aisle, sending the petrified
crowd clambering
back into the rows of benches.
The ground yawned open and Paula saw the
blackness
down there, so deep, bottomless, an infinity of
darkness.
Yet, as moonlight fought its way through the massed
clouds and cast its glow into the chasm, she saw
movement,
hands reaching upward, limbs clinging to the soft, rent
earth. Shapes climbing from the depths, figures
that were
twisted, that moaned and stared openmouthed at the sky
above, tormented souls that yearned for the world above.
Paula closed her eyes, telling herself it
wouldn't be true,
that this was not really happening. She opened them again
and saw it was true, it was happening.
There were figures on the edge of the opening chasm,
backing away, pushing each other to keep clear of the
widening gap. Even in her own terror, Paula
recogni zed
two of them.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Tucker was struggling away from the pit, hindered by his wife, who had slipped, one leg over the edge, disappearing into the blackness. She scrabbled at his clothes, desperately trying to cling to him, but he pulled her hands away, afraid she would take him with her, knowing he could not drag her weight clear. She screamed at him, imploring him to save her, but he shouted back at her, shrieked for her to let go, slapped at her face, prised at her fingers. She held on with one hand, the other grabbing at the soil beneath her, one knee on the very lip of the chasm. The earth crumbled beneath her heavy body and the material of his coat tore as she fell screaming. Tucker stumbled back, then righted himself. He stood with hands against his thighs, struggling to recover his strength, soon realizing he had to keep moving back, that the opening was still widening. He turned just as Paula rushed at him. Hatred drove her forward, loathing for a fat bastard who had betrayed her, used her, abused her body, and lied, lied, lied right-brace Beneath the ground was where he belonged, to wriggle and squirm with the slugs and worms and underground creatures that he was akin to. She slammed into him and he caught her. But her impetus was too forceful: he could not keep his balance. He toppled backward and clutched at her, taking her with him. Together, locked in screaming embrace, they plunged. Southworth ran from the door. He touched every pew with his left hand as he passed, like a child touching every spoke in a railing, an action that had no logic, panic its prompter. He reached the low rail in front of the altar and slumped against it, whining against the solitude of the church, afraid of the frozen corpses outside seeking entry. The church began to vibrate. Statues around its walls moved, shifted by the tremor. The rail he clung to became impossible to grip. The cracking of ancient stone rang out like a report from a cannon, jerking his head in the direction of the sound. He watched in fascinated horror as the

James Herbert - The Shrine

jagged tine ripped across a wall. More
ear-splitting sounds
and more lines joining the first. Now from the other side
of the church. Now from the roof.
Pieces of masonry began to clatter onto the
stone floor.
Powdered concrete descended as white dust, and the
dim
lights of the church began to falter, flickering as
if candlelight
caught by the wind. On--off--on--off. Then, just
very low.
His hands were at his mouth, stilling the cries that
nobody would have heard over the tearing of old stone.
Behind him, candlesticks toppled from the altar; the
tabernacle
door swung open, revealing the white silk
emptiness
inside; the huge stained-glass window, donated
to St.
Joseph's by a sixteenth-century nobleman
flew inward,
sending shards of colored glass spearing through the
air.
He gasped as several pieces struck his head,
scything
through his hair and scalp, leaving the fine cuts that
quickly
oozed with blood. He was fortunate that the rail
he clung
to protected most of his face and neck.
The turbulence became more intense, the cracking and
rumbling sounds deafening. A long, jagged line
appeared in
the stone floor, running beneath the pews and across the
aisle. A gap began to open, a scission so
black it seemed
painted. Pews shifted, fell against one another
as the cleft
became a fissure, the fissure a wide
split.
The knuckles of his hands began to bleed as he
bit hard;
he watched slime-covered fingers appear over the
edge of
the hole. He bit down until his teeth were
grinding against
bare bone.
Hands, then arms, filthy with earth and mold
appeared.
Small black things scuttled out, disappearing
into darker
corners; something long slithered across the floor and
curled
itself around the base of a statue. More fingers
slid over
the edge, more arms reached into the air. More hands and
naked, death-discolored shoulders began to appear.
The door at the far end of the church began
to splinter,
pressure from the breaking stone around it forcing it from
the frame. It burst open and the dead
creatures entered.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Sue felt strangely calm.

"What's happening. Mummy? Why are all the people screaming?"

She held Ben tightlv, one hand against the back of his

neck, his head tucked against her chest.

"It's all right," she soothed, stroking his hair.

"Don't be frightened."

He pushed his head away from her, looking around to see what was going on. "I'm not afraid," he said seriously,

eyes widening at the spectacle.

Someone hurtled over them, tripping on their recumbent

bodies. The figure scabbled to his or her feet--there

was no way of telling whether it was man or woman in the

poor light--and rushed on.

Ben sat up again. "I can see Uncle Gerry," he said,

pointing toward the altar.

Sue pushed herself up, using the overturned bench next

to her for support. The ground was still trembling, although

not quite as violently as before, and the rumbling sound was now deep down as if in the bowels of the earth.

For some reason people were fleeing from the center aisle, but it was impossible to see why. She followed

Ben's pointing finger and gasped when she saw the scene on the altar.

There were bodies dressed in the robes of the Mass littered all over the platform. She recognized the portly

figure of Bishop Caines, his sparse, gray hair flat against

his forehead, dampened with perspiration; his hand waved uselessly in the air. Not more than two yards from him

something was bright with flame. It was a figure, a kneeling

figure that did not move, nor squirm, in its agony.

Only the head, arms and shoulders were burning, the

hands outstretched toward someone who stood just beyond the light thrown from the one remaining lamp. It was just a small black silhouette, a child's figure, standing before

the gruesome display, watching, perfectly still, smoke eddies

from burst lights swirling around the altar. And dominating

everything, towering over the shrine, was the oak tree, its stout lower branches twisted downward like arms

about to scoop up the fallen bodies.

She saw Fenn lying on the steps of the platform.

James Herbert - The Shrine

He looked so helpless and afraid.
She stood, bringing Ben up with her.
"Where are we going?" he asked.
"Away from here," she replied. "But we have to get
Uncle Gerry first."
"Sure!" he shouted, and scampered over the bench.
At once. Sue felt nauseous and dizzy.
Her knees began
to sag.
"Ben!" she cried out, and he was back with her,
arms
wrapped around her waist, little face peering
anxiously up
at her.
The dizziness vanished. She swallowed and the
sickness
was gone. Sue looked curiously down at her
son.
She bent close. "Don't leave me, Ben.
Don't let go of
me."
He took her hand and together they climbed over the
benches toward the altar.
Sue forced herself to ignore the pitiful cries for
help
coming from the invalids scattered on the stretch of
ground
between the front benches and the altarpiece, knowing she
could not go to their aid, that she had to reach Fenn, then
perhaps together they could carry just one or two away
from there. She clutched Ben's hand tightly, not
understanding
why her strength, her calmness derived from
him, just aware that it was so.
She tried not to look at the burning figure and
saw that
Ben had become fascinated by it. She pulled his
head
against her hip, a hand covering his face to shield
him
from the sight, but he pulled her fingers open and
peeped
between them.
They reached the foot of the steps and began to climb.
"Gerry?" She was beside him, peering anxiously
into his
face. He blinked his eyes, seeming not
to recognize her at
first.
"Sue," he said softly, and she breathed a sigh
of relief.
Fenn suddenly grabbed her arm. "Sue, you've
got to get
away from here! Now, right away! Where's Ben?"
"It's all right. He's here. Come on, you're
coming with
us."
His head sank against the step. "No, I can't
move. I'm
too weak. You've got to go without me."
She pulled her son up the steps.
"Touch him, Gerry.
Hold his hand," she urged.

James Herbert - The Shrine

Fenn looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Just get away, Sue. Just go!"
She put her son's hand into his and Fenn looked from her to the boy, then down at their joined hands. His sapped vitality began to return.
Shrieks of agony made all three look toward the altar.
Molly Pagett was slowly rising from her knees, beating at her enflamed hair with hands that were also alight. The sound of her screams struck into them, chilling them. "Oh, God, I've got to help her." Fenn tore off his coat and climbed the rest of the steps onto the platform. He stumbled forward, coat held before him, ready to be thrown over the burning woman's head and shoulders. But Molly Pagett was beyond help. With one last piercing scream she lunged at the dark figure standing just beyond the light. The figure did not appear to move, yet the burning woman's arms did not strike it. Molly plunged off the platform, falling into the darkness to lay writhing in the field below, a fiery rag, the agonized shrieks slowly becoming weak, fading, stopping abruptly when her life was spent. Fenn groaned and slumped to the floor, rocking track on his heels, his eyes closed, coat held uselessly in his lap. The small figure stepped forward into the arena of light and stood before the altar, looking up at the tree. Then it turned its gaze on Fenn. Lightning flashed, freezing the shrine, the field, the church in the distance, in its silvery light. Fenn, whose eyes had opened, felt he was not part of the scene, hovering somewhere above, viewing from a great height and having no involvement. The jostling, tearing worshippers, the sick left behind, arms upraised beseechingly; the huge black abyss from which crawling things emerged; the church, its tower beginning to crumble, the opening graves; the shrine, the stumped bodies before the altar, the fallen crucifix, the hideous, misshapen tree. The creature who watched him. The lightning flash expired, a two-second exposure that

ingrained an indelible monochrome vision of
hell's chaos
on Fenn's mind.
Thunder boomed, a deafening sound that overwhelmed
all others and he clapped his hands to his ears in
reflex.
Ben rugged at his mother and said, "There's blood
all
over Alice's dress. Mummy."
Fenn stared back into Elinor's knowing
eyes and found
himself sinking into their softness, a peaceful vortex that
drew him inward to be exquisitely drowned in
their depths.
He was aware of her delicately beautiful
features, the
whiteness of her skin, the moist, natural redness
of her
lips, even though he looked only into her eyes.
He sensed
the pleasing suppleness other body, its lithencss,
its vitality,
and the firmness of young breasts which the nun's simple
costume could not disguise.
Finner smiled and his head reeled.
When she spoke, he barely understood her words,
so
strange was her accent and so low, rasping, was her
voice.
"Witness my vengeance," she said. "And be,
thysel f,
part."
And her eyes were no longer soft and brown, but were
darkly hollow, deep pits that held him
fascinated, Her skin
was no longer soft and white, but was charred and torn,
the
lips burned away to reveal stumps of blackened
teeth and
weeping gums. Her body was no longer supple
and straight,
but was twisted, bent, a warped scarred figure that
in
some curious way resembled the malformed tree which
towered over her. Her stench clawed at him in
putrefying
waves. He raised a hand against her, falling
backward,
pushing himself away.
Her laughter was insidious, a sly creeping
chuckle.
"Why is Alice standing there?" Ben asked his mother.
The laughter grew, filled Fenn's head,
swamped his
mind. Must get away, he told himself. Must
get free of
her. O God, Jesus Christ, please help
me!
The platform began to vibrate. His hands were forced
from its dissurface, his body rolling
backward. He turned,
tried to get his knees beneath him, toppling over, the
splintering of wood sharp against the rumbling noise.

James Herbert - The Shrine

The
long black rent in the field was widening, the gash
growing
longer, flowing like a dark river toward the raised
altar, stretching toward the shrine.
The nun's clothes were smoldering as she approached
Fenn, and her skin was blistering once more. Yet still
she
chuckled and her lipless mouth mocked him. Broken
charred
fingers were reaching for him. A streak of lightning cut
its
jagged way through the sky.
EITHER-NOR was almost upon him and her breath was as foul
as her body.
He screamed, unable to move.
And she grinned her death's grin.
But then she had stopped. Was looking back toward
the
tree. Was moaning, a low, piteous wail. She
straightened
and her broken hands clenched tightly at
her breasts. Her
moans became louder.
Fenn followed her sightless gaze and saw nothing.
Then
a shimmering.
A glow.
At the base of the tree.
He felt renewed fear, but this was of another
kind. The
glow became stronger, became bright, like a
newborn sun.
His hand tried to shade his eyes, but the radiance was
too
great, too blinding. Yet there was something in its
center.
Something standing within its incandescent core.
And in his mind he could hear the voices of the two
priests. Pray, they urged him. Pray.
He blinked. He closed his eyes. He
prayed.
Lightning struck the tree and his eyes shot open.
The hunched creature was moving away, shuffling
backward, arms stretched toward the splintered
oak. She
screamed, cursed, her guttural
voice rising in pitch.
The upper branches of the tree were in flame,
its trunk
torn open, tiny creatures pouring out, maggots,
lice, glistening
wood leeches. The tree was rotted, dead
inside, a
nesting place for parasites that fed on dead things.
Thunder and, almost at once, forked lightning. It
struck
the tree and every branch became alive with blue
dancing
flashes, energy pouring through the contorted limbs,
seeking
earth. The whole of the oak burst into flames
and a

tearing rending sound split the air. "The tree began to topple. Hands tugged at Fenn's shoulders. A woman's hands and a child's. Sue and Ben pulled at Fenn until he was moving with them, running from the platform, away from the screaming creature, away from the falling tree. Hand in hand they jumped from the shrine into the night. They landed heavily, but the moving earth was soft, yielding. Fenn, winded, his ankles jolted by the fall, turned to see the small girl standing beneath the descending, screeching inferno, the child who was already dead, slain by a madman, Alice, who now raised her arms as if to ward off the fiery nemesis, yet no longer the child as the flames engulfed her, once again the black, hunched creature who could not defy the greater power. Fenn believed he heard Fenn cry out as the burning tree crushed then incinerated her corrupt and unearthly body. The centerpiece collapsed, all those sprawled on its surface falling in toward the heart of the fire. Soon the whole structure was burning. Only the crackle of flames could be heard and the weeping of those still left in the field. The earth tremors had stopped. There was no more screaming. Fenn reached for Sue and Ben, their distraught faces bathed in the warm glow of the fire. He pulled them to him and they huddled together, moving only when the flames of the burning platform came too near. And then the rain tently began to fall.

FORTY. ONE

"Round and round the circle
Completing the charm
So the knot be unknitted
The cross uncrossed
The crooked he made straight
And the curse he ended."
"The Curse Be Ended," "I". S. Eliot
"comi-con IN THIS US."
Fenn smiled at Sue, who was peering in the open car door, and gently shook his head. "You go with Ben," he said. "I'll pick you up later."
The boy scrambled from the back seat out onto the curb. Sue leaned back into the Mini, one knee on the passenger seat, and stretched across to kiss Fenn's

James Herbert - The Shrine

cheek.

She tenderly hugged him and then was gone.

He watched as they walked down the long path toward

the church entrance, Sue's hair caught by the sun, made

golden at its edges, Ben holding her hand, skipping alongside her.

It was a Sunday morning, a bright fresh day, the smell

of the sea strong in the air. "The church was of contemporary

design, elegantly simple, its structure rejecting any

solemnity or oppressiveness. More inviting than less-than a couple

of churches I could think of, Fenn thought grimly.

Few

people strolled the streets in that part of the seaside town,

for, although it was a bright, sunny morning, winter's chill

still clung; only those with dogs to be exercised, those who

were too lonely to stay indoors, and those attending Sunday

services at the many and various Brighton temples and

chapels, had left the warmth of their homes. One such person, a dog-stroller, passed by on the

opposite side of the road and Fenn caught a word of the

front-page headline

in the newspaper the man was avidly reading.

It said, shrink, and Fenn turned his head away.

He was tired of their theories, their conjectures, their

desperate need for a rationale. The current favorite was

that an electrical storm had centered on the field, its lightning

destroying the altar piece, causing the tree to burn and

fall, even striking the ground to send shock currents running

through the earth. Film, radio and television technicians

present complained that electrical interference had jammed their equipment. Even the film in the

cameras of

the press photographers had gotten blanked out, although nobody could quite explain how an

electromagnetic storm

could have that effect. The police, receiving severe criticism

for not having controlled the panic, had simply claimed

that their own communications system had been disrupted by the storm. The shock waves had caused mass

hysteria

among the already highly charged, emotional crowd, causing

James Herbert - The Shrine

hallucinations, breakdowns, and panic. That was the Number One, highly rated conclusion. Others were even more hmcitui but nevertheless not totally rejected: Alice Pagett had acquired some unknown paranormal mental powers and, having no control over them, had upset nature's delicate balance; an underground eruption had shaken the area, frightening the whole assemblage into hysteria (unfortunately no seismographic evidence substantiated the idea); an anti religious organization had planted a bomb beneath the shrine (probably the same group that had killed the monsignor). More and more solutions, more and more confusion. Over twenty thousand pilgrims had arrived at the shrine on that black Sunday, and if there had been any miracle to that day, it was that only 158 had been killed in the panic. Many had been crushed to death beneath the trampling feet of their fellow worshippers; some had suffered heart seizures or fatal fits; others, those on the central altarpiece, or close by, had been burned to death; still others had died in accidents as they had fled the field. Many, many more had been seriously injured and maimed, while the condition of a number of the invalids present had deteriorated to an alarming degree. Strangely, those whom Alice Pagett had cured at other times at the shrine found their illnesses and infirmities had returned, as though the child's death had canceled the miracles. Scores of the unfortunate worshippers, clerics and nuns among them, claimed they had witnessed the ground tear itself open. But these people were confused, even weeks later, and their mental state could at best be described as "unstable." It was a fact that hundreds, possibly thousands, had blanked the incident from their minds completely; all they could remember was the fierce storm and running from the field. Speculation in the media was rife, swinging from the wild sensationalism of the so-called popular press (as if the

incident needed any sensationalizing) to the deliberately underplayed scientific and psychological views of the more conservative. Fenn was no longer a part of that particular circus. He had resigned from the Courier and refused offers of employment with the large nationals. He had even refused to answer questions concerning the events of that night. Maybe one day, when his head was clear and his nerves more controlled, he would sit down and write a definitive book on the Banfield shrine. But it would have to be marketed as fiction, for who would believe the facts? He smiled as he remembered Nancy's frantic phone call from the States. Her bosses wanted him over there, were offering him a job on the Post--"name your own figure"--in return for the full story of the shrine. He declined the offer and Nancy had fumed and ranted on the other end of the line. She had been one of the first to flee as soon as she realized "something bad was going down," mindful and still fearful of what had happened to her at St. Peter's. So scared had she been that the slightest hint of trouble had sent her scampering. Unlike most of the panicked people, she had headed directly toward the church grounds, knowing that all exits would be swamped, and had followed a man she thought was Southworth, the hotelier in the village, losing sight of him somewhere in the graveyard. She had used the entrance to St. Joseph's as her escape route and had missed the finale. That was why she was so chagrined. Happy to be alive, of course, but pissed that she hadn't witnessed the grand slam. Nancy had urged, begged, threatened, but he refused to join her. She was still in a rage at the end of their conversation, but managed to growl, "I love you, you fink," before her receiver clunked down. He rubbed his temples with stiffened fingers and thought of those who had died in the field. The fat businessman, Tucker, found lying in the mud, his face purplish-blue from a heart attack. His chief assistant, a woman whose

James Herbert - The Shrine

name Fenn could not remember, lay on top of him
as
though trying to protect his gross body from the
crushing
feet of others. She was in a state of shock.
Ironically, her
mother was found dead nearby, she too
having suffered
heart failure. Employer and mother, both lost
at the same
time from the same cause. No wonder she was still in
shock. Tucker's wife, also found nearby, could
remember
nothing, only that she had fainted while trying
to escape
the field.
Bishop Caines had died, along with other
clerics and
altar servers, in the fire. Crushed by the tree,
burned by
the flames.
George Southworth had been more fortunate, although
some might reason otherwise. He had been
discovered
hiding in St. Joseph's, a shivering, slavering
wreck of a
man. They had to drag him screaming from the church,
for he refused to walk down the aisle to the broken
doorway.
Apart from the cracked door and a shattered
stained-glass
window (both struck by lightning, it was
thought), there
was no other damage to the church, even though
Southworth
insisted it lay in ruins around him.
Then there was Molly Pagett.
He closed his eyes, but the vision of her enflamed
body
was even sharper. That poor, poor woman. How
she had
suffered in the final minutes of her life, seeing
her daughter
shot, resurrected, changed into something
unspeakable,
then dying in agony. Perhaps it was better she had
died,
no matter how terribly, for the memory would have
killed
her just as surely, only death would have been slow and
more cruel in its claiming.
Why had Alice--no, Elnor right-brace
--called her Rosemund? One
of the two nuns mentioned in the sixteenth-century
priest's
chronicle had been named Rosemund. She had
been-one of
the young novices whom h''ddl nor had seduced,
one that had
been cast out from the church and was said to be living in
the forests around the village. Could Molly
Pagett possibly
have been a descendant of that abbiri? Or was the

James Herbert - The Shrine

creature

Einor, this resurrection, this reincarnation, confused by its

own hatred? I (e would never know, for there were no clear answers.

There was not even a clear answer as to why the young man had shot Alice. His dead body had been found among

the others, battered and crushed; nobody would even suggest

that he had been torn apart by the mob. The German gun was found nearby, its barrel jammed. His name was

Wilkes, and the only abnormality of his typically middle-class

background was that he appeared to have, judging by the collected newspaper clippings found in his bed-sit, a

fascination for the assassin of John Lennon, and the would-be

assassins of Pope Paul and Ronald Reagan. If he had been

a little older, then perhaps his heroes would have been Oswald, Ray, and Sirhan.

Whatever his twisted reasons were, a trigger-squeeze to fame, a rejection of what he believed to be total good, Alice was dead. Perhaps evil had defeated evil.

Einor had sought her revenge and had claimed much of

it. Only the child's unpredicted death had thwarted its

completeness, and the shrine had been destroyed as surely

as if the hand of . . . F'enn could not accept it.

It was too

unclear in his mind. He could have imagined he'd seen . . .

everything was so confused . . .

Alice's body--what was left of it--had been found beneath

the charred remnants of the tree. She had been

buried, along with the remains of her mother, in the graveyard of St. Joseph's nearby. Curiously, when the site

of the shrine had been excavated a week later, the remains

of another body had been found buried beneath the roots

of the fallen oak.

But this one was centuries old, just a twisted skeleton. It

appeared to be that of a small person, many of its bones

broken at the time of death. Burned black, also.

The remains had been taken away to be studied by experts who would decide on the date of its origins. Eventually the bones would go to the British Museum, where they would be displayed in a glass case for tourists and

those interested in mankind's evolution could come and smile at the grinning skull.

F'enn looked up, and Sue and Ben were nearly

James Herbert - The Shrine

at the church door. Ben had been distracted and was
squatting
by the edge of the path, watching something on the ground,
perhaps an insect of some kind. Sue was speaking
to him,
obviously telling him they would be late
for the Mass.
What strange power did Ben have? Was it his
total
innocence that had protected him, that had not let him
see
what others thought they saw, not let him hear what
others thought they heard.
He had never witnessed Alice's radiance, had
never
witnessed her levitate. And he had not seen
Einor. Nor
felt the earth shake, nor watched the ground open.
And he
was not alone, for other children in the field that night had
not shared their parents' and guardians' terror.
Yet there
were other young ones who had.
F'enn had felt his strength return when he
touched the
boy--so had Sue. It was as though their weakness had
passed through him, the boy acting as a human
conductor
and dissipating their weakness into the ground. Was innocence
so powerful against such evil?
Whoever said that questions were more important
than
answers was a fool. Unanswered questions could
drive you
to insanity.
He forced himself to relax. Outside the windshield
the
sky was a clear Disney blue, the sun hazy,
soft-edged.
Even though there was no strength to its glow, it was
painful to look at, and he shielded his eyes,
resting his
elbow on the window-sill. He was reminded of the
glow he
had seen at the shrine, the glimmering shining at the
base
of the tree; the one sight more than any other on that
terrible night that constantly haunted him. Yet it
was not
an unpleasant haunting. Somehow it gave him
courage.
Something more. . . . Faith?
His hand scraped against his chin and he shifted in the
seat in agitation.
Why did it disturb him so? Why, out of everything
else
that had happened, should this drive him to such
distraction?
Why had the thing called have'ffnor been so afraid
when it,
too, had seen the glow?
And had he really glimpsed the shadowy figure
of a

James Herbert - The Shrine

white-gowned woman within that-radiance?
It couldn't be! He had suffered too many
delusions that
night. His mind had been filled with too many
terrors.
His own survival mechanism had suddenly worked
against
them, creating a different kind of illusion, one that
spread
calmness, peace, a vision that exuded a
quiescent tranquillity.
Yet why had Ben, who had not seen the other
horrors,
asked later who the lovely lady in white was
standing by
the tree that night when everybody was screaming and the
altar burned down?
Who was she?
Who was she?
What was she?
His eyes were closed, his hand covering them. He
opened
them, looked toward the church. Sue was leading Ben
up
the short flight of steps to the open doorway.
He clenched his fist and rapped his knuckles against
his
teeth. He opened the car door and strode toward
the
church gate. He hesitated.
Sue turned and saw him. She smiled.
And he strode up the path to join them. Together they
went into the church of Our Lady of the Assumption.
Little Alice, sweet and pure
Come see her if you need a cure
She'll stop your boils and clear your head
And smile sweetly when you're dead.
New Nursery Rhyme

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
James Herbert was born in London's East
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Mr. Herbert now lives in Sussex with his
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James Herbert - The Shrine