

For Trev and Mar Stead

THE LURKERS ISBN 0600 20621 1

First published in Great Britain 1982

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Hamiyn Paperbacks arc published by The Hamiyn Publishing Group Ltd.,

Astronaut House, Feltham, Middlesex, England.

Reproduced, printed and bound in Great Britain by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks

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1

Janie Fogg had the feeling that there was something out there. A kind of intuition that sent a tingling feeling up and down her spine and made her constantly glance out of the grimy latticed windows towards the dark fir woods that lined the horizon.

Another half-hour and it would be dark. That wouldn't help, because if there was anything lurking outside, whatever or whoever it was would be able to creep right up to this tumbledown cottage. She shuddered, felt the urge to flee now whilst it was still light, whilst there was time. Before . . .

She closed her eyes, hoping that when she opened them again she would find herself back in the modern characterless semi-detached house that looked across on dozens of identical dwellings. The Perrycroft Estate, mundane - but safe. It didn't happen that way, though. Oh God, the desolation, the fear was still here. And as if to increase her uneasiness the dusk was turning the distant mountains into a grey unfriendly land mass that seemed to hem her in.

Janie carried on drying the dishes. A cup and saucer rattled in her trembling hand as she carried it from the table. She was forced to look out of the window again, searching the rough grass fields that led up to the forest, endeavouring to spot the object of her mounting terror. But there was nothing, just a few sheep and a smaller creature that could have been either a hare or a rabbit by the furthestmost hedgerow.

All this was sheer madness, coming to a place like this at this time of the year. In summer it would not have been so bad; she might even have enjoyed it for a week. But it was November and the desolate landscape was shrouded in low cloud for most of the time, a perpetual atmosphere of damp and cold. Hodre was a typical dilapidated Welsh country cottage, the kind of place unscrupulous owners could charge a hundred pounds a week for in the holiday season simply because escapist urban dwellers thought they were 'getting away from it all'. That was fine when the sun shone and bees worked diligently gathering pollen amongst the masses of wild flowers; now the flowers and the bees were gone and she faced stark reality.

At thirty-six life had settled to a nice even pattern for Janie: a husband who went out to work at eight in the morning and came home at six, a mortgage

within their means because they hadn't tried to keep up with the Jones's and moved to a detached house. A car on HP and a few pounds left over for a ride out at the weekends. Now that Gavin was at school Janie could have got a job, but it would have spoiled it all because she would not have had time to do her household chores as meticulously as she liked. Life wasn't boring because this was the kind of existence she had dreamed of for years, conventionally perfect in every aspect.

And then Peter had gone and ruined it all by writing that damned book, working on it two or three evenings a week for over a year. She had actually encouraged him at the time because it kept him in the house instead of out in his garage workshop until eleven o'clock at night. But she would never in her wildest fantasies have thought that it would have been the springboard for all this. Thousands of people wrote books that were never published. Only exceptionally lucky ones received royalties. And certainly only a meagre handful made it really big on a first book.

It was an experience that left Janie dazed and still waking up each morning in the beginning thinking that maybe she had dreamed it all. Who in their right minds would pay an advance of fifteen thousand pounds for a few hundred typewritten pages of a novel when they did not even know whether or not it would sell? Janie didn't know the details of this apparent madness but there had been talk of some kind of auction - publishers trying to outbid one another for Peter's book.

Peter should have been satisfied once he'd banked his cheque, a nest egg which would allow them to live comfortably for many years without worrying about recessions and inflation and all that sort of gloom which came out of the TV screen at nine o'clock every night. But he wasn't satisfied; it had changed him almost overnight, in her opinion anyway. He was greedy, he wanted to do it all over again: another book and another fifteen grand. That was why they had moved to Hodre for a year. A year! She'd go mad. The nearest village was three miles away, and their closest neighbours, the Ruskins at the big Hill farm on the other side of the forest, weren't exactly the friendliest people you could meet. They seemed resentful that the Foggs had moved in. Driving by in their Land Rover or tractor, father and sons glared down at the small stone cottage. Peter said it was because they desperately wanted Hodre and its meagre three or four acres to complete their monopoly of an upland sheep empire, but Clive Blackstone, Hodre's owner who lived somewhere much more civilised down on the south coast, was rich enough and stubborn enough to resist tempting offers. So in a way having the Ruskins as neighbours was worse than having no neighbours at all.

Janie's lips tightened. Peter was selfish as well as greedy. He had uprooted both herself and Gavin, heedless of the fact that their nine-year-old son had just settled into the big middle school. Now Gavin had to pick up the threads all over again, and try and hold his own in an out-of-the-way village school where in all probability they used outdated teaching methods.

Janie sighed her relief audibly and almost forgave her husband for everything as she spied the blue Saab estate car winding its way down the narrow lane between the low pleached hedges. Her fears seemed to lessen with the realisation that Peter had returned from collecting Gavin from school in the village. But it would be like this every day: a regular period of loneliness and terror. She tried to tell herself that she would get used to it but she knew she wouldn't.

The Saab's headlights were on. Dusk had deepened considerably during the last ten minutes or so whilst she had been looking out of the window. Even with Peter back, night still held a thousand terrors for Janie; things she couldn't

explain, couldn't talk to Peter about.

Away to the left, only three hundred yards from the cottage and just visible from the small lead-framed windows, a rough circle of twisted and stunted pines were silhouetted against the deep grey of a darkening western sky, set on an elevated hillock so that they would be visible from almost any angle in this barren rocky hill country. Janie shivered; that place was something else that unnerved her, making her want to lock the doors and windows before it got properly dark. An ancient druid stone circle lay beneath those warped pines. So the locals said, anyway, and you could take most of what they said with a pinch of salt, Janie sneered to herself. The villagers didn't like having strangers in their midst, so the story could have been invented for the sole purpose of discouraging outsiders. But there was no getting away from the fact that there was a rough circle of large stones up there and the place was also listed on the large scale ordnance survey map of the district.

Peter had shown a considerable interest in the circle and had even taken Gavin up there (all part of the boy's education, he had said), and the boy had been fascinated by a huge flat stone which Peter claimed had to be the sacrificial stone. Ugh, it was horrible, best forgotten. There were enough killings in the twentieth century without digging up gory reminders from a bygone age, Janie had insisted. History always seemed to be about bloodshed and maybe that was why life was so cheap nowadays. Nobody was safe anywhere. That feeling of uneasiness came back. There was something dangerous about Hodre.

'Hi.' Peter was standing inside the small hallway, seemingly oblivious of the draught from the door, which hadn't latched properly. Short and stocky, his features had a squareness about them, a ruggedness that Janie had once described as a bulldog-look. But now his appearance was spoiled by the long sandy hair that curled around the collar of his open-necked shirt and the worn and faded jeans. She wore jeans, too, but had always prided herself in being immaculate, even out here. Not a strand of her long golden hair was out of place, (its natural colour was dark brown but Peter had a preference for blondes), and the matching denim jacket showed no traces of the household chores she had done throughout the day. She had put on make-up because she felt undressed without it. That was the difference between the two of them, the formal and the informal, a blend of oppo-sites that had somehow worked out. Until now.

'Where's Gavin?' She tried to peer past him through the open door. It was almost dark now and she could only just make out the outline of the rickety front gate.

'He's probably gone up to the granary to look for the cat/ Peter replied. 'This place'll give him a good chance to get used to animals, something that's been lacking in his life before. The most you could hope for at Perrycroft was a hamster and a goldfish. Dogs and cats had a high mortality rate.'

'Well, he ought to come inside. It's almost dark.' She couldn't keep the edge of nervousness out of her tone. She wanted to push past her husband, rush outside and shout for Gavin to come in quickly. With an effort she controlled herself. 'Go and call him, please, Peter.'

Tn a minute.' He paused, looked down at the floor as though he had something to say which was best said in the boy's absence. 'Janie, there's something he's not happy about. Something at school. I don't know what it is, but he'd probably tell you whereas he'd clam up if I asked him.'

'Oh!' Janie stiffened. 'What makes you think that?'

'The way he was in the car coming home; didn't say a word, just sat staring out of the window. You know how kids get fears, little things that they keep to themselves and blow up out of all proportion. It's probably nothing much but we'd better sort it out. There's no rush, though, there's a whole-weekend in front of us before school starts again.'

'It was wrong to disturb his schooling.' A reprimand. 'He was getting on OK. Now he's got to start all over again.'

'That's rubbish.' Peter could feel the friction building up between them again; it never used to be like this. 'He'll be better out here. There's more time, less pupils, and things aren't rushed through like they are in big schools. It's what he needs.'

'Maybe and maybe not.' She was edging nearer the door, trying not to make her fears obvious. She didn't want Gavin playing outside after dark. Til talk to him tonight when it's bedtime. But first -'

A movement in the darkness outside had her tensing, almost crying out; a shape that could have been anything materialising out of the encroaching gloom, wraith-like, featureless. The scream was forming in Janie's throat. Just in time she recognised the features of her own son, the familiar pallid freckled face, the tousled red hair. Thank God!

'You're to come inside straightaway, Gavin.' She sounded almost on the verge of hysteria. 'I don't like you outside after dark.'

The boy's questing gaze by-passed her and focused on his father; a look that said, 'What the hell's got into Mum?'

'You'd better stay indoors now, Gav,' Peter spoke slowly. He knew he had to cool this situation before it blew up into a major family row. 'Tomorrow's Saturday. You'll have all weekend to play outside.'

Silence; an atmosphere that all three of them felt; that words were being held back deliberately.

'I can't find Snowy, Dad. He's nowhere around but I can hear something running about in the rafters of the granary. If I had a torch . . .'

'Probably rats.' Peter regretted the words the moment he had spoken them. Oh Jesus Christ, Janie was terrified of most small creatures. It was a miracle she hadn't heard those mice last night.

'Rats!' Her expression, her posture, were rigid with revulsion. 'Peter, you don't mean to say that we've got rats in the place!'

There's always the odd rat and mouse to be found in old property.' Play it right down. 'Maybe one that was just sheltering for the night. Gavin might have been mistaken, but if he wasn't then Snowy's probably taking care of it.'

Janie pushed the door shut; the latch jumped and it swung

back open. Almost flinging herself at it she slammed it back with a vibrating crash and struggled to shoot the rusting bolt home. Oh please God, let me shut the night out!

'Tea's almost ready.' With a supreme effort she managed to speak calmly, hoping that the other two couldn't hear the way her heart was thumping. At least they were all safe inside and nobody was going out again tonight.

In a way it was claustrophobic security.

Janie had expected to find Gavin already in bed when she went up to his small low-ceilinged room at half-past nine. The place had a musty smeli about it and large areas of plaster had crumbled off the walls. She wrinkled her nose as she opened the door, and stared in astonishment at what she saw.

Gavin was sitting on the edge of his bed, still fully dressed, just looking blankly at the wall. If he had been playing with his war games or reading it wouldn't have been so bad. But he wasn't. He saw her but there was no greeting on his freckled face, no smile. Just an expression that could only be interpreted as - fear.

Janie caught her breath and felt her heartbeat speeding up again. 'What's the matter?' She moved forward, seated herself on the bed beside the boy and slipped an arm around him. Suddenly she wanted to burst into a torrent of tears but she knew that for his sake she had to hold them back.

'Snowy's missing.* His voice was husky but somehow unconvincing. Everybody was trying to cover up by lying.

'He's probably off hunting rats and mice.' She shuddered at the thought. 'But there's something else worrying you, isn't there, Gav?'

Silence, except for a stifled sob. They'd both end up crying at this rate.

'Come on, you can tell Mummy.' She'd been 'Mum' for the last two years but now he didn't seem as grown-up as she'd thought, a little boy who needed to confide in his mother. They had to go back a few years if they were to get anywhere.

'It's - it's the - Wilsons.' He choked the name out.

'And who are the Wilsons?'

'Big boys at school. They're going to beat me up on Monday.' Gavin was beginning to cry; a couple of tears escaped and rolled down either cheek. They'd've done me over after school today in the playground, only Dad came early.'

This is ridiculous/ She felt her anger mounting towards the unknown village louts. 'Now don't worry about them. I doubt very much whether it's any more than schoolboy threats. They'll have forgotten all about it by Monday. And, anyway, they wouldn't dare.'

'They would!' Almost a shout. 'They blacked Kevin Arnold's eye on Wednesday and they got him down and kicked him at playtime on Thursday.'

'And what did Mr Hughes say to that?'

'He doesn't know who did it and Kevin won't say, else they'll really do him. And Mr Hughes is scared of the Wilsons too because if he caned them their big brothers would slash the tyres of his car or throw bricks through his window. Everybody'sscared of the Wilsons, Mum,'

'Well, there's no need for you to be.' Janie's mouth tightened and she clenched her fists. 'They're just yobbos, as bad as those rioters in London. Anyway, why are they going to beat you up?'

'They say - I'm an English - bastard,' Gavin was beginning to sob now.

'Well, I think they're Welsh . . . ' She stopped herself in time. 'I see, they're copying these Welsh nationalists they've seen on telly. Anything that's English can't be any good. Spray the English road signs with aerosol paint. Set fire to the English holiday cottages. Drive the English back over the border. Good God, it's like the old border skirmishes of years ago. I suppose this boy Kevin Arnold is English?'

'Yes.' Gavin buried his face against his mother. 'They say that we've no right to be living at Hodre and they'll beat me up just to show you what'll happen to you if you don't pack up and leave'.

'Well, we're not standing for that sort of behaviour either at school or anywhere else,' Janie snapped. 'In fact, I expect your Dad will go and see Mr Hughes on Monday and get this nonsense sorted out.'

'No! No, Mum, please don't let Dad go and cause trouble because the Wilsons will kill me!'

Janie sighed. Terrorism at juvenile level, even out here in the sticks. Gavin was terrified; the Wilson boys obviously held the school in a grip of fear. It was all Peter's fault for coming out here in the first place. They never had any of this kind of trouble at Perrycroft.

Slowly she helped Gavin undress, pulled on his pyjamas the way she used to do when he was small, and felt the way he trembled in every limb. He didn't resist, showed none of the embarrassment that a nine-year-old might display in such circumstances. Because he was very, very frightened.

As Janie descended the steep narrow staircase she could hear the tap-tapping of Peter's typewriter from the front room, which he was using as a study. And in that moment she hated him for what he was doing to them. Oh why couldn't they have stayed back home in the nice friendly comfortable city? Why did he have to write a book and change their whole lifestyle? Why couldn't he have stayed on in a regular nine-to-five job that didn't have any problems?

She knew the answers to those questions all right. Because Peter didn't want to conform to the System. Because he wanted more money. And more. Because he didn't give a damn for anybody now, neither herself nor Gavin.

But somebody was going to have to sort these Wilsons out. If necessary she would do it herself.

A scratching, scurrying noise from the ceiling above her interrupted her thoughts. Mice. The skin on the back of her neck pimpled and her mouth went dry. For one fleeting second she almost ran towards the front door, to get away from this vermin-infested hovel. But she didn't, because her terror of the unknown was greater than that of rats and mice.

And there was something insidious out there in the blackness of a mountain night. She could sense its presence.

2

The Foggs always had a lie-in on Saturday mornings. Not as long as on Sundays because there were weekend chores that had to be done; like shopping, washing the car, mowing the lawns in the summer.

Janie groaned to herself as she awoke and saw the dark grey of a winter's

morning filtering into the bedroom through the frayed curtains. Everything came back to her in one rush as though determined to depress her for the day. The Wilsons, those rodents, the lack of mod-cons and all the extra work it entailed - like carrying in buckets of coal, which left a trail of mud and coaldust across the kitchen floor, and trying to light a stubborn old Rayburn that smoked back so that she needed a bath afterwards. But Gavin was her main worry. She'd told Peter in bed last night, half-expecting him to fly into one of his rages and threaten to kill the Wilson boys with his bare hands. Instead he had said, 'Decidedly awkward. We'll have to play it very, very carefully.' What was he going to do, and what would happen to Gavin on Monday?

Fully awake now, she slid out of bed and padded barefooted across the rough floorboards. A feeling of uneasiness had her hurrying across the tiny landing. When she had looked in on Gavin last night he had been lying still with closed eyes, but she had known that he wasn't asleep. He'd probably worried himself sick all night.

Janie opened the door of the small bedroom and peered inside. It was dark, because the curtains weren't so rotten and they effectively shut out the cold inhospitable November daybreak. She stood there in the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom.

Oh God, no! Panic flared inside her, making her switch on the light and scrabble with trembling fingers at the heap of discarded blankets at the end of the bed, praying that somehow she would find Gavin curled up asleep beneath them. But her prayer went unanswered. There was no sign of the boy; Gavin was gone.

'What the hell's going on?' Her shout had brought Peter on the run, trying to blink the sleep out of his bleary eyes, angry at being awakened so abruptly.

'It's Gavin. He's gone!' Janie sensed her own helplessness, her futility. This time she would not be able to stop the panic, the fear of this past week that had built up inside her and was threatening to explode at any second in the only possible way. 'For God's sake, Peter, do something. Find Him!'

'Pull yourself together.' He grasped her firmly by the arm, wondering if he ought to slap her across the face now or wait until she became hysterical. He waited. 'The boy's not a prisoner in his bedroom. He doesn't have to wait for us to get up first.' Peter noted the cast-off pyjamas, the bedside chair where his son's clothes should have been draped but weren't. Damn it, there was nothing to worry about. Yet. 'I'll take a look downstairs.'

Peter was aware of Janie following him, and half-expected her to hold on to his pyjama jacket. She never used to get emotional this way, just a bit fraught sometimes during her periods. Now she was frantic.

He checked the front rooms, then went back to the kitchen. All empty. They turned, faced each other, and Janie saw her own fear momentarily reflected in her husband's eyes. I knew there was something out there last night and now they've got my baby!

'He might have gone outside. Probably has.' Peter knew that his voice had trembled, but hoped Janie hadn't noticed it. Damn it, she was unnerving him.

'Let's go and look for him then.* She was already on her way to the back door.

'Hold it.' He caught her by the arm, pulled her back. 'Let's get dressed first. We can't go wandering about on a cold damp November morning in our nightclothes.'

I don't care. I don't care if I bloody well catch pneumonia, so long as I find my baby! She stood there numbed, unable to resist as Peter began pulling her towards the foot of the stairs. It was like a slow-motion dream; somehow, after what seemed an eternity, she found herself dressed in her denim suit, and almost stopped to put make-up on. She followed her husband back downstairs and out into what would have been an olde-worlde garden had it been cultivated. Instead it was just a mass of dying bracken and foxgloves, wet with the dew that soaked their trousers long before they reached the crumbling stone steps that led up to the granary. Janie noted details that had escaped her ah" week: the missing slates on the roof, the way the timbers bowed because they were riddled with woodworm and might snap at any time. Everything was either dead or dying at Hodre.

She opened her mouth to call Gavin, but no sound came. She mentally shied away as Peter pushed open the creaking heavy door and looked inside. He was afraid, too, of what he might see in there, but he had to look.

'He's not in here.' Peter turned back, letting the door swing closed. In the early morning light his unshaven features looked strained and grey. 'He must've gone up the fields.'

'Oh no, not up there.' That wood, so dark and forbidding, hiding whatever it was she had sensed this past week. 'He'd never go into the forest.' But her expression said that he just might.

'We'd better take a look.' Peter came back down the steps and closed his hand over hers. Suddenly even he needed Janie's support.

The big wood was only just visible, a dark mass that showed through the thinning horizon mist like a slumbering monster with a spiked back. A faint golden glow on the dying bracken showed them that the sun was already up, trying its hardest to break through. As it melted the grey swirling vapour Janie became afraid of what they might see. She had to force herself to look. Some sheep. That rabbit again, or was it a hare, up by the top hedge. Funny how you noted these things in a crisis when you were all churned up inside, a kind of inbuilt therapy.

Gavin wasn't on the fields. In which case he must be in the forest. It might stretch for miles, row upon row of artificially planted conifers that somehow destroyed the natural magnificence of the panoramic landscape. Hiding - things.

'He wouldn't go far into the wood.' Peter hoped he would convince Janie, because he didn't convince himself. 'When we get up there maybe we can shout for him.'

When we get up there; Janie was hanging on to Peter, her calf muscles beginning to ache after the first hundred yards. She thought she might be sick or else burst into tears. Maybe both, only right now it was taking her all her time to get her breath.

Sheep eyed them curiously, bunched together and moved away as though they hadn't seen humans before. A ewe was limping as though it had a damaged foot and Janie found herself feeling sorry for it.

Then they were close to the wood, could almost feel its hostility as they stood in the shadow of the nearest trees, which blotted out the hazy rising sun. Silence except for the steady drip of moisture like some form of Chinese water-torture sent to plague them. Somewhere in the dense coniferous greenery

a magpie chattered harshly like distant guerilla machine-gun fire. A friendless landscape.

'Ga - vin!' Peter shouted, feeling almost foolish at the feeble noise which his normally powerful lungs made. It was the fog, or low cloud, or whatever it was, of course, stifling his shout, not even allowing it to echo.

They just stood there, two people not daring to look at each other because they did not wish to read the expression of fear in their partner's face.

'He's got to be around here somewhere,' Peter muttered. He thought again about going into the wood. No, the boy wouldn't go in there, he had no reason to. But young boys didn't need reasons.

'Listen!' Janie gripped his arm until her fingernails dug deep like the talons of a bird of prey.

They both listened. The magpie was chattering again as if determined that these trespassers in a corvine domain should not hear whatever it was. A movement somewhere in the thicket as though some heavy creature had trodden on a dead branch and snapped it.

And inside, Janie was wanting to run, to dash headlong back down that steep field, not caring if she slipped and fell. Her terrors of the previous night came back like a damp icy cloud driven by a shrill Arctic wind, chilling her right through. There was something in there; this time there really was!

A monster was forcing its way through a pile of dead bracken, a black-faced creature with horns and eyes that regarded the two watchers intently and had them cowering back; then it lumbered out into the open, standing staring at them with a bewildered expression on its face.

'It's - it's, a - sheep' Janie's voice was weak with relief.

'A ram to be precise.' Peter tried to make it sound casual. 'Nothing to worry about.'

'But where's Gavin?'

It all came back to stark reality, the hopelessness and the panic which was starting to return.

'He must be . . .'

Peter's words were drowned by a shrill whining sound that was fast rising to a crescendo, a harsh noise that seemed to whip the lingering pockets of mist like a sudden gust of wind; an unexpected flood of weak sunshine shafting down as though to spotlight the principal actors in this remote drama.

'What is it?' Janie clutched at her husband's arm, noting subconsciously that he was trembling too.

'Sounds like a chainsaw,' he muttered. 'Bound to be a lot of forestry work going on in a place like this.'

Louder, painful to the ears, vaguely reminiscent of noises that were all part of urban life, a faint smell of diesel on the air.

'Look!' Janie pointed back down to the small valley in which Hodre nestled. 'It's - it's - '

'Motorbikes!' There was contempt in Peter's tone; he saw the machines, two of them traversing the downhill slope, bumping over the rough ground, the riders somehow managing to stay in the saddles. 'Damn it, we had enough of this

nonsense at Perrycroft, every bleeding night kids roaring round and round the block creating hell specially to annoy other folks.'

'There's Gavin!' Janie's shriek was audible even above the din of the bikes.

Sure enough even at that distance there was no mistaking Gavin's slight form, his faded light blue denims showing up against the autumn grassland, his red hair streaming as he ran; ran because the motorcycles were gaining on him; mechanical lurchers intent on running down their prey.

'Oh God!' Janie was already moving forward, still holding on to Peter, dragging him with her. 'They'll run him down, that's what they're trying to do!'

As they began the steep and slippery descent, heedless of their own safety, the angry roar of the bikes below drowned their futile shouts. The machines seemed to be honing in on the fleeing boy, veering at the last second just when it seemed that they must collide with him. Circling, revving up, driving him in the opposite direction like a collie in pursuit of a stubborn ewe.

'They're mad,' Janie screamed in Peter's ear, 'don't they realise the danger?'

Of course they do, he hadn't the breath to reply, they're doing it deliberately, it's yobbish bullying. The way those Wilson boys have been bullying him at school.

Nearer now, the Foggs covering the ground at an amazing speed, the frightening scene only a mere thirty yards away portrayed in every brutal detail. The faces of the black-coated bikers sheer ugliness that was screwed up into masks of hate, slanted eyes that gave them an oriental appearance, both with thin lips that bespoke cruelty. Brothers, they might even be twins. They turned, revved up again, grinned at the sight of their fleeing prey, the way the boy was stumbling, panting for breath. Then they shot forward again. Janie could tell that Gavin was screaming, trying to cover his deathly white face with his arms, surrendering because there was nowhere else to run. She couldn't look any more; this time her baby couldn't escape those wheels which bore down on him.

Yet somehow the riders altered course at the very last second. Their victim had fallen to the ground, a wheel missing his outstretched legs by inches, pumping stinking black fumes into his face.

'Cut it out, you bastards!' Peter stood astride the boy, paternal protection in his stance, anger on his face, fists clenched.

The two youths came round in yet another circle and leered when they saw him; one man on foot could not halt the might of their machines. Jesus, they'd teach him a lesson!

Peter saw them coming at him. He didn't flinch, knowing they would alter course again. Afraid for Janie because she was too close, he gave her a quick glance. Then they came at him, roaring fury bearing down on him. A blur of sheer malevolence.

He saw the wheels turning to miss him, and braced himself. Bastards, he'd show

'em a thing or two. The one on the right, because Peter was right-handed and it was easier. A lightning lunge; he felt the impact, a jarring blow that shuddered right up into his shoulder. He cursed, cried out with pain and stumbled back, just missing the machine behind him.

So fast it was a blur, rider and bike parted company. The machine careered on until it overbalanced; the youth crashed to the ground.

Peter staggered to his feet and went towards the fallen rider. The youth was shaken, just winded, and scrambled up; a comparatively soft landing but it had dulled his reflexes.

'You verminous little swine!' Peter had him by the collar of the fake-leather jacket, stared into that twisted hate-filled face. 'You could've killed my boy. You want birching!'

Slit-eyes returned his glare; the thin lips seemed to buckle and purse. A blob of spittle, accurate with uncouth practice, caught Peter full in the face. It took perhaps a couple of seconds for mind and body to unite and bring the rising anger, to a peak. Then it burst, Peter's free hand went back, then came down with every ounce of force that he could muster in a back-handed blow. Even the high-pitched drone of the two motorbikes could not drown the sharp report of the impact. The mean Up seemed to split and turn crimson and the head jerked back. Peter released his hold and the youth stumbled backwards, lost his balance and fell heavily.

Silence, so sudden that it was frightening. Peter turned and saw Janie clutching Gavin to her. The fallen machine had cut out, its wheels still spinning with a soft, almost gentle, swishing sound. The second youth was no more than three or four yards away, astride his silent bike, an expression of astonishment on his pallid features.

'What the hell d'you think you're doing riding on private land?' Peter broke the silence, watching the fallen biker getting to his feet, a thick trickle of blood running down his chin and dripping on to the torn jacket. 'That's just a taste of what you'll get next time. Take my advice and keep away from Hodre. You're lucky, I should be calling the police.'

They did not answer, just spat in unison; a crimson dottle landed on a frond of dying fern. Their impassive gazes fixed on Peter and did not waver. He felt himself flinching; God, they were like zombies. If only they'd speak, curse, threaten. Instead, the fallen bike was uprighted and its rider swung himself easily into the saddle, oblivious of the pouring blood, the crimson rivulet now thickened by twin streams from the nostrils.

The noise began again, reverberating, jarring the brain. Peter watched them go, typical examples of motorbike hooligans. Hodre or Perrycroft - it was just the same.

'Where on earth have you been?' Janie was doing her best to scold Gavin but the impact of her remonstrations was tempered by relief. She was trying hard not to cry.

'I went to look for Snowy.' Gavin was trembling. 'Something's happened to him, I know it has. He's somewhere in there.' A shaking forefinger pointed to the forest. Even the morning sunlight could not dispel its aura of foreboding, its silent warning.

'Well, that's settled them.' Peter clutched at his shoulder and winced. 'I don't reckon they'll be back here for a long time to come.'

'Dad!' Gavin's expression was one of terror, a fear that seemed to be mounting now that the bikers had left. 'Dad, you shouldn't've done that. Now I'll really be in big trouble!' 'Whatever are you talking about? I just gave 'em a bit of their own medicine. They won't come back, take it from me.' 'Dad, you don't know who they are.' Almost a scream. 'No, and I don't bloody well care.' 'But / do, Dad. The Wilsons really will beat me up on Monday now because those were their two big brothers, Dai and Ralph. They'll get me for sure now!'

Peter stared. Mother and son were hugging each other close, sharing a mutual fear, blaming him for what he'd done. 'Don't be ridiculous,' He licked his dry lips and felt an icy trickle run up his spine and goosepimple the back of his neck. 'I'm not going to be intimidated by a bunch of thugs, even if they have terrorised the village ever since they were able to walk. I'll have a word with the headmaster first thing on Monday morning, and if I don't get any satisfaction there I'll go to the police. If the Wilsons have got any sense they'll try and forget that this morning ever happened.'

Janie closed her eyes, feeling giddy for a second. Somewhere far away she heard a receding drone that might have been bees, had it not been too late in the year. Motorbikes, away in the big forest somewhere. The Wilsons going back home, maybe already planning their revenge.

She opened her eyes again and saw the multitude of dark firs that stretched beyond the skyline. Nature's own empire of darkness harbouring its evil minions. She felt Gavin's hand squeezing her own tightly. 'We'd better get home,' she said.

She wanted to run, to flee from here. Not just the Wilson boys, they were only a small part of whatever it was she felt in the atmosphere. Nothing logical, just a knowledge that there was something up there. Watching you. Hating you. Something evil!

3

The village of Woodside had not changed throughout the last hundred years. Its narrow winding main street had been made long before motorised transport and was stubbornly clinging to tradition. Subsidence created potholes and cracked tarmac as though it was a subtle manoeuvre to return to its former surface of mud and stones. One shop, so insignificant among the grey stone cottages that it seemed to be trying to hide from strangers, and a church that would be undergoing structural repairs if ever the twenty-year-old restoration fund realised sufficient money. The aged verger still scythed the grass in the churchyard and maintained that modern mowing machines were 'no good and made too much noise for quiet graveyards.'

The Cat, like everything else in Woodside had rejected progress. Picturesque inside and out it could have commanded trade from afar but Eli Lewis, its publican, was determined that that should not happen. Strangers were discouraged by the permanent layer of dust in the bar and the inhospitability of Eli and his ageing wife. Outsiders were served in silence, with a mute message to 'drink up and be away'.

Janie was aware of the hostile atmosphere the moment she followed Peter into the Cat on Sunday evening, as grey eyes hardened like chips of slate and focused on Gavin. She half-expected the grumpy greying man behind the bar to snarl 'Oi, no children allowed in the bar' but he didn't. Maybe he was just curious.

'A pint of bitter, a gin and lemonade and an orange juice.' Peter glanced

casually around the room. Four old men clad in Sunday suits that had probably belonged to their fathers before them were engrossed in a game of dominoes in the far corner. Two younger men, maybe in their early forties, sat stoically regarding the newcomers across pint mugs of ale. Farmworkers, probably, still wearing their rough working clothes. Peter decided. Rugged, resenting this sudden intrusion upon their pub routine. Fingers gnarled and thickened. One man had an unruly shock of greying hair that would resist the efforts of the strongest comb; the other was balding round the crown, and had a nose that had once been broken and not set. As primitive as their peasant forefathers.

Eli Lewis took his time, deliberately blowing dust off the small glass before he tipped the contents of a bottle of concentrated orange juice into it. He eyed Janie as though challenging her to comment upon the lack of hygiene.

She glanced away, wishing the two men on the other side of the room wouldn't keep staring. They gave her the same feeling as the woods and fields bordering Hodre. It was unnerving, a mingling of guilt and fear that made her want to flee, that she had no right to be here.

'Cheers.' Peter put their drinks down on the rickety table. 'Here's to the first of many pints at the Cat.'

Peter lowered himself on to a stool. Gavin was playing with a beer mat and Janie was meticulously checking on the manicuring of her fingernails. Somebody had to say something soon to break the heavy silence, and the onus was on him.

'Nice little pub you've got here.' His remark was addressed to Eli Lewis, who appeared to have a sudden urge to wipe the dust from his shelves of glasses and tankards. 'I expect you get packed out in the summer months.'

'No.' Eli's voice reminded Peter of rusty hinges being forced back. 'We don't and we're not going to encourage tourists. Woodside is one village that's going to keep its dignity. We don't take to outsiders.'

'Including us?' Peter's question was tinged with a sudden bitterness and anger. If these people wanted to force an issue then he'd take it up.

'Not just you.' The landlord of the Cat continued with his dusting. 'Outsiders generally. That fellow Blackstone who

owns Hodre, what right has he buying up our land and then not even living in the place, letting it go to rack and ruin, hiring it out to townles every year?'

'It was up for sale for months before he bought it,' Peter snapped. 'The locals had every chance to buy it.'

'That's not the point. It shouldn't've been sold outside the village.'

'Well, I wouldna' live there, rent free.' One of the two men sitting in close proximity to the Foggs' table suddenly spoke, in a whining voice. 'Not me. And neither would Don here, 'cause he knows the place as well as I do. Don't you, Don?'

'That I do.' The one called Don was staring intently into his beer. 'Wouldna' go there at night would we, Mick?'

'No, we wouldn'a, Don.' Obviously their conversation consisted of a string of approval-seeking questions, Peter decided. 'No, we wouldna' go anywhere near Hodre, I doubt we would. Not after what happened to the Beddoes. Would we,

Mick?'

'No.' A stoic silence followed. Peter felt his nerves starting to tingle. Jesus, these berks were giving him the creeps. "The boy first. A riding accident. That 'orse was crazy, you'd only got to look at its eyes to see that. They never oughta let the kid get anywhere near it. Threw 'im, dragged 'im right down the field afore it split 'is 'ead open on the bottom o' those granary steps. Folks reckon you can still see the bloodstains on the bottom step if you look close enough. Don't they, Don?'

'Aye, if anybody's foolish enough to go up there. Gives you the creeps in the daytime, but you'd go stark ravin' mad in the dark. Not as we'd go there anytime, would we, Mick?'

'Naw. But the Beddoes woman wasn't long followin' the boy, was'er, Don?'

'S'right. Cancer they said. Natural causes. But there's nothin' natural at Hodre. Fair ate 'er away, so they say, and when the end was near even the drugs they gave 'er couldn't stop 'er from screamin'. Some say if you go up there after dark you can still hear 'er, but I'd say them screams were comin' from that stone circle, wouldna' you, Mick?'

'Could well be. After all screams do come from the circle so they say. But me, I wouldna' want to go up there to find out. The Beddoes woman, they reckon they 'ad to cremate 'er to burn whatever it was that ate 'er up. The old man should never've stopped there on 'is own and it wasn't just because've what'd 'appened to the boy and 'is missus that 'e did what 'e did, was it, Don?'

'No. They say that when they found 'im 'angin' from one o' them first up on the circle the crows 'ad eaten 'alf 'is face away and there was a swarm o' wasps inside 'im so that they 'ad to 'ose 'im down afore they took 'im to the mortuary. But even what'd fed on 'im couldn't 'ide that expression on 'is face. Sheer terror. Now you tell me, Mick, does a bloke whose lost everythin' 'es's lived for get scared to hell about 'angin' 'imself? And why go up to the circle when there's plenty o' beams in the granary?'

' 'E don't that, Don. 'E don't care what 'e suffers so long as he dies.'

'So old Beddoes saw somethin' afore 'e died. And you and me aren't gonna frighten ourselves so that we don't sleep tonight tryin' to figure out what it was.'

'S'right. And that's why this feller Blackstone don't come and live up there. 'E knows, found out maybe too late after Vd bought the place and bein' as 'im and Ruskin are at each other's throats, and 'e's too bloody stubborn to sell, 'e gets round it by lettin' it out to outsiders and the like.'

Peter's mouth had suddenly gone very dry. He took a long drink from his tankard; the beer tasted flat and stale. He glanced at Janie. She was white and her arm around Gavin was trembling slightly. Her eyes met his, sending a message that was predictably blaming him for having brought them here: Let's go, Peter, all this talk is scaring Gavin. He won't sleep tonight or any other night. We've got to get away from Hodre for good.

This conversation has been set up for our benefit, Peter decided. For some reason those two fellers want us to get the hell outa here. Well, their little ruse isn't going to work. Is it just because we're outsiders, or is there something else at the back of it?

Silence, just the clink of dominoes and the hissing of green wood in the

fireplace, 'Well, I just don't happen to believe in ghosts and that sort of rubbish.' He hoped the tremor in his voice didn't show. 'In fact this whole string of disasters attached to the Beddoes family was probably all caused by distress; the mother got cancer because of it and when she died the father hadn't anything else left to live for so he committed suicide. Rumours spread from there.'

'And what about the screams you 'ear up there at nights?' The one called Don fixed him with a penetrating glare. 'You explain that away, mister.'

'Well, we haven't heard any screams,' Peter snapped.

'Ah, not yet you 'aven't.' Mick gave a short mirthless laugh. 'But you've only been there a week or so, 'aven't you? T'ain't every night you 'ear screams, believe me. Just now and then. You wait till you 'ear 'em and let's 'ope it's not too late then!'

Janie had drained her glass. Gavin's orange juice was still untouched. 'I think we'd better be making a move, Peter.' Her voice was a husky croak. 'It isn't Saturday night, you know. Gavin has to go to school tomorrow.'

'In a minute.' He tried to sound casual. 'I haven't finished my drink yet.'

Mick and Don were on their feet, the heavy working boots scraping the quarried floor, Pettr noted with surprise that both wore leather knee-caps and calf-length leggings, a legacy of the past probably inherited from their farmworking fathers. Woodside was that kind of place.

'G'night, Eli.' They were both at the door now.

'Goodnight lads, see you in the week maybe, but I suppose as the moon's full Tuesday we may not.' Eli grunted, his lips parting in the nearest he ever got to a smile.

Janie stiffened. These people were mad, a race apart from civilisation as she knew it. What the dickens had a full moon to do with whether or not they visited the pub? Her skin prickled. Peter was taking his time. She could feel Gavin trembling against her. It was wrong of them to have brought him here. The silence settled back again, except for the dominoes and the logs on the fire. Eli Lewis was still dusting his glasses, glancing slyly at the newcomers every now and then, so that it got on Janie's nerves. God, why didn't he say something, even if it wasn't civil?

Those Jads working night shift this week?' Peter hadn't meant his question to sound like common busybodying. But it did.

'You could say that/ Eli spoke slowly, Jiis words flat and expressionless. 'And, on the other hand, you couldn't.'

In other words, mind your own bloody business. Peter tensed and swallowed the remainder of his ale. It was flat, there was no doubt about that. Probably the Cat only got through a few kegs a month.

'We'll be on our way.' Much to Janie's relief, he put down his empty tankard and nodded to the landlord. 'Maybe next week we'll come on Saturday so we can stop longer.'

Tm not sure about the boy.' Eli Lewis's eyes narrowed into an expression of sheer hostility. 'I know some of these townies' pubs let folks bring kids, but that's up to the landlord. Meself, I don't think it's a good thing, neither

for the kids nor the trade. Kinda restricts the customer's conversation, if you see what I mean.'

'Well it certainly didn't restrict that cheerful pair.' Peter felt Janie tugging at his sleeve. 'In fact they were doing their damndest to put the wind up all of us.'

'Not Mick Bostock and Don Peters,' Eli shook his head gravely. 'They wouldna' deliberately scare women and kids. On the other hand, they wouldna' be afraid, o' speakin' the truth, no matter.'

'Well they certainly let their imaginations run away with them tonight.' Peter forced a laugh. 'Not that we mind listening to a few local rumours and taking them with a pinch o'salt.'

'I'd forget the salt if I was you.' Eli gripped the edge of the bar, his wizened knuckles showing white. 'Them two aren't fanciful. Far from it. Matter o' fact boys like you'll go a long way to find the likes of them agin'. Don't take 'em as rumours, mister. Take my advice and heed 'em as - warnings.'

Peter felt as though somebody had thrown the door wide and let in a gust of Arctic wind. 'We'll see you again, landlord.'

'That's as it maybe, sir.' He picked up his cloth again. 'But as I said, not with the boy. I'm afraid you'll have to leave him at home. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.'

'What a horrible depressing place.' They were back in the car before Janie spoke again. She was sitting in the back with Gavin, the boy leaning up against her and clutching her hand. 'We're not going there again. If you're desperate for a pint, Peter, I'm afraid you'll have to find somewhere else or go on your own. Every one of those men in there gave me the creeps.'

'Typical country folk.' Peter seemed engrossed in negotiating the steep winding lane which led back up to Hodre. 'When you've lived in a remote village all your life and never gone anywhere else it becomes your own little world and you resent any intrusion, however harmless. It was just a not very clever way of trying to get us to pack up and go.'

Janie sighed. She found herself wincing as she followed the glare of the powerful headlights, apprehensive of what they might reveal in their twin beams. Questions to which she had no answer hammered into her brain. What did that pair of ghouls, Bostock and Peters, find to do on moonlight nights? Were there really screams to be heard coming from the Hodre stone circle?

Warnings.

Oh God, she had to persuade Peter to leave. Those two had been right, she'd sensed it all week; there was definitely something inexplicably sinister about Hodre!

4

When Janie looked in Gavin's bedroom later that evening she knew that he was faking sleep again; his eyes were closed too tightly so that the lids trembled and his body was too taut, too tense for slumber. Gently she stepped back out on to the landing and closed the door. She must not let him see that she was afraid too. She had to keep her courage for a day or two and in the meantime persuade Peter to leave. And pray that they would be safe until then. Oh God, every minute was hell!

She could hear the typewriter clacking in the front room as she came down the stairs. The sound made her angry; he didn't have any need to work on Sunday evening. It was as though he was doing it deliberately to shut himself off from herself and Gavin, a kind of subtle separation.

Angrily she threw the door open. Her husband was sitting at his ancient Imperial 66 pounding at the keys, one hand half-raised, as if to silence her before she spoke.

Peter!' She almost stamped her foot. 'Do you realise just how terrified Gavin is?'

Annoyingly he finished a paragraph and read it through before slowly turning to face her. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'Maybe about the Wilsons but I'm going to have a discreet word with Hughes about that in the morning, anyway.'

'I don't mean about the Wilsons.' She kicked the door closed behind her, stood with arms akimbo. 'I mean about tonight?'

That was all poppycock.' He grinned. 'I'm surprised at an intelligent girl like you taking any notice of it.'

'You don't understand.' Her cheeks were becoming red. 'Because you're too immersed in this damned book of yours to realise what's going on around you.'

'And what is going on around me?'

She had to get herself under control before she spoke. 'I don't know. All I know is that there is something here, something that has me looking over my shoulder most of the time, wanting to hide in the house, to lock the doors so that it can't get me. But you wouldn't notice because you're all wrapped up in this book of yours. If a bomb went off you wouldn't hear it.'

'It's all in the mind.' He picked up the typewriter cover and draped it untidily over the machine, deciding to struggle with the chapter ending in the morning. 'The change from town to country, the remoteness. The silence. It'll pass off and in a few weeks you'll feel as if you've never lived anywhere else/

'In a few weeks!' Her voice rose to a pitch. 'Peter, for God's sake I can't stand it here any longer and neither can Gavin. He could've been killed yesterday. He's frightened out of his wits.'

'He's just worried about the Wilsons.' Peter thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans as he stood up. 'We'll get that settled. Look, if there was anything here to be frightened of, d'you think I'd let you stay?'

'You're stubborn enough to blind yourself to everything except your writing,' she sighed, 'and I can see I'm wasting my time with you. Another thing, that cat hasn't turned up. I last saw it on Friday morning.'

'Cats often go off for days on end. Probably he's found himself an attractive she-cat somewhere.'

And talking of sex, he thought, that's one commodity that's in very short supply at Hodre. Maybe Janie was brewing up for a period and that was the cause of her tenseness. He tried to work out the date, and realised then just how much he had cut himself off from Janie lately.

Janie had abandoned all hope of sleep. Her mind, her body simply refused to relax so that slumber could take over. Tomorrow she would get to work on those new curtains for the bedroom window; at least it would shut out the moonlight. A full moon was almost as bright as daylight. She'd never really noticed it at Perrycroft; she had become accustomed to the all-night orange radiance of street-lighting filling the bedroom. Moonlight was more beautiful, certainly. But it was also more sinister.

She found herself holding her breath so that she could listen, though she didn't want to listen, just close her eyes and go to sleep, to get away from this awful place for a few hours. It was like some compelling force; she had to look and listen in case something stole upon her. Like what? She didn't know. That was the trouble.

Peter was asleep, breathing rhythmically. Damn him, he was so insensitive.

Now she was listening for Gavin, afraid that he might get up and go outside again. No, he wouldn't do anything like that at night.

A dog was barking somewhere. Probably a sheep dog from the Ruskin farm on the other side of the big forest. Somehow it didn't sound like a dog; son of - wild! A long mournful howl that seemed to echo across the hills. She wondered if by any chance a wild animal could be loose. It wasn't out of the question. Only a year or so ago there had been some kind of huge feline creature on the loose (oh God, that was somewhere in Wales, too!), and a number of sheep had been killed by it. Like that puma in Surrey which was still supposed to be at large according to the press.

There was something in those hills all right.

Janie slipped into a fitful doze, still listening subconsciously.

Then, suddenly, she heard a harsh long-drawn-out scream that jarred her brain with the force of an electric shock, juddering every nerve in her body and bringing her up to a sitting position before she was full awake. Her hands covered her ears in a futile attempt to shut it out. Waking, she tried to tell herself that it had been a dream, that the events and fears of this past week had combined and exploded in one mind-shattering nightmare.

Trembling. Listening. The room seemed to vibrate with the hellish animal-like cry, and the moonlight dimmed as though even the silvery orb in the heavens feared to cast its ethereal glow upon whatever lurked in the wooded hills.

For a few seconds she seemed- to be paralysed. She was unable to shout or to shake her sleeping husband, imprisoned by that same inexplicable force which had taunted her and terrified her ever since their arrival at Hodre.

'Peter! Now it was Janie who was screaming, her limbs freed so that she could grasp Peter's shoulder and dig her long fingernails deep as she shook him. 'Peter, for God's sake wake up!'

'What the hell's the matter?' He rolled over and opened his eyes. 'Can't a feller get a good night's sleep without - '

'Didn't you hear it? You must have!'

'Hear what?' He struggled up on to an elbow.

'That scream. Something out there's screaming. Listen.'

Together they listened, but heard only the distant hooting of an owl. So peaceful. And so menacing.

Anticipating another scream, Janie clung frantically to the man at her side. It came as an anti-climax, so different this time, harsh like the dog's barking had been earlier; but not so ear-shattering, not so hellish, as the one which had awoken her. It died slowly away and somewhere there was an answering bark.

'Foxes!* Suddenly Peter burst out laughing, a peal of enforced mirth and relief. 'My God, that's what those screams were that people reckon they hear up on Hodre after dark, the screech of vixens! I read somewhere that vulpine mating begins any time from mid-November onwards. You'd think country folk would know that.'

'No!' Janie gave an indignant hiss. 'That's not what I heard, Peter. The first scream was nothing like that at all! It was the most unearthly sound I've ever heard!'

Damn it, her nerves were getting the better of her, he thought. Of course it was foxes; Janie, like the villagers, was letting herself be scared. He had to reassure her right now before she became hysterical.

'I tell you it's foxes. Listen again for a moment.'

Silence. Peter thought he could hear Janie's heart pounding; maybe it was his own. He prayed that the vixen would screech again. It did, a few seconds later - a wild, hideous scream that shattered the stillness and made the prowling male of the species bark again. Both animals were somewhere in the big forest.

There, what did I tell you? That was a fox, all right.'

'That was. 'Janie's voice quavered. 'But the other wasn't. I tell you, Peter, it was the most unearthly, awful sound I've ever heard in my life.'

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. Women! Once they got a stupid notion into their heads there was no way of changing their minds. 'Have it your own way, but I'm getting back to sleep because I've a lot of work to catch up on tomorrow. As far as I'm concerned it was mating foxes up in the forest and I don't want to hear any more about it.'

'But it wasn't up in the forest, not the sound I heard, anyway,' she almost screamed. 'Peter, it came from that stone circled

'For Christ's sake! This is sheer nonsense. You're forcing yourself to believe what that pair of bumpkins in the pub were ranting on about. No wonder Gavin's scared. You're frightening him to death. Now, I'm getting to sleep. You please yourself.'

Janie went over to the window, and stared out forcing her confused brain to register details; the sloping grassland ethereal and silvery, the bare hedges. In the distance the mass of pine trees seeming to glower threateningly. She tried not to turn her head, but in the end was compelled to, mentally flinching from the stunted pines only a couple of hundred yards away - so eerie, so majestic, so vibrant that she could almost feel their power. Wide-eyed, frightened, she was held there at the window as though they were hypnotising her, warning her.

Finally they let her go and she shuffled barefooted and trembling back to bed and lowered herself down alongside Peter. He was already asleep, she could

tell by his regular breathing. The fool, he had scorned the final warning, scoffed at it. And there might not be another . . .

For the rest of the night she lay there just staring up at the ceiling, watching the latticed square of moonlight pale until finally it was replaced by the cold grey light of a mountain winter dawn. That scream - she could still hear it like a catchy tune that persistently sticks in the brain. She heard it again and again, a long-drawn-out cry of agony, the embodiment of every fear known to man or beast, the ultimate in terror.

Her train of thought led back to wild beasts, ferocious creatures that had escaped from captivity to return to the only way of life they knew: stalking their prey with a ruthless patience, pouncing out of the darkness and ripping it to shreds with huge sharp claws. Nature's law, the law of the jungle.

And Hodre was now that jungle.

5

Malcolm Hughes had been headmaster of Woodside school for the past twenty-five years. He had lived in the village from an early age, and he had studied there himself before progressing to university. A number of postings had followed but in the end the trail had led back to Woodside because that was his ambition. At fifty-five they would let him see his retirement there and even afterwards, he told himself, his presence would be indispensable, for truly no outsider could fully understand the people of this place.

Well-built and balding, the schoolmaster had a reputation for being bad-tempered and a law unto himself. Miss Haverill, who taught the infant class, lived in fear and trembling of the headmaster but, Malcolm decided, that was the way it should be. Had not assistant teachers in his own schooldays feared the headmaster? Of course they had. There was one word to sum it all up - discipline! And discipline stemmed from the top of the tree, found its way right down to the roots and ensured a strong and healthy growth throughout. That was the trouble with society today: no discipline. The blame for recent city rioting and looting lay with parents and school teachers, principally the latter. A schoolmaster did not simply discipline his pupils, he disciplined the parents as well.

Malcolm Hughes took his time lighting his large rustic pipe as he weighed up this young man who had deemed to presume upon his valuable time first thing on a Monday morning. Outsiders could cause problems because they had not had the Woodside upbringing and looked for psychological reasons behind their children's inability to conform to what this small society demanded. They did not accept what you told them; they came up with ideas of their own which were all nonsense anyway. This fellow sitting before him was a writer; well, he'd written a book, put it that way. Mass market fiction, a sacrilege to the English language, laced with bad grammar and even worse language. It was all a con-trick, damaging to the tradition of English literature. A semi-hippy, he had not even bothered to put a suit on to consult his son's headmaster. Certainly discipline was lacking here. Hughes sighed audibly.

'My son is afraid of being bullied,' Peter Fogg said, moving his head slightly in an attempt to dodge a drifting cloud of scented tobacco smoke.

'But he hasn't actually been bullied.' Hughes knitted his bushy eyebrows into a stern countenance, which in his younger days he had practised in front of a mirror. 'Young boys are prone to many fears, their imaginations are fertile and often play-ground quarrels are magnified out of all proportion.'

'He's frightened of the Wilson boys.' Peter watched the other closely for a reaction, and saw the grey eyes beneath the brows narrow slightly.

'Oh, the Wilsons . . . ' The schoolmaster drew heavily on his pipe and took his time expelling the smoke. They can be a bit over rumbustuous at times but there's no harm in the lads. I've had to stamp down on them on the odd occasion in the past, mind you.'

Their elder brothers tried to run Gavin down on their motorbikes.' Peter sensed Hughes erecting barricades, a kind of stonewall psychological defence. They could have killed him. I sent them packing but the younger ones are threatening to beat Gavin up today, because his parents aren't Welsh!

That's nonsense.'

'Precisely. That's why I'm here now.'

'I assure you Mr - er - um - Fogg, that no such thing could take place on the premises of this school. I would not allow anything more than an exuberant friendly brawl on the playground, I promise you.'

Then how is it,' Peter spoke slowly, his words seeming to cut a path through the thick haze of pipe smoke which enshrouded the big man on the other side of the desk, 'that these two young hooligans blacked Kevin Arnold's eye and got him down on the ground and kicked hell out of him?'

Malcolm Hughes started visibly. 'Come now, Mr Fogg, that really is taking it too far. I know the incident which you are referring to, of course. The Wilsons and young Arnold quarrelled over something during playtime one day last week. There was an argument and I believe a blow was struck but Miss Haverill was quick to intervene and - '

'But she didn't intervene quite quickly enough,' Peter snapped, 'Look, Mr Hughes, suppose you drop all this facade you've built up about school discipline and the like. I know as well as you do that the Wilsons and probably some of the other kids are hooligans, given the chance. I'm not here to complain about young Arnold's black eye, just to tell you that it's not to happen to my boy. If it does. . . '

'Is - is this some kind of threat, Mr Fogg?' Malcolm Hughes leaned forward, the veins in his thick neck standing out like lengths of blue cord.

'It depends.' The other stood up. 'On whether anything happens to my boy. It's your responsibility to see that it doesn't.'

Hughes was puffing steadily on his pipe. How dare this upstart of an outsider come here and talk to him like this. He thought of the Wilsons and remembered how the tyres on his car had been slashed. There were things that were best left alone, but when parents complained it made life very difficult, especially if you weren't Welsh! Malcolm Hughes was English. With a Welsh name but born in Stoke-on-Trent, he'd come to Woodside with his parents at the age of three. Most people thought he was Welsh - except the Wilsons! Somehow they'd found out and life was a kind of brinkmanship. You never knew for sure what they would do, and if they did anything you never found out until it was too late. You could never prove anything. They were a kind of private terrorist organisation that you couldn't get to grips with, fighting you under the cover of darkness. They had obviously got it in for the Foggs, which wasn't surprising. Mark and Jon would rough the young kid up at school, the elder twins would - well, there was no way of guessing to what lengths they would go. The holiday cottage that had been burned down one night last winter,

that was the Wilsons' doing for sure. You had to tread carefully. Run with the hare and the hounds.

'Leave it to me.' The headmaster blew out a thick cloud of smoke, which he hoped would hide the flicker of fear in his eyes, the slight trembling of his lower lip. I'll see that no harm comes to your boy.'

'Good.' Peter smiled. 'In which case I'll not take up any more of your valuable time, Mr Hughes. Good day to you.'

Peter had not missed that brief expression of fear on the schoolmaster's face. He's shit-scared of the Wilsons, Peter thought. In fact he's scared of everything, including his own shadow. A big bluffing coward, another breed of the bullying species.

He drove slowly back to Hodre, a kind of unwillingness to go home because Janie would be waiting for him, demanding a word-for-word report of his meeting at the school. OK, he'd tell her. But it wouldn't satisfy her. It didn't really satisfy him, because Malcolm Hughes was just stalling, hoping that the Wilson boys wouldn't beat Gavin up and that everything would be all right.

Peter was surprised to see that Janie's Mini was not parked on the verge adjoining the cottage. In a way he was relieved, because it would give him a respite from her continual nagging barrage that there was something odd going on. After a while he almost believed that there was, but he must not believe it, or they would never stick it out for a year. It was just the sudden contrast between town and country life, that was all. Janie would get used to this place in due course and in the meantime he just had to show a little forbearance.

He had intended to go straight back to work on that difficult chapter conclusion. Now, suddenly, he wasn't in the mood. He needed to wind down, to relax for an hour or so and get Malcolm Hughes and the Wilsons out of his system.

A walk, maybe. He remembered the missing cat. Not that he was bothered much about it himself; it was only a stray that had appeared from somewhere and taken up residence at Hodre, and he had never liked cats. But Snowy would reduce the mice and rat population and save an awful lot of trouble where Janie was concerned. Also, it kept Gavin happy. So the sooner it was found the better, and the search offered the chance of a walk and some much-needed fresh air. He could still smell that schoolmaster's rank pipe.

The cat could be three or four miles away, satisfying its sexual needs on some willing mate; on the other hand, it could have found an infestation of rats somewhere nearby in one of the hedgerows.

Peter went into the porch and donned his Wellington boots and duffle coat. Then he stood for a moment wondering where to begin. Somehow he didn't fancy going up to the forest again. The place had an inhospitable look about it, especially today when there was an abundance of low cloud.

He had woken with a slight headache, the kind which gets progressively worse as the day goes on, probably because of the disturbance last night, coupled with his anger over that stupid conversation in the Cat. And the meeting with Hughes had made him tense. Perhaps he was suffering from eye-strain too.

He groaned to himself. If this mood didn't evaporate soon he'd never be able to get down to any more work today. There was something nagging at his

subconscious, a depression of sorts; and all this totally unnecessary bullshit which was upsetting Janie and Gavin.

And something else! Oh Jesus Christ, he was getting edgy, peering ahead of himself into the low cloud, which seemed to be thickening, as though he expected some kind of apparition to appear suddenly. Take a grip on yourself, Peter Pogg, or eke you'll be getting as nervy as everybody else. All the same it was a bit creepy out here, a silent lifeless grey world. Not even a crow or a magpie about; the sheep which had strayed down from the forest were nowhere in sight. Perhaps they had returned whence they had come (probably back to Ruskin's huge flock), or else they were huddling in some corner hidden by the fog. Frightened, like himself!

Damn it, I'm not scared.

Yes, you are. You just won't admit it.

Where the hell had that bloody cat gone? What chance was there of finding it out here in thickening low cloud? None, but he was going to search for it just the same, a show of bravado that wouldn't fool even himself.

Well, he wasn't going up to the forest again. There wasn't any point, because if it was up there he'd never find it. Walk the boundaries, follow the tall straggling hawthorn hedge that marked the perimeter of Hodre, and in due course he would complete the circle and arrive back at the cottage. He'd have a good look at that stone circle on the way.

Peter shivered; it was the raw damp atmosphere, of course. He struck off to the left, found the hedgerow and began to follow it. A sudden thought crossed his mind: Janie hadn't said she was going anywhere today, but then why the hell should she? They'd had quite a tiff in the night over that screaming vixen and when Janie went into one of her sulks it might be days before she got back to normal domestic conversation. Sod her, he couldn't pander to her every little tantrum. Let her work it off in her own good time.

Gigantic shapes loomed out of the opaque greyness ahead of him, mighty pine trees that would have attained fifty or sixty feet in height if the winds hadn't bent them, fashioning them over the years into weird misshapen caricatures.

Something glided from the topmost branches of the nearest tree, flapped its massive black wings just once to maintain its elevation and gave a deep cronk, before the thick grey vapour swallowed it up. A raven; while there are ravens in the Tower of London England will never fall to a foreign foe. Peter smiled to himself and tried to remember where he'd read or heard that saying. Stupid really, because they were nothing more than oversize crows. Maybe they had some kind of magical powers. He shivered again and began fastening the toggles on his coat. Coming up here didn't seem such a good idea after all; the atmosphere was damp and far from healthy, and if anything his headache had worsened. It would have been preferable to have remained in the small front room, got a fire going until the place was unhealthily snug and tried to wrestle with the conclusion to chapter one. Chapter endings were an art in themselves; they had to make the reader want to turn to the next page. If the author got it wrong, then the book was likely to be put down and not picked up again - and that was how more than a few best-selling writers had drifted into oblivion.

So this was the stone circle! Somehow he had climbed above it; possibly the bank of cloud caught up on the mountains had screened it from him until now. It was only three hundred yards from the cottage, yet the steepness of the

incline made it seem like a mile.

It was situated in a kind of no-man's-land. The hedgerows seemed to peter out here as though the rocky earth was too poor to support the growth of hawthorn. Or perhaps it was left unscreened for the convenience of tourists. Peter could not imagine anybody wanting to climb all the way up here just to look at that. There was nothing to see except a few pines that had obviously been planted long after the druids (if any had ever used this place) had passed on. Some stones; he counted them - nine. Maybe there had been more and local farmers had dragged them away for their own use over the centuries. Just a bare, roughly circular, patch of land; the entwining branches of the trees, which had been planted too close to each other, shut out the sunlight. A gloomy place; even Peter Fogg as a writer could not find words to describe it more fully. An historical nonentity. Eerie!

A deep-throated croak and a swish of wings had him cowering, throwing up his hands to protect himself. In a momentary pang of fear he became primitive man in a world that was still young, with some hideous prehistoric winged monster about to swoop down on him. That bloody raven again! The damned thing was persistent, cheeky, in no way afraid of man. Now why the hell had it come back here to this circle of desolation when surely there was food to be scavenged in the fields? Even now, it was circling beyond his range of vision in the fog, calling angrily as though it saw him as a trespasser and was ordering him to leave.

And as he turned in a half-circle to follow the irate cronking of the invisible bird, Peter suddenly saw why the big black bird was eager to return to this stone circle. Oh, Jesus Christ Almighty!

It was Snowy. Well, it was a white cat, anyway, although it was doubtful whether it was still individually recognisable. Peter stepped back a pace, his instincts screaming at him to run and keep on running; only it seemed that all the strength had drained from his legs. He felt the bile rise in his throat and thought he was going to vomit. But he neither fled nor spewed, just stood and stared in disbelief with bulging eyes. It couldn't be; he must be imagining it, in the same way that Janie had been letting her fears run riot lately. Nobody would possibly commit that kind of atrocity on a harmless cat.

But somebody had, and as if he needed further proof the bloodied feline corpse dangling from the branch above his head swung round in the windless atmosphere, dripping thick scarlet fluid from the gash which had opened up its stomach. It seemed to look down on him with dead eyes; its open jaws, frozen with rigor mortis looked as if they were trying to move and say, 'They did this to me!'

Its belly had been slit right up into its throat in a gory T-shaped wound and the rope round its neck tied so tightly that the head had bulged out of proportion to the rest of its mangled body. Pitiful. Hideous.

Peter backed away, glancing around him. The fog had moved in and thickened still further, and for one awful second he experienced a sense of disorientation, a feeling that he had suddenly been transported to another world, a hostile land of terrible atrocities where the perpetrators lurked in the mist. He realised he was shaking uncontrollably. Don't be a bloody jool, pull yourself together.

He forced himself to think logically. The Wilsons, of course; this was their revenge for Saturday morning's encounter, a cowardly way of getting back at him through a dumb animal. Peter had never liked cats but suddenly he wanted to burst into a torrent of tears on behalf of this one. Oh God, it was awful.

Undoubtedly it was the cat's death scream Janie had heard in the night, a shriek of feline agony as the knife gutted it whilst it still lived.

Well, at least there was an explanation for what had happened during the moonlit hours, revolting as it was. Otherwise Janie might have gone off at a tangent about spirits of ancient druids carrying out blood sacrifice, or something like that. He'd have to tell her; maybe he could bury the cat before Gavin came home and between them they could concoct some feasible white lie. Or just leave it that Snowy was missing, and possibly buy Gavin a kitten or some other pet. That was the best way - but, damn it, those louts weren't going to get away with this.

Peter was still shaking when he arrived back at the cottage, but now it was with a burning fury. He thought about phoning the RSPCA. No, the police were best. He'd get hold of the local copper and put him in the picture. This victimisation of English residents had to be stopped; these vandals had to be taught to respect the law, to obey the rules of society.

And if the law wouldn't co-operate, then he'd sort the Wilsons out himself! Peter paused in the doorway and found himself glancing back in the direction of the stone circle. The hill fog had come right down and obscured everything. He shivered.

It was just as Janie said: you got the feeling that something was up there in the hills watching you. But that was nonsense, all in the mind. He almost convinced himself with an effort, but not quite.

He went inside, consulted the 'dog-eared telephone directory and dialled the number of the village police station.

6

Gavin had been dreading morning playtime throughout the preceding lesson. Mr Hughes didn't make him feel any easier; it was almost as though he had singled him out with his bad tempered baleful glare time after time. Mark and Jon Wilson were sitting at the back of the classroom. Gavin heard them sniggering together, bringing a feeling like an acute bout of colic to the pit of his stomach. It was all Dad's fault; he ought not to have gone and complained to the headmaster. In a way it was as if Mr Hughes and the Wilson brothers had joined forces to make life uncomfortable for the helpless outsider.

'Right, that'll do for now,' Hughes grunted. He fixed his gaze on Gavin again and picked up his pipe from the desk. 'Playtime, lads. Out you all go. I don't want anybody hanging behind in the classroom.'

A sudden rush for the door, boys and girls eager to shake off the boredom of forty minutes of mathematics, chattering amongst themselves. The Wilsons were first out, not even glancing back, an urgency about their movements.

'You, too, boy.' The headmaster regarded Gavin steadily. 'You heard what I said. Fresh air is what you need to get rid of that pallid complexion of yours.' An insult that was meant to hurt: You don't fit in here but you'll damned well do what everybody else does, like it or not.

Gavin nodded, his lower lip trembling. But he wasn't going to give the schoolmaster the satisfaction of seeing him cry.

It was damp and foggy outside in the playground. Gavin stood on the edge of the concrete compound. He saw a group of children playing football with a sagging, partially deflated old ball, trying to kick it between the stanchions

of a rusty climbing frame. Some younger ones were playing tag, squealing and shouting.

He had a feeling of not being wanted, of a general unwillingness to allow him to join in, to mix with them. It had never been like this at Perrycroft; everybody played with everybody else. Sometimes you quarrelled but it was never over anything very important and was usually forgotten when the bell went for lessons.

'Well, if it isn't the English creep!'

He stiffened as he recognised one of the Wilsons' voices behind him. He didn't know which one - they both sounded the same. He wondered whether to run back into the classroom but decided against it. Mr Hughes was still in there marking homework. He'd be angry and send him straight back outside. It was no good running when there was nowhere to run to.

'You haven't forgotten what we said on Friday, have you?' They were edging forward, one on either side of him. 'We told you what we do to the English bastards!'

Suddenly both Gavin's wrists were seized and pulled behind his back, so that he let out a cry of pain. Leering juvenile faces were thrust close to his own, twin expressions of hate that went far beyond their years.

'You English have no right here,' Jon Wilson spat. 'My dad says so. He says we oughta beat the living daylights outa you foreigners^'

'Yeah,' Mark agreed. 'And we always do what our dad says, don't we Jon? Else he beats the living daylights outa us. So we gotta do it whether we likes it or not. But we likes it.'

They pulled him back and shoved him hard up against the wall of the school building, then banged his head against the rough stone, so that there was a momentary blaze of blinding lights before his eyes. He cried out.

'Knock 'is bloody teeth out, Jon. Black 'is eyes!'

'Hold it!' Jon caught his brother's arm. 'You know what our dad says: you don't leave no marks on anybody, else they can get you for it. Hit 'im in the guts, it don't bruise there.'

Gavin doubled up and would have fallen had they not been holding him. Hard short jabs seemed to explode his abdomen, making him gasp for breath. He was not able even to cry out with pain, but seemed to deflate like the old football the children were still kicking about.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. No more than half a dozen below-the-belt punches, and then his attackers released their hold on him and stood back as he slumped to the ground clutching at his stomach - trying to breathe, retching, groaning, writhing like a worm that has been speared by a gardener's fork. Even the tears wouldn't come. A terrible fear that they had injured him permanently, that he'd never walk again, flooded his mind. He looked up and saw their leering faces through a blur, like a reflection in a pool distorted by ripples.

'That's for what your dad did to our Dai,' Jon Wilson spat. 'And it's a warning about what'll happen to your pa and maybe your ma too if they don't get their stinking English hides out of Hodre. You tell 'em, and don't forget we didn't do nothin' to you. These other kids'll swear blind we never touched

you. Get it?'

Gavin nodded; he didn't mean to but somehow his head bobbed up and down. A sudden surge of pain made him almost black out, and when he looked up again they'd gone to join the others in kicking the old football. Everybody was totally oblivious to his suffering.

Gavin got to his knees and dusted himself down. He knew he could cry now, but he forced himself to hold the tears back. He straightened up, then doubled over again clutching at his stomach; it was as if a car had run over him and squashed his intestines into a flat mulch. Dizzily he held on to the wall, half afraid that the twin bullies might come back and start on him again.

He thought about going back inside and reporting the incident to Mr Hughes. That meant the schoolmaster would have to take some action. Or would he? Just a bit of a scuffle, boy. They haven't hurt you; goodness, you haven't even got any bruises!

Gavin knew his mother was terrified too. Afraid of Hodre and something that neither of them understood. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. The pain in his stomach was receding; it was a dull ache now, like wind that couldn't escape.

But his fear wasn't lessening. It was growing stronger.

Just as Peter replaced the telephone he heard Janie's Mini pull on to the grass verge outside and the slight judder of pre-ignition as she switched off the engine. He sighed; she'd have to be told the facts now that PC Calvert was on his way up here. He'd hoped she would not return for an hour or two, giving him time to get rid of the law before the cat's disappearance was discussed.

'Hi.' She kicked the door open and came in carrying a cardboard box in her arms. A number of tiny holes had been gouged in its sides with a sharp instrument.

'What's that?' His curiosity overcame all the fears which were crowding in on him.

'Look and see,' she smiled, lowering the box on to the table and lifting one of the flaps.

He bent over, a look of astonishment on his face. 'A rabbit!'

'Yes.' She lifted out the small grey and white half-grown creature. It stared up at them with frightened eyes. 'There was a sign offering rabbits for sale outside one of the cottages in the village. I thought perhaps you could knock up a small hutch of some kind out of all that waste wood that's lying about up in the granary. The cat's been missing for nearly three days now and, well, I thought a pet of some kind might make up for it. Gavin's upset about Snowy, you can tell that. I'm afraid - I get the feeling that - something's happened to that cat.'

'Yes.' He spoke slowly, trying not to meet her gaze. 'I'm afraid something has happened to it.'

'What - where is he?' Janie clutched the rabbit to her breast as though she feared that the same nameless fate might befall this creature also.

'That scream you heard last night - '

'It wasn't a fox!' Surely he wasn't going to start that argument all over again. 'I know it wasn't.'

'No, no it wasn't a fox.' He stared down at the floor. 'It - it was Snowy.'

'Oh my God, what's happened to him?'

The Wilsons.' Lay the blame first, the details could follow after. "They'll go to any lengths, apparently, with their campaign of terrorism against the English. They've killed Snowy.'

'Oh no! How?'

Well, she'd have to be told, because she would be here when the policeman arrived and he'd want to know every gory detail. They hanged him in a tree and gutted him.'

'How awful, how despicable!' She went a deathly colour that even her make-up could not hide. 'Where did they do it?'

Oh God, that was one question he wished she hadn't asked. 'One of those firs in the stone circle.'

She swayed. Peter grasped her arm, sure she was going to faint. He took the rabbit from her and put it back in the box.

'How - how are you so sure it was the Wilsons?' She clung to him and buried her face against his chest, and he felt the first sobs beginning. It wasn't just the cat; all her fears were building to a peak.

'It must be, part of their crazy campaign to drive the English out of Wales, as well as getting even with me for breaking up their biking session on Saturday.'

'No.' Her voice was low. 'It's not them, I know it. It's that circle - and whatever it is that's still alive up there.'

'Now you're being ridiculous.' Hell, he didn't sound very convincing. There's nothing up there - just a few big stones and some fir trees. It was the Wilsons who killed the cat.'

'Ah! right.' She gave a loud sigh. 'You're entitled to your opinion, just as I'm entitled to mine. Only I'm afraid I can't stick it here much longer, and neither can Gavin. If you're not prepared to leave, Peter, then I'm going to go and stay with my parents, and I'm taking Gavin with me.'

'I've got to stay.' His jaw became square, it always did when he was being stubborn. 'I've got to stay until I've written my book, and so far I'm not getting on very fast.' A note of anger began to creep into his voice. 'It seems that you're deliberately out to disrupt my work. Drop everything and go and make a rabbit hutch. There's bogeymen in the wood; druids have come back to haunt the old circle. And on top of that I've got this bloody peasant family doing their utmost to drive us out. Well I'm bloody well sick of it and I'm not budging for any of you. You go if you want to, but none of your spooks are going to drive me away.'

She opened her mouth to reply, but checked her angry retort as her ears picked up the sound of a car's engine, slowing, dying, and the metallic clang of a door slamming.

'That sounds like the police,' Peter said. 'Now perhaps we can get something done. Your fears allayed for a start. And then I can get on with my book in peace.'

PC Calvert was only a year or two off retirement age. Possibly he could have attained promotion to a higher rank had it not been for his, or rather his wife's, reluctance to move from Woodside. Her whole life centred round the small mountain village, and she had repeatedly insisted in the early years of their marriage that she would die if she went to live anywhere else. George Calvert had an open mind about the Woodside folk. They were a close-knit, superstitious, suspicious lot, but if you went along with them life was fairly easy. Who was to know if the regulars at the Cat continued drinking for an hour or so after closing time? In their own way the inhabitants of the village were law-abiding, so he let them alone, and they accepted him because he was Ella's husband and almost forgot that he was an outsider, born and bred in Cardiff. He was Welsh anyway, and that was the criterion.

Calvert carefully placed his flat hat upside down on the table and accepted the cup of tea which Jamie handed him, hoping that she wouldn't notice that his hand shook a little. Tall and thin, he looked ungainly on the small upright chair. His brow furrowed as he sipped his drink. He'd seen death many times during his career, and now suddenly he was shaken by the sight of a dead cat. It didn't make sense, he couldn't figure it out. It was the way it had been killed, of course; the sheer callousness of it all.

'It's those Wilsons,' Peter insisted, 'getting their own back on me.'

'Let's not accuse anybody without proof.' A village policeman had to be a diplomat at all times. 'And proof we certainly haven't got.' The last thing he wanted to say was, 'It looks like some kind of ritual killing to me, a sort of sacrifice.' There had been odd reports up and down the country of black magicians carrying out filthy blood rites in old churchyards and such places, but surely they'd never come to a place like Hodre. He'd have to word his report very carefully if he wasn't going to stir up a real hornets' nest. 'Look, Mr Fogg, I'm going to make a few discreet enquiries. If you'll leave it with me for a few days maybe I'll come up with something. On the face of it it looks like the work of vandals.'

'Tell me about the Wilsons.' Peter regarded the policeman steadily. 'The younger ones have been threatening my son at school.'

They're a bit of a rough lot' - a reluctant admission - 'the old man's got a permanent chip on his shoulder. I suppose having twins twice over didn't help.' Calvert laughed. 'He's drilled into his lads a kind of fanatical patriotism, sort of if somebody's not Welsh they're an enemy. There never used to be much bother but since one or two strangers drifted into Woodside the Wilsons seem to have taken it upon themselves to wage war on the English. Between you and me' - the constable, smiled faintly, winked and tapped his forehead with his finger - 'they're a bit dulally, if you know what I mean. I'm not saying they killed your cat and I'm not saying they didn't, but it's the kind of thing they would do. Maybe we'll find out, maybe we won't, but I'll give 'em a friendly warning that I think it might be them and there'll be trouble if they do anything else. Oh, and if they come up biking again and causing you trouble, just give me a buzz and I'll come up.'

PC Calvert finished his tea, picked up his hat and stood up. 'Well, it's been nice meeting you folks but I'll have to be tiddling along.'

'Just tell me one thing,' Peter said, and added, 'in confidence of course. What do Messrs Peters and Bostock do for a living?'

'Now why on earth do you ask that?' The policeman's eyebrows rose. 'You've not had any trouble with them have you?'

'No.' Peter smiled. 'Except that when we called in at the Cat for a drink last night they recounted a host of horrible legends and rumours purely for our benefit. I wondered why they went to work on moonlight nights in particular.'

'They're poachers.' Calvert's expression was grave. 'And tough customers at that. They've both done time, about three years ago. Twelve months apiece for maliciously wounding a gamekeeper one night. They damned near killed him. Fortunately out here there are no estates where game is reared in large numbers, and mostly they concern themselves with ground game - rabbits and hares - and most of the farmers round here turn a blind eye to it. In a way Peters and Bostock are doing them a favour by keeping the rabbits down. Mind you, if they see a pheasant they'll have it, and there's been reports of poultry gone missing from time to time. Take a tip from me, if they get working the fields round here at night and you hear 'em, let 'em get on with it. When it comes to doing unpleasant things and getting their own back on somebody for something, the Wilsons have got nothing on those two!'

Janie felt a little shiver run up and down her spine. Truly the night had a thousand eyes. And how many other unpleasant characters were roaming the fields and woods around Hodre during the nocturnal hours?

'Don't forget, any bother from anybody and I'll be right up'

'He's genuine,' Peter murmured, as they watched the blue and white Panda van winding its way back down the lane in the direction of Woodside. 'A real nice guy, the best so far in this place.'

'What about Hughes, the schoolmaster?'

'I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him, and he must weigh fifteen stone.' Peter's eyes narrowed. 'He's a coward and a bully and it's quite obvious to me that he's scared stiff of the Wilson family. I reckon from this morning onwards that he's scared of me too.' He laughed.

'I don't like the sound of this Peters and Bostock pair one little bit.' Janie entwined her fingers until the ends suffused with blood. 'Oh Peter, it isn't safe at nights with them prowling about. They've already been to prison for violence.' 'I doubt whether they'll harm us,' he smiled. 'All they're interested in is rabbits and hares, and as far as I'm concerned they're welcome to them'

'But they've got a grudge against us, you could tell that by the way they were talking in the pub last night.'

'Simply because we're English, and there must be an awful lot of other Welshmen who share their views.' 'Maybe they killed Snowy?'

'I doubt it very much. Country folk aren't like that. They enjoy their various field sports but they abhor cruelty and suffering. Me, I'm blaming the Wilsons but, as Calvert said, I doubt very much whether we'll ever prove it. Well, it doesn't look as if I'm going to get much work done today. I'd better go and cut that cat down and bury it. The last thing we want is for Gavin to go up the field and find it hanging up there. I'll do it right away.'

'And a hutch for the rabbit . . . ?' 'OK, OK. One thing at a time. First I'll go and see to the cat.'

He donned his duffle-coat and went out through the back door. The cloud had not lifted; if anything it had come down lower - a thick grey blanket that obscured everything and made weird shapes out of perfectly ordinary everyday things. Peter shivered. God, it was cold. The damp got right through no matter what he was wearing.

He didn't relish the prospect of going up to the circle again. It wasn't just the thought of having to look upon the horrendously mutilated cat again, or even that he'd have to handle the corpse this time- It went deeper than that; violent death in a silent grey world. Almost a - warning. Get out, or this might happen to you!

Peter licked his lips. His mouth was dry and his head was thumping like a voodoo drum. He gripped the handle of the spade he was carrying. It was more than just a tool, it was a weapon, a steel blade that would be deadly if it was used correctly to hit somebody at the right angle in the right place. It was a disconcerting thought, an association with the violence he loathed.

The twisted pines loomed up ahead of him through the fog, deformed giants making threatening gestures with their misshapen arms: Go away, you have been wanted! He held the spade tightly and felt tiny beads of cold sweat starting to break out on his body.

He'd work quickly - dig a hole and get the cat buried, then try and erase it from his memory. It was hanging from the furthest branch of the nearest pine. It was -

Oh Jesus Christ, the cat was gone! Just a single strand of frayed bloodsoaked rope . . .

He ran forward breathlessly and began to search the ground frantically. The rope must have snapped under the strain. Maybe the raven was responsible.

But the ground was bare. He scrabbled with the spade, scuffing up the dry earth as though he might uncover the bloodied corpse. No chance; an inch or two below the surface it was all solid rock. Hell, he should have brought a pick.

Where the bloody hell had that cat gone? Something had taken it within the last hour, since he had brought PC Calvert up here and shown him the grisly evidence. It was too high up for a prowling fox to reach, and too heavy for a raven or a buzzard to carry off, even if they could have snapped the rope.

Peter straightened up. It was useless looking for tracks, and even if he found any he probably wouldn't recognise them. He found himself listening intently; there was just a steady drip-drip of moisture falling from the saturated conifer foliage. Otherwise silence. The raven had gone. It had no cause to remain now that its carrion feast had disappeared.

Oh God, what was he going to tell Janie? He'd have to lie, and lie convincingly, that he'd buried the creature. And just pray that it didn't turn up somewhere in a day or two. No way could he tell her the truth.

He was just about to retrace his steps when his strained ears picked up a sound amidst the gentle fall of the dripping damp. He tensed and tried to recognise it. Footsteps coming this way, but certainly not human. Something else, a steady munching sound as if - as if whatever it was was chewing on something like - like the raw, bloody flesh of a dead cat!

Stark primeval fear drove him back against a tree trunk, his spade raised like a caveman's club poised for a fight to the death with a prehistoric monster. Cold sweat was running down his face now, and he smelt his own scent of fear.

The noise grew louder; feet were scraping over the hard ground, coming this way. He thought briefly of flight, but knew his legs wouldn't make it. Whatever it was, he was afraid it would run him down and hunt by scent if it couldn't see him through the fog, then tear him apart as it had the cat.

He stared ahead until his eyes hurt, seeing shapes that weren't there. The mist was playing cruel tricks that had his pulses racing, his heart thumping until he thought it would surely burst.

Then he saw it. He tried to tell himself that it was the ram that had been lost in the forest at the weekend, but it was too big, with branch-like horns that thrust this way and that. It stood erect as it smelled Peter.

That was when he began to shout an incoherent, meaningless barrage of words that were meant to frighten, but they died away to a hoarse whisper as he cowered back, the spade suddenly too heavy to wield.

Now it saw him as it turned in his direction. And his mind pictured the mangled remains of Snowy, the granary cat, and remembered what its fate had been.

7

Realisation comes gradually in the depths of the ultimate in fear. For Peter Fogg it came agonisingly slowly. The creature materialised out of the mist, a savage beast of unknown species, a fearsome thing that stared fixedly at him with wide eyes and then in a second was gone, leaping back, twisting and turning, racing in full flight. And all that was left was the drumming of hooves that seemed to hang in the atmosphere. Not just one set, many of them, a pounding herd that even now caused the rocky ground to vibrate as they embarked on headlong flight.

'Jesus Christ - deer!' He spoke aloud, lowering his spade to the ground and leaning his full weight on it. He was sweating heavily and a terrible sinking sensation in his heart and stomach had knotted his guts so that he almost vomited. Not quite. God, it was a good job nobody could see him like this because - or could they!

He found himself glancing around, feeling that even now somebody was lurking out there in the dense low cloud watching his every movement. But that was silly, because if he couldn't see them, whoever they were, they couldn't see him. It was as simple as that. His nerves getting the better of him, the way Janie's did, and he was succumbing to primitive childish fears; pull the bedclothes up over your head because the bogeyman's watching you.

He gave a laugh. It sounded strange, a kind of cackle, but it helped. He'd been scared to hell by a bloody roe buck, the most shy and gentle of all creatures, just because he'd no idea that deer roamed these hills and forests. But it didn't explain the cat's disappearance. That was the most worrying factor of all.

He shouldered his spade and began the steep trek downhill. He was surprised how quickly the cottage with its adjoining granary appeared before him out of the gloom. The stone circle was a lot closer than he'd thought.

He started when he saw Janie in the doorway. She must have heard him coming.

Or else she had been standing there ever since he'd left.

'Whatever's the matter?' There was an expression of alarm on her face, and her body was tense as she gripped the doorpost.

'Nothing.' He made a show of picking a piece of slate and scraping the spade with it. Some particles of rust flaked off, powdered like dust; maybe she'd believe it was dirt from digging. 'Nothing at all. Everything's OK.'

'No it isn't. Don't lie, Peter; don't try and fool me, because I know it isn't. You've had one hell of a scare. I can tell that just by looking at your face.'

'All right, I've had a bit of a fright.' He leaned on the spade again, thinking that he should have known all along that he wouldn't be able to fool her. 'There's deer here, Janie. A big herd, judging by the sound of their hooves in the fog. They came upon me in the fog; a bit unnerving when you find yourself face to face with a creature that size before you can identify it. Like that ram that came out of the forest on Saturday.'

*You haven't buried that cat, have you!' Oh God, female intuition again. Or perhaps he had not been away long enough. He'd lost all track of time.

'No.' He gave up trying to lie, 'I haven't.'

"Why not?"

'Because - because it's gone!'

'Gone!' Janie was gripping the doorpost with both hands now. 'What d'you mean, it's gone!'

'Just that. Something must have taken it. A fox maybe.'

'But you said it was hanging high up in a tree, as high as your head. How could a fox possibly get it down? It's something else that's taken it, isn't it? The Wilsons or those two poacher chaps - or something else!'

'We're letting our imaginations run away with us.' He dropped the spade and pushed past her into the house. 'A string of coincidences which we're interpreting the wrong way.'

'There's something sinister going on here/ She followed him into the hall. 'I don't know what it is, but we've suddenly found ourselves caught up in it.'

'Let's not go into all that again. There are perfectly logical reasons for everything that's happened, I've no doubt whatsoever. It all stems from a peasant family who hate the English, coupled with the fact that I've stopped them from hiking on these fields, where they've probably come scrambling ever since they were old enough to ride. I'm going to make some son of a hutch for that rabbit.'

He wasn't going to get any work done today, that was for sure. Better to occupy himself with something mundane, not that carpentry had ever been one of his special talents. He'd hated woodwork at school, even more than metalwork. But suddenly it was a kind of therapy. He found a hammer and some nails and went up into the granary, taking a sadistic delight that he could suddenly hit something.

The task was completed in less than ten minutes, simply because he found an

old hen coop that needed no more than a little restoration: new hinges on the lid and some loose nails knocked back in. Well, he could go back to his work now if he wanted. But he knew that he would not settle to writing that day. He had recovered from the shock of the deer, but the missing cat still plagued him. It had to be the Wilsons; he told himself over and over again that it couldn't be anybody else. But even so he could not dispel the lingering doubt at the back of his mind.

He went back down to his study and decided to rearrange the books on the shelving. Just for something to do until he fetched Gavin at four o'clock. He hoped the boy was OK. Maybe now that he had a rabbit he wouldn't ask about the cat. Neither Peter nor Janie had the nerve to lie convincingly any more, but they'd have to try if need be.

Peter sat in his car outside the school playground and watched the children coming out. He picked out the Wilson twins, Mark and Jon, and his jaw tightened. Instinctively he was clenching his fists. Little bastards, he'd like to smash their bloody faces in and listen to them pleading for mercy; the older ones, too. That one he'd knocked off his bike had been lucky not to break an arm or a leg.

Where was Gavin? He was searching almost desperately now. A couple of dozen boys and girls, their ages ranging from eleven down to five; it was noticeable how they kept well clear of the bullying twins, glancing furtively after them, holding back in order to let them get on their way.

A sigh of relief escaped the writer's lips. There was Gavin coming through the rusted iron gates, Mr Hughes at his side, a lumbering figure that was intended to create a protective image. There was a condescending expression on the headmaster's florid features: Does this satisfy you, Mr Fogg? I'm pampering your weakling of a son, making sure the others don't call him names or hurt his feelings,

Peter wound down the window of the Saab. 'Good afternoon, Mr Hughes. I trust everything's OK.'

'Absolutely.' A smirk, the deep set eyes hooded by the thick brows. 'No trouble. I never thought there would be.'

Peter's gaze switched to Gavin; the boy met it for a moment, then dropped his eyes. Embarrassment, uneasiness. Because Hughes was there, and the other children had witnessed this protection by authority?

'Good. Thank you for your help, Mr Hughes. I trust that from now onwards there won't be any need for me to trouble you again.'

'I'm sure there won't.' Another smirk: I wasn't pleased to help but I've been seen to do my duty.

'How's things?' Peter tried to sound light-hearted as he nosed the Saab out of the village and took the left fork for the steep climb up to Hodre.

'OK.' Gavin's tone was flat, expressionless, as though he was deliberately holding back something more than just a threatening flood of tears.

'The Wilsons didn't bother you?'

'No.' A lie that had to be forced and came out as a husky whisper.

'That's OK then.' Peter glanced sideways, looking for signs of bruising, but

found none. Something had happened all right but it was best if it came out in its own good time. And if Hughes was covering anything up there would be one helluva rumpus; a letter to the education authorities amongst other things. Nobody pushed the Fogs about.

'Has Snowy turned up?'

'No, I'm afraid he hasn't. Probably still off courting somewhere. But we've got you a new pet, a rabbit. All nice and snug in its hut.'

Peter half-expected Gavin to say something like: 'I don't want a rabbit, I want Snowy.' The boy wasn't normally sulky but it was obvious that inside he was distraught. But he just turned and stared out of the window at the murky grey landscape that was darkening fast. Damn the low cloud, Peter thought. Wouldn't it ever lift? It was making life increasingly difficult, spawning its own atmosphere of foreboding - as though some unseen evil force had cast a mantle over the mountains to cloak the portents of doom.

'I don't think Gavin's at all well.' Janie came into the study shortly after nine o'clock, caught her husband in mid-sentence again and forced herself to wait. 'He says he's got stomach-ache, and he's never lied over ailments before. I think the best thing is to keep him off school tomorrow.'

'We'll see how he is in the morning. There's definitely something on his mind. I reckon the Wilsons have had a go at him but he's scared to say. I don't trust that fellow Hughes.'

'He swears they haven't been near him, but I know he's holding something back. Thank God I managed to get that rabbit, otherwise he'd've been really upset over the cat. God, he mustn't ever know the truth. Anyway, I'm going up to bed, I'm absolutely shattered.'

'I'll be up later.' He turned back to his typewriter. 'I've just got to try and catch up otherwise I'm never going to get this book written.'

Janie went out into the hall, closing the door softly behind her. Peter's working days had extended into working nights. He just did not seem to sense that things were closing in on them, unknown forces that she couldn't explain.

Janie was still awake when Peter came to bed, but she feigned sleep and listened to him undressing and getting into bed beside her, his breathing gradually becoming deeper, until at last she knew he was asleep. She hadn't wanted another discussion, hadn't the energy to argue over what was going on here. Maybe if she took Gavin and went back to her parents then her husband would see sense.

She could not understand why she was still wide awake. At a quarter to ten it had been as much as she could do to mount the stairs and get undressed. Now her brain was working at full speed, going back over all the ghastly, inexplicable events, trying to find logical explanations, giving up, then trying again.

Her weariness returned gradually, almost soothingly, like a tranquilliser for easing mental agony. She began to doze, thinking about that rabbit, wondering if they ought to keep it indoors. At least that way it would be safe.

Somewhere a telephone was ringing. ,

She had got out of the habit of answering the phone because ninety-nine per cent of the calls were for Peter. Sometimes she just let it ring because she

wasn't interested anyway.

Gradually full consciousness returned. She opened her eyes and saw the room illuminated faintly by waning moonlight. Tomorrow she must make up those curtains to shut out the night and its multitude of lurking horrors.

She realised with a sudden sense of alarm that it was the phone downstairs. Not a dream. Not the television or the radio. Or a neighbour's phone. Theirs!

She sat up, starting to tremble. Peter was still sleeping soundly on his back with his mouth half-open making a senile son of snoring noise. He hadn't heard the telephone, and he wouldn't if she didn't wake him. These days he often slept through the alarm clock.

Her hand was on its way to shake his shoulder, but she snatched it back. She swallowed, feeling a constriction in her throat. Make somebody happy with a phone call. Not at this ungodly hour! It must be for her, because Peter didn't have any relatives and both his parents were dead. Oh God, maybe hers were as well, and that was what somebody was ringing to tell her!

Panic! She swung her legs off the bed and pushed her feet into her slippers, grabbed her housecoat and threw it around her shoulders.

A headlong dash took her out on to the landing. She scabbled to find the light-switch; no moonlight here, just impenetrable hostile blackness. She hesitated at the head of the stairs and almost turned back. If I don't answer it I won't hear. . . Hear what'?

She clung to the rail, almost slipping on the sharp right-angled bend when she trod on the hem of her housecoat. Now she could see the telephone, an ivory monster that seemed to glow luminously, a thing that was alive and trembling with venom. Taunting her: I've got a message for you, Janie Fogg. She made it down to the hall. The ringing was loud, a harsh sound that hurt her ears. She could stop it by simply lifting up the receiver and dropping it back on its cradle, like slapping a naughty child to stop it from screaming. But that wasn't the answer. It would only ring again.

She stretched out a shaking hand, wondering if she had the strength to lift the plastic handset as high as her ear. Your father's dead, Janie - a sudden heart attack. Bad news, Janie - your mother was out walking the dog when a car mounted the pavement and . . . Her sister's voice, crying so you could hardly tell what she was saying, car crash . . . both dead . . . ' She grabbed the receiver and pressed it to her ear. Her lips moved. She intended to say, 'Janie Fogg speaking,' but no sound came. At least that damned ringing had stopped. No it hadn't, it was still vibrating in her brain, spreading to every nerve in her body.

The line was buzzing and she wondered for a moment if it had gone dead. Perhaps it was a wrong number, and she could give vent to a burst of anger and get it all out of her system.

'Janie Fogg speaking.' She was amazed by the sudden return of her vocal powers, by the way her voice sounded normal as though she was answering a routine call in the daytime.

Silence. Nothing. Except that buzzing sound.

'Janie Fogg speaking. Is anybody there?'

Damn it, this was some stupid STD fault. She found herself becoming angry.

Didn't the tele-communications people realise the distress they could cause somebody by the phone suddenly ringing in the dead of night? They didn't damned well care so long as they made a whacking profit every year and put the charges up again so they could make more. Greed. Sheer greed.

'Is anybody there?' Her scream incorporated both fear and anger. And relief because her parents weren't dead after all.

There was no answer. She had the handset clear of her ear and was about to slam it down, when she caught another sound above the buzzing - a rasp, as though somebody on the other end of the line was fighting for breath, trying to speak. Your father and I have both had heart attacks. We're . . .

'For God's sake who's there?' She crushed the receiver against her ear.

She could hear it more plainly now: somebody breathing heavily, not speaking because they couldn't - or wouldn't. That awful thought sent a sharp stab of fear into the pit of her stomach. She'd had a call one night some years ago when Peter was away, and she'd had to break off from Gavin's nighttime feed to answer it. Heavy breathing just like this (it had been a phone box call), and then the obscenities had poured forth. A youth, somebody like those Wilson yobs. She'd wanted to slam the phone down, but she hadn't been able to. She'd found herself compelled to listen, trembling as the anonymous caller hit his climax and screamed a torrent of filth at her. And even after the line had gone dead she had remained there white and shaking, listening to the buzzing of a dead line. She hadn't told Peter to this day, but she'd never got rid of the fear. Now it was stronger than ever.

The breathing was stentorian, in no way sexually charged. Unemotional.

'Answer me!' Janie's vocal chords were weakening again.

'Who is it? What do you want?'

Just breathing, asthmatic almost, rasping steadily. And listening.

Then sheer terror exploded inside her. The smooth plastic in her hand became a repulsive wriggling slimy venomous reptile which she flung from her. It hit the wall, fell back and bounced on the extremity of the coiled flex, a living malevolent shiny white thing that turned this way and that, gasping for breath as it did so.

She backed away but couldn't take her gaze off the two dark deep-set eyes that swung and watched her, the phlegm-rattling creature that would have attacked her if it had not been tethered.

Janie retreated as far as the foot of the stairs and closed her eyes. God, she could still hear it. Whoever it was, why didn't they give up and ring off. Louder now, a terrible noise that compelled her to stand and listen, and almost had her picking up the swinging handset again.

Finally she broke the spell, ran at the stairs and fell up the lower steps as her nightdress became entwined with her slippered feet. Dragging herself up, she crawled desperately, a step at a time, like a child that has not yet learned to walk. Fleeing frantically, she still heard the intake and expulsion of breath from unknown lungs. Even when she reached the landing, she still could not shut it out. It was following her ...

Then it went dead; the dialling tone seemed to shriek hatred up the stairs, making her press back against the wall with cupped hands over her ears.

That was when her whole nervous system exploded and she gave way to hysteria.

8

It took Peter the best part of an hour to calm Janie. This time he didn't slap her face; he tried soothing tactics, and almost decided to call a doctor. Maybe he would have done so had they been anywhere except the wilds of the Welsh mountains. He didn't put the light on, because it seemed more peaceful in the half-moonlight.

Her outburst gradually subsided to a steady sobbing, her whole body shaking now that it had spent itself.

'I - can't stand it here any longer.' She dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue, then blew her nose. This is the last, straw.'

'Some nutter,' Peter sighed, squeezing her hand. 'Doubtless it's the Wilsons again.'

'It - it wasn't kids' she said. 'I know it wasn't. It was something much more insidious than a practical joke. Not even an obscene call.'

'All part of this stupid campaign against the English/ he muttered. 'Look, I'll get on to Calvert first thing in the morning.'

'Lot of good he'll do' she scoffed. 'I note that there've been no developments in this biker business and I reckon he's more or less given up hope of finding the culprit who savaged our cat. It'll be the same again: "Leave it to me. I'll look into it. Any further trouble give me a buzz and I'll be right up!" Sure he'll come right away, but it'll just be a repeat performance of leaving it and looking into it.'

'We'll - '

'What's that?'' Janie struggled up to a sitting position, feeling her terror coming back.

The room was much lighter than it had been a minute or so

ago. But it wasn't moonlight. The moon had waned, and before long the cold light of dawn would creep in to replace it. A strange iridescent glow came in through the frayed curtains, a flickering yellow and orange light that formed eerie patterns on the wall like an old-time magic lantern show - latticed squares that expanded and contracted; Peter's shadow misshapen as though some strange puppet had arrived to dominate the show; Janie's too, creating an eerie Punch and Judy performance, with jerky movements, arms raised in horror.

'What is it?' Janie screamed, clutching at Peter as though to keep him from going to the window to look.

He shook her off, went to the window and pulled the curtains wide. 'My God, just look at that'

Janie was at his side, clinging to him, not wanting to look but having to, shuddering as her strained nerves began to tremble again. 'It's a/ire!' she shouted. 'The stone circle's on fire!'

There was no doubt in then- minds that that was where the fire was. The low cloud had not lifted, yet the leaping, dancing flames were clearly visible

through the opaque fog and smoke, casting weird shadows, shapes that did not belong to this world.

'Somebody's started that fire/ Peter hissed, "no way could it start on its own.' Narrowing his eyes and staring, he thought he could make out moving shapes that might have been human. It was impossible to be sure. He felt his anger mounting, a burning fury directed at whoever had phoned Janie and started this blaze. But it couldn't have been the same people; it would have been impossible to get from a telephone to the circle in the time. The Wilsons; the younger ones to make the call, the older twins to ignite a pile of dry brushwood. Or even the old man. Or Bostock and Peters could have worked it between them. Or perhaps others . . .

'Td better get up there and take a look.' He was reaching for his clothes when she dragged him back frantically.

'No, Peter. Not You can't go out there. Whoever or whatever they are, they're desperate. They'll kill you. Don't leave me. Ok God, don't leave me here alone'

He sighed, and knew he wouldn't go. Not because he was afraid - his fury surpassed any fear he might have had - but because he couldn't leave Janie. She was becoming hysterical again and there was no knowing what she might do.

He sighed again and went back to the window. The flames were higher now, licking at the lower branches of the firs, cascading sparks high into the sky. Whoever had lit the fire had used either paraffin or petrol, adding venom to the blaze. There was no way it could be stopped; it would have to burn itself out. Thank God the ground around was wet pasture-land, otherwise it might have spread and come leaping down towards the cottage. He thought he could feel the heat even from here but it might have been the anger that smouldered inside him.

They both stood and watched the conifer foliage wither, then burst into flames as it dried, shrivelling the branches immediately above. The climbing inferno denuded age-old trees, as though the spirits of long dead druids had returned to destroy their place of worship so that mortals could not desecrate it.

Peter's ears picked up something above the crackling of the flames - a harsher sound, familiar. It took him some seconds to recognise that it was the escalating drone of a vehicle with its engine running then being revved up.

'Christ, the bastards are still there.' He gripped the window ledge. 'They've got a vehicle!'

Then he saw it; an outline that was suddenly revealed in the smoky darkness as a burst of flames swept the circle of yellow light beyond its original perimeter. A Land Rover, a squat rugged vehicle that was even now beginning to move off, edging its way back into the shadows, the darkness swallowing it up as though evil was deliberately hiding evil. Then it was gone, its engine receding as it clipped down the slope of the hill beyond the stone circle.

Peter and Janie stood watching in silence. The dawn came and the fire began to die down as it met with the resistance of damp undergrowth, billowing its smoke and thickening the fog so that eventually they could see nothing at all.

'That was a Land Rover without a doubt,' Peter muttered at last. 'Which rules out a lot of things and makes a mockery of all our theories. I'm afraid we jumped to too many conclusions.'

'Like what?' She looked strained and white in the grey light. Her hysteria had gone, simmered to a fear that was gnawing away inside her like a malignant growth.

'Well, certainly neither the Wilsons nor those two poachers possess a Land Rover. I guess that narrows the field. I'll have another chat with Calvert, but first I want to go up to the circle and have a look round. It'll be full daylight in twenty minutes or so.'

Then I'm coming with you,' she said.

'You don't have to. . . '

'I'm coming, and don't try to stop me, Peter.' She glanced at the alarm clock on the bedside table. 'It's barely half past seven. We can be back in time to get Gavin up for school, if he's well enough to go.'

'All right.' He began to get dressed. 'I don't expect there's much to see, but I'd like to take a look before I talk to the police.'

It was noticeable as they began the steep climb up to the circle that the cloud was beginning to lift; a freshening westerly breeze was dispersing it as though the evil was gone and the mantle that had cloaked it was needed no more.

'Ugh!' Janie shivered. 'I get the feeling that the cloud came down this last couple of days to screen whatever evil was taking place.'

'That's nonsense.' He stopped, then scanned the horizon through the patchy wisps of remaining mist. 'Hey, look, up there by the forest!'

She followed his pointing finger and caught her breath at what she saw. 'Deer! Peter, there must be fifty or sixty of them.'

The distant herd was grazing close to the edge of the big wood. A majestic looking male of the species stood some distance from the others, head erect, alert: the guardian on watch, scenting the air for the slightest sign of danger.

'They're absolutely magnificent,' Janie breathed, and for

one brief moment the nightmare of Hodre was forgotten. 'Oh, look at that one on the right, it appears to be limping. It's injured.'

Sure enough, the beast in question was having difficulty in walking, taking jerky, uncertain steps, staggering, almost falling. Then suddenly the grazing animals were tense, heads up, looking towards their leader. The danger signal, obeyed in unison; they retreated, and the trees swallowed them up. There was just one straggler - the cripple - but it made it to safety.

'They're nervous about something,' Peter muttered. 'Edgy as hell. We're a good half mile from them, but that buck spotted us and he wasn't taking any chances. In all probability the fire has upset them. They smelled the smoke and they're frightened of being caught in a forest fire. Anyway, we'd better get a move on.'

A few minutes later they reached the stone circle, a charred smouldering area of blackened pine skeletons. Even the topmost branches of the pines beyond the reach of the leaping flames were withered and drooping, the tree-trunks were now pillars of charcoal, and the ground beneath them was deep in flaked ash.

'How awful!' Janie wrinkled her nose and coughed. She backed away, smelling a stench more acrid, more nauseating than the stink of burned undergrowth, one that rasped in her throat and doubled her up in a spasm of retching. 'Whatever - whatever is that smell, Peter?'

'I don't know . . . ' That was true to start with anyway; it took several seconds before he came up with the answer. Then he looked away so that Janie would not see the expression of revulsion on his rugged features. There could be no mistake. It was the stench of burned flesh!

'What is it, Peter?'

He didn't answer, just poked at the ashes with a length of broken branch and stirred up a cloud of fine dust; he touched something solid and pushed hard at it, forcing it up to the surface.

Janie's scream of terror shattered the stillness of the smoky atmosphere and echoed across the valley below. She recoiled, wanting to hide her eyes so that she did not have to look, wanting to flee blindly down the steep hillside. But for some inexplicable reason she stayed. And she looked.

There was no mistaking the partially incinerated animal corpse, the blackened smouldering flesh and bared bone, the patches of hair that had somehow only been singed in the inferno. Ash spilled from an open gut, like a taxidermist's burst specimen. Janie tried to tell herself that it was that rabbit or hare which she'd seen hopping about the fields, that it had somehow been trapped by the blaze and burned alive. Or a fox. But in the end every avenue was a dead-end, every alternative an excuse, a lie. There was only one feasible explanation, only one possible answer.

'It's - it's Snowy Only when she made this final analysis from the volume of ridiculous possibilities which she tried to force her brain to accept without success, was she able to turn her head away. 'Oh, how terrible!'

'Yes, it's Snowy.' Peter jabbed his stick into the embers. 'No doubt about that. I guess I didn't look very hard for him yesterday. The rope must have snapped under the weight of his body and it's only coincidence that his corpse got burned. At least he was dead, he didn't suffer - not in the flames, anyway.'

'You're lying!' Her accusation was bordering on hysteria again, her features deathly white, her usually immaculate denim suit crumpled and smeared with ash. 'You know damned well you didn't find the cat here yesterday, Peter, because it had disappeared. There's not enough undergrowth beneath these trees to conceal a mouse. Whoever committed this terrible atrocity took the mutilated cat and then brought it back here to burn it when they started the fire. Can't you see that, or are you going to offer some other feeble excuse to try and blind me from the truth? D'you think anything human could have done this? Well I don't; it was some kind of blood sacrifice by whatever still exists in this stone circle!' Her voice trailed off. She was breathless and shaking, wide-eyed, glancing about her as though she expected some evil entity to rise like a phoenix out of the ashes and claim her.

'Druids don't go about in Land Rovers.' He tried to laugh, but it was a pathetic attempt, a smoke-dried cackle that sounded eerie in the early morning stillness. 'And whoever is responsible for this outrage used a Land Rover. Unfortunately the ground is too hard to leave tracks, but at least we've got something to go on. Let's get back. The sooner I speak to our friendly local bobby, the better.'

Gavin insisted on going to school. White-faced, with deep lines gouged beneath his eyes, he had the appearance of one who was either ill or suffering from lack of sleep. Yet he was adamant about attending school, and was already dressed when Peter and Janie got back to the cottage.

'Where've you been, Mum?'

'Nothing to worry about, Gavin.' Janie busied herself tipping cornflakes into cereal bowls; she spilled some because her hand was shaking. 'There was a heath fire up on the hill last night. Fortunately it didn't get very far because the ground was too wet.'

He sat there in silence. Maybe he detected the lie and didn't want to embarrass his parents by forcing them to lie again.

'I'm going to Gran's today.' Peter started visibly at Janie's unexpected announcement. 'Don't worry, I'll be back at teatime. I could do with a break.'

Peter's brow furrowed. Janie's visits to her parents were infrequent. She had been threatening to move there with Gavin these past few days. Was this the beginning, a talk-it-over-with-Mum-and-Dad visit? Well, she'd come back tonight, for Gavin if for no other reason. That in itself was small consolation.

Weak sunlight was beginning to spread across the distant beacons as Peter drove in the direction of Woodside. Gavin was silent, staring out of the window, seeing but not comprehending, buried in his own dismal thoughts. Peter accelerated and the Saab picked up speed. The atmosphere was embarrassing; there were things they both ought to be saying but neither would break the silence. The lane dipped, narrowed, then levelled out on an acute left-hand bend that was partly screened by an overhanging larch tree. Peter had just made up his mind and found the courage to say something that was non-committal: the rabbit, was it OK by Gavin if they brought it indoors because Janie thought it would be better than -

In an instinctive reflex action, Peter's foot came off the accelerator and slammed down on the brake pedal. Wheels locked and tyres screeched their protest as they skidded on loose chippings. The front of the car slewed, headed towards the opposite hedgerow, then stopped with only inches to spare between the -Saab's bumper and the heavy steel girder-like fender of a Land Rover. It was all over before Peter's nerves had time to absorb the sudden shock; the seat-belts bounced him and Gavin forward, then hurled them back into their seats.

'Christ alive!' Peter bent forward and looked up at the windscreen of the vehicle which had almost crushed them back into the ditch. 'What the devil does that bloke think he's doing driving round these lanes at that speed?'

The other driver stared back, a hostile expression on his face. Aristocratic features, handsome in a wild son of way: silver-grey hair that flopped over his wide brow, a hooked nose that reminded Peter of a huge bird of prey that hunted in wild terrain, a regal flowing beard set against a background of skin tanned the colour of mahogany, eyes that bored into him and had him wanting to look away in case their owner read the darkest secrets of his mind. Dominant, physically powerful, arrogant.

Only after he had noted all these details did Peter find himself looking at the vehicle. A Land Rover. There were hundreds of them in this pan of the country. Even humble smallholders seemed to be able to afford to run one. Four

colours to choose from - green, blue, white or grey. This one was blue, a short wheelbase with a ragged canvas top, battered and muddy. Well-used over rugged land. Like going up that steep hillside to the stone circle in the blackness of night, thick fog throuring back the headlight beams so that the driver was unable to see more than a few yards ahead of him. A task that required nerves of steel - the kind of nerves a man like this would have!

You're jumping to conclusions again, Fogg, he told himself. Now that the Wilsons and Bostock and Peters have been ruled out, you're looking for another scapegoat. He looked up again, met those steely eyes, and almost winced. Arrogance and a lot more besides - contempt.

Peter had already reversed and got the Saab's nearside wheels right up on the verge until he felt the hedge scraping the paintwork. What the hell am I doing? It's that bugger who should be backing up!

But the Land Rover was already forcing its way through, the rugged squat vehicle taking on the personality of its driver, eager to ride roughshod over anything that stood in its way. Then it was clear, picking up speed, its rear wheels spraying a parting shower of mud over the Saab: a final insult that might have been deliberate.

'He was in a hurry, wasn't he, Dad?' Gavin was visibly shaken. 'He'd got more room than us to reverse. Couldn't wait a second.'

'He just bulldozed us out of the way.' Peter was angry now, more at the way he had conceded ground than at the unknown driver's rudeness. But he couldn't get that Land Rover out of his mind. He saw it again, silhouetted against an orange smoky background, slinking away, its evil deed completed. Anonymous malevolence, a thing of the dark hours that came and went whilst others slept. The ultimate in cruelty, transporting men who knew no mercy, who disembowelled cats whilst they still lived, removed the corpses, then brought them back to burn in a nocturnal fire. Madness. But sane or mad, they lurked out there. Waiting. But for what?

Peter shuddered. He understood how Janie felt. Last night it was a cat. Tonight it might be a human blood victim. Janie. Gavin. Himself. There was no reason, no way of knowing until it happened.

And then it would be too late.

9

'It's damned queer, I'll grant you.' PC Calvert pursed his lips and shoved a manilla file into the top drawer of his desk. 'A Land Rover, you say. Almost everybody around here has a Land Rover, Mr Fogg. I don't suppose you managed to get the registration number?'

'No chance. All we saw was a silhouette. By the way, we met a Land Rover on the way down this morning, a battered blue one with a canvas top driven by a fellow with long silver white hair and a beard. Arrogant devil, nearly rammed us on a bend.'

'Oh, him!' Calvert laughed. 'I wouldn't worry too much about him, Mr Fogg. That's Tim Ruskin, owns most of the land up in the hills where you're living. Except Hodre, of course, and there's rumours that he's had a very generous offer for that turned down.'

'Nevertheless, he's an ignorant bastard.'

'Just his manner. Take a tip from me and don't cross him. Ah! he's interested in is making money, and he'll go to unbelievable lengths to put an extra fiver in his pocket. He costs the government a fortune in fencing grants and the like, but half the time he doesn't fence to ministry specifications. He uses second-hand posts and old railway sleepers and charges 'em the full cost of new materials. Beats me why they've never rumbled him, but he's a big shot in these parts, maybe the biggest. Chairman of the parish council, too, and half the smaller farmers go around doffing their caps to him because if ever they put in for planning permission for anything, he's got a big pull with the district council. They reckon that if Tim Ruskin okays it you're in, but if you've crossed him over anything you're wasting your time. He's fenced most of his upland pastureland just like he's some kind of self-styled land baron, and I guess it rankles with him to have a pocket handkerchief like Hodre over which he's got no control bang in the middle of it.' The policeman laughed a trifle nervously.

'That doesn't explain why the cat was removed after it had been killed then brought back and burned in the fire.,' Peter said. 'Or why it was killed in the first place.'

'Damned queer.' Calvert repeated. 'But we've absolutely nothing to go on. Look, Mr Fogg, I'm on nights next week, panda patrol. I'll try and make a few sorties up in your area; ride round the lanes and sit and listen here and there. Who knows, if there is anything going on I might drop on it.'

Of course there was something bloody funny going on. Peter groaned inwardly. A bloody campaign by loony Welsh fanatics that began amongst the kids in the school playground. 'OK, thanks.' He stood up. There wasn't much else he could say. 'My wife's nearly going out of her mind, I can tell you.'

'It'll probably take her a while to settle.' Calvert opened the drawer, and brought out the file again. 'I know myself there's a hell of a difference between living in the city and living out here. But this bit of aggro will die down, I reckon. Whoever's doing it will get fed up soon.'

'By the way! - Peter turned back at the door - 'a huge herd of deer has turned up around Hodre. I saw 'em this morning, grazing in the fields adjoining the forestry.'

'They always come in the autumn.' The policeman was flipping over a pile of looseleaf pages. 'Guess that's something that's been happening for centuries, long before the Commission planted the big wood. Starts about the middle of November, and by Christmas there's a huge build-up of herds which have spent the summer in the lowlands. Almost like something was calling 'em up there, a sort of Pied Piper, if you know what I mean.'

Peter didn't know what the other meant, but it made him feel uneasy. Something inexplicable - like everything else about Hodre and its surrounding hills.

Janie had already left when Peter arrived back home. As he walked in the house he noted that the kitchen sink was piled high with dirty crockery. She hadn't even stayed to wash-up before she left. As though she couldn't wait to get away.

Hell, she was working herself up for some kind of nervous breakdown. Perhaps it would be better if she did go and stay with her parents for a while. But it wouldn't solve the problem in the long term. They had two choices: they either stayed and fought against this persistent unknown foe or else they got out altogether. Surrendered.

He seated himself at his desk. The same sheet of quarto had been hi the typewriter for three days now, waiting for a single paragraph. Maybe just one sentence would suffice. He furrowed his brow. In a way it was like cross-country running. You struck a piece of flat terrain and made good time. Then you came to an unexpected obstacle, a wide water-jump maybe that you knew you couldn't get across so you had to find a way round. So you lost all the time you'd gained.

He stared at the typing and saw one or two minor changes he would have to make in the second draft. He wondered why they had not occurred to him in the first place, why he hadn't got it right then, why it took him a long time to spot things that were right under his nose. Like Hodre. God, what the hell was going on here? Could it be Ruskin, conducting a campaign akin to that of the Wilsons? But if the landowner scared the Foggs out, Blackstone would only find another tenant. Unless every tenant was worn down until the place just couldn't be let any more and Blackstone sold out. It seemed an awful lot of trouble to go to for a few acres of almost barren grassland that wouldn't support more than a couple of dozen sheep. Still, Ruskin was an odd one and he didn't like being crossed; one only had to look into his eyes to realise that.

Peter gave a sigh of frustration. Problems everywhere. This book for a start was becoming one gigantic headache. Literally. Sod it, the relentless throbbing was starting up again inside his skull, as though minute hammers were pounding against his temples. He hoped he wasn't getting a migraine. Maybe he'd better shelve the book for today, give it some more thought, try again tomorrow. Damn it, no. Always tomorrow. He'd never finish it that way. Skip that chapter ending for now, start the next one and come back to it later.

He rolled the paper out of the machine and flipped a fresh top copy off the pile in the Croxley box. His hands were slightly unsteady as he lined up the carbon and the blank paper, then wound it into the old Imperial. Three capitals, double spaced - T-W-O. He hit the keys hard with just one finger, giving himself a kind of breathing space whilst he mulled over the introductory sentence; like endings, beginnings had to be punchy too. And right now the words he grasped for were eluding him, jack-o'-lanterns dodging away from him, hiding in the mists of his brain, mocking him.

He slumped back in his chair. If he wasn't careful he'd start smoking again; if there had been a cigarette handy he would have used it. He glanced at his watch: eleven-thirty. He wondered if Janie had left him any lunch. Probably not, because he usually preferred to cut himself a sandwich when she was away.

He had almost decided upon a sandwich; not that he was hungry but it would give him the feeling of doing something constructive and that was very necessary right now. A couple of aspirin, too, might help.

Then the telephone in the hall rang - a sound that electrified the nerves, a ringing that was almost a groan, as though the bell was under strain and might peter out at any second. Perhaps the power was down, reduced voltage for some reason.

He got up slowly, knowing he didn't want to answer it. It was probably Tolson, his publisher's editorial director, a real pain in the arse, renowned for chopping and changing. He commissioned a book on the strength of a four-page synopsis without really giving it much thought, then got into a sudden panic about six weeks later and came up with a host of ridiculous 'suggestions', and of course the writer had to implement them. The fact that he was already forty thousand words into the first draft didn't matter a damn. Peter had heard all this from other writers; You were lucky, old son - a first book accepted on a

completed manuscript. You just wait until he commissions something.

This could be it; Tolson deciding he had to justify his position.

Or, he realised with a faint sense of foreboding that passed as quickly as it came, it could be the nocturnal hoaxer again. Well/he'd soon be dealt with: Fuck off, you bastard, I'm far too busy to waste time listening to your asthmatic wheezings.

Peter's fingers closed over the handset, lifted it off its cradle and killed the laboured ringing.

It could be Mr Hughes: Gavin's not well. I'd be glad if you could fetch him home.

But he had to stop speculating and find out who it was.

'Peter Fogg speaking.'

'Is that Mr Fogg of Hodre?'

That's right.'

This is Llanrhayader General Hospital Accident Unit here, Mr Fogg.'

'Yes . . . ?' A sense of apprehension knotted Peter's stomach, trying to figure out a hundred reasons in a split second why they should be phoning him.

I'm afraid we have some bad news for you, Mr Fogg - '

His mulch of intestines was compressed into something the size of a golf ball and twice as hard.

'Your wife's been in a car accident, Mr Fogg. I'm afraid she's suffered multiple injuries and is still in the operating theatre. She hasn't regained consciousness yet . . . '

Oh, Merciful God! How? Why? Surely you're mistaken. Not my Janie. I?§ impossible. I refuse to believe it!

On rare occasions, escalating panic can be transformed into numbing calm and logic as the brain processes its own tran-quinisers. And that was what happened to Peter Fogg in the blinding two or three seconds when he almost fainted. He started to go down into a dark abyss, then came straight back up.

Til be there as soon as I can.' He dropped the receiver back and started checking that he had the car keys in the pocket of his jeans. Llanrhayader The name was familiar; a large market town somewhere in the country. Brain and body had co-ordinated into ice-cold efficiency, enabling him to find the road atlas amidst the other books on the shelf and locate index and page in a matter of seconds.

Thirty miles. A B-road most of the way until it joined a main A-road about five miles from the town. What the hell was Janie doing out there? Probably some complex emergency ambulance coverage. But this was no time to challenge the inefficiencies of the system.

He slid behind the wheel of the Saab and thanked some unknown deity that the engine fired first time, then did a three-point turn that had the tyres spinning and showering mud up the hedge. Keep calm, you can't a/ford to kill

yourself; Gavin. mil need you now more than ever. A dilemma as he slowed on the acute bend and prayed again that Ruskin wouldn't be around the corner in that battered old Land Rover: maybe he ought to call in at the school and pick up Gavin. No, a hospital accident unit was no place to take a young boy whose mother was ... He didn't dare try and think what the injuries might be. She wouldn't be in there if she wasn't one helluva a mess. No, leave the boy and phone Hughes from Llanrhayader; get him to break the news. Make some arrangements for Gavin to be looked after until he got back. Got to get there first.

The road was winding beyond Woodside, not so hilly, but he had to watch the bends as it followed a wide valley. The weak sunshine was making one last attempt to display the fading autumnal tints before the winter winds ruthlessly stripped the last of the leaves.

Suddenly he braked hard; a trailer-load of manure was being pulled by an old tractor with an upright exhaust that belched out clouds of black diesel fumes. No number plate in sight. As Peter blared his horn, he saw the driver trying to light a pipe and steer precariously with one hand at the same time so that the trailer veered out into the middle of the road. Driving without due care and attention; no rear registration plate, probably no front one either. The bastard ought to be reported. Peter flashed his lights. No reaction. Maybe the driver didn'r even have a mirror.

Another bend; down to 15 mph.

He took a chance: pulled out and accelerated hard. If you hit anything you might as well hit it hard, he reasoned. You stupid old hayseed bastard, you don't have a front number plate either. He was sweating as he pulled back in; he'd given up praying. If his number came up there was nothing he could do about it.

A clear road ahead. That cross-country run again; he'd lost time so he was trying to make it up until he hit the next obstacle. Sixty-five mph, and knocking hell out of the brake-shoes on the bends.

He glanced at his wrist-watch: five-past-twelve. The phone call had been an eternity ago; probably the watch had slopped.

A green signpost with yellow lettering: LLANRHAYADER 5 made Peter swing off to the left, his foot slammed right down on the throttle.

Llanrhayader was bigger than he had expected. Its long winding approach with grey stone buildings on one side of the road starkly contrasted with rows of red-brick council houses on the other. There was a level-crossing but the barriers were elevated, then a panda crossing with the lights just turning to red and some youths in ragged denims sauntering idly across the road, as if with deliberate arrogance: We hope your wife dies before you get there.

He shot forward with a screech of tyres as the amber light began flashing, then braked again less than a hundred yards further on. This time it was main traffic lights, a queue of a dozen or more vehicles with a large baker's van at the head which would slow the getaway.

A sudden thought threatened to bring back his panic: he'd found Llanrhayader - but where was the hospital? He was winding down the window to shout across to some pedestrians on the opposite pavement when he saw the white and black sign arrowed to the left: Accident Unit. A sense of relief sent a little shiver up his spine and knotted his stomach again. He looked at his watch again. Twelve-fifteen. It hadn't stopped after all.

His mouth was dry as he cut into the left-hand stream of traffic. He'd broken speed limits and other traffic regulations to make record time, but now he was within minutes of his destination, he somehow wished that he hadn't got there so soon. Because he was afraid to face stark reality.

The hospital was a combination of the old and the new; a long low extension had been built on to the existing grey stone austere edifice. A spacious area of black tarmac at the side was marked out into parking lots, and a thirty yard stretch in front of the main entrance bearing three foot capital letters screamed, AMBULANCES ONLY.

Peter didn't give a toss for ambulances or any other vehicles right then; he pulled up to the main steps and was out of the Saab almost before the engine had died. He hit the heavy glass doors at a run, not caring that he was starting to panic. Just cut the officialdom. Take me to my wife.

'Can I help you, sir?' A small dark-haired girl looked up from a window marked Reception., a half-smile but no expression of surprise on her pen features. Maybe, Peter thought, most husbands dashed in here like this when they got a crisis, call.

'My wife . . . ' His voice quavered. 'Injured. I got a call . . . '

'What name, sir?' A lilting local accent.

'Fogg. Jane. Mine's Peter.'

She consulted a clipboard. Oh, for fuck's sake cut out the red lapel She shook her head slowly. Peter clutched at the ledge. Through a red haze that he knew would terminate in a faint this time, he saw her lips starting to move. Ok God, no!

I'm sorry, sir . . . '

Peter felt his legs starting to go weak.

Tin sorry, sir, but nobody of that name has been admitted to Emergency today.'

This is crazy. You're mad! You're not doing your job properly. Somebody hasn't noted my wife's accident down. She could be dying whilst we're fucking about like this. 'You - you're mistaken. I got a call.'

'Who from, sir? At what time?' She wasn't smiling any more now.

'From the hospital, of course. At eleven-thirty, I know because . . . ' Oh hell, what did it matter why he knew what time the phone had rung.

She was speaking on some kind of intercom. A long agonising wait. Somebody was checking. Everybody here checked, that was all they bloody well ever did: checked and checked wrongly. And people died, but what the hell did it matter because you were only a number, meat in an abattoir. Dispensable because there was a ready market, no shortage of supply.

A faint ting as the internal telephone was hung back on its hook. He stared into her eyes, almost reading the words before she spoke them. Tm sorry, sir, but we've checked out and I can assure you that your wife is not here. Are you sure you've got the right hospital?'

He nodded dumbly. Tm sure. But if she's not here, then she's OK. She hasn't

had an accident!' A sudden feeling of euphoria. *I guess it was a hoax.'

'Then you should report it to the police, sir. The police station's not far from here. Go out of the main gates, turn right and go on up to the traffic lights . . . '

But Peter wasn't listening. Trembling, he walked back through the heavy swing doors and just made it into the Saab before his legs gave out. The dirty fucking bastards, how low could they stoop'?

Just a hoax - or did somebody want him away from Hodre for a few hours so that they could perpetrate yet another obscenity? Jane, Gavin, were they OK?

His strength came back with this host of new fears, and he swung the car round and drove out through the wide gateway. That phone call last night, the one today, must be linked, he reasoned. Just as there was a link between everything that had happened since they had arrived at Hodre.

The youths weren't on the panda crossing now, but the level-crossing barriers were down and a queue of cars had built up. Peter took a deep breath as he sat there with the engine running. There was a tightness across his chest like a constricting metal band, and he told himself that that was how a thrombosis started: stress first, then a deep-seated pain as a floating clot of blood started to block the arteries.

An engine shunted along the empty track, then the road was clear again. He accelerated, noting that the car should have picked up quicker than it did but it was difficult to be sure in a line of traffic. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry and the continual oncoming traffic made overtaking impossible.

At last he was back on the B-road. A dawdling battered Diane in front which the Saab should have left for dead, it struggled to pass, then had to fight its way back in. With a clatter of annoyance, the Citroen's driver established his lead again.

Peter knew that the Saab's engine was going to cut out before long. The power was fading, the cylinders chugging sluggishly. Maybe he should have reversed, gone back into Llanrhayader and found a garage.

Instead he kept going, hoping that whatever was blocked might clear itself. His knowledge of motor mechanics was slight and he feared to pull on to the verge in case he was unable to get going again.

Eight miles or so out of Llanrhayader he had no choice other than to cruise gently on to the side as with a final splutter the engine cut out. He glanced at the temperature gauge; the needle was touching the red sector. For fuck's sake, he'd only had the car serviced a week ago!

He got out, lifted the bonnet and stared uncomprehendingly into the well of wires and plugs and things beyond his ken. Maybe it had just over-heated and when everything had cooled down it would have got over the trouble and stan first time.

He knew it wouldn't, though. The phone call had been a hoax to scare the hell out of him. But now he sensed that somewhere something was very wrong. Fate had suddenly decided to join forces with the unknown enemy that lurked in the mists of Hodre. And they had succeeded in getting him out of the way.

'If you'll take my advice you'll get this car serviced.' The tall, balding AA man had an expression of mystique on his angular features, like a doctor who had ummed and aahed all over your body until he came up with his final diagnosis, which he had probably known right from the beginning.

'It's just been bloody well serviced!' Peter snapped. 'About a week ago.'

'Well, in that case I'd try another garage next time.' The mechanic began dropping spanners back into a metal toolbox. 'The points hadn't been greased, so they weren't opening properly, and the air-filter hadn't been changed - which meant that the engine was over-heating. Oh, and the fan-belt was loose as well.' He had a kind of aren't - I - clever smirk. 'Thank you.' Peter got back behind the wheel, determined to check that the trouble really had been solved before the uniformed mechanic pulled away.

The engine fired and ticked over smoothly. Then the car moved off, picking up speed with its usual feeling of power. Peter glanced at his watch: three-thirty. He wouldn't be back in Woodside before four-fifteen at the earliest, Gavin would be getting worried, and he just hoped that the boy would have the sense to wait in the playground until he arrived. Damn it, there were no phone boxes on this stretch of road, no chance of getting a message to the school. He just had to drive hard and fast and pray that he would not break down again. Or crash. Hell, his nerves were frayed.

It was already dusk when the Saab's headlights illuminated the scattered farm cottages on the outskirts of Woodside. With an urgency, almost panic, Peter drew to a halt outside the school. The light from the end classroom showed up in the square of concrete bordered by railings which was the playground. It had an air of desertion about it, as though everybody had left and wouldn't come back.

Peter jumped out of the car and almost ran into the enclosure. He had to restrain himself from yelling, Gavin. Where are you? He stopped and looked around. There was nobody in sight. Oh God! Yet the school would not have been shut up with a light burning. There must be somebody around: there had to be.

'Can I help you, Mr Fogg?'

Peter whirled and tensed. He hadn't heard the soft footfalls of Malcolm Hughes approaching from behind. The schoolmaster must have been standing in the shadows by the buildings, waiting and watching. For what? Why was he so bloody secretive?

'Where's Gavin?' Peter's voice was terse, almost accusing. 'What have you done with my son?'

'He left about a quarter of an hour after school finished.' Hughes' supercilious smirk had Peter wanting to smash his fist into that florid face and shout: You've no business letting him leave. You're responsible for him until I come to collect him.

'Left?' Peter managed an incredulous croak. 'But - '

'Don't worry.' Hughes took his time, as though he was enjoying keeping the other in suspense. 'He hasn't gone off on his own. He was fortunate enough to be offered a lift up to Hodre.'

A lift! Jesus, hardly anybody went right up there into the hills. Maybe Janie had come back early from her parents. Then why the hell didn't this stupid sod

say so?

'He's had a lift with Mr Ruskin in his Land Rover.'

Rushkin! Peter stiffened as a wave of cold fear passed over him and seemed to centre around his heart. The Land Rover which he had seen leaving the scene of the fire last night . . . The sheer malevolence in the landowner's eyes when they had met earlier that day . . . And now for some inexplicable reason Tim Ruskin had offered Gavin a lift home - or somewhere.

'Why? For God's sake, why's Ruskin taken my boy?'

'I never for one moment thought you would have any objection to one of your neighbours giving your son a lift home.' The headmaster's thick eyebrows rose and twitched. 'Mr Ruskin is a governor of the school and well-respected locally. He called to discuss a small matter with me after school, and as he left, Gavin was still hanging around outside waiting for you. In fact, I suggested that Mr Ruskin should make a slight detour and drop him off at your place. Surely there's nothing wrong in that, is there?'

'No, I suppose not.' Peter pursed his lips. Providing he's taken him home. 'No, nothing wrong at all. Thanks, Mr Hughes. I'd better rush back though because my wife's away today and the house is locked up.' And it's getting dark I

A mist was coming down, or was it the low cloud coming back, a mantle to cloak more evil? Peter drove fast, praying that nobody would be coming in the opposite direction on sidelights. The narrow lane seemed to hedge him in like a nightmare Hampton Court maze in which he thought he was never going to find the way out. It seemed unfamiliar, as though he had missed a turning somewhere and would go round and round in circles throughout the nocturnal hours. And all the time Gavin was - where?

Then the incline started to level out. Peter sighed audibly and eased his foot off the throttle. Hodre; the small stone cottage by the roadside was picked out in the headlights, a dark blue Mini parked on the adjoining grass verge. Janie was back, too. Everything was all right, there had been nothing to worry about all along. His own fears had escalated because he had let them run haywire; like Janie.

He sat in the car for a few moments after he had switched off engine and lights. Calm yourself, laddie, he told himself. The last thing you want Janie to see is that it's getting you, too. It's all in the mind. But the phone call wasn't. Neither was the fire, nor the gutted cat.

'What took you so long?' Janie was at the kitchen sink scrubbing a bowl of potatoes. It looked as if she'd been back some time.

Peter licked his lips. Another problem: he'd have to tell her about the malicious hoax call, unless he could think up a plausible lie instantly. It wasn't like writing a book, where he could take his time and get it right. Janie's eyes were already boring into him, looking for the lie.

'Where's Gavin?' Stall, play for time.

'Whatever d'you mean? A look of incredulity merged into sudden mounting terror. 'You've just collected him from school, haven't you?'

The room seemed to tilt and spin. Peter clutched at the table, saw Janie's horror through a blur, heard her yell, 'Well, you did collect him, didn't you?'

Didn't you?

'Ruskin gave him a lift home. So Hughes said.'

'Why?' She came towards him, fists clenched, and for one moment he thought she was going to hit him. 'Why didn't you pick him up, Peter? Where've you been?'

'I . . . ' It would take too long to explain; maybe later when . . . 'Look, I'll phone Ruskin and find out what's going on.'

She followed him into the hall, clinging to his arm with fingernails that dug into his flesh as he thumbed through the dog-eared telephone directory. The pages stuck together and he had to dampen his shaking forefinger to free them. Jesus Christ, he felt like throwing up. Don't panic. He found it, started to dial and wished that Janie would let go of him.

Ringling out, that same groaning btr-brr-brr, as though the bell the other end was going to slow to a halt any second. Then it stopped, and he knew he was through.

'Ruskin's farm.' A woman's voice. It sounded young; probably a teenage daughter.

'I want to speak to Mr Ruskin please.'

'I'm sorry, he's out.' No offer of a message to be delivered or a 'can I help you'. Just a plain statement of fact, take it or leave it.

'I - this is Peter Fogg of Hodre speaking. Mr Ruskin gave my son a lift home from school . . . '

A silence; embarrassing because he could not see the girl's reaction. Maybe she'd put the phone down and gone away, or maybe she just hadn't heard. Or didn't want to hear.

'I don't know anything about that.' A kind of what-are-you-telling-me-for tone.

'My son isn't here,' Peter said sharply. 'I'd like to know where he was dropped off.'

'I'll leave a message for Dad.' He could visualise her expression of annoyance, the receiver on its way back to its resting place.

'Look, my son is missing and - '

The line went dead. Peter felt his hand tightening over the handset. He suddenly wanted to crush it, to throw the broken instrument on to the floor, stamp on it, crush it into a powder. Instead, he dropped it back on its cradle and tried not to look at Janie.

'Ruskin must have dropped him off.' She was fighting to kindle a ray of hope, striving for optimism. 'He'd have no reason to - to - ' To what?

'In that case' - Peter knew he had to do something positive, something active - 'we'd better go and look for him. Come on, let's try the granary first, maybe he's up there playing with his new rabbit.'

If he was, then he hadn't taken the torch; Peter's optimism wavered when he found the rubber-cased torch in its usual place in the porch. Janie wasn't

letting him out of her sight, didn't even bother to put on a coat as they went outside. It was fully dark now, the atmosphere damp and cold, threatening rain before morning.

Peter lifted the latch of the heavy granary door, creaked it open and swung the beam inside. The place smelled musty, a typical outhouse that hadn't been cleaned out for years, with rusting broken outdated farm implements, a mouldy bale of hay and the make-shift hen coop on a discarded table. 'Look' Janie caught her breath. 'The rabbit's gone' The small wire-mesh door hung wide open, revealing some shavings and a half-eaten swede inside. Nothing else.

'It can't have gone!' Janie stared at the empty hutch as though trying to will the small animal suddenly to rise up out of the shavings, to materialise from anywhere. As if to taunt her, the small door swung gently in the draught.

'Well it has gone,' Peter snapped, 'and in all probability Gavin's taken it with him.'

'But why? Where to?'

There were no answers to those questions. Yet. He turned away, not wanting to put his thoughts into words. It was last Saturday morning all over again; they'd have to go out, search by torchlight, shout until they were hoarse. Go up to the forest again . . .

They went back down the steps in silence. Both of them knew what they had to do, there was no point in discussing it.

They climbed the steep slope behind the house, the mist throwing back the torch beam, a murky gloom that could have hidden - anything.

Peter paused. Janie was out of breath, leaning hard on him. He opened his mouth to say something, anything; they couldn't stand the silence any longer, but in the second before his vocal chords had time to function, the stillness was broken by a piercing scream, a yell of sheer terror which was suddenly all too familiar.

'Gavin!' Janie was pushing Peter aside, finding the strength to run, to stumble blindly up the hillside ahead of them. 'Gavin! Ga - vin - where are you?'

Peter knew where the boy was even before he caught her up, knew without any doubt that that terrible screaming came from the stone circle.

As they topped the brow they saw a small light coming from amidst the scarred and blackened firs, a tiny will-o'-the-wisp that moved back and forth. Peter knew what it was: the cheap foreign pencil torch that Gavin had won in the tombola at last summer's Perrycroft fete. Oh God, if only they could all go back to Perrycroft right now.

Peter reached Gavin first, grabbed the screaming boy and pulled him to him, Janie was talking incoherently. Her emotions were strained, rising to a crescendo, and could only end in hysteria if they weren't stopped.

'Shut up!' Peter yelled, and shook them both. 'Shut up the pair of you!'

Sudden silence, except for Gavin's sobbing. And then Peter's torchbeam alighted on the cause of the boy's terror, a bloodied scene that made him want to drag them both away,

to run heedlessly back downhill to the cottage, to push them inside and bar the doors and windows against whatever inhuman thing had done this awful deed!

// was the rabbit, scarcely recognisable as the pet which Janie had brought home on Monday. It was stretched out across the large flat stone which dominated the centre of the circle, its four limbs putted out of their sockets by the taut baler twine which had been wound round the rock several times before being secured by a clumsy knot. The creature was dead, of course; no way could it have survived the gashed throat and slit underside. Its fresh blood was still dripping steadily on to the layer of ashes beneath.

'We'd better go home.' Peter started to pull them away. Neither Janie nor Gavin resisted.

'Who - who could have done that? Janie muttered. 'It's abominable . . . senseless.'

Who? Peter would have given anything to know the answer to that one. In his mind he saw the Land Rover again: the silhouette in the smoky glow of the fire; Ruskin bulldozing his way past them on the sharp bend.

They reached the house. Peter pushed the other two indoors ahead of him, found himself shooting the bolt home as he followed them inside.

'Gavin and I are going back to my parents,' Janie blurted out. 'It's all arranged. We'll be near enough for him to go back to Perrycroft school.'

Peter sighed. He knew he couldn't change her mind. The rabbit's death was not the deciding factor; these plans had been made before then. It was just a kind of final push that would ensure that she did not change her mind, as though whoever was responsible had known she would leave in the end.

'All right,' he said. 'If that's the way you want it. But I'll be staying. I'm not running, not for anybody.'

'You must be mad.' She switched the kettle on.

'No.' He spoke slowly. Two reasons I'm staying - I've got a book to write. I've also got a score to settle.'

'With whom?' There was contempt in her voice. 'Do you think you're ever going to find out who they are?'

I'll do my best.' He turned to Gavin, who had seated himself by the Rayburn; a white-faced schoolboy who was struggling with grief and terror, bravely trying to shake off the sobs that shook his body. 'Gavin, how did you get home?'

'A lift.' The boy stared down at the floor, 'That farmer, the one who nearly crashed into us on the way to school. I didn't want to go, but Mr Hughes said I had to. I didn't like it. I don't like that man; he scares me.'

'Did he bring you straight home?'

'Yes,' Gavin nodded, 'but he kept talking all the time, trying to frighten me, I guess.'

'How?'

'He said' - Gavin swallowed - 'that there used to be druids at the stone circle a long time ago, that although they were dead their ghosts still

haunted the place. That - that they had set fire to the trees to keep folks like us from going up there.'

'What utter rubbish!' Peter's lips tightened.

'He gave me the creeps.' Gavin trembled violently. 'Kept looking at me with those weird eyes of his, like he could see right into me and knew what I was thinking. He said folks like us ought not to be living here because we're townies and didn't understand country ways, that maybe that was what was angering the druids' ghosts.'

'The bastard!' Peter hissed. 'How low can you get, working on a young boy to try and terrorise us? He's just out to scare us away so that maybe Clive Blackstone will sell Hodre to him. I'm bloody well going to have words with Mr Ruskin before very long!'

Gavin went up to his room. Maybe he couldn't hold those tears back any longer, Peter guessed. It would be years before the boy could get the sight of that mutilated rabbit out of his system. Now he would know just what had happened to Snowy; their efforts to spare him the gruesome details had failed miserably.

Janie whirled on Peter the moment they were alone, her voice an angry low hiss which she hoped would not carry upstairs. 'Damn you, if you hadn't gone off and got back too late to pick him up from school this would never have happened!'

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Hell, what was the point in going into details, explanations? There was nothing to be gained by telling her about the hoax hospital call. She was leaving anyway. Perhaps it was best that way; at least he wouldn't be worrying the whole time about what fresh horrors his wife and son might be subjected to.

'Maybe Ruskin wasn't so far from the truth in what he said to Gavin.' She poured two mugs of coffee, slopping them because her hand shook.

'Don't be ridiculous, I've never heard such poppycock in all my life. I don't think even Gavin believes it. He's just upset about what's happened to his rabbit.'

'You're not just insensitive, you're damned well bund!' Her eyes flashed angrily. 'You're so wrapped up in yourself that it takes me to notice things. That - that - what happened tonight, didn't you notice anything? You had your torch on it for long enough.'

'What the hell are you talking about? Whoever it was stole that rabbit from its hutch, tied it to the stone and - and gutted it.'

'I don't mean the rabbit. God that was bad enough' - there was a condescending note in her tone now - 'I mean the stone it was lashed to.'

'What about the stone?' He stared at her blankly.

'Simply this.' Janie took a sip of coffee. 'That stone is the very same one that was there thousands of years ago, hauled up that slope in the days before mechanical pulleys by those vile priests for a specific purpose. It's a sacrificial stone and Gavin's rabbit was sacrificed on it!'

In a way it was a relief to be without Janie and Gavin, Peter decided. At least he did not have to worry for their safety.

He turned back into the cottage after the lanes had swallowed up the Mini, and told himself that his book was now a priority; he must just ignore everything and everybody else.

By mid-morning he was finding it difficult to settle down at his typewriter. That was strange because for the first time in his life he had all the peace and quiet for which he craved. No distractions. Yet it was hard going and he still had not solved the concluding paragraph to chapter one and was having no small amount of trouble coping with chapter two.

He found himself sitting there staring out of the window, his thoughts drifting away from the book. Truth is stranger than fiction - a hackneyed phrase down the years, but it was true. These happenings at Hodre were somehow making his own plot slight, a fantasy that was beyond belief because the reader would say it couldn't happen. Just what he'd say about the Hodre events: the product of an over-fertile imagination. Unless you happened to be there.

The cloud was definitely coming down again, an unfriendly opaqueness that had an air of permanency about it. Hodre, land of everlasting fog. It was depressing, and seemed worse now that he was alone. If Janie had just gone to her parents for the day and Gavin was at school, Peter probably wouldn't have even noticed it. Suddenly everything was different; a creeping loneliness seemed to eat into his soul, a feeling that bred despair and hopelessness. Maybe he should pack up and go too; at this rate he was getting nowhere with his book. No, that wasn't just why he was staying. As he had told Janie, he had a score to settle. Against whom? The Wilsons? Bostock and Peters? Ruskin? Whoever was responsible for these outrages, they'd pay for it. He'd get back at them in some way.

Subconsciously his hearing had picked up the distant drone of an engine. He didn't take any notice of it until it cut out and made him aware of the sudden silence again.

Peter got up from his desk. Another excuse to get away from his book for a few minutes; he was clutching at any legitimate means of procrastination. The vehicle had stopped a little way down the road. On a clear day he would have been able to see it from the garden gate. With the thickening fog he'd have to walk down the road for a hundred yards or so. He didn't have any reason to, it was none of his business. But he'd do it all the same.

He shrugged on his duffle coat and went outside. God, it was much colder than yesterday. Another drop of a few degrees and the fog would be freezing.

It was so silent that he felt like going back indoors in case he made a noise. He was a trespasser in this empty world, an intruder who slunk along furtively glancing back into the mist, ready to flee at any second. From what? Peter didn't know; that was the worst part. The fear of the unknown.

A raven was croaking somewhere. Peter found himself peering into the gloom trying to spot it. Maybe it was the same one that had fed on the mutilated flesh of the cat, perhaps even before the creature was dead.

Surely he must come upon the parked vehicle soon. The damned fog cloaked all sound. It could only be a few yards ahead, its occupants sitting there listening. Waiting. For what? He shivered.

Then without warning he came upon it. One second there was nothing but a wall of damp grey opaqueness in front of him, the next a square bulky thing parked up on the verge at an angle, almost threatening to topple over.

A Land Rover\ Peter caught his breath and took a step backwards, icy fingers seeming to caress his back. His mouth was suddenly dry, his eyes straining, attempting to see inside the vehicle. A brief feeling of relief when he saw that it was empty, just a bale of hay in the back. Then the uneasiness returned. Where were the occupants, what had they stopped for, and what were they doing, cloaked by the elements?

It was Ruskin's Land Rover all right, the one that had nearly piled into the Saab yesterday morning. What the hell was he doing here? He'd no business on Hodre ground, and that was surely where he was.

Peter did not hesitate. Ruskin had obviously climbed over the remnants of a stile in the hedge and followed an old winding sheep track that led upwards ... in the direction of the stone circle.

Peter felt his pulses begin to race. Maybe Tim Ruskin had some insidious motive; to remove the dead rabbit, destroy the evidence? Or perpetrate further atrocities?

Peter moved quickly, angry now, wanting to confront his neighbour at the earliest opportunity. There were a lot of questions the other had to answer, like not phoning back last night to enquire whether or not Gavin had turned up safely. And all this bullshit he'd fed the boy about druid ghosts and blood sacrifices.

The circle couldn't be far away, Peter knew, but he'd lost all sense of direction in the fog. The raven was croaking angrily now, the way it had when he had disturbed it from its feed on feline carrion. Maybe its feast of rabbit flesh had been interrupted too. By Ruskin. The bastard wasn't far away.

Then Peter saw the trees, grotesque caricatures in the gloom like a child's impression of something beyond adult comprehension. Dead yet alive, seeing him. Reaching out for him. Malevolent.

Something moved, making Peter's heart thump madly. A shape that became human, walking on dead ash, kicking up clouds of it as it moved, the sole survivor after the apocalypse when the earth had burned and cooled to a dead world.

'What the hell d'you think you're doing, Ruskin?' Peter shouted, his words seeming to be blanketed and robbed of their venom by the fog. 'Come to take that rabbit away, have you?'

The man turned slowly, his aquiline face a mask of predatory anger. Showing no surprise, the deep-set eyes hooded and fixed steadily on Peter. In the grey light the lone hair anH

flowing beard seemed pure white, an aged reincarnation of ancient evil rising up out of the ashes to reclaim its domain of past centuries. A druid priest returned from the dead.

'I happen to be looking for some stray ewes.' A cultured, dominant voice that brooked no interference. 'A task which I am perfectly entitled to carry out.'

'You're trespassing. Apart from that it's sheer bloody bad manners to go tramping about on somebody else's land without so much as a by-your-leave. You know where I live, you could have called at the house first.'

*I saw no reason to disturb you about something you probably wouldn't understand.' Ruskin's eyes narrowed. 'Up here we have an unwritten law that if your stock go missing you go and look for them. Nobody is going to change a way of life that has gone on for centuries. Certainly not an outsider!'

But Peter wasn't listening. His eyes were seeking out the big centre stone, which Janie maintained had been used as a sacrificial altar by the ancient druids, anticipating his revulsion, preparing himself for the sight of that slaughtered rabbit again, mutilated still further by the raven's pre-dations. But the dead animal was no longer there; even the lengths of string were gone. Just patches of dried blood remained, which the elements would erase slowly, nature's method of destroying the evidence.

The rabbit had disappeared just as the cat had done. Only to be returned later? It might be foxes, of course. This time the victim had been within vulpine reach. Only Peter knew the culprit wasn't a fox. His gaze returned to Ruskin, instinctively searching his waterproof clothing for some tell-tale bulge that might reveal a small rabbit carcass stuffed hastily into a pocket. But there was none. Not even a bloodstain or a loose tuft of grey fur adhering to the damp material.

'I rang you last night.' Peter's voice vibrated with his rising anger, his frustration at finding no evidence of the farmer's involvement in the recent happenings.

'Did you? Why?' Abruptly he half-turned away, with an I've-got-things-to-do shrug of his broad shoulders.

'My son was missing.'

'I wouldn't know anything about that. I dropped him off at your place, as a favour for Malcolm Hughes.'

'We found him here:, his pet rabbit had been tied to that stone and mutilated. Just like our cat was the other day.'

'Strange things happen in these hills.' Ruskin's expression was impassive. 'We locals have learned to accept them, not to ask questions.'

'Well I always ask questions.' Peter took a step forward, his hands clenched. 'And another thing, Mr Ruskin -I take great exception 'to all that rubbish about druids and spooks and the like which you tried to frighten my son with.'

Tin only telling your boy what every other child in the village knows.' Ruskin's tone maintained its unemotional level; Christ, didn't this guy ever get angry? So bloody sure of himself, dominant, talking down to you. 'The other kids aren't scared, they just keep well away from Hodre, and that way they know they'll be all right.'

'Well I don't believe that crap and I'm not keeping away. You won't drive me from Hodre, Ruskin!'

'Me?'

'You or anybody else. I'm staying put, and if there's any more funny business somebody might get hurt!'

'Is that some kind of a threat, Mr Fogg?' Twin red spots appeared on Tim Ruskin's cheeks and began to blotch and spread. His lower lip appeared to

tremble slightly but it was difficult to be sure because his beard screened most of it.

'Depends how you take it. I'm looking for anybody on this place without permission from now onwards.'

'I've still got to find my ewes. I can't have 'em lost up here at this time of the year. As you'll find out, blizzards can come without any warning and before you know it your house is buried up to the chimneys.'

'OK, go and look for your sheep.' And you won't scare me with snow talk, either. 'But next time I'd appreciate a call before you come walking over Hodre ground.'

Tim Ruskin turned away without another word and set off uphill away from the circle, his heavy working boots powdering ash in his wake. Peter watched him until he was lost in the fog. He had an uncomfortable feeling that this was an encounter which he had lost. No way would Ruskin come and ask permission to enter Hodre's meagre acreage. Day or night he would come, a feudal baron who was not to be denied access to that which he already considered to be his.

Peter managed to settle to an hour or two of work later that afternoon, forcing himself to hammer the words out of the typewriter. He consoled himself that this was only the first draft; an awful lot might be changed in the second.

It was almost dusk when he happened to glance out of the window. The shadowy panoramic landscape was silhouetted clearly against the skyline. The fog had lifted, the low cloud formations moved on elsewhere.

Something on the horizon attracted his attention, dots that moved, stopped, moved on again. He squinted as he tried to identify them. There were dozens of them, whatever they were; too big for sheep, too small for cattle. And suddenly he knew, and the realisation made him catch his breath. Deer; a herd two or three times the size of the one that had wandered on to Hodre previously!

The big buck leader was recognisable by his aloofness from the rest of the animals, and an alertness that was visible even at a distance of almost a mile. They were edgy; that was why they kept on the move. Probably they had lain up in the big forest all day and now with the approach of nightfall they had come out to feed, regal beasts which from time immemorial had played the role of the hunted.

Then the dusk deepened and Peter could see them no more, but he knew they were out there, fighting to survive. Why did they come to Hodre with the approach of winter when the valleys offered warmth and shelter? Perhaps there was a greater degree of safety in these wild hills and mountains, places to hide, refuge from the lowland hunters. He had read an article in one of the daily newspapers some months ago about how widespread deer-poaching had become in some parts of Britain. No longer was the poacher the romantic village Robin Hood who set forth on moonlit nights content to bag a joint of venison for the larder. Romanticism had escalated into big business. Gangs armed

with shotguns and crossbows hunted in the lights of vehicles, heedless of the cruelty involved. Wounded deer escaped, limping away into thick cover to die a terrible lingering death. Ruthless men had turned a peaceful countryside into a violent land. Gangs amalgamated for bigger kills and bigger profits. Men who poached by night and slept by day, desperate thugs who would kill rather than be caught, planted their own decoys to fool police and forestry rangers. And

at the end of the day they became rich and gave no thought to the needless suffering they had caused by their greed.

The deer were welcome on Hodre, Peter reflected. At least they weren't subjected to that', only cats and rabbits apparently.

He found work somewhat easier in the evening. It compensated for Janie's and Gavin's absence and dispelled loneliness. In a way Janie had done him a favour, because he would finish his book that much quicker, and maybe he could even be out of here by late spring.

He worked on late and didn't break off until shortly before midnight. He could have gone on longer, but past experience had taught him that long concentrated spells of writing were no advantage because tiredness slowed him down the following day. Like a cross-country runner, one had to maintain an even pace.

He made himself a mug of coffee and sat drinking it by the Rayburn in the kitchen. It was the worst time of the day for him, the time when he got round to thinking about things, when the protective shield of work was lowered. He glanced at the clock: eleven-fifty. He had a sudden pang of uneasiness: Janie should have phoned. Or maybe she was still being stubborn and putting the onus of communication on him. It was late; probably her parents had already been in bed for an hour. She might even have turned in herself.

He pursed his lips and stared into the muddy-coloured liquid that was supposed to be instant coffee, recommended for calming the nerves. That was a load of bull, the way he felt right now. To phone or not to phone, that was the question.

Peter stood up. He knew he'd have to make the call. His conscience was beginning to trouble him. This was how marriages broke up: a temporary separation to begin with until you got used to being without each other, then you didn't really want to go to the trouble of getting back together. He didn't really have a good reason for staying. He didn't need Hodre to write a book; a thousand other places would do. Neither did he have to involve himself in local feuds, prejudices and cock-and-bull stories that wouldn't even make good background for a novel because they were so common. Almost every old house, tract of wood, moor and heath had its own resident spook, according to the locals of those places.

He went into the hall and started to dial. He was only on the third digit when he got the feeling that something was wrong. The instrument seemed lifeless, as though the dialling mechanism was performing the motions but nothing else; no clicking into place, no sound of wires humming and picking up the message.

Peter's uneasiness increased. He finished dialling and listened. Silence. He tried again with fading hopes. Nothing.

Oh, Jesus Christ the fucking thing was dead! He slammed the receiver back, wanting to pummel it with his fists, smash it. But he didn't, because the prickling sensation was creeping back up his spine and into the nape of his neck, goose-pimpling his skin.

He glanced at the door and made certain the bolt was shot home. He'd check the downstairs windows too before he went upstairs. Just to be sure.

Outside he could hear the wind, a soft soughing noise that increased in volume even as he listened, buffeted the door as though it was trying to get in. Maybe it had got up earlier and he hadn't noticed it. It was a lot colder too, icy draughts seeming to come from a score of different directions. Suddenly

autumn had become winter.

He had a sudden feeling that he wanted to dash outside, hurl himself behind the wheel of the Saab and drive like hell to put as many miles as possible between Hodre and himself.

Your phone's dead. The car might not start! Don't go outside, because you don't know what's lurking out there.

It was all in the mind. He was tired, over-worked. He knew there was nothing there that could possibly hurt him,

All the same he checked the doors and windows and went upstairs without even finishing his coffee. His fears would run riot if he didn't check them: his escalating terror; claustrophobia because he was trapped; agoraphobia because he wouldn't dare go out anyway. In the end he would go mad.

Peter flung himself down on the bed and tried to tell himself once again that it was all in the mind. But true or false, he was trapped here. Alone.

Peter had never found sleeping alone conducive to a good night's rest. He tossed and turned in the crumpled sheets, somehow dragging the blankets up from the bottom so that a cold draught from the ill-fitting window chilled his feet. He dozed fitfully, stretched out an arm that was habitually trained to encircle a sleeping partner and groaned to himself when he found that there was nobody there beside him.

It was morning; it had to be, because the room was filled with brilliant sunlight. He must have slept late. He dragged himself up into a sitting position, opened his eyes and immediately blinked them shut again, tensing because he still had the feeling that something was wrong, just like last night when he'd started to phone Janie.

It was too bright. Late November morning sunlight never reached this degree of intensity. He squinted, the glare hurting his eyeballs, forcing him to turn away momentarily, but that one glimpse had been enough. It was still dark outside and this dazzling light was artificial.'

Forcing his confused brain to work he slid out of bed, groped his way towards the window. Headlights, that's what it was, a vehicle parked in the lane outside with its lights on full beam and directed up at the bedroom window. A Land Rover maybe! He couldn't figure out how the driver had got the necessary elevation.

Then suddenly it was pitch dark again. Silence, not even an engine ticking over idly. Even the wind seemed to have dropped.

Peter reached the window and stood there looking out into the blackness of a mountain night. He saw only shooting lights like the magnificence of an aurora borealis as his eyes rebelled against the alternating brilliance and darkness. No, he hadn't dreamed it, because he could still feel the searing pain in his pupils, and see a kaleidoscope of colours that threatened to blind him.

And then the light was back again, a single white beam that hit him with the force of a water cannon, and made him stagger back and cover his eyes with his hands. Christ alive, what the hell was going on out there?

He stood back and forced himself to look. The light wasn't coming from the adjoining lane, that was a certainty. It came from somewhere on the fields above - which explained how it came to be directed down into the bedroom. A

stationery vehicle (a Land Rover?) was parked downhill. It was deliberate aggro to stop him from getting to sleep, a continuation of everything that had happened so far. Wear him down, drive him out.

Peter found his clothes before the light went out again and the darkness plunged back, and struggled into them with an urgency fired by anger. Those bastards were back again, the ones who had killed the cat and the rabbit, and burned the trees in the circle. Well, spooks didn't use Land Rovers or high-powered lights! He'd go out there, take a look and possibly get the number of the Land Rover. That was all he needed: some evidence so that the police could take action and put a stop to it once and for all.

He grabbed the duffle coat on his way out, noticing that the atmosphere didn't feel cold any more. A typical still November night. He carried his torch but he didn't use it, not wanting to give his position away. The light would come on again for sure before long, but in the meantime he was familiar enough with the sheep track that led up towards the stone circle.

A strange sensation of timelessness in a dark empty world, walking through eternity, a black void which went on and on, that this was how it would be forever. Maybe it was a dream and he'd wake up and -

A sudden shaft of white light blasted the darkness, a beam that came from beyond the fire-devastated trees and swung across the night sky like a searchlight seeking out enemy which looked down on the old druid circle when the landscape was plunged back into darkness.

He found himself crouching, moving forwards on tip-toe, the only sound the thumping of his heart and the racing of his pulses. A brief moment of fear, but he swamped it with anger. Whatever these people were doing, whoever they were, they were in for one helluva shock!

He had just topped the rise when the hillside was lit up again, this time with all the brightness of seaside illuminations. He saw every detail with the clarity of an artist's sketch laid out before him: a stark black and white landscape and the horrific scarred pines seeming to move, to beckon him, the dark mass of the forest above an army on the march, the forces of evil gathering to launch an assault now that the apocalypse was nigh.

Not just one light now; two, three. Criss-crossed beams latticed the pastureland, terrifying in their total silence like a wartime commando manoeuvre. Peter shielded his eyes and tried to pinpoint the source of the lights, but beyond them was a thick curtain of darkness.

He advanced, smelling the rancid odour of dead ash and feeling it crumbling beneath his feet. His brain was working fast, outlining a plan of action. Where there were lights there were men; he must single one out, approach furtively and surprise him. Or should he go back and call the police? No, the phone was dead and if he used the Saab the men would hear it and disappear whence they had come. There was only one course of action open to Peter, except for skulking in the cottage - and he wasn't going to do that. There were a few scores to be settled and right now he was in the mood for doing just that.

He could sense rather than hear somebody moving about, a kind of stirring of the atmosphere that had him glancing around trying to figure out from which direction it came. There was total blackness again, which didn't help. Peter found himself crouching down, trying to hold his breath. Waiting.

Then something else occurred to him, something which he had previously

overlooked in his search for for a reason behind these goings-on. A black-magic coven! Of course, it had to be that. The setting was right: a remote druid circle that had seen atrocities in the past. Two animal sacrifices. Now they were up to something else.

His mouth was very dry. Not that he believed in all this occult nonsense, but these people could be very dangerous. They needed to scare off the Foggs so they could continue with their rituals in peace. Mentally Peter found himself apologising to Ruskin, and to Bostock and Peters as well, although not wholly to the Wilsons after what they'd done to Gavin. But they certainly weren't the kind to get mixed up in this kind of hocus-pocus. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

The coven had done their best to scare Peter tonight. Maybe they knew Janie and Gavin had already left and this was a determined effort to send him in their wake. Cut the telephone wire, shine powerful hand-lamps, the kind that worked off a heavy-duty battery and had a range of several hundred yards, into his bedroom, and if that didn't work . . .

One light came on about two hundred yards beyond the circle, then went off again. Another much nearer replaced it for a few seconds, then it went back to total darkness. Some kind of signalling?

Peter's eyes were flashing again in the dark, a blaze of painful colours. His head was aching with a dull throbbing that had him wincing. Then he heard something, a definite sound this time, maybe a foot crunching on dry stone and ash. Whiding, torch at the ready, thumb on the push-button switch, he hesitated because one flash of light would give him away.

And then the light hit him, a blinding devastating white beam that caught him full in the face, making him stagger back and throw up his arms to cover his face. He heard his own torch fall and was groping on the ground for it when his skull seemed to explode in a myriad of stars.

Lights of ail colours, flashing fluorescent daggers, stabbed into his brain and brought a cry of agony from his lips. The blaze of brightness began to dim, the pain escalated and then numbed. Fading, red blending in to blackness.

Then nothing.

12

Peter regained consciousness in stages. His first recollection was one of waking and staring up into a darkened room, feeling ill in the same way as when he'd had measles as a boy, with a permanent headache, afraid of the light because it hurt his eyes.

Where the hell was he? This wasn't the bedroom and neither was he lying on a bed. A hard surface gouged his back and had him wriggling about in an attempt to find a more comfortable place. Sharp stones and ash clung to his skin, and made him cough. Then he remembered.

Men with powerful lamps; they'd known he would come, had spotted him all the way, their lights flashing to lure him where they wanted him, right here in this ancient druid circle, their killing ground.

He sat up. God, his head was threatening to split in two. He rubbed the back of his neck gingerly. Apart from the thumping headache and nausea, he was all right. They had not wanted to do any more than rough him up this time. Next time . . .

He groped around and after some time located his fallen torch. He checked it; it worked. Almost certainly his attackers had gone. Nevertheless he swung the beam round in a circle just to make sure.

The descent back to the cottage slow. Waves of dizziness passed over him, and his greatest fear was that he might fall and go rolling right down the slope. In the light of his torch he saw the sharp rocks that protruded out of the ground as though they were waiting to spear a falling body, to batter and crush it to death.

At last he made it to the cottage, lurched inside and bolted the door behind him. Jesus, the light was painful. He looked at his reflection in the mirror above the kitchen sink: dishevelled, his features coated with grey ash, but no sign of any physical injury. He sank down into the big leather armchair. All he needed was rest; he'd be all right then. After that he'd speak with PC Calvert. This business had progressed beyond the slaughter of domestic animals and malicious phone calls. GBH was the official police term for it. The law would have to do something now.

Peter slept the sleep of the exhausted and awoke stiff but refreshed some time after nine o'clock the next morning. He washed, cleaned up and made some coffee. Outside, weak sunlight flooded the hills almost as though it was an apology for the past few days of continual low cloud. Not a breath of wind, so peaceful.

He stood looking out of the window for some minutes, idly wondering where the big herd of deer was; probably over on Ruskin's land. Those lights last night had surely scared the hell out of them. And it was likely to happen again unless . . .

But he couldn't stop here all day wondering about what might and what might not happen. The first thing was a trip down to Woodside, to report that the telephone was out of order and call on the police. He wouldn't get any writing done today but there was always tomorrow.

Peter stepped outside and locked the door behind him. He looked up once more towards the forest; a few sheep grazing - Ruskin's strays, probably - but still no sign of the deer.

The Saab was parked on the wide verge adjoining the entrance to Hodre, a dignified example of the car industry in Sweden. But suddenly it didn't look dignified any more. At first glance it was reminiscent of a sleek racehorse that has gone lame and been put to graze in a sanatorium enclosure. Pitiful, deprived of the power and speed with which its owner has always associated it.

Peter stared in disbelief, the sudden shock of what he saw causing the throbbing pain in his head to start up again. The Saab was a dead thing, almost down to its chassis in the long rough grass, all four tyres flat!

Peter did not curse. He had run out of steam, barely had the strength left to muster a curse. Despair, knowing there was no way he was going to drive the car down to Woodside, the futility of it all striking him like the karate chop of the previous night. He closed his eyes, wanting to open them again and discover that he wasn't a writer, after all; that it had all been a pipe-dream and he was back in Perrycroft, a nine-till-five man with no problems, a wife and son who hadn't left home. But it was real enough. He was a writer, a self-styled recluse in a back-of-beyond place known as Hodre, and his only means of transport had four slashed tyres.

He moved forward slowly. A cursory glance at the Dun-lops as he passed confirmed that they had all been ribboned with some sharp instrument. Without a pause, he embarked upon the hour-long trek which would take him to Woodside.

He shook his head to try and clear it, but started off the kaleidoscopic lights again.

Peter wondered how any literate person could write so slowly. PC Calvert seemed to concentrate on forming each letter with great precision, going back to dot an i every so often. A statement, Peter had always thought, was a kind of precis of a verbal recital of events. But it was as though the officer was determined to write a novel on the recent happenings at Hodre.

'Now if you'll just sign here for me, Mr Fogg . . . ' Peter scrawled his signature, not bothering to read through what the policeman had written. So far, this meeting had taken the best part of an hour and neither of them seemed to have reached any kind of conclusion.

'Good.' Calvert took his papers and ballpoint back and dropped them in a filing basket. 'I'll have a word with the chief about this, as well as making a few enquiries of my own.'

'But what the hell d'you think is going on?' Peter snapped. 'Apart from anything to scare us away from Hodre - and having already succeeded as far as my wife and son are concerned -what were all these searchlights in the night?'

'Lampers, I'd say.' Calvert stroked his chin thoughtfully.

'Lampers?'

'Poachers who work with high-powered battery lamps and lurchers after rabbits and hares. I reckon the lads were giving Hodre the once-over last night and you were foolish enough to go out there.'

'You mean Peters and Bostock Peter tensed. That pair who poach at night and have already done time for beating up a gamekeeper? Just like they did me!'

'No-o-o.' Calvert pursed his lips thoughtfully. 'Not them, but I'll definitely check on them. Lamping isn't their style. They use long-nets: nets about fifty yards long, which they stake out, and then use the dogs to drive the rabbits and hares into the net. The only light they ever use is the moon. Occasionally they use ferrets in the warrens, sometimes snares. But never guns or lamps, take it from me.'

'Just suppose' - Peter leaned forward - 'that these chaps last night weren't poachers at all. There have been two atrocious animal killings, like sacrifices. Black magic covens are springing up all over the place.'

'Mostly around the cities.' Calvert shook his head slowly; he was a countryman himself and the answer had to lie in the field he knew best. 'I'd say it was poachers, Mr Fogg. Rabbits fetch one-fifty a couple in the market, and anybody who knows what he's about with a lamp and a lurcher can bag forty or fifty in a night. I don't reckon there's any link between last night and those phone calls, maybe not even the animal killings either. I reckon you've stirred up a mixture of poachers, Welsh nationalists, and hooligans. Anyway we'll patrol the lanes up by you for a week or so . . . '

Which you've already bloody well promised to do and haven't, Peter thought.

I'll give you a lift back up to Hodre.' Calvert rose to his feet and picked up

his cap. 'I've got to go and call on a farmer over the other side who's had some sheep savaged by dogs, and I can make a detour to drop you off. In all probability Barratts will be up there by now with four new tyres for your car, and the telephone company doesn't waste time fixing telephones in this part of the world; they know only too well how folks living in remote areas might need 'em in an emergency.'

A little shiver ran up Peter's spine. He just hoped that both Barratts Garage and British Telecom were as efficient as PC Calvert claimed. Emergencies were becoming all too frequent.

As the police panda van slowed alongside Hodre, Peter saw that the Saab was still squatting awkwardly on its rims. Neither was there any sign of the familiar bright yellow van that heralded the arrival of the telephone engineer. Peter groaned inwardly, consoling himself with the thought that in rural areas services were that much slower, but they got there in the end.

'I expect they will be along soon.' Calvert seemed to read the other's impatience. 'Looks like it's going to snow before long.'

This time Peter groaned audibly. Away to the west, above the most distant beacons, leaden cloud formations were building up. He flipped the catch and swung the door open. 'Maybe it won't come to anything much.'

'Maybe and maybe not,' PC Calvert muttered, but his expression said that it probably would. 'Anyway, I must get a move on. And don't forget, Mr Fogg, don't get going outside if you see any lamps again. I'll probably have a run up this way later tonight anyway.'

'Probably' being the operative word, Peter thought as he watched the constable drive away. Something soft and feathery brushed against his cheek and lodged on the lapel of his duffle coat. Snowflakes! The wind was icy, strengthening, and the far-off clouds seemed nearer than he had at first thought, lighter fore-runners stretching almost to the edge of the big wood, the tentacles of a giant snow-laden monster.

Peter went inside and picked up the phone, but he knew it was a waste of time. There was not so much as a crackle, even when he rattled the cradle. The Rayburn had gone out. He'd light it later, and in the meantime he'd keep his coat on. Hell, he couldn't stop indoors; he'd go mad and his head needed some fresh air to clear it. He had meant to buy a bottle of aspirin in the village but somehow it had slipped his mind - which wasn't surprising; it seemed to take him all his time to keep sane these days.

He went outside again. It was snowing properly now; fine flakes, which the wind was beginning to drive horizontally. By the time he reached the garden gate there was a white film building up on his navy blue coat, and the sky was the colour of good old Tipton black-pudding.

He had to stop himself from pacing up and down the road outside. Where the hell were Barratts Garage and the telephone engineer? He checked his watch: three pm. Another hour and it would be dark. Calvert had been a bit vague in his instructions over the phone to the garage. But surely they knew where Hodre was, even if they did have to come from ten miles away. And British Telecom would surely be able to locate every phone by its number. Maybe one or both of them had broken down on the way. Christ, anything and everything was a possibility these days.

Peter mounted the steps leading up to the granary. It was snowing too hard to stand about in the lane and anyway there was a better vantage point from the

elevated doorway. At least he thought so until he got up there and saw how the snow was reducing visibility. It was barely possible to see as far as the first bend less than a hundred yards away. The hedges were white all over, and if he stared for too long the gnawing pain at the back of his eyes began again and started off shooting lights. Perhaps he ought to have consulted a doctor; perhaps he had concussion after the blow on his head. Well, it was too late now. With neither telephone nor car he wasn't going anywhere at all.

He lifted the catch on the granary door and stepped inside. At least here he would be out of the cold and the driving snowflakes, and if anyone should arrive he would hear them.

The gloomy interior of the musty-smelling building was somehow soothing. Peaceful, Like a church that shuts out the presence of everyday life and allows one time to relax.

Peter's eyes adjusted to the gloom and he found his gaze wandering over the piles of useless junk. That was when he saw the gun.

At first he thought it was a length of rusty iron piping but as his eyes followed it down he saw the battered stock bound together with wire to repair a crack in the grip. He moved across and extricated it from amidst some loosely coiled rusty barbed wire, almost refusing to believe what his eyes told him.

It was a gun all right, and he knew enough about shotguns to identify it as a 12-bore. Double-barrelled, the twin steel tubes a brown colour that was a mixture of rust and Damascus steel, its hammers shaped like carvings of the devil's ears, an under-lever that needed brute force to open the breech.

He blew down the barrels, then coughed at the cloud of dust which rose up. Sound enough, a credit to the makers, whose name on the centre rib had become obliterated.

The feel of this ancient shotgun in his hands gave Peter a sudden sense of power even though it was empty and useless. Something he'd once read in a cheap western novel had stuck in his memory ever since - 'God created men, Sam Colt made them equal'. It applied to shotguns as well as pistols.

It was totally unbelievable that in a space of five minutes not only should Peter discover a gun in apparent working order but that he should also find some cartridges - four unopened canons of them packed into a small wooden crate as though at some time they had been transported from the vendors by rail.

He opened a carton, took one out and examined it closely: a crimson cardboard cylinder with a shiny brass head, a crest on the case - EBL - and the words Maximum. Long Range. Heavy Load. It sounded impressive, powerful! Some traces of damp clung to the outer casings - though the granary itself was dry and the shells felt dry enough. Maybe an hour or two in front of the Rayburn to dry them off...

Peter stepped back outside, the gun cradled under one arm, the case of ammunition in the other. It was snowing hard now, large flakes whipping horizontally from the west, coating the hedges, forming a white layer across the road. There was no break in the heavy clouds, no sign of it easing up. The telephone man wouldn't come today, neither would Barratts. But he didn't bloody well care. If anybody was looking for trouble tonight then they were going to get it!

It was strange how the incentive to work had disappeared, Peter reflected. He felt that if he could have made the effort everything would have come relatively easily. But there was plenty of time. Christ, he had a year in which to deliver the finished manuscript and a day, even a week, wasn't going to make any difference. There were more important matters to attend to.

Darkness was coming early and the snow had not relented. The kitchen window was gathering a white coating on the outside, so Peter drew the curtains to shut it out. He could just hear the faint pitter-pattering of flakes against the cushioned glass and the wind howling ceaselessly in the Rayburn chimney.

In a way it was easy, Peter decided. He didn't have to go anywhere, he had plenty of food in the larder - enough to last him a couple of weeks at least. And, most important of all, he had a gun.

After he had eaten he began to clean it up. Some oil on the barrels showed that they were not as rusty as he had at first supposed, and the Damascus steel showed a beautiful grain. The hammers cocked and uncocked with smooth precision, and when he tried one of the cartridges for size it only needed a slight pressure to slide it right into the breach. The ammunition was drying off well on the shelf over the Rayburn.

He re-lit the Rayburn, made himself another cup of coffee and contemplated the weapon on the table. It had changed his whole outlook; the feeling of futility and helplessness had evaporated almost immediately upon discovering the 12-bore in the granary. Suddenly he had become the hunter instead of the hunted. If the lurkers did not come with their flashing lights tonight he was going to feel decidedly cheated.

Eleven-thirty. He went to the window and pulled back the curtains. The glass was plastered with snow and it was impossible to see out. Upstairs, the bedroom window was just as bad, but with some difficulty he prised it open.

Peter's first reaction upon looking outside was one of sheer amazement. The snow had stopped and the skies were clear, with a myriad of twinkling stars that shone down on a pure white landscape. So still and silent - even the wind had dropped - that the whiteness of the snow and the starlight showed up every detail as clearly as though it were bright moonlight, A sparkling arctic panorama.

The raging blizzard had spent itself but in its wake it had left deep drifts. The tops of the hedges which bordered the lane were only just visible above exotic miniature white mountains where the snow had driven through gateways and gaps in the hawthorn. He tried to make out where the Saab was and thought he vaguely recognised its shape beneath the largest drift. Even the dark forbidding mass of forest on the skyline had been transformed into a white ridge that was totally unrecognisable,

'Jesus Christ, what a blizzard!' He spoke aloud, deliberately breaking the silence. Otherwise he might have convinced himself that this was a dead world, that he was dead too, in the frozen hereafter as opposed to the eternal fires.

Beautiful but sinister. It wasn't just the cold that sent a shiver up his back. This was how Janie had felt, that out there somebody was lurking, waiting. He couldn't see them but he knew they were there. He just sensed them.

A movement out of the shadow of a dead elm tree had him tensing and starting to reach for the gun which lay loaded on the old chest below the window. Then he relaxed and almost gave a little laugh of relief. It was only a deer, or to

be more precise that magnificent buck which led the herd. Only somehow it wasn't quite so majestic as the last time he had seen it. No longer did it walk proud and erect, head held aloft as it sniffed the air for the slightest sign of danger. Now it had an almost bedraggled, pitiful look about it, a furtive creature that seemed to haul itself through the snow. He watched the way it laboured up the steep slope, dragging a back leg which appeared to be useless except for maintaining its balance. Once it almost fell. It did not stop to scent the atmosphere but was apparently intent on gaining the shelter of the big forest as quickly as possible, as though it was fleeing from - something.

'The poor bugger's hurt.' Subconsciously Peter understood why people living alone developed the habit of talking to themselves, needing to hear the sound of a human voice and their own the only choice they had.

It was unlikely that the animal's leg was broken, otherwise it wouldn't have been able to use it for support when it reached a flat piece of ground. Most likely it had gashed itself on a strand of barbed wire hidden beneath the snow, or trodden on some broken glass. Whatever its injury, it had transformed the beast into a pathetic creature, a deposed leader who had become an outcast, a loner. Probably another buck had sensed its weakness, fought it and driven it off from the main herd. Now it was fighting to survive against the rigours of a winter which had begun with a vengeance.

Peter felt a sadness as he stood watching it until it was lost to sight. There was no sign of the other deer; presumably they were sheltering in the forest, huddled together for warmth. There were times when nature could be very cruel.

Suddenly Peter realised how cold he was. He tugged at the window sash; the frame shuddered with the sudden impact but he could not make it close. 'Sod it, it's frozen.' He was afraid to slam it again in case the glass shattered. 'Jesus Christ, now I can't shut the bloody window properly!'

He wedged it, hoping that tomorrow, if the sun shone, the ice would melt. Lesson number one, don't open the windows when there's a hard frost, he told himself.

It was too cold to undress properly so he took off his denim jacket and jeans and crawled in between the blankets. The white reflections of the snow outside meant that the room wouldn't get properly dark, and the frosty starlight would be cosy once the bed was warm, he thought; if only Janie had been here life would have been very pleasant.

But then he was dozing; listening; almost afraid of sleep. Which was silly, he told himself, because they wouldn't come tonight. The lanes were blocked, the snow on the fields was too deep to walk through. It had taken the wounded buck all its time to reach beyond the stone circle. Even black magicians were incapable of melting snow to enable them to hold outdoor rites. They'd have to make do with some weird circles and chalk marks on the floor of the living room at home. What the hell did they call it? A pentagram, that was it. Well, they were bloody lucky, because the next time they came back here there was a charge of birdshot waiting for them.

He drifted into an uneasy, unwilling sleep. Fragments of unrelated dreams disturbed him without waking him.

But throughout his subconscious he was listening, picking up faint sounds which were recognisable and could be dismissed: a fragment of ice falling from the partly closed window where it had been dislodged; an owl hooting dismally because there were no small rodents about; the vixen screaming in the distance

because her mate had not showed up. Then something heavier, a crunching noise as though heavy booted feet were treading on scattered breakfast cereal.

That was when Peter was jerked awake and knew instantly that there was someone outside. The blizzard had not deterred those who roamed Hodre by night!

13

Peter had to force the window hard to open it, with a sound of crunching and splitting ice that surely would be heard for hundreds of yards around Hodre. He picked up the shotgun and cocked it even as he looked out.

At first he could see nothing except a barren white landscape where nothing moved. Not even a deer this time, nothing dark that stood out starkly against the virgin white background except shadows. And more shadows.

Yet something was moving, something he saw and yet didn't, like ripples in water that disappeared even as one watched them. His eyes narrowed, his flesh goosepimpled. Not even a shape, nothing. It was as though the snow had shifted, but that was impossible because it was frozen solid and there was no wind.

Then he saw it, like a patch of white suddenly puncturing the massive shadow cast by the dead elm at the bottom of the steep slope; not snow, because it moved and it wasn't white enough, more a kind of grey, but it was only visible against a black background. It seemed to glide silently across the frozen surface.

His nerves reacted like taut steel rope under pressure. His whole body went rigid, the shotgun paused half way to his shoulder, his thumb in a cocking action. It was like stepping into a cold store; an icy chill threatened to freeze him into permanent immobility. His brain slowed with confusion, the computer rejecting data because it was impossible to process it, fighting for an explanation where there was no logic.

The shape beneath the elm tree was vaguely human in that it had a head and body rather like a child's attempt to build a snowman. Yet the head tapered to a point and seemed to change shape with each slow movement of the legless body. And suddenly it was recognisable; a figure cloaked and cowled in white raiments, limbs hidden beneath the flowing material, face masked by shadow. Oh God, he didn't want to look on those features for surely they could not be human!

It had stopped, as though it sensed his presence, and turned as though looking back towards the cottage. Peter winced, feeling its malevolent stare with a force akin to the blinding beam which had sent him staggering back from the window on the previous night. And in that instant he knew; he recognised the shape from an artist's impression he'd seen many years ago in a book on ancient religions. There could be no possible doubt in his mind; the locals' fears had been more than rumours based on primitive terror - the thing before him was one of the ancient druids returned to its place of worship in search of yet another blood sacrifice!

Sheer panic broke the spell of petrification and released his trembling limbs from a frozen hypnotism. The shotgun, his only weapon, was futile, but the cold steel in his hands was real and instinct was taking over whilst logic faltered. He saw the shape again, this time against the small sight on the end of the barrels. His forefinger curled round the front trigger.

A deafening roar and a stab of flame, then the recoil threw him back. Instinct

again, man's oldest: that of survival. His finger found the second trigger. The flash seemed even more vivid, lightning that briefly turned the snowy landscape a deep orange; the acrid stench of Neoflak gunpowder an instant stimulant that made him stand his ground. Watching.

A cry like that of a wounded timber wolf, an inhuman sound that hung in the still atmosphere, and he saw the cloaked figure lurch, almost fall. Then it was gone, as though its evil contemporaries had materialised out of the night to snatch it to safety.

Peter was breathing heavily, trembling so that the shotgun barrels vibrated on the frosty window ledge, straining his eyes into the whiteness, searching the shadows. But there was nothing. Whatever the thing out there had been, it was gone.

He pulled the gun inside, closed the window as far as the layers of ice would permit, and found himself extracting the spent cases and reloading, sitting on the bed with the old hammer gun cocked across his knees. If anything moved anywhere he would shoot. And keep on shooting. Bravado. Futility. But without it he knew he would go mad.

It was fully light before Peter ventured from Hodre. His features were white and strained, his square jaw unshaven. With the coming of dawn his terror had lessened but it had not fully disappeared. Which was why he still carried the loaded shotgun.

Clear skies heralded a continuation of the hard frost, his breath clouding as he walked on the frozen snow. Occasionally the crust beneath him gave and he sank in up to his ankles but mostly it supported his weight. He scanned the horizon; just as it had been last night in the starlight, a stark white wilderness devoid of life. Even the scavenging raven had gone elsewhere in search of food.

The going uphill was heavy. Every few yards he had to pause for breath. He realised just how tired he was. No man could have slept after that\

The elm stood like a silent sentinel, as if it had seen it all before in its lifetime but taken its secrets with it when the ravaging disease had come. This was the place, about ten yards below its base, some sixty or seventy yards from the house. Oh Jesus God!

Peter found himself backing away, wanting to flee from the stain which had turned the crisp snow into crimson crystals and the trail of droplets going a few yards uphill and then petering out. After that the snow was pure white again. Nothing else, no marks except a few indentations that could have been made by that -

Christ, that was it! The blood had come from the limping buck, from the gashed leg that had bled briefly. Ghosts couldn't bleed, anyway.

He was sweating with relief in the cold atmosphere, then chilling. There was still no explanation for the druid-like apparition. Just a spirit that had materialised and then evaporated, the dead returned to the dead: an astral projection of some kind, not even aware of human presence?

Peter turned away and found himself trying to hurry, slipping once on the crisp surface. Fear churned his stomach even in broad daylight, urging him to run. A few hours ago he had thrilled to the challenge, determined to fight. Now he realised how useless that determination had been, for it was impossible to combat dark forces from beyond the grave. And surely that was what he was

up against.

He had made up his mind to leave before he got back to the cottage. No way was he going to spend another night there; long before dusk he would be miles away. Even if the car had not been immobilised, there would have been no chance of getting it through the mountainous drifts that blocked the lanes.

There was only one way out: on foot. And that was the way he was going. After the snow had melted he would return for the car and anything else belonging to Janie and himself.

They had beaten him because they were invincible, an intangible evil foe against which he was powerless.

He was leaving. Now!

Peter made it as far as the first bend, picking his footholds across weird unbelievable shapes that the drifts had formed. He had sunk in up to his knees once or twice, but kept going. Only when he reached the huge drift which had been formed across two gateways and some gaps in the hedges did he face up to the impossibility of his task. Sheer volume had prevented the snow from freezing solid; at the first attempt he went in up to his waist. He clawed his way out and found himself lying on top of something which resembled an iceberg.

He tried to stand up but his feet slid away from him. As he fell, a blinding white crevice opened up, and snow showered down on him. Panicking, fighting desperately, he was conscious of a new fear, that of being buried alive. Catalepsy in a white tomb; death by suffocation or exposure - it was a toss-up which would come first. Something gouged his hand and drew blood, which spotted the snow crimson, making him think about the stains below the circle again. He was gripping a hawthorn branch which offered a lifeline and he pulled himself up with it. He was on top of the hedge but it was strong enough to support his weight if he crawled and didn't mind spiking his hands and knees. Now there was only one way to go - back to Hodre.

Peter bathed his cuts and scratches in the sink and tried to work out a plan of action. If only it would rain, pour down so that the snow was reduced to a thick slush and then washed away. What the hell did these hill people do in an emergency when they were cut off by ten-foot drifts? They phoned for help, and if the snow plough couldn't get to them then the RAF sent a helicopter.

But I haven't bloody well got a phone! And nobody's going to come looking for me in a helicopter.

He knew that he was going to make another bid for freedom, that he wouldn't rest until he tried again. He'd been too hasty, that was his trouble. He had settled for what he'd considered was the obvious route without really making a decisive plan of action. The lanes had accumulated the worst drifts because the high hedges on either side had banked up the snow. So forget the lanes and go across country; many of the steep slopes were bare where the strong winds had cleared them and it would be just like walking on rock.

That was the answer. In his mind he mapped out a direct route from Hodre to Woodside. Almost a straight line from the rear of the cottage, past the stone circle . . . alongside the big forest . . .

Peter tensed at the thought. Jesus Christ, no! But it was the only way. If he started out right away he could make Wood-side by dusk. It was imperative that he was clear of the hills before darkness fell.

Oh God, the place reeked of ancient evil and he wasn't going to risk being caught up in any more. The druids could have their stone circle for all he cared. Ruskin could do as he liked. Peters and Bostock could poach rabbits on the gorse bank every night if they wanted; if they dared. And if the Wilson boys wanted to burn the place up with their scrambling bikes that was fine.

To hell with Hodre, he was getting our right now

Pale sunlight flooded the snowy slopes of Hodre as Peter Fogg left by the back door. Two-thirty - he'd have to get a move on. Much of the snow had fallen off the tops of the trees which formed the fringe of the big forest on the skyline; no longer was the wood able to hide its sinister appearance beneath a virgin white mantle. Still, he* needn't go through it, he'd keep to the outside, to the farmland adjoining -Ruskin's land! To hell with trespassing, he wasn't coming back here again except to collect a few belongings.

The slope was slippery. He took two steps forward and slid back one; but he knew he'd crawl on all-fours if necessary. Anything to get out of here before dark. Maybe he should have brought the gun. No, it'd be too cumbersome and he needed both hands.

Slow progress; almost twenty minutes to reach the stone circle. He tried not to look at the blood-stains in the snow but his eyes seemed automatically drawn towards the crimson spotting. Ugh. He shuddered, remembering the white cowled figure, the sacrifice of the cat and the rabbit, the other things . . .

There was a new urgency, a desperation bordering on panic about his flight now. He cursed when he fell, and had difficulty in getting up again. He wanted to run but realised the futility of it; he only had to slip awkwardly and he could break a limb and lie helpless as night fell, at the mercy of whatever it was that prowled the dark hours and lurked in the shadows.

He was sweating heavily by the time he reached the hedge at the foot of the big steep field leading up to the forest. Suddenly the snow was much deeper where it had drifted against the obstruction. Peter sank in up to his thighs and pulled himself out by hauling on a branch. It didn't look so bad the other side, just deep drifts in odd places.

The snow had soaked his jeans so that they clung wetly to his legs. He was tiring, too, his calves aching, but there was a long way to go yet. This incline was steeper; he found himself looking for patches of snow that gave him a foothold, struggling to keep his balance.

He looked up. The horizon didn't seem any nearer and the forest appeared to glare balefully down at him as though warning him. A movement made him catch his breath and think that maybe the glare of the winter sun on the snow was playing tricks with his eyes. Trees didn't move; there wasn't even any wind. They couldn't, it was impossible. But they did, coming forward, dark shadows moving out of the white background . . .

Deer! Relief flooded over Peter, his pulses speeding up then slowing down, alerting him that his nerves were in a bad way.

The herd was in full strength, huddling together as though something had frightened them and driven them out of the forest. They didn't see him because the sun was in their eyes. They turned, looking back the way they had come as if some fearful beast was in pursuit, snuffling on their scent through the deep snow amidst the trees, relentlessly hunting them down.

There was no sign of the big buck. Peter scanned the animals but he knew he wouldn't find the once-majestic male of the species because if it had been there it would have been at their head, marshalling the others into some semblance of order. It would have known that Peter was there watching them. Instead they were reduced to a rabble, fear portrayed in their every movement, jerky like an artist's animated cartoon drawings.

Peter started off again. The going was easier, or perhaps it was the brief rest that had recharged him. He found himself searching for the deer again but they had gone. He stared in disbelief. They couldn't all have retreated back into the forest in those few seconds whilst he had been looking away. But they must have because they were nowhere to be seen and they couldn't have gone anywhere else. They were damned edgy. More than that: scared to hell! >-

Almost at the brow of the hill now. He reckoned it must have taken him a good half-hour. Every muscle in his body was complaining and the whiteness of the snow had brought that damned headache back again. But he'd got to keep going.

He had to stop and get his breath. God, he wasn't as fit as he thought he was. That was why he was shaking: exertion, not fear. This place was getting on his nerves, making him look about him as though he expected to find somebody creeping up on him. He should have gone with Janie and Gavin; it would have been better for everybody.

A steady dripping sound. The snow was melting off the trees, A slow thaw, but how slow? He couldn't see the boundary fence that separated Hodre from the forest, there was just a long white wall incorporating designs that would have taxed the skill of any architect or sculptor; nature's beauty alongside her cruelty. Hoofprints had compressed the snow where the deer had gone in single file between two high drifts; that was why they had been invisible from the lower ground. Peter began to follow their tracks. Perhaps the herd's trail would lead him to safety.

He stopped and drew back. No way was he going in there. The tracks turned in a sharp right angle and disappeared between the low branches of firs weighed down by snow, leading away into the gloomy interior of the forest, which even the whiteness of the buzzard had failed to penetrate.

The deer had turned off because it was the only way. Behind lay the steep fields and the treacherous descent to Hodre; ahead impenetrable ten-foot high drifts that spilled across into the fringe of the forest.

I'm not bloody well going in there! His mute cry of despair almost had him panicking. Then I'll have to go back! No! Or stay here until the snow melts.

Peter had begun to back away without realising it, a subconscious decision to retreat. Maybe if he had known the forest he would have risked it and followed rides and firebreaks that had been sheltered from the snow out on to Ruskin's land the other side. But he didn't; he'd never set foot in the big wood before. In all probability he would get lost and still be wandering around in circles when darkness fell. Afraid to shout because - because they might hear him! Dead by morning, from exposure or ...

He had to go back, there was no other way. He experienced a sudden urge to burst into tears, to fling himself down into the snow, to give up. Surrender. His legs were on the verge of buckling, screaming at him to lie down in the soft feathery snow. He'd read somewhere that if you buried yourself it was all snug and warm, that you drifted off into a gentle sleep and . . .

That was when he saw the man! At least he thought it was a man; a white shape

that vaguely resembled a human body lying half-buried in the big drift which had caused the deer to turn off into the fir wood. He might have been asleep, except that his posture was so unnatural that nobody could possibly have slept in that position even out here, finally pulled down by fatigue: spread-eagled, the legs higher than the body. He'd been like that before the buzzard came because he couldn't possibly have got into the drift afterwards. That was one reason why he wasn't just asleep. Looking at his upside-down face, Peter found another reason: the side of the head had been staved in by a heavy blow, splintering the skull, burying the left eye deep in a gouged-out socket that was thick with congealed blood. His mouth was wide open as though the man had managed one last scream before he had died.

Peter's stomach seemed to contract and he almost vomited. He wanted to look away but that single fish-like eye seemed to hold him with a baleful stare. Look at me, see what's happened to me because I trespassed up here in their domain. You know who I am, don't you?

Peter knew; recognition filtered slowly into his numbed brain. Less than a week ago this very man had been warning him of the perils which surrounded Hodre and its druids' circle - now that same evil had claimed Don Peters' life.

It was the poacher all right, clad in some kind of homemade garment, an old white bedsheet fashioned into a cloak and cowl - the figure in the snow last night.

A limp arm slipped and brought a shower of snow down with it, as though to hide the bloodstains below the head, then straightened out, finger extended, pointing, accusing. You did this to me. You shot me!

Peter thought he was going to faint. A red and black haze before his eyes. He tasted bile at the back of his throat and knew he was going to throw up.

You killed me! Murderer!

'No!' Peter managed a denial, a hoarse shout before he was doubled up, vomiting. Then logic came from somewhere and steadied his reeling brain, pulling him back from the brink of the abyss into which he was slipping. That's no shotgun wound. Birdshot couldn't inflict an injury like that except at point-blank range. You've been bludgeoned to death. Not by me. I'm innocent! D'you hear me, I'm innocent!

The solitary eye maintained its malevolent stare of accusation; the forefinger rigid with rigor mortis was still trained on Peter.

He tried to find an explanation as he backed slowly away. The druids? If they could kill animals then they were capable of murder. That was ridiculous. The deer, then; Peters had been caught in the path of a frenzied stampede? No, that didn't seem feasible either. What then?

He didn't know; that was the most frightening part of all. Just that they had done this - those who lurked in the darkness, the gloom of the deep woods. Even now he sensed them watching him, and turned to flee. He cast one last glance at the bloodied, mutilated, barely recognisable face. / didn't do it, so help me God, I swear I didn't!

Then Peter was running, floundering, not daring to look back, hearing muffled pursuing footsteps, whispered voices; ready to scream the moment they pulled him down.

But they didn't. There was nobody there when he burst out of the drifts and fell on the smooth powdered slopes of the hillside, lying there breathless. No footsteps, just the thumping of his temples and the racing of his pulses.

The sun was dipping behind the highest peaks of the distant beacons, a deep fiery ball that threatened the return of a hard frost once its luke-warm rays had been replaced by the shadows of dusk,

He knew he had to get back to the cottage because there was nowhere else to go. His last outpost, a besieged blockhouse, the enemy forces already massing in the hills above, waiting for darkness.

The descent was far more treacherous than the ascent had been; he could see where he might end up if he slipped, a human snowball rolling and bouncing, growing in size, smashing asunder when it hit the sharp rocks below to reveal a battered bloody corpse, human carrion for the predators of the dark hours to feed upon. Like Peters.

Oh God, I didn't kill him, I swear it\

No, but I wounded him!

Peter glanced back just once to satisfy himself that they weren't on his heels already. There wasn't a living thing in sight. Even the sun was gone now and the evening shadows cast elongated tentacles down the hillside as though reaching out for him, trying to pull him back.

He wished he could have skirted the stone circle but it was the only way down. The deformed trees stood out starkly against a white background, the sun having melted the snow which had earlier hidden their scarred boughs. They, too, were pointing accusingly at him with crooked hag-like fingers. Murderer!

He was bleeding from a cut on his hand where he had scraped it against a sliver of jagged rock, leaving a trail, a scent that anybody or anything could follow! Tonight they would come for him for sure. They wouldn't wait any longer!

He grunted with relief when he made it to the back gate. There was still nothing behind him but a barren landscape that might have been in the depths of Antarctica, the dusk coming fast now that the sun had gone.

He was aware of the clinging coldness of his saturated clothes and shivered for a number of reasons. He broke into a staggering run towards the door.

Something seemed to hit him. It was almost a physical blow that stopped him in his tracks: a flash of crimson that dazzled in the surrounding whiteness like the blinding beam of an oncoming headlight in the blackness of the night. He recoiled as he thought of Peters again and the brightness of the blood on the snow. , .

This was crazy - there was blood running down the door, scarlet and wet, so thick that some of it was already congealing!

Peter couldn't hold back his scream this time, a loud cry of fear and mental agony, knowing that he hovered on the brink of that dark chasm once again. Maybe it would be easier to slide into its cooling blackness, an oblivion that would destroy the mounting terrors of this awful place.

It wasn't blood, it couldn't be ... too bright . . .

No, it wasn't blood, even though a tiny hysterical voice somewhere inside him was screaming out that it was.

It was red paint, still wet, daubed on the woodwork within the last hour or so. He could see brushmarks in the form of a large cross, although in places the paint had run.

Peter almost screamed again. He clutched at some rotten trellis work and brought a shower of wet snow down on himself. A crudely painted cross that was not yet dry . . . They had been here whilst he was away, knowing that he couldn't escape, that he would be forced to return here.

But for God's sake why?

There could only be one answer to that: they had warned him and their warnings had gone unheeded. Their patience had run out and tonight they would come for him.

The lurkers had daubed the mark of death on the door of Hodre.

14

Peter checked every room, shotgun at the ready, hammers at full cock. Only when he had ascertained that there was nobody inside the cottage did he breathe a sigh of relief. For one awful moment he had feared that they might already be here. But they weren't; they were waiting for night to fall.

He peeled off his saturated freezing clothing and changed into rough working denims, wishing that Janie had had time to renew all the curtains in the cottage. . . He couldn't shake off the unnerving feeling of being watched all the time; that was how they wore you down, just watching you until you couldn't stand it any longer.

For God's sake, I don't want to stay here. I'll go. You don't have to do this to me. I'll leave Hodre and I'll never come back \ He would have left there and then, only there was no way out. The choice wasn't his; he had to stay - but he wasn't giving in. He had the gun, he wouldn't make it easy for them. He'd take a few of them with him!

The change of clothing and the warmth from the Rayburn had brought back his resolution to fight. Anger, too, because they had no right to do this to him. And they were preventing him from getting on with his book; that in itself was a cardinal sin.

What the hell had happened to Peters? Certainly a terrible blow of some kind had smashed his skull, killing him instantly. But who had done it and for what reason? And where was Don Peters' poaching partner, Mick Bostock? Was he lying out there dead in the drifts, too?

Peter found himself doing a host of unnecessary things that he would not have bothered with under different circumstances. Like checking the doors to ensure that they were all locked and bolted, although that had been his first task upon his return to the cottage. And lifting the telephone receiver to see if by some miracle it was working again - but of course it wasn't. Then cleaning the shotgun again; he might need it very soon.

A tiny portable transistor radio stood precariously on the mantelshelf. It had been one of Gavin's presents last Christmas, and Peter wondered why the boy had not taken it with him; probably because it wasn't much good, more of a crackling toy than anything else, cheap imported junk.

Nevertheless Peter switched it on, primarily because he needed something to break the silence. Anything.

I should be listening for them coming.

The transistor crackled over a background of unrecognisable pop music, some disc-jockey shouting to try and make himself heard above it. Maybe he realised that people somewhere were foolish enough to buy three quid trannies like this and was doing his best to help them. Not that Peter was interested in the DJ's verbal garbage. It was just another human voice, even if it did sound like a dalek. In a while, Peter grinned wryly to himself, he'd end up talking back to it - and that would be a damned sight worse than talking to himself.

It was at that moment that the light dimmed, flickered. And went out.

Darkness! Maybe he'd slipped down into the black abyss of oblivion at last and his brain had burst because he couldn't stand any more. But he knew he hadn't because the DJ was still gabbling incessant nonsense, putting another disc on his ever-spinning turntable, and he certainly wouldn't be in the chasm of nothingness. Which meant Peter was still in Hodre.

The sudden plunge into darkness didn't come as a mind-shattering shock. Possibly his nerves were acclimatising to a series of crises so that they accepted them. He found himself wondering why the power had failed. Doubtless a cable somewhere had snapped under the weight of the snow. Or maybe it was something simple like a blown fuse. He'd better check . . .

The voice coming from the transistor had changed from inane rambling to a more serious tone. And the music seemed to have faded from the background but he couldn't be sure because the crackling was louder again.

' . . . a news-flash.'

, Peter tensed in the darkness; it was as though he had the telephone receiver to his ear and the voice was talking to him, giving a message of vital importance: You can't afford to miss it. Listen carefully, it's a bad line. And bad news.

' . . . break-out earlier today . . . police have launched a massive search . . . people in remote areas of these . . . warned to stay indoors after dark . . . this man is ... life-sentence for the murder of ... police spokesman said today . . . known to be dangerous . . . warned not to approach him if seen , . . contact your local police station or tele- phone . . . believed to be heading in ... Welsh mountains ...

The crackling wasn't entirely the transistor; a buzzing in Peter's ears somehow seemed to be related to the pile-driving headache and the drumming of his pulses. The DJ's stupid banter began again, with the kind of sick joke that might scare the hell out of anybody living alone, something about 'watch-out if there's a knock on the door; it could be that escaped maniac dropping in to listen to Record Roundup.' Bloody idiot!

Heading in the direction of the Welsh mountains. . . Peterfelt himself go cold. An escaped maniac on the loose, heading for the Welsh mountains. Here. Hodre!

That was stupid, letting his imagination run riot. The Welsh mountains covered a huge area; the fugitive could be anywhere. That in itself was a disconcerting thought.

First he had to try and get the power restored, if that was possible. He groped, found his torch and went in search of the fusebox. The pantry was the best place to look.

Right first time. And all the fuses were OK. At least, they seemed to be; he couldn't find one that had blown, and anyway there didn't seem to be any spares. That meant it was a cable somewhere, brought down under the weight of the snow or . . .

He went back into the kitchen and picked up the gun and cartridges. Upstairs was the obvious place to withstand a siege. The bedroom window commanded a wide view of the snow-covered slopes and the stone circle. The enemy didn't come that way, though. They might circle round and in from the front. Even so, they had to mount the stairs to get to him, and he could hold off an army that way. Provided the attackers were human. Of course they were. Hadn't he wounded one, drawn blood? If the blood had come from that cowering white figure.

The bedroom was cold and Peter could see his breath as he forced the small window open. He'd have to leave it open because the glass was frosted up and he'd never see outside otherwise.

The starlight seemed brighter than the previous night, a glittering landscape of frozen whiteness only broken up by patches of shadow. He loaded the gun, rested it on the chest beneath the window and began his vigil. It was going to be a long cold night.

The vixen screeched again and made him jump. Damn it, couldn't her mate find her without her making a row like that? Peter was all keyed up and wished he had some cigarettes. But he didn't, so he'd have to make the best of it.

Funny, he'd anticipated the deer showing themselves on the hill below the forest only a few seconds before his searching eyes picked out the first of the moving black dots. A kind of sixth sense and it was functioning well tonight. Christ, there were a lot of deer up there, whole lines of them merging into bunches, on the move the whole time. They were restless, in a hurry, as though they were going somewhere in particular and didn't have a minute to lose. Probably they were starving, getting desperate for food of any kind. In which case, why didn't they move down to the valleys, where the snow wouldn't be so deep and with luck they'd find some grass they could scratch down to? Canny creatures like deer ought to realise that - or perhaps the blizzard had put them in a blue funk. Or something had!

The herd came and went, a vast movement that crossed the top slope and then doubled back towards the wood until the shadows cast by the trees swallowed them up. Peter tried to work out their exact position; they had gone into the forest just about where Don Peter's body lay, his head crushed in, his finger still pointing accusingly. Maybe the vixen was there, too, feeding on . . . He tried to push the thought from his mind. He was feeling sick again.

He remembered the news-flash again, then reminded himself that he had a gun. They were the ones who had to do the worrying; they were in for a nasty shock.

Everywhere so still, so silent. That was what got on his nerves. Why didn't that bloody vixen scream again or an owl hoot? He was listening till he heard sounds that weren't there.

He tried to work out some kind of plan for the following day. The weather held the key to everything, his whole plight. If it did not begin to thaw then he could be here for days - nights! Oh God, he'd crack eventually and go mad in

this silence that was pregnant with lurking evil.

He found himself staring at the whiteness outside through slitted eyes. His lids seemed to be weighted down, fighting to close. Jesus, he had to keep awake at all costs. It wasn't easy. The glare of the snow was like a powerful sedative, urging him to lie down, to forget everything. There's nothing out there, it's all in the mind, he told himself. No, it bloody well isn't; they are out there waiting for me to fall asleep so that they can close in. Maybe they even know I've got a gun and all they have to do is to wait.

It was full daylight. Peter awoke with a start, his brain computer reminding him instantly that something was wrong. But it took several seconds to process the necessary data which brought everything back to him. Oh Jesus Christ, he'd fallen asleep! The very thing he'd fought against, but in the end fatigue had beaten him. His eyes had closed and he'd slumped across the wooden chest and slept. The old hammer gun was beneath him, fully cocked. Miraculously he hadn't caught the triggers and discharged both barrels.

His thumb shook as he lowered the hammers gently. Outside, the winter sun was high in the sky; the morning was well advanced. He had slept late but they hadn't come after all. At least he didn't think they had. Maybe it was all in the mind.

Cautiously, still carrying the gun, he went downstairs and checked every room. Doors and windows were still fastened. Nobody had tried to force their way in.

Peter munched some dry crackers out of a tin on the shelf and tried to work out a plan of action. The clock on the mantelshelf showed that it was eleven-fifteen. Immediately he pushed any idea of making a break for it out of his mind. The weak sunlight wouldn't melt the snow. It could go on like this for days, maybe weeks. There wasn't a thing he could do about.

He groaned and fought off despair. One way or another he was trapped. They knew that; they could take their time coming for him. It was going to be a twenty-four-hour vigil.

He unlocked the door and went outside. There was a steady drip of water from the sagging guttering at the front of the cottage, but the rear was in the shade and a line of icicles showed no signs of melting.

The glare of the sun on the snow hurt his eyes; he hadn't fully shaken off his headache. There wasn't any point in making the treacherous ascent into the frozen wilderness which even the creatures of the wild seemed to have deserted. No point at all. Slowly he went back indoors and locked the door behind him. It was truly a siege in every sense; the enemy hadn't shown themselves but they were up there all right. He could sense them. The feeling of being watched made him want to draw the curtains and shut out the sunlight, and hide himself away.

Peter switched on the transistor. The static didn't seem so bad this time. Pop music - what else! One DJ's voice was much the same as another, aimless banter and a host of unfunny jokes. 'It's one o'clock and over to the news desk for the latest world-wide news . . . '

Time had passed quickly for once when it should have been standing still.

'The hunt is still going on for the escaped convict from one of Britain's top-security prison hospitals. John Louvelle, serving a life sentence, who escaped early yesterday morning, is still at large and the reports that he was last seen heading through a remote Welsh mountain village have now been

confirmed. Police have warned the public not to approach this man as he is known to be violent and dangerous. Drifting snow has hampered the search . . .

Peter shivered, which reminded him that he must re-light the Rayburn. Louvelle wouldn't come to Hodre, though.

'And here is the weather forecast: snow which has affected Wales and the west country has now died away but temperatures are expected to remain below freezing for the next twenty-four hours.'

Peter switched off the transistor. He couldn't stomach a further dose of pop music on top of that. Louvelle - he remembered the case, about three years ago. The fellow had taken a young woman and two children hostage in a remote country cottage (like Hodre!) and he'd kept the police at bay for four days. No motive, just for the hell of it. In the end they'd tried to rush him but he'd been as wary and as dangerous as a treed cougar; he'd cut his victims' throats and seriously wounded two policeman before they overpowered him. The children had died. Peter didn't remember what had happened to their mother.

He found himself going back to the window and looking out again. Hodre and the surrounding hills were big and wild. Like Louvelle. He could be out there too.

Peter contemplated passing the time by trying to work on his book. After half an hour he gave it up. His concentration was shot to hell. He realised how besieged gunmen felt: after a time they didn't give a damn, went out shooting and got mown down in a hail of lead, Dillinger-style. The only way out was to sit tight - if his nerves would stick it - and wait for the weather to change.

He went back to the window and watched late afternoon slip into evening, the sun blood red as it slid behind the western mountain range. Even indoors Peter's breath was clouding on the windows. Tonight there was going to be one helluva frost.

At length he drew the curtains and lit a stub of candle in a saucer. Its glow didn't serve much purpose except to give him a circle of flickering yellow light to sit in; primitive man again, afraid of the dark because it held unknown terrors. Little had changed over thousands of years.

He resisted the temptation to try and tune in to a news reading on one of the transistor's wavelengths. Cowardice. He couldn't face it. It was as though the media were out to get at him too; or somebody or something was using them to wear him down.

He wondered if there were any more candles anywhere. He should have searched for some during the daylight hours.

Doubtless Janie would know he was cut off here. But just being snowed up was no reason to send a helicopter to search for him. Up in these mountain regions it was a way of life; everybody accepted it.

The candle was getting low, melting its wax into the saucer, the flame larger and flickering fast. Peter estimated it might burn for another half hour. After that he might as well go upstairs to the bedroom.

Why not stay here in the kitchen? If they wanted him they had to come through the door and he had a loaded gun. He was tense, edgy at the prospect of darkness, man's oldest fear, once again. In a way the reflection of the snow made it worse because in the dim glow he thought he saw things.

He was listening to the silence again. He could hear something if he concentrated, like the wind - only it wasn't the wind. Something was moving . . .

Oh God, something really was moving! There was a sound like a heavy animal dragging itself along across the frozen snow, the ice cracking and giving way beneath it; perhaps the deer - limping, weakening, scraping its hooves, drawing in great gulps of frosty air, wounded; so it had to come to man, trusting him. Scratching at the door!

Peter whirled in his chair and brought the shotgun up so that the barrels were trained on the door, twin tubes of Damascus steel that wavered because the hands holding them were unsteady, the forefinger touching the front trigger lightly, poised to take a pressure.

He listened again. Laboured rasping breaths from outside, a scratching on the woodwork, then something heavy pounding so that the door vibrated .

The candle flickered and almost went out. Peter was aware of rivulets of cold sweat running down his forehead and making his eyes smart. The voice inside him, the one that always highlighted his worst fears, was screaming at him: 'That's not a deer. Deer don't come near human habitation, they can't knock on doors. It's them; they've come for you!'

He should have fired both barrels simultaneously, a double charge that would have ripped into the woodwork with the full force of the chokes, almost a lethal ball of shot shattering its way out, tearing into whatever was out there. Then reloaded and fired again and again, yelling through the thick cloud of acrid powder smoke, 'Take that you bastards, and that. Never thought I'd have a gun, did you?'

But he didn't fire. Suddenly he didn't have that kind of courage. Murder. Manslaughter. A dozen or more reasons flitted through his frightened brain and prevented him from pressing the trigger. He remained poised. Waiting. Listening.

Then the candle went out; a final flicker of enlarged flame cast a wide circle of light that dimmed and died, leaving him in total blackness. Somehow he held the gun in one hand and groped for his torch with the other. Even as the beam of white light hit the door the pounding came again, louder this time, so that the bolt rattled.

A voice. He couldn't tell what it was saying but it was definitely a voice. A kind of desperate cry, fists pummelling the door again.

A lot of things went through Peter's fear-crazed brain: that the mad killer, Louvelle, had made it to a lone habitation, somewhere to hole up for the winter. If it was him he'd have a knife, and use it without hesitation. Or the white-cloaked figure, still dripping blood from its shotgun wound, come in search of revenge. / killed your cat and your rabbit, now I'm going to kill you \

Peter was on his feet. His legs felt weak and were trying to pull him back down into the chair. He moved forward a couple of steps and called out, 'Who's there?'

Silence for a few moments, then the scratching started again, lower down, almost at ground level. The blows were weaker than before as though the nocturnal visitor's strength was ebbing.

'I said who's there?' Peter scarcely recognised his own voice, a high-pitched shout that was almost a scream.

No answer. Just that same laboured breathing.

He reached out a hand and tugged at the bolt. He had to jerk it clear of its socket. The latch rattled, then steadied as something on the other side pushed at the door.

Peter backed away a step, and held the gun in one hand whilst with the other he leaned forward and flicked the latch with the end of the torch. The door creaked slowly inwards; he backed away another pace, his mouth so dry it was painful to swallow.

Then he saw it, clearly circled in the white beam of the torch: a figure that crawled on all fours and seemed to be caught up in the torn bedsheet, which had been fashioned into a cowed garment. The face was twisted with agony, hideously caked with dried blood.

A bloody hand was raised, pointing at him. Accusing. Words hammered into his brain: You killed me and now I've come for you!

He wanted to flee, to scream. But there was nowhere to run to and his vocal chords were paralysed. It wasn't possible, but it was happening before his eyes: the tattered, bloody corpse he'd left up in the big snowdrift was here, crawling in through his own doorway.

Don Peters, the Woodside poacher, had returned from the dead to exact a terrible revenge!

15

Peter had the shotgun loaded and cocked, yet for some reason he did not squeeze its double triggers. He just stared in disbelief, the barrels lowering until they were pointing down at the floor.

"Help me!

With that cracked, pathetic cry, the white-robed figure before him slumped down, breathing heavily, with a gurgling sound as though there was some obstructing fluid in the lungs. His head was raised, looking up, an expression of sheer terror on the blood-caked features. 'Help me, lock the door . . . They are out there!'

And in that instant reasoning came like a cooling wind across a parched desert, and Peter expelled his pent-up breath in one loud gasp of relief. The man who lay on the floor before him was not Don Peters; it was the dead man's poaching partner, Mick Bostock!

'Bostock!' he grunted. 'What's happening? What the hell are you doing here? And -'

'Close the door.' It was a croak of terror. 'They are out there, I tell you.'

'They?' Peter reached the door, slammed it shut and shot the bolt. 'And who the hell are they?'

'My God, I wish I knew.' The poacher was close to breaking down. 'But they'll kill us both if they get us!'

Somehow Peter got Bostock into the kitchen chair, and by the light of his torch began to remove that snow-saturated, partly frozen bloodstained outer garment. It was a head wound of some kind, a gash above the left ear which had bled profusely before it congealed, and matted hair clung to the dried blood. Nasty but not dangerous.

'We'll have to wash this,' he murmured as he moved the kettle on to the wide Rayburn hotplate. 'Now, suppose you tell me what happened to you and your mate, eh.'

'Don - have you seen him?' Bostock gripped the sides of the chair and tried to sit upright, but immediately fell back again. 'For God's sake, where is he?'

Peter was trying to sort out some bandages from the meagre first-aid tin on the Welsh dresser. 'I've seen him but I'm afraid he's dead, a wound like a horse had kicked his head.'

'I knew it.' Bostock's voice trembled. 'I knew he'd never get out of that bloody wood alive.'

'Now suppose you stop talking in riddles and try and tell me what the hell is going on around here.' Peter found some rolled bandage and wondered how long it would take the kettle to boil. 'You and your mate were doing your best to try and frighten the life out of us in the Cat that night. Now it seems that all your bogeys have materialised.'

'We was poaching, Don and me.' Bostock's eyes widened as he began to relive the terrifying events which had led up to this meeting. 'Rabbits, mind you, nothin' else, no game or pheasants or the like. We was on Ruskin's land when we saw 'em. Christ, if only we'd seen 'em sooner we might've stood a chance, but the buggers were dressed like us, all in white. First we thought they was somebody else out after the rabbits but the way they started after us we knew then they was no warreners. We split up and took to the woods to try and shake 'em off. You could hear 'em all around looking for us, and then from afar off I heard Don's scream. Just one scream that was sorta cut off so sudden I knew he was dead. Then they was after me. I gave 'em a chase I can tell you, right out of the big wood on to Hodre ground. I reckon I might've made it down here but something hit me.' Bostock fingered his wound gingerly. 'Don't know what it was but it came with terrific force, and if it'd hit me fair and square I guess I'd've dropped there and then. It was a glancing blow and I staggered on somehow, bleeding like a stuck pig. How they never caught up with me I'll never know but eventually I found myself all alone with not a sound of anybody around.'

That was when I passed out, and I guess I must've lain a whole night and a day out there in the snow. When I came round I knew there was no way back to Woodside; all the old tracks were drifted up since Don and I had set out. So I had to come here. You understand that don't you, Mr Fogg?'

'Yes.' The kettle had boiled and now Peter was trying to bathe the ugly wound, grimacing. 'But how do you know that - that they are out there now?'

'I saw 'em,' He winced. 'God strike me, I saw 'em, Mr Fogg, up on the slope above the Hodre Circle, four or five of 'em all dressed in white and heading here, sorta glidin' over the drifts!'

'I see.' Peter began winding the bandage round the poacher's head; the sooner the man saw a doctor, the better. 'But who are they?'

'I told you, I don't know. They ain't after the rabbits, that's for certain,

even if they are dressed similar to how Don and me always dressed for snow poaching. If you ask me, there's something funny going on up at that old circle.'

Which was what Peter had thought in the first place: nutters who were out to offer up a human sacrifice to whatever entity they were trying to raise up.

'I think we'd better go upstairs if you can make it,' Peter said. 'I've got a gun and cartridges and maybe we can hold'em off.'

'I'll make it.' Bostock touched his bandaged head gingerly. 'God, I wish I knew what hit me. Some kind of catapult maybe.'

Somehow Peter managed to get Mick Bostock up the narrow flight of stairs. The poacher was weakening rapidly; possibly his wound and the hours of exposure to the elements had brought on pneumonia. His lungs were gurgling again.

'Let me take a look.' Bostock seemed to find renewed strength once they were in the bedroom and staggered across to the window and began to force it open. 'Maybe we'll be able to spot the bastards from here.'

One second the poacher was looking out of the open window, the next he was staggering back, trying to scream, but something was protruding from his throat and allowing him to make only a wheezing sound. A stream of thick wet fluid jetted upwards, splashed against the ceiling and began to drip steadily to the floor. And even as Peter stood watching in horrified silence, Mick Bostock crumpled on w the frayed carpet, still trying to jerk a length of steel arrow from his throat.

Peter watched it all in the beam of his torch, a shaft of shaking light that followed the spurting blood up to the ceiling and down again, then focused on the crumpled, bleeding form of Mick Bostock. It was quite obvious that the poacher was dead.

Peter felt his stomach knotting and wondered if he was going to throw up. If he did, it was going to make a mess on the bedroom floor. Jesus Christ, the carpet was already saturated with blood and the thick crimson fluid was oozing its way along the gaps between the floorboards like sluggish polluted rivers; probably dripping through into the room below - his study - spotting his manuscript, pages splashed with genuine human blood. A real-life horror novel!

With a supreme effort he pulled himself together and knelt down by the dead man. The weapon sticking out of Rostock's throat reminded him of a redskin arrow, a shaft of some sort of steel, a weapon so silent and deadly, bringing instant death without warning.

And then he remembered an advertisement he'd seen only a few weeks ago offering sportsmen a weapon that was efficient, silent, and needed no licence whatsoever. The crossbow: a device of death that had been used many centuries ago, now updated, made of steel, a hundred times more powerful than ever before. And they were outside armed with crossbows!

Peter began to sweat, knowing that Bostock's arrival on the scene had saved his own life. Had the poacher not gone to the window, then undoubtedly at some time he would have done so himself, and would now be lying dead on the floor with a steel bolt embedded in his throat. They were here; they were closing in for the kill!

Keeping low he reached the window, cautiously raised his eyes above the level of the sill and peered out. The landscape looked much the same as on the

previous night: a steep expanse of frozen wasteland that reflected the light of millions of sparkling stars. So silent, so devoid of life. He could almost believe that the enemy had given up and gone home. But they were out there somewhere, all right.

Did they know Bostock had fled here, or were they under the impression that it was Peter himself they had felled with that devilish bolt? He wondered. They weren't making any move to close in. Perhaps they had gone away after all.

Seconds later Peter knew without any doubt that the enemy had not left. He felt the rush of cold air on his face and was aware of the passage of some kind of missile, but before his reflexes had him diving for cover he heard it strike the far bedroom wall amidst a shower of splintering plaster.

Cold steel glinted in the half-light, a shaft that quivered and hummed its vibration, angry that it had been denied a victim, embedded several inches in the far wall.

Without any doubt the enemy knew he was skulking in the bedroom and their intention was to kill him. Full realisation brought with it a new kind of terror. Previously the fear of the unknown had made him flinch from every patch of shadow. And he had been uncertain whether anybody really was lurking there. It might have been all in the mind. Now that doubt was removed. Out there was a flesh and blood enemy whose main objective was to remove him from the scene with brutal efficiency. The reason was beyond him, but it didn't matter. Now they had him in a corner; he must either fight or die. Or both.

God, he didn't know who the hell they were but he bloody well hated them, wanted to kill them, every single one of them. His smouldering fury fanned its own flames from dwindling fear. They'd scared him but not any longer. Because they were only human like himself, whoever they were, not spooks or druids or other intangible forces of evil. They had crossbolts; he had a shotgun. They wanted a fight and he'd bloody well give 'em one! It was as simple as that.

Suddenly he was on his feet, pulling on both triggers and lighting the hillside with orange stabs of flame.

He winced at the double report as he knelt to reload, and smelled the powder smoke. Its sharp odour gave him a heady sort of sensation, a feeling of satisfaction that made him want to sniff it deep down into his lungs. Because it was the smell of power; he was fighting back. He felt he could get hooked on it, like sniffing glue.

Except that there was no time. Even as the sound of the double blast was roiling into a roar that echoed across the hillside, Peter heard the glass in the open window shatter. Something glanced off the lead latticing and went singing with vibration into the night air. He flung himself sideways; flying glass smashed against the wall behind him and tinkled to the floor.

A shot for a shot; that was the way it was going to be. Like a B western movie, he grinned to himself - arrows thudding into the bunk-house, the defenders keeping the attackers at bay. That thought prompted him to check his ammunition. He'd have to go steady if the siege was going to be a long one, and it could well last until the snow had melted.

There followed a long period of silence. Once he thought he heard the sound of footsteps crunching on frozen snow, but it died away. Perhaps it was a ruse to tempt him to show himself again. The enemy had one big advantage over him - they had only to wait with their crossbows trained on one square of window; he had to search out his white-clad targets on a snowbound hillside. He licked

his dry lips; he was the proverbial sitting duck. By the luminous dial of the alarm clock on the bedside table he saw that it was eleven-forty. Jesus Christ, the night had hardly begun!

An hour passed. He was cold and starting to fidget. He experienced an urge to show himself, to get it over and done with. He longed for somebody out there to curse, or even fire a few bolts at the house, to break the terrifying silence. He tried not to glance at Bostock's inert form. Death like that was unnerving because it was so unnecessary, so bloody brutal. And he knew he might end up that way himself . . .

Oh Jesus Christ, he could smell smoke!

He coughed as he scrambled up, keeping low so that he didn't pass in front of the window. Something was on fire somewhere. The Rayburn chimney maybe.

He burst out on to the tiny landing, then recoiled as a wall of creeping smoke met him, the acrid fumes searing his throat, making him step back into the bedroom to gulp some of the fresh air that came in through the open window.

Somewhere he could hear flames, a rush and a crackling of dry wood.

The bastards have fired the granary! The whole place will go up in minutes!

He took a deep breath and with eyes closed fought his way down the staircase, still clutching the loaded 12-bore. The wall was warm; he could feel and hear the fire on the other side of the stonework. Crackling loudly, the flames had found the tinder-dry woodworm-riddled beams and were already beginning to devour their way through to the house. Something heavy crashed in the granary; the floor-joists and rafters were already yielding to the mounting inferno.

He stopped in the hall, crouched down and managed to draw in some more fresh air coming under the door. Oh Christ, they were desperate to get him; they were smoking him out now and he had no choice other than to rush out into the open. They had been too clever for him in the end.

One moment of lingering hesitation; a mixture of feelings that he had no time to sort out separately - sadness that he'd never see Janie or Gavin again, regret that he'd never get that book written now or enjoy the money and freedom his first one had given him. It was the old hackneyed western theme all over again: the Apaches had fired the bunkhouse with their burning arrows and were out there waiting to mow down the homesteader when he was forced to dash out into the open. Outnumbered, he stood no chance, but was determined to go down fighting.

Peter slid back the bolt. It ran easily, as though even this inanimate object was conspiring to hasten his death. He lifted the latch and let the door swing open a few inches.

It was getting unbearably hot. The stone wall adjoining the granary was like the side of a bread oven. He gripped the gun with both hands and pulled the hammers up to full cock. A handful of cartridges was concealed in the pocket of his jeans; this was by no means a surrender.

He tried to formulate a rapid plan of action. Go out there fast and low, zig-zagging towards the low wall by the gate. Make a last stand from there.

A report, as if the 12-bore had gone off, and the stone in the granary began to split. It was an instant inferno. The whole place was tinder dry, the beams half-rotten, and burning debris fell with a crash. Peter felt the vibration

beneath his feet and knew he couldn't stay there much longer. The cottage and the granary roof formed a single structure; the whole lot might come down together and bury him in an avalanche of fiery rubble. He could linger no longer.

The door creaked open another foot, urging him to run. He paused briefly, wishing he had gone with Janie and Gavin, thankful that at least they were safe.

Then he hit the porch at a run, feeling the snow beneath his feet, a hard-packed slippery surface that slowed him down and threatened to send him sprawling with each step he took. He found it difficult trying to zig-zag as he anticipated the tearing force of a steel bolt ripping through his body, throwing him back in a heap of mutilated flesh that spouted blood and turned the snow a ghastly crimson.

Peter couldn't understand it. He'd reached the boundary wall and was kneeling in a patch of shadow, trembling and trying not to look around him. But not a single bolt had been fired at him as he ran!

Something was wrong. It took him several seconds to realise what it was: the darkness was gone, pushed back to a mass of shadow that hovered uncertainly as far as the stone circle. It was the orange glow from the blazing building that lit the night sky, of course. Not wholly, though. Shafts of dazzling white light split the night sky, a criss-crossing of anti-aircraft searchlight beams trying to pinpoint enemy bombers, swinging this, way and that, converging, moving on. Ok God, those tampers, as PC Calven called them, they were here, too!

Even as Peter reared up slowly to try and peer over the top of the low crumbling drystone wall his ears picked up the steady drone of engines, an incessant hum that was growing louder by the second. It was aircraft . . . No, the lights, the sound was too low on the ground, they'd crash into the hillside if they were planes.

He viewed the scene above him in total amazement, his fear forgotten. Three or four vehicles traversed the steep slope, going one way then the other, their powerful lights illuminating the whole hillside.

It was impossible! The slope was like a glacier; the ice and snow would not hold a vehicle of any sort. Even a crawler would have difficulty in making it up there in dry weather. But these vehicles traversed it with ease!

Snowmobiles!

Peter caught his breath. He picked one out in the lights, a low snub-nosed thing that moved steadily with a power that defied the elements and the terrain, swinging one way, then the other. The snow machines were moving into a wide circle, now closing in.

Men were running - white-robed figures who stumbled and fell, panicking and trying to rid themselves of their obstructing garments, a kind of bizarre round-up in which they were herded by mechanical creatures which anticipated their every move. The fleeing figures had what looked like outsize shoes on their feet.

Everything had come to a standstill. The whole scene was illuminated by the lights of the stationary snowmobiles, and the eerie glow from the shooting flames which were rapidly devouring Hodre. The burning debris crackled, shooting sparks high into the windless sky in a kaleidoscopic firework

display. Above the hum of the idling engines Peter heard men shouting. There were a dozen or more figures now; a brief scuffle, and it was over almost before it began.

He gripped his gun and waited.

After what seemed an eternity the cavalcade of snow machines began to move off again in an almost vertical convoy. Coming this way. The slow procession came to a halt in the drifted lane. Two men clambered out of the leading vehicle and began ploughing their way through the deep snow towards him.

He caught his breath and instinctively began lowering the hammers of the shotgun as he recognised one of them in the glare from the blazing cottage. There was no mistaking the angular features of PC Calvert, a sheepskin jacket covering his constable's uniform- Peter suddenly experienced the urge to burst out laughing, a sense of utter relief combined with the comical appearance of the Woodside policeman in knee-length Wellington boots that were surely two sizes too large and gave him a kind of Mickey Mouse appearance. 'Glad you're OK, Mr Fogg.' Calvert was sweating. Peter nodded. 'M OK, but we'd better move away from the house. The whole bloody lot's going to cave in any second.'

'Well, we got 'em.' The constable motioned towards the group of men clustered around the waiting vehicles. The ring-leaders anyway.'

'Got who?' Peter winced as he heard the roof behind them starting to slide. 'I haven't a clue what's going on except that somebody seems determined to perforate my body with crossbow bolts. They got Peters and Bostock, by the way. Bostock's in the house, probably cremated by now.'

'We found Peters up there.' Calvert pointed up the hillside. 'Sergeant Lewis and myself came with the forest rangers tonight but I don't think any of us quite expected a haul like this.'

'Suppose you fill me in on everything.' Peter shook his head slowly. 'I'm afraid I'm getting a bit confused.'

'I'd've thought it was obvious.' A tall raw-boned man wearing a torn ex-army combat jacket over a polo-necked sweater stepped forward. These guys here are the leaders of what was probably the most dangerous and highly organised gang of deer-poachers ever to operate in Britain.'

'Deer-poachers/' Peter stared wide-eyed at the heap of crossbows and high-powered battery lamps loaded on to one of the snowmobiles glinting evilly in the light cast by the blazing cottage. 'But I thought ...'

'Sure we know what you thought, and so did we up until a couple of nights ago when we got a tip-off.' Calvert laughed, a humourless hollow sound. 'You thought you were the victim of an anti-English campaign by some fanatical yobbos, and so you were to some extent. And you also thought that a couple of our local moochers, Peters and Bostock, wanted you out of the way so they could poach rabbits on Hodre in peace. And you were right! But these deer-poachers were the ones who killed your cat and rabbit and slashed your tyres. They needed to get you out of the way when the big herds moved up to winter on Hodre because that was going to be their big coup, thousands of pounds for a few night's work. They're more desperate than most of the armed gangs who raid banks in the cities, and their overall rewards are just as rich. In an out-of-the-way place like this, working systematically, they could clean up most of the herd. They tried to scare you off first but when that didn't work they were going to make sure you didn't live to tell the tale, just as they weren't taking any chances on Peters and Bostock getting away.'

For the poachers this blizzard couldn't have been better timed; they could take their time, use snowshoes, and all they needed was a few nights when nobody could get to them. Fortunately the Forestry Commission shipped a few snowmobiles out here when they realised what was going on.'

Peter wasn't listening anymore; his brain was suddenly reeling as he stared at one of the captured poachers, a big fellow with remnants of a torn camouflage sheet still clinging to his frame. The eyes still blazed venom even in defeat, the long silver hair and flowing beard seemed to have turned white. Tonight Tim Ruskin had aged a decade!

'Him!' Peter grunted. 'He's - he's - '

'Yes, quite a surprise. With all the land he owns he must be a millionaire but he's sacrificed everything for a few extra grand. Not content with making a fat profit out of sheep he finally couldn't leave the deer alone. I guess he won't be walking these fields for a long time to come. Now, I reckon, Mr Fogg, we can just squeeze you in one of the snowmobiles and give you a lift down to a more civilised place. I'll bet you've seen enough of Hodre to last you a lifetime!'

Peter turned from his cramped place in the low vehicle as its caterpillars began to grip the snowdrifts for one last look at a place that had been home for a short time, and was now being cremated in a blazing inferno. The roof had caved in, the nearside wall was bowing and any moment it would collapse outwards, showering hot stone and burning debris into the drifts. Snow was already melting and running in rivulets down the garden path.

He grinned wryly as he remembered his book. One chapter that wasn't finished, another that was hardly begun.

In a lot of ways he was going to have to start all over again.

With a thunderous roar the cottage disintegrated and huge tongues of flame shot skywards. Hodre was going out in one last terrifying flamboyant gesture. And way up the slope the twisted trees surrounding the old druid circle were momentarily illuminated, blackened skeletons leering down on a funeral pyre, seeming to gloat as though an age-old vengeance was fulfilled.

For them, perhaps, it was not all over.