



THE SPIRIT OF

THERE IS NO SHIELD AGAINST THE—

DAGGER OF THE MIND

BOB SHAW



Dagger of the Mind

Part One

Petit mat

Chapter One

It was while he was pouring his breakfast coffee that Redpath became aware that something was wrong.

He paused for a moment and looked around the small apartment, straining his ears for an extra sound or a missing sound in the murmurous background noise of the building. The apartment block was coming to life in exactly the same hesitant but inevitable manner which was familiar to him from a thousand other mornings, with nothing out of kilter anywhere. He could *feel* the young couple directly above moving about in an ambience of hurried sex, drip-dry garments hanging like ghosts in the galloways of the doorways, moraines of toast crumbs and marmalade on the butter, and on the sideboard the holy trinity assembled into a neat pile—cigarettes, money and car keys. He could feel old Mr. Coates next door slowly regaining consciousness, simultaneously relieved and disappointed over not having died in the quiet hours of the night. On the other side, Harv Middleton, sales representative handling plug-in plastic lettering for menus in cafe windows, but who liked to tell people he was “advertising”, had already departed for the day in a cloud of conflicting perfumes. Everything was normal in the rest of the building, so the trouble had to be nearer at hand, within the four walls of Redpath’s own apartment.

He took stock of the kitchen, noting the presence and position of every object, remembering stories of how people who have been burgled sometimes fail to miss a familiar item until months afterwards. Again, there was no identifiable cause for his unease, which suggested that it did not have an external source—that the subtle wrongness was developing behind his eyes, between his ears, inside his skull. He tried testing himself. Those rays of sunlight slanting down on to the parquet-patterned floor covering—were they too yellow, too bright, too cheerful? That stencilled blue-and-bronze design on his coffee mug—had it acquired new merits, was it evoking too much aesthetic pleasure? Were there exotic fragrances, such as those of Chamberyzzette or champak blossoms, mingling with the ordinary homely smells of his food and drink? In short—was he experiencing an aura?

No, please, no, Redpath thought. *Not today.*

He went to the long chromium-rimmed mirror in the bedroom and stood close to it. The image which looked back at him in spurious intimacy was that of a tall, slim-built man in his early thirties, with closely waved auburn hair and fair, dry, freckled skin of the type which seems never to perspire. There was an irresolute, mobile quality about the mouth which could make its owner look humorous, reckless or sullen on the instant, and the brown eyes were direct and inquisitive. The overall picture was one of unobtrusive good health, something for which Redpath usually felt grateful in view of the fact that he suffered from an incurable disease. There were other times, however, when—even if only for the assistance it would afford him in the management of his condition—he felt it would be more appropriate and in some way satisfying if he could appear ill.

In the present instance, as a case in point, he had no way of knowing if he was experiencing the aura which preceded a *grand mal*, actually undergoing a mild psychomotor epilepsy with its characteristic disturbance of thought, or simply passing through a period of heightened awareness which had no connection with neural abnormality. He decided to take precautionary measures.

Setting his coffee aside, he went into the living-room, picked up a cigar-box full of darts and

positioned himself before the dartboard hanging near the window. With his toes at the edge of a carpet tile he knew to be exactly nine feet from the board, Redpath began throwing the darts, concentrating the utmost as he tried to place one in each division from one to twenty. There were twenty-one darts in the box, which allowed him to make only one mistake in the private contest. He had to make two attempts at the four, a shot he usually found difficult, but that had the effect of steadying his hand and eye, and he successfully picked off all the other numbers. In a second game he needed two darts for both the four and the sixteen, but in the third set he went right round the board without a single miss, leaving himself with a dart in hand. He resisted an impulse to throw the remaining dart at the bullseye—aware that hitting it could cause a dangerous surge of elation—and again took inventory of all those intangibles which made up his consciousness.

He felt cool, relaxed, fully locked-on to his surroundings.

Dr Hyall had recommended occupational therapy as a pre-ventative for attacks—(*“It’s a long established fact that a workman rarely has a seizure while he’s at the bench”*)—and for a time Redpath had tried making jewellery and repairing watches, but all crafts had a disadvantage in that they took too long to become engrossed, to pick up yesterday’s threads. The darts, by comparison, provided him with immediate and complete involvement for hand, eye and mind. In spite of some scepticism from Dr Hyall and others, Redpath was satisfied that they shunted excesses of neural energy into harmless channels.

He retrieved his coffee and carried it back into the kitchen, now feeling a slight sense of anti-climax. *“You can’t win, he thought. And it’s all Leila’s fault—she should have been here this morning.”*

Redpath finished his coffee, placed the mug in the sink beside his empty cereal dish and ran some hot water on both. That done, and with fifteen minutes in hand before he had to leave for the institute, he felt sufficiently bolstered to face the morning paper and mail which had been lying on the hall floor since he got up. He went into the hall and knelt to retrieve the various items spilled across the doormat. On top was a buff envelope bearing the return address of Harrup & Phizackeley, Estate Agents, and he knew it was yet another reminder about the rent of the apartment, now three months in arrears. He fingered the envelope, noted that it seemed to contain more than one sheet of paper, and wondered if things had gone beyond the reminder stage. That, he decided, was a mystery whose unveiling could wait until the evening. He flicked the unopened envelope onto the hallstand and glanced at the three other letters, identifying them as two promotional circulars and an electricity bill. What was the small ad he used to see in American pulp magazines? **“DO YOU GET INTERESTING MAIL?”**

He sighed and, still kneeling on the floor, turned his attention to the newspaper which was the *Haverside Herald*, a daily serving the four towns and scattering of hamlets which made up the South Haverside district. He took it in preference to any of the nationals because, although the *Herald* did its best to be as despondent as any major paper, the tragedies served up in its pages were usually on a manageable scale and allowed Redpath to go on believing that something could be done. One of the front page stories in that day’s edition was a case in point—it concerned a local pigeon fancier who had just lost a third batch of prize racing birds.

“It is definitely sabotage of some kind,” said 54-year-old Mr Giddings at his home last night. “My birds made good time the whole way from France, and they were definitely seen passing over the Tiverly Edge checkpoint at ten o’clock on Sunday morning, which means they should have been—”

Redpath stopped reading as he became aware of something peculiar. At this time of the day the corridor outside his apartment received a lot of natural light, creating a thin line of silver radiance along the bottom of Redpath's door. The strip of brightness was there now, but it was interrupted in the centre—which meant that an object had been placed against the outside of the door, or that somebody was standing there. The former explanation was the most likely—the postman sometimes simply abandoned packages that were too big for the letterbox—but it seemed to Redpath that the ends of the dark segment were wavering slightly, as became the shadow of a living thing. On the other hand, there was no sound, no evidence that a caller was getting ready to ring the doorbell, and it was hard to believe that anybody would be eccentric enough to stand vigil on his threshold. It had to be a package. The slight shimmering had to be a trick of the light, a result of foliage stirring in the trees behind the building or of clouds slipping across the disc of the sun.

Redpath stood up and reached for the lock, then *something* happened inside his head. There was a shifting, a disturbance, a psychological event. He found himself looking at the plastic-rimmed lens of the peephole set in the middle of the door, the absurd device he had never used because it was designed for nervous and neurotic old ladies. He brought his eye close to the lens.

The face on the other side was not immediately recognisable as a face. At first there was an impression of mushy redness, as though he was looking at a giant tomato or some crimson-fleshed fruit from which the skin had been removed, leaving a surface of moistly-oozing pulp. There was a moment during which human features began to emerge from the glistening mass, followed by a brief period of rejection in which Redpath's mind refused to deal with the messages it was receiving. Then came the instant of terrible, gut-churning, soul-blighting acceptance.

The face, the entire head, had been stripped of skin, creating what appeared to be a nightmarish sculpture in gelled blood. The eyes and eyelids, which were complete in every detail except for lashes, were complex spheres of blood; the naked flesh of the lips was parted to reveal blood-enamelled teeth; the nose, made pendulous by the distortions of the peephole lens, glittered as a mass of blood droplets, and dark-red bubbles welled and swelled beneath the nostrils, showing that the monster was alive...

Redpath moaned aloud as he stepped back from the door, then a survival mechanism came into play, forcing him against his will to do what had to be done. He lurched forward, twisted the handle of the Yale lock and pulled the door wide open.

The corridor was empty.

He advanced into it on rubbery legs and looked about him. To his left the corridor came to a dead end a short distance on the far side of the door of Mr Coates' apartment. On the right was Harold Middleton's door, beyond it the head of the stairs which led down to street level, and in the opposite wing of the building three more doors, all locked. Through the windows which ran the length of the corridor he could see mature plane trees, part of a cindery car park, a builder's yard stacked with concrete lamp standards, and the rear elevations of a row of semidetached houses and assorted garages. Morning sunlight glowed on everything with quiet intensity. The world looked cheerful and humdrum, commonplace.

Everything's normal except me, Redpath thought. I'm turning into a frigging maniac.

He went back into his living-room and stood drumming with his fingertips on the arm of a chair while he came to an important decision about the course of his life. His work—his so-called work—at the institute represented his sole source of income, but he was not going to carry on with it if this was the sort of thing he could expect. The pay was pretty poor anyway— not enough to live on, but just sufficient to convince the social security people, who put commercials on TV begging the public to come and accept money from them, that he was a malingering spendthrift. If he had no work at all he would qualify for National Assistance, would get his rent arrears taken care of, and—above all—would be able to resume a life that was as normal as anybody with his particular affliction could hope to achieve.

Find a cheaper place, came a stray thought. A safer place.

What could be safer than this place?

Safe from what?

“I told you,” Redpath said indignantly to the peacefully inert furniture. “I’m turning into a lollipop farmer.” He lifted his brown suede zipper-up, pulled it on and strode out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. The corridor was still empty. When he got down to street level flat swirls of dust and candy wrappers blew in from the footpath to greet him, gambolling around his ankles like pet dogs. Redpath stared down at them in distaste, suddenly realising how much he had come to detest the place where he lived.

Bingham Terrace was named after a prominent councillor in Calbridge, largest of Haverside’s four towns. The novelty of the location had appealed to Redpath at first. It had seemed like a fun idea to live on a high street, right in the heart of things, watching the world go by from the vantage point of his cosy apartment perched above a row of six shops. For quite a long time he had appreciated the nearness and convenience of the shops, and had gone to considerable lengths to get on friendly terms with their owners and staffs. Their assorted specialties—home bakery, newsagent, boutique, coffee shop, grocer, butcher—might, for the most part, have been chosen to suit his personal needs. Even the one exception, the women’s clothiers, had managed to make a contribution because its sign proclaimed it to be *The Boutique Shop*. After Redpath had pointed out the tautology to the girls who worked there, he had established himself as a comic by putting his head round the door once a week and saying he wanted to buy a shop.

Now, quite abruptly, he was tired of the raw modernity of the place, the noise of the passing traffic and the eternal slamming of car doors, the racket kicked up by the youngsters who hung around the coffee shop in the evenings. None of the people in the other eleven apartments had fully responded to his overtures of friendship—possibly because the word had gone round that he was an epileptic and they were slightly afraid of him, more possibly because they were dull and circumscribed beings, leading dull and circumscribed lives. In all probability he had never managed to get through to them, not even once.

Standing in the narrow passageway which constituted the entrance to the upstairs apartments, Redpath frowned into the boutique on his right, intensifying his gloomy mood. Two of the girls had already arrived, but were standing with their backs to him, arranging displays on a counter, thus making it impossible for an exchange of friendly signals.

They probably never got the joke anyway, he thought. Communication problems. They probably laugh out of politeness. Or nervousness. I should have spelled it out that first time. Look, boutique is French for shop, so your sign says that this is a shop shop. Get it? See the funny joke?

Redpath found himself wishing, more fervently than before, that Leila Mostyn had spent the night with him. He was convinced that everything would have been all right had she been there beside him when he had wakened an hour previously. And no less an authority than Doctor Hyall agreed that he would benefit from the comfort and support of a stable relationship. He squared his shoulders and walked through the tunnel-like passageway to the car park at the rear of the building. Barred by law from obtaining a driving licence, he had the distinction of being the only person in Bingham Terrace—old Mr Coates included—who did not have a car, and his pedal cycle was the sole occupant of the lean-to in one corner of the cindered rectangle. Still brooding about Leila, he unchained the bicycle and wheeled it out to the street. The girls in the boutique saw him this time and waved a greeting. Redpath halted and pointed up at the sign above the shop, and the girls shook with extravagant laughter.

“Who’s kidding who around here?” Redpath muttered, getting on to the bicycle. He rode with the townward traffic for a couple of hundred yards before turning left into a quieter and mainly residential thoroughfare which would take him most of the way to the Jeavons Institute. The purr of his tyres on the tarmac and the steady rhythm of his legs usually served as aids to thought. He tried to rehearse the resignation speech he was going to make to Henry Nevison, but his mind kept turning towards the other source of the complications which had begun to plague his life.

Leila Mostyn was a mathematician who for six months had been doing post-graduate work on statistics in the research department where Redpath passed most of the working day. On meeting Redpath, and learning what he did for a living, she had spent some weeks treating him with impersonal kindness, like a cancer researcher being very correct in her handling of a laboratory animal she would soon have to dissect. For his part, Redpath had been captivated by her white-coated, tweed-skirted, straight-backed, pale-lipped air of sexual abstemiousness.

He had set out to court her, using all his resources of imagination and intellect, and for a full month after they had begun spending occasional nights together he had gone around in a romantic daze. Selfconsciousness about his health and poor financial prospects had kept him from proposing marriage, but he had hoped they might gradually be drawn into a formal commitment as the sensual side of Leila’s character continued to develop. That had been a good month. Then had come the discovery that she was not austere by nature—merely discreet and independent. The reason she would spend only one night a week with him on average was that she often preferred to be alone, and between times felt free to choose any partner from a circle of male friends at whose extent Redpath could only guess.

He had been hurt and angry, the more so because he knew he had been tricked by his own naive egocentricity. Since then he had come to accept the situation, and even to see advantages in it at times, but his attitude was a precarious one. He was well aware that any attempt to monopolise Leila would mean the end of the relationship and yet at least once a day he got a suicidal urge to express his jealousy, to remonstrate with her for not feeling as he did, to start laying down rules for another person’s behaviour. The urges grew stronger each time there was a setback in his daily routine—the implication being that she had carelessly denied him earthly paradise—and he had even reached the stage of holding her responsible for variations in his state of well-being. He knew this was illogical

and childish, but he was unable to prevent himself from doing it. *It's all too much*, he thought. *I've got to find a safer place.*

The psychophysiology department of the Jeavons Institute was housed separately in a brown sandstone edifice, built in the middle of the 19th century, which looked as though it had originally been the home of a wealthy merchant. It was screened from the granite façade and stainless steel cloisters of the institute proper by a row of Scots pines and some very old rhododendrons which had assumed the height and volume of modest-sized dwellings. Even on a fine summer day it was dark and cool as an underground cave behind the barricades of foliage, and on the lawn there were many areas like permanent brown shadows where grass refused to grow. The gravel of the surrounding path was always wet underneath, so that footprints and tyre tracks showed up as dark impressions which lingered for a long time, like infra-red images, until the surface stones dried out and lightened.

Redpath cycled on the deep gravel until its sliding shiftiness robbed him of all momentum, then dismounted and wheeled his machine to the department's front entrance. He propped it against the short stone balustrade at the side of the steps and went into the building. Leila Mostyn was coming out of her office as he entered the hall and she stopped to bid him good morning. She was a tall girl with cropped ash-blonde hair, grey eyes and a quirky fullness to her lips which to Redpath suggested every desirable feminine quality he could think of, from intelligence and humour to warmth and generosity. She was wearing what he thought of as the typical Leila Mostyn ensemble—a transparent blouse and half-cup brassiere of indisputably sexist design which would have put her figure on blatant display had she not added a countyish tweed skirt and a white lab coat. The coat in particular served as some kind of personal statement because nothing in her work made it necessary and nobody else in the department wore one.

Give a little, keep a lot. Let people know what they're missing. I wonder how she'd like it if, instead of meekly falling in with her every whim and piddling little plan, I walked into her flat and just took her any time I wanted, any way I wanted, whether she was in the mood or...

“John!” Leila gave him a quizzical smile. “What are you dreaming about?”

“Nothing.” Redpath was startled by the savagery of the vision which had obscured his thoughts. He gave a guilty laugh.

“Did you get enough sleep last night?”

“Plenty,” he said and, giving way to a jealous impulse, added, “How about you?”

The traces of Leila's smile vanished on the instant, showing there had been near-telepathic communication. “I slept very soundly, thank you.”

This is pure madness, Redpath thought. *I'm committing suicide.* He grinned and said, “Shame, shame.”

Leila drew the edges of her lab coat together at the front. “What do you mean?”

“The two of you lying there all night and nothing happening. It seems a bit of a waste.”

Leila examined him coldly. “I think I'll suggest to Henry that he should give you a month off.” She

tried to walk away but Redpath caught her arm and was thrilled and taunted by the warmth of her flesh beneath the white cotton.

“Who was he, anyway?” he said, still grinning. “Anybody I know?”

“I’ve told you before, John—you really must try to get over your adolescent sexual hang-ups.”

“That’s what I’m doing. I asked you openly and frankly who you slept with last night, and if you haven’t got any sexual hang-ups yourself you should give me an open and frank reply. Right?”

“Get lost, John.”

“Rejection and hostility.” Redpath released her arm and mimed writing something in a notebook. Leila turned quickly, launching circles of perfume into the air, and hurried away into the complex of partitioned rooms at the rear of the house, her sponge-soled flats making little hissing sounds on the tile floor. Redpath snorted in triumph. Leila was the one who usually used psychological jargon as a quiver of poisoned arrows and she had disliked it intensely when he had got in first. It meant, of course, that in less than a minute he had undermined months of patiently building or preserving a relationship, but he could sense that it was a time for big changes. He could feel it in the air. It was inevitable that his leaving the institute would drive a wedge between them, and it was better that he should take the initiative and break free of her while he still had his pride and dignity, rather than watch helplessly as she gradually rationed out less and less of her time to him, making him less and less of a man.

Pride? Dignity? Next thing it’ll be white-sidewall tyres on the bike. Since when have you been lumbered with junk like pride and dignity?

Redpath shook his head, frowning, sprinted up the stairs and went along the first-floor landing to Nevison’s office. He knocked lightly on the white-painted, panelled door and went in without waiting for a reply. Nevison, who was seated at his desk in the bay window, glanced up in surprise. He was a lean, professorial-looking man in his fifties, with bushy grey hair and a generally athletic appearance which was modified by a certain leaden colouring of his skin and a bluish-redness of the nostrils. His academic standing was very high, but he always made a point of addressing Redpath in ultra-clear, unadorned English. It was a practice for which Redpath had been grateful until he began to suspect that Nevison took pride in his ability to communicate with the common man and saw it as a useful scholarly adjunct.

“Hello, John,” Nevison said. “You’re early today. Please sit down.”

“Thanks.” Redpath lowered himself into a chair, as he did so realising for the first time that by unfailingly inviting him to take a seat Nevison had forestalled the development of a situation in which Redpath would feel entitled to do so unasked. He considered rising and waiting until sitting down again could be seen as a unilateral action, then it occurred to him that such preoccupations were neurotic. Would he, Redpath wondered, have been like that a year ago? Was it all part of a pattern?

Nevison sat without speaking for a moment and then, as if he had been taking time to complete some important train of thought, brightened noticeably and said, “Well now, John—what can I do for you?”

“I want out of the project,” Redpath said. He considered his words and decided he had not been sufficiently assertive. “In fact, I’ve made up my mind to quit.”

Nevison looked concerned. “I get the impression that this is quite a sudden decision. Am I right?”

“Well...” Redpath was reluctant to answer, feeling he was giving something away. “What difference does that make?”

“Perhaps none. You are perfectly free to drop out at any time, you know that, but if there’s some specific cause I’d like to discuss it with you and see what we can do about removing it. We don’t want to lose you, John.”

“Thanks, but I’ve made up my mind.”

Nevison gave a wistful smile. “If we were in an industrial setting, this is the point where I would offer you more money, but I think you know the position with regard to our research grants. I live in dread of the day that word gets back to the South Haverside council that we’re dabbling with telepathy. It goes back to porridge for all of us when that happens.”

“It isn’t the money,” Redpath said. “At least, that’s only part of it.”

“Oh.” Nevison steepled his fingers and stared out through the high window. Sunlight reflected from the modern architecture of the main buildings created Utopian glimmers in the palisade of dark green foliage.

Redpath felt impelled to speak. “I’m cracking up. It might be a build-up of the drugs, I don’t know. I just know I’m not going on.”

“Have you had a reaction?” Nevison said, leaning forward.

“Reaction!” Redpath huffed to express his sense of outrage. “This morning when I was picking up my mail I looked out through the peephole in the door and I saw something straight out of a Hammer movie. There was this face, and it had been *skinned*. It was a face made out of raw beef. Running with blood. I don’t have to put up with that sort of thing, Henry. Nobody can make me.”

“It sounds rather unnerving,” Nevison conceded, “but I’m sure there must be some quite prosaic explanation. Was the impression more vivid than those you’ve been getting in the routine tests?”

“It was totally convincing. It was just as if...Wait a minute! Are you saying I got a telepathic image?”

“What other explanation is there?”

“What *other* explanation? You haven’t given me the first one yet.” Redpath shifted restlessly in his chair, causing it to creak. “Are you trying to tell me that somewhere, somewhere near me, somebody was actually looking at a face like that? And that I picked up the mental image? It would be more comforting to believe I was going mad.”

“There’s no question of your going mad,” Nevison said, assuming a didactic manner. “But just consider the circumstances and compare them with some of our test results. You had just got up, so your mind wasn’t cluttered with day residue memories. If I remember the layout of your flat correctly the hall is fairly dark, so you had another trigger factor—a sudden drop in light intensity. And you looked through one of those spyhole devices, thus sharply limiting your field of view. Do you remember that quite early on we discovered what we call the small screen effect? It all adds up.”

“The face,” Redpath said quietly. “How about the face?”

“Yes, there’s the problem of the face.” Nevison stroked his chin for a moment. “We’ve also recorded one or two examples of inadvertent double transmission, haven’t we? That row of shops you live above—is there a butcher there?”

“Yes, but his stock is very basic. There isn’t much demand for flayed homo sapiens out our way.”

“I’m suggesting—and this is just one possibility—that your local butcher may have been carving a flank of beef and thinking about somebody at the same time, and that this led to your picking up a double transmission.”

“That’s wrong,” Redpath said flatly. “That’s all wrong.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s a cooked-up thing.”

“The specious is not necessarily untrue.”

“I don’t know about that, but...” Redpath paused as something flickered in his memory like the first tongue of flame that heralds an inferno. “You can forget about the small screen effect—what we’re talking about started before I looked through the peephole. The only reason I looked through it in the first place is that when I knelt down to pick up my post I could tell by the light coming under the door that there was something outside.

“And I’ll tell you another thing! Those spy lenses distort anything you see through them, and the face I saw was distorted...”

Nevison gave a smile whose kindness was intended to show Redpath that he had said something exceptionally stupid. “So what you’re implying is that this creature from a horror film was actually standing outside your door. In the flesh, as one might say, going by your description of it.”

“I didn’t imply that,” Redpath said, wondering what he *had* implied.

“Of course not—I’m sorry. Having opened the hall door and found nothing unusual in the corridor you must know better than anybody else that we’re dealing with a subjective phenomenon. I mean you did check outside, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“There you are, John. Proof.”

Redpath nodded. “Proof I’m going mad.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but your ideas of what constitutes madness appear to have been culled from Charlotte Bronte and Edgar Allan Poe—neither of whom was a psychiatric diagnostician of any standing.” Nevison’s lips twitched and Redpath knew he was pleased with his comment and was memorising it for later repetition.

“Call it what you like,” Redpath said sullenly, becoming angry. “All I know is it was bloody frightening—the sort of thing I can well do without—and I blame it on the experiments.”

“So do I,” Nevison said unexpectedly, taking a new tack. “You must agree, John, that since we started treating you with Compound 183 your telepathic ability, which was only vestigial in the beginning, has been enormously enhanced. Admittedly, we haven’t yet developed a way to control the ability, but your radius of awareness is growing all the time, isn’t it? You told me last week that when you wake up in the mornings you can sense what’s going on in the other flats in your building. Correct?”

“I don’t see what that’s got to...”

“What I’m saying is that this is all new to us. It’s beginning to appear that all mind-to-mind contact doesn’t take place on the conscious level—and all of us have monsters lurking around beneath the surface, John. Do you ever have nightmares?”

“Sometimes,” Redpath said, feeling he was being manipulated.

“So do I. One has to accept them, and I imagine that with a little effort one could learn to live with the occasional daymare.”

“One? That means me, doesn’t it?”

“You’re the focal point of the experiment, John.” Nevison stood up, came round the desk and sat on the front edge of it close to Redpath, a manoeuvre which was intended to create an atmosphere of informal friendliness. “Look, I appreciate that you’ve had a disturbing experience, but it wouldn’t be fair to any of us if you made a decision about your future while still in the aftermath. I’d like you to skip today’s programme of tests and, instead, write or dictate a full report of what happened this morning, treating it as part of our experimental data. That shouldn’t take very long, then you can have the rest of the day to yourself. Go for a walk and think things over, and we’ll have another talk in the morning. How does that sound to you?”

“All right,” Redpath said reluctantly, rising to his feet.

I’ll hand in my resignation in writing. That’ll make it official. No quibbling. All the soft soap in the world won’t wash out a word of it.

He left Nevison without speaking further and went along the landing to the large room at the rear of the house which was used as an office by all those individuals who did not possess sufficient clo-

within the department to commandeer separate quarters. Of the six desks in the room only one was occupied that morning, by Terry Malan, a psychology student who was supposed to be working on his final year project, but who spent most of his time tinkering with motor cycle parts. He had a stripped down magneto spread out on his blotter and was staring at it with furrowed brow.

Redpath passed him in silence, sat down at his own desk and picked up a pen. He made up his mind to spend not more than ten minutes writing a brief report for Nevison and then to clear out for the rest of the day, but he quickly found that concentration was difficult.

Bubbles of blood swelling in the nostrils.

Is that the sort of thing one puts in a report? Is it attention to detail, or morbidity? Is it evidence of a scientific mind, or a sick one? How many men does Leila have? And how often? Where can I go to get another job? Why does that young creep Malan keep staring at me? I know he's staring at me, even though I can't see him. Every time he raises his eyes and looks at the back of my head it's like being caught in the beam from the Eddystone lighthouse. Should that go into the report, as well?

After an hour of sporadic scribbling Redpath had completed one page. He sealed it in an envelope, marked it "CONFIDENTIAL—FOR ATTENTION OF OR NEVISON," and placed it in the centre of his desk under a green slate paperweight. Aware he was acting as though he would not be returning, Redpath took a few personal possessions—postage stamps, emergency supply of phenobarbitone, nail clippers—from the desk's middle drawer and slipped them into his pocket. When he stood up to leave he found Malan watching him intently. Redpath winked at him, put his arms around an imaginary dancing partner and parodied a George Raft tango the whole way to the door, still without speaking.

Outside on the landing, he stood for a moment with a hand pressed to his forehead, suddenly afraid of himself. It occurred to him that it was madness to walk out on the experiment over a single incident which perhaps was never to recur—madness, not in the cackling-laughter-from-the-attic tradition Nevison had mentioned, but straightforward economic and social insanity. People were always making jokes about how easy it was to get money from the DHSS, but if his past experience was anything to go by they were likely to explain to him, very patiently, that if his surname began with R and he had the same number of fingers on each hand no benefit would be payable until after the next transit of Mercury. Then there was the prospect of cutting himself off from Leila, which was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

He smoothed down his hair, brushed some flecks from the suede of his jacket and went down the stairs to find Leila. The hall floor stretched out before him, a subdued chessboard of pale green and biscuit coloured tiles upon which moved blurred shadows of the outside foliage. All at once it was awash with blood.

This was not bright red, oxygenated blood such as he had seen on the apparition at the door of his apartment. It was *old* blood—brown, congealing, laced with black threads where it was smeared thick, filled with huge slug-like clots elsewhere. The clots glistened like mounds of raw beef. And, as if the underlying hall floor had been tilted, the hideous organic slime appeared to be flowing toward Redpath...

"Ah, no," he whispered, gripping the banister with one hand and shielding his eyes with the other. He stood motionless for a moment, cringing, and when he uncovered his eyes the hall floor was clear.

again. Its leaf-embossed tiles might have been newly laid, newly worked over by the original Victorian housemaids with scrubbing brushes and carbolic acid and reeking wax polish. The rest of the world looked normal. A typewriter began a bored clacking in one of the offices nearby.

Redpath completed his descent of the stairs and walked thoughtfully into the rear of the building, urgent questions clamouring in his mind. They had told him that Compound 183 was a harmless derivative of enkephalin, modified to make it highly selective as to which brain cells it affected—but what did that mean? How long would its effects last? And what guarantee was there that Nevison Magill and the others knew what they were talking about? After all, the very word “experiment” implied that they were only guessing, trying out different things, hoping that the guinea pig would not do something irritating like developing a tumour, or going mad, or dropping down dead.

The pay should have been higher. I've got to find a safer place.

He opened the door to Leila Mostyn's office and discovered she was not alone. Marge Rawlings, Nevison's secretary, was in a corner of the room using a photocopier which had been sited there for want of suitable space in other parts of the building. Judging by the stack of sheets at her side, she was going to be there for a long time.

“Good morning, ladies,” Redpath called, hiding his disappointment. “And how are we today?”

“We are looking for somebody to help with this copying, and you are standing around with both arms the same length,” Marge said, eyeing him hopefully through her gold-rimmed octagonal glasses. “How about it, John?”

“Sorry—I'm no good with machinery,” Redpath said, turning his back to her and hunkering down beside Leila, who was seated at her desk and had her gaze fixed on a block of graph paper. She ignored his arrival.

“Leila,” he whispered, touching her wrist, “I've got to talk to you.”

She pulled her wrist away. “I'm busy.”

“Look, I'm sorry about what I said.”

“That makes no difference to my workload—I'm still busy.”

He stared up at her face with helpless longing. “Can we have lunch together?”

Leila shook her head. “I'm going home to pick up some papers at lunchtime.”

“Well...” Redpath shot a venomous glance over his shoulder at Marge Rawlings, who had stopped operating the photocopier and was maintaining an attentive silence. “I could go with you.”

“Only if your bicycle goes as fast as my car,” Leila said with casual cruelty.

“Leila!” He lowered his voice further. “Something's happening to me.”

“Don’t worry—it’s called puberty.”

“I see.” Redpath tried unsuccessfully to think of a good riposte. “It’s like that, is it?”

Leila picked up a pencil and began making dots on a graph sheet. Redpath waited a moment before accepting the dismissal, then straightened up and walked out of the office. Peals of laughter followed as soon as he closed the door. He stood in the green dimness, humiliated, aware that Leila was now discussing him with an office acquaintance, and his hands clenched into bony clubs. That laughter and bitch-talk—a desperate notion came to him—could easily be silenced. Victory had been conceded to women in the war of the sexes, but being women they had not hampered themselves with anything as impractical as a victor’s code of chivalry. How would it be if *he* broke the rules of fair play for change? Women knew themselves to be the equals of men in those areas where they narrowly failed to be superior, but none of them was any good with fists. *Fists!* Redpath looked down at the completely involuted weapons attached to the ends of his arms. There was a painful prickling on his forehead. The spiteful laughter and the bitch-talk would stop on the instant if he burst the office door open and went in and used his fists on Leila. One punch would carry her right out of the chair and spread her on the floor; another would wreck that supercilious, Tanqueray’s-and-tonic, duvets and Bruckner’s Fourth smile of hers; another would put fear in her eyes, and fear meant respect...

The front door of the house swung open and admitted a flood of light to the hall, light which penetrated into the narrower corridor-like section at the rear where Redpath was standing, making him feel he was under observation. He strode towards the door, brushed past the two men who had entered and plunged out into the mould-scented air.

A jetliner was climbing high in the sunlight, its con trail widening and breaking into curved white flakes. He grabbed his bicycle and wheeled it away against the drag of the gravel. As soon as he reached tarmac he got astride the machine, cycled out through the gates of the institute and turned in the direction of the town centre. The mid-morning lull had descended on the traffic and he was able to travel fast in top gear, the bicycle tilting from side to side as he put all his weight into each thrust of the pedals.

Redpath had almost reached the business section of Calbridge before it dawned on him that he had no idea where he was going. He braked abruptly, barely avoiding a collision with a mud-spattered grey Ford transit which had been behind him, and swung into the forecourt of a mock-Tudor pub. The outer doors of the pub were being latched open by a tubby man who nodded curtly to Redpath, surveyed the sky and retired inside to begin his day’s work. Redpath got off the bicycle, sat down on the coping of the low brick wall surrounding the forecourt and tried to decide what to do next. The feeling was odd, similar to that which he had experienced on the one day he played truant from school—the places he was now free to go to no longer seemed worth the effort of getting there.

The classical refuge for a man in his position was the alehouse—and the shady interior of the pub beside him looked inviting—but a law he never broke was the one which decreed that alcohol and epilepsy did not mix. The alcohol itself could initiate an attack, the ingestion of large quantities of liquid was another potent trigger factor, and on top of all that there was the risk of a reaction from the anti-convulsant drugs in his system. He had learned to live with the constraints of his illness, telling himself that it was not being able to drink or drive which had kept him slim and fit, but on the

particular morning it would have been good, very good, to be like other men. Everybody needed an escape door at some time or other, he concluded, rising to his feet, and it looked as though his would have to be an uplifting day of fresh air and solitude in the public park.

Ten minutes later he freewheeled into Calbridge's Churchill Gardens, a forty-acre rectangle of greenery which owed its existence to a liberal seeding of the area with World War II incendiaries. The schools had not yet begun the summer break so the park was quiet and almost empty. Redpath chained his cycle to a railing and walked towards the middle of the park, looking for a place in which to relax. He found a long seat overlooking a geometric display of flowers and sat down at one end of it, suddenly feeling tired and anticlimactic. Since breakfast time life had been beating him over the head in a steady rhythm, like two men sledging a single spike into the ground, and now that peace had descended he found it rather unnerving. It was too much like a prelude to even greater disasters.

Think, he told himself. Draw up plans. This is the first day of the rest of your life.

It was difficult, though, to project his thoughts into the future when the present and immediate past were filled with so much pain and confusion. The big question was—what had gone wrong? Everything that had happened that morning seemed to stem from the first attack of the horrors in his flat, but what had brought it on?

He had been out of work and without employment prospects when, two years earlier, he had volunteered to take part in a series of telepathy experiments at the Jeavons. His card-guessing score had been the highest obtained from some eight hundred participants, and he had been elated when Henry Nevison had approached him subsequently and offered what seemed to be the greatest sinecure of all time. He was to be paid a monthly salary just to continue with the telepathy tests a few hours a day, five days a week, and his luck had really seemed to be in when—for once—it turned out that his prospective employer was undeterred by the fact of his having the falling sickness.

Redpath's mother had expressed alarm on hearing that the test programme included assessing the effects of a new family of psychotropic drugs on the telepathic facility, but he had managed to allay her fears. She was a naturally reticent woman, who had been turned into a near-recluse by irrational guilt over his condition, and it had come as a great relief to her to find that her son could earn money like a "normal" young man. Redpath was almost certain she had told her friends he was taking up medical research, but he had not objected. All his thoughts had been focused on his new occupation, his new mission in life.

In the early days he had been buoyed up by expectations of dramatic test results, but after some months that mood had faded and had been replaced by one of boredom. It was established beyond doubt that he did have a vestigial telepathic ability, but in such attenuated form that mathematicians usually had to be employed to differentiate between his performance and the workings of blind chance. Then had come Compound 183, and with it the gradual change not only in the statistics of his test results, but in the nature of his subjective experience. Instead of having to visualise a test card he had, on occasion, begun to see it. The ability was sporadic and uncontrollable to a large extent, but he had begun to feel that significant things were happening, that he, John Redpath, had been granted the privilege of, to use an overworked phrase of Nevison's, extending the boundaries of knowledge.

That had been the state of play when he had got out of bed less than three hours earlier, on what had

promised to be a perfectly normal Tuesday morning...

Redpath's brooding was interrupted when a black-haired woman of about forty, who had been approaching at a leisurely pace, sat down on the seat beside him. He promptly experienced two distinct kinds of wonderment. The first was concerned with the way in which his mind, which had been preoccupied with dark terrors and the machinations of fate, immediately abandoned such exotic abstracts and turned to matters of Calbridge etiquette; and the second wonderment was on the homely, circumscribed level. He had been brought up in the South Haverside area and, although he had consciously shed his provincialism, its social conventions were second nature to him. In the protocol of the Four Towns, a woman who was alone in a park and wanted to rest would always choose an empty seat or bench, and if obliged to use a seat already occupied by a strange man would invariably position herself at the opposite end of it.

In this case, not only had the black-haired woman passed by a number of empty seats, she had sat down right beside Redpath, so close that their elbows were almost touching. And in Calbridge, even a prostitute—except for perhaps the most case-hardened—would be more circumspect than that. He glanced at the woman with some interest. Her face was swarthy and handsome, with heavy-lidded dark eyes and pouting, plum-coloured lips. It was the face, Redpath thought, of a gypsy queen—one who had known hard times, judging by her expression of rueful resignation. More than anything else, it was that expression which had led him to place her age at forty, for she had the ripe, full-busted body of a young woman who was just reaching the point at which she would have to start cutting down on her food. She was wearing a blue velvet jacket over a crimson T-shirt, faded Levi's and dusty brown sandals.

"I'm dying for a smoke," she said casually. "Got a fag, love?"

Redpath, who had almost convinced himself of the woman's Romany origins, was surprised to hear the Nottinghamshire accent of his home town. "I'm sorry—I don't smoke."

She looked at him with raised eyebrows, smiling as though he had confessed to some shameful eccentricity she was prepared to forgive. "I'll just have to use my own then." She brought out a packet, extracted the last cigarette from it and flipped the packet into the centre of the path.

"That could cost you a hundred quid," Redpath said.

"It would be a good'un that got a hundred quid out of me, love." She lit the cigarette with a cheap Continental-style lighter and inhaled deeply.

Redpath noticed that her fingernails were grubby and that they had been lacquered in a nacreous brown which contrasted with the redness of her toenails. A trick of memory gave him an unexpected mental picture of a high school classmate of puritanical upbringing who had established a reputation as a rake by periodically declaiming, "I'm a great man for the slut." At the same time, and more unexpectedly, he experienced a powerful sexual attraction towards the woman, who appeared to be the opposite of Leila Mostyn in every way.

Hold on, John, he thought, alarmed. You don't go in for all that crap about rebounds. You always said you were a human being, not a ping-pong ball. Remember?

“What’s wrong? you’re not at work?” the woman said. “On your holidays?”

“No, I decided to have the day off.”

“Just like that? It’s well for some.”

“I needed the break,” Redpath said, wondering how long the oddly stilted conversation would go on.

The woman sighed. “I could do with a break. Seven days a week I work.”

“Oh? What do you do?”

“I’m a landlady, would you believe.” She gave a self-deprecatory laugh. “I run a boarding house.”

“That’s funny—I’m looking for a new place.” The words had slipped out before Redpath had time to weigh the consequences. He stared down at his hands with an unaccountable feeling of nervousness.

“Is that a fact? I’ve got just the place for you. What’s your name?”

“John.” He resisted a weird juvenile impulse to give a false name. “John Redpath.”

“I’m Betty York.” The woman put her hand on his arm. “I’ve got just the place for you, John.”

“I...” Redpath tried to force his brain into action. He had a firm conviction that Betty York’s establishment would not be to

his taste, but he had difficulty in finding a suitable way to turn down the proposal. “I was thinking of a self-contained flat.”

“That’s no use for you, love. All that expense and...” Her fingers squeezed his arm. “...no home comforts.”

“I’m used to looking after myself.”

“Ah, but it’s not the same thing, is it?” She nudged him with her hip to make the message clear.

Redpath felt a guilty thrill. He needed a break, a holiday from the onerous task of being John Redpath. He also needed to revenge himself on Leila—and here, it seemed, was an opportunity to achieve both objectives at once. Everything with Leila, especially sex, had to be suffused with the white light of rationality, made aseptic, purged of any element which might give rise to archaisms such as passions, obsessions, shame, anger, lust, jealousy, hatred, disgust, guilt—all those bitter leavenings which could turn the wine of love into a dark and dangerous brew, thus making it infinitely more satisfying. He could imagine the expression on her face if he let her know that he preferred being with a woman like Betty York, found pleasure in her coarseness and crude innuendos, her flaking nail polish and the Lawrencian slum-dwellers’ creed that sex is dirty and all the more enjoyable for it. Leila would be repelled when he told her, but at least he would know that the reaction was centred on him alone. He would know where he was. There would be no question of his having to stand by meekly while she

found other men repugnant one night a week...

“Nice big room I’ve got for you,” Betty said. “You could live there in style for only twenty a week everything thrown in.”

“Everything?” Redpath did his imitation of Groucho Marx, defiantly repressing a small twinge of sadness.

“Cheeky!” She moved away from him a short distance, reassured now that he had started behaving in accordance with a recognisable norm.

Why isn't Boswell here to record this stuff for posterity? Redpath looked around the park, battling with a sense of unreality, his eyes taking in the islands of shrubbery, the young matrons with their baby carriages, the perimeter of terraced houses in the middle distance. He froze as his gaze steadied on the figure of a man who was standing in the shade of some bushes not twenty paces away. The man was wearing a brown boiler suit, had thick sloping shoulders and an abnormally large jutting chin. He was regarding Redpath and Betty York with a fixed, eager smile which somehow gave him the appearance of being subnormal.

“Don’t look now, but I’d like your honest opinion,” Redpath whispered, lowering his eyes. “Is that Igor or Quasimodo?”

As often happens when a person is told not to look around, Betty immediately turned her head. “What are you on about, love?”

Redpath looked again and was surprised to see that the odd-looking man was no longer in sight. The bushes were hardly thick enough to provide cover and he had to conclude that the man, anxious to avoid being seen, had sprinted to the cover of a tree.

Christ, I wonder if this place is like this all the time? If it is, I'm going to come back with a movie camera and make the wildlife film to end all wildlife films.

“I thought we’d picked up a peeping Tom,” he said.

“That’s your guilty conscience.” Betty exhaled a stream of smoke in his direction. “Have you got a guilty conscience, John?”

“Not yet, but I’m in the market for one.”

Betty threw away her half-finished cigarette with an air of finality which caused a lurching sensation in his chest. “You’d best come and look at the room. Before you make up your mind, like. How about it?”

“Is it far?”

“Not far. Woodstock Road.”

“It’s far enough,” Redpath said, making a token effort to draw back from the edge of the precipice.

mean...”

“I can drive you there in ten minutes. Drop you in town again afterwards.” Betty stood up, seeming to aim her torso at him. The assemblage of strongly jutting breasts, low-waisted denims, leather boots and copper rivets made her look like a rodeo performer. Her black hair was deeply waved, heavy with natural oils and reached far below her shoulders.

Redpath felt a return of the raw, basic desire he had experienced earlier. *You could wreck yourself there*, he thought, reverting to the terminology which had been popular among his school friends. *Wipe out your mind. Wipe out all trace of Listerine Leila and faces sculpted out of raw beef.* He got to his feet, smiling, committed, and walked with Betty towards the park gates. A train hooted routinely in the distance and white smoke plumed up from the steelworks. As he walked, Redpath made a mental list of three possibilities relating to the woman he was with—it could be that she was simply a prostitute, and that the line about a boarding house was a defence against the police; it could be that she was a landlady with lusty appetites and no inhibitions, who believed in combining business with pleasure; and it could also be that she was a landlady, complete with hulking great husband, who used unscrupulous methods to draw in paying tenants. He was weighing up the third possibility—after all, everything she had said had been equivocal—when they reached a line of parked vehicles.

Taking a set of keys from her jacket pocket, Betty stopped at a mud-spattered grey Ford transit. “It isn’t locked,” she said, pointing at the passenger door.

“Right.” Wondering why the van looked familiar to him, Redpath slid open the door and recoiled in shock. The man he had seen in the park, the furtive stranger with the acromegalic chin, was smiling at him from the passenger seat. Redpath stood in silence for a moment, dumbfounded.

Betty opened the door at her side and paused as she saw the front seat occupant. “What are you doing here?” she said with some exasperation, but no surprise in her voice.

“Give us a lift, Betty,” the man said in a gentle, almost-melodious voice which contrasted with his uncouth appearance. “Give us a lift home.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Albert, have you been following me around?”

“No, Betty, honest. I seen your van, that’s all.” The man made a vague gesture with enormous hands. “I just want a lift home.”

“All right, but you’ll have to go in the back.”

“Yes, Betty, yes.” The man flashed Redpath a triumphant smile and began to clamber over the back of the seat into the dark interior of the vehicle. His movements were clumsy and hampered by the lack of space and the tightness of his brown boiler suit, from a side pocket of which there projected incongruously, a pack of American cigarettes. Redpath looked away from him and stared thoughtfully in the direction of the park. The man, Albert, *had* been following Betty—who was perhaps a landlady—but an even more remarkable thing about him was that, in spite of his ungainliness, he must have had the ability to cover ground unobtrusively and with the speed of an Olympic runner. The stretch of parkland between the main gate and the place where Redpath had been sitting was fairly

open, so Albert must have taken a lengthy detour and yet had managed to reach the van well ahead of its driver. It was difficult to see how the feat had been achieved at all.

“Hop in, love,” Betty said, starting the engine.

Redpath frowned at the now-empty passenger seat, then got into the transit and closed the door. Betty moved the vehicle off immediately, handling the gears and steering with a rough competence. Redpath waited attentively, and several minutes passed before it dawned on him that she was neither going to introduce nor account for the extra passenger who was squatting on the layer of potato sack newspapers and old scraps of carpet covering the bed of the van. For his part, Albert appeared content to maintain a watchful silence.

Another searchlight on the back of my neck—this wasn't part of the deal.

Redpath stared at the swift-changing views ahead and retreated into his thoughts. As one who had purposely made the transition from one consumer group to another—a process which used to be called going up in the world or graduating from working class to middle class—he had reckoned himself to be a man of two worlds, but there were things he had forgotten. One of his most repeated jokes was that the principal difference between the working class and the middle class was that the former felt no obligation to answer letters—now he could recall a more salient characteristic. Throughout his childhood and early youth he had never seen anybody being introduced to anybody else. Redpath himself, at the age of fifteen, had met a girl, had gone out with her on three occasions for fierce necking sessions, and had parted from her without ever learning her name. It seemed on reflection that it was only in the “higher” social orders that people felt ill at ease in the company of those who had not been formally identified and labelled for them, perhaps because they had more to lose and saw strangers as a potential menace...

That can't be right, because I've got bugger all to lose and I don't like being cooped up in a tin box with somebody I don't know. Especially when he looks like a member of the Addams family. It's time to bale out, chum.

The van reached Calbridge's Woodstock Road, which was a redbrick canyon of aging dwellings, many of them—particularly those at intersections—converted into small shops and branch offices for banks and insurance companies. A short time later, after making a left turn and a right into narrower streets, Betty York halted the vehicle outside a tall, bay-windowed house which was near the end of a Victorian terrace. The building was a member of that vast and durable population of houses which had spread the length and breadth of the land in the previous century. Built to standards which in many ways were far superior to those of modern constructors, virtually identical in size and general layout, forming a major part of the corpus of every town and city, the class of house provided much of the accommodation for students, young couples and the elderly; supplied cheap and roomy premises for GPs, dentists, chiropodists, chiropractors, struggling architects, infant advertising agencies and the less affluent charities; provided the bulk of the work for jobbing plumbers and repairmen and woodworm eradicators; served as atmospheric settings for the most sordid scandals and the most sensational murders. It was a type of house Redpath had always hated.

He got out of the van and stood hesitantly on the footpath, taking in the house's dark brown door and window frames, the tarnished numerals 131 on the transom, the mosses which clung like caterpillars between the bricks, the patch of garden with its black but infertile soil and wisps of flattened grass.

Albert went by him with a scuffling of booted feet and disappeared into the house, leaving the front door ajar. Redpath looked into the porch and experienced a strange *frisson*, a feather-flick coolness, when he saw that the half-glazed inner door had a large, amber-coloured fleur-de-lis in the centre of its leaded panes.

When I go inside, he thought, there'll be a staircase ahead of me on the right, and at the top of the stair there'll be a long landing running through to the back of the house, with a window at the far end of it, and on that window there'll be another fleur-de-lis just like the one on the front door.

"It's nice around here," Betty said, appearing at his side. "Nice and quiet. No bother, like."

Redpath looked over her head towards the semi-antique cast iron sign which was screwed to the wall of the last house in the terrace. It said: RABY STREET. The name meant nothing to him, and yet there had been an odd quality about his vision of the house's interior—a hint of poignancy, perhaps—which suggested recognition rather than prescience.

This isn't my part of the town, for God's sake. I've never been to this house before. It must be something more to do with that muck that I let Nevison and his crew shoot into me...

Betty took his arm, and the pliant warmth of her breast came through his sleeve. "I'll show you the room, love. It's at the back—where you get most of the sun."

Redpath allowed himself to be led forward like a child being coaxed into school on the first day. Betty opened the inner door for him and he went through into the hallway. The staircase on his right terminated in a long landing, and at the far end of the landing was a window featuring a stained glass fleur-de-lis. Rays of sunlight streaming through the window emphasised the darkness of the rest of the house. Redpath jerked his head back in alarm as his nostrils filled with an overpowering smell of cloves. The cloying aroma was gone in a second and he understood at once that it had been synaesthetic, a false sensation triggered by his seeing the house's rear window exactly as he had anticipated. He shivered, suddenly feeling that he had been given a warning.

"This way, love." Betty went up the stairs ahead of him, each step causing diagonal ripple patterns to appear in the taut denim of haunch and thigh. As he followed her to the landing he kept looking around for Albert, half-expecting to see him grinning from a doorway, but the house seemed to have absorbed the strange individual into itself. The only sound was that of their footsteps on the thinly carpeted treads as they made their way up a second flight of stairs. There were two doors on the top landing, both painted an incongruous nursery pink.

Children grow up in places like this, too. God help them.

Betty opened the door which was nearer the back of the house and went ahead of Redpath into a largish square bedroom. The floorcovering was pink oilcloth heavily disfigured with parallel brown lines marking the edges of the underlying boards. Redpath advanced into the room and saw that it contained a double bed, a wardrobe, two tallboys and a dresser—all culled from old suites of differing design and employing different woods. In the middle of the ceiling was a pendant light fitting which was dragged out of plumb by the flex connecting it to a second light stapled to the wall above the bed.

"It isn't Buck House," Betty commented, "but you'll be very comfortable here, John. Bathroom's just at the foot of the stairs."

~~She's serious about the room, Redpath thought, walking to the window. How am I going to get out this?~~

Below the window was the grey slate roof of the lower rear section of the house, and further down he could see an enclosed yard with brick outhouses and an old-style clothes wringer standing beside two dustbins. Beyond the yard wall was another row of three-storey houses which would have limited his field of view but for the fact that, slightly to his left, two houses had been chopped cleanly out of the terrace, possibly by a wartime bomb. Through the gap Redpath could see, as though artfully crowded into a frame, the smokestacks, gantries, spires and trees of Calbridge, all glowing with the clean light of normality, and he was seized by a yearning to be out there doing ordinary things like sitting in a coffee bar or getting his hair trimmed or taking a book back to the library. There was a creaking sound behind him and he turned to see that Betty had sat on the edge of the bed.

“Soft mattress,” she said, her eyes fixed solemnly on his. “I like a nice soft mattress.”

Redpath crossed the room, stood in front of her and placed his hands on her shoulders. He felt cold and ill. She tried to fall back on to the bed and draw him down on top of her, but he tightened his grip on her shoulders and stiffened his body, keeping her sitting upright.

“It's like that, is it?” she said, lowering her gaze to his belt

buckle which was on a level with her face. She put her hands on the buckle and began sliding the belt's leather tongue through the clasp.

Redpath stood motionless for a moment, his body a pounding column of blood, then he broke free and ran from the room, plunging down through the brown dimness of the house on nerveless legs, fleeing like a man in a nightmare and not slowing down until he was outside in the lemon-coloured sunlight of the street. He strode to the nearest corner and rounded it into the cross-street without looking back, anxious to break the visual connections with the house which he could feel clinging to him like skein of gossamer.

Chapter Two

Let that be a lesson to you. Redpath walked for more than a mile intoning the same sentence over and over again, making it a kind of silent chant, his pace gradually slowing as he got further from the house in Raby Street. *Let that be a lesson to you.* Almost trembling with relief, he began loitering at shop windows and taking an interest in things which had not interested him before—the range of styles in transistor radios, the price of wallpaper, the cubic capacities of refrigerators. *Let that be a lesson to you.*

Some thirty minutes had gone by before he got the moral of the morning's escapade into sharp focus in his mind, and it concerned Leila. He could see very clearly now that he loved, admired and needed her; that picking a quarrel with her had been an act of monumental stupidity; that top priority had to be given to finding a way of patching up the relationship. Gazing intently into the window of a home bakery as though seeking significance in the arrangement of cakes and scones, he decided that getting Leila completely on her own was a tactical necessity. He had already proved the futility of trying to speak to her in the office.

It was wrong of her to laugh at me like that. Very wrong. Perhaps she needs to be taught a lesson or two. Well. I mean, there's no bigger champion of women's lib than I am—but lib is an old word for geld. I don't bear thinking about...

Redpath looked at his watch, frowning, and calculated that if he went straight to the park and got his bicycle he could reach Leila's flat on the Leicester Road before she did. She had said she was going home only to pick up some papers, but he ought to be able to talk her into making coffee and with a little time in hand, in the undisturbed quietness of her flat, he should also be able to straighten things out. He would do everything in his power to convince her that he would be happy to get back on the old footing, that he would never be jealous or possessive again.

But is that true, John? Is it really true? If you can refuse other women, why can't she refuse other men? Why can't she learn her lesson the way you learned yours?

The sparse population of Churchill Gardens had changed when Redpath returned for his bicycle, the young matrons with their baby carriages and toddlers having been replaced by workers from the nearby steelworks and factories. There was a smell of hot food and vinegar in the air, reminding Redpath that he was hungry. He went to his bicycle, stooped to unchain it and halted in that position staring at the torpedo-shaped combination lock. The four-digit number he had used practically every day for years was gone from his memory.

"This is stupid," he said aloud. "I know this number." He narrowed his eyes at the lock, making a painful effort to remember, then his fingers moved almost of their own accord and set up the combination 1-2-1-6. Without any certainty that the correct digits had been selected, he tugged on the lock and it slid apart. He got on to the bicycle and, feeling strangely chastened, rode off in the direction of Leicester Road.

Leila Mostyn's flat was on the second floor of a large detached house set back a discreet distance from the main road. Its pleasant architecture had been marred by the tacking on of a narrow brick structure containing new concrete stairs, and most of the front garden was given over to the parking of cars, but the building still retained an air of genteel exclusiveness. The first time Redpath had seen it he had been struck by how closely it matched his preconceptions of the sort of place in which Leila would

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