

DOUGLAS ADAMS

DIRK GENTLY'S
HOLISTIC
DETECTIVE
AGENCY

By the bestselling author of
**THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE
TO THE GALAXY**

Dirk Gently's Holistic
Detective Agency

By

Douglas Adams

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to my mother,

who liked the bit about the horse

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The physical descriptions of St Cedd's College in this book, in so far as they are specific at all, owe a little to my memories of St John's College, Cambridge, although I've also borrowed indiscriminately from other colleges as well. Sir Isaac Newton was at Trinity College in real life, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge was at Jesus. The point is that St Cedd's College is a completely fictitious assemblage, and no correspondence is intended between any institutions or characters in this book and any real institutions or people, living, dead, or wandering the night in ghostly torment. This book was written and typeset on an Apple Macintosh Plus computer and LaserWriter Plus printer using MacAuthor word-processing software. The completed document was then printed using a Linotron 100 at The Graphics Factory, London SW3, to produce a final high-resolution image of the text. My thanks to Mike Glover of Icon Technology for his help with this process. Finally, my very special thanks are due to Sue Freestone for all her help in nursing this book into existence.

Douglas Adams
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CHAPTER 1

This time there would be no witnesses.

This time there was just the dead earth, a rumble of thunder, and the onset of that interminable light drizzle from the north-east by which so many of the world's most momentous events seem to be accompanied.

The storms of the day before, and of the day before that, and the floods of the previous week, had now abated. The skies still bulged with rain, but all that actually fell in the gathering evening gloom was a dreary kind of prickle.

Some wind whipped across the darkening plain, blundered through the low hills and gusted across a shallow valley where stood a structure, a kind of tower, alone in a nightmare of mud, and leaning.

It was a blackened stump of a tower. It stood like an extrusion of magma from one of the more pestilential pits of hell, and it leaned at a peculiar angle, as if oppressed by something altogether more terrible than its own considerable weight. It seemed a dead thing, long ages dead.

The only movement was that of a river of mud that moved sluggishly along the bottom of the valley past the tower. A mile or so further on, the river ran down a ravine and disappeared underground.

But as the evening darkened it became apparent that the tower was not entirely without life. There was a single dim red light guttering deep within it.

The light was only just visible--except of course that there was no one to see, no witnesses, not this time, but it was nevertheless a light. Every few minutes it grew a little stronger and a little brighter and then faded slowly away almost to nothing. At the same time a low keening noise drifted out on the wind, built up to a kind of wailing climax, and then it too faded, abjectly, away.

Time passed, and then another light appeared, a smaller, mobile light. It emerged at ground level and moved in a single bobbing circuit of the tower, pausing occasionally on its way around. Then it, and the shadowy figure that could just be discerned carrying it, disappeared inside once more.

An hour passed, and by the end of it the darkness was total. The world seemed dead, the night a blankness.

And then the glow appeared again near the tower's peak, this time growing in power more purposefully. It quickly reached the peak of brightness it had previously attained, and then kept going, increasing, increasing. The keening sound that accompanied it rose in pitch and stridency until it became a wailing scream. The scream screamed on and on till it became a blinding noise and the light a deafening redness.

And then, abruptly, both ceased.

There was a millisecond of silent darkness.

An astonishing pale new light billowed and bulged from deep within the mud beneath the tower. The sky clenched, a mountain of mud convulsed, earth and sky bellowed at each other, there was a horrible pinkness, a sudden greenness, a lingering orangeness that stained the clouds, and then the light sank and the night at last was deeply, hideously dark. There was no further sound other than the soft tinkle of water.

But in the morning the sun rose with an unaccustomed sparkle on a day that was, or seemed to be, or at least would have seemed to be, if there had been anybody there to whom it could seem to be anything at all, warmer, clearer and brighter--an altogether livelier day than any yet known. A clear river ran through the shattered remains of the valley.

And time began seriously to pass.

CHAPTER 2

High on a rocky promontory sat an Electric Monk on a bored horse. From under its rough woven cowl the Monk gazed unblinkingly down into another valley, with which it was having a problem.

The day was hot, the sun stood in an empty hazy sky and beat down upon the grey rocks and the scrubby, parched grass. Nothing moved, not even the Monk. The horse's tail moved a little, swishing slightly to try and move a little air, but that was all. Otherwise, nothing moved.

The Electric Monk was a labour-saving device, like a dishwasher or a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thus saving you the bother of washing them yourself, video recorders watched tedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at it yourself; Electric Monks believed things for you, thus saving you what was becoming an increasingly onerous task, that of believing all the things the world expected you to believe.

Unfortunately this Electric Monk had developed a fault, and had started to believe all kinds of things, more or less at random. It was even beginning to believe things they'd have difficulty believing in Salt Lake City. It had never heard of Salt Lake City, of course. Nor had it ever heard of a quingigillion, which was roughly the number of miles between this valley and the Great Salt Lake of Utah.

The problem with the valley was this. The Monk currently believed that the valley and everything in the valley and around it, including the Monk itself and the Monk's horse, was a uniform shade of pale pink. This made for a certain difficulty in distinguishing any one thing from any other thing, and therefore made doing anything or going anywhere impossible, or at least difficult and dangerous. Hence the immobility of the Monk and the boredom of the horse, which had had to put up with a lot of silly things in its time but was secretly of the opinion that this was one of the silliest.

How long did the Monk believe these things?

Well, as far as the Monk was concerned, forever. The faith which moves mountains, or at least believes them against all the available evidence to be pink, was a solid and abiding faith, a great rock against which the world could hurl whatever it would, yet it would not be shaken. In practice, the horse knew, twenty-four hours was usually about its lot.

So what of this horse, then, that actually held opinions, and was sceptical about things? Unusual behaviour for a horse, wasn't it? An unusual horse perhaps?

No. Although it was certainly a handsome and well-built example of its species, it was none the less a perfectly ordinary horse, such as convergent evolution has produced in many of the places that life is to be found. They have always understood a great deal more than they let on. It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other creature, without forming an opinion about them.

On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever.

When the early models of these Monks were built, it was felt to be important that they be instantly recognisable as artificial objects. There must be no danger of their looking at all like real people. You wouldn't want your video recorder lounging around on the sofa all day while it was watching TV. You wouldn't want it picking its nose, drinking beer and sending out for pizzas.

So the Monks were built with an eye for originality of design and also for practical horse-riding ability. This was important. People, and indeed things, looked more sincere on a horse. So two legs were held to be both more suitable and cheaper than the more normal primes of seventeen, nineteen or twenty-three; the skin the Monks were given was pinkish-looking instead of purple, soft and smooth instead of crenellated. They were also restricted to just one mouth and nose, but were given instead an additional eye, making for a grand total of two. A strange-looking creature indeed. But truly excellent at believing the most preposterous things.

This Monk had first gone wrong when it was simply given too much to believe in one day. It was, by mistake, cross-connected to a video recorder that was watching eleven TV channels simultaneously, and this caused it to blow a bank of illogic circuits. The video recorder only had to watch them, of course. It didn't have to believe them all as well. This is why instruction manuals are so important.

So after a hectic week of believing that war was peace, that good was bad, that the moon was made of blue cheese, and that God needed a lot of money sent to a certain box number, the Monk started to believe that thirty-five percent of all tables were hermaphrodites, and then broke down. The man from the Monk shop said that it needed a whole new motherboard, but then pointed out that the new improved Monk Plus models were twice as powerful, had an entirely new multi-tasking Negative Capability feature that allowed them to hold up to sixteen entirely different and contradictory ideas in memory simultaneously without generating any irritating system errors, were twice as fast and at least three times as glib, and you could have a whole new one for less than the cost of replacing the motherboard of the old model.

That was it. Done.

The faulty Monk was turned out into the desert where it could believe what it liked, including the idea that it had been hard done by. It was allowed to keep its horse, since horses were so cheap to make.

For a number of days and nights, which it variously believed to be three, forty-three, and five hundred and ninety-eight thousand seven hundred and three, it roamed the desert, putting its simple Electric trust in rocks, birds, clouds and a form of non-existent elephant-asparagus, until at last it fetched up here, on this high rock, overlooking a valley that was not, despite the deep fervour of the Monk's belief, pink. Not even a little bit.

Time passed.

CHAPTER 3

Time passed.

Susan waited.

The more Susan waited, the more the doorbell didn't ring. Or the phone. She looked at her watch. She felt that now was about the time that she could legitimately begin to feel cross. She was cross already, of course, but that had been in her own time, so to speak. They were well and truly into his time now, and even allowing for traffic, mishaps, and general vagueness and dilatoriness, it was now well over half an hour past the time that he had insisted was the latest time they could possibly afford to leave, so she'd better be ready.

She tried to worry that something terrible had happened to him, but didn't believe it for a moment. Nothing terrible ever happened to him, though she was beginning to think that it was time it damn well did. If nothing terrible happened to him soon maybe she'd do it herself. Now there was an idea.

She threw herself crossly into the armchair and watched the news on television. The news made her cross. She flipped the remote control and watched something on another channel for a bit. She didn't know what it was, but it also made her cross. Perhaps she should phone. She was damned if she was going to phone. Perhaps if she phoned he would phone her at the same moment and not be able to get through.

She refused to admit that she had even thought that.

Damn him, where was he? Who cared where he was anyway? She didn't, that was for sure.

Three times in a row he'd done this. Three times in a row was enough. She angrily flipped channels one more time. There was a programme about computers and some interesting new developments in the field of things you could do with computers and music.

That was it. That was really it. She knew that she had told herself that that was it only seconds earlier, but this was now the final real ultimate it.

She jumped to her feet and went to the phone, gripping an angry Filofax. She flipped briskly through it and dialed a number.

‘Hello, Michael? Yes, it’s Susan. Susan Way. You said I should call you if I was free this evening and I said I’d rather be dead in a ditch, remember? Well, I suddenly discover that I am free, absolutely, completely and utterly free, and there isn’t a decent ditch for miles around. Make your move while you’ve got your chance is my advice to you. I’ll be at the Tangiers Club in half an hour.’

She pulled on her shoes and coat, paused when she remembered that it was Thursday and that she should put a fresh, extra-long tape on the answering machine, and two minutes later was out of the front door. When at last the phone did ring the answering machine said sweetly that Susan Way could not come to the phone just at the moment, but that if the caller would like to leave a message, she would get back to them as soon as possible. Maybe.

CHAPTER 4

It was a chill November evening of the old-fashioned type.

The moon looked pale and wan, as if it shouldn't be up on a night like this. It rose unwillingly and hung like an ill spectre. Silhouetted against it, dim and hazy through the dampness which rose from the unwholesome fens, stood the assorted towers and turrets of St Cedd's, Cambridge, a ghostly profusion of buildings thrown up over centuries, medieval next to Victorian, Odeon next to Tudor. Only rising through the mist did they seem remotely to belong to one another.

Between them scurried figures, hurrying from one dim pool of light to another, shivering, leaving wraiths of breath which folded themselves into the cold night behind them.

It was seven o'clock. Many of the figures were heading for the college dining hall which divided First Court from Second Court, and from which warm light, reluctantly, streamed. Two figures in particular seemed ill-matched. One, a young man, was tall, thin and angular; even muffled inside a heavy dark coat he walked a little like an affronted heron.

The other was small, roundish, and moved with an ungainly restlessness, like a number of elderly squirrels trying to escape from a sack. His own age was on the older side of completely indeterminate. If you picked a number at random, he was probably a little older than that, but--well, it was impossible to tell. Certainly his face was heavily lined, and the small amount of hair that escaped from under his red woollen skiing hat was thin, white, and had very much its own ideas about how it wished to arrange itself. He too was muffled inside a heavy coat, but over it he wore a billowing gown with very faded purple trim, the badge of his unique and peculiar academic office.

As they walked the older man was doing all the talking. He was pointing at items of interest along the way, despite the fact that it was too dark to see any of them. The younger man was saying 'Ah yes,' and 'Really? How

interesting...' and 'Well, well, well,' and 'Good heavens.' His head bobbed seriously.

They entered, not through the main entrance to the hall, but through a small doorway on the east side of the court. This led to the Senior Combination Room and a dark-panelled anteroom where the Fellows of the college assembled to slap their hands and make 'brrrrr' noises before making their way through their own entrance to the High Table.

They were late and shook off their coats hurriedly. This was complicated for the older man by the necessity first of taking off his professorial gown, and then of putting it back on again once his coat was off, then of stuffing his hat in his coat pocket, then of wondering where he'd put his scarf, and then of realising that he hadn't brought it, then of fishing in his coat pocket for his handkerchief, then of fishing in his other coat pocket for his spectacles, and finally of finding them quite unexpectedly wrapped in his scarf, which it turned out he had brought after all but hadn't been wearing despite the damp and bitter wind blowing in like a witch's breath from across the fens.

He hustled the younger man into the hall ahead of him and they took the last two vacant seats at the High Table, braving a flurry of frowns and raised eyebrows for interrupting the Latin grace to do so.

Hall was full tonight. It was always more popular with the undergraduates in the colder months. More unusually, the hall was candlelit, as it was now only on very few special occasions. Two long, crowded tables stretched off into the glimmering darkness. By candlelight, people's faces were more alive, the hushed sounds of their voices, the clink of cutlery and glasses, seemed more exciting, and in the dark recesses of the great hall, all the centuries for which it had existed seemed present at once. High Table itself formed a crosspiece at the top, and was raised about a foot above the rest. Since it was a guest night, the table was set on both sides to accommodate the extra numbers, and many diners therefore sat with their backs to the rest of the hall.

'So, young MacDuff,' said the Professor once he was seated and flapping his napkin open, 'pleasure to see you again, my dear fellow. Glad you

could come. No idea what all this is about,' he added, peering round the hall in consternation. 'All the candles and silver and business. Generally means a special dinner in honour of someone or something no one can remember anything about except that it means better food for a night.'

He paused and thought for a moment, and then said, 'It seems odd, don't you think, that the quality of the food should vary inversely with the brightness of the lighting. Makes you wonder what culinary heights the kitchen staff could rise to if you confined them to perpetual darkness. Could be worth a try, I think. Got some good vaults in the college that could be turned over to the purpose. I think I showed you round them once, hmmm? Nice brickwork.'

All this came as something of a relief to his guest. It was the first indication his host had given that he had the faintest recollection who he was. Professor Urban Chronotis, the Regius Professor of Chronology, or 'Reg' as he insisted on being called had a memory that he himself had once compared to the Queen Alexandra Birdwing Butterfly, in that it was colourful, flitted prettily hither and thither, and was now, alas, almost completely extinct.

When he had telephoned with the invitation a few days previously, he had seemed extremely keen to see his former pupil, and yet when Richard had arrived this evening, a little on the late side, admittedly, the Professor had thrown open the door apparently in anger, had started in surprise on seeing Richard, demanded to know if he was having emotional problems, reacted in annoyance to being reminded gently that it was now ten years since he had been Richard's college tutor, and finally agreed that Richard had indeed come for dinner, whereupon he, the Professor, had started talking rapidly and at length about the history of the college architecture, a sure sign that his mind was elsewhere entirely.

'Reg' had never actually taught Richard, he had only been his college tutor, which meant in short that he had had charge of his general welfare, told him when the exams were and not to take drugs, and so on. Indeed, it was not entirely clear if Reg had ever taught anybody at all and what, if anything, he would have taught them. His professorship was an obscure one, to say the least, and since he dispensed with his lecturing duties by the simple and

time-honoured technique of presenting all his potential students with an exhaustive list of books that he knew for a fact had been out of print for thirty years, then flying into a tantrum if they failed to find them, no one had ever discovered the precise nature of his academic discipline. He had, of course, long ago taken the precaution of removing the only extant copies of the books on his reading list from the university and college libraries, as a result of which he had plenty of time to, well, to do whatever it was he did.

Since Richard had always managed to get on reasonably well with the old fruitcake, he had one day plucked up courage to ask him what, exactly, the Regius Professorship of Chronology was. It had been one of those light summery days when the world seems about to burst with pleasure at simply being itself, and Reg had been in an uncharacteristically forthcoming mood as they had walked over the bridge where the River Cam divided the older parts of the college from the newer.

‘Sinecure, my dear fellow, an absolute sinecure,’ he had beamed. ‘A small amount of money for a very small, or shall we say non-existent, amount of work. That puts me permanently just ahead of the game, which is a comfortable if frugal place to spend your life. I recommend it.’ He leaned over the edge of the bridge and started to point out a particular brick that he found interesting. ‘But what sort of study is it supposed to be?’ Richard had pursued. ‘Is it history? Physics? Philosophy? What?’

‘Well,’ said Reg, slowly, ‘since you’re interested, the chair was originally instituted by King George III, who, as you know, entertained a number of amusing notions, including the belief that one of the trees in Windsor Great Park was in fact Frederick the Great.

‘It was his own appointment, hence “Regius”. His own idea as well, which is somewhat more unusual.’

Sunlight played along the River Cam. People in punts happily shouted at each other to fuck off. Thin natural scientists who had spent months locked away in their rooms growing white and fishlike, emerged blinking into the light. Couples walking along the bank got so excited about the general wonderfulness of it all that they had to pop inside for an hour.

‘The poor beleaguered fellow,’ Reg continued, ‘George III, I mean, was, as you may know, obsessed with time. Filled the palace with clocks. Wound them incessantly. Sometimes would get up in the middle of the night and prowl round the palace in his nightshirt winding clocks. He was very concerned that time continued to go forward, you see. So many terrible things had occurred in his life that he was terrified that any of them might happen again if time were ever allowed to slip backwards even for a moment. A very understandable fear, especially if you’re barking mad, as I’m afraid to say, with the very greatest sympathy for the poor fellow, he undoubtedly was. He appointed me, or rather I should say, my office, this professorship, you understand, the post that I am now privileged to hold to - where was I? Oh yes. He instituted this, er, Chair of Chronology to see if there was any particular reason why one thing happened after another and if there was any way of stopping it. Since the answers to the three questions were, I knew immediately, yes, no, and maybe, I realised I could then take the rest of my career off.’

‘And your predecessors?’

‘Er, were much of the same mind.’

‘But who were they?’

‘Who were they? Well, splendid fellows of course, splendid to a man. Remind me to tell you about them some day. See that brick? Wordsworth was once sick on that brick. Great man.’

All that had been about ten years ago.

Richard glanced around the great dining hall to see what had changed in the time, and the answer was, of course, absolutely nothing. In the dark heights, dimly seen by the flickering candlelight, were the ghostly portraits of prime ministers, archbishops, political reformers and poets, any of whom might, in their day, have been sick on that same brick.

‘Well,’ said Reg, in a loudly confidential whisper, as if introducing the subject of nipple-piercing in a nunnery, ‘I hear you’ve suddenly done very well for yourself, at last, hmmm?’

‘Er, well, yes, in fact,’ said Richard, who was as surprised at the fact as anybody else, ‘yes, I have.’

Around the table several gazes stiffened on him.

‘Computers,’ he heard somebody whisper dismissively to a neighbour further down the table. The stiff gazes relaxed again, and turned away.

‘Excellent,’ said Reg. ‘I’m so pleased for you, so pleased.’

‘Tell me,’ he went on, and it was a moment before Richard realised that the Professor wasn’t talking to him any more, but had turned to the right to address his other neighbour, ‘what’s all this about, this,’ he flourished a vague hand over the candles and college silver, ‘...stuff?’

His neighbour, an elderly wizened figure, turned very slowly and looked at him as if he was rather annoyed at being raised from the dead like this.

‘Coleridge,’ he said in a thin rasp, ‘it’s the Coleridge Dinner you old fool.’ He turned very slowly back until he was facing the front again. His name was Cawley, he was a Professor of Archaeology and Anthropology, and it was frequently said of him, behind his back, that he regarded it not so much as a serious academic study, more as a chance to relive his childhood.

‘Ah, is it,’ murmured Reg, ‘is it?’ and turned back to Richard. ‘It’s the Coleridge Dinner,’ he said knowledgeably. ‘Coleridge was a member of the college, you know,’ he added after a moment. ‘Coleridge. Samuel Taylor. Poet. I expect you’ve heard of him. This is his Dinner. Well, not literally, of course. It would be cold by now.’ Silence. ‘Here, have some salt.’

‘Er, thank you, I think I’ll wait,’ said Richard, surprised. There was no food on the table yet.

‘Go on, take it,’ insisted the Professor, proffering him the heavy silver salt cellar.

Richard blinked in bemusement but with an interior shrug he reached to take it. In the moment that he blinked, however, the salt cellar had

completely vanished.

He started back in surprise.

‘Good one, eh?’ said Reg as he retrieved the missing cruet from behind the ear of his deathly right-hand neighbour, provoking a surprisingly girlish giggle from somewhere else at the table. Reg smiled impishly. ‘Very irritating habit, I know. It’s next on my list for giving up after smoking and leeches.’

Well, that was another thing that hadn’t changed. Some people pick their noses, others habitually beat up old ladies on the streets. Reg’s vice was a harmless if peculiar one -- an addiction to childish conjuring tricks. Richard remembered the first time he had been to see Reg with a problem -- it was only the normal angst that periodically takes undergraduates into its grip, particularly when they have essays to write, but it had seemed a dark and savage weight at the time. Reg had sat and listened to his outpourings with a deep frown of concentration, and when at last Richard had finished, he pondered seriously, stroked his chin a lot, and at last leaned forward and looked him in the eye.

‘I suspect that your problem,’ he said, ‘is that you have too many paper clips up your nose.’

Richard stared at him.

‘Allow me to demonstrate,’ said Reg, and leaning across the desk he pulled from Richard’s nose a chain of eleven paper clips and a small rubber swan.

‘Ah, the real culprit,’ he said, holding up the swan. ‘They come in cereal packets, you know, and cause no end of trouble. Well, I’m glad we’ve had this little chat, my dear fellow. Please feel free to disturb me again if you have any more such problems.’

Needless to say, Richard didn’t.

Richard glanced around the table to see if there was anybody else he recognised from his time at the college.

Two places away to the left was the don who had been Richard's Director of Studies in English, who showed no signs of recognising him at all. This was hardly surprising since Richard had spent his three years here assiduously avoiding him, often to the extent of growing a beard and pretending to be someone else.

Next to him was a man whom Richard had never managed to identify. Neither, in fact, had anyone else. He was thin and vole-like and had the most extraordinarily long bony nose -- it really was very, very long and bony indeed. In fact it looked a lot like the controversial keel which had helped the Australians win the America's Cup in 1983, and this resemblance had been much remarked upon at the time, though not of course to his face. No one had said anything to his face at all.

No one.

Ever.

Anyone meeting him for the first time was too startled and embarrassed by his nose to speak, and the second time was worse because of the first time, and so on. Years had gone by now, seventeen in all. In all that time he had been cocooned in silence. In hall it had long been the habit of the college servants to position a separate set of salt, pepper and mustard on either side of him, since no one could ask him to pass them, and to ask someone sitting on the other side of him was not only rude but completely impossible because of his nose being in the way.

The other odd thing about him was a series of gestures he made and repeated regularly throughout every evening. They consisted of tapping each of the fingers of his left hand in order, and then one of the fingers of his right hand. He would then occasionally tap some other part of his body, a knuckle, an elbow or a knee. Whenever he was forced to stop this by the requirements of eating he would start blinking each of his eyes instead, and occasionally nodding. No one, of course, had ever dared to ask him why he did this, though all were consumed with curiosity.

Richard couldn't see who was sitting beyond him.

In the other direction, beyond Reg's deathly neighbour, was Watkin, the Classics Professor, a man of terrifying dryness and oddity. His heavy rimless glasses were almost solid cubes of glass within which his eyes appeared to lead independent existences like goldfish. His nose was straight enough and ordinary, but beneath it he wore the same beard as Clint Eastwood. His eyes gazed swimmingly around the table as he selected who was going to be spoken at tonight. He had thought that his prey might be one of the guests, the newly appointed Head of Radio Three, who was sitting opposite -- but unfortunately he had already been ensnared by the Music Director of the college and a Professor of Philosophy. These two were busy explaining to the harassed man that the phrase 'too much Mozart' was, given any reasonable definition of those three words, an inherently self-contradictory expression, and that any sentence which contained such a phrase would be thereby rendered meaningless and could not, consequently, be advanced as part of an argument in favour of any given programme-scheduling strategy. The poor man was already beginning to grip his cutlery too tightly. His eyes darted about desperately looking for rescue, and made the mistake of lighting on those of Watkin.

'Good evening,' said Watkin with smiling charm, nodding in the most friendly way, and then letting his gaze settle glassily on to his bowl of newly arrived soup, from which position it would not allow itself to be moved. Yet. Let the bugger suffer a little. He wanted the rescue to be worth at least a good half dozen radio talk fees.

Beyond Watkin, Richard suddenly discovered the source of the little girlish giggle that had greeted Reg's conjuring trick. Astonishingly enough it was a little girl. She was about eight years old with blonde hair and a glum look. She was sitting occasionally kicking pettishly at the table leg.

'Who's that?' Richard asked Reg in surprise.

'Who's what?' Reg asked Richard in surprise.

Richard inclined a finger surreptitiously in her direction. 'The girl,' he whispered, 'the very, very little girl. Is it some new maths professor?'

Reg peered round at her. ‘Do you know,’ he said in astonishment, ‘I haven’t the faintest idea. Never known anything like it. How extraordinary.’

At that moment the problem was solved by the man from the BBC, who suddenly wrenched himself out of the logical half-nelson into which his neighbours had got him, and told the girl off for kicking the table. She stopped kicking the table, and instead kicked the air with redoubled vigour. He told her to try and enjoy herself, so she kicked him. This did something to bring a brief glimmer of pleasure into her glum evening, but it didn’t last. Her father briefly shared with the table at large his feelings about baby-sitters who let people down, but nobody felt able to run with the topic.

‘A major season of Buxtehude,’ resumed the Director of Music, ‘is of course clearly long overdue. I’m sure you’ll be looking forward to remedying this situation at the first opportunity.’

‘Oh, er, yes,’ replied the girl’s father, spilling his soup, ‘er, that is... he’s not the same one as Gluck, is he?’

The little girl kicked the table leg again. When her father looked sternly at her, she put her head on one side and mouthed a question at him.

‘Not now,’ he insisted at her as quietly as he could.

‘When, then?’

‘Later. Maybe. Later, we’ll see.’

She hunched grumpily back in her seat. ‘You always say later,’ she mouthed at him.

‘Poor child,’ murmured Reg. ‘There isn’t a don at this table who doesn’t behave exactly like that inside. Ah, thank you.’ Their soup arrived, distracting his attention, and Richard’s.

‘So tell me,’ said Reg, after they had both had a couple of spoonfuls and arrived independently at the same conclusion, that it was not a taste

explosion, 'what you've been up to, my dear chap. Something to do with computers, I understand, and also to do with music. I thought you read English when you were here -- though only, I realise, in your spare time.' He looked at Richard significantly over the rim of his soup spoon. 'Now wait,' he interrupted before Richard even had a chance to start, 'don't I vaguely remember that you had some sort of computer when you were here? When was it? 1977?'

Well, what we called a computer in 1977 was really a kind of electric abacus, but...'

Oh, now, don't underestimate the abacus,' said Reg. 'In skilled hands it's a very sophisticated calculating device. Furthermore it requires no power, can be made with any materials you have to hand, and never goes bing in the middle of an important piece of work.'

'So an electric one would be particularly pointless,' said Richard.

'True enough,' conceded Reg.

'There really wasn't a lot this machine could do that you couldn't do yourself in half the time with a lot less trouble,' said Richard, 'but it was, on the other hand, very good at being a slow and dim-witted pupil.'

Reg looked at him quizzically.

'I had no idea they were supposed to be in short supply,' he said. 'I could hit a dozen with a bread roll from where I'm sitting.'

'I'm sure. But look at it this way. What really is the point of trying to teach anything to anybody?'

This question seemed to provoke a murmur of sympathetic approval from up and down the table.

Richard continued, 'What I mean is that if you really want to understand something, the best way is to try and explain it to someone else. That forces you to sort it out in your own mind. And the more slow and dim-

witted your pupil, the more you have to break things down into more and more simple ideas. And that's really the essence of programming. By the time you've sorted out a complicated idea into little steps that even a stupid machine can deal with, you've certainly learned something about it yourself. The teacher usually learns more than the pupil. Isn't that true?'

'It would be hard to learn much less than my pupils,' came a low growl from somewhere on the table, 'without undergoing a pre-frontal lobotomy.'

'So I used to spend days struggling to write essays on this 16K machine that would have taken a couple of hours on a typewriter, but what was fascinating to me was the process of trying to explain to the machine what it was I wanted it to do. I virtually wrote my own word processor in BASIC. A simple search and replace routine would take about three hours.'

'I forget, did you ever get any essays done at all?'

'Well, not as such. No actual essays, but the reasons why not were absolutely fascinating. For instance, I discovered that...'

He broke off, laughing at himself.

'I was also playing keyboards in a rock group, of course,' he added. 'That didn't help.'

'Now, that I didn't know,' said Reg. 'Your past has murkier things in it than I dreamed possible. A quality, I might add, that it shares with this soup.' He wiped his mouth with his napkin very carefully. 'I must go and have a word with the kitchen staff one day. I would like to be sure that they are keeping the right bits and throwing the proper bits away. So. A rock group, you say. Well, well, well. Good heavens.'

'Yes,' said Richard. 'We called ourselves The Reasonably Good Band, but in fact we weren't. Our intention was to be the Beatles of the early eighties, but we got much better financial and legal advice than the Beatles ever did, which was basically 'Don't bother', so we didn't. I left Cambridge and starved for three years.'

‘But didn’t I bump into you during that period,’ said Reg, ‘and you said you were doing very well?’

‘As a road sweeper, yes. There was an awful lot of mess on the roads. More than enough, I felt, to support an entire career. However, I got the sack for sweeping the mess on to another sweeper’s patch.’

Reg shook his head. ‘The wrong career for you, I’m sure. There are plenty of vocations where such behaviour would ensure rapid preferment.’

‘I tried a few -- none of them much grander, though. And I kept none of them very long, because I was always too tired to do them properly. I’d be found asleep slumped over the chicken sheds or filing cabinets -- depending on what the job was. Been up all night with the computer you see, teaching it to play “Three Blind Mice”. It was an important goal for me.’

‘I’m sure,’ agreed Reg. ‘Thank you,’ he said to the college servant who took his half-finished plate of soup from him, ‘thank you very much. “Three Blind Mice”, eh? Good. Good. So no doubt you succeeded eventually, and this accounts for your present celebrated status. Yes?’

‘Well, there’s a bit more to it than that.’

‘I feared there might be. Pity you didn’t bring it with you though. It might have cheered up the poor young lady who is currently having our dull and crusty company forced upon her. A swift burst of “Three Blind Mice” would probably do much to revive her spirits.’ He leaned forward to look past his two right-hand neighbours at the girl, who was still sitting sagging in her chair.

‘Hello,’ he said.

She looked up in surprise, and then dropped her eyes shyly, swinging her legs again.

‘Which do you think is worse,’ enquired Reg, ‘the soup or the company?’

She gave a tiny, reluctant laugh and shrugged, still looking down.

‘I think you’re wise not to commit yourself at this stage,’ continued Reg. ‘Myself, I’m waiting to see the carrots before I make any judgements. They’ve been boiling them since the weekend, but I fear it may not be enough. The only thing that could possibly be worse than the carrots is Watkin. He’s the man with the silly glasses sitting between us. My name’s Reg, by the way. Come over and kick me when you have a moment.’ The girl giggled and glanced up at Watkin, who stiffened and made an appallingly unsuccessful attempt to smile good-naturedly.

‘Well, little girl,’ he said to her awkwardly, and she had desperately to suppress a hoot of laughter at his glasses. Little conversation therefore ensued, but the girl had an ally, and began to enjoy herself a tiny little bit. Her father gave her a relieved smile.

Reg turned back to Richard, who said, suddenly, ‘Do you have any family?’

‘Er... no,’ said Reg, quietly. ‘But tell me. After “Three Blind Mice”, what then?’

‘Well, to cut a long story short, Reg, I ended up working for WayForward Technologies...’

‘Ah, yes, the famous Mr Way. Tell me, what’s he like?’

Richard was always faintly annoyed by this question, probably because he was asked it so often.

‘Both better and worse than he’s represented in the press. I like him a lot, actually. Like any driven man he can be a bit trying at times, but I’ve known him since the very early days of the company when neither he nor I had a bean to our names. He’s fine. It’s just that it’s a good idea not to let him have your phone number unless you possess an industrial-grade answering machine.

‘What? Why’s that?’

‘Well, he’s one of those people who can only think when he’s talking. When he has ideas, he has to talk them out to whoever will listen. Or, if the

people themselves are not available, which is increasingly the case, their answering machines will do just as well. He just phones them up and talks at them. He has one secretary whose sole job is to collect tapes from people he might have phoned, transcribe them, sort them and give him the edited text the next day in a blue folder.'

'A blue one, eh?'

'Ask me why he doesn't simply use a tape recorder,' said Richard with a shrug.

Reg considered this. 'I expect he doesn't use a tape recorder because he doesn't like talking to himself,' he said. 'There is a logic there. Of a kind.'

He took a mouthful of his newly arrived porc au poivre and ruminated on it for a while before gently laying his knife and fork aside again for the moment.

'So what,' he said at last, 'is the role of young MacDuff in all this?'

'Well, Gordon assigned me to write a major piece of software for the Apple Macintosh. Financial spreadsheet, accounting, that sort of thing, powerful, easy to use, lots of graphics. I asked him exactly what he wanted in it, and he just said, "Everything. I want the top piece of all-singing, all-dancing business software for that machine." And being of a slightly whimsical turn of mind I took him literally.

'You see, a pattern of numbers can represent anything you like, can be used to map any surface, or modulate any dynamic process -- and so on. And any set of company accounts are, in the end, just a pattern of numbers. So I sat down and wrote a program that'll take those numbers and do what you like with them. If you just want a bar graph it'll do them as a bar graph, if you want them as a pie chart or scatter graph it'll do them as a pie chart or scatter graph. If you want dancing girls jumping out of the pie chart in order to distract attention from the figures the pie chart actually represents, then the program will do that as well. Or you can turn your figures into, for instance, a flock of seagulls, and the formation they fly in and the way in which the wings of each gull beat will be determined by the performance of

each division of your company. Great for producing animated corporate logos that actually mean something.

‘But the silliest feature of all was that if you wanted your company accounts represented as a piece of music, it could do that as well. Well, I thought it was silly. The corporate world went bananas over it.’

Reg regarded him solemnly from over a piece of carrot poised delicately on his fork in front of him, but did not interrupt.

‘You see, any aspect of a piece of music can be expressed as a sequence or pattern of numbers,’ enthused Richard. ‘Numbers can express the pitch of notes, the length of notes, patterns of pitches and lengths.’

‘You mean tunes,’ said Reg. The carrot had not moved yet.

Richard grinned.

‘Tunes would be a very good word for it. I must remember that.’

‘It would help you speak more easily.’ Reg returned the carrot to his plate, untasted. ‘And this software did well, then?’ he asked.

‘Not so much here. The yearly accounts of most British companies emerged sounding like the Dead March from Saul, but in Japan they went for it like a pack of rats. It produced lots of cheery company anthems that started well, but if you were going to criticise you’d probably say that they tended to get a bit loud and squeaky at the end. Did spectacular business in the States, which was the main thing, commercially. Though the thing that’s interesting me most now is what happens if you leave the accounts out of it. Turn the numbers that represent the way a swallow’s wings beat directly into music. What would you hear? Not the sound of cash registers, according to Gordon.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Reg, ‘quite fascinating,’ and popped the carrot at last into his mouth. He turned and leaned forward to speak to his new girlfriend.

‘Watkin loses,’ he pronounced. ‘The carrots have achieved a new all-time low. Sorry, Watkin, but awful as you are, the carrots, I’m afraid, are world-beaters.’

The girl giggled more easily than last time and she smiled at him. Watkin was trying to take all this good-naturedly, but it was clear as his eyes swam at Reg that he was more used to discomfiting than being discomfited.

‘Please, Daddy, can I now?’ With her new-found, if slight, confidence, the girl had also found a voice.

‘Later,’ insisted her father.

‘This is already later. I’ve been timing it.’

‘Well...’ He hesitated, and was lost.

‘We’ve been to Greece,’ announced the girl in a small but awed voice.

‘Ah, have you indeed,’ said Watkin, with a little nod. ‘Well, well. Anywhere in particular, or just Greece generally?’

‘Patmos,’ she said decisively. ‘It was beautiful. I think Patmos is the most beautiful place in the whole world. Except the ferry never came when it said it would. Never, ever. I timed it. We missed our flight but I didn’t mind.’

‘Ah, Patmos, I see,’ said Watkin, who was clearly roused by the news. ‘Well, what you have to understand, young lady, is that the Greeks, not content with dominating the culture of the Classical world, are also responsible for the greatest, some would say the only, work of true creative imagination produced this century as well. I refer of course to the Greek ferry timetables. A work of the sublimest fiction. Anyone who has travelled in the Aegean will confirm this. Hmm, yes. I think so.’

She frowned at him.

‘I found a pot,’ she said.

‘Probably nothing,’ interrupted her father hastily. ‘You know the way it is. Everyone who goes to Greece for the first time thinks they’ve found a pot, don’t they? Ha, ha.’

There were general nods. This was true. Irritating, but true.

‘I found it in the harbour,’ she said, ‘in the water. While we were waiting for the damn ferry.’

‘Sarah! I’ve told you...’

‘It’s just what you called it. And worse. You called it words I didn’t think you knew. Anyway, I thought that if everyone here was meant to be so clever, then someone would be able to tell me if it was a proper ancient Greek thing or not. I think it’s very old. Will you please let them see it, Daddy?’

Her father shrugged hopelessly and started to fish about under his chair.

‘Did you know, young lady,’ said Watkin to her, ‘that the Book of Revelation was written on Patmos? It was indeed. By Saint John the Divine, as you know. To me it shows very clear signs of having been written while waiting for a ferry. Oh, yes, I think so. It starts off, doesn’t it, with that kind of dreaminess you get when you’re killing time, getting bored, you know, just making things up, and then gradually grows to a sort of climax of hallucinatory despair. I find that very suggestive. Perhaps you should write a paper on it.’ He nodded at her.

She looked at him as if he were mad.

‘Well, here it is,’ said her father, plonking the thing down on the table. ‘Just a pot, as you see. She’s only six,’ he added with a grim smile, ‘aren’t you, dear?’

‘Seven,’ said Sarah.

The pot was quite small, about five inches high and four inches across at its widest point. The body was almost spherical, with a very narrow neck

extending about an inch above the body. The neck and about half of the surface area were encrusted with hard-caked earth, but the parts of the pot that could be seen were of a rough, ruddy texture.

Sarah took it and thrust it into the hands of the don sitting on her right.

‘You look clever,’ she said. ‘Tell me what you think.’

The don took it, and turned it over with a slightly supercilious air. ‘I’m sure if you scraped away the mud from the bottom,’ he remarked wittily, ‘it would probably say “Made in Birmingham”.’

‘That old, eh?’ said Sarah’s father with a forced laugh. ‘Long time since anything was made there.’

‘Anyway,’ said the don, ‘not my field, I’m a molecular biologist. Anyone else want to have a look?’

This question was not greeted with wild yelps of enthusiasm, but nevertheless the pot was passed from hand to hand around the far end of the table in a desultory fashion. It was goggled at through pebble glasses, peered at through horn-rims, gazed at over half-moons, and squinted at by someone who had left his glasses in his other suit, which he very much feared had now gone to the cleaner’s. No one seemed to know how old it was, or to care very much. The young girl’s face began to grow downhearted again.

‘Sour lot,’ said Reg to Richard. He picked up a silver salt cellar again and held it up.

‘Young lady,’ he said, leaning forward to address her.

‘Oh, not again, you old fool,’ muttered the aged archaeologist Cawley, sitting back and putting his hands over his ears.

‘Young lady,’ repeated Reg, ‘regard this simple silver salt cellar. Regard this simple hat.’

‘You haven’t got a hat,’ said the girl sulkily.

‘Oh,’ said Reg, ‘a moment please,’ and he went and fetched his woolly red one.

‘Regard,’ he said again, ‘this simple silver salt cellar. Regard this simple woolly hat. I put the salt cellar in the hat, thus, and I pass the hat to you. The next part of the trick, dear lady... is up to you.’

He handed the hat to her, past their two intervening neighbours, Cawley and Watkin. She took the hat and looked inside it.

‘Where’s it gone?’ she asked, staring into the hat.

‘It’s wherever you put it,’ said Reg.

‘Oh,’ said Sarah, ‘I see. Well... that wasn’t very good.’

Reg shrugged. ‘A humble trick, but it gives me pleasure,’ he said, and turned back to Richard. ‘Now, what were we talking about?’

Richard looked at him with a slight sense of shock. He knew that the Professor had always been prone to sudden and erratic mood swings, but it was as if all the warmth had drained out of him in an instant. He now wore the same distracted expression Richard had seen on his face when first he had arrived at his door that evening, apparently completely unexpected. Reg seemed then to sense that Richard was taken aback and quickly reassembled a smile.

‘My dear chap!’ he said. ‘My dear chap! My dear, dear chap! What was I saying?’

‘Er, you were saying “My dear chap”.’

‘Yes, but I feel sure it was a prelude to something. A sort of short toccata on the theme of what a splendid fellow you are prior to introducing the main subject of my discourse, the nature of which I currently forget. You have no idea what I was about to say?’

‘No.’

‘Oh. Well, I suppose I should be pleased. If everyone knew exactly what I was going to say, then there would be no point in my saying it, would there? Now, how’s our young guest’s pot doing?’

In fact it had reached Watkin, who pronounced himself no expert on what the ancients had made for themselves to drink out of, only on what they had written as a result. He said that Cawley was the one to whose knowledge and experience they should all bow, and attempted to give the pot to him.

‘I said,’ he repeated, ‘yours was the knowledge and experience to which we should bow. Oh, for heaven’s sake, take your hands off your ears and have a look at the thing.’

Gently, but firmly, he drew Cawley’s right hand from his ear, explained the situation to him once again, and handed him the pot. Cawley gave it a cursory but clearly expert examination.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘about two hundred years old, I would think. Very rough. Very crude example of its type. Utterly without value, of course.’

He put it down peremptorily and gazed off into the old minstrel gallery, which appeared to anger him for some reason.

The effect on Sarah was immediate. Already discouraged, she was thoroughly downcast by this. She bit her lip and threw herself back against her chair, feeling once again thoroughly out of place and childish. Her father gave her a warning look about misbehaving, and then apologised for her again.

‘Well, Buxtehude,’ he hurried on to say, ‘yes, good old Buxtehude. We’ll have to see what we can do. Tell me...’

‘Young lady,’ interrupted a voice, hoarse with astonishment, ‘you are clearly a magician and enchantress of prodigious powers!’

All eyes turned to Reg, the old show-off. He was gripping the pot and staring at it with manic fascination. He turned his eyes slowly to the little girl, as if for the first time assessing the power of a feared adversary.

‘I bow to you,’ he whispered. ‘I, unworthy though I am to speak in the presence of such a power as yours, beg leave to congratulate you on one of the finest feats of the conjurer’s art it has been my privilege to witness!’

Sarah stared at him with widening eyes.

‘May I show these people what you have wrought?’ he asked earnestly.

Very faintly she nodded, and he fetched her formerly precious, but now sadly discredited, pot a sharp rap on the table.

It split into two irregular parts, the caked clay with which it was surrounded falling in jagged shards on the table. One side of the pot fell away, leaving the rest standing.

Sarah’s eyes goggled at the stained and tarnished but clearly recognisable silver college salt cellar, standing jammed in the remains of the pot.

‘Stupid old fool,’ muttered Cawley.

After the general disparagement and condemnation of this cheap parlour trick had died down -- none of which could dim the awe in Sarah’s eyes -- Reg turned to Richard and said, idly: ‘Who was that friend of yours when you were here, do you ever see him? Chap with an odd East European name. Svlad something. Svlad Cjelli. Remember the fellow?’

Richard looked at him blankly for a moment.

‘Svlad?’ he said. ‘Oh, you mean Dirk. Dirk Cjelli. No. I never stayed in touch. I’ve bumped into him a couple of times in the street but that’s all. I think he changes his name from time to time. Why do you ask?’

CHAPTER 5

High on his rocky promontory the Electric Monk continued to sit on a horse which was going quietly and uncomplainingly spare. From under its rough woven cowl the Monk gazed unblinkingly down into the valley, with which it was having a problem, but the problem was a new and hideous one to the Monk, for it was this -- Doubt.

He never suffered it for long, but when he did, it gnawed at the very root of his being.

The day was hot; the sun stood in an empty hazy sky and beat down upon the grey rocks and the scrubby, parched grass. Nothing moved, not even the Monk. But strange things were beginning to fizz in its brain, as they did from time to time when a piece of data became misaddressed as it passed through its input buffer.

But then the Monk began to believe, fitfully and nervously at first, but then with a great searing white flame of belief which overturned all previous beliefs, including the stupid one about the valley being pink, that somewhere down in the valley, about a mile from where he was sitting, there would shortly open up a mysterious doorway into a strange and distant world, a doorway through which he might enter. An astounding idea.

Astoundingly enough, however, on this one occasion he was perfectly right.

The horse sensed that something was up.

It pricked up its ears and gently shook its head. It had gone into a sort of trance looking at the same clump of rocks for so long, and was on the verge of imagining them to be pink itself. It shook its head a little harder.

A slight twitch on the reins, and a prod from the Monk's heels and they were off, picking their way carefully down the rocky incline. The way was difficult. Much of it was loose shale -- loose brown and grey shale, with the

occasional brown and green plant clinging to a precarious existence on it. The Monk noticed this without embarrassment. It was an older, wiser Monk now, and had put childish things behind it. Pink valleys, hermaphrodite tables, these were all natural stages through which one had to pass on the path to true enlightenment.

The sun beat hard on them. The Monk wiped the sweat and dust off its face and paused, leaning forward on the horse's neck. It peered down through the shimmering heat haze at a large outcrop of rock which stood out on to the floor of the valley. There, behind that outcrop, was where the Monk thought, or rather passionately believed to be the core of its being, the door would appear. It tried to focus more closely, but the details of the view swam confusingly in the hot rising air.

As it sat back in its saddle, and was about to prod the horse onward, it suddenly noticed a rather odd thing.

On a flattish wall of rock nearby, in fact so nearby that the Monk was surprised not to have noticed it before, was a large painting. The painting was crudely drawn, though not without a certain stylish sweep of line, and seemed very old, possibly very, very old indeed. The paint was faded, chipped and patchy, and it was difficult to discern with any clarity what the picture was. The Monk approached the picture more closely. It looked like a primitive hunting scene.

The group of purple, multi-limbed creatures were clearly early hunters. They carried rough spears, and were in hot pursuit of a large horned and armoured creature, which appeared to have been wounded in the hunt already. The colours were now so dim as to be almost non-existent. In fact, all that could be clearly seen was the white of the hunters' teeth, which seemed to shine with a whiteness whose lustre was undimmed by the passage of what must have been many thousands of years. In fact they even put the Monk's own teeth to shame, and he had cleaned them only that morning.

The Monk had seen paintings like this before, but only in pictures or on the TV, never in real life. They were usually to be found in caves where they were protected from the elements, otherwise they would not have survived.

The Monk looked more carefully at the immediate environs of the rock wall and noticed that, though not exactly in a cave, it was nevertheless protected by a large overhang and was well sheltered from the wind and rain. Odd, though, that it should have managed to last so long. Odder still that it should appear not to have been discovered. Such cave paintings as there were, were all famous and familiar images, but this was not one that he had ever seen before.

Perhaps this was a dramatic and historic find he had made. Perhaps if he were to return to the city and announce this discovery he would be welcomed back, given a new motherboard after all and allowed to believe -- to believe -- believe what? He paused, blinked, and shook his head to clear a momentary system error.

He pulled himself up short.

He believed in a door. He must find that door. The door was the way to... to...

The Door was The Way.

Good.

Capital letters were always the best way of dealing with things you didn't have a good answer to.

Brusquely he tugged the horse's head round and urged it onward and downward. Within a few minutes more of tricky manoeuvring they had reached the valley floor, and he was momentarily disconcerted to discover that the fine top layer of dust that had settled on the brown parched earth was indeed a very pale brownish pink, particularly on the banks of the sluggish trickle of mud which was all that remained, in the hot season, of the river that flowed through the valley when the rains came. He dismounted and bent down to feel the pink dust and run it through his fingers. It was very fine and soft and felt pleasant as he rubbed it on his skin. It was about the same colour, perhaps a little paler.

The horse was looking at him. He realised, a little belatedly perhaps, that the horse must be extremely thirsty. He was extremely thirsty himself, but had tried to keep his mind off it. He unbuckled the water flask from the saddle. It was pathetically light. He unscrewed the top and took one single swig. Then he poured a little into his cupped hand and offered it to the horse, who slurped at it greedily and briefly.

The horse looked at him again.

The Monk shook his head sadly, resealed the bottle and replaced it. He knew, in that small part of his mind where he kept factual and logical information, that it would not last much longer, and that, without it, neither would they. It was only his Belief that kept him going, currently his Belief in The Door.

He brushed the pink dust from his rough habit, and then stood looking at the rocky outcrop, a mere hundred yards distant. He looked at it not without a slight, tiny trepidation. Although the major part of his mind was firm in its eternal and unshakeable Belief that there would be a Door behind the outcrop, and that the Door would be The Way, yet the tiny part of his brain that understood about the water bottle could not help but recall past disappointments and sounded a very tiny but jarring note of caution.

If he elected not to go and see The Door for himself, then he could continue to believe in it forever. It would be the lodestone of his life (what little was left of it, said the part of his brain that knew about the water bottle).

If on the other hand he went to pay his respects to the Door and it wasn't there... what then?

The horse whinnied impatiently.

The answer, of course, was very simple. He had a whole board of circuits for dealing with exactly this problem, in fact this was the very heart of his function. He would continue to believe in it whatever the facts turned out to be, what else was the meaning of Belief?

The Door would still be there, even if the door was not.

He pulled himself together. The Door would be there, and he must now go to it, because The Door was The Way.

Instead of remounting his horse, he led it. The Way was but a short way, and he should enter the presence of the Door in humility.

He walked, brave and erect, with solemn slowness. He approached the rocky outcrop. He reached it. He turned the corner. He looked.

The Door was there.

The horse, it must be said, was quite surprised.

The Monk fell to his knees in awe and bewilderment. So braced was he for dealing with the disappointment that was habitually his lot that, though he would never know to admit it, he was completely unprepared for this. He stared at The Door in sheer, blank system error.

It was a door such as he had never seen before. All the doors he knew were great steel-reinforced things, because of all the video recorders and dishwashers that were kept behind them, plus of course all the expensive Electric Monks that were needed to believe in it all. This one was simple, wooden and small, about his own size. A Monk-size door, painted white, with a single, slightly dented brass knob slightly less than halfway up one side. It was set simply in the rock face, with no explanation as to its origin or purpose.

Hardly knowing how he dared, the poor startled Monk staggered to his feet and, leading his horse, walked nervously forward towards it. He reached out and touched it. He was so startled when no alarms went off that he jumped back. He touched it again, more firmly this time.

He let his hand drop slowly to the handle -- again, no alarms. He waited to be sure, and then he turned it, very, very gently. He felt a mechanism release. He held his breath. Nothing. He drew the door towards him, and it came easily. He looked inside, but the interior was so dim in contrast with the desert sun outside that he could see nothing. At last, almost dead with wonder, he entered, pulling the horse in after him.

A few minutes later, a figure that had been sitting out of sight around the next outcrop of rock finished rubbing dust on his face, stood up, stretched his limbs and made his way back towards the door, patting his clothes as he did so.

CHAPTER 6

‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:’

The reader clearly belonged to the school of thought which holds that a sense of the seriousness or greatness of a poem is best imparted by reading it in a silly voice. He soared and swooped at the words until they seemed to duck and run for cover.

‘Where Alph, the sacred river ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.’

Richard relaxed back into his seat. The words were very, very familiar to him, as they could not help but be to any English graduate of St Cedd’s College, and they settled easily into his mind.

The association of the college with Coleridge was taken very seriously indeed, despite the man’s well-known predilection for certain recreational pharmaceuticals under the influence of which this, his greatest work, was composed, in a dream.

The entire manuscript was lodged in the safe-keeping of the college library, and it was from this itself, on the regular occasion of the Coleridge Dinner, that the poem was read.

‘So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.'

Richard wondered how long it took. He glanced sideways at his former Director of Studies and was disturbed by the sturdy purposefulness of his reading posture. The singsong voice irritated him at first, but after a while it began to lull him instead, and he watched a rivulet of wax seeping over the edge of a candle that was burning low now and throwing a guttering light over the carnage of dinner.

'But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!'

The small quantities of claret that he had allowed himself during the course of the meal seeped warmly through his veins, and soon his own mind began to wander, and provoked by Reg's question earlier in the meal, he wondered what had lately become of his former... was friend the word? He seemed more like a succession of extraordinary events than a person. The idea of him actually having friends as such seemed not so much unlikely, more a sort of mismatching of concepts, like the idea of the Suez crisis popping out for a bun.

Svlad Cjelli. Popularly known as Dirk, though, again, 'popular' was hardly right. Notorious, certainly; sought after, endlessly speculated about, those

too were true. But popular? Only in the sense that a serious accident on the motorway might be popular -- everyone slows down to have a good look, but no one will get too close to the flames. Infamous was more like it. Svlad Cjelli, infamously known as Dirk.

He was rounder than the average undergraduate and wore more hats. That is to say, there was just the one hat which he habitually wore, but he wore it with a passion that was rare in one so young. The hat was dark red and round, with a very flat brim, and it appeared to move as if balanced on gimbals, which ensured its perfect horizontality at all times, however its owner moved his head. As a hat it was a remarkable rather than entirely successful piece of personal decoration. It would make an elegant adornment, stylish, shapely and flattering, if the wearer were a small bedside lamp, but not otherwise.

People gravitated around him, drawn in by the stories he denied about himself, but what the source of these stories might be, if not his own denials, was never entirely clear.

The tales had to do with the psychic powers that he'd supposedly inherited from his mother's side of the family who he claimed, had lived at the smarter end of Transylvania. That is to say, he didn't make any such claim at all, and said it was the most absurd nonsense. He strenuously denied that there were bats of any kind at all in his family and threatened to sue anybody who put about such malicious fabrications, but he affected nevertheless to wear a large and flappy leather coat, and had one of those machines in his room which are supposed to help cure bad backs if you hang upside down from them. He would allow people to discover him hanging from this machine at all kinds of odd hours of the day, and more particularly of the night, expressly so that he could vigorously deny that it had any significance whatsoever.

By means of an ingenious series of strategically deployed denials of the most exciting and exotic things, he was able to create the myth that he was a psychic, mystic, telepathic, fey, clairvoyant, psychosassic vampire bat.

What did 'psychosassic' mean?

It was his own word and he vigorously denied that it meant anything at all.

‘And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted...’

Dirk had also been perpetually broke. This would change.

It was his room-mate who started it, a credulous fellow called Mander, who, if the truth were known, had probably been specially selected by Dirk for his credulity.

Steve Mander noticed that if ever Dirk went to bed drunk he would talk in his sleep. Not only that, but the sort of things he would say in his sleep would be things like, ‘The opening up of trade routes to the mumble mumble burble was the turning point for the growth of empire in the snore footle mumble. Discuss.’

‘...like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:’

The first time this happened Steve Mander sat bolt upright in bed. This was shortly before prelim exams in the second year, and what Dirk had just said, or judiciously mumbled, sounded remarkably like a very likely question in the Economic History paper.

Mander quietly got up, crossed over to Dirk’s bed and listened very hard, but other than a few completely disconnected mumblings about Schleswig-

Holstein and the Franco-Prussian war, the latter being largely directed by Dirk into his pillow, he learned nothing more.

News, however, spread -- quietly, discreetly, and like wildfire.

‘And ‘mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.’

For the next month Dirk found himself being constantly wined and dined in the hope that he would sleep very soundly that night and dream-speak a few more exam questions. Remarkably, it seemed that the better he was fed, and the finer the vintage of the wine he was given to drink, the less he would tend to sleep facing directly into his pillow.

His scheme, therefore, was to exploit his alleged gifts without ever actually claiming to have them. In fact he would react to stories about his supposed powers with open incredulity, even hostility.

‘Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war!’

Dirk was also, he denied, a clairaudient. He would sometimes hum tunes in his sleep that two weeks later would turn out to be a hit for someone. Not too difficult to organise, really.

In fact, he had always done the bare minimum of research necessary to support these myths. He was lazy, and essentially what he did was allow people's enthusiastic credulity to do the work for him. The laziness was essential -- if his supposed feats of the paranormal had been detailed and accurate, then people might have been suspicious and looked for other explanations. On the other hand, the more vague and ambiguous his 'predictions' the more other people's own wishful thinking would close the credibility gap.

Dirk never made much out of it -- at least, he appeared not to. In fact, the benefit to himself, as a student, of being continually wined and dined at other people's expense was more considerable than anyone would expect unless they sat down and worked out the figures.

And, of course, he never claimed -- in fact, he actively denied -- that any of it was even remotely true.

He was therefore well placed to execute a very nice and tasty little scam come the time of finals.

'The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!'

'Good heavens...!' Reg suddenly seemed to awake with a start from the light doze into which he had gently slipped under the influence of the wine and the reading, and glanced about himself with blank surprise, but nothing had changed. Coleridge's words sang through a warm and contented

silence that had settled on the great hall. After another quick frown, Reg settled back into another doze, but this time a slightly more attentive one.

‘A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid,

And on her dulcimer she played,

Singing of Mount Abora.’

Dirk allowed himself to be persuaded to make, under hypnosis, a firm prediction about what questions would be set for examination that summer.

He himself first planted the idea by explaining exactly the sort of thing that he would never, under any circumstances, be prepared to do, though in many ways he would like to, just to have the chance to disprove his alleged and strongly disavowed abilities.

And it was on these grounds, carefully prepared, that he eventually agreed - - only because it would once and for all scotch the whole silly -- immensely, tediously silly -- business. He would make his predictions by means of automatic writing under proper supervision, and they would then be sealed in an envelope and deposited at the bank until after the exams.

Then they would be opened to see how accurate they had been after the exams.

He was, not surprisingly, offered some pretty hefty bribes from a pretty hefty number of people to let them see the predictions he had written down, but he was absolutely shocked by the idea. That, he said, would be dishonest...

‘Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!

Then, a short time later, Dirk allowed himself to be seen around town wearing something of a vexed and solemn expression. At first he waved aside enquiries as to what it was that was bothering him, but eventually he let slip that his mother was going to have to undergo some extremely expensive dental work which, for reasons that he refused to discuss, would have to be done privately, only there wasn't the money.

From here, the path downward to accepting donations for his mother's supposed medical expenses in return for quick glances at his written exam predictions proved to be sufficiently steep and well-oiled for him to be able to slip down it with a minimum of fuss.

Then it further transpired that the only dentist who could perform this mysterious dental operation was an East European surgeon now living in Malibu, and it was in consequence necessary to increase the level of donations rather sharply.

He still denied, of course, that his abilities were all that they were cracked up to be, in fact he denied that they existed at all, and insisted that he would never have embarked on the exercise at all if it wasn't to disprove the whole thing -- and also, since other people seemed, at their own risk, to have a faith in his abilities that he himself did not, he was happy to indulge them to the extent of letting them pay for his sainted mother's operation.

He could only emerge well from this situation.

Or so he thought.

‘And all who heard should see them there,

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!’

The exam papers Dirk produced under hypnosis, by means of automatic writing, he had, in fact, pieced together simply by doing the same minimum research that any student taking exams would do, studying previous exam papers, and seeing what, if any, patterns emerged, and making intelligent guesses about what might come up. He was pretty sure of getting (as anyone would be) a strike rate that was sufficiently high to satisfy the credulous, and sufficiently low for the whole exercise to look perfectly innocent.

As indeed it was.

What completely blew him out of the water, and caused a furore which ended with him being driven out of Cambridge in the back of a Black Maria, was the fact that all the exam papers he sold turned out to be the same as the papers that were actually set.

Exactly. Word for word. To the very comma.

‘Wave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread,

For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise...’

And that, apart from a flurry of sensational newspaper reports which exposed him as a fraud, then trumpeted him as the real thing so that they

could have another round of exposing him as a fraud again and then trumpeting him as the real thing again, until they got bored and found a nice juicy snooker player to harass instead, was that.

In the years since then, Richard had run into Dirk from time to time and had usually been greeted with that kind of guarded half smile that wants to know if you think it owes you money before it blossoms into one that hopes you will lend it some. Dirk's regular name changes suggested to Richard that he wasn't alone in being treated like this.

He felt a tug of sadness that someone who had seemed so shinningly alive within the small confines of a university community should have seemed to fade so much in the light of common day. And he wondered at Reg's asking after him like that, suddenly and out of the blue, in what seemed altogether too airy and casual a manner.

He glanced around him again, at his lightly snoring neighbour, Reg; at little Sarah rapt in silent attention; at the deep hall swathed in darkly glimmering light; at the portraits of old prime ministers and poets hung high in the darkness with just the odd glint of candlelight gleaming off their teeth; at the Director of English Studies standing reading in his poetry-reading voice; at the book of 'Kubla Khan' that the Director of English Studies held in his hand; and finally, surreptitiously, at his watch. He settled back again.

The voice continued, reading the second, and altogether stranger part of the poem...

CHAPTER 7

This was the evening of the last day of Gordon Way's life, and he was wondering if the rain would hold off for the weekend. The forecast had said changeable -- a misty night tonight followed by bright but chilly days on Friday and Saturday with maybe a few scattered showers towards the end of Sunday when everyone would be heading back into town.

Everyone, that is, other than Gordon Way.

The weather forecast hadn't mentioned that, of course, that wasn't the job of the weather forecast, but then his horoscope had been pretty misleading as well. It had mentioned an unusual amount of planetary activity in his sign and had urged him to differentiate between what he thought he wanted and what he actually needed, and suggested that he should tackle emotional or work problems with determination and complete honesty, but had inexplicably failed to mention that he would be dead before the day was out.

He turned off the motorway near Cambridge and stopped at a small filling station for some petrol, where he sat for a moment, finishing off a call on his car phone.

'OK, look, I'll call you tomorrow,' he said, 'or maybe later tonight. Or call me. I should be at the cottage in half an hour. Yes, I know how important the project is to you. All right, I know how important it is, full stop. You want it, I want it. Of course I do. And I'm not saying that we won't continue to support it. I'm just saying it's expensive and we should look at the whole thing with determination and complete honesty. Look, why don't you come out to the cottage, and we can talk it through. OK, yeah, yes, I know. I understand. Well, think about it, Kate. Talk to you later. Bye.'

He hung up and continued to sit in his car for a moment.

It was a large car. It was a large silver-grey Mercedes of the sort that they use in advertisements, and not just advertisements for Mercedes. Gordon

Way, brother of Susan, employer of Richard MacDuff, was a rich man, the founder and owner of WayForward Technologies II. WayForward Technologies itself had of course gone bust, for the usual reason, taking his entire first fortune with it.

Luckily, he had managed to make another one.

The ‘usual reason’ was that he had been in the business of computer hardware when every twelve-year-old in the country had suddenly got bored with boxes that went bing. His second fortune had been made in software instead. As a result of two major pieces of software, one of which was Anthem (the other, more profitable one had never seen the light of day), WFT-II was the only British software company that could be mentioned in the same sentence as such major U.S. companies as Microsoft or Lotus. The sentence would probably run along the lines of ‘WayForward Technologies, unlike such major U.S. companies as Microsoft or Lotus...’ but it was a start. WayForward was in there. And he owned it.

He pushed a tape into the slot on the stereo console. It accepted it with a soft and decorous click, and a moment or two later Ravel’s Boléro floated out of eight perfectly matched speakers with fine-meshed matte-black grilles. The stereo was so smooth and spacious you could almost sense the whole ice-rink. He tapped his fingers lightly on the padded rim of the steering wheel. He gazed at the dashboard. Tasteful illuminated figures and tiny, immaculate lights gazed dimly back at him. After a while he suddenly realised this was a self service station and got out to fill the tank.

This took a minute or two. He stood gripping the filler nozzle, stamping his feet in the cold night air, then walked over to the small grubby kiosk, paid for the petrol, remembered to buy a couple of local maps, and then stood chatting enthusiastically to the cashier for a few minutes about the directions the computer industry was likely to take in the following year, suggesting that parallel processing was going to be the key to really intuitive productivity software, but also strongly doubting whether artificial intelligence research per se, particularly artificial intelligence research based on the ProLog language, was really going to produce any serious commercially viable products in the foreseeable future, at least as far as the

office desk top environment was concerned, a topic that fascinated the cashier not at all.

‘The man just liked to talk,’ he would later tell the police. ‘Man, I could have walked away to the toilet for ten minutes and he would’ve told it all to the till. If I’d been fifteen minutes the till would have walked away too. Yeah, I’m sure that’s him,’ he would add when shown a picture of Gordon Way. ‘I only wasn’t sure at first because in the picture he’s got his mouth closed.’

‘And you’re absolutely certain you didn’t see anything else suspicious?’ the policeman insisted. ‘Nothing that struck you as odd in any way at all?’

‘No, like I said, it was just an ordinary customer on an ordinary night, just like any other night.’

The policeman stared at him blankly. ‘Just for the sake of argument,’ he went on to say, ‘if I were suddenly to do this...’ -- he made himself go cross-eyed, stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth and danced up and down twisting his fingers in his ears -- ‘would anything strike you about that?’

‘Well, er, yeah,’ said the cashier, backing away nervously. ‘I’d think you’d gone stark raving mad.’

‘Good,’ said the policeman, putting his notebook away. ‘It’s just that different people sometimes have a different idea of what “odd” means, you see, sir. If last night was an ordinary night just like any other night, then I am a pimple on the bottom of the Marquess of Queensbury’s aunt. We shall be requiring a statement later, sir. Thank you for your time.’

That was all yet to come.

Tonight, Gordon pushed the maps in his pocket and strolled back towards his car. Standing under the lights in the mist it had gathered a finely beaded coat of matte moisture on it, and looked like -- well, it looked like an extremely expensive Mercedes-Benz. Gordon caught himself, just for a millisecond, wishing that he had something like that, but he was now quite

adept at fending off that particular line of thought, which only led off in circles and left him feeling depressed and confused.

He patted it in a proprietorial manner, then, walking around it, noticed that the boot wasn't closed properly and pushed it shut. It closed with a good healthy clunk. Well, that made it all worth it, didn't it? Good healthy clunk like that. Old-fashioned values of quality and workmanship. He thought of a dozen things he had to talk to Susan about and climbed back into the car, pushing the auto-dial code on his phone as soon as the car was prowling back on to the road.

'...so if you'd like to leave a message, I'll get back to you as soon as possible. Maybe.'

Beep.

'Oh, Susan, hi, it's Gordon,' he said, cradling the phone awkwardly on his shoulder. 'Just on my way to the cottage. It's er, Thursday night, and it's, er... 8.47. Bit misty on the roads. Listen, I have those people from the States coming over this weekend to thrash out the distribution on Anthem Version 2.00, handling the promotion, all that stuff, and look you know I don't like to ask you this sort of thing, but you know I always do anyway, so here it is.'

'I just need to know that Richard is on the case. I mean really on the case. I can ask him, and he says, Oh sure, it's fine, but half the time -- shit, that lorry had bright lights, none of these bastard lorry drivers ever dips them properly, it's a wonder I don't end up dead in the ditch, that would be something, wouldn't it, leaving your famous last words on somebody's answering machine, there's no reason why these lorries shouldn't have automatic light-activated dipper switches. Look, can you make a note for me to tell Susan -- not you, of course, secretary Susan at the office -- to tell her to send a letter from me to that fellow at the Department of the Environment saying we can provide the technology if he can provide the legislation? It's for the public good, and anyway he owes me a favour plus what's the point in having a CBE if you can't kick a little ass? You can tell I've been talking to Americans all week.'

‘That reminds me, God, I hope I remembered to pack the shotguns. What is it with these Americans that they’re always so mad to shoot my rabbits? I bought them some maps in the hope that I can persuade them to go on long healthy walks and take their minds off shooting rabbits. I really feel quite sorry for the creatures. I think I should put one of those signs on my lawn when the Americans are coming, you know, like they have in Beverly Hills, saying ‘Armed Response’.

‘Make a note to Susan, would you please, to get an ‘Armed Response’ sign made up with a sharp spike on the bottom at the right height for rabbits to see. That’s secretary Susan at the office not you, of course.

‘Where was I?

‘Oh yes. Richard and Anthem 2.00. Susan, that thing has got to be in beta testing in two weeks. He tells me it’s fine. But every time I see him he’s got a picture of a sofa spinning on his computer screen. He says it’s an important concept, but all I see is furniture. People who want their company accounts to sing to them do not want to buy a revolving sofa. Nor do I think he should be turning the erosion patterns of the Himalayas into a flute quintet at this time.

‘And as for what Kate’s up to, Susan, well, I can’t hide the fact that I get anxious at the salaries and computer time it’s eating up. Important long-term research and development it might be, but there is also the possibility, only a possibility, I’m saying, but nevertheless a possibility which I think we owe it to ourselves fully to evaluate and explore, which is that it’s a lemon. That’s odd, there’s a noise coming from the boot, I thought I’d just closed it properly.

‘Anyway, the main thing’s Richard. And the point is that there’s only one person who’s really in a position to know if he’s getting the important work done, or if he’s just dreaming, and that one person is, I’m afraid, Susan.

‘That’s you, I mean, of course, not secretary Susan at the office.

‘So can you, I don’t like to ask you this, I really don’t, can you really get on his case? Make him see how important it is? Just make sure he realises

that WayForward Technologies is meant to be an expanding commercial business, not an adventure playground for crunch-heads. That's the problem with crunch-heads -- they have one great idea that actually works and then they expect you to carry on funding them for years while they sit and calculate the topographies of their navels. I'm sorry, I'm going to have to stop and close the boot properly. Won't be a moment.'

He put the telephone down on the seat beside him, pulled over on to the grass verge, and got out. As he went to the boot, it opened, a figure rose out of it, shot him through the chest with both barrels of a shotgun and then went about its business.

Gordon Way's astonishment at being suddenly shot dead was nothing to his astonishment at what happened next.

CHAPTER 8

‘Come in, dear fellow, come in.’

The door to Reg’s set of rooms in college was up a winding set of wooden stairs in the corner of Second Court, and was not well lit, or rather it was perfectly well lit when the light was working, but the light was not working, so the door was not well lit and was, furthermore, locked. Reg was having difficulty in finding the key from a collection which looked like something that a fit Ninja warrior could hurl through the trunk of a tree.

Rooms in the older parts of the college have double doors, like airlocks, and like airlocks they are fiddly to open. The outer door is a sturdy slab of grey painted oak, with no features other than a very narrow slit for letters, and a Yale lock, to which suddenly Reg at last found the key.

He unlocked it and pulled it open. Behind it lay an ordinary white-panelled door with an ordinary brass doorknob.

‘Come in, come in,’ repeated Reg, opening this and fumbling for the light switch. For a moment only the dying embers of a fire in the stone grate threw ghostly red shadows dancing around the room, but then electric light flooded it and extinguished the magic. Reg hesitated on the threshold for a moment, oddly tense, as if wishing to be sure of something before he entered, then bustled in with at least the appearance of cheeriness.

It was a large panelled room, which a collection of gently shabby furniture contrived to fill quite comfortably. Against the far wall stood a large and battered old mahogany table with fat ugly legs, which was laden with books, files, folders and teetering piles of papers. Standing in its own space on the desk, Richard was amused to note, was actually a battered old abacus.

There was a small Regency writing desk standing nearby which might have been quite valuable had it not been knocked about so much, also a couple of elegant Georgian chairs, a portentous Victorian bookcase, and so

on. It was, in short, a don's room. It had a don's framed maps and prints on the walls a threadbare and faded don's carpet on the floor, and it looked as if little had changed in it for decades, which was probably the case because a don lived in it.

Two doors led out from either end of the opposite wall, and Richard knew from previous visits that one led to a study which looked much like a smaller and more intense version of this room -- larger clumps of books, taller piles of paper in more imminent danger of actually falling, furniture which, however old and valuable, was heavily marked with myriad rings of hot tea or coffee cups, on many of which the original cups themselves were probably still standing.

The other door led to a small and rather basically equipped kitchen, and a twisty internal staircase at the top of which lay the Professor's bedroom and bathroom.

'Try and make yourself comfortable on the sofa,' invited Reg, fussing around hospitably. 'I don't know if you'll manage it. It always feels to me as if it's been stuffed with cabbage leaves and cutlery.' He peered at Richard seriously. 'Do you have a good sofa?' he enquired.

'Well, yes.' Richard laughed. He was cheered by the silliness of the question.

'Oh,' said Reg solemnly. 'Well, I wish you'd tell me where you got it. I have endless trouble with them, quite endless. Never found a comfortable one in all my life. How do you find yours?' He encountered, with a slight air of surprise, a small silver tray he had left out with a decanter of port and three glasses.

'Well, it's odd you should ask that,' said Richard. 'I've never sat on it.'

'Very wise,' insisted Reg earnestly, 'very, very wise.' He went through a palaver similar to his previous one with his coat and hat.

'Not that I wouldn't like to,' said Richard. 'It's just that it's stuck halfway up a long flight of stairs which leads up into my flat. As far as I

can make it out, the delivery men got it part way up the stairs, got it stuck, turned it around any way they could, couldn't get it any further, and then found, curiously enough, that they couldn't get it back down again. Now, that should be impossible.'

'Odd,' agreed Reg. 'I've certainly never come across any irreversible mathematics involving sofas. Could be a new field. Have you spoken to any spatial geometricians?'

'I did better than that. I called in a neighbour's kid who used to be able to solve Rubik's cube in seventeen seconds. He sat on a step and stared at it for over an hour before pronouncing it irrevocably stuck. Admittedly he's a few years older now and has found out about girls, but it's got me puzzled.'

'Carry on talking, my dear fellow, I'm most interested, but let me know first if there's anything I can get you. Port perhaps? Or brandy? The port I think is the better bet, laid down by the college in 1934, one of the finest vintages I think you'll find, and on the other hand I don't actually have any brandy. Or coffee? Some more wine perhaps? There's an excellent Margaux I've been looking for an excuse to open, though it should of course be allowed to stand open for an hour or two, which is not to say that I couldn't... no,' he said hurriedly, 'probably best not to go for the Margaux tonight.'

'Tea is what I would really like,' said Richard, 'if you have some.'

Reg raised his eyebrows. 'Are you sure?'

'I have to drive home.'

'Indeed. Then I shall be a moment or two in the kitchen. Please carry on, I shall still be able to hear you. Continue to tell me of your sofa, and do feel free in the meantime to sit on mine. Has it been stuck there for long?'

'Oh, only about three weeks,' said Richard, sitting down. 'I could just saw it up and throw it away, but I can't believe that there isn't a logical answer. And it also made me think -- it would be really useful to know

before you buy a piece of furniture whether it's actually going to fit up the stairs or around the corner. So I've modelled the problem in three dimensions on my computer -- and so far it just says no way.'

'It says what?' called Reg, over the noise of filling the kettle.

'That it can't be done. I told it to compute the moves necessary to get the sofa out, and it said there aren't any. I said "What?" and it said there aren't any. I then asked it, and this is the really mysterious thing, to compute the moves necessary to get the sofa into its present position in the first place, and it said that it couldn't have got there. Not without fundamental restructuring of the walls. So, either there's something wrong with the fundamental structure of the matter in my walls or,' he added with a sigh, 'there's something wrong with the program. Which would you guess?'

'And are you married?' called Reg.

'What? Oh, I see what you mean. A sofa stuck on the stairs for a month. Well, no, not married as such, but yes, there is a specific girl that I'm not married to.'

'What's she like? What does she do?'

'She's a professional cellist. I have to admit that the sofa has been a bit of a talking point. In fact she's moved back to her own flat until I get it sorted out. She, well...'

He was suddenly sad, and he stood up and wandered around the room in a desultory sort of way and ended up in front of the dying fire. He gave it a bit of a poke and threw on a couple of extra logs to try and ward off the chill of the room.

'She's Gordon's sister, in fact,' he added at last. 'But they are very different. I'm not sure she really approves of computers very much. And she doesn't much like his attitude to money. I don't think I entirely blame her, actually, and she doesn't know the half of it.'

'Which is the half she doesn't know?'

Richard sighed.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s to do with the project which first made the software incarnation of the company profitable. It was called Reason, and in its own way it was sensational.’

‘What was it?’

‘Well, it was a kind of back-to-front program. It’s funny how many of the best ideas are just an old idea back-to-front. You see there have already been several programs written that help you to arrive at decisions by properly ordering and analysing all the relevant facts so that they then point naturally towards the right decision. The drawback with these is that the decision which all the properly ordered and analysed facts point to is not necessarily the one you want.’

‘Yeeees...’ said Reg’s voice from the kitchen.

‘Well, Gordon’s great insight was to design a program which allowed you to specify in advance what decision you wished it to reach, and only then to give it all the facts. The program’s task, which it was able to accomplish with consummate ease, was simply to construct a plausible series of logical-sounding steps to connect the premises with the conclusion.

‘And I have to say that it worked brilliantly. Gordon was able to buy himself a Porsche almost immediately despite being completely broke and a hopeless driver. Even his bank manager was unable to find fault with his reasoning. Even when Gordon wrote it off three weeks later.’

‘Heavens. And did the program sell very well?’

‘No. We never sold a single copy.’

‘You astonish me. It sounds like a real winner to me.’

‘It was,’ said Richard hesitantly. ‘The entire project was bought up, lock, stock and barrel, by the Pentagon. The deal put WayForward on a very sound financial foundation. Its moral foundation, on the other hand, is not

something I would want to trust my weight to. I've recently been analysing a lot of the arguments put forward in favour of the Star Wars project, and if you know what you're looking for, the pattern of the algorithms is very clear.

'So much so, in fact, that looking at Pentagon policies over the last couple of years I think I can be fairly sure that the US Navy is using version 2.00 of the program, while the Air Force for some reason only has the beta-test version of 1.5. Odd, that.'

'Do you have a copy?'

'Certainly not,' said Richard, 'I wouldn't have anything to do with it. Anyway, when the Pentagon bought everything, they bought everything. Every scrap of code, every disk, every notebook. I was glad to see the back of it. If indeed we have. I just busy myself with my own projects.'

He poked at the fire again and wondered what he was doing here when he had so much work on. Gordon was on at him continually about getting the new, super version of Anthem ready for taking advantage of the Macintosh II, and he was well behind with it. And as for the proposed module for converting incoming Dow Jones stock-market information into MIDI data in real time, he'd only meant that as a joke, but Gordon, of course, had flipped over the idea and insisted on its being implemented. That too was meant to be ready but wasn't. He suddenly knew exactly why it was he was here.

Well, it had been a pleasant evening, even if he couldn't see why Reg had been quite so keen to see him. He picked up a couple of books from the table. The table obviously doubled as a dining table, because although the piles looked as if they had been there for weeks, the absence of dust immediately around them showed that they had been moved recently.

Maybe, he thought, the need for amiable chit-chat with someone different can become as urgent as any other need when you live in a community as enclosed as a Cambridge college was, even nowadays. He was a likeable old fellow, but it was clear from dinner that many of his colleagues found his eccentricities formed rather a rich sustained diet -- particularly when

they had so many of their own to contend with. A thought about Susan nagged him, but he was used to that. He flipped through the two books he'd picked up.

One of them, an elderly one, was an account of the hauntings of Borley Rectory, the most haunted house in England. Its spine was getting raggedy, and the photographic plates were so grey and blurry as to be virtually indistinguishable. A picture he thought must be a very lucky (or faked) shot of a ghostly apparition turned out, when he examined the caption, to be a portrait of the author.

The other book was more recent, and by an odd coincidence was a guide to the Greek islands. He thumbed through it idly and a piece of paper fell out.

'Earl Grey or Lapsang Souchong?' called out Reg. 'Or Darjeeling? Or PG Tips? It's all tea bags anyway, I'm afraid. And none of them very fresh.'

'Darjeeling will do fine,' replied Richard, stooping to pick up the piece of paper.

'Milk?' called Reg.

'Er, please.'

'One lump or two?'

'One, please.'

Richard slipped the paper back into the book, noticing as he did so that it had a hurriedly scribbled note on it. The note said, oddly enough, 'Regard this simple silver salt cellar. Regard this simple hat.'

'Sugar?'

'Er, what?' said Richard, startled. He put the book hurriedly back on the pile.

‘Just a tiny joke of mine,’ said Reg cheerily, ‘to see if people are listening.’ He emerged beaming from the kitchen carrying a small tray with two cups on it, which he hurled suddenly to the floor. The tea splashed over the carpet. One of the cups shattered and the other bounced under the table. Reg leaned against the door frame, white-faced and staring.

A frozen instant of time slid silently by while Richard was too startled to react, then he leaped awkwardly forward to help. But the old man was already apologising and offering to make him another cup. Richard helped him to the sofa.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Richard helplessly. ‘Shall I get a doctor?’

Reg waved him down. ‘It’s all right,’ he insisted, ‘I’m perfectly well. Thought I heard, well, a noise that startled me. But it was nothing. Just overcome with the tea fumes, I expect. Let me just catch my breath. I think a little, er, port will revive me excellently. So sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’ He waved in the general direction of the port decanter. Richard hurriedly poured a small glass and gave it to him.

‘What kind of noise?’ he asked, wondering what on earth could shock him so much.

At that moment came the sound of movement upstairs and an extraordinary kind of heavy breathing noise.

‘That...’ whispered Reg. The glass of port lay shattered at his feet. Upstairs someone seemed to be stamping. ‘Did you hear it?’

‘Well, yes.’

This seemed to relieve the old man.

Richard looked nervously up at the ceiling. ‘Is there someone up there?’ he asked, feeling this was a lame question, but one that had to be asked.

‘No,’ said Reg in a low voice that shocked Richard with the fear it carried, ‘no one. Nobody that should be there.’

‘Then...’

Reg was struggling shakily to his feet, but there was suddenly a fierce determination about him.

‘I must go up there,’ he said quietly. ‘I must. Please wait for me here.’

‘Look, what is this?’ demanded Richard, standing between Reg and the doorway. ‘What is it, a burglar? Look, I’ll go. I’m sure it’s nothing, it’s just the wind or something.’ Richard didn’t know why he was saying this. It clearly wasn’t the wind, or even anything like the wind, because though the wind might conceivably make heavy breathing noises, it rarely stamped its feet in that way.

‘No,’ the old man said, politely but firmly moving him aside, ‘it is for me to do.’

Richard followed him helplessly through the door into the small hallway, beyond which lay the tiny kitchen. A dark wooden staircase led up from here; the steps seemed damaged and scuffed.

Reg turned on a light. It was a dim one that hung naked at the top of the stairwell, and he looked up it with grim apprehension.

‘Wait here,’ he said, and walked up two steps. He then turned and faced Richard with a look of the most profound seriousness on his face.

‘I am sorry,’ he said, ‘that you have become involved in what is... the more difficult side of my life. But you are involved now, regrettable though that may be, and there is something I must ask you. I do not know what awaits me up there, do not know exactly. I do not know if it is something which I have foolishly brought upon myself with my... my hobbies, or if it is something to which I have fallen an innocent victim. If it is the former, then I have only myself to blame, for I am like a doctor who cannot give up smoking, or perhaps worse still, like an ecologist who cannot give up his car -- if the latter, then I hope it may not happen to you.’

‘What I must ask you is this. When I come back down these stairs, always supposing of course that I do, then if my behaviour strikes you as being in any way odd, if I appear not to be myself, then you must leap on me and wrestle me to the ground. Do you understand? You must prevent me from doing anything I may try to do.’

‘But how will I know?’ asked an incredulous Richard. ‘Sorry I don’t mean it to sound like that, but I don’t know what...?’

‘You will know,’ said Reg. ‘Now please wait for me in the main room. And close the door.’

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Richard stepped back and did as he was asked. From inside the large untidy room he listened to the sound of the Professor’s tread mounting the stairs one at a time.

He mounted them with a heavy deliberation, like the ticking of a great, slow clock.

Richard heard him reach the top landing. There he paused in silence. Seconds went by, five, maybe ten, maybe twenty. Then came again the heavy movement and breath that had first so harrowed the Professor.

Richard moved quickly to the door but did not open it. The chill of the room oppressed and disturbed him. He shook his head to try and shake off the feeling, and then held his breath as the footsteps started once again slowly to traverse the two yards of the landing and to pause there again.

After only a few seconds, this time Richard heard the long slow squeak of a door being opened inch by inch, inch by cautious inch, until it must surely now at last be standing wide agape.

Nothing further seemed to happen for a long, long time.

Then at last the door closed once again, slowly.

The footsteps crossed the landing and paused again. Richard backed a few slight paces from the door, staring fixedly at it. Once more the

footsteps started to descend the stairs, slowly, deliberately and quietly, until at last they reached the bottom. Then after a few seconds more the door handle began to rotate. The door opened and Reg walked calmly in.

‘It’s all right, it’s just a horse in the bathroom,’ he said quietly.

Richard leaped on him and wrestled him to the ground.

‘No,’ gasped Reg, ‘no, get off me, let me go, I’m perfectly all right, damn it. It’s just a horse, a perfectly ordinary horse.’ He shook Richard off with no great difficulty and sat up, puffing and blowing and pushing his hands through his limited hair. Richard stood over him warily, but with great and mounting embarrassment. He edged back, and let Reg stand up and sit on a chair.

‘Just a horse,’ said Reg, ‘but, er, thank you for taking me at my word.’ He brushed himself down.

‘A horse,’ repeated Richard.

‘Yes,’ said Reg.

Richard went out and looked up the stairs and then came back in.

‘A horse?’ he said again.

‘Yes, it is,’ said the Professor. ‘Wait --’ he motioned to Richard, who was about to go out again and investigate -- ‘let it be. It won’t be long.’

Richard stared in disbelief. ‘You say there’s a horse in your bathroom, and all you can do is stand there naming Beatles songs?’

The Professor looked blankly at him.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry if I... alarmed you earlier, it was just a slight turn. These things happen, my dear fellow, don’t upset yourself about it. Dear me, I’ve known odder things in my time. Many of them. Far odder. She’s only a horse, for heaven’s sake. I’ll go and let her out later. Please don’t concern yourself. Let us revive our spirits with some port.’

‘But... how did it get in there?’

‘Well, the bathroom window’s open. I expect she came in through that.’

Richard looked at him, not for the first and certainly not for the last time, through eyes that were narrowed with suspicion.

‘You’re doing it deliberately, aren’t you?’ he said.

‘Doing what, my dear fellow?’

‘I don’t believe there’s a horse in your bathroom,’ said Richard suddenly. ‘I don’t know what is there, I don’t know what you’re doing, I don’t know what any of this evening means, but I don’t believe there’s a horse in your bathroom.’ And brushing aside Reg’s further protestations he went up to look.

The bathroom was not large.

The walls were panelled in old oak linenfold which, given the age and nature of the building, was quite probably priceless, but otherwise the fittings were stark and institutional.

There was old, scuffed, black-and-white checked linoleum on the floor, a small basic bath, well cleaned but with very elderly stains and chips in the enamel, and also a small basic basin with a toothbrush and toothpaste in a Duralex beaker standing next to the taps. Screwed into the probably priceless panelling above the basin was a tin mirror-fronted bathroom cabinet. It looked as if it had been repainted many times, and the mirror was stained round the edges with condensation. The lavatory had an old-fashioned cast-iron chain-pull cistern. There was an old cream-painted wooden cupboard standing in the corner, with an old brown bentwood chair next to it, on which lay some neatly folded but threadbare small towels. There was also a large horse in the room, taking up most of it.

Richard stared at it, and it stared at Richard in an appraising kind of way. Richard swayed slightly. The horse stood quite still. After a while it

looked at the cupboard instead. It seemed, if not content, then at least perfectly resigned to being where it was until it was put somewhere else. It also seemed... what was it?

It was bathed in the glow of the moonlight that streamed in through the window. The window was open but small and was, besides, on the second floor, so the notion that the horse had entered by that route was entirely fanciful.

There was something odd about the horse, but he couldn't say what. Well, there was one thing that was clearly very odd about it indeed, which was that it was standing in a college bathroom. Maybe that was all.

He reached out, rather tentatively, to pat the creature on its neck. It felt normal -- firm, glossy, it was in good condition. The effect of the moonlight on its coat was a little mazy, but everything looks a little odd by moonlight. The horse shook its mane a little when he touched it, but didn't seem to mind too much.

After the success of patting it, Richard stroked it a few times and scratched it gently under the jaw. Then he noticed that there was another door into the bathroom, in the far corner. He moved cautiously around the horse and approached the other door. He backed up against it and pushed it open tentatively.

It just opened into the Professor's bedroom, a small room cluttered with books and shoes and a small single bed. This room, too, had another door, which opened out on to the landing again.

Richard noticed that the floor of the landing was newly scuffed and scratched as the stairs had been, and these marks were consistent with the idea that the horse had somehow been pushed up the stairs. He wouldn't have liked to have had to do it himself, and he would have liked to have been the horse having it done to him even less, but it was just about possible.

But why? He had one last look at the horse, which had one last look back at him, and then he returned downstairs.

‘I agree,’ he said. ‘You have a horse in your bathroom and I will, after all, have a little port.’

He poured some for himself, and then some for Reg, who was quietly contemplating the fire and was in need of a refill.

‘Just as well I did put out three glasses after all,’ said Reg chattily. ‘I wondered why earlier, and now I remember.’

‘You asked if you could bring a friend, but appear not to have done so. On account of the sofa no doubt. Never mind, these things happen. Whoa, not too much, you’ll spill it.’

All horse-related questions left Richard’s mind abruptly.

‘I did?’ he said.

‘Oh yes. I remember now. You rang me back to ask me if it would be all right, as I recall. I said I would be charmed, and fully intended to be. I’d saw the thing up if I were you. Don’t want to sacrifice your happiness to a sofa. Or maybe she decided that an evening with your old tutor would be blisteringly dull and opted for the more exhilarating course of washing her hair instead. Dear me, I know what I would have done. It’s only lack of hair that forces me to pursue such a hectic social round these days.’

It was Richard’s turn to be white-faced and staring.

Yes, he had assumed that Susan would not want to come.

Yes, he had said to her it would be terribly dull. But she had insisted that she wanted to come because it would be the only way she’d get to see his face for a few minutes not bathed in the light of a computer screen, so he had agreed and arranged that he would bring her after all.

Only he had completely forgotten this. He had not picked her up.

He said, ‘Can I use your phone, please?’

CHAPTER 9

Gordon Way lay on the ground, unclear about what to do.

He was dead. There seemed little doubt about that. There was a horrific hole in his chest, but the blood that was gobbing out of it had slowed to a trickle. Otherwise there was no movement from his chest at all, or, indeed, from any other part of him.

He looked up, and from side to side, and it became clear to him that whatever part of him it was that was moving, it wasn't any part of his body.

The mist rolled slowly over him, and explained nothing. At a few feet distant from him his shotgun lay smoking quietly in the grass.

He continued to lie there, like someone lying awake at four o'clock in the morning, unable to put their mind to rest, but unable to find anything to do with it. He realised that he had just had something of a shock, which might account for his inability to think clearly, but didn't account for his ability actually to think at all.

In the great debate that has raged for centuries about what, if anything, happens to you after death, be it heaven, hell, purgatory or extinction, one thing has never been in doubt -- that you would at least know the answer when you were dead.

Gordon Way was dead, but he simply hadn't the slightest idea what he was meant to do about it. It wasn't a situation he had encountered before.

He sat up. The body that sat up seemed as real to him as the body that still lay slowly cooling on the ground, giving up its blood heat in wraiths of steam that mingled with the mist of the chill night air

Experimenting a bit further, he tried standing up, slowly, wonderingly and wobblingly. The ground seemed to give him support, it took his weight. But then of course he appeared to have no weight that needed to be taken.

When he bent to touch the ground he could feel nothing save a kind of distant rubbery resistance like the sensation you get if you try and pick something up when your arm has gone dead. His arm had gone dead. His legs too, and his other arm, and all his torso and his head.

His body was dead. He could not say why his mind was not.

He stood in a kind of frozen, sleepless horror while the mist curled slowly through him.

He looked back down at the him, the ghastly, astonished-looking him-thing lying still and mangled on the ground, and his flesh wanted to creep. Or rather, he wanted flesh that could creep. He wanted flesh. He wanted body. He had none.

A sudden cry of horror escaped from his mouth but was nothing and went nowhere. He shook and felt nothing.

Music and a pool of light seeped from his car. He walked towards it. He tried to walk sturdily, but it was a faint and feeble kind of walking, uncertain and, well, insubstantial. The ground felt frail beneath his feet.

The door of the car was still open on the driver's side, as he had left it when he had leaped out to deal with the boot lid, thinking he'd only be two seconds.

That was all of two minutes ago now, when he'd been alive. When he'd been a person. When he'd thought he was going to be leaping straight back in and driving off. Two minutes and a lifetime ago.

This was insane, wasn't it? he thought suddenly.

He walked around the door and bent down to peer into the external rear-view mirror.

He looked exactly like himself, albeit like himself after he'd had a terrible fright, which was to be expected, but that was him, that was normal. This

must be something he was imagining, some horrible kind of waking dream. He had a sudden thought and tried breathing on the rear-view mirror.

Nothing. Not a single droplet formed. That would satisfy a doctor, that's what they always did on television -- if no mist formed on the mirror, there was no breath. Perhaps, he thought anxiously to himself, perhaps it was something to do with having heated wing mirrors. Didn't this car have heated wing mirrors? Hadn't the salesman gone on and on about heated this, electric that, and servo-assisted the other? Maybe they were digital wing mirrors. That was it. Digital, heated, servo-assisted, computer-controlled, breath-resistant wing mirrors...

He was, he realised, thinking complete nonsense. He turned slowly and gazed again in apprehension at the body lying on the ground behind him with half its chest blown away. That would certainly satisfy a doctor. The sight would be appalling enough if it was somebody else's body, but his own...

He was dead. Dead... dead... He tried to make the word toll dramatically in his mind, but it wouldn't. He was not a film sound track, he was just dead.

Peering at his body in appalled fascination, he gradually became distressed by the expression of asinine stupidity on its face.

It was perfectly understandable, of course. It was just such an expression as somebody who is in the middle of being shot with his own shotgun by somebody who had been hiding in the boot of his car might be expected to wear, but he nevertheless disliked the idea that anyone might find him looking like that.

He knelt down beside it in the hope of being able to rearrange his features into some semblance of dignity, or at least basic intelligence.

It proved to be almost impossibly difficult. He tried to knead the skin, the sickeningly familiar skin, but somehow he couldn't seem to get a proper grip on it, or on anything. It was like trying to model plasticine when your arm has gone to sleep, except that instead of his grip slipping off the model, it would slip through it. In this case, his hand slipped through his face.

Nauseated horror and rage swept through him at his sheer bloody blasted impotence, and he was suddenly startled to find himself throttling and shaking his own dead body with a firm and furious grip. He staggered back in amazed shock. All he had managed to do was to add to the inanely stupefied look of the corpse a twisted-up mouth and a squint. And bruises flowering on its neck.

He started to sob, and this time sound seemed to come, a strange howling from deep within whatever this thing he had become was. Clutching his hands to his face, he staggered backwards, retreated to his car and flung himself into the seat. The seat received him in a loose and distant kind of way, like an aunt who disapproves of the last fifteen years of your life and will therefore furnish you with a basic sherry, but refuses to catch your eye.

Could he get himself to a doctor?

To avoid facing the absurdity of the idea he grappled violently with the steering wheel, but his hands slipped through it. He tried to wrestle with the automatic transmission shift and ended up thumping it in rage, but not being able properly to grasp or push it.

The stereo was still playing light orchestral music into the telephone, which had been lying on the passenger seat listening patiently all this time. He stared at it and realised with a growing fever of excitement that he was still connected to Susan's telephone-answering machine. It was the type that would simply run and run until he hung up. He was still in contact with the world.

He tried desperately to pick up the receiver, fumbled, let it slip, and was in the end reduced to bending himself down over its mouthpiece. 'Susan!' he cried into it, his voice a hoarse and distant wail on the wind. 'Susan, help me! Help me for God's sake. Susan, I'm dead... I'm dead... I'm dead and... I don't know what to do...' He broke down again, sobbing in desperation, and tried to cling to the phone like a baby clinging to its blanket for comfort.

'Help me, Susan...' he cried again.

'Beep,' said the phone.

He looked down at it again where he was cuddling it. He had managed to push something after all. He had managed to push the button which disconnected the call. Feverishly he attempted to grapple the thing again, but it constantly slipped through his fingers and eventually lay immobile on the seat. He could not touch it. He could not push the buttons. In rage he flung it at the windscreen. It responded to that, all right. It hit the windscreen, careered straight back through him, bounced off the seat and then lay still on the transmission tunnel, impervious to all his further attempts to touch it.

For several minutes still he sat there, his head nodding slowly as terror began to recede into blank desolation.

A couple of cars passed by, but would have noticed nothing odd -- a car stopped by the wayside. Passing swiftly in the night their headlights would probably not have picked out the body lying in the grass behind the car. They certainly would not have noticed a ghost sitting inside it crying to himself.

He didn't know how long he sat there. He was hardly aware of time passing, only that it didn't seem to pass quickly. There was little external stimulus to mark its passage. He didn't feel cold. In fact he could almost not remember what cold meant or felt like, he just knew that it was something he would have expected to feel at this moment.

Eventually he stirred from his pathetic huddle. He would have to do something, though he didn't know what. Perhaps he should try and reach his cottage, though he didn't know what he would do when he got there. He just needed something to try for. He needed to make it through the night.

Pulling himself together he slipped out of the car, his foot and knee grazing easily through part of the door frame. He went to look again at his body, but it wasn't there.

As if the night hadn't produced enough shocks already. He started, and stared at the damp depression in the grass.

His body was not there.

CHAPTER 10

Richard made the hastiest departure that politeness would allow.

He said thank you very much and what a splendid evening it had been and that any time Reg was coming up to London he must let him, Richard, know and was there anything he could do to help about the horse. No? Well, all right then, if you're sure, and thank you again, so much.

He stood there for a moment or two after the door finally closed, pondering things.

He had noticed during the short time that the light from Reg's room flooded out on to the landing of the main staircase, that there were no marks on the floorboards there at all. It seemed odd that the horse should only have scuffed the floorboards inside Reg's room.

Well, it all seemed very odd, full stop, but here was yet another curious fact to add to the growing pile. This was supposed to have been a relaxing evening away from work.

On an impulse he knocked on the door opposite to Reg's. It took such a long time to be answered that Richard had given up and was turning to go when at last he heard the door creak open.

He had a slight shock when he saw that staring sharply up at him like a small and suspicious bird was the don with the racing-yacht keel for a nose.

'Er, sorry,' said Richard, abruptly, 'but, er, have you seen or heard a horse coming up this staircase tonight?'

The man stopped his obsessive twitching of his fingers. He cocked his head slightly on one side and then seemed to need to go on a long journey inside himself to find a voice, which when found turned out to be a thin and soft little one.

He said, 'That is the first thing anybody has said to me for seventeen years, three months and two days, five hours, nineteen minutes and twenty seconds. I've been counting.'

He closed the door softly again.

Richard virtually ran through Second Court.

When he reached First Court he steadied himself and slowed down to a walking pace.

The chill night air was rasping in his lungs and there was no point in running. He hadn't managed to talk to Susan because Reg's phone wasn't working, and this was another thing that he had been mysteriously coy about. That at least was susceptible of a rational explanation. He probably hadn't paid his phone bill.

Richard was about to emerge out on to the street when instead he decided to pay a quick visit to the porter's lodge, which was tucked away inside the great archway entrance into the college. It was a small hutchlike place filled with keys, messages and a single electric bar heater. A radio nattered to itself in the background.

'Excuse me,' he said to the large black-suited man standing behind the counter with his arms folded. 'I...'

'Yes, Mr MacDuff, what can I do for you?'

In his present state of mind Richard would have been hard-pressed himself to remember his own name and was startled for a moment. However, college porters are legendary for their ability to perform such feats of memory, and for their tendency to show them off at the slightest provocation.

'Is there,' said Richard, 'a horse anywhere in the college -- that you know of? I mean, you would know if there was a horse in the college, wouldn't you?'

The porter didn't blink.

'No, sir, and yes, sir. Anything else I can help you with, Mr MacDuff, sir?'

'Er, no,' said Richard and tapped his fingers a couple of times on the counter. 'No. Thank you. Thank you very much for your help. Nice to see you again, er... Bob,' he hazarded. 'Good-night, then.'

He left.

The porter remained perfectly still with his arms folded, but shaking his head a very, very little bit.

'Here's some coffee for you, Bill,' said another porter, a short wiry one, emerging from an inner sanctum with a steaming cup. 'Getting a bit colder tonight?'

'I think it is, Fred, thanks,' said Bill, taking the cup.

He took a sip. 'You can say what you like about people, they don't get any less peculiar. Fellow in here just now asking if there was a horse in the college.'

'Oh yes?' Fred sipped at his own coffee, and let the steam smart his eyes. 'I had a chap in here earlier. Sort of strange foreign priest. Couldn't understand a word he said at first. But he seemed happy just to stand by the fire and listen to the news on the radio.'

'Foreigners, eh.'

'In the end I told him to shoot off. Standing in front of my fire like that. Suddenly he says is that really what he must do? Shoot off? I said, in my best Bogart voice, "You better believe it, buddy."'

'Really? Sounded more like Jimmy Cagney to me.'

'No, that's my Bogart voice. This is my Jimmy Cagney voice -- "You better believe it, buddy."'

Bill frowned at him. 'Is that your Jimmy Cagney voice? I always thought that was your Kenneth McKellar voice.'

'You don't listen properly, Bill, you haven't got the ear. This is Kenneth McKellar. "Oh, you take the high road and I'll take the low road..."'

'Oh, I see. I was thinking of the Scottish Kenneth McKellar. So what did this priest fellow say then, Fred?'

'Oh, he just looked me straight in the eyes, Bill, and said in this strange sort of...'

'Skip the accent, Fred, just tell me what he said, if it's worth hearing.'

'He just said he did believe me.'

'So. Not a very interesting story then, Fred.'

'Well, maybe not. I only mention it because he also said that he'd left his horse in a washroom and would I see that it was all right.'

CHAPTER 11

Gordon Way drifted miserably along the dark road, or rather, tried to drift.

He felt that as a ghost -- which is what he had to admit to himself he had become -- he should be able to drift. He knew little enough about ghosts, but he felt that if you were going to be one then there ought to be certain compensations for not having a physical body to lug around, and that among them ought to be the ability simply to drift. But no, it seemed he was going to have to walk every step of the way.

His aim was to try and make it to his house. He didn't know what he would do when he got there, but even ghosts have to spend the night somewhere, and he felt that being in familiar surroundings might help. Help what, he didn't know. At least the journey gave him an objective, and he would just have to think of another one when he arrived.

He trudged despondently from lamppost to lamppost, stopping at each one to look at bits of himself.

He was definitely getting a bit wraithlike.

At times he would fade almost to nothing, and would seem to be little more than a shadow playing in the mist, a dream of himself that could just evaporate and be gone. At other times he seemed to be almost solid and real again. Once or twice he would try leaning against a lamppost, and would fall straight through it if he wasn't careful.

At last, and with great reluctance, he actually began to turn his mind to what it was that had happened. Odd, that reluctance. He really didn't want to think about it. Psychologists say that the mind will often try to suppress the memory of traumatic events, and this, he thought, was probably the answer. After all, if having a strange figure jump out of the boot of your own car and shoot you dead didn't count as a traumatic experience, he'd like to know what did.

He trudged on wearily.

He tried to recall the figure to his mind's eye, but it was like probing a hurting tooth, and he thought of other things.

Like, was his will up-to-date? He couldn't remember, and made a mental note to call his lawyer tomorrow, and then made another mental note that he would have to stop making mental notes like that.

How would his company survive without him? He didn't like either of the possible answers to that very much.

What about his obituary? There was a thought that chilled him to his bones, wherever they'd got to. Would he be able to get hold of a copy? What would it say? They'd better give him a good write-up, the bastards. Look at what he'd done. Single-handedly saved the British software industry: huge exports, charitable contributions, research scholarships, crossing the Atlantic in a solar-powered submarine (failed, but a good try) -- all sorts of things. They'd better not go digging up that Pentagon stuff again or he'd get his lawyer on to them. He made a mental note to call him in the mor...

No.

Anyway, can a dead person sue for libel? Only his lawyer would know, and he was not going to be able to call him in the morning. He knew with a sense of creeping dread that of all the things he had left behind in the land of the living it was the telephone that he was going to miss the most, and then he turned his mind determinedly back to where it didn't want to go.

The figure.

It seemed to him that the figure had been almost like a figure of Death itself; or was that his imagination playing tricks with him? Was he dreaming that it was a cowled figure? What would any figure, whether cowled or just casually dressed, be doing in the boot of his car?

At that moment a car zipped past him on the road and disappeared off into the night, taking its oasis of light with it. He thought with longing of the

warm, leather-upholstered, climate-controlled comfort of his own car abandoned on the road behind him, and then a sudden extraordinary thought struck him.

Was there any way he could hitch a lift? Could anyone actually see him? How would anyone react if they could? Well, there was only one way to find out.

He heard another car coming up in the distance behind him and turned to face it. The twin pools of hazy lights approached through the mist and Gordon gritted his phantom teeth and stuck his thumb out at them.

The car swept by regardless.

Nothing.

Angrily he made an indistinct V sign at the receding red rear lights, and realised, looking straight through his own upraised arm, that he wasn't at his most visible at the moment. Was there perhaps some effort of will he could make to render himself more visible when he wanted to? He screwed up his eyes in concentration, then realised that he would need to have his eyes open in order to judge the results. He tried again, forcing his mind as hard as he could, but the results were unsatisfactory.

Though it did seem to make some kind of rudimentary, glowing difference, he couldn't sustain it, and it faded almost immediately, however much he piled on the mental pressure. He would have to judge the timing very carefully if he was going to make his presence felt, or at least seen.

Another car approached from behind, travelling fast. He turned again, stuck his thumb out, waited till the moment was right and willed himself visible.

The car swerved slightly, and then carried on its way, only a little more slowly. Well, that was something. What else could he do? He would go and stand under a lamppost for a start, and he would practise. The next car he would get for sure.

CHAPTER 12

‘...so if you’d like to leave a message, I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Maybe.’

Beep.

‘Shit. Damn. Hold on a minute. Blast. Look... er...’

Click.

Richard pushed the phone back into its cradle and slammed his car into reverse for twenty yards to have another look at the sign-post by the road junction he’d just sped past in the mist. He had extracted himself from the Cambridge one-way system by the usual method, which involved going round and round it faster and faster until he achieved a sort of escape velocity and flew off at a tangent in a random direction, which he was now trying to identify and correct for.

Arriving back at the junction he tried to correlate the information on the signpost with the information on the map. But it couldn’t be done. The road junction was quite deliberately sitting on a page divide on the map, and the signpost was revolving maliciously in the wind. Instinct told him that he was heading in the wrong direction, but he didn’t want to go back the way he’d come for fear of getting sucked back into the gravitational whirlpool of Cambridge’s traffic system.

He turned left, therefore, in the hope of finding better fortune in that direction, but after a while lost his nerve and turned a speculative right, and then chanced another exploratory left and after a few more such manoeuvres was thoroughly lost.

He swore to himself and turned up the heating in the car. If he had been concentrating on where he was going rather than trying to navigate and telephone at the same time, he told himself, he would at least know where he was now. He didn’t actually like having a telephone in his car, he found

it a bother and an intrusion. But Gordon had insisted and indeed had paid for it.

He sighed in exasperation, backed up the black Saab and turned around again. As he did so he nearly ran into someone lugging a body into a field. At least that was what it looked like for a second to his overwrought brain, but in fact it was probably a local farmer with a sackful of something nutritious, though what he was doing with it on a night like this was anyone's guess. As his headlights swung around again, they caught for a moment a silhouette of the figure trudging off across the field with the sack on his back.

'Rather him than me,' thought Richard grimly, and drove off again.

After a few minutes he reached a junction with what looked a little more like a main road, nearly turned right down it, but then turned left instead. There was no signpost.

He poked at the buttons on his phone again.

'...get back to you as soon as possible. Maybe.'

Beep.

'Susan, it's Richard. Where do I start? What a mess. Look I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. I screwed up very badly, and it's all my fault. And look, whatever it takes to make up for it, I'll do it, solemn promise...'

He had a slight feeling that this wasn't the right tone to adopt with an answering machine, but he carried straight on.

'Honestly, we can go away, take a holiday for a week, or even just this weekend if you like. Really, this weekend. We'll go somewhere sunny. Doesn't matter how much pressure Gordon tries to put on me, and you know the sort of pressure he can muster, he is your brother, after all. I'll just... er, actually, it might have to be next weekend. Damn, damn, damn. It's just that I really have promised to get, no, look, it doesn't matter. We'll just do it. I don't care about getting Anthem finished for Comdex. It's not

the end of the world. We'll just go. Gordon will just have to take a running jump -- Gaaarghhhh!

Richard swerved wildly to avoid the spectre of Gordon Way which suddenly loomed in his headlights and took a running jump at him.

He slammed on the brakes, started to skid, tried to remember what it was you were supposed to do when you found yourself skidding, he knew he'd seen it on some television programme about driving he'd seen ages ago, what was the programme? God, he couldn't even remember the title of the programme, let alone -- oh yes, they'd said you mustn't slam on the brakes. That was it. The world swung sickeningly around him with slow and appalling force as the car slewed across the road, spun, thudded against the grass verge, then slithered and rocked itself to a halt, facing the wrong way. He collapsed, panting, against the steering wheel.

He picked up the phone from where he'd dropped it.

'Susan,' he gasped, 'I'll get back to you,' and hung up.

He raised his eyes.

Standing full in the glare of his headlights was the spectral figure of Gordon Way staring straight in through the windscreen with ghastly horror in its eyes, slowly raising its hand and pointing at him.

He wasn't sure how long he just sat there. The apparition had melted from view in a few seconds, but Richard simply sat, shaking, probably for not more than a minute, until a sudden squeal of brakes and glare of lights roused him.

He shook his head. He was, he realised, stopped in the road facing the wrong way. The car that had just screeched to an abrupt halt almost bumper to bumper with him was a police car. He took two or three deep breaths and then, stiff and trembling, he climbed out and stood up to face the officer who was walking slowly towards him, silhouetted in the police car's headlights.

The officer looked him up and down.

‘Er, I’m sorry, officer,’ said Richard, with as much calmness as he could wrench into his voice. ‘I, er, skidded. The roads are slippery and I, er... skidded. I spun round. As you see, I, I’m facing the wrong way.’ He gestured at his car to indicate the way it was facing.

‘Like to tell me why it was you skidded then, exactly, sir?’ The police officer was looking him straight in the eye while pulling out a notebook.

‘Well, as I said,’ explained Richard, ‘the roads are slippery because of the mist, and, well, to be perfectly honest,’ he suddenly found himself saying, in spite of all his attempts to stop himself, ‘I was just driving along and I suddenly imagined that I saw my employer throwing himself in front of my car.’

The officer gazed at him levelly.

‘Guilt complex, officer,’ added Richard with a twitch of a smile, ‘you know how it is. I was contemplating taking the weekend off.’

The police officer seemed to hesitate, balanced on a knife edge between sympathy and suspicion. His eyes narrowed a little but didn’t waver.

‘Been drinking, sir?’

‘Yes,’ said Richard, with a quick sigh, ‘but very little. Two glasses of wine max. Er... and a small glass of port. Absolute max. It was really just a lapse of concentration. I’m fine now.’

‘Name?’

Richard gave him his name and address. The policeman wrote it all down carefully and neatly in his book, then peered at the car registration number and wrote that down too.

‘And who is your employer then, sir?’

‘His name is Way. Gordon Way.’

‘Oh,’ said the policeman raising his eyebrows, ‘the computer gentleman.’

‘Er, yes, that’s right. I design software for the company. WayForward Technologies II.’

‘We’ve got one of your computers down the station,’ said the policeman. ‘Bugged if I can get it to work.’

‘Oh,’ said Richard wearily, ‘which model do you have?’

‘I think it’s called a Quark II.’

‘Oh, well that’s simple,’ said Richard with relief. ‘It doesn’t work. Never has done. The thing is a heap of shit.’

‘Funny thing, sir, that’s what I’ve always said,’ said the policeman. ‘Some of the other lads don’t agree.’

‘Well, you’re absolutely right, officer. The thing is hopeless. It’s the major reason the original company went bust. I suggest you use it as a big paperweight.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t like to do that, sir,’ the policeman persisted. ‘The door would keep blowing open.’

‘What do you mean, officer?’ asked Richard.

‘I use it to keep the door closed, sir. Nasty draughts down our station this time of year. In the summer, of course, we beat suspects round the head with it.’

He flipped his book closed and prodded it into his pocket.

‘My advice to you, sir, is to go nice and easy on the way back. Lock up the car and spend the weekend getting completely pissed. I find it’s the only way. Mind how you go now.’

He returned to his car, wound down the window, and watched Richard manoeuvre his car around and drive off into the night before heading off

himself.

Richard took a deep breath, drove calmly back to London, let himself calmly into his flat, clambered calmly over the sofa, sat down, poured himself a stiff brandy and began seriously to shake.

There were three things he was shaking about.

There was the simple physical shock of his near-accident, which is the sort of thing that always churns you up a lot more than you expect. The body floods itself with adrenaline, which then hangs around your system turning sour.

Then there was the cause of the skid -- the extraordinary apparition of Gordon throwing himself in front of his car at that moment. Boy oh boy. Richard took a mouthful of brandy and gargled with it. He put the glass down.

It was well known that Gordon was one of the world's richest natural resources of guilt pressure, and that he could deliver a ton on your doorstep fresh every morning, but Richard hadn't realised he had let it get to him to such an unholy degree.

He took up his glass again, went upstairs and pushed open the door to his workroom, which involved shifting a stack of BYTE magazines that had toppled against it. He pushed them away with his foot and walked to the end of the large room. A lot of glass at this end let in views over a large part of north London, from which the mist was now clearing. St Paul's glowed in the dark distance and he stared at it for a moment or two but it didn't do anything special. After the events of the evening he found this came as a pleasant surprise.

At the other end of the room were a couple of long tables smothered in, at the last count, six Macintosh computers. In the middle was the Mac II on which a red wire-frame model of his sofa was lazily revolving within a blue wire-frame model of his narrow staircase, complete with banister rail, radiator and fuse-box details, and of course the awkward turn halfway up.

The sofa would start out spinning in one direction, hit an obstruction, twist itself in another plane, hit another obstruction, revolve round a third axis until it was stopped again, then cycle through the moves again in a different order. You didn't have to watch the sequence for very long before you saw it repeat itself.

The sofa was clearly stuck.

Three other Macs were connected up via long tangles of cable to an untidy agglomeration of synthesisers -- an Emulator II+ HD sampler, a rack of TX modules, a Prophet VS, a Roland JX 10, a Korg DW8000, an Octapad, a left-handed Synth-Axe MIDI guitar controller, and even an old drum machine stacked up and gathering dust in the corner -- pretty much the works. There was also a small and rarely used cassette tape recorder: all the music was stored in sequencer files on the computers rather than on tape.

He dumped himself into a seat in front of one of the Macs to see what, if anything, it was doing. It was displaying an 'Untitled' Excel spreadsheet and he wondered why.

He saved it and looked to see if he'd left himself any notes and quickly discovered that the spreadsheet contained some of the data he had previously downloaded after searching the /World Reporter and Knowledge on-line databases for facts about swallows.

He now had figures which detailed their migratory habits, their wing shapes, their aerodynamic profile and turbulence characteristics, and some sort of rudimentary figures concerning the patterns that a flock would adopt in flight, but as yet he had only the faintest idea as to how he was going to synthesise them all together.

Because he was too tired to think particularly constructively tonight he savagely selected and copied a whole swathe of figures from the spreadsheet at random, pasted them into his own conversion program, which scaled and filtered and manipulated the figures according to his own experimental algorithms, loaded the converted file into Performer, a

powerful sequencer program, and played the result through random MIDI channels to whichever synthesisers happened to be on at the moment.

The result was a short burst of the most hideous cacophony, and he stopped it.

He ran the conversion program again, this time instructing it to force-map the pitch values into G minor. This was a utility he was determined in the end to get rid of because he regarded it as cheating. If there was any basis to his firmly held belief that the rhythms and harmonies of music which he found most satisfying could be found in, or at least derived from, the rhythms and harmonies of naturally occurring phenomena, then satisfying forms of modality and intonation should emerge naturally as well, rather than being forced.

For the moment, though, he forced it.

The result was a short burst of the most hideous cacophony in G minor.

So much for random shortcuts.

The first task was a relatively simple one, which would be simply to plot the waveform described by the tip of a swallow's wing as it flies, then synthesise that waveform. That way he would end up with a single note, which would be a good start, and it shouldn't take more than the weekend to do.

Except, of course, that he didn't have a weekend available to do it in because he had somehow to get Version 2 of Anthem out of the door sometime during the course of the next year, or 'month' as Gordon called it.

Which brought Richard inexorably to the third thing he was shaking about.

There was absolutely no way that he could take the time off this weekend or next to fulfil the promise he had made to Susan's telephone-answering machine. And that, if this evening's débacle had not already done so, would surely spell the final end.

But that was it. The thing was done. There is nothing you can do about a message on someone else's answering machine other than let events take their course. It was done. It was irrevocable.

An odd thought suddenly struck him.

It took him by considerable surprise, but he couldn't really see what was wrong with it.

CHAPTER 13

A pair of binoculars scanning the London night skyline, idly, curious, snooping. A little look here, a little look there, just seeing what's going on, anything interesting, anything useful.

The binoculars settle on the back of one particular house, attracted by a slight movement. One of those large late-Victorian villas, probably flats now. Lots of black iron drainpipes. Green rubber dustbins. But dark. No, nothing.

The binoculars are just moving onwards when another slight movement catches in the moonlight. The binoculars refocus very slightly, trying to find a detail, a hard edge, a slight contrast in the darkness. The mist has lifted now, and the darkness glistens. They refocus a very, very little more.

There it is. Something, definitely. Only this time a little higher up, maybe a foot or so, maybe a yard. The binoculars settle and relax -- steady, trying for the edge, trying for the detail. There. The binoculars settle again -- they have found their mark, straddled between a windowsill and a drainpipe.

It is a dark figure, splayed against the wall, looking down, looking for a new foothold, looking upwards, looking for a ledge. The binoculars peer intently.

The figure is that of a tall, thin man. His clothes are right for the job, dark trousers, dark sweater, but his movements are awkward and angular. Nervous. Interesting. The binoculars wait and consider, consider and judge.

The man is clearly a rank amateur.

Look at his fumbling. Look at his ineptitude. His feet slip on the drainpipe, his hands can't reach the ledge. He nearly falls. He waits to catch his breath. For a moment he starts to climb back down again, but seems to find that even tougher going.

He lunges again for the ledge and this time catches it. His foot shoots out to steady himself and nearly misses the pipe. Could have been very nasty, very nasty indeed.

But now the way is easier and progress is better. He crosses to another pipe, reaches a third-floor window ledge, flirts briefly with death as he crawls painfully on to it, and makes the cardinal error and looks down. He sways briefly and sits back heavily. He shades his eyes and peers inside to check that the room is dark, and sets about getting the window open.

One of the things that distinguish the amateur from the professional is that this is the point when the amateur thinks it would have been a good idea to bring along something to prise the window open with. Luckily for this amateur the householder is an amateur too, and the sash window slides grudgingly up. The climber crawls, with some relief, inside.

He should be locked up for his own protection, think the binoculars. A hand starts to reach for the phone. At the window a face looks back out and for a moment is caught in the moonlight, then it ducks back inside to carry on with its business.

The hand stays hovering over the phone for a moment or two, while the binoculars wait and consider, consider and judge. The hand reaches instead for the A-Z street map of London.

There is a long studious pause, a little more intent binocular work, and then the hand reaches for the phone again, lifts it and dials.

CHAPTER 14

Susan's flat was small but spacious, which was a trick, reflected Richard tensely as he turned on the light, that only women seemed able to pull off.

It wasn't that observation which made him tense, of course -- he'd thought it before, many times. Every time he'd been in her flat, in fact. It always struck him, usually because he had just come from his own flat, which was four times the size and cramped. He'd just come from his own flat this time, only via a rather eccentric route, and it was this that made his usual observation unusually tense.

Despite the chill of the night he was sweating.

He looked back out of the window, turned and tiptoed across the room towards where the telephone and the answering machine stood on their own small table.

There was no point, he told himself, in tiptoeing. Susan wasn't in. He would be extremely interested to know where she was, in fact -- just as she, he told himself, had probably been extremely interested in knowing where he had been at the beginning of the evening.

He realised he was still tiptoeing. He hit his leg to make himself stop doing it, but carried on doing it none the less.

Climbing up the outside wall had been terrifying.

He wiped his forehead with the arm of his oldest and greasiest sweater. There had been a nasty moment when his life had flashed before his eyes but he had been too preoccupied with falling and had missed all the good bits. Most of the good bits had involved Susan, he realised. Susan or computers. Never Susan and computers -- those had largely been the bad bits. Which was why he was here, he told himself. He seemed to need convincing, and told himself again.

He looked at his watch. Eleven forty-five.

It occurred to him he had better go and wash his wet and dirty hands before he touched anything. It wasn't the police he was worried about, but Susan's terrifying cleaner. She would know.

He went into the bathroom, turned on the light switch, wiped it, and then stared at his own startled face in the bright neon-lit mirror as he ran the water over his hands. For a moment he thought of the dancing, warm candlelight of the Coleridge Dinner, and the images of it welled up out of the dim and distant past of the earlier part of the evening. Life had seemed easy then, and carefree. The wine, the conversation, simple conjuring tricks. He pictured the round pale face of Sarah, pop-eyed with wonder. He washed his own face.

He thought:

'...Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!'

He brushed his own hair. He thought, too, of the pictures hanging high in the darkness above their heads. He cleaned his teeth. The low buzz of the neon light snapped him back to the present and he suddenly remembered with appalled shock that he was here in his capacity as burglar.

Something made him look himself directly in the face in the mirror, then he shook his head, trying to clear it.

When would Susan be back? That, of course, would depend on what she was doing. He quickly wiped his hands and made his way back to the answering machine. He prodded at the buttons and his conscience prodded back at him. The tape wound back for what seemed to be an interminable time, and he realised with a jolt that it was probably because Gordon had been in full flood.

He had forgotten, of course, that there would be messages on the tape other than his own, and listening to other people's phone messages was tantamount to opening their mail.

He explained to himself once again that all he was trying to do was to undo a mistake he had made before it caused any irrevocable damage. He would just play the tiniest snippets till he found his own voice. That wouldn't be too bad, he wouldn't even be able to distinguish what was being said.

He groaned inwardly, gritted his teeth and stabbed at the Play button so roughly that he missed it and ejected the cassette by mistake. He put it back in and pushed the Play button more carefully.

Beep.

'Oh, Susan, hi, it's Gordon,' said the answering machine. 'I'm just on my way to the cottage. It's, er...' He wound on for a couple of seconds. '...need to know that Richard is on the case. I mean really on...' Richard set his mouth grimly and stabbed at the Fast Forward again. He really hated the fact that Gordon tried to put pressure on him via Susan, which Gordon always stoutly denied he did. Richard couldn't blame Susan for getting exasperated about his work sometimes if this sort of thing was going on.'

Click.

'...Response. Make a note to Susan would you please, to get an "Armed Response" sign made up with a sharp spike on the bottom at the right height for rabbits to see.'

'What?' muttered Richard to himself, and his finger hesitated for a second over the Fast Forward button. He had a feeling that Gordon desperately wanted to be like Howard Hughes, and if he could never hope to be remotely as rich, he could at least try to be twice as eccentric. An act. A palpable act.

'That's secretary Susan at the office, not you, of course,' continued Gordon's voice on the answering machine. 'Where was I? Oh yes.

Richard and Anthem 2.00. Susan, that thing has got to be in beta testing in two...' Richard stabbed at the Fast Forward, tight-lipped.

'...point is that there's only one person who's really in a position to know if he's getting the important work done, or if he's just dreaming, and that one person...' He stabbed angrily again. He had promised himself he wouldn't listen to any of it and now here he was getting angry at what he was hearing. He should really just stop this. Well, just one more try.

When he listened again he just got music. Odd. He wound forward again, and still got music. Why would someone be phoning to play music to an answering machine he wondered.

The phone rang. He stopped the tape and answered it, then almost dropped the phone like an electric eel as he realised what he was doing. Hardly daring to breathe, he held the telephone to his ear.

'Rule One in housebreaking,' said a voice. 'Never answer the telephone when you're in the middle of a job. Who are you supposed to be, for heaven's sake?'

Richard froze. It was a moment or two before he could find where he had put his voice.

'Who is this?' he demanded at last in a whisper.

'Rule Two,' continued the voice. 'Preparation. Bring the right tools. Bring gloves. Try to have the faintest glimmering of an idea of what you're about before you start dangling from window ledges in the middle of the night.'

'Rule Three. Never forget Rule Two.'

'Who is this?' exclaimed Richard again.

The voice was unperturbed. 'Neighbourhood Watch,' it said. 'If you just look out of the back window you'll see...'

Trailing the phone, Richard hurried over to the window and looked out. A distant flash startled him.

‘Rule Four. Never stand where you can be photographed.

‘Rule Five... Are you listening to me, MacDuff?’

‘What? Yes...’ said Richard in bewilderment. ‘How do you know me?’

‘Rule Five. Never admit to your name.’

Richard stood silent, breathing hard.

‘I run a little course,’ said the voice, ‘if you’re interested...’

Richard said nothing.

‘You’re learning,’ continued the voice, ‘slowly, but you’re learning. If you were learning fast you would have put the phone down by now, of course. But you’re curious -- and incompetent -- and so you don’t. I don’t run a course for novice burglars as it happens, tempting though the idea is. I’m sure there would be grants available. If we have to have them they may as well be trained.

‘However, if I did run such a course I would allow you to enrol for free, because I too am curious. Curious to know why Mr Richard MacDuff who, I am given to understand, is now a wealthy young man, something in the computer industry, I believe, should suddenly be needing to resort to house-breaking.’

‘Who -- ?’

‘So I do a little research, phone Directory Enquiries and discover that the flat into which he is breaking is that of a Miss S. Way. I know that Mr Richard MacDuff’s employer is the famous Mr G. Way and I wonder if they can by any chance be related.’

‘Who -- ?’

‘You are speaking with Svlad, commonly known as “Dirk” Cjelli, currently trading under the name of Gently for reasons which it would be otiose, at this moment, to rehearse. I bid you good evening. If you wish to know

more I will be at the Pizza Express in Upper Street in ten minutes. Bring some money.'

'Dirk?' exclaimed Richard. 'You... Are you trying to blackmail me?'

'No, you fool, for the pizzas.' There was a click and Dirk Gently rang off.

Richard stood transfixed for a moment or two, wiped his forehead again, and gently replaced the phone as if it were an injured hamster. His brain began to buzz gently and suck its thumb. Lots of little synapses deep inside his cerebral cortex all joined hands and started dancing around and singing nursery rhymes. He shook his head to try and make them stop, and quickly sat down at the answering machine again.

He fought with himself over whether or not he was going to push the Play button again, and then did so anyway before he had made up his mind. Hardly four seconds of light orchestral music had oozed soothingly past when there came the sound of a key scratching in the lock out in the hallway.

In panic Richard thumped the Eject button, popped the cassette out, rammed it into his jeans pocket and replaced it from the pile of fresh cassettes that lay next to the machine. There was a similar pile next to his own machine at home. Susan at the office provided them -- poor, long-suffering Susan at the office. He must remember to feel sympathy for her in the morning, when he had the time and concentration for it.

Suddenly, without even noticing himself doing it, he changed his mind. In a flash he popped the substitute cassette out of the machine again, replaced the one he had stolen, rammed down the rewind button and made a lunge for the sofa where, with two seconds to go before the door opened, he tried to arrange himself into a nonchalant and winning posture. On an impulse he stuck his left hand up behind his back where it might come in useful.

He was just trying to arrange his features into an expression composed in equal parts of contrition, cheerfulness and sexual allurements when the door opened and in walked Michael Wenton-Weakes.

Everything stopped.

Outside, the wind ceased. Owls halted in mid-flight. Well, maybe they did, maybe they didn't, certainly the central heating chose that moment to shut down, unable perhaps to cope with the supernatural chill that suddenly whipped through the room.

'What are you doing here, Wednesday?' demanded Richard. He rose from the sofa as if levitated with anger.

Michael Wenton-Weakes was a large sad-faced man known by some people as Michael Wednesday-Week, because that was when he usually promised to have things done by. He was dressed in a suit that had been superbly well tailored when his father, the late Lord Magna, had bought it forty years previously.

Michael Wenton-Weakes came very high on the small but select list of people whom Richard thoroughly disliked.

He disliked him because he found the idea of someone who was not only privileged, but was also sorry for himself because he thought the world didn't really understand the problems of privileged people, deeply obnoxious. Michael, on the other hand, disliked Richard for the fairly simple reason that Richard disliked him and made no secret of it.

Michael gave a slow and lugubrious look back out into the hallway as Susan walked through. She stopped when she saw Richard. She put down her handbag, unwound her scarf, unbuttoned her coat, slipped it off, handed it to Michael, walked over to Richard and smacked him in the face.

'I've been saving that up all evening,' she said furiously. 'And don't try and pretend that's a bunch of flowers you've forgotten to bring which you're hiding behind your back. You tried that gag last time.' She turned and stalked off.

'It's a box of chocolates I forgot this time,' said Richard glumly and held out his empty hand to her retreating back. 'I climbed up the entire outside wall without them. Did I feel a fool when I got in.'

‘Not very funny,’ said Susan. She swept into the kitchen and sounded as if she was grinding coffee with her bare hands. For someone who always looked so neat and sweet and delicate she packed a hell of a temper.

‘It’s true,’ said Richard, ignoring Michael completely. ‘I nearly killed myself.’

‘I’m not going to rise to that,’ said Susan from within the kitchen. ‘If you want something big and sharp thrown at you why don’t you come in here and be funny?’

‘I suppose it would be pointless saying I’m sorry at this point,’ Richard called out.

‘You bet,’ said Susan, sweeping back out of the kitchen again. She looked at him with her eyes flashing, and actually stamped her foot.

‘Honestly, Richard,’ she said, ‘I suppose you’re going to say you forgot again. How can you have the gall to stand there with two arms, two legs and a head as if you’re a human being? This is behaviour that a bout of amoebic dysentery would be ashamed of. I bet that even the very lowest form of dysentery amoeba shows up to take its girlfriend out for a quick trot around the stomach lining once in a while. Well, I hope you had a lousy evening.’

‘I did,’ said Richard. ‘You wouldn’t have liked it. There was a horse in the bathroom, and you know how you hate that sort of thing.’

‘Oh, Michael,’ said Susan brusquely, ‘don’t just stand there like a sinking pudding. Thank you very much for dinner and the concert, you were very sweet and I did enjoy listening to your troubles all evening because they were such a nice change from mine. But I think it would be best if I just found your book and pushed you out. I’ve got some serious jumping up and down and ranting to do, and I know how it upsets your delicate sensibilities.’

She retrieved her coat from him and hung it up. While he had been holding it he had seemed entirely taken up with this task and oblivious to anything

else. Without it he seemed a little lost and naked and was forced to stir himself back into life. He turned his big heavy eyes back on Richard.

‘Richard,’ he said, ‘I, er, read your piece in... in Fathom. On Music and, er...’

‘Fractal Landscapes,’ said Richard shortly. He didn’t want to talk to Michael, and he certainly didn’t want to get drawn into a conversation about Michael’s wretched magazine. Or rather, the magazine that used to be Michael’s.

That was the precise aspect of the conversation that Richard didn’t want to get drawn into.

‘Er, yes. Very interesting, of course,’ said Michael in his silky, over-rounded voice. ‘Mountain shapes and tree shapes and all sorts of things. Recycled algae.’

‘Recursive algorithms.’

‘Yes, of course. Very interesting. But so wrong, so terribly wrong. For the magazine, I mean. It is, after all, an arts review. I would never have allowed such a thing, of course. Ross has utterly ruined it. Utterly. He’ll have to go. Have to. He has no sensibilities and he’s a thief.’

‘He’s not a thief, Wednesday, that’s absolutely absurd,’ snapped Richard, instantly getting drawn into it in spite of his resolution not to. ‘He had nothing to do with your getting the push whatsoever. That was your own silly fault, and you...’

There was a sharp intake of breath.

‘Richard,’ said Michael in his softest, quietest voice -- arguing with him was like getting tangled in parachute silk -- ‘I think you do not understand how important...’

‘Michael,’ said Susan gently but firmly, holding open the door. Michael Wenton-Weakes nodded faintly and seemed to deflate.

'Your book,' Susan added, holding out to him a small and elderly volume on the ecclesiastical architecture of Kent. He took it, murmured some slight thanks, looked about him for a moment as if he'd suddenly realised something rather odd, then gathered himself together, nodded farewell and left.

Richard didn't appreciate quite how tense he had become till Michael left and he was sud