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THE HOUSE OF THE BRANDERSONS

RAYMOND RUDORFF

A chilling story of demonic possession
that destroyed a whole family



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'Something in that child's room had filled me with a loathing, premonition of evil . . . a sheaf of drawings, lovingly rendered scenes of cruelty, hinting arcane knowledge . . . worst of all, the contrast between the youth of the little artist, and the suggestion that the spirit guiding the childish hand was that of a mature mind twisted and corrupted . . . I have seen some of the world's most perverted and decadent pictures, but none could rival these in sickening delight in evil . . .'

Walter Mayhew, PSYCHIC INVESTIGATOR . . .

Terence Branderson was eight years old at the time; a lively, affectionate, little boy—until he became the second one of his family to succumb to the diabolic presence which was to possess the Brandersons . . .

The House of the Brandersons

Raymond Rudorff

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For Peter and Marie-Jeanne affectionately

CONTENTS

	<i>Preface of Walter Richard Mayhew, Psychic Investigator</i>	7
One:	<i>The Haunting</i>	19
Two:	<i>The Letters</i>	44
Three:	<i>The Possession</i>	122
Four:	<i>The Trial</i>	180
Five:	<i>The Confession</i>	227
	<i>Postscript from Walter Richard Mayhew, Psychic Investigator</i>	265

THE NARRATIVE OF WALTER RICHARD MAYHEW, PSYCHIC INVESTIGATOR

Even though I was forewarned and forearmed, it was with no little unease that I made my way through the gate and towards the front door of the House of the Brandersons. There are some houses in which merely setting foot for the briefest space of time can be dangerous for one's sanity and that which we call the human soul. Mercifully, such houses are rare and the fact that they have acquired the reputation of being 'haunted' is usually sufficient in itself to cause them to be shunned by all but a few hardy investigators or amateurs of curious sensations. In certain cases, fully documented, ministers of the faith have been called in to rid an abode of baneful influences and phenomena attributed to supernatural powers through the exercise of the Christian ritual of exorcism. Often they have been successful.

In the course of my own career, I have had experience of houses whose occupants were not merely plagued by the usual type of occurrence ascribed to the *poltergeist* or some such mischievous spirit, but who were in actual physical and spiritual danger as though some malignant force were actively disputing them the tenancy of their domicile. I have entered such houses after their inhabitants have been driven out by terror and despair. I have known what it is to leave behind the brightness and life of day, the bustle of the outside world and the normal everyday workings of nature, to pass into an atmosphere of Stygian gloom, a realm of silence and dread, a dimension not of this life. To go into some houses is to enter a domain inhabited by something beyond our ken and our understanding although the silent, brooding presence is immediately apparent to our instincts and fills our soul with dark apprehension. Often, knowledge of such things can bring madness and even death to those insufficiently prepared for the encounter.

But such was not the case as I turned the key in the lock

of the main door and entered the former home of the Brandersons. Indeed, there was nothing in either its outward or inner aspect to suggest that the house had ever been the repository—if not the source—of the monstrous evil which had come to claim the Brandersons for its own and which threatened to take over all those who came near the family. Here, all was placid, smiling and familiar. No hints of abnormality, no suggestion of concealed evil or past crimes marred the peaceful atmosphere of its sunlit rooms. Relics of its last tenants were few, but those I did find were deeply moving on account of the memories they evoked of a once-happy past. A faded handkerchief here, a scrap of embroidery there, a child's toy, a sheet of music, an old Christmas card—all were reminders of the time when this house was once a place of laughter, gladness, convivial company and all the happy intimacies of the close-knit life of a family bound together by deep affection, trust and kindness.

It is important that I stress the complete absence of anything sinister in this house, the walls of which were said and presumed to have witnessed something indescribably foul, and horrifying beyond measure.

Allow me to describe the house carefully. It stands, like its neighbors, in its own small grounds on a quiet leafy square in a part of Kensington characterized as much by the restrained elegance of its edifices as by the comfortable social standing and economic means of its inhabitants. When the house was built, about 1860, there was little save the arrangement of the trees and plants of its garden to distinguish it from the other residences in the wide, quiet street, for the whole district was constructed contemporaneously to a plan of discreet though not monotonous uniformity.

The first tenants were a doctor and his wife. They relinquished their occupancy prematurely but not for any sinister reasons, as the doctor had merely inherited a more lucrative practice elsewhere and had suddenly decided to transfer his abode. The house then became leased by a wealthy and highly respectable banker with many business connections on the Continent and principally in Italy. He

became engaged to the daughter of an equally prosperous banker in Florence and before he married and brought his bride home, he sought and obtained permission to make certain changes in the building. To the back of the house he had extended the conservatory, making alterations to suggest a typically Italian *loggia*. The roof too was given a small terrace, and the garden at the back was redesigned and adorned with a small pool in the center of which he set up a small fountain of Italian craftsmanship. Several statues of the late seventeenth century were also imported from Italy and tastefully set around the garden. In other words, as the banker hoped to combat any nostalgia his future wife might feel for her native country, he attempted to give the London house something of the appearance and style of a Florentine villa. Several of the rooms were furnished in an italianate manner with tiles and ceramics blending harmoniously with the general décor and proportions of the rooms. Shortly after the wedding was solemnized in Florence, the couple took up their residence, and the banker's bride declared herself enchanted by her new home and deeply touched by her husband's gentle solicitude for her future happiness in surroundings so new to her.

Alas for the happiness of the newly wedded couple, the husband might do his utmost to reproduce the architectural and decorative characteristics of his wife's native home but there was nothing he could do about the London climate. The capital's notorious fogs and damp proved inimical to his wife's health. Although she bore the rigors of two London winters with uncomplaining stoicism, it became clear that her constitution was not one capable of enduring the transition from sunny Tuscany to the grayer skies of England. Eventually, her husband managed to transfer all his business interests to Italy and returned to that country with his wife. It was at that point that the Brandersons came and chose to make the house their permanent home.

I inspected the house slowly and carefully, from the cellars to the attic. The basement rooms, with the extensive kitchen and scullery, wine cellar and storerooms, were light and well-designed. The main hall inside the front door was

spacious and flanked on either side by two rooms, those to the front of the house being the larger, and led up a short flight of stairs to the conservatory or *loggia* at the back, overlooking the garden. The rooms were virtually bare of furniture. Here and there, some trifling household object—a small chair, a stool, a length of curtain material, a box for needlework—had been left abandoned. In the conservatory, into which the sunlight streamed in different hues through the stained glass of the windows, there remained a low settee, considerably the worse for wear, and a small marble-topped table made of cast iron on which there still stood a small vase containing the withered remains of a few flowers. At the far end of the conservatory there was a music stand, and as I contemplated it an involuntary sigh passed my lips, for I remembered that one of the Branderson daughters had been devoted to the violin and had played it with great feeling.

I pushed open the casement window and looked out. The sun was beginning to sink behind the trees at the far end of the garden and a faint breeze was stirring the leaves of the tall trees. The pool with the stone boy carrying the giant carp in his arms was sadly neglected, its stagnant waters covered with decaying leaves, and everywhere the grass was unkempt and the flower beds in disarray. As I walked back into the main portion of the house, my foot hit some object which tinkled softly. I picked it up. It was a small tambourine, and as I shook it softly and its bells tinkled, a fierce melancholy took hold of my soul. How indescribably melancholy was this deserted house. I could not help feeling that its every room was silently mourning the past days of music and laughter as I passed upstairs.

There was the master's study, still with its heavy desk and chair, a few scraps of paper, cards and even some books still strewn on the shelves which lined its walls. A faded yellow visiting card or two, an invitation to a dinner party, a few envelopes and even a sheet of unused postage stamps—that was all. I put the visiting cards in my pocket and began my exploration of the upper floors. I saw the Brandersons' bedroom, that of the two daughters and that of the son. In the guest room, a few clothes still hung in a wall

closet. Among them was a slightly faded officer's ceremonial jacket and I shuddered as I looked upon it and remembered the history of its wearer. But in none of the rooms did I detect the slightest trace of evil—of anything that might have remained of a malevolent presence. The only memories I could sense clinging to the walls, to the few scraps of furniture or the objects lying on them were those which every house emanates when it has been left recently unoccupied.

Most pathetic of all was the little room on the top floor which had been used by the Brandersons' youngest boy as a playroom and day nursery. Here, little attempt had been made to remove his toys and other objects. There was a box of paints, several picture books on the shelves, a few broken toy soldiers, a toy sword and a soldier's helmet, a little boat and some wooden, colored bricks. On the walls there still hung colored prints of ships and animals and on a table lay several childish sketches. And yet it was here, in this child's retreat, that for the first time I felt something that was not mere melancholy slowly stir in me. Here, surrounded by these few testimonies to a child's innocent pursuits in the little room set aside as his den which had become his kingdom, the boy's mind filled by all the magic that a child's fancy can so spontaneously conjure up, there was something which *repelled* me. It was as though the echo, the resonance of some obtrusive presence still pervaded the room. I could not divine its source but I *knew* that somewhere within these four walls there lay concealed or invisible something that was as different from the world and mind of childhood as darkest night is from day. I felt at the point of suffocation in the room which was rapidly becoming dark. In the gathering dusk I could not—*would not*—continue my search. I would wait for daylight again before continuing my scrutiny of the room's contents after I had spent the night in the empty house that once was the Brandersons'.

Most of the terrors of darkness are born in the mind. The terror that does not spring from the imagination can also stalk by the brightness of day.

For my vigil to bear any hopes of success, it was essential that I rid my mind of all preconceived notions or fancies. It is hard to avoid fear when one faces the oncoming of night alone in a house where one knows something dreadful has happened; but like fear, curiosity is one of the oldest human emotions and if it is strong enough, the one can drive the other out or at least keep it under control.

My quest was essential. As part of my vocation, I had been used to contemplate phenomena which would have driven most people to the limits of terror and even to insanity. If there was to be any manifestation of dark powers, I knew in advance that they would be frightening, and therefore I was able to face the prospect with relative calm. I lit my pipe and reclined in the master's chair in the study after lighting the lamp I had brought with me and placing it on the desk. I put my bag down beside me, took out the book I was reading and passively waited for the night to come and pass.

The house was in absolute stillness—a stillness so intense as to be almost palpable. I heard none of the creaks and gentle crackings common to most houses at night. Only occasionally was the silence broken by the distant rattling of a carriage through the streets. No ray of moonlight redeemed the blackness of the night outside the little oasis of light I had established inside the house. The distant murmur of the life of the great city that I could hear as I opened the windows of the conservatory and peered into the darkness of the garden soon became hushed. I closed my book shortly before the hour of midnight and shut my eyes, waiting for whatever sensation might suddenly impress itself on my senses.

Eventually I slept, but my dreams were vague and un-fearful. I awoke two hours later but still there was nothing—absolutely nothing—in the house, or at any rate in the room, to suggest any presence I might have been seeking.

‘There is nothing in this room, then?’ I remarked aloud, as though almost expecting an answer or some form of silent but visible denial.

Nothing but the ticking of my watch and the glow of my lamp. Not a hint, not an echo of the former powerful

presence of Justin Branderson in the room that had been his study.

I felt only the foreboding of disappointment, not of terror, as I picked up the lamp and softly went out of the room. Where should I begin again? I resolved to repeat my first reconnaissance of the house, beginning with exploration of the basement. As before, it had no secrets to yield me.

It was the same with the rooms on the ground floor and those apart from the master's study on the first floor. The upper bedrooms remained peaceful, and it was only as I ascended to the topmost floor and the attic that my mind was struck by a peculiar circumstance: not until I approached the door of the nursery of the young Branderson did I remember how something in that room had filled me with a loathing, premonition of evil. The same emotions came back to me with increasing intensity as I drew near and I marvelled that after having first experienced them with such shock and suddenness they should so quickly have fled from my memory after I returned to the lower regions of the house. It was as though the rest of the house had bid me—*made me*—forget the momentary anguish I had experienced with such force in the little room. It was as if the entire fabric of the house had acted upon what had come to my mind, just as a damp sponge will erase a word from a blackboard. How could I have so easily forgotten what had assailed me only a few hours earlier?

I forced myself to go on. The house was dead and uninhabited. It was neutral with the neutrality of absolute nothingness, and yet something was pulling me back from the door of the child's room, urging me, *impelling* me to return to the peaceful, if desolate, silence of the lower floors. I resisted it and lay an uneasy hand on the doorknob and turned it gently. As I opened the door and stepped inside the room, I sensed once more the close proximity of some evil as strongly as though the room had been filled with a noxious vapor or lethal gas. It was only with the most strenuous mental effort that I managed to overwhelm the urge to run through the door again and slam it on whatever lay behind it.

I placed the lamp on the table and took the tiny cross

from my pocket. It is not necessary to be a Christian in the orthodox sense of the word or indeed to be a follower of any of the world's great faiths to believe that certain objects—like this crucifix—can be the focus for powerful moral and mental forces that can bring protection from the workings of a malevolent will. I knew with profound certitude that in that room there lurked at least the echo of an unutterable evil. My symbol of man's will to good helped give me the courage to remain in that damned place and seek out the source of the evil. Others who have similarly ventured into the more dangerous realms of the 'supernatural' will at once know what I mean.

It was by directing my thoughts upon the cross and observing how, almost like a compass, it indicated where the evil emanation was stronger or lesser, that I was soon able to locate the source.

It is well known that many children love secrets. Who, as a young boy, has not experienced the delights of having a secret place in which to hide some childish treasure, some favorite toy or other possession, known only to himself and which is part of his own private kingdom made magical by his imagination and closed to the world of the adult?

It was not, therefore, surprising that little Terence Branderson should have discovered that by removing part of a partition inside the lower portion of a wall closet it had become possible to create a little hidden recess into which various objects could be kept. But in this case the hiding place had been used to conceal an abomination.

Pasted to the reverse side of the thin, board partition which covered the secret recess was a twelve-inch-high drawing in colored crayons, executed by an obviously childish hand but also with a deeply disturbing proficiency and expressiveness. What kind of child was it who at the age of eight or nine was capable of drawing with such realism two men in their death throes, the rope of the gallows around their twisted necks? Children are often attracted to the macabre and sensational, admittedly, and most small boys have at some time enjoyed drawing scenes of battles, cruelty and violence. But this was no ordinary child's drawing of such a nature. There was surely a fiendish

skill and conviction in the way the little boy (for no one else could have been the artist) had rendered the lineaments of the hanged men. There seemed a diabolic power in the composition, a hint of sickening familiarity with the processes of violent death, overall an air of *gleefulness* in the way the child had applied himself to depicting the scene of legal murder which still disfigures our statute books. There was, worst of all, the contrast between the obvious youth of the artist, despite his skill in rendering the essentials of the repellent subject, and the suggestion that the spirit guiding the faltering, childish hand was that of a mature and developed mind, twisted and corrupted by heaven knows what sinister inspiration. No wonder that the product of such a depraved imagination had so pervaded the room.

There was a sheaf of other drawings too. Lovingly rendered scenes of cruelty; pictures, ostensibly of innocent subjects, hinting arcane knowledge and complicity of far older minds. Several drawings were of a more cryptic but no less disturbing nature. Often it appeared as if the child had in vain attempted to delineate a certain face—always unsuccessfully. Sometimes the face was long, sometimes it was short and squat, and in each case the strangely inspired child had repeatedly tried in the same drawing to represent the cast of the mouth and the eyes in particular. Another drawing represented a small figure, apparently seen from the back, raising its arms as though in greeting or in a sign of worship before a huge towering figure drawn only as a vague sketch. But even the most rudimentary, unfinished drawing seemed impregnated with the same feeling of corruption.

I have seen some of the world's most appalling representations of men's evil and cruelty. But not even the darkest of Goya's inspirations, not even the most perverted imaginings of some of the most tortured artists of the Symbolist and Decadent schools could rival these compositions in suggestive awfulness, in sickening delight in evil. It was not wise to look upon them for long. I resolved to burn the drawings, but some force held me back at the last moment. Before I replaced the sketches where I had found them, I

remembered how my previous impressions of the child's room had been so quickly and mysteriously expunged from my mind after leaving the upper floor of the house. I hurriedly thrust a few of the smaller abominations into my pocket before leaving the room. In some way, I knew that those awful drawings concealed a key to the mystery I had hoped to solve.

Nothing happened that night as I resumed my vigil in the master's study. The house remained peaceful but my thoughts were in turmoil. I did not dare inspect the drawings I had taken with me, and I struggled with my conscience as to whether to report my find.

But now there is something else that I dare report. And I never shall be able to bring myself to return to the house of the Brandersons.

I saw my client the next day. He was greatly disappointed at the fruitless result of my night's stay in the house.

'Are you sure there was nothing?' he said, scrutinizing me. 'Quite sure.'

'That is strange. I was sure there would have been some clue, some remaining sign—*something* at any rate that a man of your peculiar vocation—shall I say profession?—would have found. Did you not *sense* anything at least?'

'There was nothing,' I said. 'The house is peaceful. It is certainly not haunted. There are no evil spirits or malevolent entities there. Whatever there may once have been there has now vanished. It is simply an empty house—a little sad perhaps, as are all vacant houses abandoned by their occupants. I am sorry I can help you no further.'

But my client was not satisfied.

'I must know something: did you keep watch the *whole* night? Did you perhaps—excuse me for asking—but did you doze off and sleep for part of the time?'

I shook my head. 'I do not think so. But that is the strange thing about it: I cannot in all truth swear that I was awake the whole time. Yet I have no memory of sleeping.'

'And no dreams?'

'If at any time I did fall asleep, I cannot have dreamed

anything. No, I have no recollection of any dreams. It was the most uneventful night of any I have ever spent in this manner—more especially in a house whose former tenants have had such a horrific history.’

‘That is very strange.’

I agreed that it was very peculiar. But I had nothing to tell him. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing in the house to explain what had happened to the Brandersons.

‘Very well,’ he said after I had handed the keys of the house back to him. ‘Our investigations along this line have failed. For the moment. I shall go back myself, although not at night as you have done. Nothing would induce me to do that.’

He requested another meeting with me a few days later.

‘I have been through the whole house again,’ he said. ‘From top to bottom. I noticed nothing odd but this one thing. Tell me, did you light a fire in Mr. Branderson’s study? It was your headquarters for the night, was it not?’

‘A fire?’

‘Yes, a fire of sorts. Perhaps you were chilly. There was a mass of burned papers in the fireplace of the study. They were in ashes and had been so stirred with a poker as to be reduced to only the smallest charred fragments. There was not one scrap that was remotely legible. The grate was heaped with the ashes.’

‘I remember nothing of lighting any fire.’

I spoke the perfect truth. It was only some weeks later that the so strangely effaced memory of what I had found in the house returned to me. I wish it had not.

In the *Illustrated Gazette*, a newspaper highly popular with the less literate orders of society and which purveyed (very profitably) news mainly of a highly sensational nature, there appeared a lengthy and detailed account of crimes which had shocked the nation as much on account of their ferocity as for their apparently total lack of motivation. At the trial, the defense’s plea that the men had acted in a fit of insanity was dismissed after examination by the highest medical authorities. The men were found guilty, and before passing sentence of death, the judge had somberly remarked that although the actual motive for the murders

must remain a mystery, it was clear that the two men had been inspired by 'evil—the purest, blackest, most satanic evil.' The executions were duly carried out and the *Gazette* reminded its readers of the elimination of the two monsters who had formerly been in their midst by reproducing portrait sketches of the two men, sketches taken from life. It was while I studied their faces that a shock of recognition unlocked certain memories from the dark cells in my mind where they had been so inexplicably immured ever since the night I had spent in the Branderson house.

In every essential respect, the faces of the murderers tallied perfectly with those in the drawing I had seen in the playroom of the small Branderson child. This alone was enough to make me fear for my reason, but there was still worse.

There could be no doubt that the child had drawn the faces from life. From what I could now remember again, with shocking vividness, there could be no doubt concerning the resemblance between the figures represented in their final agonies, with the nooses around their necks, and those which stared at me from the page of the *Gazette*. But the youngest of the Brandersons had perished before even the *first* of the crimes imputed to the two men had been committed!

Despite my determination never to return to the Brandersons' house, I could not rid myself of a curiosity about the family that had inhabited it and about the strange matters that I myself had experienced in that house.

I did not return, but I spent years attempting to put together the story—laboriously, piece-by-piece, by a combination of rather careful detective work, intuition, and some good luck. I now offer it to the reader. It is based on my research, on certain papers, letters and narratives which were made available to me and on conversations with some of those involved in the drama. The pages linking the documents are my own. As for the letters and narratives—I reproduce them exactly, in the order in which I first read them.

THE HAUNTING

It was in the summer of 1886, five years after their return from India, that Mr. Justin Branderson and his family moved into the elegant Kensington residence, (recently vacated by the banker and his Italian wife), after living in a pleasant but undistinguished house in a somewhat dull suburb in south London. The change of domicile reflected the steady rise in Mr. Branderson's fortunes, the foundations of which he had laid in the East, the advantages of which he decided to offer himself and his family by eventually moving into one of the pleasantest and most fashionable districts in the great metropolis, within quick and easy reach of his company's offices in the City.

Justin had now reached the peak of his career and had begun to accumulate considerable wealth. His long experience in the trading and economic conditions of the Far East enhanced his career. He was a man of enterprise, a businessman of the very best sort who by making use of the talents bestowed upon him by nature and by acquiring a reputation for rigorous honesty in all his dealings, deservedly flourished and provided an inspiring example to others in the same field.

When he settled in Kensington, Justin was popular and respected, and his wife and children were equally esteemed. In every way they were regarded as a model, dutiful, loving and closely united family. Within the next eighteen months, they became gradually shunned by their neighbors and many of their former friends. No one could say exactly why they could no longer bear to frequent the Brandersons' or why they felt so uneasy in the presence of a man formerly regarded as charming, convivial, honest and generous. First, Justin Branderson and his family had been welcomed as an adornment to their society. Later they were treated practically as lepers and were the object of an apparently invincible prejudice and something very close to fear.

The few people who could be persuaded to speak of their aversion to the Brandersons could say little beyond that the mere proximity of any member of the family was enough to make them feel ill at ease and that in some manner, the family had all 'changed'. One, more forthcoming than the rest, had stated his impression that after a while—about a year—he had come to feel that the Brandersons had become 'a threat' to their immediate community. But all agreed that at first, in the few months immediately following the arrival of the Brandersons in Kensington, there was nothing about any member of the family to inspire feelings other than those of sincere respect and friendship. It was also agreed that the change which had come over the Brandersons had first made itself apparent through the person of Justin Branderson.

At first sight, no one could have seemed more immediately attractive and likeable than Justin Branderson. Some men are debilitated by the long years spent in the tropics under an alien sun. Not so Justin. He had flourished physically and mentally as well as materially under the burning skies of India. The few who still remembered the nervous young man who had set sail for the East thirty years previously now marvelled at his physique, his commanding presence, air of easy assurance, his vitality and his acute and cultured intelligence. Six-foot-one high, broad-shouldered, wide of brow with piercing eyes and a leonine head of hair, he might have been one of the Viking forbears from which his family descended. His physical attributes, combined with his charm, instantly aroused admiration among both sexes. He and his wife and eldest daughter were welcome guests at the receptions and dinner parties to which they were soon invited after the establishment of their new domicile in Courtland Square.

Justin Branderson's wife, Clara, did not merely enjoy the reflected glory and esteem of her talented husband. She complemented it. She too had escaped the ravages that an eastern climate too often wreaks on a western constitution. Her complexion was as frash as it had been when she married Justin, her dark brown eyes were still those of a young girl and danced with the same light of gaiety or ex-

pressed the same unfeigned serenity and purity of soul which had first so deeply attracted Justin to her. In every respect she was what Justin's friends and associates admiringly and unhesitatingly defined as 'a damned fine handsome woman'.

The Brandersons had four children. The eldest was Simon, a sturdy lad, not over-endowed with intellectual ability, though he had inherited his father's charm. Since his boyhood he had expressed his ardent desire to make soldiering his life and at the age of eighteen had joined the colors. When the Brandersons returned to England, he had been gazetted a lieutenant and was stationed with his regiment in India.

The second-born was Jane. She was now twenty-one years old and had more of her father's looks than her mother's, with her dark brown Celtic hair and eyes. Hers was a grave, slightly solemn beauty which intrigued the young men whom she met instead of instantly captivating them. She was inclined to be somewhat reserved and formal in her manner and was said to have an 'artistic temperament' which she displayed well in music and particularly on the violin.

As so often happens in families, the next child, Rachel, now aged seventeen, was the complete opposite in character and appearance to her elder sister. Instead of Jane's dark beauty and quiet manner, she had the radiant physical appeal of her mother, the same sparkling eyes and manner, the same glorious crown of flowing blonde hair and the same capacity for mirth and conviviality. Unlike Jane, she rarely brooded and practically nothing could ever disturb her cheerful equanimity.

The last and youngest child was Terence, aged nine. Like Jane and unlike Simon, he showed an intellectual or reserved character and a definite artistic flair. Of the four children he had the most delicate physique, and it was this and an unfortunate propensity to illness which had prevented him from attending a school in his early years; he had received tuition at home instead. But when he came to England for the first time in his young life, the doctors decided that the danger to his health had come more from

the torrid Indian climate than anything else and that eventually he would become strong enough in England to attend any boarding or day school his parents might choose for him.

The Brandersons soon settled happily and comfortably into their new home together with their capable house-keeper, a middle-aged widow, Mrs. Penfold, and their two maids Charlotte and Susan. For Justin, life was now easier and more leisurely. He had reached the time of life when he could work less and enjoy the fruits of his industry by devoting himself more intensively to his family, to the pleasures of friendship and to cultured pursuits. Even so, his business affairs made it necessary for him to make frequent visits to his company's offices in the City and occasional trips to the great industrial towns of the Midlands and even to the Continent. His wife Clara devoted herself to the usual pursuits and occupations of a lady of the upper classes, Rachel was sent to finishing school, Jane studied the violin and piano at the London Academy of Music, and little Terence received private tuition in preparation for the time when he would attend a public school. Justin had very few relatives, for he was an only child and his parents had died young. The uncle into whose care he had passed had long since died, and he had only rarely maintained contact through correspondence with his remaining aunt and two cousins. Clara, however, resumed relations with the friends of her girlhood and their families who readily welcomed her and her daughters into their midst. From the start, the Brandersons were not without friends in London and a widening circle of acquaintances ready to become friends.

All those who knew the Brandersons at this time and who were readily admitted into their home spoke of the happy atmosphere that reigned there and prophesied that the two daughters would soon make excellent matches among the many eligible young men they were able to meet. Justin was put up by sponsors for a well-known club in the West End and was immediately accepted as a member.

There was only one respect in which he differed to any substantial extent from other men of a similar station in

life, and that was in his attitude towards religion. Naturally, as was the custom at that time, the local vicar of the parish called upon the family to pay his respects and express his hope of seeing them attend his church, but he soon realized that Justin's attitude towards the Christian faith and the conventional forms of observance into which it had been enshrined was not that of a usual member of the Protestant Church of England.

It was not that Justin was an atheist or an agnostic—it was simply that he had read about too many of mankind's other religious faiths and ideas ever to be able to ascribe primacy or a superior position to any one particular system of beliefs. He had also read extensively of the sacred and mystical texts of the Hindus and the Brahmins and of man's earlier, primitive beliefs long before the evolution of the world's great faiths of the present age. One particular religious doctrine, accepted by only one portion of the earth's population, was too confining to satisfy Justin's restless enquiring mind. Nonetheless, he agreed and told the vicar that members of his family might—if they were so disposed—attend services at the vicar's church, for they had been brought up in the Protestant faith. The vicar then took his leave, surprised and even mystified by the unexpected philosophical, historical and religious interests evinced by such a man whose life had mainly been devoted to commerce. He had also been intrigued by some of the eastern idols, statuettes of deities and other figurines which formed part of Justin's collection of Oriental objects.

It was some time later, when the Brandersons were fully integrated into the life of London society, that the first hint of some transformation of Justin's character suggested itself to his wife. No one would have ever known of the matter had Clara not eventually felt impelled to mention it in a letter to her friend Ellen Middleton who had been her closest friend and confidante in her schooldays and with whom she had maintained a constant and regular correspondence during all the thirty years they had been separated.

The most important part of this letter, which bears upon the beginning of the subtle change in relationship between

Justin and his wife, is as follows :

‘And now, my dear, I must tell you of something very peculiar and even—I confess—rather disturbing that has happened to me on two occasions lately. Were I to tell anyone else of these happenings, I fear they would only laugh at me and call me superstitious or the victim of idle fancies, probably engendered through reading some book or quaint tale. But I know that I am not given to odd fancies—indeed I do not think that I am an imaginative person at all, and it is precisely because of this that I find the experiences I feel compelled to describe to you so disturbing. Dear Ellen, please do not laugh at me. I have to confide in someone and in *you* I know I have a dear and trusted friend. I also know that you are interested in strange things.

‘There is no need to tell you how happy my marriage has been ever since a wonderful stroke of fate brought me face to face for the first time with Justin. It truly was love at first sight, and it was even more than that. From the beginning I felt (and Justin often told me he felt the same) a deep *rapport*, a spiritual sympathy and reciprocal understanding between myself and my beloved husband. There have never been any secrets between us, we have lived together for thirty years in wonderful harmony, and we have been blessed with four wonderful children and have every material resource we could wish for in life. In body and soul we have been so attuned the one to the other that often it was unnecessary for either of us to use words to express our feelings to the other. You know what I mean—I believe you have spoken once or twice on the mysterious gift of telepathy. Well, such a thing undoubtedly exists between us. I know when Justin is anxious, when he is overworked, when he is coping with some problem in his mind or maturing a decision. No doubt such a thing is common to all happily married, closely united couples.

‘For some time now—in fact, not long after we came to live in this house—I fear that in some respects I have been losing a little of this close, spiritual, mental or emotional (call it what you will) facility of communication, thanks to which no thought or utterance or action of Justin’s was ever a mystery to me. The realization of this deeply saddens me.

It is as though after always being accustomed to looking upon a clear sky, one finds suddenly that part of that clear serenity is veiled from one by a passing cloud or a sudden mist. I cannot explain it better: I am not clever with words as you are. Let me try to give you an example of what I mean. Shortly after we settled in the house, Justin and I were slowly walking around the garden, my arm in his. It was a beautiful summer's evening and we were alone. Little Terence was in bed, Jane was playing the violin to friends in a house nearby, and Rachel was at her studies in her room. We sat down on the bench in the garden, while Justin lit up a cheroot. All of a sudden I had the most dreadful unprecedented feeling. I can only describe it by saying that for a few moments I had a sense of utter icy coldness and what was even worse, a dreadful desolate feeling of loss, as though I were alone and in the deepest, most irremediable solitude. It was as if I had been abandoned and left completely bereft of love and companionship for a very long time. Several minutes passed while I felt weighed down with this deep, unexpected melancholy. Justin might not have been beside me on the bench. There might have been a void—*he might never have existed*. I shivered as I sat there, although the evening was warm.

"Are you cold, my dear? Come into the house," said Justin, putting one arm around my shoulder. For the first time since we were married, I felt that Justin had in no way sensed my feelings, the lowering of my spirits or the strange anguish which so suddenly came over me. He repeated the question, "Are you cold?" but in an oddly dull and toneless manner. He gazed at me vacantly and I *knew* that the spasm of sadness which must have shown itself on my face was completely undetected by him—by the man who hitherto had always shown himself to be the most sensitive and perceptive of husbands. I could not restrain myself from asking, "Are you happy in this new home of ours? In this house?" He answered in the same mechanical voice: "Yes, dear, very happy. Why do you ask?" A few minutes later I found that the full *rapprochement* which usually existed between us had been completely restored as though a bridge

between two shores—temporarily broken—had been repaired.

‘Now, I am afraid, the same thing has occurred again several times since. I keep feeling that Justin is no longer present with me and that only his outer shell remains while his real inner being is absent. At other times I feel that some invisible force has come to interpose itself like a physical and mental barrier between us. For the first time I have the feeling that there is something in Justin’s behavior and innermost thoughts which is totally beyond my reach and comprehension.’

A fortnight later, a more definite note of alarm became apparent in another letter Clara wrote to her friend :

‘Lately, there have been some very disturbing occurrences. I can only write of them to you, for anyone else, my dear friend, would only dismiss them as foolish delusions of an over-imaginative woman with too much time on her hands. I have hesitated before telling you of my experiences but now *I must*. I cannot keep them to myself any longer. I know you will understand.

‘Justin had to go to Manchester a few weeks ago. He was to be away from London for two days and nights. It was by no means the first of such brief separations, for in the course of his work he has sometimes been away for much longer periods. But on this occasion, besides the regret and slight anxiety I always feel at such partings, there came a sensation I can only call *fear*, and a dread premonition for I felt more strongly than ever that some secret misery or apprehension is tormenting Justin’s mind. I remembered tales of how some people have had inexplicable intimations of some sudden disaster befalling their loved ones, and how their forebodings had been justified by events. Justin comforted me and told me not to worry, while I did my best to stifle my fears and present a cheerful countenance to him. Oh, my dear, I do not think I have ever spent such a dreadful two days and nights of waiting in all my life! I sat up late that night after dinner with Jane and Rachel, trying with all my might to conceal my anxiety from the girls. Rachel, bless her, did not realize that anything was amiss and lightened matters with her gay chatter and natural high

spirits. But Jane, by some delicate intuition, divined that I was far from happy and more than ordinarily affected by Justin's absence. After Rachel retired for the night, Jane kept me company for a little longer and played the violin for me. At length, after the gentle melodies of Schubert and Mendelssohn had brought some peace to my soul, Jane kissed me gently and left the room, after entreating me not to sit up too late.

'The time was far past midnight, yet I knew I would not sleep, so I picked up a novel with the intention of trying to concentrate upon it for an hour or two before going upstairs to my lonely bedroom. At first the letters on the page seemed to blur and dissolve themselves before my eyes, but at length, by a great effort, I succeeded in taking up the threads of the tale again and in reviving my temporarily dormant interest in the progression of the novel. I must have read for longer than I intended or perhaps I had dozed off awhile, for suddenly I found that I had let the book drop onto my lap. Although I could not see the clock which stood in a shadowy recess in the room, I knew that several hours must have passed, and that the hour was far advanced towards dawn.

'The shade of the reading lamp threw a small pool of light upon my table and part of my chair, but otherwise the room was in shadow and at each corner in nearly complete darkness. There was no sound within the house or outside it, none except the occasional gust of wind against the heavily curtained windows. I repeat, Ellen, that there was not a sound in the house.

'But as I raised my eyes and looked again towards the lamp and then at the book in my lap which I picked up and placed on the table, something drew my eyes towards the far end of the room where the windows were hidden by the thick dark-green velvet curtains. Despite the darkness, a message had flashed in my brain telling me that I should direct my gaze in that direction—even though there was nothing to be seen—and *wait*. I imagine I know what it is to be hypnotized, for some will greater than my own seemed to have taken command and forced me to look towards the curtains. Again a terrible sense of premonition returned

to me. A dread that some calamity might have befallen Justin made my heart feel as though it had turned to ice.

‘I cannot say how long I waited—two minutes, half an hour—For some reason I made no attempt to rise from my chair and ascertain the time from the little clock which ticked quietly on the sideboard. As I strained my eyes, keeping them focussed on the shadowy curtains, the center of the darkness into which I was peering gradually became filled with what resembled a mass of cloudy vapor. It first became visible as a patch of grayness, only a shade or two lighter than the encompassing obscurity. The gray patch then became elongated, reaching from a height of roughly five or six feet downwards towards the carpet. In a few moments, the gray light (or rather than light, let me say the *lesser darkness* which had appeared in the normal darkness) grew brighter, attaining a kind of white luminosity. For an instant this white shape hovered in the air and then seemed to come towards me but broke into several distinct smaller patches each of which lost its glow and faded back into former grayness.

‘I assure you, Ellen, no power on earth could have made me take my eyes off that spot. I felt as though something were bidding me wait. Once more the gray patches brightened, then became white, the separated globules (for that is what they seemed) joined together again, forming as before a shape some five or six feet high and as wide as a human body before becoming gray again for a second time. The process repeated itself several times and as I watched it—the constant alteration between shades of light and gray, the disconnected globules joining together only to break apart a few seconds later—I felt no fear nor, indeed, any emotion whatsoever. I was like a vessel that is empty and waiting to be filled, but what emotion or what message was to be transmitted to me I could not say. Instead of surprise or wonderment, my attitude was simply that of passive acceptance—as if the phenomena were utterly normal! And then something stirred in my brain and bid me concentrate.

‘The thought of Justin came strongly into my mind. I shut my eyes for a second and then opened them again,

resuming my observation of the dark curtains. Here, dear friend, I must ask you to suspend incredulity and have faith in what I tell you: in place of the gray or white globules or elongated form, there stood the life-sized figure of Justin, dressed as I had seen him when he bade me farewell before leaving for the station to take the Manchester train!

His eyes were looking straight into mine, and in them I saw an expression of deep melancholy compounded with alarm and dismay. His face was pale—paler than the *whiteness* I have mentioned, but every feature, every line and nuance in his countenance was as clear to me as though I had been observing my husband in the brightness of a sunlit day! He seemed to be making an intense effort to speak, his arms trembled as though he were about to extend them towards me, the expression on his face changed to one of acute pain and anguish and then, as suddenly as he had appeared out of the darkness, he disappeared. There was no gradual fading of the shape; there was no reversion to the white, oblong mass and then to the former grayness which had first made itself manifest. There was nothing but a sudden pall of even blacker darkness. It was exactly as if some mysteriously produced screen had suddenly been placed between me and the apparition of my husband! And then, the patch of *greater blackness* which had presented itself to my sight just as the patch of *lesser darkness* had done, diminished and became merged with the normal obscurity of that portion of the room.

‘I need not tell you what I felt for the few remaining hours of that night. I knew that I had not been dreaming and that in some way my poor husband had made himself known to me. I shuddered as I remembered all the stories of what such appearances portend. My misery was so great, my forebodings of disaster so intense, that I instantly put on a dress and light coat and silently slipped out from the house. After a few frantic minutes of wandering in the deserted streets, I found a hansom cab which had just deposited some late night reveller and asked the driver to take me to the central post office, where I had learned from Justin it was possible to dispatch a telegraph message at

any hour of the day or night. I telegraphed the hotel in Manchester where Justin was staying, begging him to answer as soon as possible and to reassure me that all was well with him. I then returned home by the same cab and sat up until the early hours of dawn. One hour passed, then two, then three . . . I was incapable of joining my children at the breakfast table. I sent a message to them saying that their mother was indisposed while I lay on the bed and tried to overcome an overwhelming conviction that my beloved Justin had been taken away from me—from all of us!

It was not until mid-morning that the boy arrived from the telegraph office. The message he brought was short but it *was* from Justin. He said simply: "All is well. Do not be anxious. Fondest love. Justin." My relief was so great I fainted away on the doorstep in the presence of the messenger boy, the maid and Jane.

'When I beheld Justin again late the following day no mortal was ever filled with such joy and gratitude. He chided me gently for my foolish anxieties and begged me not to fall prey again to such needless alarm in the future. He pointed out that although his duties were less onerous than they had been in the past, he still could not escape the obligation to make certain journeys from time to time. In return I gently scolded him for having delayed so long his reply to my urgent telegraph message, for at the post office they had told me exactly how long it should take to reach Justin and for his answer to reach me. "Did you not receive it at once?" I asked him. "Did you not think of answering your poor wife immediately? You were in the hotel, were you not?" I had sent the telegraph at four o'clock in the morning and had been assured that it would reach him within an hour or two, and I knew that, as was his wont, Justin would be arising early, before the hour of six. The deep fondness and solicitude in his eyes were momentarily veiled. After a moment he replied in a lower tone, "Of course I was in the hotel. Why should I not have been in the hotel? They brought it to me late. That is all, my dear." But even as he spoke—for the few seconds it took him to speak the words—I had another of those dreadful feelings

that all communications and closeness between us had suddenly been lost. God forgive me, for I am certain I wronged him, but at that moment the suspicion shot through my mind that he had not been speaking the truth to me! I could not put aside the thought that when my telegraph message was delivered at his hotel, he was elsewhere!

I now dismiss such a suggestion as ignoble and worthy only of contempt. Even so, my dearest Ellen, I feel compelled to relate to you each notion, each vagary of my disturbed imagination.'

A few days later, in a letter in which a tone of rising panic was becoming apparent, Clara repeated her conviction that Justin was spiritually moving apart from her and showing an increasing tendency to behave abnormally:

'Another strange and fearful experience! Two nights ago I retired at my usual hour while Justin remained for a little longer in his study to deal with some urgent correspondence and other matters relating to his business. I was unusually tired that day, for there had been many household duties to supervise and we had entertained guests to dinner. Justin had asked me not to wait up for him, warning me that his work might take until early in the morning to complete. I therefore composed myself to sleep. Our dinner party had been an exceedingly pleasant one, and Justin had been at his most convivial. In addition, four days had lapsed since my last unsettling experience, and Justin had never been more kind, more tender, more lovingly attentive.

I do not know how long I enjoyed a sleep untroubled by anything more than the briefest and most insubstantial fleeting fragments of dreams which I instantly forgot as I awoke. The lamp by the bedside was still alight, and the space beside me was still vacant. But as I raised my eyes I saw Justin standing at the foot of the bed, his countenance drawn and white. There was pain and fear in his eyes. His lips moved as though he were about to speak, and he began to raise his hands slowly as if in supplication or, as I thought, to implore my help. Suddenly darkness and unconsciousness swept over me, and I saw no more.

I must have slept for several hours, for when I awoke

again the first light of dawn was filtering into the room through the slightly parted curtains. The door opened and Justin came into the room again, but this time there was no hint of fear or suffering on his face. It could not have been more composed, and as his eyes met my startled gaze he calmly remarked: "I have had to do more work than I anticipated. Now it is done. But why do you look so alarmed, my dear?" Oh, Ellen—again that icy sensation of remoteness, utter unbridgeable remoteness between us!

"Oh, my darling!" I cried, "you gave me such a fright earlier. You looked so very unhappy and—"

"Earlier? Unhappy?" His tone was almost peremptory. "When was this?"

"When you came into the room earlier this night. Shortly after I retired and had begun to sleep, Justin, you came and visited me a moment."

"I made no such visit to you, Clara. You have been dreaming."

"But—"

"You have been dreaming. I did not come into this room this night."

He spoke with an unaccustomed dryness and an air of sudden authority which discouraged any further questioning. And yet I *knew* I had not been dreaming. And then he kissed me and was his old self again.

I was musing over this singular circumstance at the breakfast table later that morning after Justin had gone to his office. Only Jane was with me. All of a sudden and without looking at me, she murmured: "Mama, has papa been quite himself lately?"

"What do you mean, Jane?" I replied. "In what way do you mean, not quite himself?" I fear I spoke a little too sharply, betraying something of my inner agitation which I try so hard to keep from my children. Jane lifted her eyes and scanned my face intently before speaking again.

"Papa came to my room last night. It was very late—three or four o'clock, I think, and he must have entered on tip-toe so as not to alarm or waken me. I opened my eyes to see him standing over me. He did not speak a word and he looked so unhappy. I have never before seen him look—

ing so wretched!"

"He came to your room, child? Are you sure you were not dreaming?"

"Yes, mama. It is . . . it is the second time he has done so in the last ten days. I am so worried for papa! Each time he seemed so unspeakably sad and—"

"Yes, Jane?"

"As though he were about to—wanted to but could not—implore my help."

"Oh, Ellen, what does all this mean?"

Such were the first of a series of letters which Clara Branderson sent to her friend Ellen Middleton. In a few letters following those quoted so extensively above, she had little new to relate—only that the peculiar feeling of sudden estrangement from Justin returned to her for varying periods from time to time and that in each case Justin gave not the slightest sign of being aware of her unease and distress.

Clara was not the only person to notice that her relationship with Justin, and his attitude, were prone to unexpected subtle alteration.

Some of Justin's friends and colleagues also remarked on the occasional changes they could detect in him. On one occasion, a man with whom Justin had many dealings in the past and with whom relations were always marked by extreme cordiality declared that Justin had betrayed an unsuspected arrogance and impatience in his manner during the last encounter between the two men. The experience had slightly shocked him but he charitably attributed Justin's attitude and tone to some nervous depression caused by overwork or a private worry. Two other colleagues of Justin's and fellow members of the same club observed to their friends one evening that whereas formerly Justin had always been a merry fellow, nowadays he seemed to be making a deliberate and conscious effort to behave with his usual convivial cheerfulness almost as though he were an actor who strives assiduously to render conviction to an unsuitable part he has been called upon to play.

A little later, another man who had dealings with

Branderson in London complained to a mutual acquaintance that Justin had behaved in a way implying that he was somehow superior and held such power he was certain of being obeyed without any question. 'It is strange,' said the man, 'for the first time since I met Branderson I begin to find the fellow irritating!' Others echoed his complaint, but what was stranger was that even when they began to find themselves disconcerted by Justin, they could not escape his fascination. In a way, he acted like a magnet upon those who came into frequent contact with him: he had acquired the knack of making them feel not only uneasy but as though they were subject to his power.

As Justin had formerly been so readily sought after as a companion for lunches, all who knew him regretted the change which periodically came over him. A few cronies were discussing him one evening in the smoking room of his club when he made an unexpected entrance, much to their discomfiture. But to their surprise he behaved completely like the Justin of old. He was his normal, likeable, unassuming self—a man in whose presence it was impossible not to feel at ease. More than one member eyed the other curiously during the evening as though to seek silent corroboration from his neighbor that they had been mistaken in their recent impression of Justin. One eminent banker afterwards declared that he and his friends must all have been victims of some strange common delusion: Justin had not changed!

In addition, those who were on friendly terms with Justin soon found that his friendship was not only giving them pleasure but actual material profit. Justin had recently begun to extend his business operations and to deal on the Stock Exchange on a fairly considerable scale. As a result of his advice, which seemed based more often on intuitiveness than on solid knowledge, several people found themselves unexpectedly prosperous and could not help acknowledging their gratitude for the sudden windfalls he had so spontaneously put in their way. Meanwhile Clara continued her correspondence with Ellen. For some time a complete harmony between herself and Justin seemed to have been restored, though her husband was absent from the

home more frequently than before, explaining that he had many contacts to maintain and interviews of importance to attend.

It was during a dinner at the club that some of Justin's associates noticed another singular incident which they connected in their minds with belief that there were facets of his nature and his capabilities which had hitherto been invisible to them. It was one of those occasions when a good deal of serious business and discussion was combined with fine food and wines, in surroundings far removed from the stressful bustle and confusion of the Stock Exchange and the City, where every minute means money lost or gained. The diners were fully relaxed; they had made an important decision with calm and careful forethought; and Justin had never been more sparkling and witty a companion at table.

More wine from the club's fine cellar had been ordered but the waiter had mistaken the order. He was a Frenchman from Bordeaux and had greater knowledge of the vintages of his own celebrated region than of those of Burgundy. Also, he was new to London and had not yet fully mastered the English language. The poor fellow could not realize his mistake at first and stood red-faced in confusion while one of the members did his best to remedy the situation by attempting to advise the waiter in halting, ungrammatical and poorly remembered French. All of a sudden Justin spoke to the man. There was considerable surprise at the table.

'My dear fellow, I had no idea you spoke the language so well,' observed the man on Justin's left.

'Well, this is a surprise, Justin. I never dreamed that perfect French was one of your many accomplishments,' said another diner. Several of the company looked at Justin admiringly. They knew he was a man of great abilities, but to hear him utter words of French with such fluency and precision, such very un-English and polished preciseness of inflexion, came as a revelation to them.

'You might be a Frenchman or have lived in France for years instead of India from the way you speak,' said another of the diners. Afterwards, they privately com-

pared notes and agreed that Justin's reaction to the compliments was unexpected and odd in the extreme. For an instant his expression had been one of deepest misery! He had then fallen into a dull and unresponsive mood which lasted for several minutes until the table was enlivened with a new topic of conversation. Everybody was of the opinion that Justin, by speaking such pure French, had involuntarily betrayed a secret he wished to keep to himself. He had given every indication of being vexed with himself for having committed an indiscretion—as if letting it be known he had such command of the French language could result in some personal disadvantage. It was certainly not modesty which had caused him to dismiss so curtly the friendly remarks addressed to him concerning his obvious linguistic talents.

The dinner party broke up at a fairly early hour without any further reference being made to the incident. One of Justin's colleagues offered to share his hansom cab with him since they were both going in the same direction towards Kensington. Justin abruptly rejected the offer. Then, as he realized the unfavorable impression he must have given by his abrupt refusal, he immediately apologized for his tone, explaining that he was preoccupied and wished to think over some matter alone by walking part of the distance home with no one to disturb his thoughts. The man in question accepted the apology but a few days later expressed his conviction to friends that 'Justin seemed to have been badly shaken' at the dinner when knowledge of his French had been noticed and commented upon.

Three days later Ellen Middleton received another alarmed letter from Clara:

'I had thought, my dear, that all my recent worries and the feeling that all was not as it should be between Justin and myself was a peculiar, passing phase. Now my peace of mind is destroyed by another strange event. Just *one* slight incident has been enough to upset the fragile serenity I had regained after feeling so reassured about Justin. A colleague of his called Carter, who with his family is a friend of this house and has been our guest more than once, happened to pass by this morning with some papers

for Justin. Also, as is his charming custom, he brought me some flowers. After Mr. Carter and Justin emerged from the study, we stood for some moments in the hall exchanging a few friendly remarks, and I lightly said that I'd heard that Justin and his colleagues had enjoyed an extremely pleasant dinner at the club last Thursday. Mr. Carter made some jest about his hoping that we women were not too jealous of these exclusive masculine gatherings where the men seemed only to regale themselves with gossip and the finest food and wines, whereas in reality much serious business and delicate negotiating might also be accomplished on such occasions. I assured him cheerfully that I understood the ways of men even if, like others of my sex, I was sometimes a little envious of their clubs. Mr. Carter then added that the dinner party that night had ended early so that he hoped I had not felt too long abandoned by my husband. I could not contain my surprise: "Early?" I said nervously. "Why, yes," replied Mr. Carter, "it was not long after ten o'clock when we dispersed."

'Believe me, it was only due to an immense effort at self-control and by masking my amazement with a smile that I was able to conceal my distress and avoid provoking an embarrassing and unseemly scene by giving the impression of being a suspicious wife. But I knew that Justin had not returned home until past one o'clock!

'After Mr. Carter left, I caught Justin observing me carefully. I knew that during my brief conversation in the corridor he had been watching me closely. Before he returned to his study he gazed at me thoughtfully and then said, 'I took a long walk afterwards to clear my head and think upon certain matters. Then, remembering I had left some papers, I returned for a while to the club.'

'For the first time in our marriage I found that Justin was trying to justify himself to me! I cannot tell you how this upset me. But worse—far worse—than this was my conviction that he was not telling the truth! There was a hint of defensiveness in his voice and almost anxiety. I affected a smile and said, "Dearest, you do not have to explain to me if you felt inclined to take a walk or return to your club. I am not a jealous wife, you know." "Of course not," he

said gravely. I touched his arm lightly and said, "I know that something is worrying you dreadfully. Do not deny it! You have been looking so miserable lately. Please will you tell me why, if you love me?" As I looked intently upon his face, I seemed to glimpse a subtle alteration in his expression which evaded all my attempts at analysis. "No, Clara, there is nothing that is on my mind," he said shortly. His countenance then softened and he bent forward and kissed me on my cheek. With the touch of his lips an icy shock went through me, and I again had that feeling that some great gulf had opened between us. After he had returned to his study and I passed the door, the curious sense *that he was not there, that the room was empty* suddenly took hold of me. It is the only way I can explain the sensation. I now know that for the first time in all these years there is something that has entered Justin's life which is hidden to me and of which he will not speak.

'You may well think, Ellen, that what I relate to you is trivial, that I have become hyper-nervous beyond the bounds of all reason. I would not even mention this incident to you were it not that something compels me to do so and tells me that for my own sake if no one else's it is imperative that I do so. Now here is something stranger. Later, as I came to the living room and laid my hand upon the door handle, the conviction came to me that there was *someone* in there. The only people in the house at the time, apart from Justin and myself were one of the maids, Charlotte, and little Terence who was in his nursery. I had seen Susan, the other maid, and Mrs. Penfold go out to shop after I had given them their instructions. Rachel was at her school and Jane was at her music college. I had decided to go into the living room to write a letter to a friend in India with whom I maintain a regular if not frequent correspondence. As I opened the door I was unable to refrain from calling out "is there someone here?" even though it was quite obvious to my eyes that there was not. Here, no doubt, you will say, poor Clara. She is obviously quite demented. But I assure you the sensation that there was another living thinking presence in that room was positive.

There was something there which seemed to have laid in wait for me and which was determined to watch! Nonetheless, I forced myself to sit down at the writing table and to pen my letter. After a few moments the feeling I was being watched disappeared from me as though what I had to write was of no interest to whatever lurked invisible there. I am now certain that this house is "haunted". I know you will not make light of this notion since you and your poor dear husband have a professional interest in such matters. One last thing: for the third time I have seen an apparition of Justin arise before me, even though I knew he was in another part of the house. There was the same pleading expression, the same mute entreaty for help ...'

Had it not been for the fact that her husband, a well known antiquarian and expert on local quaint lore as well as an ardent student of so-called supernatural phenomena was chronically ill, Ellen Middleton would have come straight up from Devon to see Clara. For the moment, all she could do was to reassure her friend as best she could and urge her not to feel any inhibitions about continuing to supply her with all information about the curious sensations she had been experiencing and the phenomena which so perturbed and mystified her. She also advised Clara to endeavor to ascertain whether the house had any history of abnormal happenings during its two previous occupancies.

Meanwhile, another small odd incident occurred in the Branderson household which seemed to prove conclusively that Justin was not always his usual self. A small dinner party had been given for two couples, a Mr. Carter who had brought Clara the flowers, his wife and a Colonel Duckworth and his lady who lived in the same square and who had become friendly with the Brandersons. The Duckworths had also spent some years in India. The Colonel had commanded a regiment in one of the northern provinces and like Justin had taken a profound interest in many of the native arts and beliefs. After dinner, as was customary, the ladies retired into the drawing room while the men lit their cigars and lingered a while over their port. In the course of the men's conversation, Colonel Duckworth and Justin naturally touched upon their experiences in India—

a country in which Carter was also deeply interested—and mentioned the fact that both in their own modest ways had been collectors of some of that fascinating country's art and lore.

'I have a few pieces that you might care to see afterward,' said Justin casually. 'None of them are of any great worth, I assure you, nonetheless they are curious and original. From what you say, Colonel, I am sure that you have been a far more discerning collector than I have either had the time or the knowledge to become.'

Colonel Duckworth, was, in fact, excessively proud of his Indian bronzes and other objects.

'Not at all, Justin, not at all.' The Colonel nodded towards a small cabinet with glass-paned doors at the far end of the room. 'I could not help noticing as we came in that you have one or two extremely fine figurines there.'

Justin rose to his feet. 'They are only slight things. Nonetheless, gentlemen, if you like I shall show them to you before we rejoin the ladies.'

He returned from the cabinet with three small bronzes.

'Ah, the goddess Kali!' said the Colonel, picking up a statuette some six inches high. 'Kali, the destroyer. The goddess of destruction and death. See, Carter, here she is in her female aspect. Notice the way the artist has represented her with her necklace of human hands. Not a very pretty sight, eh?'

Carter shivered slightly as he inspected the black statuette. As he said later, despite the consummate craftsmanship of the figurine, he found it repelling. It was almost as if its finely wrought features became possessed of life as he handled the object. It seemed to him to radiate an aura of corruption and malevolence. He placed it back on the table.

'I have heard of her evil cult,' he said thoughtfully. 'Don't her followers obey her precepts by executing dreadful murders and other crimes? How strange that the faith of the Hindus, with so much that is good and compassionate in it, should show itself so tolerant towards such unpleasant beliefs and practices.'

'Other religions have been similarly guilty,' remarked the Colonel as he stared down at the figure of the goddess.

‘What do you think, Justin?’

To the Colonel’s and Carter’s surprise, Justin remained silent as though he had not heard the question addressed to him. His face was impassive as the Colonel pushed the statuette towards him. Carter later declared that all hint of thought and feeling appeared to have vanished from Justin’s countenance.

To break the silence, Carter said, ‘But at least followers of Christianity and other great faiths of the world do not feel the necessity to create such material images of all that is evil and destructive as the artist has done in this case.’

‘And what do you mean by that?’ said Justin slowly, the look of interest returning to his momentarily glazed eyes. His expression disturbed Carter, who replied with a forced lightness of tone, ‘Well now, let us take Christianity as an example. Men still make the image of Jesus the Saviour as the image of all that is good and uplifting for human inspiration. But they no longer feel any need to create images to represent the antithesis to the good that Jesus symbolizes in His person. Since the superstitious Middle Ages, artists have not needed to make sculptures or pictures of devils representing Satan and his dark forces.’

Justin gave Carter a look which the latter could only interpret as one of superiority tinged with contempt.

‘There have been many conventionalized representations of Satan and similar emblems of evil in the world,’ said the Colonel, who did not see the look. ‘But I quite agree that in our modern age we do not find such things necessary. Not unless we belong to some primitive tribe or else subscribe to one of those small diabolical cults which a few perverse people in our society are said to adhere to today.’

‘It is not because men do not find it necessary,’ said Justin heavily. ‘It is because they *cannot* give form to what they can sometimes glimpse.’

‘And this?’ said the Colonel, indicating the statuette.

‘Mere childishness. The man who made it had not the remotest apprehension of the . . . the . . .’

To Carter’s and the Colonel’s alarm, Justin’s face became pale and his lips actually trembled. Both guests felt that an icy chill was pervading the dining room while Justin tried to

speaking. He closed his eyes. The Colonel got up quickly from his seat.

'I say, old chap, are you all right?'

Justin's shoulders heaved for a few moments and then he opened his eyes again. Both men were startled by the fear and torment which twisted his normally handsome, composed features. He looked, as the Colonel afterwards remarked, like a man condemned to an awful death who sees the instrument of his execution.

'You have no idea,' he said in a tone so low as to be almost inaudible. 'Had the artist the smallest intimation of the real truth, the real dimensions and import of what he falteringly tried to convey ...' Justin shivered and lowered his eyes.

'Yes? Go on,' said the Colonel nervously, wondering whether his host had been afflicted with a sudden malaise. The was a long pause.

'Then his mind would have been irremediably destroyed,' finished Justin.

Justin finally looked up again. He had completely stopped trembling and, in disturbing contrast to the anguish he had displayed but a few seconds before there was a cold quiet smile on his face such as his guests had never seen previously. In his demeanor there was a suggestion that he had an immeasurably greater knowledge of the subject under discussion than either of his guests.

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' Justin said in a calm tone. 'I fear I have been discourteous. A temporary indisposition, I am afraid. I have been somewhat overtired of late. What is it we were talking about? Upon my word, I have no remembrance. Shall we join the ladies?'

When the guests left the Branderson home that night, the Colonel drew Carter aside for a moment while the ladies stepped into their waiting carriages.

'It is true,' the Colonel said quickly. 'Did you remark it? He really had no recollection of what he was saying when we were looking at that damned statuette. What on earth has got into the fellow? And did you see the way his manner changed so quickly?'

Carter had indeed remarked the same thing. He also

agreed with the Colonel that after first feeling a profound compassion for Justin, the emotion had changed within a few seconds to one of fear and loathing as he noted the expression on Justin's face after he had recovered from his seizure . . . an expression that denoted nothing so much as an inner triumphant rejoicing in the possession of some hideous secret.

THE LETTERS

While some of Justin's friends and business associates began to remark on the increasing frequency with which his tone and manner were liable to sudden, inexplicable alteration and on the way in which he now seemed prone to strange lapses of memory, Clara did her best to persuade herself that her fears and visions had a perfectly rational explanation.

For a time Clara was untroubled by any further apparitions, and in her letters to her friend she described them as 'bad dreams.' In a subsequent letter to Ellen, she referred again to the odd incident of the telegraph message to which Justin had so long delayed a reply, of his late homecoming from the club and Jane's affirmation that she had also seen her father in the night:

'Why should I not dream of Justin in such a way sometimes? I am sure that he is undergoing moments of deep anxiety as he grapples with some new problems which must have arisen in his affairs. Although he prefers not to speak of them to me because of his loving concern for my peace of mind, he cannot prevent awareness of them from reaching me in my sleeping mind by what I believe is called the telepathic process and which so often operates between two beings very closely bound together by strong love and mutual understanding. What is strange about that? All that alarmed me was that I had never received such communications previously—no doubt because he has never been so worried or perplexed before. As for Jane—well, as she is the closest to him of our children, it is understandable that she also senses his worries and subconsciously translates them into dreams in her mind. And as far as Justin's occasional absences, what could be more natural than that he should feel compelled to seek seclusion for a while in order to debate with himself on whatever matters disturb him?'

But Clara was not to be reassured for long. Justin continued to be away from the house more frequently and when he was at home, often showed signs of extreme fatigue and had difficulty in sleeping at nights. On several occasions during the daytime Clara had found him in a state of apparent exhaustion, as though drained of all his physical and mental energy, in a kind of torpor from which he aroused himself only with difficulty. She begged him not to overwork, but each time Justin assured her that he would take more relaxation as soon as he was able but that just now matters of great importance were absorbing his attention and he preferred not to discuss them. Again Clara's deepest feminine intuitions told her things were still far from truly normal between her and her husband.

In late August the terror struck her in earnest. Our only source for knowing what happened in the Branderson household between that date and Ellen's visit in early November are the series of letters from Clara to her friend. I present them to the reader without any further comment than that they were written with such wealth of detail at the insistence of Ellen (no doubt urged by her husband Robert, who was known to be keenly interested in matters pertaining to the supernatural) and that their tone is mainly one of dignified restraint. Certainly I see nothing in them to suggest the ravings of a hysteric or the self-induced fantasies of a deranged mind. Reading all these letters again I find their cumulative effect overwhelming and ominously suggestive of an impending disaster.

I have only deleted a few lines here and there when Clara writes of matters in no way connected with the case. I must also emphasize that none of Ellen Middleton's letters have ever come to light. Most probably they were destroyed.

LETTER OF CLARA BRANDERSON TO ELLEN MIDDLETON, AUGUST 25, 1886

... Before I describe what happened last night, I must tell you that Justin has been defying the doctor's injunctions by making even more frequent business trips lately. Still, the tonics and cordials have done him some good, for he has

shown less signs of tiredness and absentmindedness. Soon, he told me, he hoped to have all his affairs under control and then we might even consider the possibility of a holiday. I was delighted at this glad news, and although Justin informed me that he would be away from home for the entire day and part of the night I was less affected than usual by this temporary parting. I fully trusted in my dear Justin and my hopes were high that nothing would impede the speedy resumption of the happy and leisured mode of life we had come to enjoy.

This time it was Jane who was the most influenced by her father's absence. As I have told you, she is a highly imaginative and artistic girl, and spiritually she has always been much closer to her father than Rachel, who has always been of a gayer and less thoughtful nature, though equally devoted a daughter. We were a happy trio that evening after supper. Little Terence went to bed at his usual hour, and we three women sat for a while in the conservatory. For a little while Jane read to us. It is always a delight to hear her soft, mellifluous voice. What a gifted girl she is! Truly, were it not that her talent inclines to music, I do believe she would have great promise as an actress.

After reading, and while the shadows lengthened in the garden outside, Jane began to play for us on her violin. Suddenly she laid the instrument down and looked out into the gathering darkness while Rachel slipped away to fetch another lamp. Although the night was warm, I shivered slightly. So did Jane. A vague sense of unease returned to me. Jane was looking at me, apparently deeply troubled. Again I felt the icy sensation. Both Jane and I were thinking about Justin, and she knew it. A moment later the door-bell rang and Rachel, who had just returned, ran to open it—Mrs. Penfold and the maids had retired. She came back with a note.

‘It was a messenger, mama,’ she said, ‘from papa.’

The note simply stated that Justin would be detained late. He asked me not to wait up for him and on no account to worry about him. All was well.

‘He is working so hard for us,’ I said as I folded the note again and put it down.

'I wish papa would not have to go away so often,' Rachel said wistfully. 'It is such fun when he is here with us in the evenings. Why must he work so hard? We have all we need, have we not?'

'He is not working—he is fighting,' Jane said in a low voice. I looked at her in astonishment. There was a faraway look in her eyes and she was clenching her fists so hard the white of the knuckles showed plainly.

'What do you mean?' I cried.

Jane shut her eyes a moment. 'It is nothing,' she said. 'You know I say odd things sometimes.'

I shivered again and so did Jane. Only Rachel seemed unaffected by the sudden change of mood that had overtaken us. She made some laughing remark, the words of which escaped me, and shortly afterwards we went to bed. After she had done so, Jane and I looked at each other anxiously. There was a long silence, finally interrupted by Jane! 'Oh, mama, do you not see—do you not *feel* that papa is . . . is in some great struggle? I am so afraid for him!' Then she began to cry.

I had the same presentiment. I did not retire after Jane had finally done so. Instead, I sat up in the conservatory, staring into the darkened garden, conscious of nothing but the increased rate of the beating of my heart and the physical sense of oppression that weighed me down and drove every other thought from my mind. At length, after I had entered into what I can only call a mental oblivion, there came to me the sense that from some far distance Justin was silently calling upon me as though he wanted me to pray for him, or at any rate sustain him with my own spirit. As I thought of Justin I suddenly became subject to a new and even more alarming sensation: the stronger the image of Justin became in my mind, the more my vitality—both of body and mind—were drained from me. I no longer had the strength to hold the book in my hands, my respiration slowed down, my sight was blacked out, and I felt myself slipping away into a region of utter darkness. I do not know whether I fell asleep or unconscious as though in a faint. My last sensations were the pounding of blood in my temples and the throbbing of my pulse and heart. There was no thought in

my mind. I might have been a machine.

Seconds, minutes or even centuries might have passed for all I knew. Then, slowly, upon my sight or my mind's eye, there became imprinted the sensation that I was no longer in the house, the walls of which had mysteriously dissolved. I was moving but without any feeling of bodily weight. I was encompassed with darkness yet in this darkness there flickered a distant light. It grew in brightness until it utterly dazzled me. I seemed to be in a room and something was holding me fast in an iron grip. Bonds of steel seemed to be around my wrists and a vice tightening around my head, which pounded as though it would burst. In a red haze I dimly apprehended a shadowy figure in front of me. Words in a tongue unknown to me filtered through the storm of pain which wracked me. I seemed to be writhing while my chest was being torn open, my heart plucked out by fiery pincers. I was then possessed by a raging emotion completely foreign to me. How can I describe it except to say that I know what a wild beast must feel when it is caged for the first time? There had come into me a ferocity beyond description, a rage to free myself from my confinement, to smash, to destroy, to rend, to fling myself loose and wreak havoc. But worst of all, as the fury raged and then ebbed within me, there came into my mental vision the face of Justin, sad beyond measure, his eyes haunted with terror. For a moment the murderous fit left me and in a cry of torment I heard Justin call me: Clara! Clara! Clara! A rush of wind seemed to carry me away. My bonds had burst as I rushed forward through a gathering mist towards Justin's dimming face. Blackness then swept over me and there was a terrible crash. A moment later I found myself in my normal bodily state, standing erect in the now darkened conservatory, the cast iron table overturned at my feet, the lamp smashed on the floor! Jane and Mrs. Penfold, both carrying night-lamps, were gazing in alarm at me from the door.

'It is nothing,' I said. 'I fell asleep and when I awoke I knocked the table over.'

I had never felt so weak in my life, and it was only with Mrs. Penfold and Jane supporting me that I was able to

reach my room, where Jane remained with me for a while. At length my strength returned. I bade Jane go back to her room and, reluctantly, she obeyed. When she left, I saw to my surprise that the hour was only slightly past midnight. My terrible experience had only lasted a quarter of an hour at most! But it was more than any ordinary dream. I had felt as though imprisoned by steel hands, and after I had come to myself my wrists were aching fiercely, as though indeed they had only just been released from fetters, and my head was throbbing with pain.

Exhausted though I was, sleep did not come easily to me as I lay in bed, wondering whether my mind, like a ship caught in a tempest, would be driven to wreck on the reefs of madness. I was certain that if I should have to suffer another such agonizing experience my reason would founde forever!

I was in an agony of suspense as I waited for Justin. I was now certain that Justin had been in great danger. Jane's strange remark that he had been 'fighting' returned to me again and again as I lay exhausted, straining for some sound of his return. At last I heard the rattle of a carriage. It stopped outside the house, there was the sound of the front door opening and closing quietly; then came the soft tread of footsteps on the staircase and a moment later my beloved Justin was standing before me. He gazed at me by the light of the gas-lamp with an expression of deep compassion and—strange to relate—something like gratitude in his eyes.

'I have been so worried about you!' I said. Justin smiled wearily, then bent over me and scanned my face attentively. 'If you love me truly,' he said, 'then there is no great need to worry. Your love is the best protection.' His use of the word *protection* revived all my fears. Obviously aware of the effect it had upon me, he bit his lower lip and frowned slightly as though cross with himself for having spoken an indiscretion. 'Protection?' I repeated. 'What do you mean by that?' 'Did I say protection? Upon my word, I meant nothing other than that the loving heart and soul of a devoted wife is a man's best armor against any kind of infelicity. I mean, my dear, that with your love and concern for me, any worries or slight difficulties which might arise

for me in the course of my work are soon overcome.'

They were sweet words, but they did not dispel my anxiety. He spoke them with great feeling, but I knew that some other thought was uppermost in his mind and that just as I had been so alarmed for his sake, so he was profoundly concerned for me. But more than this—what most sent my mind racing was the undeniable, the shatteringly evident fact that as he leaned over me I could see on both his wrists reddish marks as though they had been enclosed in some tight bonds such as those which had tormented me in my frightful dream! Needless to say, I slept but little that night...

LETTER OF AUGUST 29

Another strange dream—if it be a dream at all! It has left me so bereft of energy and will that it is only now that I find the strength to write to you. I have received your last letter. I shall do as you say for as long as I am able. You tell me to keep a journal or at least notes of everything peculiar that manifests itself here. I shall do my utmost to do so until my reason or my remaining strength desert me completely. You promise to help me as soon as possible—that prospect helps to sustain me.

Last night Justin was lying by my side, peacefully asleep. I remained awake for some time—still upset and mystified by the events of that other night and the significance of the peculiar marks on Justin's wrists. As I finally tried to compose myself for sleep I was seized by the premonition *that it would be dangerous for me to go to sleep no matter how tired my mind and my body*. Do not ask me why or how, for I have no idea. But this sense was so acute that my mind instantly became alert. I thought I could hear a far distant, very faint voice whispering to me and bidding me *not to sleep on any account*. I was possessed by cold fear to such an extent that I found myself paralyzed, incapable of any movement even though I felt an immense urge to rise, leave the side of my husband and escape the room. As I lay there as though dead, I realized that the icy cold sensation afflicting me was not merely caused by my terror but by an actual

drop in the temperature of the room, as though all the windows had been opened and the blasts of mid-winter had been allowed entry. One of the curtains was slightly drawn, allowing a ray of moonlight to stream across the floor and across the foot of the bed. As I gazed at the moonbeam, it gradually became obscured from my sight as though a veil had been drawn over the window. As the cold increased, numbing my body, the moonlight grew even dimmer and the surrounding darkness ever blacker. I felt faint. I was slipping towards an abyss of unconsciousness when like an alarm bell there again flashed in my mind the thought that on no account must I surrender to oblivion, that if I did something irrevocably harmful would happen to me. With great effort of will I managed to keep my eyes open, straining to see the friendly beam of light which was now practically obliterated by the gathering blackness. But as I fought to remain awake, another sinister sensation impressed itself on my consciousness. I was sure that Justin and myself were no longer alone in that room!

I shall never forget that moment as I became aware that there was an invisible presence with us. It was not in front of me, it was not before my eyes or above my recumbent body, *it was all around me*, it pervaded every corner of the room like some evil vapor. It was bodiless and all-embracing and it had an active intelligence, for I also knew that in some manner it was watching me. For a few seconds I *thought* I could see piercing eyes looking down at me from the ceiling, and then a dim face or rather, to be correct, the shadowy outline of a face. As I stared at it I had the most peculiar feeling that if only it would materialize, I would recognize it and then it would cease to afflict me.

Suddenly, sharp pains went through my head, my eyes blurred, the room was rocking, the walls turning around me. The ray of moonlight grew bright as before and began to flit across the room. Again I seemed to make out eyes above me, but this time they grew dimmer and as they did so I felt myself the target of some malevolent force. It was exploding into fury and directing its anger towards me as though I had been impeding the accomplishment of its purpose. A weight was oppressing me, my eyelids had become leaden,

all feeling was rapidly ebbing from me, and then I heard a voice shrilling through my brain, calling me by name. In an instant I recovered my full faculties and sat up in bed. The sense of an evil presence remained although the room had resumed its normal aspect, and Justin was still sleeping peacefully beside me.

I arose from the bed and lit a candle. I inspected Justin's face. His features were completely rigid, and had it not been for the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his chest, I would have been certain he was dead. His face was unnaturally pale, and as I touched his cheek I felt the same coldness which had come over myself. But it was not this which caused me to rush from the room: it was the conviction that the spirit of life which now occupied Justin's body was somehow not his own! Whatever had spread like an invisible vapor throughout the room now seemed to have been absorbed by Justin's sleeping body. As I looked at him again, instinct made me pull back from the sight as though I had found some poisonous serpent or dangerous beast in the bed. I was struck, as though by an electric shock, with a sense of *loathing*. A moment later I was in the corridor outside the room.

As I debated with myself what to do, I heard what sounded like muffled weeping. It came from Jane's room and I went there at once. As I knocked gently on the door there was a cry of alarm. Afraid that some evil thing was also attacking my daughter, I opened the door and rushed in to find her sobbing bitterly, her face buried in a pillow. As I put my arms around her and tried to comfort her, she told me, 'I have had such a dreadful dream again. Papa was here and—' She burst into tears again before she could finish her sentence. Finally she managed to tell me that, as on the previous occasion, she had seen a vision in her sleep of Justin standing silently before her. Again he had a haunted, pleading expression, as if he had come to implore her help. All the love and devotion in her soul had gone out to meet him but his image suddenly was blotted out and Jane awoke, a victim of the same feelings of intense cold and oppression of the spirit I had suffered only minutes earlier.

Jane then voiced the thought which came to us both

simultaneously. 'Rachel ... Terence!' Had their sleep too been disturbed in such a harrowing manner? Telling Jane to remain where she was, I hurried to Terence's nursery and then to Rachel's room. Both were sleeping soundly and there was an expression of peace on their faces. After returning to Jane and speaking a few words of comfort to her with an assurance I did not feel in my heart, I steeled myself to go back to Justin.

He was sitting up in bed and looking around him in a daze, but the room was now free of the sense of evil. Everything was calm, and as I took Justin's hand in mine I discovered that his body had regained its normal temperature. He expressed surprise that I had left the room. But in answer to his unspoken question, I found myself quite unable to explain to him the real reason for my precipitate flight or the terror I had felt as I had looked at him. Instead, I merely stated that I had awoken from a dreadful nightmare which had left me alarmed about the security of the children. His reaction to my use of the word nightmare was as violent as though I had described every detail of my awful experience and the state in which he had appeared to me only a few minutes earlier.

'You had a nightmare?' he repeated, taking me by the wrist and searching my face as though he expected to see some mark it might have left on my countenance. 'Tell me—what kind of nightmare? Describe it to me if you can. Have you had such a dream before?' The urgency in his tone startled me, and I realized that for some reason it was vitally important for Justin to know what I had seen. He asked me again, insistently, and suppressing an inward shudder I told him briefly that I had dreamed or imagined that the room was being invaded by some ill-disposed ghost or spirit and that Justin had been transformed into a total stranger. When I spoke the word "stranger," I *knew* from Justin's look of consternation that he was aware of the reason for these dreams which had been tormenting me. But all he would tell me when he had regained his composure was that I need not be afraid of sleeping again that night. Needless to say, I slept no more that night.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 7

I am alone in the house now except for the domestics, Terence and Justin—when he is here. It has long been arranged that both girls would go to the Continent at the commencement of this autumn. Jane is to study at the Cologne Conservatory, for which she has been so highly recommended by her teachers here and for which she has won a scholarship, and Rachel is to perfect her French and learn the social graces and accomplishments at the Academy in Geneva. Both girls had been looking forward with great excitement to their European sojourn, but when the time of departure came we were all filled by a sorrow and anxiety greater than that usual on such occasions. Rachel, I know, was pleased to go, for I could see that her normally ebullient spirits had been depressed lately. Jane, however, showed considerable distress and even asked me whether she could not defer her trip? I know that like me she is terrified that some harm may befall her father and she feels it her duty to stay and sustain him during whatever trial he may be enduring. But Justin was adamant. We could not express our real anxieties, but he knew that Jane was reluctant to leave him. He insisted, however, that such opportunities as were offered his daughters were far too precious to be missed. What he did not say but what I could see he felt was that somehow it would be better, for the girls' sakes, that they now leave this house for some time.

Later, Justin confirmed to me his unspoken urgent desire that the girls should no longer be under this roof. He urged that Terence and I should take a holiday, perhaps after accompanying our daughters to the Continent, adding that he thought I looked tired and that the boy should have a change of air. I refused, insisting that I would stay with him. How could I leave my husband all alone at this time? Why, indeed, did he betray such a pressing desire for us all to leave, as though he were the captain of a vessel in danger of sinking who orders his passengers and crew to abandon ship while there is still time?

I persisted in my refusal, saying that I could see that he was overtired and in need of me, and that my place was by

his side. At last he accepted the inevitable—for however great my fears are and however strangely Justin may behave—I will not desert him now. He said little but I saw that his expression was not only one of deep gratitude but also of great concern for me.

And so I stay in this house, which is unnaturally silent, with Terence enclosed in some secret world of his own and talking little to me when not with his governess, and Justin more and more alone in his study or else away from home.

My uneasiness grows as I feel that Justin is keeping some doleful secret from me. I miss the girls greatly but I rejoice that they are no longer here, even though no more phantoms have appeared to trouble my sleep.

Justin keeps longer and longer hours in the study, always giving the strictest instructions that he is not to be disturbed. Lately he is not only working but seems to be reading a great deal. Twice recently some volumes were delivered from various bookshops and even from France. He will not tell me whatever it is that he is so voraciously reading, and to tell the truth, the atmosphere is so strange now that I do not even try to find out from him. I do my best to distract my mind by keeping Terence company when his governess, Miss Primrose, is not here. She complains that he has been listless and inattentive lately. Mrs. Penfold and the maids also seem to have been infected by the depression which hangs so heavily over this house. Several times I have been greatly tempted to speak of all these dreams to Justin but there is something in his attitude which prevents me from confiding fully in him. Each time I nerve myself to speak, my deepest instinct holds me back. It is most curious, but I feel that to discuss these matters with Justin at the present time would somehow be harmful to him and destroy what strength of mind he still possesses. It is obvious, at any rate, that he is extremely busy dealing with many problems and needs peace and privacy in which to apply himself to their resolution.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 9

... Another strange incident. Yesterday Justin spent the

entire afternoon and the early part of the evening in his study. Earlier he appeared singularly tired and remote. Mrs. Penfold remarked to me that the master seemed to be working extremely hard lately and she hoped that he was not overtiring himself. She was reluctant to say more but after I had pressed her, she admitted that something was worrying her about the master. It was while I was briefly talking with her that I noticed one of the maids was staring at me in a most curious manner. When she noticed my glance, she at once looked away but I was sure that her expression as she looked at me was one of nervous bewilderment and even apprehension.

Mrs. Penfold then told me something even more disturbing. She herself, as was usual, had brought tea to Justin in his study. As she knocked on the door, Justin had commanded her to enter in a tone of unusual sharpness. As she went into the room with the tray, she had a vivid sensation that the study was unnaturally cold even though a fire had been lit some hours before.

'How do you mean, "cold?"' I asked. 'The master's study is always warm and the weather is mild. It is one of the coziest rooms in the house.' I knew of course that after spending so many years in India, Justin, like myself, was unusually sensitive to the lower temperatures of England and suffered greatly from variations in the climate that people here hardly notice.

Mrs. Penfold could not explain exactly what she meant. All she could say was, 'It seemed so chilly, ma'am. Almost as though it were the middle of winter. Perhaps there's damp in the walls, ma'am. Anyway, I never felt so cold in all my life. The poor master—perhaps it's not good for him to be cooped up in there for so long. It really was so cold in there it wasn't natural. I would have thought the walls had turned to ice—'

'And Mr. Branderson?' I inquired. 'Did he not notice the cold?'

Mrs. Penfold looked puzzled. 'Well, that's the funny thing, ma'am. He was asleep as I came in with the tea. Sound asleep in his chair and looking so tired I hardly had the heart to wake him.'

'But you said he spoke to you when you knocked on the door?'

'That's what was so strange, ma'am. It was the way he spoke to me. I'd never heard the master speak in such a tone before. It was—well, ma'am, you'll think I'm a fanciful and silly old woman, I know, but the fact of the matter is it mightn't have been his voice at all. And there he was sound asleep a moment later.' . . . As Mrs. Penfold spoke I remembered how yesterday, as I passed the door of the study, I had shivered for an instant and had the curious fancy that as I went by, the heavy door of the study had suddenly dissolved to let an icy draught of air rush out. Later I had forgotten the matter after attributing it to a sudden nervous tremor or temporary faintness of my own.

Even though I have had no more strange dreams I wake each morning feeling drained, as though coming out of some deep, drugged coma, and it is only as the day wears on that I recover my usual energy. I decided now to see for myself whether Justin's study was in any way subject to dampness which could account for such mysterious coldness.

It was while Justin was absent from the house, having gone to his office, that I visited the study. All appeared normal. I felt the walls and they were quite dry to the touch. The piles of papers on Justin's desk were witness to his recent intensive work. Everything in the thick-carpeted, book-filled room, with its few Indian vases and framed miniatures, seemed comfortable and soothing. I was about to go out when something caught my eye. One of the lower drawers in Justin's desk—which neither the maids nor Mrs. Penfold ever touched or even approached—was slightly open and from it was protruding a piece of dark wood. For some reason I felt an imperative urge to go over to the desk and see what it was that was preventing the drawer from shutting properly. A moment later I was standing by the desk with the fragments of a broken crucifix in my hands!

The fact that there was a crucifix in the room at all was astounding. As you know, Justin has never been a conventional follower of any religion. He believes that all great religions contain a kernel of universal truth but has never observed any of them in their ritual. Although he had col-

lected various Indian images, being deeply interested in the art and lore of that country, and has other Oriental objects in the house, I knew that I had never seen him in possession of the symbol of the Christian faith. But my feelings on discovering such an object in Justin's study was more than astonishment. Believe me or not, my dear Ellen, the fact remains that the sacred symbol had been violently broken in two! It was a heavy cross, such as may be purchased in any establishment selling religious articles. It was of dark wood, about one inch thick and about six inches high, and on it there was the figure of Jesus, made of ivory as far as I could determine. It was immensely strong and yet—and this was at once obvious—someone had deliberately broken it in two, as though in a paroxysm of blasphemous fury. And who could it be if not Justin? And for what purpose? I could not help bursting into tears as I contemplated the remains of the crucifix. The gesture they told me of was one that must have come from an inexplicable malevolence! I replaced the pieces as I had found them and hurried out of the room as though from a place accursed.

That evening was pure agony for me as I tried to hide my distress from Justin after he had returned home. Not even the fact that we had received a letter from Simon with the joyful news that his regiment would be coming back to England shortly could dissipate my perplexity. To what sort of a father will our first-born now return?

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 14

Justin had a strange visitor yesterday evening. As usual, he had spent most of the day in his study. His behavior was perfectly calm and he gave no signs of observing my struggle to keep my emotions under control while I wondered what fury had possessed him to break the crucifix. Naturally I could not bring myself to raise the matter with him. I am—to put it plainly—too frightened.

At half-past six, as I was passing through the entrance hall, I heard a carriage draw up outside the house. A person emerged from it and swiftly ran up the steps to the door. Before the visitor could ring, I opened the door and found

myself confronted with a slightly dark-skinned, middle-aged man of obviously foreign aspect. Speaking beautiful English, he courteously inquired whether Justin was at home as he had to see him on an urgent matter of business. Leaving the visitor in the hall, I went to Justin's study and knocked on the door. There was no reply. I knocked again and, still receiving no answer, opened the door. To my amazement, I saw Justin reclining back in his great armchair, sound asleep—just as Mrs. Penfold had seen him earlier. Before I could recover from my surprise—for Justin had told me he would be working until dinnertime—he awoke and stared at me as though he were seeing a perfect stranger. In a few moments he fully recovered his senses and after explaining that he must have fallen into an involuntary doze, went to greet his foreign visitor, briefly introducing him to me as Signor Orsini and saying that he was a colleague from abroad. They went at once into the study, but as they passed through the door I could not refrain from lingering behind them and then—oh, God forgive me—committing the sin of eavesdropping on my own husband. Just before the door closed I heard Justin murmur, 'You should not have come here, you know ...' In response to Justin's reproach, the foreigner began to say something in an urgent tone but I lost his words as the door closed.

Half an hour later, I saw Justin and the man go out of the house towards the waiting carriage, which left after a few more words were exchanged. Justin then came straight into the drawing room, where I was standing, and without preamble informed me that an urgent matter had arisen which made it necessary for him to undertake a journey to Paris the next morning. He will be gone for two or even three days. I did not dare ask him the reason for this unexpected trip which fills me with foreboding.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 17

Justin's parting words to me were, 'I know you love me. Do not worry on my account but keep me company with your loving thoughts.' I have indeed done so and the result has been yet another dream—the strangest and most fright-

ening of all so far. I fear more than ever for my own sanity but, as you advise me, I conceal nothing from you.

Once more I found it hard to compose myself to sleep, and when I finally succeeded I appeared to be moving in a strange dark world in which Justin was silently summoning me to join him across the intervening gulfs of darkness and space that were separating us. I felt myself soaring out of my body to a great height above this house and then descending rapidly. The encompassing obscurity began to change into dim light and I found myself impelled in a certain direction towards what looked like a large mansion surrounded by trees. An instant later I was in a garden and moving towards a curious small edifice built, as far as I could see in the faint moonlight which illuminated the scene, after the manner of an Egyptian pyramid. There were no windows in this structure but only an iron door surmounted by strange reliefs carved in the stone and flanked on either side by winged crouching figures.

Standing by the door was Justin, holding a travelling bag. He then proceeded to do something which in normal circumstances would have filled me with incredulous surprise but which now aroused no emotion whatsoever in me. I had become an *eye*, devoid of all feeling and thought. I saw Justin take something out of his bag and begin to work upon the lock in this curious iron door, as though to force an entrance. In a short time the heavy door swung open and Justin went through it after taking out a small lantern from his bag and lighting it. By its glow I could see that his features were tensed and drawn. At the same time I felt that he was summoning me to give him all the spiritual succor of which I was capable. Strange to relate, as I watched this obviously illegal entry into this odd building, the only reaction which suddenly came to my sleeping mind was one of acquiescence, as though I felt it were normal and indeed desirable for Justin to be engaged in this mysterious activity. For several minutes he remained motionless inside the building, which gave the appearance of being a tomb or mausoleum, its walls lined with more curious figures resembling those on the exterior by the door. From Justin's expression it was apparent he was waiting or listening. At

length, apparently satisfied no one was coming to disturb his activities, Justin moved forward towards a second smaller aperture in the wall beyond him and I saw him looking at a large stone sarcophagus or coffin, also covered with curious reliefs and winged figures. As he touched its sides, I was seized by a sense of danger but felt unable to communicate the warning which flashed into my mind. I now had the sense that we were no longer alone in that tomb—neither Justin in his body or myself in my dreaming state. Some living being or, to put it better, some *living thought* had entered the mausoleum from outside. The walls and roofs blurred and then vanished, but instead of the moonlit landscape outside, all I could see was impenetrable blackness.

Then from this obscurity, there gradually appeared the same shadowy face of my recent nightmare. Again I saw two piercing eyes gazing downwards, this time directed upon Justin, and as before I had the conviction that only a slight mental effort was needed on my part to recognize the face, but I was incapable of making this effort. As Justin took some tools out of his bag and began to work at the task of opening the coffin, the outlines of the face—now hovering only a slight distance above and behind Justin—became clearer.

I tried to call out to Justin. I tried my utmost to transmit a warning to him, to beg him to guard against the presence overlooking him, but it was all in vain. I watched while Justin continued his unholy task and began to pry up the heavy stone lid of the sarcophagus while the face behind him became sharper and more furious. I can see this face now as I write these words. It was emaciated and distinguished only by its finely chiselled features, long pointed jaw, aquiline nose and high wide brow suggestive of great intelligence. As it saw Justin, its angry expression suddenly changed to a sardonic, triumphant one. Of my own dream-presence, it appeared entirely unaware.

Finally, Justin succeeded in removing the lid. Lifting up the lantern, he peered down into the coffin. Suddenly released from my temporary immobility, I found myself by his side, also gazing into the coffin as though expecting to

discover some secret. It contained the body of an elderly man wrapped in a cloak. It was shrunken and withered but without evident signs of decomposition. Its dead face, with closed eyes, corresponded in every detail with the one I could still see hovering above Justin.

I can hardly bear to relate what happened next, yet the scene is so etched in my mind that I doubt I shall ever forget it. After looking at the dead man for some time while the living replica of the face continued to survey his activities, Justin took a broad-bladed knife with a serrated edge from his bag. After a momentary hesitation, during which he shut his eyes and seemed to be uttering a silent prayer, Justin began to hack through the corpse's neck until he had completely severed the head. While he accomplished his hideous act, the face above him again expressed anger and hatred. Then, satisfied that he had completely separated the head from the trunk, Justin went to his bag and extracted a large bottle from which he proceeded to pour a thick liquid over the head and the body. When he had done this, he replaced the other instruments in the bag and struck a match, throwing it into the coffin. Flames rushed to the ceiling and smoke filled the chamber, obscuring the scene. A moment later I was outside the mausoleum, from which smoke was now issuing in dense clouds, and watching Justin hurriedly retreat the way he had come. But even as he did so there still hovered above him the disembodied face, its features distorted past recognition by its fury. I can still see that face now. God help us if I am right, for it looked as if it were aware of my presence and seemed to be transmitting to me the message that nothing that Justin had done to the body whose features it repeated in every detail would be of the slightest avail. The face drew near me, there was a sharp pain in my head, I cried out and found myself awake, my heart beating rapidly, my body in perspiration, every instant of this awful vision fresh in my mind. Oh, Ellen, I don't understand any of this, and I do not know how much longer I can tolerate such dreams. Worst of all, are they dreams at all? I know it sounds impossible, yet I am almost certain that last night Justin did indeed break into a tomb to destroy a corpse. Please *help* me. Who else can I turn to? Who will ever believe me?

I spent the day in a misery of fear and expectation of further nightmares. What little courage I still have is due to your letter and the news of your Doctor Morell. I pray he may be able to help us.

My anxieties have been immeasurably increased by two events today. First, a telegram arrived from Paris. In it, Justin told me that he has to delay his homecoming by another day and a night. While I spent the weary hours waiting and attending to a few household tasks, I again felt certain that some mysterious invisible observer had come into the house. Even the servants and Mrs. Penfold seemed to be affected as they went about their duties. The youngest maid—an Irish girl much given to fancies and superstitions, from what Mrs. Penfold tells me—was dusting in the dining room when I heard a crash. On entering the room, I found the girl in a hysterical state, rushing past me and leaving the shattered remains of a fine Indian vase on the floor. After Mrs. Penfold had taken the weeping girl to her room and tried to comfort her, she came down to me and told me that as far as she could learn the maid had become convinced that an evil spirit or demon had made itself known to her and was watching her as she went into the room. ‘Superstitious nonsense!’ was what Mrs. Penfold called it, but in my heart I was inclined to agree with what the poor maid had said.

As I write this I still have the certain feeling that some invisible force is lurking in this house and I cannot help connecting it with my dream of Justin desecrating the tomb. You may think my words wild, Ellen, but I declare to you that I believe Justin was really trying to track down and destroy the source of whatever thing has made its way into our home. For the first time in my life I believe in tales of ghosts and curses, but for what purpose this spirit molests us remains a mystery.

A few hours after the unnerving incident with the maid I heard a cry from Terence, who was playing in the garden as it was an unusually mild autumn day. His hand was bleeding a bit from a scratch which, I learned, was caused by our cat. The strange thing is that the animal has always been extremely fond of Terence. This time, however, as he tried

to pick it up it hissed at him and resisted fiercely. He eventually caught it and then it scratched him. For some hours it refused to come into the house—something it has never done before—as though its feline instincts told it to shun whatever inimical force hovers within these walls.

But this is not the worst. Despite the atmosphere of gloom and anxious anticipation that pervaded the house, little Terence seemed unaffected and happily engrossed in his books, colored crayons and paper. I think I have told you that he is very fond of drawing—a pastime to which he has lately become increasingly attached and for which he already indicates a sensitive talent. After he had eaten his supper and made peace with the cat—it showed no more signs of its inexplicable hostility towards him—I went upstairs with him as usual, in order to dispel my melancholy and worries as far as I was able by reading aloud to him in his bedroom. He had left his favorite book in the day nursery but seemed curiously anxious as I went with him to fetch it. Despite his pleas to let him go alone, something told me that it was important that I go with him and I brushed aside his childish objections.

On entering the day nursery I saw nothing unusual, only his little table and chair and, strewn on the floor, his toys, books and several more of the many colored sketches he delighted to show me. I picked up several that littered the room and gently chided him for his untidiness. When I looked at one or two of them, he tugged me by the sleeve and entreated me to go with him to his bedroom, almost as though he were reluctant to see me remain any longer in his private domain.

‘First we must see that your room is tidy for tomorrow,’ I said. It was unusual to see his nursery in such a state of disorder, for he was always a methodical and neat child. Again he begged me to let him clear the room the following day, saying that he was very sleepy and wanted me to read to him at once. I insisted that first he must pick up the pieces of paper and toys he had scattered on the floor, and to give him encouragement I bent down and picked up a few scraps of paper. He at once darted forward and snatched them from me. Amazed by his naughtiness and rebelliousness, I

was about to scold him severely when with a start I noticed that on several of the sheets were drawn human faces. Each one bore a certain similarity to the other, as though Terence had been doing his best to delineate the features of a single person, always without complete success. As I looked at them, with Terence now silent and submissive before me, I trembled and had to sit down, incapable of speaking for several minutes. There was no mistaking what I saw. Crude and awkward the drawings might be, but beyond a doubt, the faces he had tried so painstakingly to draw were those of the person, the apparition or the specter that in my dreams I had seen in the tomb! There was the same angularity of features, the same deep-set eyes, the same enormous brow. In several of the sketches, Terence had concentrated on the cast of the eyes, in others he had given attention to the line of the mouth, but in all of them the shape of the face was as elongated as that which perpetually haunts me.

I finally succeeded in uttering a few questions, trying to keep my voice steady. Who was this man? I asked Terence. Had he ever seen such a person? Terence could not reply but simply kept his eyes fixed on me with an expression partly of anxiety and partly of—what was it? Fear? Suspicion? The look of one who holds a secret knowledge? Whatever it was, it puzzled and alarmed me. I tried another question: had he imagined or perhaps dreamed of such a face? Terence smiled at this and said something about how he liked to 'make up faces' and how sometimes 'they just came to him.' Unable to obtain any further information, I took him to his room and tried to read to him. I wondered if he too had suffered the same dreams as I. In a short while he fell asleep. I stayed by his bed for perhaps an hour afterwards, observing him attentively. His face was calm, his hands were slightly clenched under the coverlet but not unusually so, his breathing was regular, the temperature of his brow was normal. If he were dreaming anything, then his dreams at that time could only be those normal for any small child endowed with a lively imagination. I finally went downstairs again, determined to keep watch on my child at intervals through the night.

I went from room to room and, in particular, the dining-room, where the maid had been so frightened. There was nothing anywhere in the house now to suggest an alien presence. The feeling that the house was now—but for how long?—free from this presence was as strong as my previous conviction that a malign will was encamped within these walls.

I thought of Justin's last words to me on his departure and wondered what my reactions would be when I saw him again? Would he speak to me of what he had done? Would he give me any proof—even involuntarily—that would confirm the reality of what I still prayed was only a nightmare? An hour passed and then another as I sat up in the living room. But there were no further apparitions and no more mental summons from Justin's mind to mine. I felt curiously apathetic and resigned. The silence in the house brought no peace, for it was curiously oppressive. It was almost with relief that I heard some faint sounds which showed that life still existed in the world outside. It had begun to rain and a slight wind had risen and was sighing through the trees of the garden, perhaps like a grieving, distressed soul? Another hour passed and I trembled as I heard the deep chimes of a churchbell, for to my anguished mind it seemed to resemble the solemn tolling that announces a death or a funeral. My spirits fell lower. I felt utterly alone in the house even though I knew it contained Terence, Mrs. Penfold and the maids beside myself. My strange mental torpor and physical sluggishness continued to keep me bound to my chair. Even though I dimly remembered my resolve to keep watch on Terence, I seemed incapable of movement. And then, as suddenly as it had overtaken me, my languor vanished and I was alert again.

I slipped quietly into the corridor, determined to see not *if* but *how* Terence was sleeping. The whole house was still and in darkness. No gleam of light shone anywhere except in the front hall. I quietly made my way towards Terence's room and reached for the door handle, but even before I touched it I heard him cry out softly.

'Mama!' He was awake even before I opened the door. As I did so, a sudden gust of air like a fierce draught blew

past me and I had the sensation that with the rush of air something dreadfully cold and almost tangible had slipped out of the room like an escaping intruder.

'Mama!' the child cried again as I sank down on his bed and pressed him to me. I asked him why he was awake and he told me that he did not know. Had he suffered a bad dream? He shook his head vigorously, and as I scanned his face by the light of my night-lamp I could see that it was free from any fright. All Terence could tell me was that he remembered nothing from the time I had stopped reading to him until the moment when I came in the room. But his words were far from reassuring to me since I knew beyond any doubt that even as I approached the door of his room, *something inside it* had made him return to wakefulness. 'Papa is not home yet,' I whispered. His answer caused a new fear in me, for he said with a tone of profound conviction:

'I know, mama. He cannot come home yet.'

I am so tired I can hardly finish this page. After I had kissed my child and bid him go to sleep, I waited beside him until he had done so. After about half an hour, certain that he was no longer awake, I went out of the room and into the nursery, where I had found those terrible drawings. This time there was no trace of them. They had completely disappeared and only the others—of innocent subjects—still lay on the floor and table! And yet, the sketches of that evil face had definitely been there when I had taken Terence to bed.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 19

After discovering the disappearance of the drawings, I went back to Terence's room and from a chair beside his bed kept vigil for the remainder of the night. His sleep was untroubled, and when dawn finally broke I was too exhausted to do anything but go to my room and lie down. As though in a daze I let Mrs. Penfold and one of the maids attend me. I remember they brought me some food, which I could not eat, and soothing cordials and asked me whether they should call the doctor, but I told them to leave me

alone. When I had sufficiently recovered I went to Terence, who had just awakened, and very solemnly asked him to tell me where he had put the drawings 'with the faces.' It was almost without surprise that I heard him tell me with an expression of complete candor that he had never drawn any faces such as I described. He had no memory of ever doing so and insisted that the only drawings he had made were those he could show me in the nursery. Too depressed to pursue the matter any further for the moment, but secretly determined to keep close watch on Terence's behavior, I spent the rest of the day waiting with mounting anxiety for Justin's return. Letters arrived from Rachel and Jane, which brought me the only relief of the day. They, at least, were far away from this unwholesome atmosphere. But when would it be safe for *them* to return?

By nightfall my mind was far too weary for any more conjectures, and I fell into a doze as I remained in the living room, reluctant to face the bedroom alone. I must have been so tired that even my subconscious mind was unable to trouble my slumber. I was in a state of deepest insensibility when a crash brought me back into wakefulness. As I opened my eyes I saw Justin standing framed in the doorway and holding on to its sides with both hands, as though to prevent himself from falling. I rushed forward and only just caught him in my arms as he swayed towards me as if he were going to collapse at my feet. He had left the house a robust and vigorous man, even though he was weighed down by a secret anguish. He had returned a mental and physical wreck, like one who has stepped beyond the confines of this life into some dread realm and returned as only a shadow of his former self. His face was haggard and paler than I had ever seen it before; his features were drawn and sunken; his eyes were unnaturally bright and his body shook as though in a crisis of fever. But before I could express my alarm or ring for help, Justin silenced me with a pleading look and gesture. I led him to the nearest armchair. As he sank down into it, he clutched me by the wrist and murmured, 'I beg you, call for no one.'

Obedying his request, I contented myself for the moment with pouring him a glass of brandy, which he downed at one

gulp. Then he leaned back in the chair, closed his eyes and shuddered, as though trying to escape some frightful memory or experience, completely unaware of my frantic questioning and still holding my wrist as though I was the only anchor to sanity.

At least a quarter of an hour passed in this way without any noticeable change in his condition. As he held me tightly, I felt that in some way he was taking in the little strength which remained in me, for he gradually grew calmer and his respiration returned to normal.

At last, after he had opened his eyes again and seen the expression on my face, he said, 'Clara my dearest, if you love me still, then I must ask you to do two of the most difficult things I have ever asked you. Firstly, do not question me. Secondly, and most important, if you value me, *do not let me go to sleep this night.*' He then became silent again and turned his head first this way and then that, as though straining to discover whether some other being in the room were present and overhearing us. I looked around in alarm but the room was as before. And yet Justin's reactions indicated that *we were not alone* and that upon his return, the disembodied, watchful presence was once again somewhere in our vicinity, like a beast of prey awaiting the opportunity to pounce upon its victim. Justin sank back in the chair again and closed his eyes only to start violently and stare before him. Another tremor shook his body, and gripping my arm so fiercely that I cried out, he whispered, 'Do you see anything?' I could still see nothing in that dimmed light. What awful hallucination could be afflicting my poor, half-demented husband? As I gently stroked his forehead and silently grieved at the change which had molded his features into such a pitiful expression, he spoke again in a tone of even greater urgency: 'No Clara, I am not insane as you fear. I still have possession of my mind. But I cannot impress upon you sufficiently the importance of not allowing me to sleep tonight. Keep me awake by whatever means you can devise and *do not sleep yourself.* Read to me, my dear. That will keep us both awake.'

The rest of that long night Justin refused to stir from his

chair or the room. When I read aloud to him, he kept looking around him as though to catch an intruder, and the tension never left his body or his expression. He explained nothing, but when finally the light of dawn filtered into the room he told me that our vigil was at an end. He then allowed me to take him to our bedroom and instantly fell into a sleep of complete exhaustion for several hours.

Such was my husband's homecoming.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 22

From the morning after his return until late afternoon, Justin slept without interruption after giving me the strictest instruction that he was not to be allowed to sleep for one minute after sunset. After arising, he then further dumfounded me by informing me without any explanation that he wished to spend the next few nights alone in another room! It was the first time he had ever expressed such a wish in all the years of our married life, but he did his best to reassure me that it was only for our own good and that shortly he hoped things would revert to normality between us. I accepted the inevitable and gave orders to Mrs. Penfold that one of the guest rooms should be prepared for Justin and that, as he was suffering from exhaustion due to overwork, it was essential that he should not be disturbed in any way.

Our dinner was a melancholy affair. Justin still would not speak of what had happened during his journey to France nor even allude to his strange behavior on his return. He did, however, agree to be visited by the doctor. I preferred not to tell him of your Morell. After dinner he spent two hours or so in the study and then came out to kiss me goodnight and say that he would still be working late and that on no account was I to stay up to wait for him to retire. Completely bewildered and frantic at Justin's absolute refusal to stop working and take the further rest he so badly needed (he looked ghastly), I went to the bedroom knowing very well that many anxious hours would elapse before I could sleep. A few moments later Justin knocked on the door and came in holding a glass. It contained a soothing cordial, he told me, and asked me to drink it. I did so and

soon fell into a long sleep from which I awoke feeling more refreshed than I had for days, with no memory of any untoward dreams.

The next morning the doctor called. Doctor Alexander is a blunt and forthright physician of the old school, and it was quite out of the question for me to tell him of my fears and experiences with Justin. I merely stated that my husband was showing every sign of extreme fatigue and seemed to have great difficulty in sleeping, judging by his lack of vitality and general physical state. After concluding his examination of Justin, Doctor Alexander came to me and said, 'He's a very strong man, Mrs. Branderson, and I can't for the life of me imagine what has got him into such a state. It's as if he has done without any sleep at all for a long time and been working continually, draining his nervous energy. You say he's been worried lately. Worry can do strange things to a person. Have you any idea what it is that's been bothering him?'

Naturally, I was unable to tell the doctor anything. He finally diagnosed extreme mental exhaustion and prescribed various sedatives and tonics and urged me to see that Justin got plenty of rest and if possible, a prolonged holiday. As he prepared to go, he suddenly turned round as though he had forgotten something. 'By the way, you'll find the balm I've indicated on the prescription will quickly soothe the pain of the burn. How did he get it? He didn't seem able to tell me.' 'What burn?' I asked in astonishment. 'Why, the burn on his wrist. It's as if he had been holding something over a fire and got scorched by the flame. Probably by stoking a fire carelessly.'

The tomb? The fire he had lit in the tomb? The dream in which I saw Justin burning a corpse in its coffin—

But before I had time to consider the implications of what the doctor had told me, a maid came in and told me that a Dr. Morell had come to see me. From the moment I saw him, I felt that here, thanks to you, was a man who could bring hope and comfort to us. There was such wisdom and compassion in his eyes I knew at once that if any mortal could unravel the mystery of Justin's behavior and my dreams, then it was he.

'I am not a doctor in the usual sense,' were his first words

to me. 'I deal with things beyond the scope of ordinary medicine. My domain is the mind and beyond. Some people of conservative views would call me a charlatan and an imposter. But if you and your husband trust me, then I may be able to help. I have seen all your letters to Mrs. Middleton. It may reassure you to know that I believe them implicitly. But do not be afraid that I shall speak of them to your husband. Indeed, I do not think it would be wise to do so. They will only worsen his mental state. Simply say to him that I am another physician and leave the rest to me.'

Morell then began to ask me some questions :

'You are convinced that at times your husband has behaved like a person not himself?'

'Absolutely.'

'You have written that you have observed him in states of acute anxiety for which he cannot or will not account to you?'

'That is true.'

'You mention in your letters to Mrs. Middleton some highly curious phenomena such as an occasional feeling of intense cold accompanying the onset of your dreams and sensations that some alien presence has made its way into this house?'

'I have. I cannot help believing it. I have seen its face—I am sure of it—'

'And so you account for the alterations in your husband's state. Tell me plainly, Mrs. Branderson, do you believe in ghosts and evil spirits?'

I told him that I did not know what to believe, but I insisted on the vividness of the various apparitions, on the loathing I had once felt for Justin as I saw him lying beside me, the finding of the broken crucifix in the study, the strange 'coldness' that the maids had spoken of, and the way Terence had delineated in his childish drawings the face I had seen in my nightmares. And then I came to the matter of the tomb-dream and of how, after seeing Justin destroying a corpse by fire, Doctor Alexander had discovered marks of burning on his wrist.

'Even if what you saw in your sleep did really occur,

there must be a very good reason for it,' Morell said thoughtfully. 'Your husband obviously believes in the supernatural and must have come to the conclusion that a deceased person—whom he once knew—bore him illwill and would haunt him as a ghost until his remains were destroyed. Similar things have been known before. It is well-known, for instance, that people in many countries destroy corpses because they believe that otherwise, they will metamorphose themselves into vampires. It is a shocking deed your husband has committed, but men commit even more dreadful things when they are under the empire of fear and too powerful an imagination. The proof that his fears come from some other source than this body you saw in your dream is that his mind is still a prey to great fear.'

'And why would he not sleep that night he returned?' I asked.

'No doubt because he was afraid that further dreams might come to him. The superstitious belief that the powers of evil only exercise their activities at nighttime is common to people the whole world over. But now let me say that I do not believe in what men term the supernatural. I entreat you for the peace of your mind to reject all ideas of ghostly visitation. In the universe nothing is supernatural, but there is much that is unknown to us—until we discover it. Nature's laws are immutable and cannot be suspended by any magical rituals or ghostly beings. But life still has many mysteries which we must resolve, and one of the greatest is the workings of the human mind. I intend to explore the mind of your husband for there, I assure you, we will find the solution to the enigma of his behavior.'

'But the apparitions . . . I know I saw them!'

'All kinds of images and sensations can be created by the mind. The very strong mental rapport between you and your husband which you have written about undoubtedly exists. Under such circumstances, certain ideas and pictures which were created by your husband's disturbed mind must have been transmitted to you. Even your youngest child, whose drawings so alarmed you, and who you say is of a sensitive nature, must be receptive to them. Do not look so surprised, I have known odder things to happen. I repeat—

all your nightmares came from your husband and he is probably unaware of the fact. The reasons for them must be found, but I tell you again that they are simply the translations of inner mental turmoil and obsessions into apparent physical sensations and objects.'

'And the broken crucifix?' I said, still far from reassured at Morell's words.

'No doubt some fierce conflict is taking place in his mind. Your eldest daughter very perceptively observed, did she not, that Mr. Branderson was *fighting something*? You may have heard of the power of suggestion. What you have reported indicates symptoms of what people of deep religious beliefs call possession. It is a hallucinatory phenomenon and can be due either to self- or external suggestion. I have treated such cases before. I know of a woman of a highly strung, very imaginative temperament who aroused the fierce hostility of neighbors who resented her for being a wealthy widow and a foreigner. She became a victim of a kind of collective mental persecution and the result was the creation in her subconscious mind of the conviction that she was an inherently evil person and a witch. Previously religious, she now shunned the church and when the priest came to see her she displayed all the signs of fear and hatred that witches are traditionally supposed to exhibit towards such sacred symbols as the cross. She decided that she was haunted by a demon and therefore felt a compulsion to commit evil. At this point, I was called in by an unusually open-minded doctor who knew of me. By using the techniques of hypnosis, I was able to unveil her deepest hidden fears and show her that as she was extremely receptive to the ideas and inward feelings of others, their prejudices and jealousies had impinged upon her subconscious and formed harmful delusions in her conscious mind so that she ended by believing herself to be the slave of a demonic power. I have said that I am not superstitious. I do not believe in devils and ghosts, but I do believe in the power of thought because I know it and have used it myself. It is now my task to find the source of these terrible anxieties which have so altered your husband's behavior and destroyed his peace of mind. After I have been able to make him open his

subconscious mind to me, I shall be well on the way to restoring his former tranquillity and the complete harmony between you both.'

Justin was resting on the chaise longue in his study when I brought Morell to him. His face was as strained as ever and limned by sorrow, but his dull eyes came alive briefly when I introduced the visitor, whose first words to him were, 'You have been greatly tired and, I believe, distressed. I have come to bring peace to your mind and body.' Justin smiled sadly. 'It is true that I have not been myself lately, but I fear you cannot help me,' he said. 'Let me try,' said Morell firmly. Justin looked despondently at him and then at me. Seeing my own imploring expression, he sighed deeply and nodded. Morell drew up a chair and sat down near Justin after requesting me to leave the room, explaining that it was most important that nothing should disturb them. I at once went to the drawing room and spent the next hour waiting with anxiety and also a little hope.

One glance at Morell's face when he came into the room was enough to dispel any new found optimism. He gave signs of physical exhaustion and looked deeply perturbed. Ignoring my questions, he paced up and down the room for a few seconds, staring thoughtfully at the carpet. Finally he looked up at me. 'You are a brave woman, Mrs. Branderson. I must beg you not to be unduly alarmed if I ask you—does Mr. Branderson have any enemy you may know of?'

'An enemy! You mean someone who wishes to do him harm?'

'I mean someone who may well be directing malevolent thoughts at him,' said Morell.

'But he cannot have an enemy in the world!' I said. 'Justin had always been so good and generous!'

'Mrs. Branderson,' said Morell gently, 'it is a sad but inescapable fact that not even the greatest goodwill and generosity can shelter a person from the malice and jealousy of others. Your husband is wealthy, he prospers increasingly, he is highly esteemed in his profession. In every way he has been successful. He has a devoted and loving wife and family, a fine home, friends and influence and until recently, no great worries to spoil his perfect contentment.

This does not mean that he may not, unintentionally, have provoked violent resentment and malice in someone close to him. He may not know he has an enemy, but I am now sure that he has become the victim of someone who has great power of the mind and the ability to will him unhappiness and perplexity. Do not ask me exactly how I know but all the signs are there, I assure you.'

'A man capable of hating Justin with such intensity that he can put living nightmares into his mind—and mine?' I said incredulously. Morell took me by the hands and looked intently at me. There was such strength and determination in his eyes that I felt certain he must be right. His next words were more encouraging. 'Your husband's mind can be freed from the effects of such evil thought transmissions, for this is what they must be. They will rebound upon the sender. I will visit him again tomorrow. I will armor his mind against such hate and spitefulness. His own will would have been strong enough had he known what was threatening him. You still look unbelieving. Let me remind you, madam, that the power to send thoughts—which you have yourself experienced with your husband—does exist. Among primitive peoples whose instincts and faculties are less obscured by modern civilization, there are even cases in which evilly disposed people have willed others to disease and even death. Such incidents are acknowledged by the most authoritative sources.'

'But what can we do?'

'It is essential that you try to help me find this person. He is very dangerous. So far, I can learn little from your husband. But with your help, I shall keep trying. I want you to make notes of every thing that your husband says and does out of the ordinary, as in your letters to your friend. I have hopes that he will sleep more easily tonight. Try to make him talk of his friends and acquaintances. The slightest clue can be vital. I am afraid, Mrs. Branderson, that I am asking you to spy upon your husband. But it is for his good and yours.'

With these words, Morell concluded his first visit. At least I now have an ally who is striving to deliver Justin from the grip of—what? Morell says he does not believe in ghosts.

But whatever it is that afflicts Justin, I know that it is evil beyond measure....

LETTER FROM JAMES MORELL TO
ROBERT MIDDLETON, SEPTEMBER 22

My dear Middleton,

The case of Justin Branderson disturbs and intrigues me greatly. Your wife was quite right to urge you to get in touch with me. This is certainly one of the most peculiar—and difficult—cases I have ever attempted to treat. I spoke comforting words to Mrs. Branderson but to be honest, I am far from confident of success. There are features attending the case which suggest it may be beyond my domain of expertise. However, I see no signs that either Mr. Branderson or his wife is insane. As I suspected, Mr. Branderson is definitely being subjected to some sort of telepathic and hypnotic suggestion resulting in his obsessions, *whatever they are*. He seems to be the victim of someone with an immensely powerful and malignant will and the ability to project it, thus disproving my first theory that he was suffering from a conflict between a primary and a secondary personality in his psyche.

This time, I decided to put Mr. Branderson into only a light hypnosis, during which I would make certain suggestions and call upon him to use his own powers of thought and volition to help him recognize his delusions and control his mind. I found little difficulty in inducing this light hypnosis by Bernheim's method, which I generally use. After a short time Mr. Branderson began to show a general drowsiness and blinked his eyelids in the usual manner. I carefully observed his orbicular muscles contract several times; the globes of his eyes rotated upwards and inwards, their expression became dull and vague, he breathed quietly, his body became relaxed, the limbs were limp and pendant. I lifted his arm and it dropped heavily to his side—in short, everything proceeded normally. When I was sure that the functions of his conscious state of mind were suspended, I prepared to address his subconscious. But as I began to speak, a most unnerving thing happened: just as Mrs.

Branderson had described in her letters, there was a vivid sensation of coldness in the study, as though the temperature had dropped suddenly. At the same time, and for no reason I can account for, I had the feeling that some hostile force had become present. My feeling was as strong as though I was actually confronted by a flesh and blood enemy who was willing me the utmost harm and striving to expel me from the room. I then realized that *the source of the hostile force was centered in Mr. Branderson himself.*

Nonetheless, I steeled myself to ask Mr. Branderson a few questions, such as: Was there any person or deed in his past whose memory was troubling him? What did he fear or see in his sleep? There was no answer. I asked the question again, the feeling of cold and malignancy increased, I found it more and more difficult to maintain my concentration. The sense was overpowering that Mr. Branderson had become the focus for an enemy will which was defying me. Suddenly and even more alarming, his eyes opened and looked straight into mine. With a shock I sensed that a completely alien mind was now confronting me. A terribly strong force seemed to have moved into Justin's own subconscious from outside it. It began to speak to me with Mr. Branderson's own normal voice and tone, merely saying that there was no need for me to question him, that all was normal, that there were no fears or hidden memories and so on, as though to convince me that my presence was uncalled for. For several minutes he continued to fend off my suggestions and questions. All further attempts at a colloquy were clearly useless, and I did not like the unnatural look in Mr. Branderson's eyes. Was he still under hypnosis or not? For the first time in my professional life I was unable to tell. As though in answer to my unspoken question, he shut his eyes again and remained still and silent until I employed the usual methods for bringing a person out of hypnosis. As I did so, the room regained its normal temperature and the atmosphere seemed no longer charged with hostility and menace.

One of the most worrying aspects of this affair is that it left me with the feeling that for some moments I too was possessed by the same power and will which I detected in

my subject. I was fatigued beyond measure. For some time afterwards I found it hard to concentrate, my head ached and my sight was blurred. I shall certainly resume my endeavors, but next time I shall try to induce a deep hypnotic state. One result of this experience is that I am inclined to treat Mrs. Branderson's accounts of the phenomena she experienced with even greater urgency. There is indeed an incredibly powerful influence at work deep in Justin's mind. What can it be? And, above all, what can its object be?

LETTER OF CLARA BRANDERSON TO ELLEN MIDDLETON, SEPTEMBER 24

Dr. Morell returned yesterday and left, in much the same state of mind as on the first occasion, after further questioning me at length to see if there was any light I could throw on the matter. I endeavored to broach the subject to Justin but without success. But what is really so terrible is that I believe he *does* know who this enemy is but refuses to speak of him. Either he deflects my questions or else relapses into a solemn silence. He is as tired as ever, still insists on spending the nights alone, and still shuts himself up for hours in the study. He does not go out nor is he in a condition to do so. He sends messages to the office and receives messages here. Today a heavy parcel—containing books, I think—was delivered to him. He at once took them to the study and that was the last I heard of them. Needless to say, this house is a gloomy place now. Our friends no longer come here: I have told them all that Justin is indisposed and in need of rest and privacy. Terence too is still showing signs of tiredness and seems to have withdrawn into himself. One of the maids—the one who broke the vase—has given her notice and the other looks subdued and nervous. Only Mrs. Penfold gives me any comfort. Otherwise I am more alone than I have ever been. But at least I have had no more terrible dreams.

LETTER OF JAMES MORELL TO
ROBERT MIDDLETON, SEPTEMBER 24

My dear Middleton,

Another short visit to the Branderson household and, I am afraid, nothing good to report. My powers, alas, seem to be of no avail here, and I must tell you straight away that Justin Branderson is no ordinary subject even though I have no difficulty in inducing hypnosis with him. That is what is so strange about the case. You may or may not know that I have specialized for some time in one of the most challenging and difficult branches of hypnotic treatment—I mean, hypnosis of the insane or near-insane when the attention of the sufferer is so concentrated upon its unhealthy delusions, phobias and ideas that it is almost impossible for any suggestion from the hypnotist to find an entrance into the brain of the patient. Even so, it has been found that with the most obstinate patients, ways can be found of making an impression upon their brain after which other suggestions can gain admittance. You will remember my success in the Fowler case, for instance. And Durckheim similarly succeeded in Vienna recently.

As I returned for my second visit, I found that Branderson was still in a state of great exhaustion. This at first gave me hope, since if the patient's voluntary and conscious activity is decreased by exhaustion, it is easier to induce the somnolent state and deep hypnosis.

Before beginning I again questioned Mr. Branderson closely but gently. As before, he would tell me little save that he was excessively afraid of sleeping at nights, that he had losses of memory and that he was constantly subject to the most dreadful sense of an impending disaster of some kind. I then asked him plainly whether he thought he was being haunted and whether he had, in fact, ever been to a certain tomb? He was unable to give a reply. He kept closing his eyes and drawing his hand over his forehead, muttering something about 'not quite being able to remember' and 'having strange dreams.' I then began the procedure and noticed with satisfaction that he gave no sign of lacking the required susceptibility for the induction. Also, there was

no indication of any conscious or subconscious auto-suggestion in him to oppose or delay deep hypnosis.

In a few minutes I had put him in a deep cataleptic state with general loss of physical sensibility. There was the usual muscular rigidity and other symptoms, and I prepared to resort to post-hypnotic suggestion to banish his obsessions. But to my stupefaction—this is not too strong a word in the circumstances—the same sense of intangible presence returned, and even more strongly than before. Where I had thought to find some monstrous, self-engendered phantom which had invaded his conscious mind from his subconscious, I found instead a fierce resisting force which frustrated my every effort. It was as if Mr. Branderson's brain had become a battleground on which a fearsomely strong spiritual entity was preparing to do mental battle with me. There was the same sense of evil, the same mental atmosphere charged with defiance and hostility—the force that had come into Mr. Branderson was either refusing to react to my words and suggestions or else parrying my questions. When I asked, 'Who are you?' the only reply I received was, 'I am Justin Branderson.' But I suspect it was not Justin Branderson nor even the voice of his subconscious that spoke to me. I do not like this affair. It even frightens me. I found it quite unendurable to repeat the process. I felt that some new mind was mocking me, watching my endeavors with scorn and hatred. For all my previous rejection of superstitions, I feel myself being compelled to accept the hypothesis of what the church calls 'possession.' But if there is something possessing Mr. Branderson, in the sense used by priests and exorcists, it is not the type described by all the authorities. There is evil, yes, but there have been no blasphemies, no epileptic seizures, no attempt to attack me physically—only the presence of an infinitely superior evil mind which disdains my efforts and cuts off Mr. Branderson's subconscious from me. I am tired and discouraged. I must take advice. Perhaps the church is right. I hardly know what to believe in this case, but I shall not give up the fight. I know that my enemy only comes to battle me through Justin once I have begun treatment. As soon as I cease, it disappears. It is like a sentinel who rushes

forward to bar access to the doorway to Mr. Branderson's real mind. I left him in deepest misery, as though his instinct had told him that I am powerless to intervene in his crisis. I shall return again.

LETTER FROM CLARA BRANDERSON TO ELLEN MIDDLETON, SEPTEMBER 26

The most terrible thing has happened to Justin and nothing that Mr. Morell says will convince me that there is not an evil spirit abroad in this house, tormenting my poor husband. I have proof. I have seen such terrible things these last twenty-four hours that I can only attribute them to the supernatural. There is no other explanation for what happened last night. I was so tired yesterday that contrary to my usual custom I allowed myself to go to sleep yesterday afternoon. This is something I have not done since we were in India, where the heat of the afternoon makes a siesta imperative. As I slept, I again began to dream vaguely and felt as though something heavy were weighing down upon my chest. I was bound and oppressed and in complete darkness until again there appeared the glowing eyes above me and then *that face*. It began to whisper to me, but what it said I cannot remember. All I know is that as I listened fascinated and, curiously enough, without any fear, I was suddenly awakened by Justin, who had come into the room. He seemed most distressed to see my lying on the couch and with great agitation asked me if I had been asleep? I confessed that I had and this seemed only to increase his distress. He asked me whether I had slept peacefully or had any dreams? Unwilling to worry him any more, I lied and said that my rest had been entirely peaceful. The answer reassured him to some extent, but then he made a curious request. In future, he urged me to take my afternoon rest only in the bedroom. He would give no explanation for this but insisted that if I loved him I would obey him. I was pondering upon this strange injunction of his as I prepared to face another lonely night.

After I had gone to bed, something seemed to command me not to sleep and not to drink the sleep-inducing cordial

Justin still recommended me to take. An inner voice, similar to one I had heard previously, was telling me that if I allowed myself to go to sleep at all that night, something dreadful would happen. I did not extinguish the night-lamp and lay awake as instructed by my mysterious counselor. After about an hour, I heard footsteps softly approaching the door. Someone stood outside my room, waiting. After a few moments I could hear Justin softly calling me. Intrigued and impelled by a sudden urge, I refrained from answering. The door opened and Justin came in, fully dressed. I shut my eyes and pretended to be fast asleep while he prowled around the room as though in search of something. When I felt that he could not see me, I opened my eyes and looked discreetly in his direction.

Justin was standing some few feet away from the bed facing the wall, which I know is on the east side of the house. After remaining motionless for a few seconds, he raised his right hand and, as far as I could see, made the signs of a cross on his breast and then on his brow. He then lifted his hand to his forehead and muttered something. Knowing that Justin has never been one for conventional religious piety, you will realize how amazed I was when I distinctly heard him murmur words which could only be a Christian prayer: 'To Thee, O God, be the kingdom and the power and the glory unto the ages of the ages. Amen.' When he had said this prayer, he held up his right hand, with the fist clenched as though he imagined himself to be holding a stick or a sword. With his hand at shoulder level, he slowly began to turn round, describing the beginning of a circle in the air. As he turned towards me, I shut my eyes again. I heard him murmuring what I took to be another prayer, in a tone too low for the words to be audible to me. When he had finished, he quietly left the room.

A little while afterwards, still struggling against the temptation to sleep, I left my bed and stole outside the room. At the end of the corridor was the guest room where Justin now slept, and through the minute space underneath the door there shone a beam of light. There was not a sound to be heard and I returned to my bedroom, but as I did so the feeling came over me that now there was no longer any

reason why I should not surrender to my tiredness. The prospect of sleep seemed infinitely delicious and desirable to me and, unaccountably, all my worries faded away as I climbed back into bed and shut my eyes. In a moment I was fast asleep. The only dream I had was a brief one of rising a second time and descending down a long flight of steps in the dark and then ascending again. After that—only oblivion.

I awoke to the sound of a terrible crash, as though someone in the room furthest from me were hurling furniture at the walls or else engaged in a ferocious struggle. There was no doubt about it—the din came from Justin's room. There was another crash and then a pitiful cry followed by moaning. As I hurried down the corridor towards this commotion, I collided with Mrs. Penfold and the maid. Both were in a state close to panic and barely got out something about 'the master being murdered in his bed.' I opened the door of the room to a frightful scene. The bed was in complete disarray, as though Justin had thrown the blankets, counterpane, sheets and pillows around him in a frenzy. A picture on the wall had been smashed, a chair was overturned, a table lay upside down in the center of the room and Justin was lying in a corner. He was moaning; his fists clenched and held against his head, his bare feet beating on the floor, his body arched and twisted as though by a fit of epilepsy. His skin was icy cold to the touch, his eyes were closed and his respiration almost non-existent as we managed to pick him up and place him back on the bed.

After the maid had fled from the room, announcing that she would not spend another day in the house, and Mrs. Penfold had hurriedly gone in search of the doctor, I remained alone in the room with the shattered wreck of my husband. At first I was sure he was dead. Only later, after I had detected a very slow breathing and heartbeat, did I realize that he was in a kind of stupor, completely insensitive to my touch, to the water with which I bathed his forehead, or even to the warmth of the blankets which I placed over him as his body remained extremely cold. As I kept watch over his insensitive form, the door slowly opened and Terence entered. The words of reassurance I was about to speak to him died on my lips. As soon as I saw his face, I

realized with a terrible shock that instead of concern or fear, his features showed placidity and even a kind of quiet satisfaction! Frozen, I watched the child approach his father and gaze at him without speaking a word. He then raised his eyes and looked steadily into mine. While he did so, I had the feeling he was no longer my son—that everything that bound us together had completely vanished and that like Justin previously, he had become the fleshy abode of another mind and soul.

Terence—or whatever it was that inhabited his body—cast another long look at Justin, smiled slightly, and turned silently away and went back to his room. As he did so, I heard the doctor arrive. He diagnosed Justin's condition as a deep coma but was at a complete loss to account for it. As for the struggle which had preceded it—all he could say for the moment was 'an epileptic fit—*perhaps*.'

Justin is still unconscious. He seems to feel neither cold nor heat although his palms are sweating somewhat. He bears the marks of several bruises, as though someone had inflicted blows with their fists upon him but he has no other injury. I cannot think what will happen when he emerges from this coma, as the doctor assures me he will. I have this awful premonition that his mind will not return to his body.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 27

No change in Justin's condition—either for better or worse. Dr. Alexander has insisted that Justin should not be moved to a hospital, saying there is no need, but I think he fears that any sudden move would prove fatal. A highly qualified and dependable nurse has come to the house to stay with Justin at night since I am far too tired from watching over him during the day to do anything useful after dusk. I have tormented myself by wondering whether to call Jane and Rachel home, but the doctor advises me that there is no immediate necessity for this. He also told me something very peculiar, which has led me to take action as I shall tell you, and has given me some hope that all may yet be well with Justin.

While sitting by Justin's bed and observing him atten-

tively in order to catch the slightest signs of alteration in his condition, Dr. Alexander had discovered a small bronze statuette in the bed, forgetting to mention the fact to me at first. It is one of Justin's collection of Indian figures, and as far as I remember has been in his possession ever since we were married. It is not a pretty object, and although Justin had gathered many strange things in his travels and years in the East, none had ever aroused in me the same feeling of dislike, for I had always felt that it had been associated with grim deeds and cults. Now as I gazed at it in the doctor's hand, I felt as violent an aversion for it as though it had been a poisonous snake or a toad.

'An odd thing to find in a sick man's bed,' remarked the doctor. 'What can he have been doing with it, I wonder.'

'It cannot have been in the bed,' I said firmly. 'It must have fallen from the table or chest of drawers.' The doctor shook his head vigorously.

'Not at all, madam. When I found it, it was enfolded in the sheets and blankets. It's most peculiar, I admit, but it can only have been in his bed. Now why would he want to put a statuette of the Indian goddess Kali in his own bed—particularly if he was feeling unwell? Can you tell me that?'

My eyes blurred as I contemplated the figurine. I knew that Kali is the Indian divinity of death and destruction. I also knew that the statuette has always been kept with several others in the glass-paned cabinet in the dining room. And *then* I remembered how I had dreamed before Justin's attack that I had been moving in darkness, first descending and then ascending as though I had left my room in my sleep to go down the stairs and then back up again. I have no doubts about the matter any longer. As I examined the cabinet my profoundest intuitions told me that I had been there and taken out the object in the midst of the night.

As I looked again at the Kali statuette, I remembered strange tales, such as those we had heard in India, of certain objects which are accursed and bring nothing but misery and disasters to those unfortunate enough to possess them. So this must be the enemy or focus for the malignant will Morell spoke of. This was the cause of all the dreams and apparitions that had been plaguing us and which were

driving Justin towards insanity and physical collapse. But the object had been under our roof for years. Why was it only recently that it brought such terror here? Why was it only at certain times that I had felt an unseen presence or an enemy force in the house? What kind of cat-and-mouse game was the devil or curse, whatever it was, inhabiting this statuette playing with us? In any event, I firmly made up my mind to be rid of the thing forever, praying that once I had done so, Justin would begin to recover.

My superstitious fear of the thing was so great that I had to make a huge effort of will before I could conquer my repulsion and bring myself to touch it again and take it from the house.

At first, I was uncertain what to do with it. To have sold it or to have given it to a dealer in antique objects would have been out of the question, for if my theory was correct, then it would only have brought misery to some new owner. If I buried it, it might eventually be discovered. If I had asked someone to destroy it, they might have been tempted to keep it since its fine workmanship and obvious great antiquity showed it to be a thing of value.

As I paced the streets, I wondered whether the evil spirit which, I was sure, clung to the statuette, was impeding my design of ridding myself—and the house—of it. Several times I decided to go with it to the Thames embankment and hurl it into the dark waters, only to change my mind at the last moment. I was afraid that just as the thing had somehow willed me to bring it to Justin's room as he slept, so it would force me to keep it in my possession. I know you will not laugh at me as I tell you this.

Happily, in the end I succeeded in my object. As I passed a quiet mews, a sign indicated that among the stables where the people of the district keep their horses and carriages there was a blacksmith or farrier. Without hesitation I went straight into the workshop, where I found him busily working by a brightly glowing furnace, hammering a white-hot horseshoe. You can imagine how surprised he was when I held out the statuette to him and asked him if he could melt it down and throw away the remains. I explained that I was superstitious, that the statuette was said to bring ill-luck to

the owner and that after I had acquired it, nothing but misfortune had come to me. The fellow was puzzled at first, pointing out that it seemed a most curious and valuable object. But after I offered him three gold sovereigns, he agreed to my request and put the thing into the blazing furnace before my eyes. When I had satisfied myself that it was well and truly destroyed and its molten metal dispersed among the fiery coals, I gave the man another two sovereigns and left the forge. For the first time since these events started, I felt my spirits begin to revive, and as I briskly made my way back home I believed that Justin would now show signs of recovery. I found him in the same state. Now that I have rid the house of the statuette, I can only wait and pray.

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 28

No change in Justin's condition, but last night there occurred an incident which gave me fresh hope that the time will not be long before Justin returns to consciousness. Although I was deadly tired, I awoke in the middle of the night and decided to visit the sickroom. As I suspected, the nurse was soundly asleep in her chair by the bed. Justin was still in his coma which the doctor defines as catalepsy, but this time his breathing was more rapid and his face slightly flushed, as though the blood were returning to it. As I bent over him and whispered an endearment, his features contracted spasmodically and twitched while his body began to stir under the sheets. I immediately felt that he was inwardly struggling to regain consciousness, but his movements soon stopped and his body went back to its previous rigidity. Still, in that moment I had a faint but definite impression that Justin's innermost spirit, imprisoned in his unconscious body, was desperately trying to communicate something of the utmost urgency to me. I angrily shook the nurse awake and we then both inspected him closely. For all I knew I might have been contemplating a corpse from which the last spark of life and thought had fled. But Justin is not dead and I knew that life is only dormant in him. I am convinced he will not die. His will is far too strong to let him ebb away ...

LETTER OF SEPTEMBER 30

Justin is sinking rapidly. I have sent telegrams to the girls and they will be here tomorrow evening. Despite my distracted state I must tell you what happened. One thing is clear to me : I hoped in vain that by destroying that horrible statuette peace and normality would return to this grief-stricken house.

Last night I still hoped and managed to snatch a few hours of sleep after making sure that the nurse was really being attentive to her duties. In excuse for her lapse the night before, all she could say was that it was the first time that such a thing had ever happened to her while on duty and that it was as if some invincible force had entered the room and willed her to sleep despite herself. She is very uneasy and looks at her patient almost as though fearing that Justin will suddenly spring to life and menace her. But so many strange things have already happened in this house that I only half-listened to her words and was too weary to consider their implications.

Before I left the room and flung myself down on my bed, Justin was as unconscious as ever but breathing more strongly and regularly. I was so tired that I did not even undress but at once fell into a deep slumber. I suddenly awoke, to find myself trembling and a prey to unprecedented sorrow. All my senses were numbed with an awful presentiment that Justin would shortly be no more. As I started up in the bed, my mind electrified by my awful conviction, there was a scream from the sickroom. I was there in a second, closely followed by Mrs. Penfold. As we opened the door we were confronted by the most astonishing sight : the nurse lay senseless in the middle of the room, and standing upright near the bed, staring at us with the expression of one just returned from the dead and struggling in his mind to recollect his identity and surroundings, was my beloved Justin ! He was paler than we had ever seen him and his features were drawn as though he were emaciated by the most virulent fever. While Mrs. Penfold brought the nurse back to consciousness, I gently put my arms around Justin, who seemed to be making a superhuman effort to speak to me. His lips moved soundlessly several times before I could

catch the first words: 'You must . . . you must . . .' He then fell back on the bed again, gasping for breath, his fingers clasped on the edge of the coverlet and his eyes—truly haunted—staring up at the ceiling.

Fighting back my tears, I leaned over Justin and whispered to him: 'I have taken away and destroyed the statuette. There is nothing here to afflict you any more.' By the flickering of his eyelids and a sudden gleam of understanding in his eyes I knew he realized that it was the source of evil, but a moment later he murmured to me that it was 'too late.' After Mrs. Penfold at my request had left the room, and the nurse—now whimpering hysterically—and been ordered to fetch Doctor Alexander at once, several long minutes dragged by before Justin could gather the necessary strength to speak to me again. In response to his pleading look, I bent over him again to hear him whisper: 'The study . . . you must go . . .' And that was all, for he relapsed into unconsciousness before being able to complete his sentence.

While I sat by him, waiting for the doctor to come, Mrs. Penfold returned to the room, telling me that the nurse, now recovering from her faint, had a most curious story to tell. Apparently she had succumbed to a feeling of invincible drowsiness for a second time, only to awake and find the bed empty and her patient gone. Before she could leave the room and raise the alarm, the door had opened and Justin had come through it, pale as death. The sight had been too much for the woman, who thought she was seeing a ghost, and she had promptly fainted away.

When Doctor Alexander arrived, he examined Justin only to tell me in a solemn tone, 'I am afraid there is little we can do for him. Some terrible exertion has quite deprived him of all his remaining strength. I must ask you to prepare for the worst.' I told him how the nurse had seen Justin out of his bed, which he must have left for some time, having regained consciousness, and the doctor agreed that it was by thus overtaxing himself that Justin was now in a state which precluded any further hope. But as he felt his pulse he made a most peculiar discovery. From a small but deep scar on his wrist with congealed blood on it, it was clear

that during his nocturnal excursion out of the room Justin had deliberately opened a small vein and bled himself. Remembering his broken utterances, I at once went to the study and there, on the desk where he had recently spent so many hours, were two drops of freshly spilled blood.

I am too wretched and my mind is too worn out to form any theories on the matter. All I know is that Justin is dying. No one can help him now.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 1

Jane and Rachel are here but can be of little comfort to me. Life is no longer bearable. As though my misery were not sufficient, a new nightmare has come. After spending many hours by Justin's side and watching his unconscious form fight its last, losing battle with the powers of death, I had been ordered by Dr. Alexander to take a rest. I finally sank into a fitful slumber. No sooner had I done so than I saw Justin standing before me, surrounded by an aura of light. An expression of love and sadness was on his lined face as he gazed into my eyes like a person taking his last farewell of a loved one. Then he said in tones that shrilled through my brain and brought me back to wakefulness: *Clara, by all that is holy, if you value your soul and mine, destroy me. Destroy me before it is too late. . . .*

If it were not for our children, I would willingly and gladly join Justin in eternal rest.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 2

Justin has miraculously returned to life in the most astounding circumstances and is already well on the road to what Doctor Alexander believes will be a complete recovery. I can hardly believe it, but it is true. Last evening we were all certain that nothing more could be done and Justin was sinking with ever increasing speed. For some reason, the girls and I had to leave the sick room for a while. Jane and Rachel gave way to their grief and were sobbing while little Terence, pale and tense, was brooding silently and standing by the window overlooking the garden where the great

orange disc of the autumnal sun was fast descending in a misty haze behind the distant roofs and trees. The dying sun must have symbolized to all of us simultaneously Justin's approaching departure from this life, for with one accord we held our breath and stood stock still and silent as though waiting for some momentous event to occur. The atmosphere in the room became charged with tension. Terence stiffened as he looked out of the window and fiercely clenched his little fists, and as I stared at him he turned around for a moment and I saw that his eyes were unnaturally wide and seemed to gleam strangely while his lips moved slowly as though he were uttering a silent prayer. But the expression on his face was not of childish hope or sorrow, but of intense joy and triumph. A hush now fell upon the room. As the sun disappeared and darkness came down, I felt as though I had been hit over the heart with a giant hammer. The walls of the room seemed to dance before my eyes and the house seemed to tremble as though hit by a great blast. A tremor went through me, I was without breath and for a moment shadows veiled my sight. The sensation was gone as swiftly as it had come and I could see that it had been shared by my children. Jane shivered and put her hands over her face; Rachel sank into a chair, weeping again; and Terence remained with his back turned to us. As I looked at Jane and she uncovered her face and looked back at me, I knew she shared my certainty that Justin had just passed away even though Doctor Alexander had been sure that he would linger for several hours more. I ran to the sick room, followed by the children, only to find the doctor coming out, looking dazed.

'He is dead!' I managed.

Dr. Alexander shook his head and put out an arm to bar me from the door. 'No, he is *not* dead. I do not know quite what has happened. It is the strangest thing I have ever seen in all my experience. He suddenly took a turn for the worse. I was about to call you when . . . How can I explain it? I seem to have passed out for some instants. I was bending over your husband and then—I remember nothing except that I saw his eyes open. I have checked his heart and pulse. They are stronger. Upon my word, Mrs. Branderson, if I

believed in such things, I would say it is a miracle. Your husband is not only most definitely alive but he shows signs of becoming stronger. I want you to go in alone at this moment. Too much emotion or disturbance could still be harmful to him.'

As I went in, I saw Justin lying propped up by pillows, his eyes closed but breathing strongly, patches of color in his sunken cheeks. I hardly dared to speak. At last I softly called his name and he answered in a strange low, vibrant tone. 'Yes, my dear, I am here.' Unable to restrain myself I said, 'I thought you were dead.' At this, I burst into tears, but when I looked at Justin again his eyes were staring at me with a peculiar intensity. The whole room was now charged with force and vitality. Justin's wasted body seemed to radiate energy and power beyond measure. I had the disturbing sensation that the eyes I was looking into were no longer those of my husband but of some other. My astonishment was such that for a few moments I could not stifle the thought that Justin really had died for a few seconds and then come back from beyond death's threshold. As though he had divined my thoughts, Justin then said in tones of deepest gravity, 'Yes, my dear, I have come back from the dead.'

LETTER OF OCTOBER 5

It is hard to write these words. You would think, no doubt, that a woman who has seen her husband snatched from death would be in the seventh heaven of rapturous delight. Honesty forces me to confess that the joy I first felt has changed into emotions of baffled wonderment tinged with a fear I cannot explain to myself. The memory of those words that Justin spoke to me in that last dream when he begged me to destroy him before it was too late hangs over me like an ominous cloud.

Lazarus returned from the dead and was a changed man. So it must be with Justin. May God forgive me for what I write, but I feel distinctly uneasy in Justin's presence. An inner voice tells me that there is something not *normal*, not quite *right* about this recovery, as though *he had really died*

and should never have come back again. He is still my Justin in many ways, but in other ways I do not recognize him. My nervousness in his presence is shared, I know, by Jane and Rachel, who prepare to return to the Continent now that Dr. Alexander has pronounced his recovery almost complete.

In the meantime, a new unprecedented complicity seems to have sprung up between Justin and Terence. It is not what they say to each other that disconcerts me but the way I catch them exchanging glances apparently meaningful beyond my grasp. It is as if Justin were treating Terence as his mental equal or even as an adult who understands his thoughts and has shared a common experience. And then, there is the way that Justin wanders around the house like a person who finds some things in it unfamiliar and new to him. Once or twice he asked me the meaning or the whereabouts of something to which he was previously well-accustomed. There are cadences in his voice that I have never heard before, there is a new light in his eyes, his features have a different cast, he appears charged with a new and stronger personality. Although outwardly he is as loving and attentive as before, I detect subtle changes in his manner and I am unnerved by his way of looking at me as though to read the innermost thoughts in my mind. I often feel great lassitude in his presence and am quite unable to speak to him of our previous nightmare experiences. My dreams have gone and I sleep heavily.

As soon as he was able to rise, Justin went back to his study and closeted himself in it for several hours, explaining that he must make up for time lost. He is now out of the house for the first time since his illness, and it is only now that I find the determination to write to you. And always, the same thought runs through my brain: Justin has changed completely. He has totally and irrevocably changed. I do not know him any longer.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 11

... Dr. Morell came back to the house. He was received by Justin who told him firmly and politely that he was no

longer subject to any anxieties and fears and therefore no longer in need of his services. The girls went three days ago. Justin is away from the house again, having gone to his office. A man called to see him yesterday. I had never seen him before and was most unfavorably impressed by his sullen saturnine countenance and shifty eyes. Many messages of good wishes and congratulations on his recovery have arrived from friends and colleagues, but Justin has informed me that he does not yet feel ready to entertain anyone in this house. I feel lonelier than ever, and to my distress Mrs. Penfold has told me that she is leaving the house. She seemed afraid for me and told me in a sudden outburst that Justin had asked her to leave. Why? He had also hired a new maid—a dark, swarthy girl of sly manner. I said I feel alone—that is not quite correct. For the first time, since Justin came back to life, I have the belief that someone who *loves* me is trying to send messages to my mind.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 14

Justin is more given than ever to seclusion. He always sleeps in his separate room and, sad to say, I am not sorry. Yesterday two workmen brought in a large heavy case addressed to Justin, and without telling me what it contained they took it straight to Justin's study (he was absent at the time). It was locked and it was not I that had the key but the new maid! Yes, Justin would not trust the key to me.

Worse even—he is lying to me. Mr. Carter called to see him and when I told him that Justin had gone to the office, he told me that Justin had not been there all this week! Where has he been going?

Again, I have the sense that something in this house is trying to speak to me, to warn me. I confess to you the tragic fact that I now am afraid of Justin.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 17

Yes, Ellen, do try to come up to London to see me. I shall go mad if I remain without a confidant for much

longer. I go out sometimes, I see the few people who pass for friends of ours, but I know that they too are disconcerted by Justin and even by myself. I cannot speak to any of them of the things I tell you. If only your poor husband were better. Then you perhaps might be able to stay in London for a while. Justin cannot deny me *your* company.

He has lied to me again about his whereabouts outside this house. I know it for a certainty. And I do not like the way the new housekeeper, Mrs. Bryant—a surly, forbidding creature—and the maid keep looking at me. And Terence—he exasperates his governess and is increasingly moody and withdrawn in my presence.

I see by the clock that Justin will be returning home in a quarter of an hour. I must post this letter at once. Yes, Ellen, it has come to this—I do not want Justin to know how I have been corresponding with you!

LETTER OF OCTOBER 20

There have been strange comings and goings in the house and lengthy discussions between Justin and one or two visitors who only arrive late at night and then drive away after remaining closeted in his study. When I am alone with Justin we speak little, as though we had tacitly agreed that our former relationship is a thing of the past—forever buried. He is exercising some form of mental domination over me. I cannot speak to him of what is in my mind. I cannot question him. I merely *accept*. It is only when he is away that I find sufficient resolution to write to you. For heaven's sake, please come as soon as you can.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 23

... I have told you that our eldest son Simon is returning soon to England. Now we have had a letter from him saying he will be here with his regiment in time for Christmas. But I was alarmed by the look of quiet exultation on Justin's face when he read the news. Heaven help me but I feel that for some reason Justin rejoices at the prospect that all our children will be gathered here together soon because he

means to draw them into his power. Yes, his power—I must discover where he goes so frequently and what he does in his study. But how? That inner voice keeps telling me that there is something in the study which I must find.

LETTER OF OCTOBER 26

... It is as I thought. Justin or, at any rate, the maid or the new housekeeper Mrs. Bryant have been putting a drug, some kind of powerful sedative in my food or drink which accounts for the lassitude I have recently experienced and makes me sleep so early. You must believe me. I am certain that Justin is determined to keep me unconscious and powerless during the late evenings and night.

Yesterday Justin could not be home for dinner and I ate alone. From the way the maid served me at table and her inability to restrain herself from looking at my plate and glass, it was clear to me that they contained some unknown additive. The maid was also stupid enough to linger in the room after placing my dinner on the table, as though to make sure that I would eat and swallow the first mouthfuls in her presence. Masking my true feelings with a great effort, I smiled at her and said she need not wait any longer in the room or worry about whether I would make a good meal because I was exceedingly hungry and thirsty. My little ruse worked, for as I lifted my glass and pretended to drink from it she lowered her eyes and left the room. When I was sure she had returned to the kitchen, it was only a moment's work for me to dispose of the food and liquid by the simple expedient of opening the window and emptying most of the contents into the garden, behind the bushes that stand below. That night I was not drowsy, although I pretended tiredness. My mind was more alert than it had been for days, my thoughts came quicker and clearer.

I now realize more than I have been able to put down in these letters to you. I am determined to find out where Justin goes at nights. My sixth sense tells me that it is on this that the safety of my children depends. Furthermore, I no longer feel that my intention to follow Justin is a betrayal of any wifely trust. The real Justin is elsewhere, not in the

being who wears his body and face. Truly, it is as though I can hear my soul-mate calling to me from a great distance . . . I feel his presence near me. That summons to go into the study—if I can manage it—to look for something . . .

LETTER OF OCTOBER 28

I have found where Justin goes. My opportunity came last night. Justin informed me that he had to dine at his club and this, at least, I knew to be true for it is the last Friday in the month and Justin always meets his colleagues on such a day.

I again got rid of my dinner after the maid had left me. Justin had also told me that he would be back very late. To me this suggested that after dining with his cronies he would be going elsewhere. Mrs. Bryant and the maid retire early, usually about half-past nine. I went to the bedroom and waited until nearly ten o'clock. Satisfied that there was no sound in the house, I went down the stairs and carefully let myself out of the house, as though I had been a thief.

It was a dank, fog-ridden night—the type of gloomy autumn night that with its evil yellow mists makes London so notorious in the winter time. As I hurriedly paced through the quiet, muffled streets, I met few passersby, none of whom gave me more than a fleeting glance. At the Brompton Road I found a hansom cab and ordered the driver to take me to Justin's club and wait near its main entrance. Glad of a long fare on such a dispiriting night, the driver showed little surprise or curiosity when I instructed him that we were to wait until a certain gentleman came out and then follow him. He merely smiled ironically as though my purpose were to follow an erring husband—which, in a sense, was quite true. We reached the club in good time and after waiting for some three quarters of an hour on the far side of the street, while I shivered from the damp cold and pulled the rug the driver had given me more tightly round my shoulders, our patience was rewarded. By the flare of the gas jets outside the club entrance I saw Justin descend the steps and look each way as though for a cab. He began to cross the street toward my cab, but my driver raised his

whip and pointed at another approaching cab, saying loudly that he was already engaged. A moment later, at my request, we moved off in earnest pursuit of Justin.

Spurred on by the thought of the large sum I had promised him for his night's work, my driver proved himself an able spy, never drawing too near the cab in front of us, never falling back so much as to lose sight of it. After living in the confined and fear-laden world of the house for so long, it was a welcome relief to me to see the bright lights and gaiety of the Strand and the surging crowds. No matter what private miseries and troubles each individual might have suffered, he at least lived in a normal everyday world untenanted by such phantoms and terrors as I have experienced.

We drove on to the City and soon left behind us Ludgate Circus, Saint Paul's, and Mansion House and all the great temples of Britain's commerce as we proceeded eastwards. When we passed the Tower of London and entered a narrow miserable street lined with low-storeyed houses in a state of neglect and decay, the driver turned round, and said, 'It's a bad place to be going through, madam, and none fit for a lady like yourself. Aren't you afraid?' But I told him to drive on, thinking that whatever sinister purpose Justin had in his mind, the present surroundings were surely fitted to it. Through swirling wraiths of yellowish fog I caught glimpses from my window of rough-visaged men and women, some elbowing and cursing each other as they stumbled drunkenly along the slimy pavements littered with refuse. From public houses whose garish lights pierced through the surrounding gloom, there came crude music, the sound of voices and raucous singing and, occasionally, the crash of breaking glass and a woman's scream. Women bowed down by poverty and age moved past us carrying their jugs of gin, a sailor sat slumped in a doorway and other, younger women whose painted faces proclaimed their profession turned to call some obscene jest or imprecation at the carriage in front of us and our own as we rode by. Dark figures emerged from rotting doorways and alleyways. Once we passed two men punching each other in the gutter, the accompaniment of the melancholy hooting of a

ship's siren in the near distance. But still the cab in front drove on at the same quick pace through the labyrinth of ill-lit wretched streets, and to my surprise I suddenly became aware that a third carriage had joined our procession and was apparently moving in the same direction.

The sounds died away as we entered a quieter part of the mysterious world of London's East End near the docks. Even though the fog was still fairly dense, I could now see the still elegant facades of houses whose porticoes and classical windows spoke of better days when merchants had built their graceful Georgian residences near the great docks and ships had brought them wealth from across the seas. We passed a noble church and another row of houses and then some tall warehouses when my driver brought his horse to a halt and told me that the cab in front was slowing down. As we stopped, the carriage behind overtook us and in a few seconds also came to a stop some hundred yards further on.

'And now, ma'am?' said the driver, looking puzzled and concerned as I told him that I would get out and proceed on foot. He again warned me that I was in no safe place. The district, which was only a few yards from the river, was mostly derelict and abandoned and known to be a favorite haunt of some of the worst denizens of the underworld.

The area might be abandoned in the daytime but now it had become curiously alive. Still another carriage had appeared and stopped ahead of us and as it passed I heard the soft laughter of a woman. Several people of both sexes, heavily muffled but elegantly dressed, were swiftly and silently walking in the same direction, none taking the slightest notice of the others. I assured the driver that I would shortly return if only he would wait for me, and after I paid him several gold coins he readily agreed after observing that the district seemed unusually frequented that night.

The street soon opened into a small and well-proportioned square, two sides of which had been demolished and had become wasteland, the other two of which retained a cluster of ancient houses of uneven height. One house, larger than the rest, stood at the far end of the square in isolation from

its neighbors, separated from them by a patch of desolate, weed-infested ground and enclosed by walls and iron railings. It was here that all the figures I had seen were converging rapidly and making their way to the main entrance through a finely wrought iron gate surmounted by an extinct lantern. I drew back into the darkness of a cavernous doorway on the other side of the square. From my vantage point I could observe that although the windows of the large house were in darkness, I could glimpse a spacious and brightly lit interior each time the door opened to admit a new arrival after he had briefly halted on the threshold and apparently identified himself through a small shutter. After the last dim figure had entered, I remained in my doorway for several minutes, shivering and weary. Not one sound of life came from the house and not a single glimmer of light redeemed the impenetrable blackness of its dark façade. After I had taken note of the name of the square, which, to my surprise, was Swedenborg, that peculiar Swedish mystic and visionary who claimed to have travelled in his soul to heaven and hell, I returned to my faithful but now thoroughly puzzled driver and bade him drive me home.

To my relief, the house was still asleep and silent when I slipped back into it. For the first time in my life I had been driven through the abyss of London's underworld and glimpsed scenes of human squalor and degradation I had only known from books, but as I allowed the front door of my own home to close softly behind me, the thought came to my mind that I would be safer—physically and mentally—in the most squalid hovel or noisome drinking den than in this house. I lay awake for an hour or two until at last my exhaustion made me drift into an uneasy sleep, but even then there was no repose. All at once the image of Justin—as I had once known him—came into my mind again as though he were trying to warn me. My brain was making frantic efforts to comprehend his silent message when the sound of the front door opening and shutting broke through my dream and I found myself awake and alert.

There was no mistaking Justin's heavy measured tread as he came up the stairs. I heard him pause by my door. He

made no attempt to open it but stood still outside as if he expected to hear some sound to show that I was awake. I can never describe to you the anguish of those long moments as I lay like one dead, terrified to breathe and fearing that even the beating of my heart and pulse should reach his ears and bring him through the door. Never did I feel so strongly that I was the powerless prey and that an implacable enemy was waiting for the right moment to make his true intentions known to me. But at last I heard him move away as though satisfied that I was indeed sound asleep, but now instead of proceeding to his own bedroom he began to ascend the stairs again. Was he going to see Terence? But why should he awaken the child at this late hour? Curiosity gave me new courage. Unable to resist my impulse, I left my bed and moved cautiously to the door. After waiting for a few seconds I opened it slightly and as I did so I heard the muted but still distinguishable voices of Justin and Terence from the floor above. I could not make out their words, for they were speaking fast and in a tone little louder than a whisper, but it was the way they were talking which quite literally made my blood run cold. There was something detestably conspiratorial in their dialogue. Instead of overhearing my husband and child, I might have been eavesdropping on two unknown persons exchanging secrets or plotting a sinister deed and my deepest instincts told me that the object of their conversation was none other than myself!

This morning, I caught Justin gazing at me thoughtfully and with more than a hint of suspicion in his manner. Did Terence know that I had left the house and tell his father of it? Did Justin see the cab behind his own and surmise that I was in it? Whether he did or not, I must try to find out what he and all those other strange nocturnal visitors were doing in that house in Swedenborg Square ...

LETTER OF OCTOBER 31

It costs me a great deal of effort to write this and I do not know whether this letter will ever reach you. I have been so weak that I can hardly drag myself from my bed to

my table. I am now certain that Justin knows that I followed him the other night. Yesterday, after observing me attentively as I forced myself to partake of dinner with him, he remarked softly, but with a wealth of underlying meaning in his tone, that I was tired 'and must not go out so much.' There was a flash of sarcasm in his eyes as he looked at me. And then there was the incident of my shoes—the same I had worn on my expedition. Justin came into the room as I was looking for them and, obviously divining my thoughts, said, 'the maid has taken them away for cleaning. They were very dirty you know. Where *have* you been walking in them?' in a voice which betrayed inner amusement.

He tells me that I need rest and sedation and has called for Dr. Alexander, who is under the impression that recent events have taken their toll of my body and mind. He has prescribed cordials and medicaments for me which I am obliged to take in his presence. My will power seems to be diminishing and I am a virtual prisoner here. None of our friends come to the house now and as for who may visit Justin when I am asleep, I have no way of knowing. No doubt, Justin is preventing people from calling here and telling them that I need rest and privacy. There was a smile on his lips when he brought me your last letter, as though he knew its contents. He says little to me and appears preoccupied by something and even nervous on occasion. More than once I have seen him prowling around the house, like an uneasy beast of prey that strains to catch the scent of some hostile animal. Furthermore, I have seen and heard him opening and shutting cupboards and drawers in the house as though searching for something which he very much needs. His voice is subject to unexpected alterations: its cadences become deeper and more resonant and there seem flashes of wild intensity in his eyes. Another singular fact: as I wearily made my way past his study yesterday, a most peculiar odor assailed my nostrils and I felt my flesh tingle for a few seconds.

I still have the nagging feeling that someone is trying to communicate with me. Twice yesterday afternoon, as I lay dozing, I had faint intimations that the Justin of old was somehow very close to me. At such times I truly believe

that he is willing and urging me to become strong again. It is only after this last visitation or dream—how shall I call it?—that I find myself able to write to you. How strange it is—although I can hardly bear to remain with Terence for long since he inspires such a tragic revulsion in me, and while I remain convinced that Justin is harboring malignant intentions towards me, I hear a tiny inner voice which tells that I have an ally. Somewhere, there is a friendly spirit that loves me and wants to help me. Of that I am sure. As for you, my dear, if only I could see you soon!

LETTER OF NOVEMBER 2

The mysteries increase in this house. There have been more attempts by the friendly spirit to communicate with me but each time it seems on the verge of delivering its message, something seems to prevent it. But yesterday afternoon, while Justin was away from the house, and I was resting in a chair, my eyes closed, I had the clearest vision of the Justin I loved. There he was, standing in front of me, his face illuminated by a tenderness tinged with deep anxiety, holding out his arms to me and saying something about the study. Just as he was about to speak again, a sudden alarm transformed his features and he was gone. A moment later, I heard voices in the corridor. This time I was convinced the vision meant that Justin really does love me and that my fears must be the result of terrible delusions which threaten to wreck my sanity and conjugal happiness. I rose from my couch and staggered out of the room to look on my husband in the certainty that I would find the same loving expression in life as in my dream. But Ellen, I swear to you by all that is holy that even as I advanced towards Justin with a cry of joy about to come from my lips, one glance at his face was enough to send my mind reeling back into confusion. The Justin of the apparitions was not the Justin I saw standing before me. There was no kindness or love in his face—only somber determination in the line of his mouth and a gleam in his eyes which were boring into mine as though to read my most private thoughts. For God's sake, which is the real Justin? The figure of dread I see in

my waking hours or the man who appears to me in these visions?

LETTER OF NOVEMBER 4

Tomorrow, Justin will be away from the house for two days. That much at least he has condescended to tell me. During that time I shall make every endeavor to find out what the vision tells me to look for in the study, for again last evening, I saw *my real Justin* and he began to tell me to go to a certain place until his face and voice were suddenly blotted out from my perceptions. The other Justin has become increasingly nervous and restless. I have heard much banging and thumping in the house as though he were rifling his own study and the cabinets in the other rooms. When I awoke, I found evidence that even my *secrétaire* and closets had been searched. This letter reaches you by Dr. Alexander. I have asked him to put it in the post for me as I am unable to go out.

LETTER OF NOVEMBER 6

God bless you for your understanding, sympathy and love. You have tried to help and advise me whereas anyone else would have dismissed my letters as the ravings of a madwoman. Perhaps I shall go mad soon—my mind can no longer stand the assaults made upon it and the events that have just occurred confuse it further. Bear with me, Ellen, for I am grown weaker and I fear that I shall soon be unable to communicate. I am in such a state that I am no longer sure whether what I am about to tell you really happened or not. But thank heaven for your news that shortly you will be able to come to London. I still trust Justin cannot forbid me to see you!

I said that to my vast relief Justin had to go away for two days. As soon as he left the house, the atmosphere around me seemed to become lighter even though my unease returned each time I saw Terence or that odious Mrs. Bryant, or the sallow-faced maids who act like keepers in an asylum.

No sooner had I assured myself that Justin had indeed departed than I determined not to partake of any food or drink served to me, since I know it to be drugged and to induce profound sleep at night and a state of semi-insensibility in the day time. By good luck I was left alone to take my meals and succeeded in disposing of them in the manner I have previously described. As I had anticipated, by late evening my mind gradually became clearer than it has been for some time, although I was still physically weak. I had now succeeded in the first part of my plan. I hoped that my mysterious dream-Justin would be able to tell me clearly what it was that was so important for me to find in his study. As evening became night and the hours passed, I lay awake in the bedroom, convinced that *he* would try to communicate to me again. Shortly after the church clock had struck the hour of eleven and the domestics had retired, I felt new strength slowly returning to my body and again sensed the proximity of a loving, comforting soul. I shut my eyes and gradually, as through a mist, the husband I had known and loved appeared and began to whisper words to me which became increasingly clear until it was as though he were standing in front of me. A few moments later the image faded and disappeared and I opened my eyes again feeling that I had been briefly asleep but with every word of the message etched upon my mind. I was to make my way into the study, with a duplicate key which I would find concealed behind a painting which hangs on the wall of the corridor outside the room. I would then go to a Chinese lacquer cabinet which Justin had acquired many years ago in the East and press a certain portion of its back to open a hidden compartment where I would find something of great importance.

Not for a second did I question this strange message, delivered to me by this apparition who bore such an exact resemblance to Justin. I was convinced that such instructions, with their precise details, came from a living intelligent mind and could not be the product of my own fevered imagination. Simultaneously, as I received the communication, I felt a new strength, as though the loving spirit has infused a strong determination and courage into me to

counteract the debilitating effects of my past sufferings and the drugs I had been forced to swallow.

In a few minutes I was standing outside the study, and just as I had been told there was a key fastened to the back of the little oil painting on the wall near the door. I quietly turned the lock and went to the Chinese cabinet after briefly noting the changed aspect of the study which had been closed to me for so long. There were many books I had never seen before, there were masses of papers and old parchments, boxes with strange inscriptions, oddly shaped instruments apparently for religious rituals of some cult I could not recognize. I paid little attention to them as I began to examine the back of the cabinet which I pulled away from the wall. After I had run my fingers over the gilded reliefs of dragons and stars which decorated the fine lacquer, I felt a small portion of wood protruding slightly, and pressed it hard. There was a click, a little panel slid sideways and revealed a cunningly concealed recess fashioned by some expert Chinese craftsman. In it I found a small packet with a note written in Justin's hand but in such wavering characters that it was immediately evident that it could only have been penned by an ill and feeble person. Some of the words were almost illegible and my general impression of the missive was that Justin must have been in a state near to total physical collapse and had made an immense effort to complete it. But after several attempts I was able to decipher the entire note, which I believe I am able to quote quite faithfully to you from memory :

'Beloved wife and companion of my soul, by the love you once held for me, I entreat you not to examine the contents of this packet on any account. If you value your soul and mine and those of our children, leave it unopened but execute my instructions as soon as possible, no matter how difficult it may be for you to do so. Take this packet by the quickest means to 23 Chesterfield Street in Mayfair and hand it to the master of the house or, if he is absent, to whomever shall answer the door. Tell them that *it is a matter of beyond life or death*. It is important that you repeat these words exactly. After delivering this packet, I beg you to try if possible to leave your home with Terence.

Try to believe that the very fact you have received this message from me and have found this packet will mean that *the man who appears to you and the world as Justin Branderson is not your true husband. He is not myself.* As long as you are near him, your soul is literally in peril. Beware of him if you are forced to return to the house, and mention nothing of this to him. The person to whom you will go is a friend and ally, and even if you do not meet him, he will help you and give you protection. My love for you is everlasting, but if our souls are to meet again in this world or the next it is imperative that you obey me now. Your Justin who loves you.'

As I read and re-read this extraordinary message I felt that all the love that Justin had shown me in the past was emanating from the letter and the packet. I was no longer alone in the room—his presence was beside me, he was giving me courage and willing me to obey him. I needed no further proof that Justin's shape and form had been usurped by a new and loathsome personality. My Justin was dead but his spirit lingered on to sustain and guide me.

I rushed from the room. In a few moments I was dressed and ready to leave the house and then—I pray, Ellen, that you will still trust my sanity and believe what I have to tell you! As I left my room, the house was still. Terence and the domestics were asleep; not one sound broke the silence of the night; there was no one awake to prevent my departure; and thanks to the new strength given to me I knew I could go out into the street and walk until I found a cab to take me to my mysterious destination. But even as I went through the deserted darkened hall and approached the front door, there returned that atmosphere of intense cold. Before I could lay my hand upon the door, I stepped back in shock. Directly in front of me and scarcely two feet distant, there appeared a long luminous cloud of gray mist. Fear rooted me to the spot as it grew in brightness. My limbs were like lead. I could no longer breathe or utter a sound. I was like a person paralyzed and the only faculty left to me was that of sight. While I stared at the cloud which began to vibrate as though to move towards me, it quickly coalesced into the shape of a *rat*. I swear to you,

Ellen, and it was no ordinary rodent! It was of unbelievable size and malignancy. If you knew how even the tiniest mouse—let alone a rat—fills me with repulsion, you may realise what I felt when I saw the mist materialize into a gigantic rat at least three feet long and two feet high, with eyes that blazed while it bared its huge razor-sharp teeth. I do not know how long I stood staring at the monster. But at the very moment when I felt my consciousness slipping from me and I began to sink to my knees in an extremity of terror, the voice whispered to me again. 'Do not be afraid. It is not real. It is nothing but a thought. Do not look in its eyes but *between* them. Tell it to be gone. *Think* it to disappear.'

As the creature began to increase in size, blocking the entire door, I made an immense effort of the will and wrenched my gaze away from its infernal eyes. I forced myself to stare between them, concentrating on the thought that the thing *must* disappear as I silently urged it to go away. I had a sense that it was angrily baffled, but as I kept my gaze *between* its eyes, the apparition did indeed dim and begin to waver. A moment later it began to fade and lose its outlines. In a few seconds it was gone, but at the very instant of its disappearance there flashed into my mind the face of Terence, just as though his features had replaced those of the beast in the last seconds of its materialization!

I was out of the house and rushing along the pavements as fast as my legs would carry me, too intent upon my mission to feel even the after-effects. I found a cab and in less than half an hour was standing outside a large, stone mansion on Chesterfield Street. A grave-faced servant of foreign aspect opened the door and as soon as I uttered the words 'it is a matter of beyond life or death' he silently motioned to me to follow him. He led me up the staircase into a large, richly furnished room lined with books and prints and made a sign to me with his hand, as though ordering me to wait. A few moments later the door opened and I could not repress a word of surprise as the same man entered who had visited Justin some weeks earlier and who had called himself Signor Orsini. I repeated the words in Justin's message. I handed him the packet, which he care-

fully placed inside a large silver casket, covered with strange lettering, which stood upon a table.

Signor Orsini's first words were, 'You are a good and a brave woman. Tell me, can you—will you—leave your present home with your children? To do so would be most advisable. *We* (he stressed the word) will protect you. Have no fear of that. I know why you have come here.'

I blurted out that I could not leave my home—Jane and Rachel and Simon would all be returning there in a few weeks. How could I abandon them? And to leave my husband, no matter how alarming his behavior, was out of the question. . .

Signor Orsini came close to me. 'Come now, Mrs. Branderson, I am sure that by now you must be very well aware that the Justin Branderson you see in your home is no longer your husband.'

'Then where *is* my husband?' I demanded. There was a silence for a while and then Signor Orsini took my hands in his. 'I fear,' he said, 'you will no longer see him in this life. But his soul still lives and cherishes you. Do what he wants you to do, I beg you.'

But, Ellen, I *could not*. As I said to Signor Orsini, no matter what dangers I may have to face, I cannot abandon my *home* before Jane, Rachel and Simon return. As for Terence, who I confess now fills me with such aversion—perhaps there was still hope for him if I could remain and strive to deliver him from the evil I was certain had entered him as well. Signor Orsini sighed deeply at my reply and then muttered, as though to himself, 'So be it then, but we must act quickly.' He solemnly informed me that 'friends' would look after me and do their utmost to protect me as long as I remained in my house. He told me that soon events would take place that might appear terrifying but which would help me and my children. Then he dismissed me, saying that his servant would drive me home in his carriage.

Somewhat comforted by his words and the knowledge that now I had allies, I followed the servant out of the house and asked him to let me alight a short distance from the house, for I was afraid that the sound of the carriage

would betray me to the domestics—and to Terence! But no sooner had I stepped through the door than a light flared in the darkened hall. Sitting on a table on which he had lit a lamp was none other than my little boy, now staring at me with accusing eyes, his little face set like stone into an expression of pure concentrated hostility. At once the same inner voice told me not to look in his eyes. As I averted my glance I sensed that furious anger was swelling up in him, but after several seconds had passed in this awful confrontation he got to his feet, picked up the lamp, turned his back on me and slowly walked up the stairs towards his room, never once looking at me.

In that instant I was certain that the huge phantom-rat which had barred me from the door had been an emanation from Terence's mind. The eyes—*the eyes were the same. They were his eyes.*

I am writing to you now, in my room, barely an hour after the event.

I have been forced to interrupt and conceal this letter. If you receive it at all it will be thanks to a ruse. Hearing that I have been unwell, that charming Mr. Carter sent me flowers. I am putting this letter in an addressed envelope together with a reply of thanks to him and a note begging him to post it for me. I pray that he will do so without mentioning the matter to the being who inhabits Justin's body. He at least seems a man who would respect a lady's confidence.

He came back later that same night, from wherever he had been. All I remember of our encounter was his inquisitorial face as he straightaway accused me of treachery. But he did not ask me where I had been nor what I had done. Instead, he towered over me as I lay weak and helpless and fixed his eyes on mine. I knew nothing more . . . I came back to my senses with confused images in my mind of swooping dark shapes. I had a frightful headache, was bathed in perspiration and trembling. I am helpless.

LETTER OF NOVEMBER 9

I scrawl this note in haste and after I have put it in an envelope and affixed a stamp (thank God, I have found some postage stamps in a folder of mine) I shall attach some small weight to it with sealing wax and throw it from a window into the street, hoping that some passer-by may see it and put it in the letter box at the end of the road, *for I cannot leave the house*. Almost every movement of mine is watched in the daytime. At night, I am bound to my bed. The dreams of dark, swooping shapes locked in some angry combat continue, always more violently. It is as though some battle is being fought in my mind between contending forces of great power. I feel imprisoned and that my life is in the balance. Who will help me? Have you written to me? [This was to be the last letter that Ellen Middleton received from Clara Branderson.]

LETTER OF NOVEMBER 12

I shall again try to deliver this to you by indirect means. As I watched from the window yesterday, I saw a gentleman look at the letter I had thrown down a few minutes earlier and which landed on the pavement a few yards away from the house. He picked it up, gazed curiously at it for a moment, took off the weight attached to it, and then walked in the direction of the letter box. I left the window before he could see me. Perhaps I might have signalled to him, but then he would have come to the door. Even though Justin was away, the domestics would have told him all on his return and I should be lost. It was for this reason that I omitted from the envelope my name and return address. I am more afraid than ever. Last night the whole house—walls, windows, furniture—everything seemed infected with an invisible but terribly potent force, as though a giant being filled every square inch inside these walls and was breathing, *seeing*.

Justin—whom I briefly glimpsed—looked at me as though he had never seen me before. His mind is elsewhere. His whole being appears suffused with an inner exultation. His

voice is deeper and stronger, seems to come from outside his own body. Terence I no longer see. I have letters from the girls and Simon. They thank me for letters which I never wrote them! They are coming home next month full of happy anticipation. God—if only they knew . . . but what can I tell them? If I write them as I have written you, they will never believe me. How can I convince them that their father is some kind of devil incarnate? If I alarm them, then they will come rushing home at once, and as long as there is still hope of ultimate salvation, *they must stay away*. For the moment their innocence is their best protection. For how long? Still no letter from you.

LETTER OF NOVEMBER 16

(This letter and the accompanying newspaper cutting were placed in an envelope addressed to Ellen Middleton but without a return address or name and then inside the pocket of an overcoat, left hanging in the Brandersons' front hall, belonging to an office employee who had called at the house to deliver some papers to his master. On returning home, the clerk found the envelope, and though puzzled by the discovery, posted it at once. Later, the clerk was to report that he had seen Clara Branderson standing near his coat after he had taken it off.)

Still no letter from you, I am desperate. For God's sake read this piece of newspaper and call the police and tell them that Justin is the murderer. Now you see I wrote you the truth always. Somehow, he must have forced me to tell him that I had been to see Orsini. It is the packet Justin wants. I found the newspaper in the maid's room.

EXTRACT FROM THE LONDON TELEGRAPH, NOVEMBER 7, 1886

BRUTAL MURDER IN MAYFAIR

Last night a peculiarly brutal and revolting murder was committed at 23 Chesterfield Street in Mayfair, the residence of a wealthy and eccentric Italian known as Signor Orsini. The melancholy facts of the case are as follows.

At about nine o'clock this morning, Signor Orsini's foreign servant, who is a mute, was observed rushing from the house in a state of great agitation and returned some minutes later with a police constable on duty nearby. On entering the house, the policeman found Signor Orsini lying dead from strangulation in the study, which was in a state of indescribable disorder, as though the perpetrator of this outrage had ransacked the entire room and those adjoining it in a search for some specific object. A number of very peculiar circumstances attend this case. The fact that valuables and a large quantity of money remained in the house suggests that material gain was not the motive of the assassin. Also, the thoroughness with which the search was conducted proves that the criminal was left free to ransack the house for at least an hour after killing his victim despite the fact that the manservant was in no way harmed or rendered incapable by the intruder. It is expected that Detective Superintendent Jameson, who is conducting inquiries, will shortly announce charges against the manservant as being an accomplice to the crime despite the latter's silent protestations of innocence and his known devotion to his master.

Signor Orsini was a resident of the house for the last ten years and is known previously to have lived in Rome and Paris. He was regarded as a scholarly eccentric and recluse. Inspection of his commodious library shows him to have been particularly interested in matters pertaining to occultism and supernaturalism. One first hypothesis, not to be discounted, is that Signor Orsini may have been a victim of some criminal secret society of his country of origin—such as the Camorra or the Black Hand of Naples—and may also have been on the point of precipitate flight since his rooms contained two suitcases packed as though for imminent departure. A neighbor residing at 19 Chesterfield Street has reported witnessing the departure of a heavily veiled lady from the house, in Signor Orsini's own carriage driven by the mute manservant, about an hour or so before the murder, as far as can be ascertained. Further announcements concerning the case are expected later.

LETTER FROM ELLEN MIDDLETON TO ROBERT MIDDLETON, NOVEMBER 21

Robert, my dearest,

I have had a most frightful shock. There is indeed something terribly wrong in the Branderson home and, in particular, with Clara. In view of everything we discussed and what Morell told us, I am more than mystified by what has happened to her.

Strangely, in view of Clara's recent precautions in sending her letters, I had no difficulty at all in gaining admission to the house. A messenger came to the hotel bearing a sweet note from Clara saying she would be overjoyed to see me and suggesting that I should call round at tea time the same day. I arrived just before four o'clock. The house is charming, but from the moment that I stepped into it I felt a sinister atmosphere around me. There is a most peculiar maid who as she opened the door stared at me as though I were a being from another world, and a surly housekeeper with brooding eyes which filled with suspicion when she saw me. Instead of being taken directly to Clara or being welcomed by her in the front hall, I was left alone for a minute while the maid hurried off. When she returned and asked me to follow her, she might have been conducting some humble subject to the presence of majesty. Her expression as she paused before the door of the drawing room was as if she were the acolyte of some priest or the handmaid of royalty and not merely an ordinary housemaid. My amazement was even greater when she opened the door. Sitting on a sofa, directly facing the door, were Clara *and* Justin, both smiling and contented as though nothing that Clara had written me had ever happened!

It is hard to describe, but there was an atmosphere so heavy and oppressive in that room that my first impulse was to turn and run off. And yet both Clara and Justin quickly got to their feet and came towards me with every sign of gladness and affection. Physically Clara has changed very little since I last saw her. For a person who had undergone such nightmarish experiences such as she had described, she looked astoundingly well. Two weeks ago, she had

written me as a woman driven to the frontiers of madness and physical collapse. Now she was smiling, calm and assured! But I found something, to state it mildly, most unpleasant in the sweetness of her tone, and as she leaned forward to kiss me I actually had to repress a shudder.

At first sight there surely was little in Justin to suggest that he had been transformed into the monster Clara alleged. He is tall, broad-shouldered and exceedingly handsome of feature, with a noble brow, wide shoulders, a majestic profile, a well-cut beard and piercing eyes, and in his movements he combines authoritative slowness and deliberation with the grace of a panther. He is a person who, as one says, seems born to command, and he radiates strength and power. This frightened rather than reassured me. Another circumstance which made me uneasy was the curious similarity between their voices. Both seemed to have the same low timbre and resonance and a kind of monotony, as though they were incapable of varying the pitch of their tone according to the emotion appropriate for the matter being discussed. Their speech had a mechanical quality which seemed as devoid of real feeling and sincerity as were the gestures with which they greeted me. It was as though they were twin souls closely linked together by possession of a common secret. When I began to speak this impression was heightened, for I could not help feeling that even as I spoke to the one, I might have been addressing myself to the other. Robert, I could not help thinking that in some strange way both Justin and Clara were the same person! As Clara spoke to me, I felt that her words were inspired by Justin. She said, 'It is so good and kind of you to come and see me, Ellen. I have been somewhat ill and subject to strange moods but now, thanks to dear Justin, I am completely restored. Please forgive me for sending you all those foolish letters: the fever I contracted in the East is one which plays strange tricks with the mind but the physicians have at last cured me marvelously. Justin knows all about my ravings to you.'

My mind was in a whirl as I listened to her. Justin then spoke to me, saying how much he had heard of me and how grateful he was for my friendship, concern and affection for

Clara, and my astonishment increased as he urged me to become a frequent visitor to the house. Even more peculiar: when I mentioned you and said that I had been unable to visit them for so long because of your serious illness, the fact seemed to come as a surprise to them, as though neither of them knew of it before.

Never having met Justin before—if this *is* Justin—I am unable to judge how far he has become transformed, but Clara certainly no longer seems to be the same person. I believe this man has suffused her entire being with his own mind and personality. I remembered how beautiful and soft her eyes used to be in her youth. Now they have a new expression—a kind of metallic intensity, a hardness in their gaze which made it difficult for me to concentrate my thoughts and express myself properly. Instinct told me to be on guard against *her*. I felt she was dissimulating and that her expressions of warmth and friendship were not natural. I tried to meet her eyes as little as possible, but each time our gaze met and I quickly looked away I would be confronted by Justin's attention.

I shall never know how I managed to endure that afternoon with them. I could have cried with relief when at last I emerged from that house to feel the cold November drizzle on my face and find myself walking in the streets in the normal everyday world among ordinary people!

Just before I left, Clara came out of the room to accompany me to the door and, in tones of coaxing sweetness, begged me to be their house guest and return the next day with my bags. I told her that I would stay in the hotel and maintained a polite refusal to accept her offer of hospitality despite her repeated urgings. Everything in me says that she is dangerous! However, I agreed to see her alone tomorrow. Do not be alarmed, dearest. I long to rush back to you at once, but as we have agreed, it is only by trying to uncover the mystery of what has happened to Clara that we can help her and her family. Those poor, poor Branderson children! Either their mother has become completely insane (and I do not think so) or else she and Justin really are possessed and transformed by some horrible spirit which has robbed them of their true personalities. Do not be upset

or angry with me. Your health is too frail and I worry I may already have tested it too much with this account. I shall see Morell. I shall go to your old friend and tell him what I feel after my visit. With Clara I most definitely shall be on my guard. How tragic to feel this necessary with someone who was once my dearest friend!

LETTER FROM ELLEN MIDDLETON TO ROBERT MIDDLETON, NOVEMBER 23

Dearest,

I have had a very strange and frightening conversation with Clara. I am afraid to see her again. When I stepped over the threshold of that house, she was waiting for me in the hall and at once told me that Justin was not at home and that we could talk undisturbed. This time, I found Clara much more like her old self, which seems to suggest that it is only in Justin's presence that she becomes so different. I was somewhat reassured but still very much on the alert as I followed her to the drawing room and broached the subject uppermost in my mind.

I told Clara quite plainly that her letters had caused me great anxiety, that you and I had discussed them at length and tried to take advice, that I believed the matter contained in them, and that only the need to stay by your side had prevented me from rushing up to London at once. Despite all this, Clara insisted that everything she had written was the product of capricious, obsessive hallucinations which, she explained, were mostly caused by powerful drugs administered to her to combat the fevers which had so sapped her vitality and disturbed her mind. Now, she begged me to ignore everything she had written, saying that she was finally restored to health both in mind and body, and she affirmed that Justin is the kindest and most understanding husband on earth.

I remain unconvinced. I told her that I might be prepared to accept that the apparitions she had described were all nightmarish delusions but asked her to account for the fact that she had followed Justin to a house in the East End? Furthermore, what about her letter with its description of

the finding of the mysterious packet and the visit to the late Signor Orsini? She had known to give to the cab driver the address of the man who had been so horribly murdered—the newspapers had mentioned the fact that an unknown lady had called at Orsini's house a few hours before he was murdered. Surely *this* could be no illusion.

To my immense astonishment, the mention of the visit to the poor Orsini man seemed to come as a surprise and shock to Clara. She declared she knew nothing of any such letter with such a sincere tone that for a moment I quite believed her. But I insisted that she had written it. I told her that in an earlier letter she had already mentioned the name of Orsini, when the man had come to visit Justin before his profound collapse and coma. I pointed out to her that the matter was one of the utmost gravity for the mute manservant has been charged with Orsini's murder or, at least, for having been an accomplice to it. I begged her to tell me the truth, pointing out that otherwise a man who might well be innocent was likely to suffer trial and condemnation, and that the papers are saying that the police are still looking for the woman who visited the Orsini house. 'If they find that it was you, then suspicion will inevitably fall upon you—and Justin,' I insisted, desperate at Clara's apparent ignorance of her own letter.

As she began to reply, I thought I could feel a presence of evil returning to the room where we sat. 'You say I wrote you this letter,' said Clara softly. 'Then only if it falls in the hands of the police would I—and Justin—be suspected?' 'I suppose that is true,' I replied, at once feeling uneasy—'Do you have this letter, my dear? May I see it?' I told her that the letter was with all the others she had written me and that I would not show them to anyone but yourself. 'Do you really believe that I wrote you that letter?' was her next question. I told her that it was her own letter in her own normal hand, beyond a doubt, and then—somewhat carried away—I added that when she had sent me the newspaper report of the murder she had stated her own conviction that Justin was the murderer. She tried to make me tell her where the letters are and to promise to bring them to her so she could see them and be convinced by her own eyes. After

I had told her that I had shown them to no one else but you, her eyes momentarily seemed intensely bright and I lowered my own eyes quickly to avoid meeting her gaze, for I felt that she was about to compel me to divulge their whereabouts. You were right, Robert, to tell me to put them in a safe place, which I have just done, and now only I know where they are. I shall take them to a lawyer as soon as possible. I know that Clara is determined to get them and will destroy them. Thank God you warned me to be careful in the Branderson house. Had I stayed longer with her I am sure she would have forced me to tell her where they are. As it is I fear to tell even you in this letter, for I cannot help feeling that I am being overlooked or watched. Strange things have begun to happen. As soon as I reached the hotel I found that my room had obviously been searched, for my clothes had been disturbed and some strange hand had evidently rummaged through my suitcase. Also the hall porter told me that 'a friend' had called to see me during the afternoon but had left no name. Had this 'friend' (a man, said the porter, who seemed incapable of supplying any further description) been up to my room, I asked. The hall porter was very vague and confessed that, strange as it may seem, he really has little recollection of the matter except that the man had asked whether I was in or out. Beyond that, all he could say was that the man had very 'queer eyes.' This mysterious visitor must have come to the hotel to search my room even while I was still sitting in Clara's drawing room and only a few minutes after I had told her of the letter about her visits to Orsini! After tomorrow's appointment, I shall come straight back home. In the meantime, dearest, do not fear for me but ask Mrs. Hunter not to admit anyone, under any pretext, to the house.

Two hours after writing this letter and posting it in a nearby pillar box, Mrs. Ellen Middleton was knocked down and killed in a street near her hotel by an unidentified carriage, driven at furious speed, which suddenly emerged from a side turning. According to the first person to arrive at the scene of the accident, he heard the carriage stop for a

moment and then depart again at the same rapid rate. The police treated the case as a hit and run affair but were unable to find the driver responsible. Death was instantaneous.

Chapter Three

THE POSSESSION

News of Ellen Middleton's death left her husband Robert a shattered, dying man. For years she had lovingly tended him and done everything possible to alleviate the effects of the chronic, debilitating illness which had rendered him a virtual invalid since his early manhood. Although he was often confined to his bed for long periods, he had found comfort and strength in his studies and in his wife's devoted companionship. It was always a matter for conjecture whether Robert would live out a normal span of life, but thanks to his wife's attentions he had been confident of completing the monumental labor on which he had been engaged ever since the illness first struck him—a profound and detailed study of primitive witchcraft myths and superstitions in rural and pre-Roman Britain and particularly in the West Country.

In a few years Robert had become an authority in his chosen field. Whenever he was strong enough to leave the house, he became a familiar and respected figure in local libraries, museums, and churches, where he would spend hours pouring over musty archives, parish registers and various memorabilia, quaint objects and manuscripts. He also entered into correspondence with other well-known scholars and widened the range of his interests until they came to include not only those subjects most directly related to his study but others contingent or only remotely related to them, such as unorthodox religious sects since the Reformation, the psychology of religious beliefs and superstitions, the evidence for modern witchcraft practises, supernatural phenomena, spiritualism and mysticism. It was only natural, therefore, that the strange happenings in the Branderson household should have aroused his keenest interest.

Shortly before Ellen's death, Robert had already voiced the opinion that first Justin and then Clara Branderson had become 'possessed,' although not in the way usually de-

scribed by the Church. Each successive letter from Clara to Ellen had increased his fears for the Brandersons. After receiving the singular reports on Justin from Dr. Morell, to whom he had referred the case, he had begun to correspond with certain experts to see whether there were any recorded precedents for such a strange case of apparent victimization by malignant forces.

Now that he had lost his wife, Robert was a broken man, both in body and spirit. At first the two doctors and the nurse who attended him despaired of his life and only gave him a few days to live. But when he had regained some measure of lucidity following the stroke which left him unconscious for a day and a night after the news of Ellen's death, the doctors had feared for his sanity. He had spoken wildly of his worst suspicions being confirmed, of 'witches' and 'warlocks' and 'devils in human form' who had forced the Brandersons to murder his wife. He had also spoken of the need to destroy the accursed family who, he insisted, were a deadly threat not only to their neighbors but to all who came into contact with them. Finally, when he was somewhat calmer, he implored the doctors to take the two letters Ellen had written him from London and show them to the police as evidence that her death was in no way accidental, as had been officially stated.

Impressed by his persistence, the doctors read the letters and at once realized the significance of the mention in the second letter that Mrs. Branderson had apparently been in contact with the murdered Orsini. The letters were handed over to the Devonshire police, who passed them on to Scotland Yard, where Detective-Inspector Jameson was conducting the investigation into the Orsini case.

There was little in Ellen's first letter of November 21 to interest the inspector. The fact that Ellen had written of her sense of fear and revulsion in the Brandersons' presence was certainly no proof that either Justin or Clara had been connected with the crime and, certainly, to arouse dislike in others is no offense. As for Ellen's assertions that the Brandersons were 'possessed and transformed by some horrible spirit'—it was known that the Middletons had long been interested in matters pertaining to the supernatural.

Ellen's letter was therefore seen as inspired by an excited and overheated imagination. But the reference in Ellen's second letter to a visit paid by Clara to Signor Orsini at once aroused the inspector's interest although, as he pointed out to his colleagues and superiors, Ellen had written that Clara seemed to know nothing of such an encounter nor of the letter her friend had mentioned.

Orsini's mute manservant had been questioned at length about the mysterious woman who had been seen coming out of the house with him and whom he had taken away in his master's carriage, but he made it clear by signs (he could not write) that he remembered nothing of this alleged incident. Nor could he throw any light on the identity of the person who had left fingerprints in the study. The whole night had obviously become a blank in his memory. One thing, according to the forensic expert, was certain: the woman visitor could not have committed the murder, for the fingerprints were those of a man and death had occurred at least two or three hours after the witness had seen the woman's departure.

Ellen had also written to Robert that Clara had already mentioned Orsini in a previous letter, but where then was this letter which Ellen claimed to have left in a 'safe place' together with all the other correspondence she had received from Clara? Robert Middleton, of course, had no idea. All the police had to act upon was Ellen's written allegation to the effect that Clara had accused Justin of Orsini's murder.

Detective-Inspector Jameson sent a policeman to the London hotel where Ellen had been staying in order to make inquiries about the stranger who, according to her letter, had called to see her and then searched her room. The hotel porter was extremely vague and could only say that some man—whose appearance he could no longer recollect—had come to the hotel but he could not even remember whether or not the man had asked for Mrs. Middleton. In fact, he could remember nothing else. He was so manifestly confused about the incident that the policeman questioning him decided that the porter must have been drinking while on duty.

Detective-Inspector Jameson then made a visit to Clara

Branderson. He took care to make his call at a time when Justin was known to be away from the house. He was received with great charm and courtesy by Clara. Without preamble the inspector told her that he had been shown Ellen Middleton's last letter in which the poor woman had mentioned a visit paid by Clara to Orsini on the night of his murder and referred to a 'mysterious packet.' Clara unhesitatingly told the Inspector that she had never been to Orsini's house and that she knew nothing whatsoever of any packet and that she had never written any letters to her friend about such a nocturnal visit. What had happened was that Ellen had been in a distressed state when she had come to see her and had made all kinds of wild accusations inspired by some dream she had had in which she claimed to have seen Clara running away from her home to Orsini's house and being pursued by Justin. According to Clara, Ellen was a woman of hysterical temperament and her imagination had unfortunately become unhinged through dabbling in spiritualism. She had nourished a wholly unjustified prejudice against Justin, and had become insanely convinced that Clara was in the grip of an evil spirit. Ellen's delusion that the Brandersons were involved in the death of Orsini probably came from the fact that Clara had mentioned in a letter that Orsini had once called to see Justin after a chance meeting, to lend him a book on certain aspects of Eastern religion and philosophy in which both men were keenly interested.

Jameson was impressed by Clara's evident sincerity when she spoke of the grief she had felt at seeing Ellen's deranged state and subsequent death, but he secretly pocketed a small letter opener used by Justin lying on a desk and a teaspoon used by Clara, taking them for fingerprint examination at the Yard. Before leaving the house, he also managed to question the domestics, who all declared that they were prepared to swear under oath that their mistress had not once left the house on the night of the Orsini murder since she was unwell and lying in her room under heavy sedation—a fact which was later confirmed by the doctor.

The next day Jameson spoke to Justin, who told him that he had met Orsini on two or three occasions to converse

about Oriental lore and philosophy and that he had invited him once to the house to see his collection of Oriental *objets d'art* and antiquities. Justin said that Orsini seemed a strange man and a scholarly recluse of considerable wealth, which accounted for the fact that someone had tried to rob him. Justin was extremely angry and distressed that his wife's name should have been mentioned to the police in connection with the case as a result of poor Ellen's mania and obsession. He insisted that a confrontation should take place between Clara and the mute manservant to clear the matter up once and for all. This was speedily and discreetly arranged. Clara was taken in privacy to the mute's place of confinement and brought face-to-face with him in the presence of the inspector and several of his colleagues. The afflicted man showed not the slightest sign of recognition in Clara's presence but merely stared at her vacantly as though even the faculties of thought and sight had been taken away from him. Meanwhile, police experts compared the fingerprints on Justin's letter opener and on Clara's teaspoon with those found in Orsini's room. There was not the slightest similarity between the prints and therefore not a shred of proof against the Brandersons. Further questioning of the mute produced no results and the police physician declared that the poor man's mind had obviously become deranged as a result of shock at his master's death.

But Jameson could not rid himself of the feeling that somehow Justin's relationship with Orsini had been more than a casual one. Ellen's letter to Robert still worried him and his detective's instinct told him that she had been anything but insane or hysterical when writing it. Moreover, it was now established that a person unknown *had* come to her hotel as she had alleged in the letter. If she really had possessed letters from Clara saying that Justin was involved in the Orsini affair, then there was a very good motive for obtaining the letters from her. In addition, Jameson was intrigued by the physical aspect and manner of both Clara and Justin Branderson. There was something distinctly strange about them, he confessed to his colleagues. His own impressions of the couple tallied disquietingly with the

description in Ellen's letter. He too had felt at times that he was talking to the same person in two different bodies. He also had observed the curious similarity between their voices and the expression in their eyes—almost 'as though they had been twin brother and sister rather than husband and wife,' to quote his actual words. He also expressed the opinion that both the Brandersons seemed to have the faculty of 'reading' his mind while he had interviewed them and of divining his next question even before he had put it in words.

Jameson would have continued his investigations had not a sensational development made him close the file on the Orsini affair—although not without some reluctance. A signed confession to the Orsini murder was sent to Scotland Yard from an address in Chelsea. The writer declared that he and a female accomplice had attempted to extort large sums of money from Orsini by threats and blackmail. They had planned that the woman would visit Orsini at night and then declare that she had been assaulted and outraged by him. The man would then call upon Orsini a few hours later and demand money, threatening that his female accomplice would otherwise go to the police. Orsini had refused. There had been a struggle and murder had ensued. The police at once went to the address given in the letter and found it to be that of a cheap lodging house near the Thames Embankment. The landlady was in a state of great agitation and had already called the police after finding the door of one of her lodgers' rooms locked and a trickle of blood emerging from under it.

In the room there lay the body of a young man. The unfortunate wretch had cut his own throat from ear to ear with a razor after briefly going out to post a letter. His fingerprints corresponded exactly to those found in Orsini's library. He was later identified as Lionel W****, the younger son of a well-known and highly respected family who had seen nothing of him since he had been expelled from Oxford University. He had come to live alone in London on the allowance his sorrowful parents had finally agreed to pay him after he had been involved in a series of scandals.

Strange things were said of Lionel W**** by those who had known him or briefly encountered him. At Oxford he had become notorious for his wild profligacy and had become the acknowledged leader of a small band of fellow undergraduates reputed to have perverse tastes and to have shared a common passion for the occult. They had attempted to re-create the infamous 'Hell Fire Club' of the eighteenth century, were supposed to have each taken an oath to commit one evil deed to earn full membership and had finally been expelled by the college authorities after being caught in the act of attempting to hold a diabolical 'black magic' ritual involving the killing of a cat belonging to one of the janitors. In London, Lionel W**** had dropped mysterious hints, to the few acquaintances he retained, that he was on the verge of 'great discoveries.' Once, while drunk, he had spoken wildly to companions about having met people of 'great powers' who were 'showing him the way to secrets undreamed of by common humanity.' He had urged them to accompany him to a clandestine meeting one night but they had declined, being alarmed by his appearance and attitude which no longer seemed those of a sane person. He had then vanished from sight for several weeks until taking up residence in the lodging house.

The landlady testified to the police that when Lionel W**** had come to rent a room from her, his appearance and manner had been anything but those of a debauchee and wastrel. He had seemed 'a perfect gentleman,' he had always paid his rent regularly, never received callers and never occasioned the slightest disturbance. He was often away at night, sometimes returning home late the next morning, but she had never caught sight of any friends or acquaintances he might have had and she was particularly struck by the fact that he never received any mail at all. Although he was a model lodger in every respect, she often felt slightly disturbed in his presence for he had 'such strange eyes and a funny look' and a curious way of talking 'almost as though it wasn't himself talking.' On various occasions when she had passed his room she had heard him muttering and once, as she had stood outside his door to eavesdrop, being un-

able to resist her curiosity, she had felt as though a sudden chilly draught 'had come straight through the wood to freeze the marrow of my bones.' As an afterthought, she told the police that her pet tabby cat—usually an affectionate animal—had been unable to stand the sight of her lodger and always hissed and run away upon seeing him.

The identity of Lionel W****'s young female accomplice remained a complete mystery, but Jameson's superiors declared the investigation at an end as far as the identity of the murderer and his motive were concerned. Jameson, however, was far from satisfied. The fact that Lionel W**** had been passionately interested in occultism convinced the inspector that, despite the murderer's confession, the crime had been more than a sordid case of attempted blackmail and extortion. It was said by the few people who had vaguely known him that Orsini was deeply versed in strange religions and supernatural practice. His funeral in Highgate cemetery had been attended by several foreign visitors, two of whom had pronounced strange words over his grave, and a will had been found in which Orsini left all his library of mystical, magical and scientific works to a man in Paris with a reputation for arcane knowledge. Although he did not express it at the time, Jameson's own theory was that Orsini had been the leader of some group of occultists or spiritualists of which there had been much talk in several newspapers, and that young Lionel W**** had been trying to force his victim into divulging secrets which he believed would bring him great material gain and power.

But the greatest sensation, which unleashed a floodtide of speculation in the press, was the desecration of the grave of the murdered Orsini. The keeper of the Highgate cemetery, where the mysterious foreigner was buried, stated to the police that twice he had found men wandering around the cemetery after he had rung the bell to warn visitors that it was time to close the gates. A few nights later, while he and his wife were asleep in their small lodge by the gates, they had been awakened by their dog who was growling and whining and running around the house. Immediately surmising that some intruder had made his way over the walls

into the cemetery precinct, the keeper went out of the lodge. He was surprised that his dog refused to come with him, although the animal was a thoroughly trained watchdog. The keeper began to search the cemetery for intruders. He did not take a lantern, which would have given away his whereabouts, and besides, the night was clear and moonlit. As he came to the part of the cemetery where Orsini lay buried, he denoted shadowy figures moving between the gravestones and mausoleums. He could smell the strong, pungent odor of weeds and strange herbs and incenses being burned and heard a man speaking unrecognizable and unintelligible words in a commanding tone.

Realizing that an unhallowed and illicit ceremony was in progress, the keeper ran forward, brandishing his stick to order the trespassers to desist from their sacrilegious ritual. He was confronted by a tall, dark man who, he stated, 'had great blazing eyes and spoke in such a funny tone, all hollow and echoing and deep like a muffled drum-beat,' and he was about to be set upon by another man from behind when he struck out blindly with his stick. He hit the first assailant on the shoulder and knocked him off balance and then ran for his life along one of the overgrown, winding pathways leading back to the main entrance. After warning his wife to bar the door of the lodge, the keeper ran uphill to the center of Highgate Village near the Green and returned with a constable.

There was no sign of the intruders, who had obviously escaped over the wall, but an awful sight confronted the keeper and the constable when they came to Orsini's grave. The huge heavy slab over the grave had been wrenched away and pushed aside, exposing the coffin, which gaped open and was empty. On the ground, in the middle of a roughly-traced circle and near a small bronze bowl on a tripod containing a smouldering and evil smelling mixture of dried herbs as well as other substances and powders, there lay the body of the dead Italian. His head was lying to the east, and his arms were outstretched like those of a crucifix. Along the perimeter of the circle surrounding the corpse were nine black candles, and the soil within the circle and under the body was later found to have been sprinkled

with sulphur and blood. In the course of the investigations, a local priest declared both to the police and the press that the intruders had clearly been attempting to perform a rite of necromancy, possibly in order to summon the dead man's spirit back into his decaying body so that he might impart certain information to those invoking him. The case came to the notice of Detective-Superintendent Jameson and made him believe more strongly than ever that Orsini's murder had been the result of some kind of vendetta among unknown persons who had been active in the practice of what was popularly known as black magic.

Strange and perplexing incidents occurred in the little Devonshire village in which he and Ellen had made their home. It was Robert's wish that Ellen should be buried in the village graveyard, but his condition was so desperate that it was quite out of the question for him to attend his wife's burial. While the body was brought down from London, Robert lay in a semi-coma, occasionally regaining full consciousness only to reiterate his accusations against the Brandersons whom he called 'devils' and 'murderers.' At these times his agitation was so extreme that the vicar, who came every day to comfort the afflicted man, decided it would not be wise to let Robert know that Clara Branderson had arrived in the village to attend the obsequies of her oldest and dearest friend.

The funeral was a restrained and dignified affair, held in the presence of a few friends and relations and the villagers, who had been sincerely distressed by Ellen's death and the alarming condition of the widowed husband. But the center of attention was Mrs. Branderson, for it had become known in the village that she was the object of Robert Middleton's wild accusations. They noted her air of subdued but profound sorrow, remarked that she 'looked a very distinguished lady' and quickly came to the conclusion that there was not the slightest basis for Robert's charges which, they were sure, were inspired by a mind deranged from grief and illness. Even so, some of the keener-eyed and more curious onlookers noted that Clara took no part in the prayers but seemed to withdraw into herself as though the

religious ceremony was of indifference to her. The vicar was also struck by her manner, her soft but curiously resonant voice and her intense, piercing gaze when she briefly lifted her thick veil. He remarked to his intimates she seemed a person of such unusually strong character that he found himself slightly disturbed in her presence. There was something in her which he could not define in words but which aroused in him a feeling of alarm and hostility that persisted even after he had concluded his short conversation with her.

Despite the vicar's and the doctor's warnings that Robert was in no fit state to receive any visitors, Clara insisted that she be taken to his house, for she was sure that she could give him some comfort and that as she had so loved his dear wife, she could not leave the village without paying her respects to Robert even though she had never met him before. Neither the vicar nor the doctors were able to persist in their refusal, although such a meeting was likely to worsen the condition of the sick man. Clara then made her way to the Middleton house, where she was met by a nurse who informed her that Robert had recently lost consciousness. A most distressing incident then took place. While the nurse was conferring with Clara, from the sickroom Robert's voice however distorted by pain and a fearful tone of hatred, audibly, spoke the words 'do not let her in' and 'devil, murderess, monster.' The nurse rushed to the patient and found him on the point of another collapse and naturally Clara was not allowed to see him. Apparently greatly upset by the incident, Clara left the house, but instead of returning to London by the next train, she announced her intention of spending the night in the village inn, hoping that perhaps Robert might be sufficiently recovered the next morning for her to attempt to see him again.

After Clara's departure the doctors were even more convinced than before that Robert's bereavement was threatening his sanity, for he told them that Clara had come to see him and questioned him 'about her letters to Ellen.' When had she come to the house? Robert could not say exactly but affirmed that 'I was asleep when she came and it was *while I was asleep that she questioned me. I know it.* She knows now that I have no knowledge of where the letters

are.' The nurse was questioned but all she could say was that late during the evening Clara had simply come to the door of the house and asked her about Robert's condition and had been told that he was sound asleep. Had the woman admitted Clara into the house? Curiously she could not say: she thought she had not but after exchanging a few words with Clara, her memories were vague. One moment she had been talking to Clara—the next thing she knew for sure was that Clara had taken her leave and that Robert was still sleeping.

For some days after the funeral Robert Middleton's state remained extremely critical. More than once he appeared to be on the point of death and the doctors were convinced that the slightest physical disturbance or mental excitement would be fatal, but to their immense surprise he did not die. After he had handed over Ellen's two letters, he spoke no more of the Brandersons or of his belief that Ellen had been murdered. Instead, he showed a grim determination to cling onto life for as long as possible and declared that he was willing to cooperate to the fullest extent with his physicians in the hope that he might eventually be able to leave his sickbed.

Before Ellen had died, Robert had still been capable of walking for a limited time each day. He had been able to pursue his studies and writings and to receive company in the house, although travelling for any long distance was out of the question. Now only the glow in his sunken eyes and the desperate firmness in his tone attested the intense will to live which still animated his disease-ravaged body. Were he to remain confined to his bed, he might still live for another two or three years at the most. He had asked his doctors to be frank and open with him and not to hesitate to tell him how long he might expect to live. He affirmed that he knew that his days were numbered and that death held no terrors for him since he would soon be reunited with his beloved Ellen in a world beyond the grave.

Robert's next question dumbfounded his doctors. How long, he asked them, would life remain in his body if he not only left his bed, but went to London? He was told at once

that such a course—assuming he regained enough strength to move—was tantamount to suicide. If he really were to carry out his declared intention of journeying to the capital to pursue certain studies in libraries and institutes which, he claimed, were vital to his life's work, the strain on his constitution would undoubtedly lead to his death within three or four months. The answer did not dismay Robert. He repeated the question, asking the doctors to assure him that he really would have at least three months to live in such circumstances. He then declared that, for the time being, he would renounce every form of activity in order to store up the necessary reserve of physical strength for the course of action he planned, insisting that the doctors had no power to prevent him from doing as he pleased.

Willpower alone seemed to sustain Robert. A little blood returned to his hollowed cheeks, his movements became more assured and after three weeks he was able to rise from his bed for a few hours at a time and even take short walks around the village. Two weeks later, after leaving notes for his nurse and housekeeper, Robert slipped out of the house and caught a night train to London. He left no forwarding address. He had disappeared into the depths of the great metropolis to pursue whatever course of action he had decided upon in the three months of life which were now all that remained to him.

Poor Ellen Middleton had not been the only person to be surprised by the peculiar change which had overcome Clara Branderson since her illness or by the similarity of expression which now characterized her and her husband. Neighbors and acquaintances had spoken of how both husband and wife must have suffered from the same affliction, and of how it made them behave so strangely until they had made the remarkable recoveries which had baffled their doctors. Soon people came to the conclusion that the illness the Brandersons had shared had produced some very singular after-effects in both of them.

It had already been rumored that first Justin and then Clara had been mentally disturbed during their periods of illness. Now it was said that their sufferings had effected a

permanent alteration in their characters. The normally affable and convivial Justin of the past was no more. He had become solemn, withdrawn, uncommunicative and inhospitable, shunning the company of his former friends and associates and either spending long periods enclosed in his house or else away from home for as much as a whole day or a night at a time. On some of these excursions he was accompanied by his wife, otherwise she remained at home and showed a similar disinclination for company. Shortly after Clara returned from attending Ellen's funeral, Justin let it be known that he was completely retiring from business and handed over his company to other hands, renouncing all say in its management. He was known to have amassed great wealth but to the surprise of all who knew him, he seemed to have no intention of enjoying the fruits of his years of labor. The Brandersons went on no holidays, they invited no one, they remained content with their residence, their style of life remained unchanged, they enjoyed none of the amenities of the capital, they never went to a restaurant, an art gallery or concert, they shopped and clothed themselves modestly, and they politely but firmly declined every invitation they received.

What on earth did the Brandersons *do* now that Justin had given up his profession, people wondered as they saw him emerge from his house to step into his carriage and be driven away to some mysterious destination? Clara would stay in the house for days at a time and when her son Terence appeared in public, it was invariably with the close-mouthed, severe-faced governess who came to the house each day and refused ever to enter into conversation with those who met her in the street or park. In former days the house of the Brandersons had been alive and gay with music, dinner parties and receptions. Now it was silent as though its residents had become members of some monastic order sworn to silence and frugality.

As the weeks passed and the Brandersons withdrew increasingly from the world, it became rumored among a few of their neighbors and former friends that their illness had produced a spiritual crisis in their lives which had led them to forsake the pleasures of the world for religion and

mysticism. Although neither Clara nor Justin attended any church of a Christian denomination, it was believed that they had begun to subscribe to some Oriental cult or else to one of the new, unorthodox creeds like the Theosophical movement, which had been attracting great attention in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. One of Justin's former colleagues was told by an acquaintance that another friend had informed him that Justin had been seen at the meeting of a singular mystical sect which had evolved a new occult philosophy inspired by a disciple of the Swedenborgian faith. Another person who vaguely knew Justin had once observed him immersed in the study of some ancient volumes in the Reading Room of the British Museum and had later seen him deep in discussion with the proprietor of a book shop specializing in occult and mystical works.

The house of the Brandersons had become a gloomy place and tenants of the neighboring houses began to speculate about how the Branderson children would react to its changed atmosphere once they returned to it. Later in November, the elder son, Lieutenant Simon Branderson, returned with his regiment from India and at once went home on leave. But no sooner had he crossed the threshold of the house on Courtland Square than he appeared to have been struck down by some illness, for he did not emerge from it for a whole week. During that time his closest friend, a Lieutenant Mason who served in the same regiment, called at the house to inquire after him since it had been agreed that the two friends would be seeing much of each other in London. Furthermore, Simon had promised to go down to his friend's parents' country seat in Sussex for a few days.

Lieutenant Mason left the Brandersons' house a puzzled and anxious man. In India, Simon had always been one of the most popular officers in the regiment and a gay and entertaining companion in the mess. But when his friend saw him in the bosom of his family, Simon had become subdued, pale, tired and withdrawn and disinclined for any long conversation. In response to his friend's inquiries, he said that the sudden change from the Indian to the English climate had made him unwell and that he was too exhausted

for the time being to do anything but rest in his parents' house. But it was not only the evident signs of physical debility which distressed his friend Mason. Rather it was his strange reluctance to speak at any length on exactly what it was that had made him ill, the complete absence of his former affability and warmth in his attitude towards Mason, and what seemed to be signs of fear in his manner as though he were now living under the threat of some greater misfortune than that of his ill-health.

Mason was also affected by the peculiar atmosphere of the house. Although both Clara and Justin Branderson welcomed him with the utmost courtesy, he detected an insincerity in their manner and felt uneasy in their company. When he had been left alone with his sick friend, he could not rid himself of the feeling that somehow the parents could overhear every word he was speaking and that Simon himself was aware of this and consequently unwilling to speak normally to him or to take him into his confidence. Mason later stated, 'Simon wasn't just ill or fagged out, you know. I could see in his eyes that he had something on his mind that was badly worrying him and that if he had half a chance he would have told me all about it. But he looked so afraid!' During the brief and unsatisfactory colloquy between the two friends, Mason sensed that some barrier had now come between them and that although there was certainly no question of either of the parents actually eavesdropping on them, he felt that somehow an invisible but watchful projection of their presence had come into the room and was overlooking them. Preposterous, perhaps, but . . .

A few days later Simon must have recovered sufficiently to leave his bed, since some curious neighbors passing the house saw him standing by the window of the drawing room, looking out into the street like a patient gazing from his hospital room or, as one person put it, 'like a prisoner looking out from his cell.' It was noticed that as the days passed, never once did Simon set foot outside the house.

Two weeks before Christmas, Jane and Rachel returned home from the Continent, making the last lap of the journey together after meeting in Paris. With them, they brought a

young girl called Mary Roscoe, the daughter of wealthy Scottish parents living near Aberdeen. A warm friendship had sprung up between Mary and Rachel at the finishing school which they both attended, and Rachel had invited Mary to spend the night in the Branderson home before completing her long journey home to Scotland on the following day.

The three young ladies had barely crossed the threshold of the house when they all became indisposed—apparently from influenza contracted on the journey. A telegram was dispatched to Mary Roscoe's parents, who at once left for London. Three days' later, when it was established that Mary was well enough to travel, her mother and father took her home. Somewhat to their surprise, she told them that Justin Branderson had suddenly decided that Rachel would not be going back to the finishing school at the end of the Christmas holidays, nor would Jane be resuming her music studies in Germany. For one reason or another, both the Branderson daughters would be staying indefinitely in London. But when Mary's parents asked her whether she was not sorry that she would no longer enjoy the companionship of Rachel, Mary cryptically replied that it did not matter, that henceforth she would always be 'very, very close to Rachel.'

From this moment the Roscoes began to regret that their daughter had ever met and become friendly with the Branderson girl. Mary now seemed alien to her own family and they blamed the fact on the Brandersons, who had made a disturbing impression on them when they had met. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Roscoe had felt at ease in the Brandersons' presence, and they afterwards declared that Justin and Clara had extremely dominating personalities. They also had not liked the unusual stillness in the house, the attitude of the servants, and the adoring, worshipful way in which Mary had looked not only at Rachel but at every member of the Branderson family as though henceforth her primary loyalties and affections belonged to them and not to her own kin.

Puzzled but relieved that Mary had suffered from nothing more serious than a mild bout of influenza of which

there was an epidemic in London, the Roscoes decided that rest and the bracing air of the Highlands would soon restore their daughter to her former self. They were quickly disappointed. To their consternation, she seemed to have become a different person. She was brooding, introspective and secretive whereas formerly she had been high-spirited, talkative and warm-hearted. She showed little interest in her parents, the rest of her family or her former pursuits. The young man she had known since childhood, who came to call at the Roscoe's house, seemed to fill her with an inexplicable aversion, and she displayed only boredom or indifference in the presence of other former friends. At night she was subject to strange dreams and was heard to talk in her sleep. To her parents' amazement, she declared that she would no longer attend church or, indeed, have anything more to do with the faith in which she had been brought up.

At the end of the Christmas vacation, Mary returned to her finishing school but soon a series of alarming letters reached her parents from the principal who finally requested them to remove their daughter since she was having 'a bad influence' on the other girls and had even physically assaulted two of them during some argument. Mrs. Roscoe immediately went to Switzerland to fetch her daughter and came back with her to London, where they took a hotel for the night, intending to catch the next morning's fast train for Aberdeen. Late that night, a commotion was heard in the room shared by the mother and daughter and the porter caught a glimpse of Mary Roscoe, fully dressed, running through the hotel lobby and out into the night. A few minutes later Mrs. Roscoe was found in a state of shock on the floor of her room, having fallen after ringing the bell. She was half-insensible and bleeding profusely from a number of blows which her daughter had struck her in the course of a violent quarrel after Mary had manifested her intention of going out of the hotel on her own. As the days passed, no trace of the daughter was found, although the police had been provided with a portrait photograph of Mary Roscoe taken just before she had first left her home for Switzerland.

As Mary had been so friendly with Rachel Branderson, the distraught mother and father declared their belief that the transformation in their daughter's character and behavior could only be due to some malign influence exerted over her by the Branderson girl, even though she had been glowingly described in Mary's letters as a sweet and lovable person. A police inspector called upon the Brandersons and was allowed to see Rachel, who had now recovered from her illness, but was assured that at no time since her disappearance had Mary made any communication with her friend. None of the Brandersons had any idea why the girl had run away from her mother nor where she could have gone. She had no relatives in London, no friends, no acquaintances, and only a small amount of money which she had filched from her mother's purse.

A week later, on a damp January night, Mary Roscoe was recognized by a constable on duty in a dingy Islington street. He immediately detained her and asked where she was going. At first Mary looked as if she was about to run from the policeman, and had stared around her like a trapped person seeking some issue of escape. A moment later she calmed down and meekly allowed herself to be led to the police station, where she admitted her identity although steadfastly refused to say where she had been living or where she had been bound. A doctor was summoned and proceeded to examine her. He found her in good physical condition and apparently in a normal frame of mind but could not help being struck by the singularity of her gaze, which disconcerted him, and by an incongruously low resonant timbre in her voice when she consented to answer a few simple questions such as 'had she eaten recently?' and 'had she been sleeping in the open, or with friends, or in a lodging house?' As the doctor said afterwards, he had the impression not only that she was adamantly refusing to tell him what she had been doing since running away from her mother, but that her refusal seemed to be prompted by 'something outside her,' almost as if 'her words did not really come from within herself.'

As Mary Roscoe's condition did not warrant her being

taken to a hospital, a bed was prepared for her in a cell in the police station, while a telegram was sent to her parents to advise them that she had been found. During the latter part of the night, the police officer on duty was startled by the sounds from Mary's cell. As he went into the cell, he found the girl lying on the floor in a semi-conscious state, babbling and making what he could only describe as 'almost animal sounds.' She began to struggle as he tried to pick her up and even as he called for help and tried to prevent her biting and scratching him, he noticed that the temperature in the cell had become unusually cold for a few minutes although the entire premises of the station were well-heated. The girl was finally overpowered and made no further attempts at resistance, but when she was examined by a doctor she was still incapable of any coherent utterance and seemed oblivious to either her physical surroundings or the people about her. She never spoke again but always continued to make the same animal-like mumblings and cries. Her mind was shattered; she was irremediably insane and removed to an asylum where she died a few months later.

In a short time the heart-broken Roscoes were not the only people to believe that contact with members of the Branderson family was likely to produce tragic and sinister results. At first the Branderson children seemed to share their parents' disinclination for all company and to have joined them in their seclusion. Neighbors saw Simon and the two girls—now recovered from their influenza—through the windows of their house. They noted that none of them ever ventured outside except occasionally by night, and that unlike all the other homes in the district, that of the Brandersons was giving not the slightest sign of preparing for Christmas festivities. Then, on the very eve of Christmas, there occurred the incident which shattered the happiness and harmony of nearly thirty families and which led to an outbreak of the wildest rumors and speculation concerning the Brandersons.

Towards eight o'clock at night, the last of various groups of carol singers that had been making the rounds of the

district came into Courtland Square. Warned by neighbors and discouraged by the forbidding and unfestive aspect of the Branderson house, previous carollers had passed its front doors without ringing the bell. This time the group was composed of some thirty little boys from a nearby preparatory school and was led by an eleven year old prefect. After singing 'While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night' outside the house directly opposite the Brandersons', they crossed the road and prepared to sing their next carol. An elderly widower who lived at a house a few numbers away was passing at the time. After slipping a shilling piece into the hand of the youthful choir leader, he jovially remarked: 'I wouldn't waste your time singing in front of that house, young man! They don't appear to like carol singers. Nor Christmas neither, by the look of it.' Then, seeming to regret his words and the impression they made upon the little boys who stared at him, he added: 'Well, why not then? I saw Mr. Branderson leaving a short time ago and perhaps his family won't be so meanhearted.'

The young singers then clustered together to share the light of a street lamp, held up their song books and began 'Hark, the Herald Angels sing!' A light or two could be seen gleaming faintly behind the drawn curtains of the ground floor windows of the house but still the door remained closed while the boys sang the second and third verses. Provoked by the total lack of response to their enthusiastic singing, several of the bolder spirits among the boys began to call out 'Scrooges, meanies ...'

What happened next was witnessed by a neighbor and his family as they returned to their house. The front door of the Brandersons was opened and the small figure of Terence could be seen silhouetted in the dim light which illuminated the front hall. The little boys who had been jibing against the alleged meanness of the Brandersons fell silent as Terence came out of the door and went halfway down the front steps. After surveying the group for a second or two, he raised his little hand with a gesture that was half a command and half an invitation and then went back to the door, followed by the boys in the front of the group. A minute later, every one of the thirty little boys had gone

through the door, which closed silently behind them. Three or four minutes elapsed and then the door opened again and the group descended the steps and moved along the street towards the house of the well-known retired general, Sir Hugh S*****, who was a close friend of Colonel Duckworth and who shared the latter's recent aversion for the Brandersons.

This time the carol singers began intoning a peculiar chant which bore no recognizable affinity to any known Christmas carol or hymn. But although the words were unintelligible to all who heard them, there was something disturbing in both the cacophonous melody and rhythm of the chant and in the contrast between the sound of the mysterious words and the pure piping trebles of the small boys. It was as though a sweet melody played on a flute had suddenly changed into some incantation from a pagan rite. Nonetheless, despite the weird new song which had replaced the Christian hymn of a few minutes ago, General Sir Hugh S***** at once opened the door and stood framed in it beside his wife, ready to welcome the singers and give them a Yuletide offering.

In the course of his long and distinguished career General Sir Hugh S***** had taken part in the storming of the Redan in the Crimean War, had faced Sepoys in the Indian Mutiny, had fought the Ashantis, stood fast against the Zulus in Africa and taken part in the Sudan expedition to Khartoum just before his retirement. But as he afterwards declared, never in his life had he seen anything more upsetting than the way the thirty small boys, neatly clad in their school overcoats over their suits and white collars, advanced in a solid formation up the steps to the front door, their faces all frozen into a look of sheer savage aggression. In an instant he and Lady S***** were swept aside and knocked off their feet by the numbers. The General's monocle was smashed, one eye was badly bruised and his jaw fractured by vicious kicks from one small, heavily soled boot after another; his wife was thrown prostrate and trampled so badly that three of her ribs were broken, and her hair was wrenched out by the handful. As the maid and the butler came to the rescue, they were hit by canes

and umbrellas which the boys had taken from the hall stand. Vases and a bookshelf were knocked over, windows were broken and almost every plate and cup in the kitchen and the dining room were smashed against the walls. A steaming tureen of soup was thrown over the butler as he struggled to his feet, which scalded him badly; hot coals and logs were snatched with tongs from the great fireplace in the library and strewn around the room; a table lamp was thrown against a book-shelf, setting fire to it; the family silver was hurled against the walls, and in an upstairs room a flaming gas lamp was hurled into Lady S*****'s closet. An upstairs maid was also assaulted and flung down the staircase, and the General's Spaniel was later found with its skull crushed by a blow from a poker.

As the flames began to spread in the library and Lady S*****'s room, neighbors who had heard the din ran out of their houses only to see the small horde of schoolboy singers emerging from the house in the same close order to gather around a lamppost and energetically sing the first verse of 'God rest ye Merry Gentlemen' as though nothing out of the way had occurred. While the police and firemen rushed to the scene and began to douse the flames that threatened to spread to the whole dwelling, grief-stricken parents and passers-by gazed in disbelief at the small boys. Recrimination of any sort was out of the question: each boy, who only moments previously had behaved like a savage, was now looking dazed and pale, as though just emerged from a trance. Several of the boys immediately burst into tears as they gazed around them and saw the fire engines outside the house, the ambulance attendants carrying the general, his wife, maid and butler on stretchers, and found their own hands covered with blood.

The schoolboys were at once taken into custody, but despite repeated questioning by the police, none of them had the slightest recollection of what had occurred from the time they had been singing outside the Branderson house. A doctor and an eminent specialist in mental diseases were called, but both declared themselves baffled by the case. The clergyman who was headmaster of the boys' school came to see them. After being allowed a brief inter-

view with a few of them in the police station, he withdrew, pale and shaken, saying that he was convinced that somehow the unfortunate boys had been literally 'possessed by the devil.'

It became widely known that the carollers had been inside the Branderson house for a few minutes before attacking General S*****'s residence. At once rumors flew that the little Branderson boy had been responsible for the transformation of thirty previously well-behaved boys of eminently respectable families into murderous hooligans. Several furious and bewildered parents clustered outside the Branderson house and shook their fists menacingly at the darkened windows. A few minutes later a cab stopped outside the house. As Justin stepped out, he was instantly surrounded by a small irate crowd, but something in his attitude made them step back. A police constable then arrived on the scene. Respectfully and hesitantly he told Justin that allegations had been made that Terence Branderson must have persuaded the boys to commit their wanton deed.

'Are you implying that my youngest son has been capable of deliberately willing some thirty boys he has never seen before and all presumably with minds of their own, to attack and destroy a neighbor's house? On what grounds, pray, do people base such a scandalous accusation? If their sons choose to behave like devils, theirs is the responsibility alone and they must be punished for it!' Justin scornfully retorted. As the policeman began to look confused, Justin invited him into the house. The policeman later told his superiors that upon being admitted to the Branderson residence, the boys had demanded excessive sums of money, threatening that they would wreck the house in the event of a refusal. The Brandersons' domestics confirmed the story, adding that they had been far too afraid to attempt to call the police, and Mrs. Branderson added that she had reluctantly been forced to hand over fifty sovereigns before the group would depart. On examination, each of the boys was found to have one or two of the gold coins in his pocket and was unable to account for how it came to be in his possession. The boys appeared before a magistrate, were examined

by specialists at great length and finally sent to reformatories.

Years later, when they eventually emerged from confinement, none of them was ever able to account for what they had done that night. Their young lives had been blighted at the outset and their families were heartbroken. Meanwhile, although it was obviously an absurdity to suggest that little Terence really could have persuaded or forced the boys to commit their frightful deed, the Brandersons' neighbors continued to regard him and his family with apprehension and suspicion. On the rare occasions when Terence was seen outside his home with his governess or mother, parents would immediately cross the road with their children, avoiding the boy as though he carried the plague.

The next member of the Branderson family to arouse gossip of an unpleasant nature was Simon, after he emerged from his confinement in the house. People were quick to observe that there must be something singularly unhealthy about the Branderson residence, for every time people stayed under its roof for any length of time they became afflicted by illness for several days and then made a rapid recovery after which they were no longer quite the same as before.

Soon Simon was well enough to accept the invitation of his friend, Lieutenant Francis Mason, to his family's country seat. The moment Mason saw Simon again he was uneasy. Formerly Simon had been open and unassuming in his manner: now, his manner was tinged with loftiness and despite his usual cordiality, he seemed unable to avoid giving the impression that he was somehow superior, as though born to command—and to be obeyed. As Francis Mason wrote to another friend and fellow officer in the same regiment: 'I felt that he wasn't one of us any longer. There was something so damnably *knowing* and self-satisfied about the fellow!' Although Simon chatted gaily with his friend, Mason soon felt he could no longer confide in Simon as he had done before. The old intimacy between them had gone, and Mason now had the uncomfortable feeling that in all the three years when the two men had soldiered together he had never really gotten to know his

friend beyond his surface personality and manner. It was as if Mason had just come to realize that Simon kept his real self hidden from the world.

Another factor which contributed to Francis Mason's unease was that Simon now bore a marked resemblance to his father, which he had not previously noticed when he had visited the house and met Justin Branderson before proceeding to Simon's sick room. Naturally there was a certain physical similarity between the father and son as in all families, but now there was something else: since his return to his family's home, Simon had acquired a great deal of Justin's manner and facial expression. The look in his eyes was the same and even his voice seemed to have altered slightly, acquiring the same resonances and rhythm of his father's. But the greatest surprise of all was when Simon told Mason he had decided to resign his commission and leave the army for good. He gave no explanation for his proposed action except that he had recently decided he was tired of soldiering and wished to live a new life, free of military discipline and constraints; he now hinted that 'new interests' had come into his life.

At Elmwood Manor, where the Mason family lived, Simon met Francis Mason's father and mother and their daughter Juliet, who had recently become engaged to a young curate who was said to be exceptionally talented and to have a great future in the church. As Francis Mason's parents had not met Simon before, they were unaware of the change in his personality. Although their son told them nothing of this, they soon came to share his unease in Simon's presence, although Simon behaved with perfect courtesy toward them and other guests who came to the house. But the two people most affected by Simon's personality were the Masons' daughter, Juliet, and her fiancé, the curate Philip Humphries.

From the moment of their first meeting, it was plain to all that Juliet was fascinated by the new visitor and that there was instant antagonism between Humphries and Simon that Humphries had great difficulty in masking. He afterward confessed to a friend that Simon had made a deplorable impression upon him. He had felt that Simon was

somehow a person of 'great evil' and one who had also immediately sensed Humphries' hostility. His deepest instincts told him that as long as Simon remained in the Masons' house, he was a danger to them and to all who came near him—although in what precise respect, Philip was unable to say. Above all, the young curate was alarmed on behalf of his fiancée, for it was obvious to him that Simon had managed a strange effect upon her from the moment he had first seen her and learned she was engaged to a man of the church.

Philip Humphries was normally not a jealous man. He was known for his good and easy disposition, his tolerance, patience, and manly faith in God as well as his abiding belief in the innate goodness of people. But as he said afterward, 'I never knew or dreamt that pure, wholly irremediable evil could exist in a person until I met Simon Branderson. The realization came to me like an electric shock, and I could see he hated me from the beginning!'

Without appearing in the least provocative or insolent, Simon always managed to attract Juliet's attention in conversation and avoided becoming engaged in anything but the most banal exchange of words with her fiancé. He spoke to her mostly about his soldiering experiences and life in India. It was not what he said that worried and alarmed Philip Humphries but the way he looked at Juliet while he spoke, as though he were 'sending silent messages of a different nature into her mind' (Humphries' own words) and forging some strong, mysterious bond between himself and the impressionable young girl.

Philip Humphries left Elmwood Manor an anxious and distressed man. He was proved right in his intuitions. In the next three days it became clear to the Masons that Simon had managed a strong hold over Juliet. He had gone riding with her and Francis on their estate in the crisp winter mornings. Not being an accomplished horseman, Francis was often outdistanced, and when he had rejoined the other two, he had found them in deep conversation on some subject unknown to him. In the house, Simon exploited every opportunity to talk with Juliet alone, and she made no

secret of the fact that she found him a fascinating companion. The degree of unspoken intimacy that had sprung up between Juliet and Simon alarmed her brother, fiancé and parents. Although Simon and Juliet were hardly ever alone for more than a very few minutes, it looked as if they were both sharing some recently acquired secret knowledge which set them apart from all the others around them. Francis and his parents began to long for Simon's departure, although he was only due to stay with them for another three or four days, and they invited Philip Humphries to come to the house as frequently as possible, hoping that his presence would counteract the peculiar influence Simon was exerting over the girl. The evenings were heavy with tension: as though sensing that his attentions to Juliet had been causing anxiety, Simon spoke seldom to her and studiously avoided looking in her direction, but the others could not help noticing the way she would gaze at him ... almost like a worshipper in the presence of some god. Philip Humphries forced himself to be polite whenever he had to speak to Simon but he declared later that he had always felt that between them there was a silent battle of wills for 'Juliet's mind.'

Philip lost the battle: when he left the house he knew that although he and Juliet were still nominally engaged to be married, there was no longer any love or communication between them. In any other circumstances he would have sadly acquiesced to the inevitable and acknowledged the fact that a newcomer had captured Juliet's affections. But the revulsion and fear which Simon inspired in him was so great that Philip became determined to do everything he could to free his Juliet from the thrall of his new rival's compelling personality. Philip needed no encouragement when Francis Mason discreetly took him aside and implored him to come to the house as often as possible, despite his arduous studies and pressing duties, so he might help protect Juliet from Simon's influence. Juliet showed only indifference or boredom towards her fiancé.

On the night after his conference with Philip, Francis Mason found himself unable to sleep. Instinct told him his sister was in danger. Shortly after midnight this premoni-

tion became so intense that 'it was as if an alarm bell had suddenly begun to ring in my mind.' Francis immediately got out of bed, slipped on a dressing gown, and went out of the room. Even though he could not hear a sound in the house, he was convinced that Juliet was not alone in her bedchamber, which was situated at the far end of the corridor in the wing of the house opposite to the one where Simon was lodged. His sense of alarm persisted and became so great that he instantly dismissed the thought that it was unworthy of a brother to spy upon a sister. Quietly, he made his way toward Juliet's door. Standing now outside it, he heard the low voice of a man, and there came to him a feeling of intense cold and depression. Francis flung the door open.

Juliet Mason was standing in the middle of the room in her nightdress, and staring—as though magnetized—at Simon, some three feet away from her, fully dressed and with both hands held up at shoulder height. As soon as Francis came into the room, Juliet fluttered her eyes, looked at her brother, gave a low cry and fell, fainting, to the ground. Simon turned around and fixed Francis with a stare of open hatred. The two men looked at each other for several seconds without speaking, but what transfixed Francis even more than the odd scene that had confronted him or the murderous hostility in Simon's expression was the way Simon's face became, for a few fleeting instants, an astonishing replica of Justin's.

After Francis had picked up his sister, who had regained her senses, and gently deposited her on the bed, he asked Simon for an explanation of his presence in the room, saying that such an unwarranted intrusion was both compromising to his sister and an affront to her family. Simon's face quickly resumed its previous expression, and he calmly replied that he had nothing to explain and nothing to justify but would, of course, leave the house early in the morning after writing a letter of thanks to his hosts. His last words, spoken in obvious sarcasm, were, 'Do not worry about her. I leave her to her curate.'

Simon left the Mason's house a few minutes before day-break after writing a note to say he had just remembered

an urgent appointment in London. Francis was unwilling to alarm his parents by telling them of the incident but tried several times, without success, to discover the actual reason for Simon's nocturnal visit to Juliet and what he had been saying to her. All Juliet could say was that no matter how she tried, she was completely unable to remember. All she knew was that she had suddenly seen Francis come through the door, and Simon standing in front of her, before losing consciousness.

The Masons' relief at Simon's departure was short-lived. It quickly became evident that Juliet's personality had undergone a significant alteration. At night she became troubled by strange dreams from which she would awake shivering and tearful. Sometimes she was heard to talk and cry out in her sleep. Francis went to her room one night, after hearing unusual sounds coming from it, to find her kneeling on the floor as though in a trance. She was facing the open window and intoning words quite incomprehensible to him but chilling him and echoing disturbingly in his mind. When he had touched her, she again fainted, but upon recovering she professed complete ignorance of her nocturnal actions and utterances.

During her waking hours Juliet was prone to long silences and occasional fits of weeping which she said were the result of sudden attacks of depression for which she could offer no explanation. Her previous high spirits had deserted her: she seemed fearful and intensely nervous, as though she were now living in the shadow of some impending disaster, and she needed the constant companionship of her family. She was now as affectionate as before with Philip Humphries but with the difference that she welcomed the curate's visits not as though she were a young woman about to marry the man she loved but as an apprehensive child looking for protection and reassurance. The family doctor could not account for her moods and disturbed sleep, merely saying she was the victim of a depression that had led to a general lowering of vitality. Despite the doctor's administrations, she continued to talk and cry out in her sleep, and when she was questioned about her health and state of mind she would say nothing, merely sitting pale and silent in front

of her interlocutors.

Neither Francis nor his parents were superstitious people. They held to a firm belief in God and the tenets of their Protestant faith as their ancestors had done for centuries; they gave no place to the supernatural in their minds. Nevertheless, although they could not bring themselves to mention the words, they also could not help believing that ever since her meeting with the disquieting Simon Branderson, Juliet had somehow become 'possessed' or 'bewitched.' Philip Humphries quickly guessed the unspoken suspicion in their minds and for the first time in his short career as a man of the church he was obliged to face up to the possibility that an occult, malevolent force might exert its sway over a decent human being's mind and soul. He therefore determined at least to protect his fiancée with his love for her and his faith. He asked the Masons to allow the marriage to take place without further delay after Juliet had assured him of her constant love and begged him always to stay close.

The date of the wedding was fixed, and Juliet became calmer and even showed signs of regaining her former vitality and happiness. Then, two mornings before the ceremonial date, she awoke screaming and declared hysterically that any marriage between her and Philip was out of the question because 'he cannot save me and I will destroy him—' When she came to her normal senses again she insisted she could not remember what she had said. Philip hurried over to the house and spent most of the day comforting and reassuring her. Before Philip left, Francis asked him whether he believed in the possibility that Simon might actually have cast 'a spell' on her or hypnotized her in any way. Philip said he was quite convinced Juliet was not 'possessed' in any sense that would be accepted by the church. Indeed, Juliet had showed no signs of fear or hostility in his presence—as a churchman—or before the Cross and the Bible. She had even briefly prayed with him at his request, and he was convinced that there was 'only good in her heart and soul.' What had happened, he was sure, was simply that her mind had received some violent shock—probably on account of Simon—but he was sure

he would be able to help her recover from it. How Simon could have inflicted such a shock on Juliet was something neither man was able to explain but they heartily agreed that he had radiated an aura of deliberate malevolence that would upset any sensitive person.

Francis had moved his bedroom next to Juliet's to be near her in case she might suffer another crisis. On the wedding eve he heard her muttering once or twice in her sleep, but she woke up calm and confident, and showed not the slightest hesitation in preparing for the wedding ceremony to be held in the nearby village where Philip was acting as curate. During the ceremony, she was pale and withdrawn, appearing to accept the ritual of Christian marriage more with resignation than joy or piety. After the wedding luncheon the couple took a train to London, where they had decided to spend their first wedded night in a hotel before leaving the next day for their honeymoon in France and Switzerland.

Philip and his bride dined quietly in the hotel and retired early. Shortly after midnight the guests in rooms adjoining the newlyweds' complained to the night porter that they had been disturbed by sounds of a violent commotion in the Humphries' suite. The porter went to the door of the room and found it locked. All that he and the other hotel guests could hear behind it was the sound of a woman seeming to chant or intone some kind of litany. He knocked again but the chanting continued, even more loudly than before. Although the other guests angrily insisted that they had heard a man's cries and what sounded like a struggle, the porter refused to open the door with a pass-key. Instead, he jocularly remarked that as the Humphries had just been married, they might have had a 'little wedding night tiff' and then made it up and were now 'singing a hymn or two because, well, after all, he's a clergyman, you know!'

Next morning the door was still locked and the sound of Mrs. Humphries' chanting could *still* be heard. Eventually, as neither she nor her husband made any reply to the repeated knocking on their door, it was opened by the manager. He and a maid came out of the room pale and silent and immediately called for the police. Mrs. Juliet

Humphries, clad in her wedding nightgown, spattered in blood, was crouched in a corner of the room, her eyes glazed and expressionless, moaning and crooning softly as she rocked her body to and fro to the rhythm of an obsessive, mind-chilling ululation. On the bed lay the mutilated body of her husband. Philip Humphries' throat had been cut with his own razor. His skull had been crushed by repeated blows with a heavy poker taken from the fireplace of the suite. His neck had been slashed with such force that it was nearly severed, his face was cut up and several fingers had been sliced off. In addition, his Bible had been torn to pieces, its pages shredded by the razor, and his crucifix was found charred in the fireplace. The policeman and detective who had hurried to the scene declared that never before had they seen a crime of such bestial savagery committed by a woman. Juliet Humphries was taken away and found to be insane and incapable of coherent speech. She continued to howl and chant for two days and nights despite the administrations of sedatives. She then died after a violent seizure of an epileptic nature.

Although there was never proof, the stricken Masons never wavered in their affirmation that in some way Simon Branderson had been responsible for the transformation of their daughter into a lunatic murderess. Reports of the sickening crime reached Detective-Superintendent Jameson, as did Francis' and his parents' accusations. Francis, in particular, was overwhelmed with guilt for having brought Simon to the house, although when he had seen his former best friend deliberately trying to win his sister away from her fiancé he had tried his best to stay close to her and protect her.

The fact that, once again, the name of the Brandersons had become linked with a case of murder, profoundly intrigued and worried Jameson, but in his frustration there was little that he could really do. He read with interest that at the inquest Simon had been called upon to give evidence concerning the behavior and mental state of Juliet Mason. When he appeared at the court, Francis Mason had gotten to his feet, pointed at Simon and shouted, 'That's not Simon

Branderson, that's his father!' After he had been sharply rebuked by the coroner, Francis then apologized, saying that he now realized that the man about to give evidence was in fact Simon Branderson but that he appeared to have aged suddenly, and his face had so changed that at first sight he was no longer distinguishable from his father. The court stared curiously at Simon. Several members of the jury and the public agreed that for a young man in his mid-twenties Simon did indeed look old, but they attributed his graying hair and lined face to the years he'd spent soldiering under the burning sun of India and his arduous campaigning along the North-West Frontier.

Simon stated clearly and firmly—in a deep, vibrant voice—that when he had met Juliet at the Masons' home she had rather quickly showed every sign of being attracted to him and of desiring his company. He had said that this had caused him great embarrassment since he knew Juliet was engaged to the young curate. His own feelings towards her had been merely those of respect and liking for her as the sister of his closest friend. When he realized that the girl had become smitten with a sudden unreasoning infatuation, he decided on some pretext to leave the Masons' home earlier than anticipated. During the last night he had spent under his hosts' roof, he said, he had found a note in Juliet's handwriting in his room. She had begged him to come to her room, to speak with her in private, threatening that otherwise she would come to him. He reluctantly had acceded to her request in order to tell her that he was leaving and to urge her to forget her misguided passion for him, to return to her senses and her fiancé.

He said it was while he was remonstrating with Juliet that Francis Mason had burst into her room and misconstrued the nature of their colloquy. Because of his friendship and affection for Francis, Simon had decided not to tell him that it was Juliet's caprice that was responsible for this midnight encounter. When Simon was asked whether he could produce the note from Juliet, he looked at the court steadily and said: 'As an officer and a gentleman, do you really expect me to have kept such a compromising note?' The silence which ensued in the court was broken by

Francis who jumped up again and shouted, 'He is lying! For God's sake, can none of you see this man is a devil?' The public and the court agreed that Simon showed great dignity and restraint at this moment, and attributed Francis' violent outburst to his grief. Under the circumstances, the only possible verdict was the one which stated that Juliet Mason had become insane and murdered her husband in a paroxysm of madness.

The law might find it preposterous that contact with the Brandersons could somehow lead people to madness and crime, but after the newspapers had printed their accounts of the horrific murder of Philip Humphries, the coroner's findings and Francis' dramatic denunciation of his former friend as a 'devil', the Brandersons' neighbors and former acquaintances talked even more than before about the family that seemed destined to bring misfortune to others. If the Brandersons had appeared more often in public, they would certainly have been shunned by many people after the horror of Christmas Eve and the shocking Humphries case (the people of the neighborhood did not know about Mary Roscoe's tragic end), but Justin and his family were hardly ever observed outside their home. The sound of a carriage approaching or leaving the house was occasionally heard at night, however, and once Simon—heavily muffled—was seen returning early one morning by the driver of a local delivery cart.

Before they had left for the Continent the previous autumn, the two Branderson girls had acquired several admirers and friends. Jane's grave, classic beauty had won more than one fellow music student's heart, and Rachel's ebullient and naïve charm had gained her many friends. Now the girls showed little inclination to step outside their home or to take part in friendly gatherings. Jane's music teacher in London had been distressed to receive a note from his promising former student, saying that she would no longer be attending lessons, and he had paid a visit to the house to persuade her to change her mind. He left puzzled and perturbed and would speak little about his former pupil. Something in her condition or her behavior had upset and surprised him greatly.

Later, Edward Saunders, a music student who had known and greatly admired Jane, called at the house to pay his respects to her. When he informed his parents of this fact, they were dismayed, since they had heard that the Brandersons had become 'queer recluses' and had acquired a reputation for strange and secretive behavior and for bringing misery or disaster to everybody who had dealings with them. Nevertheless, Edward Saunders insisted on paying a second visit to the Branderson house. On returning home, all he would say to his parents was that he had found Jane to be in excellent health and spirits. Their concern grew as they learned later, from a neighbor, that he had been paying visits to the house with increasing frequency and had been neglecting his studies. Edward Saunders refused to discuss his visits to Jane or even to discontinue them temporarily in order to catch up in his work. He was now observed to sleep badly, to mutter in his sleep, to show signs of lassitude and no longer confide in either his brother or his parents as in the past.

Eventually, Edward Saunders's father decided to call upon Jane's father, to beg him to discourage further visits by young Edward on the grounds that the boy was far too young to become involved with a young lady of marriageable age, and that such frequent attentions to the girl could only lead to complications that were already harming his studies. Also, as the father later admitted, he was curious to see something of this family that kept so much to themselves and about whom curious and even unpleasant things were being rumored.

Mr. Saunders was received with solemn courtesy by Justin. To Mr. Saunder's surprise, Mrs. Branderson did not appear once during his brief but amicable conversation with Justin, nor was there any sound of life in the rest of the house although the whole Branderson family was at home at the time. Also, despite the fact that it was a fairly bright late winter's afternoon, the curtains in the room were drawn, and the darkness in the room was only slightly relieved by the faint glow of a gas lamp. Noticing his guest's surprise, Justin Branderson apologized for the lack of light, saying that his eyes had been ailing and were weak from

his intensive studies. After the two men had talked for a time and Mr. Saunders had politely but firmly stated his conviction that it would be unwise for his son to pay further visits to the house for the time being, he then asked whether he might have the pleasure of meeting the young lady who had so greatly aroused his son's admiration. After a moment's hesitation Justin had agreed and rung for the maid, asking her to call Jane to the drawing room. It was difficult for Mr. Saunders to see the young girl in the dim light, but he did notice that she had long flowing hair that masked part of her pale, elongated and 'even rather mannish face,' and that although she spoke very softly the tone and resonance of her voice was most similar to her father's. At the conclusion of his visit Mr. Saunders was shown to the front door by the maid. Jane had already left the room, and Justin had agreed that further visits by Edward would be discouraged.

When he reached home Mr. Saunders informed his son of the visit and explained to him that he had only called on Jane's father in his own best possible interests. Edward had listened impassively and made no protest but a week later he vanished from his home, and despite his parents' and the police's efforts, his whereabouts could not be determined.

The last member of the Branderson family to receive a visitor was Rachel. Two of her oldest and closest school friends called to see her on several occasions but each time they were told that Rachel was either busy with her studies and could not be disturbed or that she was indisposed. Then one of Rachel's former school teachers who had just retired and who was about to move to Florence to give English lessons to supplement her modest income announced to an old colleague that she was determined to see her ex-pupil, no matter what. She had always been extremely fond of Rachel, who had been a diligent if not very talented scholar, and she had constantly encouraged and helped the girl. The teacher, Miss Templeton, declared that it was 'a shame and a disgrace' for such a lively, gregarious, loveable person as Rachel to be 'shut up in a gloomy house with such abnormally unsociable parents.' She intended to see Rachel

before she left for Italy and to ask Mrs. Branderson for permission to take her daughter out for tea and perhaps a visit to an art gallery or a concert. After she had written two letters to Rachel and received negative replies to her offer, she went one afternoon directly to the house, for she was a strong-minded woman and her instinct told her that all was not well with the Branderson girl. Her persistence was rewarded; she was allowed to see Rachel and thereafter visited the house again several times before moving to Italy.

Miss Templeton had been bewildered and disturbed by her first visit and said that Rachel was no longer the same girl she had known at the school. Beyond this she would say nothing. Other teachers who had heard intriguing stories about the Branderson house pressed her to give details about the strange life now being led by Rachel and her family. Miss Templeton remained silent. Her friends did notice, however, that a new interest seemed to have come into her life and that she appeared to be silently, even arrogantly, mocking them for their curiosity. She also stopped attending her parish church, where she had played the organ and taken a prominent part in charitable events, church concerts and bazaars. When she left England no more was heard of her until the London *Telegraph* published a brief account of how Miss Templeton, a teacher of English in Florence, had been found mysteriously dead. Her body was found in a disused Renaissance chapel in the hills above Florence, where the Italian police discovered that peculiar rituals had been performed with the participation of several young people of the Florentine nobility who had been taking private lessons from her. Two of her pupils, including the son of the famous Count Palombini, were arrested and charged with sacrilege and church desecration but were subsequently found to have become quite hopelessly deranged.

Meanwhile, increasingly fantastic rumors about the Brandersons circulated in the neighborhood. They hardly ever went out, and even after nightfall most of their windows remained unlit and heavily curtained. It was said that they had all begun to suffer from a loathsome and disfigur-

ing disease contracted in India and the dread word 'leprosy' was several times mentioned. But there were other more sinister rumors. When they had recovered from the vicious, inexplicable attack made upon them by the thirty small carol-singers, General Sir Hugh S***** and his lady complained of recurrent nightmares and hinted that their source lay in the Branderson house. Another neighbor, a woman of unusual sensitivity and said to be endowed with psychic power, spoke earnestly to the parish vicar of her belief that blasphemous rituals were being conducted by the Brandersons. She also had dreams in which great swooping shadows and dark clouds had materialized out of the brightness of day above the Branderson house. Madame Julienne, a noted clairvoyant who lived on the road near the house, declared that there was something in the neighborhood that made impossible the exercise of her powers, and she became so agitated that she eventually moved from the district. Several other people noticed with surprise that their pet dogs would whine and even tremble whenever they were led on leashes past the Branderson house and that whenever a carriage drew up before it the horses seemed unusually skittish.

After a few glimpses had been obtained of various members of the Branderson family, there was a new rumor that they had begun to assume a curious identical appearance, as though a common affliction had now cast their features in the same mold. On one occasion the local postman, who had delivered a registered letter at the house, had been met by Mrs. Branderson in the darkened hall. In the dim light he had momentarily thought he was looking at the face of Justin Branderson—a confusion that led him to state that 'now they're even beginning to look like each other!'

While people were incessantly gossiping about the peculiar Brandersons, a series of sensational reports of witchcraft and black magic began to appear in some of the less sober London newspapers. The subject of spiritualism, which enjoyed a certain vogue and notoriety in England as in France and America in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, became a fashionable topic again. It was linked by journalists eager to provide their readers with

sensational reading, with a reported massive outbreak of black magic in London. Several churches had reported the theft of sacred vessels and chalices, crosses and consecrated hosts; and priests and clergymen of various denominations agreed that in most cases the motive had not been material gain but obtaining materials for blasphemous rites.

Further thefts from churches continued to be reported. Newspaper writers continued to link them with the doings of various strange, esoteric sects which were said to have sprung into existence during the previous few years and which, in their turn, were attributed to the 'decadent movement' in artistic and literary circles that had attracted much publicity and which suggested unbridled indulgence in all manner of sin and weird eccentricity. This was the time when Oscar Wilde was alternately scandalizing and fascinating London with his extravagances and wit, when the amoral poetry of Swinburne with its emphasis on vice, forbidden pleasures and unusual sensations was accused of encouraging immorality and thereby irreligion, and when young artists and writers returned from Paris under the influence of Baudelaire and his followers in the Decadent and Symbolist schools. There were strange undercurrents in London's literary and artistic world, as many younger spirits looked to age-old superstitions and the world of the supernatural for their inspiration and rejected the rationalism and sturdy, conventional religious faith of their elders. It was also a time when Freemasons on the Continent and in England were accused of practising devil worship and magic, and popular journalists wrote knowingly about the so-called 'occult sciences' of which spiritualism, table-turning, clairvoyance, and hypnotism were the best-known aspects.

Persistent rumors kept reaching the police about the alleged existence of occult lodges in London which, under the disguise of societies or private gatherings for the mere discussion of unorthodox religions or related subjects, had actually been formed for the purposes of dabbling in occultism and, in particular, 'black magic'. There was even talk of covens of witches and Satanists for whom sacred ecclesiastical objects were a prime necessity before they

could conduct their perverted ceremonies. As in Paris and several American cities where similar outbreaks of witchcraft were observed, the London police began to keep a close watch on certain societies and 'chapels' or 'temples' of an unconventional nature.

Soon, a number of sensational and tragic events convinced some leading churchmen and the police that occultism of an especially evil and dangerous nature was indeed being practised in London and was attracting a steadily growing number of adherents. A well-known, self-styled Decadent poet, the flamboyant John Morven, after disappearing from all his usual literary haunts and his home for two weeks, reappeared wild-eyed and haggard in the offices of the well-known *Literary Review* with the manuscript of his strange poem, 'The Dwellers of the Void,' including these cryptic lines:

Oh, Dwellers of the void, oh, Dark Lords of All
Come down again and hold the Earth in Thrall.
Your house shall be my House.
I am your Temple and You my Life.
I will open the gate and you will come to dwell therein.
You who dwelled outside this House,
You who were cast out in ages past,
Your Second Coming is now at hand
And you shall rule for evermore.

In response to questioning by curious friends, he muttered about having met a great teacher and of the 'old truth' being revealed to him. Two days later, he was found gibbering in his home, kneeling in the middle of a circle of esoteric symbols painted on the floor of his studio in front of a makeshift altar with black candles, a chalice filled with human blood, and the decapitated heads of his young wife and two children.

The following week, a letter was published in the *London Telegraph*. It was written by the well-known and self-styled 'accursed' painter Jean de Maupertuis, whose oneiric paintings had been hailed by aesthetes and members of the Decadent group of writers. He had claimed to derive

his inspiration through being able to 'travel outside his body to remote worlds in another dimension.' He now warned the newspaper's readers, and all who might be tempted to explore the world of sorcery and the supernatural, that a peculiarly evil and ruthless sect of black magicians had recently been formed in London and had caused the deaths and madness of several of its members, including John Morven. There were people, stated Maupertuis, who claimed to have access to long-lost occult lore and to possess and be able to confer great secret powers. But their real aim was to seduce and pervert the minds of those they attracted, and then to enslave them mentally and physically for their evil purposes. In recent months, they had begun to infiltrate groups which met to study the magic arts, as well as various non-conformist religious societies and gatherings of spiritualists or theosophists, in order to enlist recruits in the service of 'an evil beyond Satan himself.' They were 'occult criminals' and anyone who might be tempted to dabble in the supernatural for immoral or basely materialistic purposes was in danger of meeting them and becoming their victims. The day following the letter's publication, Jean de Maupertuis was found to have hanged himself from a beam in his studio.

Naturally such press accounts of black magic and diabolism in London resulted in a flood of letters to the newspapers. Most of them were written by frauds and cranks, but one letter particularly interested Detective-Superintendent Jameson when it came to his notice after being forwarded from a police station in Islington. The letter was written by a Louise Kelly, a clairvoyant and member of a group practising spiritualism. According to Mrs. Kelly, an 'occult lodge' where Satanic witchcraft was being practised had been founded in a dilapidated and poor part of the district which was mainly inhabited by foreign immigrants and artisans. Furthermore, this lodge was haunted by the 'earth-bound spirit' of the deceased Mary Roscoe. The girl's ghost had appeared to Mrs. Kelly and begged for help so that it might be freed from its earth-bound condition and soar to its 'higher sphere.' Further contact had been established between the spirit and Mrs.

Kelly, and the dead girl had claimed that her unfortunate after-death condition was due to having allowed herself to be 'possessed by the Brandersons.'

Jameson immediately reacted to the mention of the Brandersons. After he had requested details of the Roscoe case, he learned that the girl had been a guest in Justin's house shortly before giving the first signs of abnormal behavior. The detective went to Islington and interviewed Mrs. Kelly. He found her the usual type of eccentric who is drawn to spiritualism and who claims to have contact with people 'on the other side.' But there was no denying the tone of sincerity in her voice when she spoke of her communications with Mary Roscoe. She was even able to describe the girl's appearance minutely and when the detective went to the police station where Mary's mind had snapped so irrevocably, he found that Mrs. Kelly's description tallied in every detail with that provided by the police station and with her photograph. The spiritualist had asserted that Mary Roscoe had been 'taken over' after attending the 'satanic lodge.' According to Mrs. Kelly, it was a shabby second-hand bookshop in a quiet street very near the spot where Mary Roscoe had been found by the policeman a week after she had run away from her mother.

Together with another policeman, Jameson visited the bookshop, which he found to be shut. Through the murky, dust-laden window, they were able to see a chaotic collection of books, most of which dealt with occult, religious and philosophical subjects, as well as piles of cheaply printed pamphlets and a tattered poster that advertised a meeting, held some months earlier, of a religious-philosophical circle calling itself, The Sons of Enoch. Next to the door of the shop was another leading to the upper part of the house, and on it there was affixed a discolored plaque with the words, 'The Sons of Enoch.'

After the two policemen had tried the door of the shop again and knocked loudly upon both doors without eliciting any response, the father of a Portuguese family that lived in the adjacent house came out and in his broken English, told the detective that the owner of the shop, Mr. Jacob Zangwill, had not been seen in the past three days.

The Portuguese, who was a bootmaker, volunteered that Mr. Zangwill had been 'a very strange man.' He had made his bookshop the headquarters for some kind of sect that believed that 'the children of the angels' would again come down and make a new heaven on earth. Various fellow-believers would visit him from time to time to read and discuss certain books and writings and to pray together. Some weeks previously Mr. Zangwill had been absent for several days, and when he had returned he behaved even more eccentrically than before. Whereas previously he had always been ready to chat with his neighbors who had been fascinated or amused by his odd ideas and preachings, he was now taciturn and secretive and 'even his voice—it was not the same,' said the Portuguese. He confessed to Jameson that his former feelings of neighborly good will toward the bookseller had changed into an aversion he could not explain or justify. He believed that Mr. Zangwill had now become 'a devil' and had the 'evil eye.'

The Portuguese family had been alarmed that Mr. Zangwill now held meetings almost every night in his house. People they had never seen before would assemble there after dark. But although as many as twenty would cluster in the tiny bookshop or in the rooms above it, the Portuguese family could no longer hear the sounds of animated debate, preaching or praying which had characterized early gatherings. They found the stillness of the shop disquieting and abnormal and had 'bad feelings' every time they passed it. The visitors' aspects also alarmed and mystified the Portuguese family, although they were unable to say why. But after being given a detailed description of Mary Roscoe, the Portuguese did admit that he had seen her entering and leaving the shop on two occasions. He had remembered her because no women in former days ever went to Zangwill's gatherings.

The policemen returned the following day, but there was still no sign of Jacob Zangwill. The Portuguese now claimed that the proprietor and another person must have been inside the shop at some time during the night because he had heard the door being opened just before dawn, and when he had looked out of his bedroom window into the

street below, he had seen two strange men emerge, wearing heavy coats and wide-brimmed hats. Neither resembled Mr. Zangwill, as far as he could see; therefore the elderly mystic was presumably still on the premises since the Portuguese had been unable to sleep again and would have seen him leave the bookshop—he had sat by the window for the whole morning, working at his craft. But repeated knocking by the policemen still failed to bring any response from the shop or the house.

Jameson at once applied for a warrant to enter the shop on the grounds that the proprietor had disappeared in mysterious circumstances and that foul play could be suspected. As soon as he and a constable had forced open the door, they detected a smell of burning. The back room of the shop, where the bookseller had kept his most valuable stock, had inexplicably become alight. In a few minutes the blaze forced the two policemen to leave the shop before they had searched it properly, and the fire soon spread to the upper floors. In less than an hour the entire building was consumed, and its Portuguese neighbors had to be evacuated while firemen fought to prevent the fire from spreading along the length of the little street. A search was later made among the charred ruins of the shop, but still there was no trace of Jacob Zangwill.

When he returned to Scotland Yard, Jameson found that Robert Middleton had called to see him and had been given an appointment for the following morning, after he had explained to a clerk that the matter was one of the utmost importance.

Jameson was shocked by Middleton's appearance when he saw him again. When the detective had been to see Robert in Devonshire, he had found the grief-shattered widower in an apparently hopeless condition. Now, Jameson's first impression was that he was being confronted by a man risen from the dead and endowed with unnatural life. Robert was deathly pale and emaciated, his limbs shook as though he were in a crisis of fever, his eyes glittered and the veins in his forehead visibly pulsed as though they would burst at any moment. But despite his spectral appearance, there was no doubt that Robert was

possessed by a driving energy and will-power which—no doubt with the aid of powerful drugs and stimulants—were enabling him for the time being to hold off the inevitable and final collapse.

Speaking forcefully and gravely, Robert repeated his conviction that Justin Branderson was not only responsible for Ellen's death—as he had claimed previously—but was now at the center of a hideous web of satanic witchcraft that was spreading like an evil stain throughout London and driving innocent and credulous people to murder, madness and even worse. He told Jameson he knew for a certainty that Justin was guilty of witchcraft but added, 'If I told you how I know, you would never believe me but think me insane.' Since coming to London, he had made 'certain researches,' and by the simple expedient of keeping watch on the Branderson house at night and following those of its inmates who occasionally left it he had found that Justin and his wife and children had been to various parts of London to visit occult or mystical lodges and societies where they had recruited allies for their evil purposes. Even the daughters were witches: on the pretext of performing charitable work they had gone to the poorest and roughest parts of London with clothes and food, but to those they had visited they brought not only creature comforts but 'temptation and damnation.'

Naturally Robert Middleton could not expect Jameson to believe all his charges but he earnestly begged the detective to go to a house in the East End, in Swedenborg Square, which had been a meeting place for members and scholars of the strange Swedenborgian sect, but which was now—he was sure—one of the lodges used by Justin for his evil-doing. He had been outside the house several times and although it had been impossible for him to gain admittance, he had managed to catch glimpses of Justin going in and out of the house. In addition, he reminded the policeman that a church not far from the square had recently been one of those robbed of certain religious vessels, crosses and consecrated wafers.

Despite Robert's wild words, fantastic accusations and startling appearance, Jameson was impressed. Too many

strange things had been happening lately and now another occultist had been murdered. Mary Roscoe's visit to the lodge in the strange bookshop and her behavior after staying with the Brandersons, the terrible incident of the carol-singers, the case of Juliet Mason, who had murdered her newlywed husband after meeting Simon Branderson—all this suggested to the policeman that, far-fetched as it might seem, there were indeed grounds for suspecting that the Brandersons had been exerting fatal influences over people who came into close contact with them. In any event, Jameson decided to investigate the house in Swedenborg Square, and he agreed to go with Robert the next night to keep watch on the house and see if it were really true that Justin Branderson had joined the community that had been meeting there for worship and study. In a short time, Jameson learned that the house, which was built in the eighteenth century, had been the home of the mystic Swedish theologian and visionary and that some twenty years previously, it had been acquired by some disciples and interpreters of Swedenborg's ideas and made into a chapel and library and meeting place.

So far there was nothing to connect the house with any of the alleged black-magic circles said to be operating in London, and certainly there was no lawful reason why Branderson should not attend the meetings of such a sect if he wished. But the fact remained that the practice of witchcraft had become fashionable with the members of certain artistic, literary or mystical groups, and if they were connected with desecration and robbery from churches, they were open to prosecution. Furthermore, if Jameson could somehow gain admittance into such circles, he would have a chance of meeting people who might throw light on the murder of Orsini and the hideous fate of Mary Roscoe, as well as the madness of John Morven and Jean de Maupertuis' apparent suicide.

On the appointed night, Jameson met Robert Middleton after detailing a plain-clothes policeman to keep watch on the Branderson house. The weather could not have been more suitable for keeping such a vigil without being observed, for it was a dank, moonless night and thick swathes

of evil pea-green fog had risen early and reduced the visibility to only a few yards. According to Robert, the meetings in the house began between eleven o'clock and midnight, and the two men therefore took up their stations in the porch of an abandoned house a short distance away at a quarter to eleven. A few minutes after eleven, two men followed by a third appeared through the fog under the sickly yellowish light of a street lamp at the corner of the square near the doorway where Jameson and Robert stood concealed, and pushed open the heavy iron gate leading to the front door of the Swedenborg house. During the next twenty minutes several other people came to the house from different directions and were all admitted after apparently identifying themselves at the door. Then, after a ten minutes' interval in which no other visitors appeared, Robert suddenly squeezed Jameson's arm and whispered, 'There he is!'

A tall dark figure in a heavy black greatcoat, wearing a wide-brimmed hat emerged out of the gloom and quickly made his way to the front door of the house, which opened at once to admit him without the usual formality on the threshold. Neither Jameson nor Robert had been able to glimpse the face of this latest arrival, but in an excited whisper Robert told the detective that he was certain beyond any doubt that the man could be none other than Justin Branderson because he knew him by his gait, stature and overcoat. He added that Justin was always the last person to enter and the first to leave the house on these occasions.

After another hour's waiting, during which time the detective feared more than once that his sickly companion was about to collapse from cold and exhaustion, the tall figure emerged from the house and walked briskly back in the direction from which he had come. Without hesitation and after whispering to Robert to keep silent, the detective began to follow the man, who appeared unaware he had been observed and was now being trailed through the maze of winding, narrow side streets in the labyrinthine district adjacent to the square. To his pursuer's surprise, the man suddenly stooped in front of the door of a squalid, tumble-

down house and took a jingling bunch of keys from his pocket. As the man opened the door, Jameson went up to him. 'Why, it's Mr. Branderson. Good evening, sir.'

The man started back nervously at the unexpected apparition of the detective. 'I've no idea what you mean—who *are* you?' Peering hard at the man in the dim light of the flickering gas jet in the corridor of the house, Jameson said, 'It's Mr. Branderson, is it not? We have met before, sir.' The man met Jameson's gaze without flinching and easily replied, 'I am not Mr. Branderson and I have no idea of whom he may be or what you mean. You are mistaken.' As Jameson continued to scrutinize the man in front of him, he became increasingly confused and disconcerted. As he said later, the man both *was* and *was not* Justin Branderson. He seemed to be a fraction less in stature than Justin; the shape of his head and the mold of his countenance were different; and yet the line of the mouth, the expression in the eyes and the timbre of the voice all bore such a striking and uncanny resemblance to those of Justin that the detective was not in the least surprised he and Robert should have mistaken the man's identity in the bad light. He said he might have been looking at Justin's twin brother. Recovering from his surprise and doing his best to conceal his discomfiture, Jameson apologized to the man and returned to the waiting Robert.

The night had been a fiasco and Robert had been mistaken, but Jameson was still thoroughly intrigued by the Swedenborg house. The mysterious man's behavior and aspect had given him, however momentary, an unaccountable sense of alarm, as had his astonishing resemblance to Justin. Also, although he had not said anything of it to Robert, Jameson had recognized one of the other visitors to the house: the wastrel son of a prominent lord who recently had been divorced from his heiress wife after running through her large fortune and who had narrowly escaped prosecution for attempted embezzlement. The young man had also been found by the police during a raid on a low drinking and gaming haunt known to be a meeting place for criminals, and was rumored to maintain close contacts with some of London high society's most depraved and

dissolute elements. Truly, an odd person to become a member of a religious, mystical sect apparently dedicated to unveiling the hidden truths of the Swedenborgian doctrine!

When he was back in his office, after telling Robert Middleton to cease risking his precarious health by attempting to discover the Brandersons' activities Jameson learned from the man he had posted near the Branderson's house that Justin had briefly made an appearance outside it.

At about the same time that Jameson and Robert had been keeping watch in the square, Justin had emerged from the house, politely greeted the policeman and taken a five-minute stroll before returning—almost as if he had wished to prove to the policeman that he had not left his home during the night.

But who, then, was this other man who looked like Justin's double? And what really did take place inside the Swedenborg house? As Jameson brooded over the mystery, he remembered with a start that Robert had told him of a letter from Clara Branderson in which she had described how she had followed her husband to the same house one night in October. In addition Ellen Middleton's last letter had stated that she had asked Clara, 'to account for the fact that she had followed Justin to a house in the East End.' Perhaps the man who looked so like Justin was his brother or a cousin? Jameson immediately decided to pay another visit to Swedenborg Square—this time by daylight.

Few of the residents of the depressed area in which the house stood had anything of value to tell Jameson. The most he could learn was that since the building had been acquired by the head of the Swedenborgian sect who was now abroad, meetings were held in it, 'by religious folk and such like,' and that in the last two years these assemblies only took place by night. One old woman did, however, tell him that she thought that the house had become the headquarters for some kind of missionary or proselytizing activity, and that she had heard of two young brothers living nearby who had become converts to the Church of the Sons of the New Jerusalem. She also told Jameson that the only inhabitant of the house was an aged caretaker much

given to drunken and incomprehensible ramblings.

After Jameson had rung the bell of the house several times, a small, bent, bewhiskered old man came into view from behind the house and shambled toward the iron gate, after yelling at the detective that the house was empty and that no visitors were allowed. After peering through the gate at Jameson, the old man condescended to open the lock and to come out, but he fiercely refused to allow the detective inside, claiming that, 'they wouldn't like it. Only the worshippers can go in. It's a holy temple for only them that believe!'

Posing as a seeker after the 'true faith' and a fervent disciple of the teachings of Swedenborg, Jameson asked the old man if it might be possible for him to meet members of the congregation and enroll in their group. As suspicious as ever, the aged curator numbled something about, 'they don't meet nobody. They only meet those they know and those they know are all Sons of the New Jerusalem. Ye're a Son of the New Jerusalem or ye ain't. Ye can't become one. Ye are or ye ain't. All the others are damned. Ye can never go to *their* heaven, no matter how hard ye try.' Undeterred by the old man's attitude, Jameson repeated his questions and claimed that he himself was a follower of the New Jerusalem and therefore eligible to become 'a Son of the Church.' The hostility in the caretaker's rheumy eyes suddenly turned to greedy interest as Jameson began to jingle some gold sovereigns in his pocket and suggest that a good stiff drink was indicated on such a cold and blustery day.

A few minutes later both men were standing at the counter of a public bar near the square, where the old man proceeded to mumble further particulars about the sect that was destined to eternal felicity and life, not only in the next world but in this one. During the conversation, in which the old man became increasingly animated and correspondingly more unintelligible, Jameson learned that the 'sons' of this church had the 'secrets of heaven' at their disposal and were preparing to extend 'their heaven' over the entire globe until, eventually, all mankind would become part of the 'family of the Sons.' To Jameson's satisfaction, the now fully intoxicated caretaker hinted to him that in exchange

for some money, he might be able to arrange an introduction to the sect for him, since 'the Sons should be glad if I bring them to you—aye, that is if you're one of them—' It was agreed that Jameson would return to the house in two nights' time at eleven o'clock before the congregation assembled, would ring the bell four times in quick succession, and that the old man would then admit him to the presence of 'the teacher.'

On the night following his conversation with the old man, the population of the square and the neighboring streets were awakened after midnight by the sound of weird chanting from within the Swedenborg house. Despite the shouted objections and imprecations of the neighbors, the dismal ululation continued with ever increasing intensity. The word quickly spread that the old man had completely and finally lost whatever little reason remained to him, for he was chanting and yowling like some mad dog. As a small crowd gathered in the square in front of the house, flames suddenly were seen leaping up from several windows in the house. Silhouetted against their glare appeared the figure of the demented caretaker rushing from room to room with a burning torch and a bucket of some inflammable substance. By the time the fire brigade arrived, the entire building had become an inferno, but the shrieks and yowls of the old man could still be heard while he continued his chanting. As the wind, for a few minutes, blew the clouds of smoke in a different direction, the spectators and powerless firemen caught a last glimpse of the old man. Apparently oblivious to his danger, he was skipping and cavorting on the rooftop with the agility of a monkey. Every now and again he would stop throw his head back and his arms up as though in supplication of the heavens or some invisible deity and let out a screech before resuming his frenzied antics. As the firemen tried without success to set their ladders against the sides of the blazing building, he briefly looked down at them and the crowd in the square and shouted, 'Aye, aye, they shall have ye all . . . they are come again . . . aye, aye, they come again . . .' As the smoke blotted him from sight, a final screech could be heard and a rumble of masonry as the entire top story and roof

crashed into fiery ruins.

When the ruins of the house had ceased smouldering, the firemen discovered that the old man had daubed the panelled walls, staircase and furnishings with paint, tar and pitch to ensure that the fire he had obviously lit would spread rapidly and consume the entire building from basement to attic. He had bought the inflammable materials at a chandlers' shop near the dock in the afternoon after an unidentified tall stranger dressed in a black greatcoat and wide-brimmed hat had been seen to visit the house. Detective-Superintendent Jameson immediately traced the house where he had accosted the man who so resembled Justin, but learned that the lodger had just given notice to the landlady and had left for an unknown destination.

In the week following the destruction of the house in Swedenborg Square, it came to Jameson's attention that Robert Middleton had frequently been seen in the vicinity of the Brandersons' home. A few days later, after a young girl had arrived to stay with the Brandersons, the neighborhood was buzzing with gossip. The girl had been seen by inquisitive neighbors to alight from a carriage in the company of a man who might have been either Justin or Simon. A passerby who lived in Courtland Square, and who knew the Brandersons by sight from previous fleeting encounters, declared that although he thought that the man accompanying the young lady was Simon, the latter seemed to have aged greatly. In addition, his features were said to have undergone some abnormal change—his face had lengthened and developed deep lines, and he had acquired a rather vulpine expression, 'as though he came from a different breed than that of his parents—'

The fear and repulsion the Brandersons had aroused had reached such a pitch that their neighbors were quick to express their sympathy and fears for the young girl who had just gone to live under such an ill-omened roof. Several people expressed their belief that in a matter of a few days the girl would mysteriously fall sick, 'like all the others,' and their forecast seemed only too likely to be proven correct since no sign of the girl was seen after her arrival.

A young man was also seen to arrive at the house, only staying for half an hour. He was again observed at night, looking up at the windows of the Branderson house as though hoping to catch sight of the young girl.

On the afternoon of the fourth day after the girl's arrival, a neighbor saw the young man step out of a carriage that drew up near the Branderson house. The young man was carrying a small black leather bag. He was admitted into the Brandersons' house and emerged from it some ten minutes later with the girl whom he was supporting with one arm and who was walking with difficulty. It was immediately surmised by the neighbor and those she told of the occurrence that the young man was a doctor, that the girl was sick, and he had taken her to a hospital. What was surprising was that none of the Brandersons had accompanied the pair or even shown themselves at the door when the couple left. According to the same neighbor, the young man had been holding some shiny object in his free hand that might have been a knife or a short sword, but she could not be sure of this.

During the next two days there were signs of unusual activity in the Branderson house, and Justin and Simon were seen to leave it on several occasions, but no one who came in contact with them dared ask them for news of the young girl.

Meanwhile, the report of a disturbance at the house inhabited by the late Signor Orsini reached Jameson after he had read a brief account of the affair in a morning newspaper. An elderly and frail-looking man had been seen entering the house, which now bore the sign *To Let*—no doubt in order to view the premises as a prospective tenant. A tradesman delivering goods to a caretaker a few doors away had later seen a carriage with closed blinds draw up outside the same house. The passenger alighted, produced a key and opened the door, which prompted the caretaker to remark to the grocer that it was strange that people seemed to have suddenly become interested in a house that had remained empty and in which no one wished to live since it had become notorious for the murder committed in it. Being curious to see the prospective new tenants, the

woman had lingered near the front door of the house and heard a pistol shot and the sounds of a struggle coming from within. A moment later the front door was opened and the first visitor, elderly and frail-looking, staggered out and began to run with faltering steps down the street, as though running for his life. He no sooner had disappeared down a side street than the second man emerged, looking dazed, as though he had received a blow in a fight. As the caretaker came up to him and inquired whether he had been hurt and was in need of any assistance, the neighbor had been struck by his peculiar elongated features and intense eyes, and also by his deep muffled voice. He had declined her offer and shown signs of irritation at being seen before re-entering the carriage, which drove off at top speed.

Eager to know more about the visitors to the murdered man's former home, Jameson went to the estate agent, whose name was on the notice board. He was told that as soon as Orsini's furnishings and possessions had been removed by relatives and testators, a man giving the name of Morgan had asked at the office for the keys of the house so that he might inspect it. He had worn dark glasses, was bearded, wore a low hat and had spoken with a deep, unusually resonant voice that lingered strangely in the estate agent's memory. He had returned several hours later, explaining that he had decided not to rent the place as it was too large for him.

No one else had inquired about the house except on the previous day when an elderly and obviously very ill man, calling himself Brown, had come to ask for the keys. The estate agent had been alarmed by his appearance since, 'the man was obviously in a very bad way. To be quite frank, I thought he looked like a man with only a very short time to live, and I was very surprised that he should have been interested in renting the house.' However, the estate agent had handed over the keys. Mr. Brown did not return the keys to the office. Three days later they had been returned to the estate agent by post, in an envelope bearing a Paris postmark. Even more puzzling for the agent was the realization that the mysterious second visitor had also managed to

procure keys to the house which he had entered when Mr. Brown was still inspecting the property. After the caretaker of the house nearby had been questioned, it seemed clear to Jameson that the man called Morgan was the same second visitor who had emerged dazed from the house, and that Mr. Brown could only be Robert Middleton.

A few days later, Robert Middleton was seen going into the house of the Brandersons. A few minutes later the inhabitants of Courtland Square were alarmed by a noise coming from the house. All who heard it agreed that it was the most unearthly sound they had ever heard—a kind of long, drawn-out shriek or howl that ‘might have come out of the very bowels of the earth rather than even *that* house’ and which seemed to reverberate like thunder in the winter’s air throughout the district. Several people near the scene also spoke of a sense of intense cold that assailed them for a few seconds as they heard the awful noise, and of their conviction that even the walls of their homes trembled as though there had been a slight earth tremor at the same time.

A few minutes later a police constable arrived at the house. He rang the bell several times without reply and was about to summon a colleague when the door finally was opened by Robert Middleton, who was in a state of collapse. Without a word he led the policeman into the drawing room. On the bloody floor lay the body of Justin Branderson with the handle of a curiously wrought and ornamented short sword, shaped like a crucifix, protruding from his chest. Near him, sprawled across a chaise-longue, was the dead body of his wife Clara. Another room contained the corpses of Rachel and Jane. Little Terence was found lying on the landing of the stairs on the next floor. The housekeeper and the maids who had produced such a disagreeable impression on the neighborhood were found in what was first thought to be a state of shock but which soon proved to be total insanity. They were incapable of speech, mumbled mindlessly and seemed to have lost all control of their limbs and movements.

After the policeman had taken in the full horror of the scene, Robert Middleton calmly confessed to the slaying of

Justin Branderson and all his kin, including, he believed, Simon, the whereabouts of whose body he could not be sure of. He also told of representing himself, as Jameson correctly surmised, as 'Mr Brown.' He declared his readiness to be taken into custody. When Jameson arrived on the scene, he agreed with the policeman that the murder by stabbing of Justin Branderson was by no means the most horrific aspect of the case. Like the constable who had been admitted by Robert, Jameson was struck by the aspect of the other bodies. In each case the corpses gave the impression of being 'deflated.' There was no horror or shock on their faces; rather a complete blankness of expression as though all the character and individuality had been drawn out of them. As Jameson said, 'It was as though each of the Brandersons had been stripped of even their soul before they had died ...' The police surgeon was baffled by the case and could only suggest that as a result of the murder of Justin, shock great enough to provoke heart failure had instantaneously been communicated to the entire family. They had died like people being electrocuted—as though the death of Justin had produced a lethal current that had run through them all at the same moment. The case was inexplicable—nothing like it was known to medical science. When he was being questioned in the police station, Robert Middleton would only say that he had 'come to destroy a being of utter evil' and that when he had stabbed Justin, 'they were destroyed too.' Asked about the curious weapon he had used and that was found to be made of silver and bore several curious symbols and words, Robert merely said it was 'a sword of power.'

At the same time that Justin was killed a similar strange outcry was heard coming from a villa in Saint John's Wood and the same phenomenon of intense coldness was noted. The villa belonged to a young man prominent in London society and notorious for his gambling and extravagant mode of life. Recently he had broken a long spell of bad luck at the gambling tables and had begun to win huge sums. He was now found crouching in the corner of a large heavily curtained room containing crucifixes, consecrated wafers from churches and other religious items, as well as

black candles, a *grimoire* and other occult paraphernalia apparently destined to be used in a black mass or some similar blasphemous ritual. Lying dead across a table draped with black was Simon Branderson, his face as devoid of character and expression as those of the rest of his dead family. Several other such mysterious deaths were later found to have occurred at the same time in parts of London, and in several cases the deceased were known or else were rumored to have been involved in the activities of mystical, spiritualist or occultist groups. Among the dead was the missing Edward Saunders, whose father had been to see Justin following the young man's infatuation with Jane Branderson. Later two brothers were arrested for the appalling murder of their parents and were found to have been members of the sect that met in the house in Swedenborg Square. When brought to trial they had testified that they had committed the murders to avenge the 'death of the master who would soon return to earth when his faithful were able to bring him down again.'

Some readers may remember the trial of Robert Middleton. It was the most unusual and sensational of the decade, without parallel in the annals of English justice. He was charged only with the murder of Justin Branderson since none of the other members of the dead family bore any marks to indicate that he had directly caused their death. But the fact that Clara, Terence, Jane and Rachel had all been found dead in the house a few minutes after Justin had been killed, and that Simon had also been fatally struck down in a house several miles away at the precise moment when Robert's weapon had penetrated the father's chest, excited wildest speculation and conjecture.

What had killed the other Brandersons? After the most thorough examination of their bodies, all the forensic experts could say was that they had died from a sudden and complete failure of the heart and nervous system, as though they had been administered some incredibly violent shock. But even though it could be considered probable and even natural that the horror of seeing her husband stabbed before her eyes had been fatal for Clara Branderson, it was still hard to explain why the children had all died—apparently simultaneously. The two girls and Terence had been found in another part of the house and there was no way of knowing whether they had even been aware of Justin's murder when they expired. Even more peculiar was the fact that Simon Branderson had been far distant from the house and had no way of knowing what had happened at his home at the time of his death.

The strangeness of the case caused some people to speak of witchcraft, especially inasmuch as Simon had been found in a satanic lodge. Others were of the opinion that Justin had exerted such an uncannily strong mental domination over his family that they had died with him by a process of physical and nervous sympathy due to unnaturally strong

links being formed between them. Several journalists said that it was one of 'occult murder' and that Robert had annihilated the family by invoking a mysterious, supernatural force which had struck down the Brandersons as though they had been blasted by a thunderbolt from the heavens (the dark cloud which had been seen above the house seemed to favor this hypothesis).

Despite all the theories put forward, no one involved in the investigation of the case could produce a satisfactory explanation. Another mystery was that several other people had died similarly at the same time as the Brandersons and were found to have been involved in occult activities. Also, when their corpses were inspected, Justin's and Simon's faces had reverted completely to their former, more youthful aspect. Gone were all the lines of age, the elongation of the countenances, the vulpine distortion of the features which had so repelled the people who saw them in the previous few weeks. The face of the dead Justin was again that of the jovial, charming, open-hearted personality that had once commanded such affection and friendship, and Simon looked once more the fresh-faced, handsome young officer and not the disturbing, ominously transformed person who had stood up in the coroner's court to give evidence after the appalling murder of Philip Humphries. Finally, there was no longer any trace of the alleged resemblance between Clara and Justin, which had caused people to suggest that they might have been twin brother and sister.

Most aspects of the affair might remain incomprehensible to Detective-Superintendent Jameson, but he had no doubts about Robert's guilt and motives. Robert had readily confessed to Justin's murder at the police station after his arrest and even added that he had 'destroyed the whole Branderson brood.' However, when he had been questioned about whether he had touched the other Brandersons in any way after stabbing Justin, he would only say that, 'no one would ever understand,' and affirm that he had not attacked them, adding 'I did not need to strike them.' He expressed no remorse for what he had done and showed not the slightest fear of the probable consequences of his act. He

would not even ask for any particular lawyer to defend him, saying that he was perfectly agreeable to the law taking its own course. But despite his passive behavior, it was clear that inwardly he was calm and satisfied, like a man who knows that he has fulfilled his duty well and honestly.

No plea of insanity could be put forward on Robert's behalf, as he was found to be in perfect command of his mental faculties. At first the doctors who had attended him in Devonshire declared that he would have been far too weak to have committed the murder of Justin, but when he was examined he was found to be in better health than expected for a man supposedly to have only a few more weeks to live because of the nature of his illness. For some unknown reason the progress of the disease that had ravaged Robert's constitution had been checked, and although he was far from being a sound man there was no longer any sign that he might collapse and die at any moment as his medical advisers had warned him.

The entire court was fascinated by Robert's appearance when he took his stand in the dock. He hesitated slightly when asked, 'You are Robert Middleton, aged fifty-five years, resident of the Old Cottage, Hunter's Bridge, Devonshire, are you not?' but then pleaded, 'Guilty, your worship' in a strong ringing voice. Thereafter he showed little interest in the proceedings, giving the impression of a man too withdrawn into himself, too preoccupied with other thoughts to pay any attention to the judicial drama that was to decide his fate and most probably lead him to the gallows.

The court was told that immediately following Ellen Middleton's death Robert had made wild accusations against the Brandersons, saying that they were 'devils' and speaking of the need 'to destroy the accursed family.' Jameson told the court of how Robert had come to see him in London and tried to convince him that Justin was involved in witchcraft of an evil and diabolical nature, and how Robert had been seen lurking near the Brandersons' house. The prosecuting counsel stated that Robert's failure to prove to the detective that the Brandersons were guilty of unlawful activities and the murder of his wife had

prompted him to take matters into his own hands and exact vengeance for his imaginary grievances. As the prosecution pointed out, there was not a shred of evidence against Justin to show that he had committed any offense. Admittedly there had been talk of occult practices and Simon's body had been found in a lodge for black magicians, containing items stolen from churches, but even so, there was no proof that the Brandersons had been involved in such thefts. As for the matter of performing occult or magical rituals—witchcraft and sorcery had not been considered crimes in English law since 1736. There was no indication that any of the Brandersons had committed anything the law could define as a crime, and yet Robert Middleton had coolly and deliberately come to the house and murdered Justin and caused the deaths of 'an entire, respectable, innocent family.'

The defense made much of the fact that Simon Branderson had been found in an occult lodge and also stressed the fact that people like the Masons, the Roscoes and the parents of the unfortunate Edward Saunders had all asserted that the Brandersons' evil influence had brought death and misery to the families of those who had close dealings with them. Whether such things as magic and occult influences really existed was not for the court to decide, said counsel for the defense, but Robert Middleton was certainly not the only person to believe that the Brandersons were evil people, active in causing harm to others. Also, the very nature of the weapon used by Robert upon Justin—a so-called 'sword of power' inscribed with magic words and symbols—proved that Robert was wholly and sincerely convinced that Justin was an evil magician. As the counsel told the fascinated but skeptical court, 'We are in the presence of things which seem unnatural, fantastic, beyond the bounds of reason and laws of the world, and yet—can we deny that there may exist forces in nature which are unknown to us? Can we prove beyond question that there is no such thing as a magician able to cast spells and to influence minds and cause the sufferings and even the deaths of others?'

On the second day of the trial, a sensation was caused by

the announcement that a series of highly important letters written by Clara Branderson to her friend Ellen Middleton had been found and forwarded to Robert's defense counsel. After his wife's death, Robert had given her clothes away to a woman who had been their housekeeper for several years. This woman, in her turn, had handed several of Ellen's dresses and gowns to her daughter. One of the garments was the dress which Ellen had worn on the morning of the day when she had been fatally struck down by the carriage. While the housekeeper's daughter was lengthening the dress, she had found thirty-two letters, all written to Ellen and signed by Clara, carefully concealed all around the ample hem of the velvet dress which had been let down and then hastily sewn up again. As the young woman knew of Robert's imminent trial from the newspapers, she soon realized the importance of the letters and had given them to her mother, who took the first train to London and went straight to the Old Bailey, where she handed them to Robert's defense counsel.

The fortuitous discovery of Clara's letters in which she described the change which had come over Justin and his alarming behavior, as well as her visit to Orsini with a mysterious package, intrigued the court and, in particular, Inspector Jameson, but unfortunately the letters could not diminish Robert's culpability. There was still no firm evidence that Justin had been transformed into a monster of evil; there was no proof that he had murdered Orsini; and although the concealment of the letters showed that Ellen had been fearful of them being stolen, there was still nothing to suggest that she had been deliberately killed by the unknown person driving the carriage or that the driver was in any way connected with the Brandersons. All the defense could do was to claim that these letters were added evidence that Justin Branderson had become deeply involved in occultism after apparently becoming subject to some evil influence. To this the prosecution retorted that if the letters were true at all, then far from being evil, the unfortunate Justin and his wife were all the more deserving of sympathy for having undergone such horrific experiences. There was *still* no indication that the Brandersons had

committed any crime that could even remotely justify Robert Middleton's antipathy towards them—an antipathy which had led to 'the most foul, premeditated, brutal, cold-blooded murder.' Furthermore, said the prosecution, the nature of Robert Middleton's own interests were well-known in the field of superstition, myth and magic, and therefore 'if occultism and witchcraft there be in this case, then their evil practitioner was not Justin Branderson but the man who stands before you in the dock—a man armed with a dagger inscribed with superstitious and blasphemous symbols who drove it into the heart of a man who had been sick and unbearably tormented by nightmare visions created either by his own afflicted mind or by the prisoner's evil suggestions! If indeed there are such things as occult powers which can kill and bring misery to others, then the man who used them was not Justin Branderson but Robert Middleton, who was thus able to bring death to an entire family by invisible means! If indeed it be possible to harass and dominate the minds of others by sending them visions and nightmares, and by exerting evil mental influences, is it not possible that Robert Middleton himself was the source of Justin and Clara Brandersons' mental sufferings?'

A fresh sensation was then caused by the arrival from Paris of a new witness, a young man called Jonathan King. He was the young man who had been seen to visit the Brandersons' house and who had been seen leaving the house with the young girl who had come to stay with the Brandersons shortly before the murder. His signed statement is here reproduced in its entirety.

STATEMENT OF JONATHAN KING, MAY 14, 1887

If there is any real justice on earth, as I hope and pray there is, then it will absolve Robert Middleton. He has been my kindest friend, he has saved my wife's body, mind and soul, and he has sacrificed everything to wipe out a horrible evil which would have otherwise continued to bring death and far worse to a great many more people.

My wife Miranda is the niece of the late Justin Brander-

son. Her father, Norman Branderson, became a widower soon after she was born and lived in New Zealand for more than thirty years. My own family lived near the Brander-sons, and Miranda and I were friends—and then sweet-hearts—ever since we first met as children. By the time she was nineteen it was tacitly understood by all of us that we should eventually marry as soon as I was in a position to support her. The only shadow on our happiness was that I had won a scholarship and would be going to England for three years to continue my medical studies at Bart's Hospital. Norman Branderson then became seriously ill and, learning that he had only a few months to live, wrote to his brother Justin, whom he had not seen for over thirty years, asking him and Clara if they would look after Miranda when he died. A few weeks before he died, Norman Branderson invited me to his study to have a private chat with him after he had dined with Miranda and myself. He told me in confidence that he knew he had only a few weeks to live and would never have the joy of seeing me—whom he considered as a son—marry Miranda. But as I had to go to England, and as Miranda would be left with no one to care for her in New Zealand, he had arranged for her to go to her uncle's house, where she would be looked after as one of the family until I was a practising doctor and we could marry. Norman Branderson had received a reply from his brother, who said that he would be only too delighted to welcome Miranda into his family, but he had said nothing of this to his daughter for fear of distressing her too much. Nonetheless, he knew that once she had got over the grief of losing her father, Miranda would be living with friends and relations who would do everything for her and—most important for her—she would be in England near me. That was the kind of man Norman was—the most generous, sensitive, lovable man I ever met, who thought only of others' happiness and good up to the moment of his death.

A month after Norman died, Miranda and I were on a ship taking us to England, excitedly making plans for the future and looking forward to seeing London and later, the Continent for the first time in our lives. Although, of

course, I would be living in lodgings near the Hospital as soon as the teaching term started, I would have frequent occasions to meet Miranda, and her uncle had been told that Norman had already given us his blessing for our engagement and marriage.

When we arrived in London, we were met as arranged by Justin Branderson's eldest son, Simon, who had been an officer in India. It was a strange meeting and I must say I was surprised to see that no other member of the family was present to welcome Miranda—especially as she had come all the way from New Zealand. Both Miranda and I were taken somewhat aback by Simon's appearance, for although he was only in his twenties, he certainly looked a far older man. He had a beard which covered most of his face and slightly dark spectacles, but both of us could see that he had an unusually long face with a pointed jaw, and that it was heavily lined, as though he had lived through years of severe toil and suffering. In addition, his voice was strange for a young man: I don't quite know how to describe it but can only say that it had a curiously deep, resonant quality and after he had spoken, his words had a way of echoing in my mind . . . almost as though I had not heard his words from his mouth but rather from his mind to mine.

Another thing that surprised Miranda and myself and struck me unfavorably was that even though I was introduced to him as Miranda's fiancé, he did not suggest that I should meet my relatives-to-be but merely asked me where I was lodging and whether I wanted to join Miranda and himself in his carriage. Something made me decline, although I was reluctant to leave Miranda a moment earlier than absolutely necessary. From the moment I set eyes on Simon, I felt intense dislike for him and extreme regret that Miranda should even have to sleep under the same roof as him. Miranda herself looked disconcerted in his presence and especially so as we separated. I had promised to call at the Branderson house the next day and Simon had said something about 'looking forward to the pleasure of better making my acquaintance.'

I took a cab to my lodgings and spent most of the night

a worried unhappy man. Although I could not fathom why, my instinct told me that there was something wrong about the house that was to be Miranda's home until we were married. The next afternoon my misgivings diminished when I reached Courtland Square where the Brandersons lived. The house obviously belonged to a man of considerable means and the district was elegant and quiet. I could not have imagined a pleasanter place for Miranda to live in the great city we were now seeing for the first time. The only thing that surprised me was that although the weather was sunny and warm, none of the windows overlooking the road were open and unlike other houses in the road, all the windows on the ground and first floors were so thickly curtained that it was impossible to catch a glimpse of the interiors. Another circumstance which caught my notice as I went to the front door of the house was that a couple of passers-by on the far side of the road had stopped and were gazing at me with the utmost curiosity as I rang the front door bell. As I stood waiting on the doorstep, I turned round again and saw that the couple were still staring at me, until they turned their heads away in embarrassment and went on their way.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman with dull eyes and an even duller voice who stared at me for a few seconds before taking me into a darkened hall and disappearing. There was not a sound in the house, and all its occupants might have been sound asleep as far as I could see. After a full minute had passed, the maid returned and told me that Mr. Justin Branderson was waiting for me in the drawing room. As soon as I saw him, the feelings I had experienced on meeting his son returned to me with even greater intensity. I am not a person with a special gift for writing or description but can only say that as I stepped into the darkened room where thick, heavy velvet curtains were keeping out the light of day, and a single gas lamp shone dimly in a far corner, the thought came to me that I had entered some sort of trap or a place where some dangerous thing lay in ambush. The air was curiously stuffy. I could hardly breathe for a moment and could feel my heart beating abnormally fast. Although the atmosphere seemed

stifling to me and surely the weather was mild, I had the sensation that waves of coldness were running through my body and that some kind of icy current was vibrating in the room. In addition the bearded, elongated face of my host was unnaturally similar to his son and there was a hint of watchful caution in his manner which suggested that, in some way, he was on his guard against me. However, Mr. Branderson must have realized my uncomfortable feelings on entering the room because he smiled at me, as if telling me to forget my worries and unease and to have trust in him. I found myself unable to take my eyes away from his gaze, but when he finally looked away I discovered I was less nervous and temporarily soothed by the low rich tenor of his voice as he asked me questions about myself, my studies and profession and my plans with Miranda for the future.

After I had satisfied my curiosity on these points, Justin told me that Miranda would be coming down directly but he regretted not being able to present me to his wife or daughters and small son on this occasion as they had been obliged to go out for the afternoon. Miranda then came into the room, looking lovelier than ever but somewhat pale and tired. After assuring me that Mr. Branderson was being marvellously kind to her in every conceivable way, she confessed to feeling extremely fatigued from the long voyage and of needing to rest for a few days. This was natural enough but what I did not like was the way she appeared so passive as I spoke to her. She had always been lively, gay and impulsive, now she was quiet, grave and even a little withdrawn in her manner. I realized that for the first time in all the years we had known and come to love each other, a slight but nonetheless definite barrier had suddenly sprung up between Miranda and myself. It was as though she had become impervious to my feeling for her. My presence seemed neither to gladden or interest her, she had little to say to me and she barely listened as I spoke to her.

After several painful minutes had passed, in which I had tried to bring Miranda back to her usual high spirits with light chatter, Justin Branderson brought the interview to a close, saying that Miranda needed to continue her rest.

I then told Miranda that I would call again on the next day, providing Mr. Branderson had no objection. For the first time that afternoon Miranda showed some life at the prospect of seeing me again, for the color came back to her cheeks, her eyes brightened and she smiled. But even while I noted her welcome change in mood, I detected a hesitancy in Justin's manner after Miranda had turned smiling to him and said, 'That will be all right, uncle, will it not? Jonathan *may* come tomorrow?' Justin turned his intense eyes on me again for several long seconds before replying, 'Yes, indeed. He is always welcome here.' Then, impulsive as ever, Miranda said, 'Will you not invite Mr. King to dinner soon, uncle? After all, he is my fiancé.'

There was a moment's hesitation and another solemn stare from Justin before he replied, 'Yes, my dear. You must not think me inhospitable, Mr. King, if I do not invite you straight away, but Miranda must rest and my wife, unfortunately, cannot receive anyone for some days. Be patient, I pray you. Soon, Mr. King, you will be a constant and ever-welcome guest in this house and later, of course, you will be one of the family.'

Such was the end of my first meeting with Miranda's host, uncle and guardian. As had been the case with his son, I had felt acutely uncomfortable in his presence and it was with an actual feeling of relief that I came out of the house into the open air again—although I hated to leave Miranda in that place. Also, Mr. Branderson's words, 'you will be one of the family' rang ominously in my mind, and I could not rid myself of the feeling that he had said them as though he were savoring some private hidden jest.

I was so deep in thought that as I began to walk across the square I collided with a man pushing a wheelbarrow full of gardening implements. After I had apologized to him, he stopped, looked at me curiously, and said, 'You're new to that house, aren't you, sir?', indicating the Branderson's house with his thumb. Amused by his curiosity, I told him that I had come from New Zealand with my fiancée, who was a niece of Mr. Branderson's and who was now staying with the family. The gardener frowned and said, 'Not for too long, I hope, sir. They're a strange lot, the Brandersons

... Have you seen them *all*?' I told him that I had not met Mrs. Branderson or her children, as they had been obliged to go out for the afternoon. The elderly gardener looked back at the house for an instant, took hold of my sleeve and whispered, 'But they haven't gone out! I've been gardening and trimming the hedges in the square since noon without a break and would have seen them come out for sure. Go out! Why, sir, they *never* go out nowadays!' Seeing my mystified expression, he added, 'A word of advice to you, young sir. Don't let your lady stay in that house a day longer than necessary!'

The old gardener's words increased my misgivings and I impatiently counted every hour until I could see Miranda again, cursing myself for not yet being in a position to make her my wife and give her a real home. In the next two days my misgivings turned into alarm and then fear. As I returned for the second brief visit as arranged, Justin Branderson came out to see me in the hall and regretfully told me that Miranda could not see anyone, that she was resting and had become 'slightly indisposed' as a result of the change of climate and the stress of the long voyage. Persistence was useless. I left the house feeling wretched and with the gardener's words still echoing ominously in my mind. I insisted I would return to the house the following day and Justin Branderson finally agreed, although adding in that resonant, hollow voice I was beginning to detest, 'So be it then, but I do not know whether Miranda will be able to see you so soon.' The next day he told me again that Miranda could see no one, she had contracted a slight fever although 'this was nothing to worry about,' and urged me not to return for about a week, adding that she would write me a letter in the meantime.

As I lingered outside the house, looking up at its windows in hopes I would catch some glimpse of Miranda, the gardener made signs to me from the house next door and I went up to him. He must have noticed my frustration and despondency. His first words were, 'So you weren't able to see your young lady, were you, sir? Tell me, did they say she was sick?' I told him that Mr. Branderson *had* said Miranda was indisposed and could have no visitors. After

hesitating slightly, the gardener caught me by the sleeve again and whispered, 'Listen, sir, they all get taken ill in that house. Mr. Branderson was ill, his wife was ill, the daughters were ill—there's something in that house that makes them all ill and then they're no longer the same people. I tell you, sir, they're all *queer*. Can't you get your young lady out of there? There's a curse on that house, to be sure!'

The gardener was about to tell me something else when we were interrupted by a distinguished-looking man who came down the steps of the house where the gardener was working and said, 'Are you gossiping again, Thomson? You should have finished those hedges by now—' Upon seeing me, the man bowed courteously, and I told him it was not the gardener's fault that he had stopped working, as I had approached him to ask for some information about the house next door. The mention of the Brandersons' house had the same curious effect upon this man as upon his gardener. He stared curiously at me and then, as soon as I told him that I was the fiancé of the young girl who had come to stay with the Brandersons, said, 'In that case, I pity her, sir. And I pity *you*.'

When I got back to my lodgings I found a letter from Miranda. Far from calming my anxieties, it only increased them. Miranda wrote she had begun to feel unwell and that the Brandersons' physician had ordered her to take to her bed for a few days rest and had told Mr. Branderson not to allow her any visitors until she was restored. She begged me to be patient. But although the letter contained many endearments, there was something artificial and even strained in the tone that aroused my suspicions. Miranda had always been healthy and there had been nothing to fatigue her during our voyage. What was this illness or exhaustion keeping her confined to the house? Who was the doctor forbidding her to talk to me? Had Justin Branderson made her write this letter? My own few years of medical studies convinced me there was little if anything wrong with her—and yet, how listless she had appeared when I saw her in that house....

I had been told I might call again in a week, but I was

determined to keep a watch on the house in the meantime. My duties and studies were not to begin until the following month and so I had time to find out all I could about Miranda's mysterious relatives. It certainly hadn't taken me long to discover that they were feared and disliked in the neighborhood. By spending an evening at the nearest public house, much frequented by the coachmen, tradesmen, and servants of the houses in Courtland Square, I learned further how Justin and then Clara Branderson had been strangely afflicted, how they and their children had become recluses, and how it was whispered that they brought unhappiness and terrible misfortune to others. No one in the public house could tell me anything more precise about the way the Brandersons were alleged to bring disaster to other people, but it was plain that everybody in the neighborhood shunned them as much by instinct as by knowing the dreadful events with which they were said to be associated.

I went back to the house for a third time only to be told coldly and firmly by Justin Branderson that I would still have to wait a few more days before seeing Miranda. He stayed unmoved by the fact that I was her fiancé with her late father's blessing, and that I had already studied enough medicine to be allowed to see the patient. He merely reminded me that he was Miranda's legal guardian and therefore responsible for her protection and welfare. 'Welfare!' The word echoed ironically in my mind as I left the house in a rage, now convinced that he was purposely keeping Miranda away from me. Also, I wondered why I had not yet caught even the briefest glimpse of Mrs. Branderson and the rest of her family. Where had they enclosed themselves and for what reason?

That same evening I decided to keep watch on the house from the garden in the square, where I could conceal myself quite easily so as not to arouse suspicion. It is said that lovers have an acute instinct and certainly, mine told me that Miranda was in some danger. If I could only catch sight of her face from some window I hoped to be able to communicate with her. One thing I definitely did not believe was that she was over-fatigued or ill.

I was back in the square when night fell. As the garden was a private one, for the sole use of the inhabitants of the square, its gate was locked but it was an easy matter to climb over the railings in the darkness when few passers-by were about. I found a bench sheltered by bushes and trees and from which I could plainly see the Branderson house, the front door of which was illuminated by a nearby street lamp. I was preparing for a night-long vigil if need be when I saw the stooping figure of an elderly man come slowly into sight and make straight for the garden gate. To my surprise the man opened the gate—while I hid behind some bushes—and sat down on the seat I had just occupied. He then took a pair of binoculars from his coat pocket and focussed them on the Branderson house.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I left my hiding-place and went up to him. As he saw me approach he immediately put down his binoculars. 'It's all right,' I said, 'we both seem to be interested in the same house.' 'And why are *you* interested in it?' he said in a tired voice. I decided to speak frankly and told him that my fiancée was staying in the house and that I suspected her guardian of keeping her from seeing me, adding that I hoped to catch some glimpse of her at a window since I did not believe she was ill as I had been told. At the mention of the word 'ill,' the man got up from his seat and grabbed my arm. He was greatly agitated.

'Ill? Your fiancée is in that house? But since when?'

'A few days ago. She arrived with me from New Zealand. The owner of the house is her uncle.'

The old man sat down again, his shoulders sagging as though he were exhausted or deeply depressed. 'And have you seen her since she entered the house?'

'Once.'

'And how did she appear to you?'

'I thought she was somewhat tired and pale. Not her usual self.'

'And since then?'

'I have been told she can have no visitors; I cannot see her until next week.'

'Next week?' This last answer of mine seemed to gal-

vanize the old gentleman. He leaped up again and stared at me. In the faint light that came from a distant street lamp I could still see that my interlocutor's face was terribly pale and deeply lined. His eyes were glittering and his mouth twitching, and I could see his legs were unsteady as he moved. He was either seriously ill or drugged—possibly both. He slumped down on the seat again, sighed and then said, 'It is as I feared, but there can still be hope. Tell me again, how long has your fiancée been there?'

'Only four days.'

'And Mr. Branderson—do not look surprised, I know his name well—he definitely said that you might visit your fiancée next week?'

'Yes, he expects her to have recovered from her fatigue and indisposition by then.'

The man again sighed deeply and said, 'Then it may not be too late to save her if we act *now*.'

'Save her?'

'As soon as possible. She is in great danger. You must believe me. Come with me and I will tell you everything I know about that house.'

As we made our way to my new friend's apartment he told me that his name was Robert Middleton and that his late wife had been the closest friend and epistolary confidante of Mrs. Clara Branderson, who had sent her a series of letters describing the terrible and mysterious change that had come over her husband until he had become a different and sinister person. As we sat up the whole night long, I learned from Robert Middleton how the Brandersons had become objects of fear and execration in their neighborhood; how misery, sickness and death had come to those who had been closely connected with them; and how Robert had become convinced that Justin Branderson and his family were now practicing some form of black magic.

It was the strangest tale I had ever heard and yet—I beg the court to believe me—I knew that I was not listening to the ravings of a madman. A mortally ill man, no doubt, whose existence and last remaining energy were being sustained only by massive administrations of drugs whose ultimate effects would be as lethal as his illness. But they

did give him a little precious time in which to attempt to unmask the evil of the Brandersons. Sensational as Robert's disclosures and conclusions were, they were all based on thorough study and research. I noted that his study was filled with books and notes on occult lore, demonology, possession, spiritualism, magnetism and hypnosis, sorcery and necromancy, and in one old book that he showed me there was even a precedent for the Brandersons' case. Still, under normal circumstances most of what Robert told me would once have seemed the wildest, most superstitious nonsense, but I was hardly inclined to scoff. I learned how Robert had followed Justin and Simon Branderson on some of their nocturnal excursions and how his own studies and knowledge had enabled him to make contact with certain occultists. They had spoken to him of a new threat in their midst and of the spread of a malignant new sect which was unlawfully using secret powers to unleash a monstrous evil and to recruit new members for its nefarious purposes. I learned how Robert had decided that the source of this evil must be the Brandersons themselves. He told me of the terrible case of the young carol-singers who became murderous hooligans after entering the house, and of how Juliet Mason murdered her newlywed husband after her meetings with Simon Branderson. As I remembered the hints dropped by people of the district and my own disturbing impressions of Justin and the house, my last doubts vanished.

If Robert will tell the court what he told me, I am sure that even the most skeptical lawyer or member of the jury will have to suspend his disbelief and forget his former prejudices as I did. But for the moment, let it be enough to say that when dawn broke in Robert's apartment and he had finished speaking, my mind was reeling with implications of what he had told me. Nonetheless, his tone was so sober and sincere, the evidence he had been accumulating was so suggestive, and his conclusions so damning that I no longer hesitated to believe him implicitly. By then I had decided to do everything in my power to bring Miranda out of that accursed house—even if it meant breaking the law.

Robert agreed that it was essential to make the attempt to save Miranda at once. 'She must on no account spend another night under the Brandersons' roof. I can see that you love her deeply. I also see you accept what I have told you, but are you prepared to do something you may find incomprehensible and even preposterous? Remember, only you can save Miranda now.' Robert paused to study my face, as though to read my mind and character and see whether it reflected any remaining doubt. Then he went on in a tone of great solemnity. 'We do not have time for me to explain fully all the processes and properties of the forces of evil I believe to be concentrated in purest state in the bodies of the Brandersons. Nor will I speak now of certain conclusions I have formed concerning them, nor of the rituals and powers of what is vulgarly known as sorcery or witchcraft. But just as evil is an element in the universe as potent and real as electricity, fire or water, so there is an opposing element with which it can be resisted and even overcome. Those who follow what is termed the Left Hand path of occult lore and magical science can be fought with the weapons of the so-called Right Hand.'

He stood up and put his hands on my shoulders. 'Jonathan King, I am too ill to be able to use such a weapon myself. I have not the physical strength to endure a confrontation with Justin Branderson or any of his kin. No matter how well-armed and prepared I might be, they would be able to exploit my debility and force me to lower my guard against them. But you are young and healthy, and I think I can provide you with the weapon you will need to save Miranda. I shall now go out and be back this afternoon. You should rest. When I have armed you with this weapon, you must go to the house of the Brandersons before nightfall and take Miranda away. I believe they may not be able to stop you.'

After Robert had departed, I spent the next three hours waiting in a fever of excitement and anticipation. I assure the court that before my meeting with Robert Middleton I had never given a moment's thought to such matters as magic and sorcery. I am a thoroughly sane, rational and unsuperstitious fellow, but although what Robert told me was

so fantastic and seemed so beyond the bounds of everything we call science or reason, my deepest instinct nonetheless told me that he had been speaking the truth. What I have seen since has proved to me the existence of powers in the universe stranger than any I could have dreamed of or that most men know. I have *seen* the use of these occult powers with my own eyes.

When Robert returned he brought a long leather case in a Gladstone bag. Opening it, he produced a beautifully made short sword or dagger with a hilt which gave it the shape of a pointed crucifix. Both the blade and the handle were engraved with strange symbols and words whose significance escaped me. Robert laid the weapon reverently on the table in front of us and explained, 'Thanks to the knowledge I have acquired and the contacts I have made, I have succeeded in persuading a very powerful and good occultist to give me this. It is a Sword of Power, used in certain extremely important and difficult rituals. Just as a piece of metal may be magnetized or charged with electrical forces, so this sword has been charged with properties and powers that repel forces of evil. Perhaps you have read accounts of how evil witches and demons are held at bay by the Christian crucifix?'

I told Robert that as a boy I had indeed read one or two such tales.

'Very well,' he continued, 'you know that such crucifixes can afford protection, but in this case they would be of little use against such powerful evil beings as the Brandersons unless they were properly and sufficiently charged by a master occultist. This weapon is of extreme potency. You must go as soon as possible to the Branderson house, carrying this Sword of Power concealed in a bag or case—perhaps a surgical bag such as you use for your medical studies. You will probably be admitted into the house and told again that you cannot see Miranda. You must insist that you see her, threatening that otherwise you will go straight to the police—mention Inspector Jameson—on the grounds that you believe Miranda to have been unlawfully taken away from the house, or else to have been done away with.'

'I am sure that Justin Branderson will not want any policemen coming to his house and that he will therefore be obliged to give you physical proof that Miranda is still in the house. Ignore his arguments or refusals—even say you once heard her screaming for help or that the neighbors have confirmed she has not been seen since entering the house. Then, when you go to Miranda's room or when she comes to you, take her by the hand, produce the sword and point it towards Justin or anyone else who tries to stop you. They will be terrified of being touched with it and will not be able to stop the two of you from leaving. I shall be waiting in a carriage a few yards from the house. Do not let anything distract you as you confront the Brandersons. Above all, do not look directly into their eyes but concentrate your gaze on the point of this sword and repeat aloud these words: ***** (these are occult Words of Power and I have solemnly sworn not to reveal them). You will thus shield your mind from any hypnotic influences the Brandersons will undoubtedly attempt to direct at you. It is essential you do not falter and that you hold the sword firmly. The fact that it will be daylight will also prevent the Brandersons from exercising their full powers.'

I drove with Robert to my own lodgings, collected a surgical case into which I put the sword and set out again with him for Courtland Square. I could hardly believe I was not dreaming, but what Robert had told me and my anxiety for Miranda were enough to make me carry out any scheme—no matter how fantastic it might seem.

Just as Robert had predicted, I was allowed into the house by the sulky maid. Justin Branderson then appeared, obviously irritated. I cut him short as he began to repeat to me that Miranda was still unable to see visitors.

'I insist you let me see my fiancée at once. Otherwise I shall go straight to the police and say she is missing or murdered. I shall say I heard her screaming in this house. Now, will you take me to her?'

Justin Branderson's face momentarily contracted with anger, but he quickly composed himself and said easily, 'I assure you, my dear young man, that your fears are en-

tirely misplaced. Come with me into the drawing room.' He stepped forward and began to gaze at me with eyes that became unnaturally large but I quickly said the words :
*****. He instantly stepped back while I averted my eyes from his face and repeated my demand, informing him that I had a friend waiting outside who would also go to the police if I were molested or even delayed in any way. Without a word, Justin went to the window, looked out and saw Robert's carriage waiting a few yards away. He then walked straight past me, saying, 'Very well, you shall see Miranda.'

No weirder confrontation can be imagined. While Justin rang for a maid, he tried several times to attract my eyes towards his again but each time I repeated the Words of Power while he stared at me with baffled fury. He showed not the slightest surprise that I should know these occult words or have had foreknowledge of his attempt to hypnotize me.

As I followed the maid up the stairs to Miranda's room, I could see Justin pacing slowly up and down in the entrance hall with the menacing grace of a tiger. There was still no sign of any other inhabitants in the house. A minute later I was looking at my darling Miranda, who was reclining on a couch in a prettily furnished room with heavy curtains drawn over the windows. She looked at me in surprise, like one who suddenly awakens from a dream or a heavy sleep and cannot quite remember her surroundings. Then she recognized me and came unsteadily across the room to throw herself in my arms. 'Oh, thank God you have come! I have been feeling so strange and weak these last days. Uncle Justin says I am not well, and I seem to have no strength left at all.' I interrupted and told her that she was to leave the house with me at once. To her added amazement, I opened my bag and took out the Sword of Power before taking her by the arm, and I half-led, half-carried her through the door.

We no sooner were on the landing than a door opened, and we were confronted by a female form. I know that what I say sounds incredible, but the truth is that although the person who had come into the corridor to bar our way was

a woman physically, her face—half-hidden by thick long strands of dark hair—might have been that of Justin himself! There was the same elongation of the face, the same thin, aquiline nose, the same vulpine jaw, the uncanny gleam in the large luminous eyes . . . As she came toward us, just as Justin had done, I said the Words of Power again and pushed forward with the Sword. She stepped back as though I had singed her with a red hot iron and then moved aside, glaring balefully at us as I began to descend the stairs with Miranda.

When we were half-way down, I heard other doors open and more people behind me while Justin stood at the foot of the stairs. As I held out the Sword again and he drew back, I vaguely could perceive other female forms behind me. Two more women had joined the first, and in each case the features were the same—all distorted into uncanny replicas of Justin's. As they came down the stairs after us, trying to look into my eyes, I said the Words again and again and extended the Sword in my free hand, touching one of them who quickly moved back. I then thrust the Sword upwards at Justin as he tried to approach us again. As it brushed his wrist, he let out a cry that was immediately echoed by the three females, and retreated back towards the door of the drawing room. My last impression of that hellish place was of Justin and those three hideous females glaring at us with rage and frustration as I opened the front door and managed to get down the steps to freedom, supporting Miranda with one arm. As we got into the carriage Miranda fainted away, and by the time she came back to her senses we were well on the way to Robert's lodgings, where he had decided we should take her, as the Brandersons knew my address.

Robert's first words were, 'Well, Jonathan, you see that I was right.'

'I shall never doubt anything you tell me,' I said, holding tight to Miranda's hand.

When we reached the safety and comfort of Robert's apartment, Miranda was able to tell us little of her stay in the Branderson house. She had spent the four days there in a mental haze, a semi-stupor for which she could not

account. She had begun to feel lethargic and indolent from the moment she had entered the house and been greeted by Justin Branderson. Strangely, she seemed to have lost all curiosity about her relatives and had not found it in the least surprising that Justin should have told her that it was not yet possible for her to see her aunt or cousins. She had never wondered about them, her capacity for feeling emotions of any sort diminished increasingly, she became indifferent to her surroundings and future. Even her love for me had become obfuscated in her mind. She had spent her waking hours in a state of quiet passivity while Justin and Simon Branderson had talked to her. She could not remember what they had said to her although she knew that the conversations had been lengthy. Odder, she had not been surprised by the peculiar similarity of features between Justin and Simon, and at times she had not known which was which, nor had she cared to know. She had not been frightened, excited, depressed or gladdened by anything in the house. As she said, her life with Justin and Simon Branderson had been 'like a dream I can only barely remember.' She did vaguely recall I had once seen her in the house, but otherwise all she knew was she had been constantly visited by Justin and Simon and had dreamed frequently.

Robert's emaciated face became increasingly tense while Miranda spoke. After taking her to another room where she could refresh herself and make her toilette, he motioned me into his study. When we were alone he said quietly, 'I do not know how greatly her mind may have become affected by her stay in that house, Jonathan. Oh, don't look so worried—I do not mean she has become unbalanced. Only I do fear the Brandersons might have succeeded in forging some link with her mind and may exploit this.'

'What do you mean?' I said, greatly alarmed.

'Let me be frank. I very much fear she may already be partly under their control. Most important, she must not sleep tonight until we have given her protection. I pray I am wrong, but I believe that when she becomes unconscious in sleep the Brandersons may be able to communicate with her subconscious mind and with even what occultists call

her astral body—and that way learn her whereabouts.'

We went back to Miranda. Robert gently told her she had been in great danger, that her uncle and his family were persons of profound evil and that he had convincing reason to believe they were trying to gain control over her mind and soul. Meanwhile it was essential she remain in the safety of Robert's lodgings while we devised a way of taking her out of the Brandersons' reach. Robert felt it necessary to tell her what had happened to other people who had come into any lengthy contact with the Brandersons and solemnly repeated his conviction that they had the power to transmit evil.

'I am sure you are right,' she said. 'Now I begin to remember how frightened I was in that house and how when Jonathan came to take me away I seemed to see their faces for the first time—oh, those faces ... But the man in the house—he looked so kindly, so sad when I saw him in my dream! He wanted to protect me and tried to talk to me but he had to leave ... He was not the same man as—'

'Tell me,' said Robert quietly when she regained her composure, 'tell me, did the man of this dream resemble your uncle as you first saw him?'

There was a moment's pause before Miranda replied, 'I cannot remember clearly ... he had something to tell me ... something so important!'

'Try to recollect,' Robert urged her, his face betraying a sudden new excitement.

Miranda tried, but after several moments of intense concentration, she still could not.

Meanwhile, Robert had become deathly pale and begun to slump forward in his chair. There was perspiration on his brow, and he began to shake spasmodically. As I touched him on the arm he straightened himself and said it was nothing, that it would pass. He staggered to his feet, made his way to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. When he came back I could see at once from his altered countenance and his dilated pupils that he had administered himself a massive dose of some drug. He was temporarily possessed with new—and I feared abnormal—nervous and physical energy. Even so, it was painfully clear

to me that he was a man fast approaching the point of death.

He saw our concern and smiled ruefully. 'Do not be alarmed. I must prolong my wretched existence by every means possible. These are things we must do, and there is little enough time. I must go out now and return with someone who will help us. Jonathan, you must stay here with Miranda. Admit no one who may ring or knock at the door and above all, do not let Miranda out of your sight.'

Robert led me into his study again. 'I do not wish to frighten Miranda, so it is better we talk alone. I think the Brandersons may have the power to overlook us. They may even know where we are. But I do not think that they will try to regain Miranda by physical force—not while we are armed with the Sword. Nor will they tell the police, for they have attracted too much attention already from that quarter and will not wish to arouse new suspicions. No, I believe they will use different means and try to attack us in the occult dimension. They know I am their dedicated enemy. We must take defensive measures at once.'

Robert took the Sword from its case as we rejoined Miranda and said, 'Do not be surprised by what I shall now do. I am going to attempt to seal this apartment. The protection should last until nightfall, when I shall repeat the operation. Even if the Brandersons should by some means know that we are in this house, they will not be able to project their minds into it or to send forth thought-forms to harass you while I am gone. They will not be able to overlook you or hear what you say.'

Robert then clasped the Sword with both hands and intoned certain words and formulas that neither of us could understand. In spite of his desperate condition, he seemed to tower majestically over us, and there seemed a new strength within him as he held the Sword at shoulder height and uttered occult Words of Power as he moved around our room and the adjoining rooms, touching the doors and windows with the point of the Sword and describing circles and triangular figures in the air. When he had completed this curious ritual, he smiled at our evident

amazement and said, 'What is evil, if not thought? Walls cannot keep out evil thoughts, but thoughts of goodness and strength together with others enshrined in age-old ritual words of wisdom and power can repel evil mental transmissions. I am by no means an adept, but what I am doing is well-known to practitioners of what you may call magic. The Sword itself is so charged with the concentrated power of goodness that everything it touches it magnetizes so as to repel emanations of evil. That is why the Brandersons fear it so much. It is our strongest weapon against them.'

After Robert had left the apartment I told Miranda of all the amazing things I had learned from him and of how he had been keeping watch on the Branderson house. I doubt whether few other girls in the whole world would have accepted our weird and terrifying situation as well as Miranda did. For a young girl of nineteen to be confronted with allegations of the supernatural and the practice of magic as she had been must have been an overwhelming experience. Like myself, Miranda at first thought she must be dreaming—everything was too fantastic, too far beyond the bounds of credibility—and yet she showed only understanding and courage in her expression and behavior. Both of us had at least seen enough to realize that the Brandersons' house was an evil and dangerous place, and that its inmates were far more than passing strange. Our flight from the house and Robert's patent goodness and sincerity convinced us we were indeed in some kind of desperate struggle. And it was Miranda's safety that was at stake. All we could do for the moment was to be patient, wait for Robert's return, and discuss our future plans, which included a joyous decision to get married at once.

When Robert returned to the apartment he was accompanied by a tall, silver-haired gentleman with piercing compassionate eyes and a quiet, thoughtful manner. 'Dr. Morell is an old friend of mine,' Robert said, introducing the visitor. 'He has helped me in the past and will do so again. Miranda, you are a very brave girl but I must now ask you to be even braver and trust us completely. It is essential that we try to find out exactly what happened while you were staying in the Brandersons' house. We must know

what Justin and his family said to you, who the man was whom you saw in your dreams, and what it was he was trying to tell you. You have told us you cannot remember, but we may find much that will help us by probing your subconscious mind. I fear the Brandersons may have been trying to plant evil notions in your mind when you were asleep or in a trance—this is how they begin to draw others into their power. Dr. Morell is an expert hypnotist. Will you allow him to speak to your subconscious mind? There is nothing to fear. He is a physician and healer just as much as a doctor who examines your pulse and takes your temperature.'

Miranda and Morell sat down in two chairs facing each other, and Morell put Miranda under hypnosis, using a well-known technique which I recognized from the little I had read on the subject.

What I heard from Miranda's lips during the next three-quarters of an hour will forever remain engraved in my memory. When Morell had satisfied himself that Miranda was completely under his hypnotic influence, he began to ask her what the Brandersons had done to her from the moment she had gone to live with them. Had they behaved in any threatening manner or tried to intimidate her in any way, had they kept her forcibly confined in the house and prevented her from leaving it?

To my surprise Miranda replied that Justin Branderson and Simon had behaved towards her in a kind and cordial manner, welcoming her fondly into the family. She had dined with Justin and Simon on the first night in the house but had not seen any other members of the family, and when she had asked when she might meet Clara, Terence, Jane and Rachel, she had simply been told that she would see them soon.

Father and son had then spoken to Miranda about her past life, asking her many questions and showing special interest in her engagement to me. Then Miranda had felt increasingly tired and had gone to bed early. Thereafter she had spent most of her time either reclining on a sofa or in bed while Simon and Justin had talked to her. She could remember little of what they had said but had been im-

pressed by their eyes and the peculiar reverberations of their voices. They always seemed to be in her room and spoke insistently of their desire for her perfect happiness and welfare and of the need for her utterly to trust them.

Sometimes, while Justin or Simon spoke, Miranda had felt sensations of fear and even—to her surprise—revulsion in their presence, but then a delicious languor would overcome her and she would be wafted away into a deep sleep and strange dreams. She was soaring out of her body through black gulfs of space and time; she felt herself suffused with a pulsating force that enabled her to travel far out of her body and to look down from out of space and darkness onto the entire world. At other times she had experienced sensations ranging from unprecedented joy and pleasure to violent rage and an urge to annihilate every living thing in her path. She had seen apparitions of Justin or Simon—she could not say which—who were calling her to them and bidding her become a part of their bodies and minds so she too might experience the even more fantastic delights of their existence.

When Miranda had awakened from these dreams, which left her feeling physically exhausted and drained of mental energy, she had felt depression and a remorse for having thus surrendered her mind in her sleep. She had wanted to leave the Branderson' presence and house, but as soon as she saw them again she felt a compulsive yearning to submit to their commands and let them take entire direction of her life, thoughts and feelings. They had given her cordials and made her sleep again and had come to her in visions, bidding her to create certain images in her mind and to repeat some mysterious words over and over again. As she did so, she felt she was about to leave her own body and *become Justin*, her personality fused with and absorbed into his so that she would see with his eyes, speak with his mouth and think with his brain. Sometimes she would hear another voice and see a man telling her to awake and leave the house, but then Justin would return to her and again direct her to 'think of certain things' and to 'speak certain words.'

'What were these things and these words?' asked Robert,

who was becoming increasingly excited as this singular interrogation progressed.

'They—' Miranda began to sway on her chair. Her cheeks flushed, her breathing became irregular, her body began to shake as though she were about to suffer from a seizure. I was about to move forward to support her before she fell from her chair, but Robert caught my arm and said, 'Do not touch her! She will be all right soon. She cannot reveal these things to us because her subconscious mind, her instinct and the force of her character reject them. It is only when she is under their control that she can be forced to allow them into her mind.'

When Miranda had become calmer, Morell asked her:

'What is the purpose of these words and things?'

In the same flat toneless voice as before, Miranda answered: 'To call the master for his second coming.'

'Who is the master?'

There was no reply.

'Of what is he master?'

'Of the dark void.'

'Where is that?'

'I do not know.'

'Why must you call him?'

'To bring him to me.'

'Why must you bring the master to yourself?'

'So that I may be the master.'

'Can others be the master too?'

'They can be the master.'

'How?'

'By calling him.'

'What will the master do when he is called?'

'He will rule over all again.'

'Has Justin Branderson called the master?'

'He is the master.'

'Has Simon Branderson called the master?'

'He is the master.'

'Do you wish to be the master?'

Miranda trembled again, moaned, 'oh, no, no ...', then burst into tears and fell forward off the chair into Morell's arms.

'It is too much for her. That is far enough,' Morell said firmly as we picked Miranda up and placed her on a couch. To my intense relief she opened her eyes, smiled faintly at me and asked what had happened. 'Oh, I am so sorry, have I been of any help at all to you?'

'You have helped us immensely,' Robert said triumphantly. I could see from his face that he had made an important discovery. His eyes were shining and from the way he clenched and unclenched his fists I concluded that Miranda's words under hypnosis held some vital significance for him.

After telling Miranda to rest for a little while, Robert drew Morell and myself aside. 'It is as I suspected,' he said. 'Justin has been trying to overcome her resistance to so great an evil that it surpasses imagination. He is possessed of this evil and has been trying to break down her natural psychic defenses and make her call it into herself. He has been instilling desires into her sleeping mind to draw her along the path that will ultimately end in her becoming enslaved by the same power as himself. We got to her just in time.'

Returning to Miranda, Robert then asked her whether she would agree to allow Morell to hypnotize her again for a few minutes because he still had some vitally important questions to ask her.

'Robert, this is enough,' Morell said indignantly. 'You have no idea of the strain upon us both.'

'My dear Morell, I assure you that I would not dream of asking you this if it were not that I have the most pressing reasons for doing so,' Robert answered. 'I must ask you to cooperate with me again if we are to fight this thing. Not only people's lives, but their very souls are at issue.'

'Very well, I must believe you then,' the hypnotist said wearily. 'But I shall only continue if Miss Branderson is willing.'

'I am quite willing,' Miranda said with new energy. As I looked at her with admiration for her extraordinary courage, Robert whispered to me, 'Now you can see why Justin has not yet been able to overcome her mind and soul.'

When Miranda was in the hypnotic state again, the next

question put to her was :

'Who is the man that appeared to you in a dream and told you to awake and leave the house?'

'He said he was Justin Branderson, my uncle.'

'And who is the man who claims to be your uncle and who spoke to you in your sleep and told you to call the master?'

'He is the master.'

'Is he living in the body of Justin Branderson?'

'I do not know.'

'Does the master resemble the Justin Branderson who appeared to you in your dreams?'

'No ... I am not sure ... he does not look quite the same ... I think he is a different person.'

'I do not quite understand,' Robert said to me. 'Justin no doubt has been possessed, but how could that change him physically as well? Morell, ask Miranda again whether she ever saw Clara Branderson or the other children apart from Simon.'

'I only saw the master,' said Miranda.

'Can all the Brandersons have deliberately concealed themselves from her?' Robert wondered before proceeding to the next question. 'Tell me again—what did Justin Branderson say to you when you saw him?'

'He told me he loves me and wishes to protect me. He said that I should try and leave the house and stay awake between sunset and sunrise. He has tried to watch over me but he had to go away because his enemies are on the watch against him.'

'Where does he go?'

'He is here now.'

'Where?'

'He has seen me and has come into this room. He is speaking to me. He has a message.'

'What?'

'We must go to a house in Chesterfield Gardens. Number twenty-three. We must look ... they have seen him ... He has had to go. He is no longer here ...'

'Why has he gone?'

'They are watching the house and saw him enter. He

said ... I do not remember, it is so faint I could hardly hear him ...'

'Try to remember,' commanded Morell.

'He said ... the package ... under the wood. That is all I can remember.'

'That is enough now,' Robert said, and Morrell immediately brought Miranda out of hypnosis. Robert excitedly told me, 'What we have just learned is, I'm confident, of immense importance. Before she too was possessed, Clara Branderson told my wife that Justin's spirit had commanded her to take a packet from his study to the occultist Orsini. When they were all possessed, the Brandersons tried to find the packet but failed. It must still be there—in that empty house. Justin has just confirmed this through Miranda!'

'Justin!' I said, hardly able to believe.

'His *true*, disembodied spirit or soul, or perhaps this etheric double which occultists call the astral body and which can be projected out of the physical body,' Robert said with complete solemnity. 'It appears that although an evil being has stolen Justin's human form, his essential spirit has escaped destruction. There can be no doubt that he was trying to watch over Miranda when she was in the house and to warn her. Just now, when she was hypnotized and sheltered, he managed to communicate again with her subconscious mind but was forced to retreat by his opposing spirits which must have seen him enter this house. Justin has been warring against his enemies on the occult plane, and if *he* attaches such importance to our finding the packet, it must be because it is a powerful weapon against them. I must go to the murdered Orsini's house first thing in the morning after I get the key from the estate agent.'

'But if, as you say, they can overlook this house, surely they will be able to see you and know where you are going,' I said.

'They may if they come in the Brandersons' bodies to keep watch on the house,' replied Robert, 'but if they watch us by projecting their minds out of their bodies into the astral plane, it is possible to make ourselves invisible to

their gaze. I have both the talisman and formula necessary for this. I shall also use it for you and Miranda when it is time for us to leave here. Morell, you look surprised, but what I tell you is *true*. Have you still not seen enough to believe that such powers exist?’

When Morell had departed after a few private words with Robert and after assuring Miranda she needed fear no after effects from the hypnosis, Robert repeated the ritual of ‘purifying’ and ‘sealing’ the rooms and, in particular, the one Miranda would spend the night in. He decided that while Miranda slept in his bed, we would spend the night in his armchair and sofa in the adjoining room, keeping the door open the whole time. ‘A psychic link may have already been established, and the Brandersons may try to use it to break through to her.’

That evening was the strangest of my life. As we sat down for a light dinner Miranda had insisted on preparing for us and opened a couple of bottles of good burgundy that brought a little color back into Robert’s emaciated cheeks, we began to converse for a while as though nothing strange had ever happened. After a while, though, we fell silent again, each absorbed in our own thoughts. I could see that Robert was nervous and edgy despite his forced gaiety. He sat tensed and expectant, as though straining ears and eyes to detect any sound or apparition that might come to break the stillness that had descended over our table, and he constantly looked toward the doors and windows. Miranda was also silent, but her expression was one of serene courage and trust. As I looked at her, saw the love in her eyes and took her hand, I felt certain we were sharing the same thoughts. What had happened in the last four days and nights seemed to defy all the laws of nature and reason, and yet by now Miranda and I believed it was all true—as I must entreat the court to believe.

When we had finished our meal, Robert made the signs of the Circle and the Pentagram around Miranda’s bed and spoke the protective words again before we retired to the sitting room and prepared to endure a sleepless night. After an hour we knew from Miranda’s steady breathing that she

was asleep, no doubt exhausted by her questioning under hypnosis. While I relit my pipe and leaned back in a capacious armchair, and Robert reclined on his sofa and stared up at the ceiling, I pondered again the strange words that had come from Miranda's lips while Morell hypnotized her. What were these implacably malignant forces or spirits that had taken possession of the Brandersons? What was their ultimate purpose? And why should they wish to take Miranda from me and subjugate her will? Who was the so-called master and how could he be called back for his 'second coming?' Robert must have read my thoughts because he suddenly said, 'Christians speak of the Devil or Satan, and yet how limited is their conception of the evil for which he is the mere symbol or conventional embodiment. Beyond the visible world there lie devastating forces in universes and dimensions unknown. Still, with God's help, we have withstood their onslaught throughout the ages, for otherwise humanity would be a race of slaves without soul, without intelligence or free will. We would be without that immortal spark that urges us to aspire to higher planes of existence and makes us so different from the beasts of the earth. As long as we keep our souls and our belief in the invincibility of good there can be no second coming of the legions of darkness. But through people like the Brandersons, who have become their minions, they are again attempting to gain a hold among mankind and establish their dominion over the world. We are at war, Jonathan. Men of good will have always been at war against evil, but now the battle has entered a new phase—infinitely more ruthless than before. Somehow Justin Branderson has unleashed an appalling tide of evil that threatens to engulf us all if it is not checked.'

Robert stood up from his sofa and wearily went over to the window. As he looked down into the streets below and at the bright lights of the great city, he said, 'Help me, Jonathan. I have little strength and time to live. Only you and I and a few others know what is at issue. I wonder how many people have any notion of the battle being fought for their salvation. Satan *is* among us again—is at the gate, even though we have succeeded in locking and barring it

for the time being. He will devise new methods of attack. Once I have been to Orsini's house and searched for what I need to find, we must leave London immediately and take Miranda where we shall at least have allies, people fighting the same battle—'

Before Robert could finish his sentence he was interrupted by a shrill cry and a plaintive moan from Miranda's room. As we rushed to her bedside and lit a lamp, we saw her twisting under the blankets, her face flushed, tense, her eyes tightly closed. She began to gasp for breath, then let out another high-pitched scream followed by a deep moan. As I took her in my arms and held her tightly to me, she stopped trembling, opened her eyes and stared at me.

'Look, Robert, they *have* possessed her,' I said bitterly. 'Your protection did not help her!'

'She is *not* possessed,' Robert said firmly. 'She has been harassed by their evil thought-projections, but thank God the circle kept them from touching her.'

When Miranda had grown calmer, she was able to tell us what had happened. She had a dream in which she was standing within a circle of light, surrounded by darkness, and was being called by a persuasive invisible presence to leave the circle. So soft and seductive was the voice and so insistent its summons, that she had felt a longing to respond to it and plunge into the encompassing darkness, but an invincible force had kept her back as though she were chained within the circle. She had felt piercing pains throughout her body. Then intense, destructive rage followed by grief and utter desolation. Beyond this, Miranda knew and remembered nothing. All she could say of the voice that had called her was that it was like 'a whisper in my mind.'

'You must rest now and trust us,' Robert said, 'but I am afraid you must not sleep any more this night. The forces that possess the Brandersons are trying to make contact with you, even though they know you are presently protected from them. Unfortunately, they are still able to torment you, and I fear they will give you no rest tonight. Tomorrow, when it is day, you shall sleep for a while and we shall then leave this place for one of greater safety.'

‘Please believe me, all will be well soon.’

Despite his reassuring words, Robert was clearly disturbed. As he led me away from the bed he whispered, ‘It is as I suspected—they are calling her from outside and something within her has tried to answer. Her aura has been damaged. If it had not, then her sleep would not have been troubled. They have succeeded in establishing the first psychic link with her unconscious, and we must eradicate it. While the link remains, part of her mind will continue to try to communicate with the evil, but it cannot come to her while she is shielded by the powers of the Right Hand. If it were not for that protection, the affected part of her mind would call the evil into her and it would grow like a malignant tumor. The Brandersons are obviously keeping a vigil on this house and will resume their summons whenever she sleeps at night. Do not look so desperate, Jonathan. Only a slight part of her aura and psyche have been affected by their devilishness, and with the help of an expert occultist we can almost surely heal her.’

I do not need to describe my feelings on learning that part of Miranda’s mind had already been contaminated by the Brandersons! Nor did I want to think what might have happened to her had she remained another night under that accursed roof!

All we could do for the rest of that night was to sit in turn by Miranda, cheering and comforting her and doing everything to occupy her mind and keep her awake. When the first light of dawn filtered through the curtains, Robert repeated his purifying and sealing rituals and told me that Miranda might now sleep, adding that I must watch her and waken her at once if she gave the slightest sign of being troubled. Meanwhile, he would go to the house where Orsini had been murdered, taking the Sword of Power with him for protection.

The morning passed slowly as I sat by Miranda’s bed and anxiously observed her sleep, but her sweet face remained calm and her pulse and breathing were regular. Towards noon I heard footsteps outside the front door, but it was only the caretaker of the building, who rang the bell and called out to me that there was a letter for Mr. Middleton

which she proceeded to push through the letter-box. I picked up the envelope, put it on the mantelpiece and returned to Miranda, who awoke and smiled at me, saying, 'Tell me, darling, where has Robert Middleton gone? I am so worried about him. He looks so desperately ill and in need of rest.' I told her he had gone to the empty house she had told us about under hypnosis, adding that Robert was convinced something of tremendous importance was still concealed in it.

Miranda smiled lovingly at me, then closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep while I continued to keep watch over her and pray for the success of Robert's mission. But even as I leaned over Miranda's slumbering form to gaze at her serene face, I started back in shock. Suddenly, it seemed to me that there was something abnormal in her very tranquillity. I could not quite define what it was in her that made me uneasy but there was something in the way her lips seemed to arrange themselves in a smile, something in the set of her features and even in the rhythm of her breathing that had not been there a few minutes before. Her face was the same and yet instinct told me she was no longer the same person. The expression on her face—*it might have been that of Justin Branderson when I had spoken with him ...*

Even as I stared at Miranda, I heard the front door open and Robert faintly call out my name. He staggered into the room carrying the bag with the Sword and fell into a chair, looking as though he were about to faint. While he struggled to speak, Miranda opened her eyes and her face resumed its usual aspect. Now she was once more her usual sweet self and the momentary fear she had inspired in me vanished.

'Quick,' Robert gasped when he had regained his breath. 'Lock and bolt the door and then fetch my medicine case. You know where it is ... I cannot last any longer ... But lock the door first!'

Our friend was in such a terrible state that Miranda and I feared he was about to expire, but as before, speedy administration of the drugs brought him back from the fatal threshold and momentarily renewed his vitality. As soon as he could speak normally he said: 'I have it! We must go

at once. They have seen and attacked me. They know where we are! I do not know how, but they have succeeded in learning that I went to the Orsini house.'

The urgency of his tone was such that Miranda and I did not dream at this point of questioning him further. As Miranda dressed and I hurriedly threw a few necessities and Robert's medicine into a bag, I gave him the letter I had put on the mantelpiece. As he tore it open, a small gleaming object fell onto the table. It was a ring. There was no letter enclosed with it!

'That is one of my rings,' Miranda said as she came out of the bedroom, fully dressed now. 'It was in my room in Uncle Justin's house. Why should he send it here? How does he even know that I am here?'

'So this is how they have broken the circle,' Robert said angrily. 'They have watched the outside of this house but could not penetrate inside it because I sealed it. Then by the simple expedient of introducing an object belonging to Miranda into the apartment, they were able to pierce our protective barrier. This emerald ring enabled them to influence Miranda. Has she been asleep?' I told Robert that she had slept and that when she had briefly awakened and asked where he had gone, I had told her and that she had gone to sleep again.

'I'm afraid I know why she awoke and asked you where I had gone,' Robert said. '*They* made her do so when they could hear your answer or else learn it from Miranda's mind as she slept again. The ring is charged with their own powers. It is well known in occult lore that crystals and precious stones are singularly receptive to magnetization and thought-transplantation. When they put it in an envelope and had it put through the letter-box of my apartment by the caretaker, it had become part of themselves—a living, sentient thing. Now we must leave at once. They are on my trail. Even though they could not overlook me, they will know that I have come back here. Now I must give you both protection against the astral eye of our enemies. Put these around your necks and you will be invisible from them while they are on the astral plane.'

As he spoke, Robert handed each of us a small, curiously

fashioned silver amulet on a chain which he had taken from a small wooden box on his writing desk, but as we made toward the door he suddenly raised a warning hand to make us still. While we stood motionless, hardly daring to breathe, we could hear the sound of footsteps on the landing outside the door. There was a soft knocking, followed by the voice of Robert's caretaker saying, 'Something for you, sir. It's very important.'

'Listen to the tone of her voice . . . They have her under their control,' whispered Robert. 'They are outside and will kill us to get the packet just as they killed Orsini—'

The knocking continued and the caretaker again called out to Robert, who handed me the Sword. 'You are stronger than I am. You must be very brave and quick now. Miranda, go into the bedroom. Jonathan, when I open the door, strike them with this. If we can overpower them we can force them into the study and lock the door on them. *Now.*'

As I stood to one side and flattened myself against the wall, Robert suddenly pulled the door wide open. Two men wearing hats and with beards rushed into the hall. I moved forward, striking them in succession on the arm. A pistol dropped on the floor, the men's faces convulsed with fury, and as I again brandished my Sword they pulled back exactly as the Brandersons had done when I forced my way out of their house with Miranda. I pointed the Sword at them again and they withdrew even further into the apartment. As Miranda appeared at the door of the bedroom to stare at the astounding scene, Robert called out to her not to look at their eyes and told me to drive them into the study. As one of the men rushed forward toward the corridor I was barring I drove the Sword at him and had the satisfaction of hearing him call out in rage, although the blade seemed merely to graze his arm. I then struck out at the second man, who was trying to rush past me. As he collided with Robert, I hit him on the head and he retreated toward the study as I brandished the Sword again and forced them back foot by foot. When they were both within the study, Robert moved forward with surprising agility, slammed the door shut and turned the key in the

lock. A few moments later we were in the street, where Robert hailed a cab and told it to take us with all speed to Victoria station.

'Did you notice their faces?' Robert asked us as we sped on our way. Both Miranda and I were too shocked to do anything but nod yes, we had seen their faces. Although they had been heavily bearded, we had been able to see that their features bore an uncanny resemblance to those of Justin Branderson and his monstrous family.

When we reached the station, Robert informed us, to our surprise, that we were bound for Paris. It was there that he had to take the packet he had found and it was there, he insisted, that Miranda and I would be safe from the Brandersons with allies far more powerful and skilled in occult lore than himself. As the train left the station, Robert told us how he had succeeded in finding the packet and what had happened in the house. He had already been convinced that Orsini must have hidden the packet in the room he had been murdered in which had been thoroughly ransacked by the murderer. He decided to begin his search there.

Robert had always believed that the Brandersons had failed to find the packet. He had learned that shortly after Orsini's death his grave had been desecrated and that intruders had been surprised while in the act of performing an occult ceremony over Orsini's body, which they had exhumed and taken from its coffin. There could be no doubt about the nature of the occult ceremony—it was necromancy. By summoning Orsini's spirit to return temporarily to his corpse, the intruders hoped to force it to speak to them and reveal the whereabouts of the packet, but the dead man had kept his secret.

When Robert entered the house, he found it stripped bare of all furniture. The study Orsini had been murdered in contained nothing except some bookshelves built into the walls and some fire-tongs and two brass coal scuttles by the fireplace. As Miranda had said under hypnosis that Justin's spirit had told her we must look 'under the wood,' Robert had first thought of searching behind the bookshelves or under the floorboards, but he failed to discover any secret

drawers or hidden recesses. After a long search he noticed that one of the brass scuttles alongside the fireplace was still filled with firewood. What simpler hiding place could there be? Robert's intuition was right—he found a packet wrapped in parchment, concealed under the logs, and not in any drawer or chest or hidden locker as the murderer must have thought. The very simplicity of the hiding place helped assure its success.

Orsini had another excellent reason for concealing the packet among the logs, which would need to be taken from their scuttles and placed in the fireplace before use. Even if he failed to resist his enemies, there would still remain a very good chance that the packet might eventually reach its destination, for on the parchment *wrapping* there was written not only the address of the destinee but the promise that whoever should deliver the packet on finding it should receive the sum of one thousand guineas from the recipient. Clearly Justin Branderson had been determined that the packet should reach its destination at literally all costs, and Orsini had counted on the probability that even if he died a new tenant would eventually take out the wood to build a fire and thus discover the packet and be induced to send it by the prospect of so great a reward.

While Robert was turning over and inspecting the packet in his hand, he heard someone open the front door and rush up the stairs. As he left the room his way was barred by still another emissary of the Brandersons, armed with a pistol. In spite of his weakness, desperation gave Robert new strength. There was a scuffle, Robert hit the intruder with the Sword and deflected his pistol, which fired over his head. He then escaped from the house. Our attackers had then come to Robert's apartment in another attempt to get the packet from us, for although the Brandersons had such potent occult powers, in this affair they were obliged to rely on physical force.

As Robert explained to us, it was possible with his knowledge and weapons to protect ourselves at least temporarily from the Brandersons' magic but not from a bullet from a pistol or a thrust from a dagger. Our bodies remained vulnerable. The Brandersons were forced to fight

us on the physical and earthly as well as on the occult plane.

What did this packet contain and to whom was it to be taken? The court must believe me when I say that neither Miranda nor I ever knew. Robert begged us to forgive what might at first appear a lack of trust on his part but assured us that should Miranda or I by any chance fall into the power of the Brandersons, it was essential that we should know nothing of it. Only if he was in desperate straits or on the point of death, would Robert hand over the packet to me and ask me to complete the mission. Meanwhile our ignorance would also be our best protection.

There remains little more for me to add to this statement. When we arrived in Paris, Miranda and I rode with Robert in a fiacre through the dark streets of the suburbs to a large house set in its own grounds. After Robert had spoken to a majordomo, Miranda and I were conducted to a salon while Robert went to confer with the master of the house. After a short wait, Robert returned with the majordomo and a valet to say that the time had come for us to part and that we would be blindfolded and taken to a secret place where we would enjoy protection and Miranda need no longer fear any invasion of her mind when asleep. In the meantime Robert was obliged to stay with the owner of the house, to whom he had delivered the packet. Finally he assured us that in a very short time we would no longer need fear the Brandersons.

Miranda and I sorrowfully bade farewell to Robert and thanked him for all he had done to save Miranda from that awful house. We were blindfolded and driven away to another house, which we reached after a long journey. When the blindfolds were taken from our eyes, we found ourselves in a luxuriously furnished suite where servants motioned us to our chambers. We noticed with surprise that behind the heavy curtains that fell from the ceiling to the floor in each room, the windows were heavily shuttered. We could no longer tell whether it was night or day; not a sound was to be heard in that suite except the soft footsteps of the servants as they brought us food and drink; none would speak and we had not the slightest idea whether we were still in Paris or the countryside.

We were in a luxurious prison but our fears were soon quieted by a note written in excellent English that one of the servants brought us. The anonymous writer informed us that we were completely safe, that we would only be confined for a week at the most and that it was imperative neither Miranda nor I should sleep between sunset and sunrise but only during the daylight hours, which the servant would indicate to us. In the meantime we had an excellent library at our disposal and had only to ring for a servant to attend on us.

We were in that house for three days and nights. Only one incident was memorable. On the third day, during the afternoon—which had now become our night—I heard a cry coming from Miranda's room and immediately got out of bed and ran to her door. When I entered her bedchamber she was sitting upright in bed, breathing deeply, her cheeks flushed and her eyes opened wide. To my enormous relief, she smiled happily at me and said, 'Oh, Jonathan, I am so glad you are here. For a moment I thought I was going to die, but now the pain is gone and I feel so wonderful again ... Some awful weight that was oppressing me seems to have vanished, I feel so *completely* happy and free!'

Neither of us could find any explanation for what had occurred. All Miranda was able to tell me was that her sleep had been interrupted by a tearing pain in her chest and head, as though part of her body literally was being torn out of her. In a few moments the pain left her, as did the sensation of inner anguish she had felt since she had first come to the Brandersons. Now, as I looked at her, I could see the radiant change that had come over her. During the time elapsed since I had taken her from the Brandersons' house, she had been pale, tired and withdrawn. Now she was once more the Miranda of old with sparkling eyes and sunny features filled with love and zest for life. Now I knew for a certainty that whatever the wound inflicted on her psyche, it had been totally healed!

On the morning of the fourth day, the servants come to blindfold us again, and we were led out of the house and into a carriage. After one or two hours had elapsed—we had no means of knowing exactly—the blindfolds were

removed and we were set down in a wood that I soon found to be part of the Bois de Boulogne. A servant handed us our travelling case, a leather purse with a large amount of money in it and a note from Robert Middleton. Then, without a word, our escort climbed back in the carriage and drove off at full speed.

Robert's note was a short one. 'When you receive this letter neither you nor Miranda will have anything more to fear from the evil beings who have possessed the bodies of the Brandersons. They will have been annihilated. I myself shall have been the instrument for their destruction. Do not grieve for whatever may happen to me. You know how close I am to death already. In a short time I shall be reunited in the world beyond this with my darling Ellen, and the souls of the Brandersons shall find peace. The essence, the spirit of the true Justin Branderson still exists, and I have spoken with it. Shortly after I am dead, you will know the full story of what happened to him and his wife and family. I cannot say any more now except may you and Miranda live happily and secure in the knowledge that the danger that so threatened you is past.'

After reading Robert's message we walked out of the park onto the Paris boulevard and found a small hotel where we took lodgings. The following day I found an English priest who consented to make us man and wife after we had complied with the formalities. On the day of our marriage, we read in the *Times* that Robert Middleton had been arrested for the murder of Justin Branderson and his family. And as I read the details of the account, it occurred to me that Justin Branderson had been struck down, as near as I could determine, at the very moment when Miranda had been so violently afflicted with pain during her sleep in our place of confinement and then dramatically relieved. Her complete recovery dates, therefore, from the instant of the Brandersons' deaths.

To conclude, I know and solemnly declare that whatever Robert did in the house of the Brandersons, it was not murder, not in the conventional legal sense. No matter how the law may interpret his action, he is *not* guilty of any crime. I profoundly believe that he has destroyed something

of infamous power and evil that has brought misery, death and madness to many people and would have destroyed my wife as well. Miranda and I have seen enough—and remember I aspire to be a man of science—to know that such things as witchcraft, sorcery and supernatural powers do exist in this world. You may mock or disbelieve us if you wish—we have been face-to-face with such powers of darkness and are indifferent to others' opinions. Robert Middleton was a desperately sick and dying man when we last saw him, but he was and is a person of the utmost courage and goodness. I have nothing but the deepest feelings of admiration and affection for him. My wife and I owe him our lives, our happiness, our souls.

The sensation aroused by Jonathan King's statement can be imagined. Both Jonathan and Miranda solemnly swore under oath that the facts contained in the statement were true, no matter how fantastic they might appear to others. Neither had the remotest idea of the identity of the man to whom Robert had delivered the mysterious packet and in whose house they were blindfolded, nor of the whereabouts of the owner of the heavily curtained apartment where they had been confined in France.

When Dr. Morell came to give evidence, he stated that Miranda's answers to questions put to her when she was under hypnosis were exactly as recorded in Jonathan's statement. He also had the definite impression, he said, that Miranda's mind had been affected by her stay in the Branderson house, just as earlier he had felt that Justin Branderson himself had come to be dominated in his mind by some unknown outside intelligence which had begun to obliterate his true personality. However, when Dr. Alexander, the Brandersons' former family physician was called, he stated that as far as he could see at the time, there was nothing wrong with either Clara or Justin Branderson that could possibly suggest that their minds were either under some strange influence or capable of exerting unwholesome influences on the minds of others. Both had suffered periods of illness and mental strain, and both had made excellent and gratifying recoveries, which he attributed to his ministrations and their own force of character. He also

said he had not been to the house since that time of their recovery.

When Robert Middleton was questioned again and asked to say on what grounds he based his belief that the Brandersons had become 'possessed,' he steadfastly refused to answer. Neither would he say anything about the nature of the packet he had taken from the Orsini house, or what he had done in Paris. He merely repeated that he had killed Justin Branderson of his own volition and that no one else bore the slightest responsibility for his action.

Despite their obvious disbelief in the amazing statements offered to the court, the prosecution could not prove that they were in any way untrue. But as counsel pointed out, even if such things as evil spirits, possession and spells *did* exist, the fact remained that Robert Middleton had confessed to the deliberate murder of Justin Branderson and therefore had to pay the penalty for his crime. The prosecution accepted the fact that neither Jonathan nor Miranda King were in any way accessories to the murder, but regretted that the young couple should have been so influenced against the Brandersons by Robert's violent prejudices and wild notions. Finally, the prosecution repeated its opinion that if there had been any such thing as evil mental influences capable of causing harm to others, they had come not from the Brandersons but from Robert himself.

In his summing-up, the judge stated that hard as he had tried, he had been unable to find any extenuating circumstances in the case. He and the court had heard a most astounding concoction of superstitious myths and weirdly fantastic alleged events, but no one was in any position to determine to what extent they might be true. It was known that many strange and even inexplicable circumstances attended the case—not least the deaths of Justin Branderson's wife and children—and it seemed proven beyond question that both the Brandersons and Robert had been engaged in some kind of occult experimentation of the kind described in the more sensational newspapers. What was obvious was that Robert had conceived a murderous hostility towards Justin, probably as a result of such activities as well as the influence of his wife Ellen, who had

herself been turned against Justin Branderson by Justin's temporarily deranged wife Clara. Middleton therefore decided to kill Justin after persuading Jonathan King to remove Miranda from the house. The evil effects of dabbling in occult matters were clear, and society needed to be protected against people committing murder in the name of the unknown and supernatural. There was no evidence that Robert Middleton was in the slightest degree insane according to the law, so the law would have to take its course. The judge had no other alternative but to instruct the jury to find the prisoner guilty.

After the jury had returned and pronounced the fatal verdict, the judge asked Robert whether he had anything to say before sentence was passed on him. For a few moments Robert's face lost its passivity as he looked around the court, smiled at Jonathan and the now openly sobbing Miranda and declared in a full, strong voice: 'I die content with what I have done. Let no one grieve for me. By what I have done, I have saved my soul.'

There was no appeal against the sentence. Three weeks later, Robert Middleton was hung by the neck until dead. Only one person had been allowed to see the condemned man before the execution, and that was Detective-Superintendent Jameson, who left the condemned cell a perplexed and deeply disturbed man, unwilling to reveal any particulars of his conversation with Robert. When Robert was taken to the gallows, the prison chaplain was struck by the expression of joyful expectation on his face.

The 'Sword of Power' was placed in Scotland Yard's famous Black Museum, where it may be seen today. A week after the execution, the still grieving Jonathan and Miranda King received a sixty-page narrative purporting to be Justin Branderson's own statement of what had happened to him from the time he had been possessed. The messenger would not give his name, but when Jonathan took the manuscript to be examined by one of Justin's former solicitors, it was determined that although there were certain slight singularities in the script, there could be little doubt that it was in the late Justin Branderson's own hand.

THE CONFESSION

Existence can hold few greater miseries than the sudden revelation that one is about to suffer an appalling punishment for a crime committed in one's youth and of which one has since lost all recollection. Until less than two years ago, I, Justin Branderson, was a happy man. I was prosperous, popular and respected. I had reached the summit of my profession, and life had given me the incomparable blessing of a loving and deeply devoted wife and family. I had reached that enviable stage in a man's life when he not only feels he has succeeded in everything he has undertaken, but is free from tormenting ambition and demands nothing more than that he should continue to enjoy his good fortune until the end of his allotted span of days. Then, after thirty years of perfect happiness and spiritual serenity, I was brutally confronted with the ghost of my forgotten past and learned the shocking price that I was to pay for my previous good fortune.

My beginnings were humble. My father was a seafaring man of Celtic and Scandinavian ancestry, the only child of parents who had died in a shipwreck. My brother and I were his only children. Our mother died in our infancy, whereupon my father retired from the sea to venture into commerce. He became bankrupt and died quite literally of a broken heart when we were in our teens. Our education, for which he had made great sacrifices, was brutally interrupted and we were forced to go out into the world to earn our living. Through the intercession of a friend, my brother obtained a free passage to New Zealand, where he was to make his career. Myself, I became a humble and underpaid clerk in an important trading company in the City of London.

My work was one of unrelieved monotony. I had always been a highly ambitious child and aspired towards one of the liberal professions, for I was told I had intellectual gifts.

I therefore felt the drudgery of my work made necessary by the meanness of my material circumstances all the more keenly. To relieve my frustration and boredom, I continued to read voraciously and to study in my few hours of spare time and I dreamed of visiting far-off countries and civilizations. Being naturally gifted in languages, I continued to study French on my own, for the little I had been taught at school had already given me the urge to read the literary masterpieces which abound in that tongue. Fortunately, my increasing proficiency in French came to the notice of one of my superiors who told me that the Paris branch of our firm had an opening for just such a junior clerk as myself. I eagerly accepted and in a few weeks found myself in the great French capital.

Being young, ambitious, enthusiastic, intellectually curious and highly imaginative, my stay in Paris was a heady experience, despite the disappointment of finding that my working conditions and pay were little if at all better than in London. Nonetheless, time seemed to pass so quickly that when I later looked back at that period in my life, I could remember little of it except that I had fled every evening from the grinding dullness of my office to frequent the literary and artistic cafés, the bookshops and picture galleries of the capital. The life and color I saw around me only increased my frustration and made my humble situation the more exasperating. Only one event broke the tedium of the office where I worked—the brutal murder of my immediate superior, who had been stabbed to death one night in a dark and narrow street on his way home.

It was at this time that the great change in my fortunes began to take place. I returned to the parent firm in London, where I was promoted and soon discovered that despite my disdain for the world of commerce, I had hitherto unsuspected gifts for finance and business dealings. To my joy, my thirst for foreign travel and exotic cultures was gratified by the offer of an important and promising post in the main Indian branch of our firm. One good fortune was quickly followed by another: I had met and fallen in love with Clara, the only daughter and child of a retired colonel. She returned my love, and although he knew he would be

losing his beloved child forever, her father gave us his blessing and we were married the day before we sailed to India.

The new phase in my career and our married life began in Bombay. My fortunes steadily continued to rise. I had developed a rather remarkable intuition and understanding in banking and commercial negotiations, and on many occasions my own judgement and suggestions had brought great benefit to my firm. I was promoted several times and eventually became a director. I became increasingly prosperous, and four children brought us to the highest imaginable peak of human happiness. But although I seemed to have been endowed with an infallible instinct for making the right decisions in business and for amassing wealth, my mind was still not fully satisfied. My profession had become too easy for me, and I yearned for fresh interests. I immersed myself in the lore of the country and read deeply of its past culture, its myths and religions, and found that I could yet further develop the powers of my mind by practising the *yoga* of the Indians.

After a few years spent in my company's service in various parts of the great Indian subcontinent, I was able to found my own firm, but after thirty years the pull of our native England became too strong for Clara and myself. Now that I was an independent man, we both longed to enjoy the fruits of my labor in our homeland, in an atmosphere of a great city instead of the provincial and necessarily limited circles in which we lived in India. In addition, our last born, Terence, showed himself unsuited for the torrid Indian climate on account of his delicate constitution, and both our daughters longed for the opportunities and society of London—Jane was particularly anxious to develop her musical gifts by attending an academy of music.

We returned to England and made our home in Courtland Square. I had established my offices in the City and had branches on the Continent. I now confidently expected to spend the remainder of my life taking pleasure in the affection of my wife and family and enjoying as much material prosperity as any man can reasonably require. There was not one shadow over our happiness.

It was there, in that house in Courtland Square, that my torment began. Suddenly, I began to find myself subject to fits of absent-mindedness, complete forgetfulness, and feelings of profound despondency. To my disquiet, these attacks became more frequent. Sometimes, I would find myself on apparently a completely different plane of conscious thought from my wife and children. At other times, some force seemed to be voiding my mind and body of all thought and feeling, transforming them, in effect, into empty vessels. I would become unaware of the presence of my dear ones. My once familiar surroundings seemed to become totally new to me. I would no longer be aware of my own personality but feel that I was simply an eye in a body—without feeling, without thought. I felt oppressed, weary and passive. At times, even though I was sitting or standing next to my dear ones, I had the unnerving sensation that I was no longer present in my body and had become a disembodied, unemotional spectator of my own actions and those of my family.

It was then that the dreams began. Night after night I felt that some far remote but peculiarly insistent voice was calling to me. I had fleeting impressions in my sleep of a disembodied face looking down at me, and the premonition that I had once known its identity and that when I would learn it again some frightful misfortune would overtake me. I became like a man haunted. I was remote and withdrawn in the daytime, afraid to confide my inexplicable fears to my wife and full of forebodings for what each new night would bring me as I slept. A few nights later, I recognized the face that came to me. From that time onwards, my life became one of constant terror and remorse. A secret door had been unlocked, and remembrance of what had for so long been erased from my mind seared my very soul and conscience until I reached the verge of total insanity. I now know what I had done thirty years earlier, when I had been an articled clerk in Paris!

I have already said that I was a sensitive and bookish young man. None of the gaudy splendors and pleasures of the Second Empire held any attraction for me when I came to work in Paris. I had neither the time, money or inclina-

tion for them. Instead, as I have also said, while always exploring the fate that had made me a lowly clerk, I read more voraciously than ever, began to haunt the students' and artists' quarter on the left bank of the river in the medieval warren of streets around the great churches of Notre Dame and St.-Séverin near the Sorbonne. I became friendly with struggling artists, students and young literary aspirants. Together we would gather in cheap wine shops and bistros from evening until dawn and seek refuge from the poverty of our existence by pretending to be a part of the great artistic and literary world of the capital, and condemning the outside world for ignoring our self-styled genius and singularity.

Frustration and excess of imagination, nourished by ill-assorted reading, can lead youth down some strange and even sinister paths. My impressionable mind was fired by the novels and poetry of the Romantics and the disturbing and insidious siren calls of Baudelaire's decadent poetry, and I began to find new and dangerous ways of compensating for the drabness of my life. My companions became wilder and more disreputable. Among them was one called Julien, who had fled from his family in the provinces to savor the delights of Paris and there make his fortune. After he had decided to take me into his confidence, he told me that there were other ways of fighting against one's wretched condition than by posing as a rebel Bohemian. Some of his friends, he said, practised magic and had already learned curious secrets which could give them powers denied to most men. I was skeptical at first, but what began as a joke for me soon became deadly earnest. Sorcery and the black arts were enjoying an unprecedented vogue in certain circles, and the books of Eliphas Levi had created a sensation. After reading his brilliant though wildly romantic *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*, I met other young men whose minds were similarly inflamed with the prospects of learning the secrets of the occult and who spoke of strange secret sects in the city. Together we would meet in abandoned churchyards, to read spells and incantations from old books picked up in the Latin Quarter. We began to commit sacrilege and blasphemy, further exciting our

already enfevered sensibilities and seeking new and unhallowed sensations by opening graves, desecrating tombs, and placing objects taken from the dead in a cellar which we had made our so-called 'magic lodge.' More than once we narrowly escaped capture by the police. But although our escapades and acts of desecration gave us perverse enjoyments, we were still far from knowing any of the secrets of so-called magic. My friends began to tire of our dangerous and repellent pursuits. Only I remained constant in my determination to find the key to the great mysteries which, I was sure, would free me from my present stale and profitless existence. By now, I profoundly believed in the existence of the occult, and nothing would deter me from pursuing my quest for the person who would unlock doors to secret knowledge for me.

Some weeks after my companions had dissolved our 'magic lodge,' my friend Julien came to me as I left the office. 'If you really want to meet a magician,' he said, 'I have learned of one who lives not far from here. I have met one of his disciples.'

Julien took me to a miserable garret where we were met by an emaciated young man who kept shivering horribly as though he had a virulent fever. After staring at me with lacklustre eyes for several minutes while the purpose of my visit was explained, he told me, 'I cannot take you and I warn you not to go. Vitrac is too dangerous. He is a devil. I shall have nothing more to do with him.'

He trembled again after he had spoken, and I was impressed by the horror that had come into his eyes. Still, I persisted in my demand that I should be allowed to meet this man. Despite all my entreaties, the young man refused, declaring that he himself had suffered too much from contact with Vitrac to allow anyone else's existence to be made a misery through having dealings with him, and he warned me the magician was a person who lived only to do evil. Further pleas were useless, and as I left the garret with Julien he also entreated me to renounce my quest. I remained secretly determined to find this man, whose name I now knew, and whose powers seemed so great.

In the evenings that followed, I visited all the bookshops

which specialized in strange and curious books on magic, philosophy, religion and the arcane sciences, asking the owners whether any of them knew of this Vitrac. Only in two bookshops did the name seem to mean anything to the men I questioned, but there was suspicion in their faces and they abruptly refused my request for information. Finally, I found a little hovel of a bookshop in a narrow, ill-lit street, kept by a half-crazed, ancient little man named Zangwill who spent most of the day mumbling and shuffling aimlessly among his dust-laden collection of ancient tomes and faded manuscripts. As I asked him the same question, a tall middle-aged man of aquiline features emerged from the even more chaotic back room of the shop and fixed his eyes on me. The old man continued to mumble incomprehensibly, but I felt somehow compelled to turn round and meet the tall man's stare. As I did so, a voice suddenly came to life in my brain, directing me to 'come outside, I wish to speak to you.' The words were as plain as though the man had spoken aloud.

I obediently obeyed this disconcerting injunction by following the man into the street outside the shop. With a motion of his hand, he indicated that I was to follow him. After we had walked in silence down several of the neighboring streets, he stopped under a gas lamp. 'I am Vitrac. What do you want of me?'

I conquered my first impulse of fear and unhesitatingly told him that I wanted to learn the secrets of the occult. At first his mouth tightened in skeptical amusement, but when I persisted in my affirmation he nodded.

'I believe you. Come to me tomorrow night.'

He mentioned a place where I was to wait and the hour of the rendezvous and then strode away into the darkness while I returned to my lodgings in a fever of anticipation.

On the following day, as I left the office, Julien was waiting for me. He took hold of my arm and said that the emaciated young man we had met in the garret had just been found dead. The poor wretch had committed suicide. Julien seized me by both arms and urged me to give up my quest for the magician if I valued my life and sanity. I lied, saying that I would take his advice, while privately count-

ing the minutes until it should be time for my appointment, confident that Julien's friend had only himself to blame for his untimely end.

At the agreed time, late in the night, I stood in the doorway of a Gothic church in a quiet part of Paris. A carriage drew up as the churchbell began to chime the hour and the driver motioned me to step inside it. Some quarter of an hour later we stopped inside the large stone-paved courtyard of a private mansion. I was ushered into a high-ceilinged room, the walls of which were entirely concealed by heavy, crimson velvet curtains. I was left alone. One hour passed, then two. I was beginning to despair of the outcome of my mission when the curtains before me parted, and Vitrac stepped into the room. After staring at me somberly, he asked me again the purpose of my wishing to see him.

'I am looking for someone to teach me the secrets of magic and I have heard that you are the man,' I replied, pretending boldness. He continued to study me. As his eyes gazed into mine, my vision began to blur, the room became dark, and I momentarily lost consciousness. When I returned to my senses, he began to speak:

'You hope thereby to better your unwanted mean condition, to attain felicity and prosperity in life, to gain rewards far beyond your merit? You need not answer. I am able to read your mind.'

I insisted on replying: 'I only wish to learn from you.'

'Why should I be your teacher? I do not need pupils. I need servants.'

'Then let me be your servant,' I said, desperate lest he should conclude this interview.

'You have been sent to fulfill my purpose,' Vitrac murmured, as though speaking to himself. 'Very well, I can offer you the success and wealth in life you so desire but not the secrets of the great rituals. There is no need for you to have such knowledge nor for me to share it with you. I can ensure you a life of uninterrupted happiness in which you will enjoy love, friendship, esteem, wealth and culture, popularity and respect as long as I live.'

'As long as *you* live?'

‘Do not look so alarmed. I enjoy perfect health. I am powerful and can divert untoward accidents. I confidently expect to live a normal span of life—about another thirty years, I should say. I am offering you unprecedented happiness and good fortune for all that time.’

‘What must I do?’ I asked incredulously.

‘You must give me your body—your own—when I die.’

My own body! This was like some scene from Faust or one of those infernal pacts which abound in Gothic tales. Vitrac smiled at my astonishment and confusion. As though he had again read my mind, he drily said:

‘Do not worry, I am not the devil. Your soul is of no consequence to me. I shall only require your body, your brain and your vitality. I have extraordinary powers but even I cannot resist ultimate dissolution. When the time comes, you will be in the prime of your life. I shall live in you again and you shall live in me. Think of it. I am offering you probably as much as thirty years of unalloyed happiness such as you have barely dared to dream of and then—at the end of that time when I shall call for you, you will continue to live in *me*—you will live again and again as myself, enjoying vast powers, the knowledge of the innermost secrets of the cosmos—of time and space—the ability to command and rule. You will have my powers, and others will give you themselves as you will give yourself to me. You have had the temerity to ask me to impart to you some of my secrets and to teach you how to acquire the greatest forces of the occult—you will obtain them all when you become my own self. You will have thirty years of bliss as Justin Branderson, and then eternity as Vitrac.’

I was being offered not only almost a lifetime of wealth and happiness in my present form, but all Vitrac’s powers and knowledge, as well as an eternity of life as his soul thereafter! But why me—a humble clerk with no prospects?

‘Because you have persisted in making your way to me,’ said Vitrac in answer to my unspoken question. ‘Because you may be willing to do what no one else had the courage to do. It is only by an immense surrender of your will and the successful defiance of what men call their own soul and their instincts of self-preservation that you can obtain what

I offer you. Others have tried, and failed. It is not easy. What you must do will be in opposition to every instinct and innate conviction you possess. In the light of brutish mankind's morality, it is the ultimate perversion. It is also a victory over man's wretched condition. Are you willing to try? Think of what I am offering you.'

'What must I do?' I whispered, struggling inwardly with the instinct to reject everything Vitrac had proposed to me and run from that room.

'Your mind does not yet belong to me. You must keep your own will and freely and deliberately do what you may find it impossible to do. You must do something completely alien to your nature and conscience. Then we can make our pact.'

Vitrac stood closer to me and stared into my eyes again, saying quietly, 'There must be a sacrifice of blood—I know there is a man in your office who has always shown great kindness to you. You admire him and have affection for him. You must kill him. No one will suspect you. That is your sacrifice. If you have the courage to do that, then I will ensure that the memory of your deed is banished forever from your mind. You will have no remorse. The suffering will come before the deed—afterwards the rewards, and eventually—myself in you and you eternally in myself. Leave now and think of what I have said. You will know your decision when I summon you again.'

Vitrac departed from the room and a mute servant came in to lead me back to the carriage. I did not sleep that night as I struggled with my conscience and deepest instincts. Although I had been given not the slightest proof that Vitrac could fulfill the terms of his offer, I was certain beyond doubt that it was all true! As I twisted and turned on my bed, a strange, sudden peace came over my soul. My mind became quiet, my last thoughts vanished, and once again I could hear a sibilant voice from inside me, saying, 'See what happiness I can give you ...' No sooner had I heard the words than I was taken up in a paroxysm of joy such as I had never experienced in my life. I felt a surge of power, visions of illimitable rapture floated into my mind, I felt myself soaring up towards undreamed-of

heavens, pleasures beyond the wildest intimations of sensual gratification possessed my body—I was transfixed by ineffable delights beyond, I am sure, any experienced in any opium dream ... The rapture passed, leaving in its place unutterable misery as the dawn light came streaming through the windows of my modest lodging, and I again faced the choice before me. As I prepared myself to return to the office, I heard Vitrac speaking to my mind once more, saying, ‘You see what joys I can give you; you know my power ...’

Several times, during the next few days, I could hear Vitrac calling to my mind, asking if I was ready to give him his answer. I ate little, I grew pale and my constant nervousness was noticed by my employers. To make my wretchedness even more acute, the man I had been called upon to murder kindly suggested that I should take two or three days’ rest, as I looked so unwell and overwrought. On the third day, I could bear my sufferings no longer. The temptation put before me was too great. Either I would surrender to it or I would go mad and even, perhaps, put an end to my futile existence. What was one man’s life compared to the limitless rewards being offered me? That I could formulate such an obscenity was my defeat and Vitrac’s triumph. It was thus that I surrendered to evil, totally and irrevocably.

‘You have almost passed the test. You may yet show yourself worthy of my powers,’ Vitrac said to me as I stood again before him, having answered his mental summons which came to me in my lodging. He handed me a dagger and told me of a dark and little frequented lane through which my superior always walked on his return home in the evening. It being late autumn, it was already dark as I waited for my victim, grimly trying to drive away thoughts of shame and repulsion for what I had determined to do. As the man came closer, I stepped out from the doorway where I had concealed myself and seized him. I struck him several times in the chest and ran off, seeing the expression on his face change from one of affection upon seeing me to terror, shock and pain. I was now a creature accursed, the servant of evil! I vowed that I would never again go to Vitrac, but the agony of my remorse was unendurable, and

before the night was out I stood before him once again.

'Your sufferings and trials are over,' he said. 'None shall suspect you. They will think it the crime of some footpad. Now we shall seal our pact, and from this moment you shall remember nothing of ever having met me or of what you have done. You may prepare for your new life.' He opened the crimson curtains to reveal a narrow door leading into a darkened chamber where several candles glowed dimly. And that is the last I remember of that dreadful night when I lost my soul.

The following morning, my mind was without the slightest recollection of my meeting with Vitrac or my frightful deed. My grief was unpretended and genuine when I learned of the brutal murder of my superior and later, when I met Julien, I was sincere when I told him that I was no longer interested in any of our former pursuits. I was promoted to fill the post left by my dead superior and told soon afterwards that there was an even more interesting position open to me in London where I could use the experience learned in the Paris branch. From that time until I arrived with my family in Courtland Square, my life was one of uninterrupted felicity. Then, after half a lifetime of peace, my forgotten past suddenly came back to me as a voice I had not heard for some thirty years began to speak to me again: it was the voice of Vitrac warning me that it was time for me to honor the infamous contract I had made with him.

About that time, as I have said earlier, I had been subject to inexplicable periods of deep depression, of mental blankness and temporary sensations of remoteness from my loved ones and my surroundings. Now I knew that they were the prelude to a perpetual torment. Whether I was working, resting, asleep or awake, at home or walking in the street, I would without warning hear Vitrac calling to me, speaking to me, insistently reminding me that the time had come for me to give myself up to him. When he did not appear to me and his voice was momentarily stilled in my brain, I would be equally afflicted by the now returned memory of my crime and the prospect of my fate. There was no escape for me. No matter how hard I tried, I could

never banish my memories or the baleful visions of my tormentor, who would come to me without warning.

At times, to make my agony the more exquisite and to diminish my mental resistance further, Vitrac would spare me his visitations for several days at a time and even expunge the knowledge of my crime and my pact with him from my memory again. Then, he would return to plague me even more insistently, deriding me for my false hopes and temporarily regained serenity and taking pleasure in my misery as I trembled on the edge of *final* surrender. I am convinced no physical torture ever devised by man could be more terrible. My sufferings were all the worse as I knew that he had the power to make me forget them for a while, only to make me re-experience them even more intensely. He showed literally fiendish ingenuity in finding ways to break my already battered spirit. Sometimes, I would be looking at the face of someone close to me—my wife, a friend, a colleague—only to see their features transformed to those of Vitrac, his eyes alight with rage as I stubbornly resisted his will.

Vitrac's urgings and his apparitions became increasingly frequent. Each time I saw him standing before me as I had thirty years previously in that crimson-curtained room, he would conjure up every detail of that night of murder until I felt my mind would snap, but I knew that I could not even hope for eventual insanity to bring me release from my memories and what impended. I would find myself being forced to relive every second of that time when I had stepped out of my hiding place in that narrow Paris street, grasped my superior's coat by the lapels and repeatedly drove my dagger into his chest. I re-experienced every moment of that agony when I fled through the quiet streets after watching the gouts of blood ooze through his shirt and waistcoat as he stared at me with agonized incomprehension before sinking onto the damp cobbles.

I now understood that Vitrac was indeed a devil incarnate with monstrous powers. My body was to become the abode of an unspeakable foulness. What new crimes would it commit when Vitrac had mastered it? What fate waited for my soul once it had been driven out of its

corporeal home? I was certain that it would remain tied to the evil that was already beginning to grow in me like a cancer, and that there would never be any peace for my spirit.

I tried to escape from Vitrac by every means possible. In India, as I have said, I had imbibed some of the wisdom and techniques of *yoga*, and much of my success was due to the faculty I had of divining what lay in the minds of my competitors and prospective clients as well as in my uncanny knack of forecasting future trends in banking and commercial affairs, knowing well beforehand when to buy and when to sell at the maximum advantage to my company and myself. Clearly I had been aided by Vitrac as well as my study of *yoga*. Now as I frantically began to consult books on the phenomena of possession and haunting and exorcism to see whether I could find a way of freeing myself from Vitrac's visitations, I realized that I had acquired the faculty of projecting my mind from my body as I slept. In the language of occultists, I had been travelling in my 'astral body'—the etheric double of the physical body, which it can leave and to which it can return at will after travelling through space and even solid objects.

Still, there was no escape for me. In my desperation, I learned how to make conscious use of the techniques I had been using, unknown to myself, in India. The books and treatises I studied spoke of the many paths in that strange world of the astral plane that lies halfway between this three-dimensional world and the higher spheres. But even as I ventured from my body in that twilight intermediary world and sought for escape, my way would be barred; for there before me would rise up the shape of my persecutor. I would turn aside and flee along another path only to be confronted by him again and awake.

I realized that it was Vitrac's astral body that was directly attacking and haunting me. No matter where his living human body was, it was capable of sending its etheric double across hundreds of miles of space to follow me. I was under its constant surveillance, both on the earthly and on the astral plane. It was while I was in Manchester on a business trip that the haunting and Vitrac's threats reached

a new pitch of intensity. In my waking hours, by using remembered *yoga* techniques of concentration, it was at times possible to resist Vitrac to some extent and ignore his calls, but when I was tired or allowed my mind to be off its guard, he would force his way back into my mind with renewed energy and persistence. Sleep became a horror to me: as Vitrac came to me in my hotel bedroom, my weary soul in my astral body fled back to my home and mutely begged my dear wife for her spiritual support. I saw her start in surprise as I came into the room where she was sitting, I saw her distress and foreboding as she stared at my face, but I knew that she could do nothing.

As the struggle continued I realized mine was a losing battle. Not only my mind but my physical powers were passing out of my control. Vitrac frequently succeeded in superimposing his own will and thoughts upon mine and would play tricks upon me which mystified those who were with me and led them to speak of strange alterations in my character. At my London club I suddenly found myself speaking perfect French again although I had long since lost command of the language after going to India. At other times I was incapable of speech and communication and had to rush off into the deserted silent streets of London as I struggled with my incorporeal adversary and feared to let any human face look on mine. When I was at home I could see my wife's growing unease as well as that of the servants and children, but I still was unable to speak.

Vitrac had become a permanent unbidden guest in the house, watching me, jibing and jeering at me while he observed my abject state and frantic attempts to close my mind to his, and my pitiful attempts to escape from him on the astral plane when I was asleep. I knew that with every day and night that passed he was relentlessly dragging me nearer to the confines of an alien, malignant world, to compel me to make the final surrender.

I went in secret to an exorcist and told him my story, hoping that the powers of good which he could channel through his own body would be strong enough to drive the evil out of me and free my mind from Vitrac's dominance. He agreed to help me and we made another appointment,

but even as he seized my wrists in an iron grip while his assistant squeezed his vice-like fingers around my temples and they began to intone the age-old invocation against evil spirits, I could see Vitrac standing behind them looking on with amusement. In my delirium of pain and despair I could not prevent my spirit from calling upon Clara for her spiritual support, and I saw her start up from her chair in the conservatory where she had been quietly reading, her mind afflicted with the same agony I was experiencing as I writhed in the grip of the exorcist and in my frenzy called out her name.

The exorcism proved useless, and I was determined at least to spare Clara my own sufferings—for why should she suffer for my crime? I knew that when my mind was in a delirium and my body in pain as the exorcist tried to come to grips with Vitrac, she was sharing my anguish by virtue of the close spiritual ties between us. I left the exorcist in a haze of pain, and even as I walked through the deserted streets I could hear Vitrac by my side, deriding me for my failure to be rid of him.

Now Vitrac began to succeed in taking further control of my body as I slept, while my astral body moved about the house, appearing anew to my terrified wife and daughters. I succeeded in sending Jane and Rachel abroad for a while, still hoping I might yet defeat Vitrac before they returned. I studied some of the world's rarest and most recondite books of occult science while continuing to conceal the truth from Clara and my youngest child. I spoke with spiritualists and practitioners of witchcraft, whom I found through diligent questioning at certain bookshops where students of the dark ways would gather. None could help me.

As Vitrac's summons became more insistent, I attempted to divert his evil thought-attacks by praying, but his image would always reappear to me and his words would blot those of my prayers from my mind. Sometimes I would spend hours motionless and silent in my study, unable to utter one word of the sacred formulas of Christianity while his spirit engaged in still another ferocious struggle with mine, oppressing further my mind with a relentless

procession of images of my youthful crime and promising me blissful relief if only I would give in to him. The longing to give up the struggle and let him do as he would with me became unbearable, but even then some residual spark of free will forced me to resist his attacks and temptations. I tried to arm myself with sacred symbols to give me at least a few hours peace from his insidious whisperings and hateful promptings. While I would search for some protective charm, talisman or prayer in books of occult lore, Vitrac would always find the gate into my mind. In my desperation, I bought a crucifix blessed by a holy priest and spent hours trying to concentrate on the powers of good it represented only to find that Vitrac had forced me to break the holy symbol with my own hands!

It was then that I discovered a good and wise occultist who had travelled far along the Right Hand path of secret knowledge—Orsini. He was quick to recognize the appalling nature of my affliction and began to make inquiries to see whether we could find Vitrac, for I still hoped that if only I could again confront him physically there might yet be some way of forcing him to renounce his claim. What Orsini found drove me into even worse despair: *Vitrac was already dead*. It became known among the occult confraternities of Paris that he had died some weeks previously—*when my sufferings first began*. It was no living body sending its mind to haunt me but Vitrac's astral corpse. Orsini told me that although a dead man's astral body will eventually disintegrate and die, thus releasing the soul so that it may ascend to the higher spheres, it could also retain enough life to maintain itself indefinitely in a vampire-like state of existence by absorbing the powers of a living being such as myself. Unwilling to allow his spirit to go to such new planes, Vitrac had deliberately made himself earth-bound so that he might resurrect his astral spirit in my own body and thus continue his career on earth.

Vitrac had lied when he told me that my soul would flow into his and that I would become himself, sharing his triumphs. I knew now that after he had possessed my body, my spirit would forever retain its own existence but live chained to his, suffering all the agonies of absolute ser-

vitute, powerlessness and shame for what I had done. There would *never* be any peace for my soul.

I could tell my wife nothing of this—how could I tell her that I was a murderer and that I literally had sold my soul into such appalling slavery? Even worse, I had believed that human misery had its limits, only to find that it was illimitable. As Vitrac had reminded me, I had also promised him that I would yield not only myself but '*your own*,' as he had said—my family! How could I save not only my soul but theirs from ultimate perdition? Suicide offered no solution, for I knew that I could not kill my soul and so give it merciful oblivion, and Vitrac would still fasten his evil spirit upon the minds and souls of Clara and the children. I had to survive physically and continue the fight to discover some way of avoiding fulfillment of my blasphemous contract.

Orsini gave me the name of a man in Paris who might conceivably help me—a powerful French magician and disciple of the great Eliphas Levi who had special reason to fear and loathe Vitrac. I went to Paris on the pretext that I was making another business trip. The magician told me that he could do nothing for me yet but urged me to resist to the utmost, adding, 'If the slightest part of your body can escape possession, then you may yet save your soul,' but he would not elaborate on his cryptic remark. Through another occultist, I learned that Vitrac lay buried in his own mausoleum on his estate in the country. Hoping that by destroying his physical remains I might free myself from his not-dead astral self, I made my way illegally into the grounds of his château. I forced open the doors of his mausoleum, praying for the success of my mission and concentrating on thoughts of my dear Clara, whose spiritual strength I tried to take into my own soul. I broke open the coffin, looked down at the dead features and body of the man who made life into a living hell for me, who had made me a murderer, and then severed the head and burned the body as it lay in its coffin . . . only to see Vitrac's face rise above it and gaze with hatred at me.

Vitrac multiplied his attacks. He chased me back to London after I had conferred in vain with the magician a

second time and began to break down the last defenses in my mind. It was impossible for me to sleep at night, for I knew that if I did so he would overcome me. I could no longer conceal my misery from my wife and made the appalling discovery that now Vitrac had fastened his spirit upon the defenseless and impressionable mind of my youngest son Terence!

Still the battle continued. With Orsini's help I was able to protect my mind against Vitrac's direct assaults by sleeping in the daytime and putting a magic circle around my body, but his tormentings continued in my waking hours. In answer to Clara's pleas—for she now realized that I was being possessed of an enemy spirit—I agreed to let the hypnotist Morell visit me, only to see him depart a baffled and frustrated man. I deduced that even while I was under hypnosis, Vitrac had succeeded in blanking out all knowledge of my plight from my subconscious mind.

Now Vitrac turned his attention increasingly to Terence and Clara. I could see that the child was being influenced by his evil suggestions and used as a weapon against me, and I endeavored to protect him in vain. When Clara was asleep, Vitrac began to appear to her and bid her to ally herself with him against me. To protect her mind against his visitations, I drew the invisible but potent circle around her with an imaginary Sword of Power such as is well known to occultists, visualizing it in my mind as Orsini had instructed me when advising me how to defend myself against astral attacks. Somehow, though, Vitrac succeeded in working upon Clara's subconscious mind so that she left the protective circle around her bed and he could gain control over her when she finally fell asleep. That next morning my own protective circle was pierced as I wearily lay down on my bed to snatch a few hours' desperately needed sleep, and I was subjected to a psychic attack of unprecedented intensity. Later, I realized that just as some occultists can fasten an element spirit to an inanimate object, so had Vitrac succeeded in forming a link with the little bronze statuette of the goddess Kali I had kept in the house. Because of the evil thought emanations with which it had long been contaminated ever since it had been

worshipped in some shrine by its perverted devotees, it had provided an excellent focus for Vitrac's malignant powers. Vitrac's spirit had made Clara take the statuette from its cabinet and introduce it within the circle I had made around my own bed, and thus my defenses were made useless.

It was while I was hovering between life and death as a consequence of this attack that the magician I had met and conferred with in Paris appeared to my exhausted mind as I lay in a coma. He told me he had faced great risks in coming to me since Vitrac was extremely active on the astral plane, but he had decided to help me *in extremis*. There was now no doubt that, after his devastating astral attack on me, Vitrac would possess himself of my body in a day or two, but there was still at last hope for the salvation of my soul *if only I could conceal part of the vital essence of my body from him and make it the refuge for my astral being*.

I had already learned from my studies into the occult that inanimate objects may be magnetized and charged with a magician's will and powers. Now I learned that the whole of a man's life and essential spirit can reside in even a single drop of his own blood. If I could conceal only a few drops of my blood somewhere beyond Vitrac's reach, it would be possible for my astral spirit to escape my body at the crucial moment and dwell within it, thus at least saving my soul from capture. If I could succeed in this and somehow manage to have the blood brought to the magician, he would attempt to free my soul from Vitrac and the chance would remain that it might eventually return to my body if Vitrac's evil spirit could be forced out of it. It was the last hope.

It is to that magician that I owe the preservation of my living spirit in freedom. His astral influence caused the nurse attending me to fall asleep and gave me the necessary energy to rise from the bed and steal down to the study to prepare my last refuge. By now I had acquired enough occult knowledge to seal the study from Vitrac's astral gaze. Temporarily safe from his surveillance, I cut my wrist and let the precious drops of my life's essence fall into a small

silver and crystal phial, staring with all my remaining powers of concentration at each drop of my blood, forcing my will to magnetize it and form the link between it and my spirit while I uttered the words that the magician had taught me. I then closed the phial and wrapped it in a small piece of old parchment on which I had inscribed a powerful protective talisman that was to shield it from the eye of evil. Finally, after making a little packet, I wrote the address of the magician on it before penning my last letter to Clara. I bade her do her utmost to leave the house and take the packet to Orsini, who I knew would then take it to Paris. I then placed both the packet and the note in the secret recess in my Chinese cabinet which I had often used in India to conceal important documents from thieves. After hiding a spare key to the study—for Clara to find—behind a painting in the corridor, I managed to stagger back to my sick-room to the astonishment of my nurse, who had just returned to consciousness as I entered and who promptly fainted from shock.

The end came quickly. I was unable to deliver my last message to Clara or to warn her that another being was about to make its home in my body. I could see and hear Vitrac calling me, furious that I still had not submitted, but ready to enter my body at the moment I died physically. As I felt my life ebbing from me and my mind on the edge of surrender, I made a last desperate effort and willed myself out of my fleshly shell, mentally concentrating upon the drops of my blood in the phial. There was a brief confrontation with Vitrac, who called out in fury as he saw my astral spirit flee past him. Before he could pursue me, I had entered the study and willed myself through the solid wood of the cabinet, the parchment wrapping and the crystal of the phial, *into my own blood*. As I came into it, there was darkness and silence. I could feel nothing, hear nothing, but I was still alive—a living thought, a disembodied spirit with the same emotions and personality as when I had been in my physical body.

I do not know how long I remained in my refuge, but when I made another mental effort and *thought myself* back into the study, I found myself in the insubstantial

replica of my own body, hovering in the semi-darkness near the window by my desk. Another relatively slight mental effort was enough to propel me out of the room. I moved upstairs and looked upon my sleeping wife, sending my thoughts of loving tenderness into her mind and then proceeded slowly along the corridor until I saw my own physical body, alive and restored to health, but with the eyes now gleaming with the satanic intelligence of Vitrac. I drew nearer but still he could not see me. I observed the triumph in his expression, his commanding air, his arrogance and confidence as he slowly stalked from room to room as though to familiarize himself with the slightest details of my home, which had now become his own. At times, from the change in his expression, I could see that he sensed the proximity of some spirit on the astral plane. But, for the first time since my ordeal began, there was an uplifting of my spirit as I looked into his face and his terrible eyes and knew that he could not see me in my astral state but was aware and furious that he had taken my body but that my soul had escaped his dominion.

He had, of course, lied many years before when he told me that he had no interest in my soul, only my body; he wanted complete control with no opposition. However, my rejoicing was short-lived, for a moment later I was confronted by the faintly glowing apparition of my little Terence. His childish countenance contorted with malevolent rage as he saw me, and I fled back to my place of safety with the awful knowledge that Vitrac had possessed my child's body, which was now in trance and keeping watch on the astral plane.

I could only move around the house with the greatest circumspection. As my spirit was still earth-bound and anchored to my blood in the phial that served in lieu of my physical body, I could not move onto any higher plane but remained confined to that of the astral, where I was liable to detection and attack by either Vitrac or Terence when they were in their ethereal form. Although I was no longer subject to all the physical limitations of the human body, the mental effort I needed to make me move freely within and without the house was almost as tiring as protracted

physical exertion. I also knew that if the energy with which my astral body was charged were to exhaust itself, I would no longer be able to return to my sanctuary. My astral shape would weaken and disintegrate and then my soul would also remain earth-bound and be liable to capture by Vitrac.

I tried without success to communicate to Clara and warn her to leave the house, but when I was sheltering within the phial and gathering strength for the next excursion, I had no means of knowing whether Vitrac or Terence were on the astral plane. If they were awake in their physical bodies then I could attempt to communicate to Clara, but once either of them was asleep or in trance, they would be watching over her. Several times, indeed, I did emerge from the phial to see her writing her last frantic letters to her friend Ellen Middleton, but try as I did, I was unable to contact her mind. It was too preoccupied with her anxieties and fears. To add to my misery at being powerless to help Clara while she began to weaken and Vitrac prepared to take her over, I realized that it was useless to try to make contact with someone outside the house, for who could gain an entry into it and take the packet from the study even if they were disposed to believe and help me? I managed briefly to appear to Orsini while he was in trance, but he told me that the only person capable of obtaining the phial and bringing it to him to take to the magician in Paris was Clara herself, before she succumbed to Vitrac.

Each time I came out of the phial, it was to find Clara becoming increasingly weak and somnolent as Vitrac and the sinister new housekeeper and maid he had hired administered drugs and soporifics to her while he proceeded to condition her mind so that he might eventually command her soul. While Clara lay in a semi-stupor in her armchair or upon her chaise-longue in the daytime or slept her drugged sleep at night, I would see Vitrac learning to assume all my own mannerisms and patterns of speech so that none would ever suspect that my body was now tenanted by another soul. I saw furtive men arrive at the house to see Vitrac, but as they talked together, Terence's

astral form would appear and prevent me eavesdropping. I also saw strange packets and crates being delivered at the house and Vitrac making feverish preparations for what I recognized as an occult ritual. When he was not closeted in his study or out of the house, he would continue to prowls from room to room, vainly seeking for the source from which he knew I emerged onto the astral plane; he knew that I was still in the house.

One late afternoon, when I ventured forth again to try to speak to Clara, I realized that she had finally begun to suspect that Vitrac and the maids were drugging her, and I saw her throw away the tainted food and drink before Terence resumed his watch on the astral plane. Being overly confident that Clara was now under their control and incapable of resistance, Vitrac and Terence began to relax their vigilance. It was because of this that I later saw Clara able to leave the house one night to follow Vitrac as he drove to a destination in the heart of London's East End. I followed closely behind her, willing myself to stay close to the hansom cab in which she was travelling, but as we came into a large dilapidated square, I suddenly caught sight of Terence's astral spirit and realized that he too had been following Clara ever since she left the house. Before I could penetrate into a large mansion where I saw several people and then Vitrac enter, Terence sighted me and I had to escape back to my phial.

After several other abortive attempts to communicate with Clara, I finally succeeded on November 6—I know the date from having seen a newspaper lying on a table. It was the afternoon. Neither Vitrac nor Terence were on the astral plane, and as I approached my sleeping Clara I realized that their efforts to win her mind had already made it singularly receptive to spiritual communications. Quickly and succinctly I delivered my message to her and then focused my entire will and all my loving thoughts on her, draining myself of as much spiritual energy as I could spare so that I might pass on to her the strength necessary for what she must do.

That night, when Vitrac was away again, there was no sign of Terence's astral in the house. Obviously, neither he

nor Vitrac had considered it necessary to keep Clara under their constant surveillance, and she was therefore able to make her way down to the study and find the precious packet while I stood near her. I followed her outside the room again, keeping watch in case Terence's astral spirit should suddenly appear and see her. I was with her near the door when Terence suddenly must have overlooked her bedchamber and realized that she was about to leave the house. I saw him project a terrifying thought-form of a giant rat to break her spirit and keep her inside the house, but I managed to inspire her with the courage to face the apparition and defeat it and then go to Orsini's house. I was with her as she delivered the packet to Orsini. That same night I was about to communicate with Orsini, who was preparing to go into a trance after having sealed the room against evil visitants, when a young man came to the house and immediately mesmerized the occultist's mute manservant. I saw Orsini receive a last, despairing telepathic message from his faithful retainer and quickly hide the packet under a stack of firewood before the door burst open. There was a struggle and as the stranger—who was obviously possessed and controlled by Vitrac's mind—proceeded to choke Orsini to death, I fled back into my phial. I do not know how long I remained there while the murderer ransacked the room, but the protective talisman on the parchment wrapping apparently saved me on that occasion and on others when various of Vitrac's minions came to search for the packet.

Who could save me now? How long was I destined to stay in the hiding place Orsini had found for me? As I came out from the phial, I discovered that I had new enemies on the astral plane. Although I could not recognize them, I knew that Vitrac had now succeeded in possessing new victims to do his will. It was painfully clear that his army of minions was steadily growing and that in time he would have a veritable regiment of astral spirits to protect him and to hunt for me. To attempt to make the effort of crossing the hundreds of miles to Paris and communicate there my hiding place to the French magician was out of the question: the link with my blood would be too far ex-

tended, and if I were sighted by my enemies I would never be able to return to the phial in time. All I could do was remain in the Orsini house and near my former home and continue the fearful game of hide-and-seek with my adversaries.

I became increasingly skilled in evading their watchfulness and came to realize that to pursue me was no longer Vitrac's main preoccupation. My momentary relief soon changed to deepest misery as I briefly glimpsed my dearest Clara in astral form and knew that she too had finally become possessed and was Vitrac's servile creature. When Ellen Middleton came to the house, I tried to warn her, only to see Vitrac's astral spirit following her and looking on with satisfaction as one of his minions emerged in a carriage from a side street to run her down under the heavy wheels and crush the life from her body.

As I spied on my own home whenever it was possible for me to do so, my grief and longing for vengeance were unbounded when I saw my son Simon and my dear Jane and Rachel return home to become similarly possessed. As the diabolical pact I had made with Vitrac started, my entire family was to belong to Vitrac.

I then realized that Vitrac had only possessed them to possess even others in turn, for I saw how Mary Roscoe left the house with her mind contaminated and her soul filled with craving for complete domination by Vitrac's will. I saw how thirty young carol-singers became temporarily possessed by Terence. I looked on while Juliet Mason murdered her newlywed husband as he realized the awfulness that had come into her soul and fought to prevent her from leaving him to go to what she called 'the master's lodge,' to surrender herself there totally.

The circle of evil grew wider every day. All who went to my former home or who came into contact with Vitrac or his victims were similarly forced to obey his malignant will and lost their souls. Soon I came to know the answer to the question that had consumed me, and I began to realize the extent of the evil that Vitrac was letting loose on an unsuspecting world.

Why had Vitrac wanted my body in the first place? Why,

when he had reached the end of his life, had he been so determined to prolong his earthly existence in an alien body instead of letting his astral spirit die the natural second death and so allow his soul to go upwards to the higher spheres, according to the great plan which governs the universe?

Throughout history, some men have sought immortality on this earth so that they might continue to enjoy fleshly delights, or wield power over others or further pursue their quest for knowledge. Vitrac wanted none of these.

I had thought of Vitrac as a perverted being representing the ultimate in human depravity, greed and malice. I had been wrong. Unlike other magicians of the Left Hand path, he had not been using his powers and knowledge for his own ends to gratify any overmastering ambition or lust, but to serve an evil far greater than any in himself. He himself was the servant of a more awful power than any possessed by any other magician in the world. In his quest, he had succeeded in making contact with a supreme evil intelligence which he called the 'master' and which had come to seek and possess him in turn.

This awful intelligence, this awesome spirit that reigns in the void in a dimension outside any of this universe is the primal source and fountainhead of the misery, violence, hatred, crime, greed, wanton slaughter and destructiveness which have marked the history of our race. In ages immemorial, when man built the first and long-forgotten great civilizations eons before the temples and pyramids of mighty Atlantis towered towards the skies and the Great Flood changed the face of the planet, this Evil had been brought down to earth. It had battled for dominion of the first human race, which knew not what it had called from beyond the Beyond. Memories of that gigantic confrontation when the Forces of Light and Creation blasted the Evil back into the extra-cosmic void from which it had come are enshrined in the myths and legends of most races. They are found in the cryptic writings of ancient civilizations such as the Book of Enoch with its references to the Watchers, the children of the angels and the emissaries of He who dwells in the void who tried to couple with the

daughters of men and thereby give incarnation to the Evil.

The essential Evil was expelled from the world, but its effects have remained, and the memory of a previous Golden Age on earth when evil was unknown linger in man's collective subconscious. Ever since its titanic defeat, the Evil has striven in vain to reaffirm its claim to our universe and to dominate mankind. It has raged as it has tried to regain contact with those who bear its seeds in their souls. It seeks revenge and destruction. It is the enemy of all creation, and it is the will to deny all life. It aspires to the final chaos in which all shall be destroyed until only the spirit of Destruction and Nothingness—the supreme Evil—survives to rule forever and supreme in a universe that has become void, and to rejoice in perpetual triumphant contemplation of Itself. It aims to possess and then destroy all that *is*, since existence is its enemy and all that lives is an affirmation of the Creative Spirit and therefore an intolerable denial of itself.

In his monumental blasphemous defiance of every law of creation, in his mania to become a part of that supreme evil will, Vitrac believed he had actually found the way to bring about its second coming. He had committed a crime of cosmic proportions, a vast treachery.

He had found the way to open the gates of the universe to the Evil that dwells in the void.

Now I knew why Vitrac had wanted my body and had not been in the least perturbed that it was that of a man already fast approaching the autumn of his life. He did not want my body for his own terrestrial life to be prolonged, but as a channel through which he might call down the Evil. By the end of his life in his own body there was only one last step to be taken, a last obstacle to be overcome before he finally succeeded in his purpose: at the moment of his physical death, he had to transfer his own soul into another body. This was the final stage of the great ritual which, if successful, would create the entry through which the Evil would come again into the world.

Now I knew the significance of the invocations I had sometimes heard Vitrac utter in my study. Now I understood the purport of those books of hidden knowledge,

those occult instruments, those pentagrams and words of dark power—it was through my body that Vitrac had called the dweller in the void! What did it matter if the body died after a few years? The Evil had eternity in which to achieve its purpose. Vitrac had made my body the channel through which the Evil could pass on into other men's souls and bodies, which in turn would become the home of the 'master.' The Evil was to spread throughout the world, like a gangrene, until all mankind was possessed and made to destroy itself and become part of the void.

Now I knew why Vitrac and his victims went out from the house to infiltrate occult lodges and societies and seek new recruits among those who dabbled in the occult and supernatural, for they were the first and most responsive victims. Those who were receptive and sought after arcane knowledge became instantly fascinated by Vitrac and his emissaries. After their will and vitality had been diminished and destroyed, they were induced to perform the rituals that brought the evil into their own bodies. Then they too would go forth like missionaries, to spread the evil word and destroy still other souls.

I saw Vitrac and his followers at meetings of Satanists, magicians and spiritualists who realized nothing of the threat in their midst. Wherever there were men and women of perverted tendencies, wherever there were minds too eager to grasp at forbidden mysteries, there also was the figure of Vitrac and his creatures. I saw him go to cellars and secret rooms where sects who believed in the coming of Satan would meet and eagerly attend his every word while he spoke of the 'master' and the joys that would be theirs when they had submitted to him.

I saw Vitrac and his servants attend the ritual ceremonies of black magic which they would adapt to their own terrible purposes. I saw Vitrac go out at night to meet another occultist and followers of the Left Hand path, to present himself to them as the Messiah of the master who was preparing his second coming. I saw his astral spirit appear to a group of spritualists who met in an endeavor to commune with the dead and who became so fascinated by his tempting promises of the great secrets that would be theirs

that they allowed themselves to be enticed to the secret lodge, where the ceremonies of possession were performed and they too became slaves to the master.

I saw Vitrac and then another man he had possessed and who came to bear his resemblance, go by night to a mansion in Swedenborg Square—the headquarters of a sect that practiced forms of worship that were a distortion of the Scandinavian mystic's original teachings. I saw them turn it into a temple for the master. I saw the master's slaves go into squalid drinking dens, clubs of vice, elegant drawing rooms, esoteric chapels and other meeting places, like the one in Zangwill's squalid bookshop, where the followers of a strange faith would listen entranced to his tempting words and be made to summon the master into their own bodies. I saw Vitrac's victims recite the secret Names of Power and call on the Nameless One who dwells in the void by pronouncing that shocking inversion of the true name of God which has only been known to three or four magicians since the beginning of civilization. I saw how Vitrac gradually put his victims in a trance, forced them to summon the master and then watched them as they writhed inside the black circle while the Evil came into them and human blood smoked and bubbled in black bowls over glowing braziers amid the narcotic vapors of strange herbs and chemicals. I also saw how Vitrac's powers had become so great that even the abominable paraphernalia of the Black Mass and the necromantic ritual of the goat with the reversed head were no longer needed for him to bring the monstrous force into the gasping, contorted bodies of his satellites as they looked on at the One in the void.

My rage and frustration grew as I watched the spread of the master's power and realized my inability to help or warn each new victim as he began to succumb in his body and spirit. My sufferings reached a new peak when I saw the semblances of my wife and daughters go out at night—ostensibly on errands of mercy and charity—to visit miserable hovels, doss-houses, thieves' kitchens—where they would tempt and lure the unfortunate and destitute to occult lodges where they would be possessed . . . until the hideous change in Clara's, Jane's and Rachel's faces as they

came to resemble Vitrac forced them to remain indoors. For all his cunning, Vitrac was unable to prevent each new victim from eventually resembling him as he had appeared in his own body before taking mine. Vitrac's features gradually imposed themselves over those of all he possessed. They had to become increasingly circumspect as they moved abroad, for otherwise the shocking resemblance between them would have excited public attention and betrayed the fact of their possession by the master.

I saw occultists and magicians of great power and knowledge grow alarmed as they realized something of the nature of the threat and tried to take measures against it, and I saw how those courageous people who tried to fight Vitrac were forced towards madness and suicide. When Detective-Superintendent Jameson and Robert Middleton began to keep watch on the house of the bookseller Zangwill and the Swedenborgian lodge, I saw how Vitrac and his creatures made their slaves destroy the evidence that would have betrayed their rituals by setting fire to their own lodges.

I also saw and watched over Robert Middleton as he steadily acquired knowledge of the occult powers of defense and worked to avenge his wife's murder. I saw him keep watch on my former home and I looked on, dismayed, at the arrival of my niece Miranda and the beginning of still another process of mental and spiritual vampirization. Despite the risks facing me on the astral plane, I succeeded briefly in penetrating into the house in an unsuccessful attempt to warn her. Then, to my immense relief, I saw Robert acquire that most powerful of white magicians' weapons against the powers of darkness—a Sword of Power—and give it to Miranda's fiancé Jonathan. I marvelled at the young man's courage as he entered that house and got out with Miranda, for now I knew that the master's creatures were not invincible.

Before Miranda was freed from the house, Vitrac had begun the work of sensitizing her mind to be receptive to his evil. It was therefore open to visitations on the astral plane, and when she sat within a protective circle to be questioned under hypnosis in Robert Middleton's apart-

ment, I was finally able to communicate my message and reveal my hiding place. But even before I could finish speaking through her, I saw the astral spirits of Vitrac's creatures move towards the exterior of the house to trap me, and I was forced to return to the phial. Again I knew nothing but darkness and silence.

I then heard a voice summon me and I knew it was the French magician speaking. I emerged from the phial to find myself in a dark room lit by a single candle. The magician, who had been my friend and savior, lay before me in a trance on a low couch. As I looked down on his unconscious form, he spoke my name and I saw his astral spirit standing by the head of the couch. His face was stern, his eyes accusing and his voice harsh when he spoke again :

'Justin Branderson, you have sinned terribly and brought the most frightful imaginable fate not only on your own family but on many others. You have brought the dweller in the void back onto earth.'

'I know.'

'Look at me again.' There was another long painful silence while he scrutinized me. At length it seemed to me that I could detect a hint of compassion in his stony countenance.

'Your sin is great, but it is not as great as the ultimate sin for which there can be no redemption. Do you wish to atone for what you have done?'

'I do.'

'Look,' commanded the magician. A dense vapor arose from the floor and blotted his form from my sight. After a few minutes, a light began to glow through the mist and I beheld the old man I had murdered thirty years previously, staring at me with uncomprehending horror as he clasped his side and great drops of blood oozed through his fingers.

'Forgive me!' I said. 'Let me atone for my evil, let me pay whatever necessary penalty, but let me be forgiven—'

The image faded from my sight, and the magician spoke again :

'You shall have your opportunity to undo the evil you have brought. Return into your blood. We shall call for you when it is time.'

I returned into the phial, alone with my overwhelming remorse, but for the first time, also with a glimmering of hope.

When I was summoned again, I found myself in a high-ceilinged room hung with black draperies. Standing between four tall concave mirrors suspended from the ceiling by silver chains was a low altar of blackest ebony within a circle of slender candles whose scented trails of smoke rose up in lazy spirals. On the altar there was a pentagram within a magic circle, four black candles at each corner and a small copper bowl on a tripod above a little brazier. Standing before the altar was the magician in a robe of dazzling white and holding a sword I recognized to be the Sword of Power Robert Middleton and Jonathan had used. Behind the magician I could dimly see other white-robed figures in the penumbra, and among them but seated on a chair and obviously in a last extremity of physical suffering and exhaustion, the emaciated and trembling form of Robert Middleton. There was no sound in the room except his labored breathing, and a single glance was enough to tell me that he was fast dying.

The magician moved slowly towards the altar and with great deliberation took a candle and lit a little fire in the brazier beneath the copper bowl. Then from a silver casket handed to him by an acolyte, he took my precious phial and carefully let a few drops of my blood fall into the bowl. A small cloud of vapor arose from the bowl as it began to grow hot from the flame below it. The magician then held aloft the Sword and began to summon me to materialize before him. The vapor from the bowl became a reddish cloud that rose up to the full height of a man. My sight dimmed, the room swirled around me, I heard the Words of Power reverberate, thunder in my mind. In an instant I found myself hovering in the pillar of reddish smoke above the altar and heard Robert Middleton gasp in amazement.

'Robert Middleton, can you see the mortal shade of Justin Branderson?' the magician asked.

'I can.'

'Look on this man. This is his living astral spirit before you. As you can hear and see him, so he can hear and see

you. It was he, who by a crime committed in his youth, brought the Evil of all evil back into this world and so lost his body and caused your wife's death and that of many others. He has been the instrument of the dark powers of the void and of the murder of human souls. Can you forgive him?"

After a long pause, during which I gazed in shame into Robert Middleton's pain-wracked face, he replied in a voice barely above a whisper. 'I do.'

'Why do you forgive him?' the magician asked.

'So that Good may overcome Evil. In this world, and the next.'

'So be it,' the magician said. 'Robert Middleton, are you willing to become the instrument by which the evil shall be destroyed on this earth and the dweller of the void forced to return to the outer darkness whence He came?'

'I am,' said Robert, as he swayed on his seat and made only with great effort kept himself from falling forward.

The magician then turned towards me. 'He who helped bring the Evil into the world must help expel it from the world. The body that was once yours cannot be exorcised, for your soul no longer resides within it. It is the husk and shell of your body that contains what must be destroyed. You alone can destroy it but to do so you must return to the physical plane and fight it on earth. You must become incarnate again, but for this you need a body willingly given to you by its owner at the moment of his death, for as its astral body and soul are realized, the fleshly body will momentarily retain sufficient innate life force for your astral spirit to inhabit it. *By his own choice Robert Middleton is giving you his body so that you may do what must be done.* Justin Branderson, do you accept Robert Middleton's body and will you destroy what was once your own body?'

'I will!' I said, and knew nothing more as darkness came down over me. I awoke out of oblivion as one awakes out of a dreamless sleep. I was lying on a low couch in a richly furnished room and the magician was standing by me.

'Go to that mirror and see yourself.' As I rose up to obey him I could feel the soft velvet draperies of the couch under my body, I could feel its texture under my fingers, I

could feel the weight of my legs, my own skin and the palpitations of my chest as I breathed and the throbbing of my pulse as the blood flowed through my veins. I was in a human body again! I staggered as though in a daze to the long tall mirror, to be confronted by the features of Robert Middleton! His eyes were my eyes, his thin, slender-wristed hands were my hands, his heart was my heart, but the spirit and consciousness within his body was my own as was the new strength and energy which had replaced his spent forces as he had lay dying.

The magician read the unspoken question in my eyes.

'Robert Middleton's soul is safe. He has gone to the higher spheres and has rejoined his beloved wife. When you have destroyed Vitrac you will most certainly be called upon to pay the penalty men exact for willful and unlawful killing of others. You will probably be hung, but whether you die on the gallows or in prison, you will have saved your soul and those of your family. You will have redeemed yourself.'

The magician went over to a sideboard and opened a case, taking out the Sword of Power. 'You will go at once to England with this. You will go to the house you formerly inhabited and demand to see the one who took your body. When he stands before you, you will utter the words *****

***** and drive the Sword through his heart. You are the only person who can do this. We have not been able to defeat the evil in the occult sphere and none of us are able to approach Vitrac on the physical plane. But he cannot refuse to see you, for he is bound to do so. You did not only bind yourself to Vitrac—*he bound himself to you, and he cannot stop you coming to him.* He will know it is you despite the body you inhabit because he will see your astral spirit within it.'

I took the Sword and that night travelled to London. It did not take me long to discover that Vitrac was at home. Ignoring the bemused curious gazes of a few neighbors and passers-by in the square, I went straight up the steps to the front door of the house and rang the bell. The unpleasant-faced maid who opened the door started back in amazement when she saw me, but even as I ordered her to take me

to her master I heard Vitrac's voice calling out, 'Admit him, I know who he is.'

Within a few moments I was standing before Vitrac in the dim light of the heavily curtained room, face to face with the man who had taken my own body! But now it had changed beyond recognition. What I saw was Vitrac himself as he had appeared at the moment of his death, white-haired and aged, his lofty brow and bony cheeks furrowed by the lines of eighty years but still pulsating with evil life and relentless purpose. As I looked at him, there was a slight sound behind me and I turned around to see another figure rise from the depths of an armchair and approach me. My God, what a hideous caricature of the person who had once been my beloved Clara! Despite the gray strands of hair that framed her withered cheeks and fell on her shoulders, all trace of femininity had vanished from her appearance. *She too was Vitrac.* She was his double in every respect.

'So you have at last come to me,' said Vitrac in his soft resonant voice that vibrated strangely, as though it had come not from within him but from some remote, cavernous depth beyond the confines of his body.

'I have come *for* you,' I said, looking away from his face as his eyes began to gleam with hypnotic power. There was an oppressive silence as I began to unfasten my cloak and reach for the handle of the Sword. As Vitrac saw the gesture of my hand he quickly moved back towards the door. I called out the Words of Power and I drove the point of the Sword into his chest. There was an unearthly cry, the room became black, there was a great coldness, the floor shook under my feet, there seemed a rush of wind that soared upwards through the ceiling, a flash of light and a peal of thunder.

When I regained my senses and stared at the lifeless body at my feet, I saw that it no longer resembled that of Vitrac but was that which I had inhabited at the moment of my possession! And lying across the sofa, was the body of my Clara, as beautiful as when I had last seen her before she too became possessed. And then, when I wearily made my way out of the room and found the lifeless bodies of

my little Terence and my daughters Jane and Rachel, who had all been struck lifeless at the moment the Sword entered Vitrac's body, I realized the full, mind-searing truth. The creature I had stabbed was no longer Vitrac at all! He had taken my body but when he had summoned down the master from the void, it had expelled his own twisted soul from its new incarnation. Vitrac was no more—only the Evil had lived in my body! The bodies of my wife and children—the bodies of all who became possessed by the Evil—they were all animated and controlled by the same single, diabolical intelligence and energy. The 'master' lived in more than one body at the same time. When I had sent him back into the dark dimension beyond this universe whence he came, I had simultaneously expelled him from every other body he had possessed. Had the Evil not been checked, he might well have had a hundred, and then a thousand, and then a million bodies. Their eyes would have been his eyes, their brains would have been his brain, their limbs would have been his limbs. Although they could function independently, they were all controlled, motivated and inspired by the same solitary, supreme intelligence and will that emanated from the first body he had possessed—*my own*. He could have lived in an infinity of bodies, and eventually controlled the entire world.

I have done what I had to do, and the souls of my family and all others who had up to then succumbed were free again. There is still evil on the earth, but man has the freedom and power to overcome it unless another Vitrac succeeds in again opening the door to the 'master.' May my narrative serve as a warning to any who may be tempted to follow the path of that dark and blasphemous knowledge, for they will bring destruction upon themselves and others, both in this world and beyond. It is not good for man to know what lies beyond the dimensions of the universe in the dark void. It is the secret that must forever remain secret.

They are coming for me shortly, to take me from this cell in which I write these final words and hang me by the neck until I am dead for the murder—although they do not know it—of *my own body*. It does not matter if the world believes

that it was Robert Middleton who paid the penalty for the slaying of Justin Branderson—his soul is reunited with that of his beloved Ellen and they leave no children or close relatives on this earth. As for myself, I gladly go to my death in this world. I shall live in the next and rejoin those I love who are also delivered from the Evil. After all that I have suffered and experienced, one small plunge into darkness at the end of a hangman's rope is of no consequence to me. You who read this, do not pity me, for I have won the greatest victory and avoided the worst fate. But the true credit for this victory, this salvation belongs to Robert Middleton. He has saved me, as he helped save mankind, from what must never be allowed to come into this world again.

POSTSCRIPT FROM WALTER RICHARD MAYHEW, PSYCHIC INVESTIGATOR

Jonathan King, whose eloquent testimony failed to convince the court and save Robert Middleton, did indeed complete his medical studies at Bart's Hospital and thereafter studied para-psychology under the great if eccentric Westenheimer. With his lovely wife Miranda, he then took up residence and the practice of psychological medicine in his clinic in the sun-drenched vineyards and rolling hills of the peaceful Tyrol, which was where I first met him and learned his astounding story. It was also, of course, through him that I was able to secure and read the testimony of Justin Branderson as delivered to Jonathan shortly after the execution of Robert Middleton for Justin Branderson's murder.

As for myself, I am already past the prime of my years, and it is entirely possible that this volume may appear posthumously, especially since Dr. King and his wife did request that I make provisions that this account will not be publicly released until twenty-five years after he met with me and I had been given Justin Branderson's statement (the medical establishment—even its more liberal elements—would, he suspected, take at least that long to become reasonably tolerant of the convictions he expressed in this material.)

This being the case, it is entirely possible that others with newer and more advanced insights and information may be able to add to the perspective of the events I have recounted, including those that I myself experienced when I went to the Brandersons' house that first and only time. Even with my own limited knowledge and my profession which, of course predisposes me to belief in the supernatural, I realize so-called ordinary, mundane explanations or at least rationalizations may exist for what I experienced and for aspects of the documents which I have provided.

The skeptical reader may believe, for example, that what

I described as unexplained memory lapses concerning the fearful reactions I had to little Terence's room after I had left it before returning to it, might simply have been a healthy reaction of my 'rational' senses to a perverted imagination stimulated by the child's room and sense of an evil presence, reinforced by the many stories from occult lore and some of our finest novelists and storytellers concerning the harboring by supposedly the most innocent of beings—children—of the most infamous or devilish spirits. It may have been that my 'logical' mind took over when I had left the presence conducive to such thoughts. And it may have been merely morbid curiosity that impelled me to return to the child's room.

The ashes in the fireplace of the master's study that my client implied were from papers I had burned, and of which I had no memory when first I spoke with him, may have been there for some time and may not have been of the drawings I had taken from Terence's room. And yet I had not those drawings when I later looked for them. Perhaps I inadvertently dropped them from my pockets during my stay in the house or at a later time after I departed it. Perhaps.

The drawings of the faces I had seen in Terence's room were not literally representational of Vitrac as described by other documents herein included. Some, as I have said at the outset, showed a longish face, similar to Vitrac's. Others had no similarity at all, being short and squat. But would Vitrac not have been clever enough so as to be certain that Terence, even during his possession or just before it, did not reveal this state in his drawings?

I have said that I could not swear to my client after spending my night in the house whether I slept or did not. I thought I had not but I could not be certain. Could this not be honest confusion, as happens to many people in less strange circumstances than mine, even in one's own home and bed during those curious half-waking, half-sleeping times that occur most commonly, it is said, during the early morning hours? Yes, possibly, but the confusion might also be—and I believe most certainly was—induced by the residual of the terrible forces that had once possessed that entire house.

Finally, however, what of the remarkable similarity I have reported between the expressions on the faces of the drawing by Terence of the two hanged men and those on the faces of the men whose sketches were shown in the *Illustrated Gazette*, and the fact indisputable that even the first of the crimes imputed to the two men had been committed after Terence's death? I have said that looking upon the reproductions of the sketched faces of the condemned men shown in the *Gazette* unlocked certain memories from the dark cells in my mind that had been immured ever since my night in the Brandersons' house. I have said how horrible many of the drawings there seemed to me. Children, however, have, as is known, highly active and uninhibited imaginations, and often even delight in things judged by adults as cruel and perverse. I might, it could be argued, have been shocked and so repressed the shock at seeing drawings which offended my adult and conditioned mind. And it was only later, upon seeing the faces of the two men, that I quite naturally recalled the drawings. Except what of my conviction that there was such exact tallying of the expressions on the faces in the drawing and on the two men in the *Gazette's* sketches? Some may suggest I have myself a most active imagination, appropriate to one in my profession, that I am more given to suggestion than others, and therefore claim that in retrospect I imposed the definition of the faces seen in the *Gazette* on that of the drawing of Terence, whereas in fact his drawing was one of two men being hung—not an unheard-of scene for the hand of a mentally upset child to depict—and the exact features and expression were my own imaginative contribution evoked by the men in the *Gazette*.

Perhaps, but I am convinced otherwise. I am convinced that the haunting hand of Vitrac's spirit or his deputy directed me to destroy those drawings in the grate, that an effort was made to divert me from that room, to erase from my mind memory of it, as well as destruction of the drawings I had taken, that Terence was given a satanic foreknowledge of evil and the look of those who would perpetrate it through the agency of Vitrac or his successor. I am certain that 'rational' men would debate my claim

even now if they were to compare the pictures—I have no idea if the original drawing survives—and suggest that the *Gazette*'s resurrected sketches were too imperfect to be identified as exact replicas of *any* drawing, let alone a small child's. But 'rational' men have been known to commit all manners of errors—including the execution of innocent persons—in the name of reason and logic and law.

I know not if the two men who were hanged and whose sketches appeared in the *Gazette*, and whose crimes were described by the judge as inspired by 'blackest, most satanic evil' were possessed by some new Vitrac—surely the evidence of evil in the world suggests that while Justin Branderson may have saved his own soul and that of his family and others taken over by Vitrac, the original Evil persists and others of its emissaries must still be among us. Perhaps they were such, and hence the remarkable resemblance I am convinced I noted—a link in a once broken but not destroyed chain of evil. Perhaps they were more prosaic malefactors. Perhaps.

Some may also feel I have given too little attention to the explanation of the judge at Robert Middleton's trial for his crime and the judge's dismissal of the documentary evidence and testimony given. But it was the prosecution and the judge who gave so little attention to the evidence adduced, calling it 'a concoction of superstitious myths and fantastic alleged events.' Jonathan King's evidence in extenuation of Robert Middleton's crime was given the worst possible light by the prosecution—which claimed as it did that Middleton merely was anxious to get Miranda out of the Brandersons' house before committing his murderous deed. As for Miranda's strange sickness and hypnotic response as confirmed by Dr. Morell, little weight was given to this (after all, he was a hypnotist). It might have been more convincing from the prosecution's standpoint if they had emphasized that Miranda was recently arrived from New Zealand, that the long journey and sudden change in air had accounted for her apparent illness, not some baleful influence of the supposedly evil Brandersons.

The prosecution's reaction to the letter of Clara Branderson to her friend Ellen Middleton was perhaps most

astonishing: in this instance, with the agreement of the court, the claim of 'occultism and witchcraft' was given at least speculative credence for the purpose of damning Robert Middleton for using them against the Brandersons, and thereby being even less deserving of any mitigating sympathy by the court. Evidence was in the eye and mind of the beholder, to be used—regardless of content—for the purpose (some might say prejudgement or at least prejudice) at hand—in this case the finding of Robert Middleton guilty for the 'cold-blooded' murder of Justin Branderson, with no extenuating circumstances whatsoever.

Of course, the court did not have available the account of Justin Branderson himself, delivered to Jonathan a week after the execution of Robert Middleton. Doubtless, claims would have been made against the authenticity of this remarkable manuscript—though confirmed by Justin's solicitor to be in his own hand—and even if accepted as valid, its interpretation by the court might well have been such as to make little difference in the outcome. Argument would surely have been made, based on Justin's own account of his personality and temperament, that he was a preternaturally restless, ambitious, sensitive and imaginative man. That his mind was already predisposed to believe in occult matters, and later when writing his document, he had already passed beyond the bounds of reason and used the personage of Vitrac, his pact with him and the events that supposedly followed to explain his own hallucinations and guilt feelings that terrified him. The rise in his material fortunes was the natural result, it could be claimed, of his natural talents and creative ambitions when applied to the world of business affairs. His withdrawal from the world, his strange dreams and behavior could be the result of illness, physical and mental, and he had communicated such illness to his beloved wife Clara and even to the children with all of whom he was so close and who had also doubtless suffered in health both from their stay in India and abrupt transition to London—as well as from the grievous sight of their ailing father. Clara's letters to Ellen themselves could be argued to show her own overwrought mental condition, presumably reinforced by her husband's,

and so in what the new science of psychology calls paranoia she believed herself in mortal danger from him.

How to explain Justin's account of Vitrac possessing finally the entire family as well as others who bore his resemblance once under his power—or the 'master's?' Gossip begets gossip—people believed first in the strangeness of the Brandersons and their failure to show themselves. That they were all afflicted by a general devilish sameness of visage due to supernatural forces rather than to the ravages of the same disease was more congenial to the imaginations of neighbors and friends who almost daily read in the sensational press accounts of the occult and witchcraft then being practiced widely in England and on the Continent. Similarly Clara's and others' description of feelings of sudden chill when confronting Justin: why not sudden fear in the face of the sudden and apparently irreversible illness of a loved one? What of such things, as Miranda's painful and then pleasurable release in her dreams at the time when Middleton released the soul of Justin Branderson from his mortal body? Could this not be simply coincidence, (and the exact time of the two events was never really fixed)—they were merely thought to be so close. And the accounts of the trembling of the house of the Brandersons and the other houses at the time of Justin's death, the ascension of a disembodied cloud . . . all could have been merely the gossipy reports and rumors of folk who almost traditionally associate such things with terrible and violent events.

But what of Simon's death in a lodge at the same time as Justin's death? What of the simultaneous deaths of the others *outside* the Branderson family, for whom no familial physical and nervous sympathetic shock reaction could be used in explanation? What of these and all the other matters that even the court declared it could not explain, nor in fact even speculate upon? One could, if determined perhaps, arrange some 'rational' explanations for them all.

Perhaps.

Perhaps they would be true.

Or perhaps they would be further symptom of man's arrogance that says all must be explained by his own piti-

ful, circumscribed knowledge, an arrogance that has made him so often deny and thereby succumb to the evil within and outside us, and which passeth all understanding.

We ignore it—and the lesson of Justin Branderson—at our peril.

THE END

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