

THE DRESS

Anne would have never seen the dress had she not run out of sugar. She had left her sons watching the Saturday afternoon wrestling on the television and walked the short distance into the town centre to rectify the shortage. She was charged, too, with instructions from her sons to purchase Mars bars for Vincent who never appeared to cease eating or growing, and super glue for Martin who was assembling a new dust-trap.

It was in the window of Florence's, the small boutique next to Woolworth's, and it caught her eye not just by virtue of its colour, a rich, deep, crimson, but because it was one of the few visible articles left in what was normally a well-stocked display. It was distinctive and unusual in cut and style, but the kind of dress which she might be able to wear on most occasions, even if it was cut a little low in the neck for her. It looked as if it was her size and she did not expect Terry home from his football for a good hour. She had plenty of time and with no further debate she went in and asked if she might try it on.

"The crimson gown?" repeated the proprietor, as if the window were packed full of dresses and he needed to be absolutely certain as to the one she had in mind. "We have only two in that style. I am sure that one will fit you, perfectly."

She knew he was the proprietor. She had seen him from time to time standing in the doorway, smiling at the younger women as they passed by, soliciting custom. Granted, he was handsome and young himself, but he was categorised as dark and oily in Anne's compendium of men, probably of Greek or Turkish origin although there was no trace of this when he spoke. She also had him down as the type who would grope and paw his female assistants and, no doubt, spy on the customers if an opportunity arose.

With a little trepidation, she went into the changing room and pulled the curtains tight, checking meticulously for the slightest chink. The sight of the dress set her heart racing when she viewed herself in the mirror. It might have been made for her! Was it just a little too daring, a little too revealing? Come on, she could wear it that very evening and surprise Terry! She would probably amaze him as he had often commented upon her, as he saw it, prudish habit of wearing high-necked, low-risk, dresses. Yet, she had a cleavage. It should be shown when the occasion was right.

"I must apologise for the disorder you see around you," said the proprietor as he smoothed and folded the material. "We are closing down next week for redecoration and refitting, only temporarily you understand. I have packed the girls off on holiday, leaving me to clear away the balance of the stock before the workmen come in and pull everything apart. But I will be here next week should anything not be to your satisfaction."

Yes, he was ogling her, picturing how she looked in the dress and, perhaps, how she looked out of it. Maybe he had a video camera secreted in the changing room, or it was a two-way mirror. Anything was possible! Once outside she felt more comfortable and relaxed, pausing to eye the identical dress which was still in the window. It would just be her luck if someone came along now, bought it, and turned up that evening wearing it! It would just be her luck if Terry asked her to take it off when he saw it! As long as he did so before they went to the party.

As she was standing there the proprietor suddenly materialised before her in the window, stepping forward out of the internal gloom. She gave a little start when he smiled at her in a manner she found most unpleasant, and she fled into Woolworth's.

She was lingering near the lingerie section when she heard the noise. It sounded like a series of muffled thuds followed by a low-pitched groan. What ever had created it, it had originated from behind a green, sliding, door set in the wall. It was cracked slightly open. Anne looked around her. No-one else was near; no-one else appeared to have heard, so she cautiously

went over and peered through the crack. In the semi-darkness beyond she could just distinguish the crumpled and grotesquely contorted body of a woman lying on the ground at the foot of a flight of narrow stairs.

Unable to control her reaction, Anne spun on her heel and walked away. The store was reeling before her eyes and her heart was pounding as she felt an irresistible and uncontrollable compulsion which drove her to distance herself from the door and the gruesome sight that lay beyond. Yet she would not allow herself to leave the store. In a semi-trance she wandered aimlessly around the counters for several minutes before she recovered a degree of composure and rationality. "Oh God," she said to herself. "What am I to do?"

Could this be the big test? Was it a trial sent by God? But even now the recollection was becoming blurred and creating doubts. Her vision had been brief, a mere glance in an instance of time. Had she really seen something, something that she should not have seen? Or was it all a trick of her imagination? She could recall the noise and this recollection sent a cold shiver through her trembling body. It had been the sound of something, somebody, falling down the flight of stairs. She was positive about that. And there had been a groan too. Of that there was no doubt. Someone had suffered an awful accident and was almost certainly lying there still; a woman who might be critically injured and in need of urgent medical attention. She might lie there undiscovered for hours! The store would soon be closing.

Yet there was this conflict in Anne's mind. There was a nagging doubt that she had really seen someone there and there was an ingredient in that which she thought she had actually seen which made her terrified at the thought of returning, something elusive, something she was unable to identify, yet something far more potent and significant than the morbid possibility that the woman was dead. However, as her sanity and self-possession returned, she knew that she had to return, verify, and seek assistance.

When she reached the door she was surprised to find it no longer ajar. Someone had closed it! Anne hesitated, trying to divine the significance of this development, but she had to know what was beyond. After a few seconds' contemplation, she took a firm hold of the handle and braced herself.

"Can I be of assistance, madam?" said a deep, booming, voice from behind her. Anne's composure disappeared instantly. In a frenzied panic she spun around to find herself confronted and dwarfed by a towering, leering, man whose frame seemed to totally eclipse her view of the remainder of the store. Her thoughts ran amok as her senses fell into disorder, and she said the first thing that came into her head.

"I wondered if I could get out to the car park this way." It was a silly thing to say.

"No madam," the man said ponderously as if she had strained his limited patience close to breaking point. "The exit to the car park is over there where it says to the car park. It is clearly marked. This door leads nowhere. Look, I will show you."

"No!" she protested, and tried to turn away, but the word froze on her lips as he yanked the door open.

"There you are," he announced. "Nothing!" Cautiously she looked. There was the dim, dingy corridor and her heart missed a beat when she saw that there was a flight of stairs leading up, away into the darkness. But there was no body, not a trace. "Your shopping bag?" the man said, thrusting it towards her after having examined the contents. That was all right. He would find only the sugar in there, and the dress. The dress! Why did her heart skip when she thought of it?

Could he be the store detective? She was about to tell him what she thought she had seen when a number of new ideas smashed, like meteorites, into her troubled mind and she was suddenly afraid. "Would you like me to show you further?" he asked sarcastically. "Or shall I show you to your car?" he added sinisterly.

“Oh, no! That will be quite all right,” she whispered, and started to walk unsteadily towards the exit he had indicated. She had no car. She could not even drive. Now her instincts told her repeatedly that she should get to the relative safety of her home as quickly as possible and without arousing any further suspicion in this or any other man. Was he following her, to see where she went? At the exit she paused and bravely looked back. No, he was still standing near the sliding door, but he was watching her. Of that she was certain.

Anne walked home in a daze, finding her way more by instinct than design, alert only to the fearful possibility that someone might follow her. Once indoors she went straight up to the bedroom and, without a second thought, placed the dress in her wardrobe. She sat on the end of her bed and studied her pale, mournful, image in the dressing table mirror. What did it mean? What had really happened? What ever the truth, she was aware of certain facts and she could draw reasonable conclusions. She had heard a noise, of someone falling downstairs. There was a flight of stairs there. She had seen a woman's body. Why would she think she had imagined that? And there was something else, something important. If only she could remember!

She closed her eyes and tried to picture the scene again. It made her shudder. Whatever it was, one inescapable conclusion that she had to face was that the woman was dead and, if so, she had been murdered. Why else had the body disappeared? The way the woman was lying, still, inanimate, distorted; she could not have got up and walked away in the short interval of time between Anne seeing her first and then going back. There had been a pallid, grey, waxiness in her face. Her eyes had been lifeless and seemed to stare into space. She was dead, but if she could recall all that, what was it that she had forgotten?

Had she witnessed a murder? Oh, no! That was too absurd! She had been watching far too much television, and that was what they all would say.

“Mum? When's dinner? I'm hungry! Did you get my Mars?” The voice of her son roused her from her morbid thoughts. In her anxiety to return home she had forgotten to purchase both the Mars bar and the superglue! It was too late now to go back and she wondered if she would ever have the courage to go into Woolworth's again. Still shaking she shut the wardrobe on the dress and went downstairs. A large black cloud followed her.

“Running late, are we?” cried Terry as he breezed in and went to sit in front of the television.

“Mum forgot to get our things when she went to the shops,” she heard Martin moan.

“And dinner's late, too,” groaned Vincent. “I'm starving!”

During the meal Anne was suddenly conscious that Terry was studying her closely. “You haven't forgotten that we are going out this evening?” he asked. She shook her head and looked at her plate. It had all but been driven from her mind. Perhaps she was becoming forgetful as well as untruthful? “Better get your skates on, then!”

She had no wish to go to the party, but felt that she could not decline without provoking any number of searching questions. Later, she was unable to recall very little of the evening's events, and the new dress - it remained unworn on its hanger in the wardrobe. When Terry came to bed and fumbled his way towards her she feigned sleep and he withdrew. She was really wide awake, kept so by one question which repeated itself, over and over, tormenting her. What should she do? Terry would never believe her. If he did he would only send her to the police station. What would happen then? She would be dragged into court and questioned, just the way she had seen it happen on television. There would be confrontation, cross-examination by one of those sharp, incisive, defence counsels. And what if the accused man was not found guilty and was released? Would he come looking for her? What would be gained by going to the police now? The poor woman, who ever she was, was undoubtedly dead. Someone, somewhere, would report her as missing, and the police would find her body somewhere. Modern forensic science would

locate and identify the place where she had died and who the killer was. Her involvement was quite unessential. She could just allow matters to take their course.

In the small hours of that Sunday morning Anne told herself these things. If she could fall asleep, everything would be all right when she awoke, and eventually she dozed and fell into the clutches of indistinct but threatening nightmares. When the dawn came, although she could recall no detail of what she had dreamed, she found herself impregnated with a sombre and morbid horror. She went to Church early that morning, surprising her husband by appearing at the bedside fully dressed whilst he was still waking. "I want to go to confession," she said. "You can catch me up."

"Catch you up?" he called after her. He did not understand. He had not been to Church in months.

In the confessional she recounted in a soft, faltering, voice the events of the previous afternoon. "What should I do, Father?" she whispered.

"Firstly, I do not think that you have committed a sin of any great significance, but from a secular point of view, you must go to the police."

"Yes?" she said doubtfully.

"You appear to be reluctant?"

"I am fearful," she whispered.

"Fearful of what, my child?"

"Of the consequences, and that the might nor believe me."

"If they disbelieve you, there will be no consequences."

"I am not really certain of myself, as to what I actually saw."

"Then you should make that clear. You must go - it is your duty."

Couldn't you go for me?"

"That is impossible, my child. Have you not asked your husband?"

He would only laugh at me. I mean, I don't think he would believe me."

"In that case, you must go yourself. Pray to God to give you the strength and courage. Your prayers will be answered."

As she was saying her penance, Terry knelt beside her. "Why did you go so early?" he whispered. "And why tell me to follow?"

"I just wanted you here, beside me," she said, mysteriously and fell back to prayer.

The courage and strength that she prayed for were slow in arriving. The question of what to do nagged her without any clear resolution through breakfast and throughout the morning. By the time that lunch was over and the dishes were safely stowed in the rack, she could bear the pressure no longer. "I am going for a walk," she announced.

"A walk?" they cried. "But it is drizzling out there!" No-one offered to go with her.

Anne had never been inside a police station before. She found the interior quite different to that in her mental picture which had been assembled from numerous television serials. An officer sat behind a modern, glass screened, counter which would not have appeared out of place in the Building Society or the Bank. At her approach he stopped writing, drew aside the glass, and greeted her.

"I think I saw a dead woman yesterday, in Woolworth's," she blurted, "but I am not really sure as when I went back she was gone." The officer frowned, puzzlement spreading across his features. "Oh! I shouldn't have come" she cried, turning to leave. "I am wasting your time."

"No, no," he called "Not so fast." She hesitated and was conscious that he was scrutinising her in much the same manner as her husband had the previous evening.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she said quietly, looking at the floor.

“Oh, yes, I believe you when you said you thought you saw a dead woman. Now, just tell me what happened, slowly. I won't write anything down. I will just listen.” So, for the second time that day, Anne recounted the events, stressing her doubt as to what she did see, but being unable to avoid reliving some of the horror, struggling to keep it concealed inside her.

“And you want me,” he said when she had finished, “to tell you that there was a dead woman there?”

“Oh no!” she cried desperately. “I want you to tell me that there was not! Please tell me that it was all my imagination and that it did not really happen!”

“It is a very serious matter,” murmured the officer, running his finger down a column in the ledger before him. “Although we have had no reports of missing people fitting your description. In fact we have had none today? And you cannot remember what this woman was wearing? I will make a note of your report in the day book, just the same.”

“Must you?” Anne asked nervously. “I mean, if I am wrong?”

“I expect you were mistaken,” said the officer, fingering his pen, “but we must be certain. If I can start with your name and address?”

Anne was ready to tell him when a small grenade seemed to explode inside her head. “Oh, I can't! I can't!” she cried, and ran frantically out onto the pavement. Near the bus station she caught sight of a policeman and recoiled in fright. So that was how it was to be! She could not go into Woolworth's. She would have to give the police station a wide berth, and now she would be scared half to death every time she saw a policeman. As she walked home she told herself that she had done her duty and that she could forget the matter and act as if it had never happened. Her reassurances were, however, half-hearted and barely credible.

At home the men were doing something to the car and barely noticed her. She slipped upstairs and opened the wardrobe. The dress hung there. That was real enough, but what more could she now do to dispel the fears and worry? Nothing! She resolved that she would put the whole affair out of her mind and forget it. All of it. The matter would not allow itself to be forgotten. Apart from the fact that the dress lurked in the wardrobe, anxiety continued to infiltrate and annex her thoughts throughout the remainder of the day. The question of whether or not she had been right in what she thought she had seen became paramount, eclipsing the original question of what action she should take. In her imagination, her husband, the boutique proprietor, the man in Woolworth's, the Priest, the police, everyone, told her that she was wrong. It was her integrity, even her sanity, that was on trial. “I did see it! I did!” she hissed in bed.

“See what?” murmured Terry, already half-asleep. Anne tried to picture the interior of Woolworth's. She was not conscious of losing control of the images she created and falling asleep, but she started to dream. There was the tall, broad, man who had confronted her at the door. Now he was dressed as a conjurer in evening dress with long tails.

“Gather 'round, ladies and gentlemen, gather 'round!” he was crying as he beckoned to the shoppers. “See our latest illusion - the lady vanishes. Nothing quite like it has been seen before! You will not be able to believe your eyes! But, first I need a volunteer from the audience. How about you, madam?”

He was addressing her, and Anne watched in horror as she saw herself, wearing the dress, step forward, turn and smile as she curtsied and revealed her cleavage before the gathering.

“First of all I will place her under my power,” he announced, gripping her throat with both hands so tightly that her face went red before imitating the colour of the dress. Suddenly her head flopped, lifeless, forward. “I would ask you all to note that I employ no trickery whatsoever. No hypnotism, no sleight of hand. Nothing like that! Yet she is completely under my power. See?” He took hold of the neck of the dress and lifted her bodily so that she hung with her limp feet inches above the floor, her arms senseless at her sides. “Would another member of the audience like to step forward and corroborate my statement? Come on - anyone! You, sir? Don't be afraid. She won't feel a thing. Punch her - hard! Harder! She will not respond.”

Anne closed her eyes, but she could still see and feel what was happening. She turned to try and leave but the boutique proprietor was standing behind her, blocking her escape. "The dress fits you perfectly," he said smiling lasciviously. "I always thought it would."

She turned the other way but the Priest faced her. "You must do your duty, my child," he pronounced.

"Now, if I can continue to have your close attention, I will place the body, er, the young lady, behind this door. You will observe that it is a perfectly ordinary door, nothing special, no hidden gadgets, trapdoors, or secret compartments, but once I have closed the door, thus, and said the magic words, the lady will have vanished"

"Open the door! Open the door!" the audience began to chant.

"Hey presto, and voila!" cried the conjurer, pulling back the door to reveal a poorly lit empty corridor.

"There you are," said the police officer. "There was no body. It was all a trick from the very beginning, all in your imagination."

Anne awoke, breathless, and immediately felt her throat and ribs. The room was in darkness and there was no sound except for her husband's heavy, reassuring, breathing. At first she was petrified but gradually she distilled the substance of the dream and realised that it had provided her with the answer to the one elusive fact regarding what she had actually seen, although it was a long time before she fully realised its significance.

It was the normal Monday morning scramble, to find the right clothes, cook breakfast, and despatch both her husband to his work and the children to school. Once that part of the routine was over, she had time to stop and collect her thoughts. Again, she sat on the bed and studied the mirror, reviving fragments of the dream as she sought inspiration and courage. For, when the conjurer had thrown open the door and the audience had gasped and seen nothing, or had been induced into seeing nothing, she had seen herself in the dress, lying there at the bottom of the stairs. Was it an omen, some kind of premonition? Did it really mean that she should not dare to either go to Woolworth's or wear the dress?

Oh, no! There was no alternative but for her to meet the problem head on. Without further thought she opened the wardrobe and took out the dress. Oh, it fitted her so well! It really could have been made just for her! Was it too revealing for it to be worn outside? Through the window she could see old Mr Banks, uttering his repertoire of obscenities as he tugged at the weeds. He was down to only one of his normal complement of pullovers. At least, it had to be mild.

Woolworth's was all but deserted when she entered. She could see no sign of the man whom she had assumed to be the store detective, but the thought did occur to her that he might be waiting on the other side of the door. The dress, which had turned heads and evoked whistles in its wake, gave her an uncustomary confidence. She dismissed the idea. As soon as she was certain that no-one was watching her, she slid the door open and slipped through the gap, closing it behind her.

Anne found herself in the corridor. To her left it terminated after a few yards in a substantial iron door. To her right was the dimly lit flight of stairs. And she realised that where she stood was on the very spot on which she had seen the woman's body, clad in a dress identical to the one she now wore. For a moment she felt dizzy and thought that she might faint and end up there sprawled, like the woman before her, at the foot of the stairs. Breathing deeply and holding firmly on to the stair rail for support, she slowly climbed upward. What ever it was she sought, she was convinced that she would find it there, at the top of the stairs.

It was a new and completely unexpected experience for Terry to arrive home and find the house empty and locked against him. Night was falling but no curtains were drawn, not could he

see any lights on. There was no sign of life inside at all. Indoors he searched for a note or message which would indicate where Anne and the boys had gone, but he found none. Vexed and worried, he was debating what to do next when the telephone rang. "Is that you, Anne?" he said hastily as he placed the receiver to his ear.

There was a pause as if the caller was unfamiliar with the language, let alone that form of address, then a gruff voice said, "Dad?"

"Vincent? Where are you?"

"At Roger's. We're both here."

"Is you mother there?" asked Terry, hopefully.

"No," said Vincent, suspiciously. "When we got home we found the house all locked up so we came around here. I've phoned lots of times. Where is she?"

"I expect that she's had to pop out and has been delayed. You'd better come home now."

"What about dinner?"

"We can rustle something up, but I expect your mother will be home by the time you arrive. She can't be far away."

But though he sat in the kitchen with the door open so that he could hear the bell or the merest tap on the door, Anne did not come. Dinner came, cascaded from tins and hacked from the end of a loaf, and it went. He told the boys that she had gone to their Gran's, trying to reassure himself at the same time as he did them. It was a futile task. Terry had already assessed that Anne's absence was the result of something extraordinary. He had discovered the dress that she had worn at breakfast lying on the bed. All the suitcases were still there. So, too, were her clothes, intact and packed neatly into drawers or suspended in the wardrobe. She had acted strangely at the weekend, going to church, then going out for that walk, and being generally preoccupied. Was it possible that she had run away? Wives did that kind of thing, often quite without warning, but not Anne, not his Anne! An accident, maybe? Surely the hospital or the police would have contacted him had that been the explanation. Amnesia? White slavery? Her mother taken ill?

He toyed with the idea of telephoning around all their friends and acquaintances, anywhere she might have gone, but abandoned it. Had she been visiting someone, she would have telephoned him. His enquiries would only at best arouse gossip and speculation, at worst spread the anxiety. And, deep down, he felt embarrassed.

He sent the boys to bed early on an evening which seemed reluctant to pass and, as soon as he was sure that they were asleep, he phoned the police station. They did not appear to be over-concerned. There had been no reports of unidentified female accident victims or bodies discovered. He was told that in all probability, she would turn up or make contact. They usually did, he was assured.

Anne failed to conform. Breakfast brought complaints from his sons about the standard of cooking but no news. Terry was tempted to tell them that they might have to become accustomed to it. How long could he hold out? Perhaps he should telephone his mother and ask her to come over and help?

He called the police station again. They had no further information. "Perhaps you would let us have your telephone number at work, just in case we need to contact you," the faceless voice said.

"I think I would rather stay at home, in case she reappears," Terry replied. He did not relish the thought of sitting at work, looking at the telephone, wondering if, should he dial his home number, Anne would answer.

"A missing person?" asked the duty officer as his colleague replaced the receiver.

"It sounds like an absconded wife to me. These husbands always express surprise and ignorance when it happens."

“We did have a strange woman come in here on Sunday and go on about having seen a dead woman in Woolworth's. It all sounded a bit odd and she wouldn't leave her name or address. I didn't believe her at the time, but you'd better follow it up.”

Armed with the duty officer's account of Anne's garbled tale, the police officer went to see his former colleague who now held the position of store detective at Woolworth's. “This is very interesting,” said the store detective. “I discovered a woman trying to open that particular door on, let me see, it, it must have been late Saturday afternoon. It used to be a fire exit, but it was stopped up after the reorganisation last year. The door was retained because we sometimes use the storeroom above Florence's.”

“The boutique?”

“Next door.”

“Perhaps we had better take a look?”

“Then we'll have to talk to Brian Chapman who runs it. It's his storeroom.” They found the boutique proprietor standing on the pavement outside his shop surveying, from a safe distance, the frenzied and destructive actions of the workmen. When he had listened to the story he shocked the two men by bursting into laughter. “A woman's body?” he cried. “ON Saturday afternoon? Of, it's marvellous, too good to be true!”

“It is not a laughing matter,” cautioned the policeman.

“Oh, but it is,” chuckled Mr Chapman. You cannot imagine! Let me explain. You can see that the shop is being refitted although I am now having misgivings about it. Well, late Saturday afternoon I was finishing off the job of clearing the stock from the shop and moving it to our storeroom which is upstairs at the rear of the premises. To get to the storeroom you go through the fire door, past the sliding door into Woolworth's, and up a flight of steps. I had taken the last of the dummies from the window and to save time I left the dress on it. I remember it particularly because I had sold an identical one to a young woman not long before - quite a good-looking woman, come to think of it. Anyway, when I managed to struggle to the top of the stairs I found that the storeroom door had shut. It's on a closer which trips the lights as well - saves having the girls leaving them on all night and costing me a fortune in electricity bills. I propped the dummy up against the wall whilst I was finding the keys and it slid sideways, toppling all the way down the stairs. That must have been what your woman saw - one of my dummies! In fact, I can also recall that I slid the door shut, cursing the assistant who left it open. They use it as a short cut to the car park on their way home. It all fits, don't you see?”

“It all sounds very plausible, but I think we should go and examine this storeroom.”

“Really?” said the boutique proprietor, peering into the shop. “Do you think that's really necessary? Just as you wish, but we will have to go in through Woollies if that's all right? The door in my shop is blocked by building materials.”

Inside the store detective slid the door open. “Well, there is nothing there,” he announced. They paused on the landing whilst Mr Chapman searched for the storeroom key.

“It isn't locked,” said the policeman, pushing open the door.

“Oh, I must have forgotten, what with everything else,” murmured the proprietor. “We must prop it open as there is no handle on the inside. We would want to get trapped in there. And I must apologise for the lights; the workmen have disconnected the mains supply or something. We have only the emergency lighting to see by.”

The store room was long and, relatively, narrow. The windows had long been boarded over, partly to prevent bleaching, partly for added security. In the weak light none of the men could initially distinguish the extent of the room's contents, but gradually their eyes adjusted and they began to discern the shapes of racks of clothes and dummies in all stages of assembly and disassembly, surrounded by untidy stacks of cardboard boxes of a variety of shapes and sizes. “Now, where is the dummy in question?” asked the policeman.

Mr Chapman peered and squinted. "Let me see. I think I dumped it, over there - no, it's over there, look!" As the men approached the tangled and disorderly heap of limbs, torsos, and clothes, they witnessed something grotesque and horrible, a vision that would remain with each of them, darkly lurking in and stalking their nightmares, until their dying days, For, as if summoned forth by the incantations of the proprietor's voice, from amongst the inanimate chaos came a lithe, snake-like, human arm, and a fist that clutched at the thin black air as it slowly reached out towards them.

Terry was permitted ten minutes at the bedside. "You are going to be in all the papers," he said. "I can see the headlines! Missing Woman Reports Her Own Disappearance!"

"Oh dear," murmured Anne. "I've been so foolish and caused you all that worry and nuisance."

"Nonsense. I think you were very brave, and we were very fortunate." She closed her eyes but the semi-darkness compelled her to open them again. How long would this sensation of raw fear last? She had called for help repeatedly until her voice had weakened and faded, but no help had come. She had found herself trapped, entombed, in a black hole surrounded by inert, human, forms, arms, limbs, anyone of which could have belonged to the dead woman. What had passed, the hallucinations, the endless nightmares, the sound of unidentified objects moving around in the room near her, she could never relate. She had given herself up and resigned herself to a lingering, unavoidable death. And now life had to begin again. How?

"So there was no dead woman?" she said softly.

"No!" exclaimed her husband. "You saw a dummy. It had fallen down the stairs. That was what you heard. It's as well that you went to the police station. They said that you could have been in there for more than a week or more before anyone was likely to go and find you!" He sounded almost gleeful.. She closed her eyes again, but unspeakable things in the shadows were waiting for her and her heart raced. "I can see that you are tired," he said, standing up.

She had wanted to sleep, yearned to sleep, there in the storeroom, but the darkness was frightening. It seemed far darker with her eyes open that it was with them shut, yet she was kept awake, waiting for the touch or the invisible blow from the imagined assailant.

"I'd better leave you now," Terry continued. "The boys can come in this evening." She seemed to have neither the energy nor the words with which to restrain him. Although it pained her bruised face, she contrived a smile. At the door he paused and studied her. "Oh," he added. "From what I could see of it, I like the dress!"

Anne's smile broadened, then subsided as the door slipped noiselessly shut. She closed her eyes. The darkness was there but she was, at last, at peace. Perhaps she would sleep.

THE END