

THE POOL

“We know so very little about our remote ancestors. We are knowledgeable of our own time to an extent never equalled before by mankind, but as one looks back detailed knowledge tails off rapidly, until one passes over the precipice which separates history from the great undefined pools of pre-history. It is easy to assume that we know nothing because there is nothing to know. That is not the case. The period of man's prehistoric existence is colossal compared with his historic past and the paradox of all this is that our lives are dominated and infused, some might even say guided, with instincts, practices, beliefs, taboos and a form of natural justice, all part of a legacy originating from that period though we are mostly, and for the most part totally unaware of the fact and the extent. History covers only a microscopic page in the book of cosmic existence. Across the ages, the hand and soul of primitive man reaches out and touches each and everyone of us.” Professor Alexander Stewart paused and examined his pipe. “But I am standing here and giving you a lecture, Charles, and you are allowing me to do it out of courtesy which only makes it worse. It is quite unintentional. You must excuse me.”

“No, no,” murmured his companion, demurely. “It is all of interest and I know that it is a pet subject of yours, though the coincidence of our discoveries and experience with your visit is pure serendipity.”

“Ay. There are deep and dark places, both in the world and in the minds of the men who inhabit it. And through it all runs a fierce primeaval force, fearful, powerful, moving, sometimes rationally, sometimes without apparent reason, always mysterious and elusive. You might call it “God”, or the very essence of life itself. We may try to ignore it, insulating ourselves with our modern technology and material comforts, but every now and then the crust of our civilisation parts and its presence is manifest, good or evil. Anyway, shall we go in and see these discoveries of yours?” Charles solemnly lifted the latch and threw open the door to the gardener's shed. Together the two men stepped into the gloomy sanctuary.

It might have been the thud of the morning paper on the doormat that brought Charles precipitately to his senses and to a vivid awareness of the breakfast table.

“Charles?” It was Laura's voice. “Charles? Are you all right?” From beneath the rolling blond locks her steel blue eyes were fixed upon him. For a moment he stared at her features, at the firm, moist, lips and her small, charming, nose. As he did he felt captivated by the profile which never failed to intrigue and enchant him no matter how intimate his knowledge. And, in that extended moment, he was plunged into an enveloping mist of sadness as the years were stripped away and his mind leapt backwards. What was it, the essence seeping through his metabolism and causing his heart to race? He could give it a medical description, but that did no more than reveal the chemistry. Was it nostalgia, love, or guilt? And why, today, was it paralleled with a presentiment of fear?

Thoughts and emotions floated like spectres out of the mist, each indistinct at first, then taking material form as they neared his consciousness. He loved his wife. More than anything else, he loved her. It was now in a different way to the early, rapturous, passion they had shared. It was now mature, constant and stable, and it saturated him, penetrating every fibre. Yet he found it impossible to put into words and tell her. Why should that be so? Was it because the words seemed so facile and inadequate to express his fundamental feelings? He simply did not know. So, he did not tell her.

His gaze drifted around the table. The children had stopped eating and sat staring at him, frozen in mid-mouthful as if his reverie has invoked Carabossa's spell. What had started this train of thought? He probed and tried to rationalise, tracing the trouble back to its lowest accessible

level. He was aware of a disturbance to his mental equilibrium, but how and by what? There was a pain from an invisible wound, yet he appeared totally unaware of its occurrence. What had happened to cause it? But he could see only the ripples as they lapped against the edge of the pool. He had not seen what ever it was that had fallen and was now sunken deep from his view. "The swimming pool!" he exclaimed, involuntarily.

"Swimming pool?" echoed the chorus. Sarah clapped her hands in unashamed and undisguised joy.

"The swimming pool, Daddy? You mean we are going to have one? Oh, how super! Wait until I tell the girls at Manor Park!"

"Calm yourself," said Laura, serenely. "I am sure that Miss Baxter would disapprove most strongly of that sort of frolic at the breakfast table." Sarah pulled a face at the thought of Miss Baxter, but her mother had turned towards her husband and addressed him in a tone of demur inquisitiveness. "Now Charles, would you care to enlighten us on the matter that has so occupied you this breakfast time?"

He looked at her again. Her chin was lowered onto an upturned palm, supported by an elbow planted firmly beside the toast. Laura smiled. She knew what he was thinking. It was not a posture that would have earned the approbation of Miss Baxter. He was gathering his thoughts. What had prompted him to speak and say that? True, it had been half in his mind, but it was as if some uncontrollable force had possessed him and spoken in his place. And did he detect a trace of excitement in his wife's voice and a tiny extra sparkle in her eye? "If the builders were to start at half-term," he found himself saying slowly, "it could be ready for the summer holidays." It gathered impetus. "I think we should accept Wilson's offer. It is not the lowest of the quotations, but it is clear as to its inclusions, and he has a good name."

"What about its exclusions?" inserted Richard.

"Yes, it is clear as to its exclusions as well. If no-one has any objection I will speak to Mr Wilson today."

"Have you decided exactly where it is going to go? And how will the workmen get to it? Neither I nor Mrs Ovenden will want to have them parading through the house." Charles swung around and pointed through the French windows.

"I think we'll put it there, just beyond the lawn and clear of the old oak, this side of the laurels." He paused. Movement amongst the laurels arrested his attention as a pair of alarmed birds flew off, shrieking loudly. And there - what was that? A fleeting shadowy glimpse of a figure. Was it a man? Charles blinked and started forward in his chair, but it was gone and tranquillity returned to the leaves. "Just this side of the laurels," he repeated, and fell silent, deep in thought once more.

Breakfast resumed on a more clamorous course. The children, excited, expounded extravagant plans for parties and friends. Laura remained intent and alert, not once moving her gaze from her husband's face. "Charles?" she said sharply after a while.

He stumbled mentally. "Laura?" For a moment she looked stern, almost anxious, then a smile pregnant with improvised charm swept across her features.

"What were you really thinking about?" she asked. He shrugged and failed to find an answer. "You appeared to be miles away," she prompted.

"I suppose I was." But he failed to utter the words with the tinge and emphasis he intended. He saw his wife colour and look involuntarily at the children, but they were too full of schemes to notice. "What are you doing today?" he started again, trying to make the words sound more casual than those previously. She leaned forward, twisting her head so that her long neck looked particularly seductive.

"I?" she began, sounding slightly defensive. "I thought I might drive into Wincanton and change my library books."

Library book? All these books! When ever did she find the time to read them? “You seem to be getting through a lot of books recently,” he said, trying to make it sound light and resisting an urge to switch his attention from his wife's ruffled features to the strange magnetism of the laurels. It was almost as if he had discovered a connection between his wife's confusion and their disturbance.

“Am I?” Her gaze moved, away, down, the eyelids lowered, her long lashes curling across her cheeks. An invisible cloud passed between them leaving a faint, barely detectable, shadow in his heart. Library books appeared to represent a further area of sensitivity. Was it the subject matter of what she read, or something else? It did not matter. Charles had touched a small sore. He would withdraw and attempt to heal it.

“I could run you over after surgery,” he said hopefully, reaching for the toast, innocently unaware of the ambivalent nature of his offer. “I have very few calls today.” Laura's glare informed him that this was no compensation. There was no change in her features, but that upward flash of her eyes sufficed. Hastily he looked away, back across the lawn into the evergreen foliage of the shrubbery. It was still, calm as it yielded the last vestiges of Spring mist up to the atmosphere and the greedy rays of the morning sun.

“Oh, I was planning to go in early,” she said suddenly. “I would be there and back before surgery is over.” A pause followed as she fingered an unused knife. In it she caught sight of her reflection and she promptly laid it aside, pushing it away from her. “Though I could do a little shopping, and I thought that I might call in on Mrs Crowfoot,” she added with deliberate emphasis. The expedition had grown in magnitude and was assuming a quite unattractive form. Wandering around the small library and museum was acceptable, but to be trapped into indeterminate shopping and unsolicited house calls was not.

“We must invite John Harrington over soon,” he heard himself say. The laurels swayed and the dewy leaves sparkled in the sun as a slight breeze caught and disturbed them.

“That would be nice,” said Laura without expressing her true feelings. The hall clock was striking half-past-eight. It was the call to duty. Soon old Mrs Jones would be in the receptionist's area, checking the appointments book and laying out the patients' files, performing all the services she had provided, gratis, to Charles and the Practice's predecessor, throughout unmeasured years. With a final glance into the garden, he rose, lightly kissed Laura's brow, and went out into the hall.

Dusk was forming as the family assembled in the garden under the lengthening shadow of Long Knoll. “About here,” indicated Charles vaguely, standing below the outermost bows of the oak. He gestured towards a patch of bare ground which lay, like a fire break, between the lawn and the flanking shrubbery. Hardin, the gardener, nursed no plans for it.

“Nothin'll grow in thar,” Hardin had said. “That ground, he's rough, plain bad.” At this point a darker look had spread across the man's weathered features. “In fact,” he added, drawing close to Charles as if about to betray a confidence, “there's those 'round here that'll tell 'e that it's unhallied! That's awhat they call 'em, unhallied! What ever 'e be, nothin'll grow there. Best to leave it alone, leave it be.”

“Have you asked for Hardin's permission?” said Sarah brightly, like a shaft of sunlight piercing the dark storm clouds as they gathered. She was drawn to the gardener, despite his odd temperament. He seemed a creature of the countryside, born not of woman, but sprung from the very earth itself, fashioned from clay. He was like a Godfather to her. Frequently he would appear, stubble-faced and ruddy, clutching a brightly coloured posy which he would present to her.

“Just brought 'ese for ye, Missee,” he would grunt through the broken brown stumps that crowned his gums. Sarah's room was never without fresh flowers or sprays of evergreens.

“It's almost like being a perpetual bride,” she exclaimed joyfully, on day.

“Or more like being at an endless funeral,” her brother had retorted sinisterly.

Charles mentioned Hardin's “unhalled” plot of land to John Harrington when the two had found themselves seated together at an evening function arranged by the local Round Table. The librarian nodded, understanding. “It is a strange phenomenon,” he began authoritatively, cladding himself in the mantle of the local historian. “There is a number of, I suppose you could say recognised, sites around Maiden Bradley and Wincanton, but the area is rich in dark and mysterious prehistory. One needs to look at the barrows and megaliths to see that.” He stopped and sipped his wine. Charles experienced a cold, unaccustomed, shudder.

“Someone has just walked over my grave,” he heard himself think in his mother's voice. It had been one of her favourite sayings.

“There may well be similar spots all over the Plain and the Downs,” added the librarian. “Outwardly, the soil appears good and fertile, but it lies barren for years on end. Nothing will grow, not even the most prolific of weeds. Such sites have existed for sufficiently long for the locals to have coined a word for them, though you find that few will utter it.”

“Unhalled?” murmured Charles, recalling the conversation with his gardener.

“Unhalled? Goodness, no!” laughed the librarian with the superior air of someone who cossets a large number of personal secrets and who is in the comfortable position of having to surrender none of them under duress. Charles did not like it. “That's a corruption of the Christian word “unhallowed”. No, this word is much older than that. They call them “crellocks”. Folklore has it that they are places of great evil and ill fortune, and that they should be avoided at all costs. No sensible farmer will annex one in case it brings disaster on him and his family. You will rarely find a public footpath crossing one and where they do, the locals will not use it. No matter how long or inconvenient the diversion, they all go around a crelloch.”

“Yes,” said Charles, wishing he could appear better informed on such matters, “come to think of it, the path to our shrubbery skirts our bare patch rather than run across it. Being non-believers, I'm, afraid we walk across the - what ever you call it.”

“The shrubbery,” dwelled Harrington for a moment. “There's a strange one near Mere standing in the middle of a cultivated field. It is almost totally surrounded by trees and dense undergrowth, almost as if it is protected, some would say. When you fight your way through to the centre, what do you find? Nothing! No plants, no life, a bare patch of ground..”

“You think that is what we may have at Norton Servis?” The librarian looked thoughtful.

“It may be,” he said slowly, “but, then, it is all probably superstition, a local myth dreamed up to explain a natural occurrence.”

“What is?”

“Oh,” Harrington shrugged. “There are stories, old wives tales. There has to be a rational explanation. Perhaps it is all down to poor drainage.”

“Ours is always damp.”

“Or it could be chemicals in the ground, arsenic or chromium. Who knows? One day someone will undertake a full chemical analysis and archaeological survey. Did you know, incidentally, that when the well was sunk at your house at the beginning of the last century, the workmen uncovered artifacts and human bones? I turned up the records only the other day!”

“No, I did not,” said Charles, feeling chilled again. He resolved not to tell the librarian of the plans for the swimming pool.

A breeze disturbed the foliage around him and brought him back to his senses. “I wonder if it is a crelloch,” he said quietly.

“A what?” queried Laura, looking at him sharply. He had not told her of the conversation with the librarian, but he imparted the substance now. It appeared to arouse his wife's interest and she became quite animated.

“How fascinating!” she said, excitedly. “Who knows what may found when the builders start digging.”

“I don't think that it is anything of the sort,” muttered Richard, kicking a few loose stones in that direction.

“No,” added his sister, with naive gaiety. “Hardin simply sneaks around with a large can of weedkiller when nobody is looking! Support your local legend!”

“Tush, Sarah,” reprimanded Laura in a light, but serious, tone. “You must not be so irreligious.”

“Irreligious?” echoed Sarah in mock horror.

“Yes! And I think that the excavation will be just the kind of thing to interest” She broke off. For a moment a look of incredulity and terror filled her pallid, grey, face as she gripped her husband's arm tightly. Charles did not speak but spun abruptly to look at the spot on which his wife's hypnotic gaze was fixed, but he saw only the indistinct form of the laurel bushes, silently swaying as if rocked by an invisible hand. He turned back to his wife.

“What is it?” he said softly, trying to draw her to him. “What's the matter? Has something upset you?” Her eyes were cast down and she resisted his intimacy, gently but firmly. Breathing heavily she pushed him from her and released herself from his hold.

“It is nothing,” she croaked. “It must have been a trick of the light.” Charles glanced at the children. Richard was still kicking stones, aimlessly and thoughtlessly, but Sarah had seen and stood intent upon her mother. A look passed between them, born out of womanhood, worldly, knowing and far beyond the innocent years of the adolescent girl. He shivered.

“It is becoming cold,” he said. “We had better go in.” Silently they walked back across the lawn as the darkness of the night slunk about and outflanked them. All the way to the house Charles had the unmistakable, uncomfortable, conviction that they were being watched from the shrubbery, but he dared not look around.

Events revealed that Charles had been grossly optimistic in his assessment of the time required to complete negotiations and motivate the builder into starting work. News of the construction of the pool had inevitably filtered through the village and had become the subject of whispers and much shaking of heads in dark corners. Faithful Mrs Jones had felt bound to carry reports of the gossip and local feeling back to the Doctor, and to add her own disquiet. He could rely upon her services for the while, but once Midsummer came - well, she would have to see. And now rumours of a darker hue started to circulate, stories concerning the Doctor's family. These poor Mrs Jones could not find it in her heart to repeat and she attempted to stifle the foul tale at every opportunity, carrying the black knowledge of the truth like a great, evil, millstone inside her, around her soul.

The workmen eventually arrived on a sunny day in early June. Their visit was not accompanied by any material progress, but it was followed several days later by the arrival of a rather battered concrete mixer and a lorry-load of material which remained long on its conveyance as there was no-one there to off-load it. In due course the location of the proposed pool was agreed by Charles and pegged out. Hardin witnessed the event, shook his head in his most disapproving manner, spat onto the earth for good measure, and slunk away into his shed, muttering audibly.

The next day a massive mechanical contrivance, as Mrs Jones was to describe it, appeared having journeyed all the way from the other side of Wincanton if the profession of ownership on the cab side was to be believed. After a period of confusion, it spent several hours clawing at the earth, feeding soil into a procession of lorries which reversed, carelessly, up the drive to within reach of its insatiable jaws.

That day had started warm. The morning slipped away and it grew warmer as low cloud slipped in from the South-west and shut out the sky. Ever lower it grew, the light dimmer, the air

warmer and closer. In the early afternoon the noise of the excavator suddenly ceased and Laura, secretly relieved, went out to investigate.

“Tis the heat, lady,” apologised the operator, mopping his brow. His soft, lilting, accent told her that he had originated in a far greener place than that one, but there may have been no local man who would have been willing to undertake the task of driving that machine. Laura pressed her damp palms into her skirt.

“It is hot,” she confirmed.

“That it is! And there's me digger aboiling as if we were away in the Sahara desert. She'll dig no more today, says I. So I've sent the lorries away.”

“Oh!” Laura exclaimed and added, almost under her breath. “I wish I'd known.”

“Eh? What was dat, Ma-am?”

“Oh, nothing. It's just that it is Mrs Ovenden's half-day. I mean, I stayed in especially,” she added, not wishing to appear foolish. The digger driver did not reply but bit back his comment. Laura saw from his face what was in his mind and softened her tone. “I know,” she continued, soothingly. “It isn't your fault. Goodness me! Was that the front door?”

In no little excitement she ran across the lawn, inside the house and along the hall. Reaching the door she realised that she had left the back door wide open and that her visitor would be clearly visible from the garden. She would have to go back! The bell rung again. There was no time. With a name and greeting ready on her lips, her fingers closed over the latch. As the door swung open Laura emitted a gasp of frustrated astonishment. On the doorstep, short and nutberry brown, stood a dark-haired, colourfully clad, gipsy. Her dark eyes fixed on Laura's face, then drifted past her shoulder, searching the dimness of the hall, and beyond.

“Afternoon, lady,” she began, moving a cloth covered wicker basket from under her arm. “Would ye be interested in” The sentence was left incomplete. To Laura's consternation, a sudden transformation came over the woman. Her face blanched as if the supply of blood had been terminated, and her expression changed through horror to what appeared to be utter terror. Gasping a single word which was, to Laura, foreign, she dropped the basket and fled to the gate.

“Hey!” called Laura, confused, trying to both look behind her and follow the gipsy's movements. She could see nothing amiss in either the hall or the garden beyond. By the time she had reached the gate the woman had vanished completely, leaving only the basket and its contents as proof of her existence. “It must have been the workman she saw,” thought Laura, going back into the garden, but he was gone, too.

“How very strange,” said Charles when his wife acquainted him with the events on his return an hour later. “What could have possessed her?” Inevitably his thoughts ran to the dark tales and predictions reported by Mrs Jones, but he did not tell Laura.

“Should we inform the police?” she whispered. Clearly her normal composure was still fragmented. Charles told her he would pay a call on the village constable later that evening and leave the gipsy's basket with him. A little while later, whilst Laura was upstairs and otherwise occupied, he crept into the hall and opened the front door and the door to the garden. Standing into the porch he could see through to the lawn, and when he crouched slightly his line of vision extended across the site of the pool to the shrubbery, but all was normal. It had to be another of those unexplained mysteries and, with a sigh, he closed the garden door, tight.

“It is so hot!” complained Sarah as she stood, in the garden, beside the gardener, shortly before dinner and looked longingly towards the pool's location, wishing it were there and that she could take the plunge. It had grown hotter as the afternoon wore on, cloud piled upon cloud, compressing and thrusting the lowest layer ever closer to the ground, thickening the air until all gasped for breath as if they were suffocating and drowning at one and the same time.

“Ay, Miss, 'tis so,” said Hardin in a woeful yet expectant voice.

“Will there be a storm?” asked Sarah in her voice that evoked the sun to combat the gardener's gloom.

“Ay, Miss, 'tis likely.” He went and stood, bent and worn, staring at the infernal machine and the gaping, ominous, hole it had created. “Ay, 'tis enough to snuff out a candle,” he added lowly.

“Pardon?” Hardin turned his attention to her and some of the gloom lifted. “It could snuff out a candle, Miss,” he said, his eyes charged with an uncustomary excitement. He moved, as if changing his ground and preparing for a new experience.

“A candle? Oh, the air! Yes, it is heavy.” Sarah grew disturbed by his gaze and the penetrating attention to which she was suddenly subjected.

“Tell me, Missee,” he continued. “Do you think a flame'll burn for thousands of years? If folk light one candle, then another from that one, then another, on and on, always the same flame, never going out, never rekindled - just the same flame?”

“I've never thought about such a thing,” she said with an assumed disinterest. But he had not heard her. He was locked deep in the grip of his own momentous concepts, plundering recollections of his youth and initiations, ancient tales and mysteries. He was transformed.

“Or would the flame wilt, grow weary over the ages, lose its intensity, its brightness, its power to burn, and its potency?” The gardener uttered the last word with such animation and venom that Sarah stepped back with alarm.

“Ah, I tell 'e, Missee,” he continued, becoming familiar and relatively warm again, “there's powers an' things what it's not right to tamper with, far older than your Christianity, far stronger than your machines. Part of the hills and o, the land. Forces what make things grow in their season, and makes one season follow on t'other. Forces as loud as thunder, as searing as lightening. They'll have their dues. They've got their laws an' their sacred places, an' they're not to be tampered with. An' I knows all what goes on around here. I got eyes. I sees it all. No good'll come of it, Missee. Mark my words well. You'll see! No good, never did.”

At the end of a hot and clammy June afternoon, Sara felt an unnatural cold. Hardin walked away, bent forward, still muttering and shaking his head from side to side, but there was a new, light, determination in his step and, as she watched him, Sarah started to shiver quite uncontrollably.

“Do you know what day it is?” said a voice at her elbow. It was her brother, but the juxtaposition of the preceding experience with her realisation of the nature of the answer, made Sarah shriek and run, sobbing, into the house and straight up to the flower be-decked altar that was her bedroom.

“What was the matter with you earlier?” Richard casually asked her later that evening as they stood surveying the excavation. Sarah cautiously approached the edge of the hole. She wished he had not asked. It was difficult, if not impossible, to explain the explosive emotion she had experienced. Now she found herself possessed by a new sensation, an expectant, throbbing, excitement which set her heart racing and her hands trembling. That, too, was quite inexplicable.

“Nothing,” she said, at length. Did Richard hear her? Or were his thoughts totally occupied in peering into the dim void on that humid eve of Midsummer? Sarah's gaze ran up the oak, out beyond, across and up the grassy, shadowy, slopes of Long Knoll, to the summit where she could just make out two figures stood there, distant, barely visible, silhouetted against the grey and darkening sky. “Mother's a long time,” she said, trying to suppress another tremble.

“Eh, what?” Richard was moving, scrambling down into the hole. “Look!” he exclaimed. “I've found something! Ugh, it's all wet and mucky down here!” He regained the summit and thrust an object in her direction. “Now, what have we got here? Careful, it's heavy.” He stooped to examine a second discovery as, gingerly, she took the offering and turned to try and find better light in which to examine it. It appeared to be a cylindrical stone, about eight inches long and, perhaps, two inches in diameter. Most of the barrel was smooth to the touch, but one end was

shaped like a rough, uneven, cube. It was covered in dirt and a green, slippery, slime. She almost let it slip through her fingers, but it did not fall.

“What do you think it is?” she asked, anxiously, finding herself unable to put the object down.

“I think it must be a mortar and pestle,” said Richard. He held up a large, encrusted, bowl. “Goodness knows how old they must be. Look! This has a lip for pouring and - oh, we'll have to take them indoors and clean them up.”

After washing and scraping, they were able to examine the discoveries more closely. The bowl appeared to have been fashioned from a single piece of fine grained sandstone. Its interior was smooth and stained dark brown whilst the exterior bore evidence of heavily weather carvings. The handle of the pestle was clearly broken, but it too had something carved on it, Sarah thought. “I always thought pestles were made of wood,” she said, picking it up and fondling the smooth surface.

“Oh, no,” said her father, making her jump. “Stone and ivory are quite common. Did you find them together?” He looked closely at the objects, but kept looking out into the garden.

“No,” said Richard. “As a matter of fact they were several feet apart. I saw the bowl first. Perhaps there's more to come down there?”

“I wish your mother would come,” said their father, softly.

“I think they are very interesting,” said Sarah, elatedly. “Do you think we have made an important archaeological discovery?”

“Definitely a job for John Harrington!” laughed Richard. His amusement was terminated by a sharp look from his father, who turned away to continue his scrutiny of the garden.

“I am sure that we are in for a storm,” Charles said gloomily. As if to confirm his prediction, a distant rumble reached them. “I wish she would not go off on these long walks of hers,” he continued with a slight tugging of the net curtain, though it was hanging, innocently, out of his line of vision. “Sorry, Richard,” he said, suddenly brightening. “What were you saying? About Harrington? Oh, yes, your discoveries? I might be able to produce a far better authority for you - Alexander Stewart, none other. Oh, I don't expect you to know of him, but he's a Fellow of the Royal Society, and he will be coming to see me on business in a couple of weeks. You can ask him for his expert opinion.”

The darkness closed in, the evening progressed, and the storm grew ever nearer, Occasional vivid flashes evidence its progress and loud rolls of thunder its proximity. Gradually the alternation of light and noise grew to such an intensity that they found it almost unbearable. The glare penetrated everywhere and the thunder seemed to be emerging from the earth beneath their feet. It was all around. The village was surrounded and although no rain had fallen, the enemy was closing in on all flanks, inch by inch, crushing the atmosphere.

“You had better go up to bed, you two,” said Charles, coming from the study. “I expect she's taken shelter somewhere. I'll wait up.”

“Oh, can't I stay up too?” pleaded Sarah.

“I don't think that will be sensible. No, you need your beauty sleep, and the storm is right on top of us. She will wait until it has passed. I'll wait too, for a while at least before....”

Before what? What would he do? Telephone around? Had she been sheltering with friends she would have telephoned. Unless the lines were down. Should he call the police? That would be melodramatic. Laura had been home late before, having wandered too far across the meadows and hills, and finding herself forced to return home by the long way, along the lanes which were anything but direct. To his surprise, Sarah did not argue.

“Goodnight, daddy,” she murmured sweetly as he kissed her forehead. She followed Richard upstairs.

Safely in her bedroom, Sarah laid the pestle on the bedside table. From the bottom of a drawer she took out a secret black lace and fine chiffon nightdress. Shortly after, she stood

amongst the flowers before the full length mirror, turning, twisting, admiring, thinking that she would have made a fine sacrifice. A fresh crash of thunder startled her and the room was plunged into darkness. Close to terror she stumbled to the window and fumbled with the curtains. As they parted a strange, incandescent, glow illuminated the dim shapes of the furniture.

A searing flash of lightning bleached the room as she started back to the bed. In the mirror she saw her reflection and more. Behind her, moving from the shadowy alcove, was the form of a man. The brief illumination was enough. She saw his yellow, trance-like eyes, the parted lips, and the outstretched hands as they groped and clawed towards her. Sarah shut her eyes, but the image remained imprinted on her retina. It was inescapable. The scream was stifled in her throat. The Gates of Hell opened and pain poured forth, overwhelming her limbs and body. The room was fading, but the vision remained. Another crash of thunder shook the house and she plunged into, and was swallowed up by, an abyss of darkness.

Laura had been in sight of the house when she saw the lights go out. With John Harrington at her heels she had found her way along the footpath until she came to the gap in their hedge and the path that ran through the shrubbery. "It's a well-worn path," he said jovially, trying to raise her spirits.

"Ssshhh," she hissed tautly. Before then she had felt like a schoolgirl returning from a trip out-of-bounds after lights-out. This time it was worse, much worse. She could feel it. The rain started. A wall of water swept across the garden and thundered through the shrubbery. Within seconds they were drenched. "This is terrible," she said. "What am I to do?" He caught her arm and pulled her around to face him.

"Stop here a minute, under the oak. There's some shelter and we can't be seen from the house." She paused in his arms, feeling like a piece of flotsam which is temporarily safe until the next wave crashes down upon the beach. But as he leaned forward, she pushed him away.

"It is impossible," she yelled. "I must go in!" She started to run towards the sanctuary of the back porch. The next flash of lightning seemed to completely engulf her. She felt the heat and was blinded and deafened as she was flung to the ground by a blow from behind. Something pinned her down, holding her close to the lawn. Consciousness was beginning to ebb away. Was this, then, death?

And there was Charles, pulling her, now carrying her towards the darkened house. The rain lashed at her mercilessly, beating on her face and exposed skin, running through her hair and in rivulets down her cheeks. It could not wash away her sin and there seemed little point in crying now.

Charles stood at the bedroom window and watched the doctor close the garden gate, cross the lane, and get into his car. He turned to look at Laura. "I think it was wise to have a second opinion," he said, sitting gingerly on the edge of the purple counterpane. "No doctor should be the sole practitioner for his own family. There is always a risk that his diagnosis could be emotional or less than professional." He sighed and looked towards the rear of the house as if he were able to see the garden through transparent walls. "It is much too wet for the builder to continue work. At least you will be able to have a complete rest. We'll see how you fell this evening." He spoke confidently and in his best bedside manner, but he was far from being calm. He had examined his wife carefully, diligently, thoroughly, and concluded that she was suffering from nothing more serious than shock and minor lacerations which, in the circumstances, was a remarkable and fortunate outcome. Dr Owen's examination had confirmed his view, but when Charles looked at her grey cheeks and the glassy, lifeless, expression in her eyes, and saw the nervous, twitching, restlessness, his doubts grew and multiplied. Laura said nothing, not a word, but every now and then her lips would part and move, as if words were being formed but she could not force them to emerge. He had elected not to treat her with sedatives, but allow nature to run its course. Would she sleep? She did not even look at him as he stood up. There was no

visible response to his movement. "Try and sleep," he said softly, "and I'll look in again in half an hour."

Richard awaited him on the landing. "She's asleep," Charles announced.

"And Sarah?"

"She took the sedative and was out in less than ten minutes. I don't know what had got into the women around here. It only needs Mrs Ovenden to go berserk in the kitchen and my day will be complete!"

"Do you know that half of the oak appears to have gone altogether?" hissed Richard, following his father downstairs. "And what is left is scattered all across the lawn!"

"Perhaps we could get Wilson's men to take it away, or have it cut up for logs. How is Hardin taking all this?"

"I don't know," said Richard with a short, derisory laugh. "I haven't seen him today. And he is not the only person who has suddenly gone missing, according to Mrs Ovenden!" But his father was no longer listening. Heavily preoccupied, he lapsed into his prescription-writing attitude.

"Yes, yes," he said, sitting at the crowded desk. "It was a bad storm. Anyone could have got stranded, fallen down, even - exposure. Maybe someone should organise a search party?" As he paused at the doorway, Richard encapsulated the sight of his father, ageing, shuffling his papers with no objective and with very little hope. The door swung shut, but the picture remained.

"That's when the troubles all began," Charles told his life-long friend who paid them his scheduled visit. "Sarah slept through it all, but next morning she appeared at breakfast looking as if she had been up all night and dragged through innumerable hedges backwards, forwards, and all other wards. She looked dreadful, ghastly!"

"Yet Laura was unhurt, you say?"

"Physically, yes, except for some minor scratches and cuts. By a miracle although her clothes were burnt off her back and torn by the branches of the tree as it came down around her, she escaped. I suppose the lightning struck the opposite side and the trunk shielded her. What suffered the greatest injury, however, and I find it hard to understand or account for, was her complete mental equilibrium."

Alexander stared into the bowl of his pipe which had died and tried to coax it back to life with the application of several Vestas. "Mental equilibrium?" he repeated through clenched teeth.

"That's' the best way to describe it. You remember how Laura was, self possessed, firm, opinionated, certainly extroverted. All of that has evaporated. She has gone to pieces, but it isn't something which one could fairly describe as approaching a breakdown. You'll see exactly what I mean when she comes down. She's nervous, edgy, absent minded, and totally withdrawn. Yet she is also listless, although she has to be almost forced to leave the house. She cannot sit still or concentrate on anything for more than a couple of minutes. She used to be always going over the library at Wincanton and bringing back library books as if there was no tomorrow. Now I can't get her near the place. I catch her walking up and down, talking to herself. Just watch her. You'll see exactly what I mean."

"You are satisfied it is not shock?"

"I thought it might be at first, but no, it isn't. It runs far deeper than that. I am just an ordinary GP, but I am beginning to think that I may have to suggest that she sees a psychiatrist."

"And the construction of the pool goes on?"

"Yes. There seemed little point in stopping that, and it is funny but it is the one thing that will occupy her and arouse her interest. She will not go out into the garden. It is almost as if she is afraid to do so, but she will stand at the window for hours on end, watching the workmen."

“Mmmmm. I suppose that could be due to an association of unpleasant ideas. I mean, if you had the very clothes scorched off your back, you might be more than a little cautious of treading the same path again. And don't go and try to tell me that lightning never strikes the same place twice!”

“Well, it certainly can't strike the oak again because that's all gone except for a heap of logs.”

“And what of the discoveries you mentioned? The artifacts?”

“Oh, yes. Come and look at them. We don't take them into the house. They're in the gardener's shed, except we no longer have a gardener. He has stopped coming here. Anyone would think we had the plague!” Charles glanced at his watch. “Yes, I think we have time. It will be another ten minutes before Laura comes down.”

They left the door of the shed ajar and stood together among the columns of flower-pots and canes in the dimness of the place that had, for years, served as Hardin's temple. Alexander diligently examined the objects, holding each in turn up to the light. His darkening frown communicated his feelings to Charles as he continued his impromptu lecture without a further apology. “I don't think I would like to keep either of them in my house, either,” he said emphatically.

“Why's that,” said Charles with growing apprehension. The professor rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and laid the objects side by side on the bench.

“I think they might be better placed in a museum.”

“I could send them to the library at Wincanton. There's a small museum attached to that, except the librarian and curator has disappeared and not been seen since the night of the storm. What are they?”

“Well,” Alexander began cautiously. “You know of my enthusiasm for this period, but I must state, categorically, that I am no expert, not in prehistoric, possibly Neolithic, man. I've read about and I have examined many artifacts from that period. I can make a reasonably informed and intelligent guess as to the nature of these things you have unearthed.”

“Yes?”

“Let me start by saying that, in my opinion, both are of great antiquity. They are probably about the same age and they may well pre-date the building of Stonehenge. They will, no doubt, arouse a fair measure of interest but, as to their origin and use, I warn you, I doubt that it was pleasant. This one, for instance” He paused. Sarah was standing, framed by the doorway, gripping the woodwork for support.

“It is horrible,” she hissed, her eyes fixed on the object in the professor's hand. “Absolutely evil!”

“Horrible? Evil?” Alexander smiled grimly. “It is no more than a worked piece of bluestone. The use to which it was put - both of them, for that matter - might well be thought of as horrible and evil judged by today's standards, but concepts don't grow or survive in stone, only in the dark recesses of people's minds.” At the start, we assume that primitive man was unaware of his role in the act of procreation. Women reigned supreme in a matriarchal society, holding men in contempt as a superfluous species worth little more than providers of occasional pleasure and some protection. But when the early farmers unlocked the secret of life, men realised their true status and his preoccupation, some might say obsession, with all the ramifications of reproduction commenced. Adam fell, but from ignorance and certainly not from Paradise. It wasn't very long before the very act was elevated to a superhuman status, venerated as being magical and mysterious, rudimentary at first, crude, but later becoming part of a sophisticated philosophy about life, the seasons, the Universe, growing into a religion and a perversion. It may have joined forces with the solar calendar to produce various rites and practices, some of which are preserved in the Greek Myths. Later we have the Decadon and most of our taboos about sex,

and vestiges linger on in black magic, local superstitions, and so on. Inescapably, it comes from the very kernel of life itself, however unpleasant that might appear.”

“Oh, yes,” said Charles slowly, looking quizzically at his daughter. “I don't think you need say any more. I understand what that is, but the bowl?”

“Yes, the bowl. As I said, it probably comes from the same period, perhaps even the same culture, but it is darker and of a more evil portent, whatever you might think, Sarah. Several have been found and each discovery has been associated with unusual and unpleasant occurrences, side effects one might say. No-one is exactly certain as to the use they were put to, but the dark stain has been analysed and found to be human blood. The general theory is that they were used for a sacrificial rite. We have some inconclusive evidence of human sacrifice taking place at around this time. The blood would be collected in one of these. It may have been drink or poured on the fields as an offering to guarantee fertility. It would, of course, have been very effective as a fertiliser but the better crops would have been credited to the sacrifice. Note the size. A human skull would probably fit neatly inside. It could even have been cannibalistic, a quasi-religious purge. Or it could have been used as an instrument for demonstrable punishment in which the victim could have been anyone from a virgin to an adulteress.”

“Or an adulterer,” breathed Charles heavily. He spun around, but Sarah was no longer standing there. For a moment the shed seemed to grow darker. The metaphoric missile that, three months earlier, had disturbed the pool of his thoughts at breakfast, suddenly rose from the depths, black, bloated and grotesque, unavoidable evident. Then it slowly sank again.

Alexander did not notice the change in his friend's demeanour but, having warmed to the subject, accelerated. “Later, these acts or worship or punishment became ritualised and were performed in front of the whole tribe, in the public eye, you might say, but it is possible that the ritual was secret at first, carried out in locations which were remote from the settlement and forbidden to all except the initiated, and their victims. Who knows what dark places we have inherited from those days? You know, a discovery here, at the foot of the beacon, Long Knoll, will be of particular interest. It is the highest point for miles around. From the summit you can see the Isle of Avalon - Glastonbury - which lies due West and, I reckon, Stonehenge will be visible in that direction while that was lies Milk Hill which is more or less on a straight line to Avebury. This could have been a place of great importance in prehistoric times. I wonder what else lies up there?”

Charles was barely listening. He heard his friend ask if he could take the objects back to London with him, promising to return them to Wincanton if that was to be their resting place. He heard himself say “yes”. For a reason he did not fully understand, he felt relieved that he had found someone who was prepared to take them away. When he did speak, it was of the subject that most occupied his thoughts. “Laura should be down by now. Shall we go in?”

Nothing further was found during the excavation and construction of the pool. It was built, completed and commissioned in August, but neither Charles nor Laura displayed any kind of affinity towards it. Nor did they ever refer to the incidents of the night of the storm. Charles kept the substance of the conversation in the shed secret and failed to voice the feared which subsequently appeared and flourished in his imagination. He scoured the Estate Agents and local papers in a vain search for another house that might be suitable for his family and his practice. He found nothing to his liking. Again, much as he longer to escape, he often had the feeling that even if he had located a suitable house, there was an invisible force preventing Laura from leaving, keeping her there. For what reason?

He did note that the post of librarian was advertised and avoided drawing his wife's attention to the fact. Gradually life assumed a degree of normality, but it was only on the surface and Laura's mental condition failed to completely heal. As Winter approached she grew increasingly restless, particularly at night when she would turn and toss in the bed, sometimes

talking in her sleep, sometimes crying out. Charles elected to move his bed across the landing into the spare bedroom next to Sarah's, overlooking the pool.

One night, barely six months after the storm, he dreamed as if in a nightmare, that he was woken from his sleep by a movement in his bedroom. Sleepily, but still asleep, he opened his eyes to see Laura there, standing at the window, the curtains drawn back. She was looking down on the yet undrained pool. The night was clear and frosty, and the moonlight reflected from the surface, bathing her and the ceiling in a shimmering, ghostly, white light. As she slipped off her nightdress and let it fall noiselessly to the floor, he tried to speak but his words would not form. She spoke. In a voice which represented the apotheosis of all her aspirations and all his fears, she called a man's name. And, as if by a cruel, ironic, trick of the reflected light, a man's shadow seemed to reach out across the ceiling towards her. "Oh Laura!" Charles called to the empty room, turning and burying his face in the pillow, hopeless.

Her naked body was taken from the pool next morning and laid to rest in her bedroom. Charles sat at her side, a lonely vigil, seeing again the beauty and serenity in her face he had seen on their wedding night. Resolute he stayed with her until the coffin was lowered into the grave and the earth replaced. Only then did his composure disintegrate.

THE END

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