

# THE MACABRE ONES

BRON FANE

Francis Simnel was a pathetic old man who lived in a strange world of his own, a world of puppets and marionettes. His sister, Agnes was a demoness in caricature, a female fiend in human form, a relentless, ruthless, driving force urging the old man to a macabre destiny. There was something different about Simnel's Puppets. They had personality and a realism that was uncanny. They bore a sinister resemblance to the newly-dead.

What began as the wildest and most improbable suspicion, crystallised into near certainty in the marriage of Josephine Starr. She began asking questions, and the Satanists scented danger. She fell into a trap that had been set with diabolical cunning. Her life was balanced on a razor edge, with all the macabre resources of the Black Magicians weighing against her.

The dramatic climax of this story will challenge the strongest nerves and satisfy the most experienced connoisseur of supernatural thrillers.



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**SUPERNATURAL SPECIAL**

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*by*

**Bron Fane**

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## CHAPTER I

### *The Puppet Master*

#### INTRODUCTION

*"There was something horribly familiar about the dolls."*

FRANCIS SIMNEL was a pathetic old man who lived in a strange macabre world of his own, a world of puppets and marionettes. His sister, Agnes, was a demoness incarnate, a female fiend in human form, a relentless, ruthless driving force, urging the old man to a macabre destiny. There was something different about Simnel's puppets. They had personality and a realism that was uncanny. They bore a sinister resemblance to the newly dead.

What began as the wildest and most improbable suspicion crystallised into near-certainty in the mind of Josephine Starr. She began asking questions, and the Satanists scented danger. She fell into a trap that had been set with diabolical cunning. Her life was balanced on a razor edge, with all the macabre resources of the Black Magicians weighing against her.

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FRANCIS SIMNEL opened the door with a hand that trembled slightly, as though the nerves and fibres were so used to manipulating strings and jointed wooden bars that they were incapable of rest. The palsy that afflicted Francis Simnel's hand spread gently to his whole body, but it was a controlled trembling which did not seriously affect his movements. His pale, watery eyes blinked as he switched on the workshop light. The smell of sawdust and shavings assailed his ancient nostrils. There was another smell in the workshop, a mixture of glue and paint, with a soupçon of pine resin. Francis made his way slowly and shakily towards the bench and sat himself on a high stool. His old hands picked up a small, frighteningly human figure about eighteen inches high.

"Well, now, Johnny," the old man's voice quavered as he spoke to the little figure. The puppet looked back at him with tarnished black eyes that were, somehow, accusing.

"I'm sorry you got knocked about a bit," went on Francis, "but then, you're one of the stars, aren't you? I'll have to get Agnes to do something about your costume. You really must have another one. Can't expect a man of your importance to perform in an old costume like that."

Chuckling to himself mildly, Francis Simnel began re-securing the puppet's arm and leg joints. There was some-

thing unpleasantly grotesque about the dismembered little figure, as it lay helplessly irregular on the bench. With infinite care and patience, Francis Simnel put the hooks and eyes into their sockets.

"There you are, Johnny! Now let's see about your strings," quavered the old man. He laid the puppet carefully on the bench and combed out the strings with his fingers. His hand came to rest on the underside of the control. The stout black nylon thread was beginning to show some signs of wear. "We'll have to change this one."

Francis Simnel patted the puppet's head, as though the little doll were a living animal of some kind. Chuckling feebly to himself, the old man replaced the string that was wearing. "It's done very well," he commented. "You're cheap to keep, Johnny, that's one thing! Ah!" he grunted to himself, "I only wish Agnes was as cheap to keep." He cocked his head on one side in a listening attitude. A footstep sounded outside the workshop door.

"Speak of the devil!" he muttered, and a troubled frown spread across his weak, septuagenarian features.

Agnes Simnel opened the door with cold, calculating precision and came into the room on long, angular legs. Agnes was unnaturally tall for a woman. Her hair, which was grey and mean-looking, was piled high on the top of her head. Her eyes were bright and penetrating, as though they were much younger than the rest of her. She stared about her with a kind of superior detachment and patronising hostility.

"Haven't you finished yet, Francis?" Her voice cracked out in the workshop like a metal whip. The old man started up from the bench as though he had received a physical blow.

"I'm sorry to take so long with it. . . ."

"Your dinner is on the table." Agnes came across and looked at the puppets that lay on the bench.

"That wretched thing needs repainting!" she said coldly.

"Don't talk to him like that, you'll hurt his feelings, Agnes, my dear," protested Simnel.

"Rubbish! You're getting senile, Francis!"

"Oh dear, oh dear," the old man muttered to himself.

"You don't seem to understand my work. You don't seem to take any interest in our show."

"To me," retorted Agnes coldly, "these puppets of yours represent our income, nothing else! I'm interested in their efficiency, their smartness and presentability in the same way that any good business man would be interested in the appearance of his shop."

"That's not the way to approach them at all. They're like little people to me," protested Francis. "Each one has a personality."

"You talk the most sentimental drivel I've ever heard from an adult!"

Something that might have been a tear tried to form in the corners of the old man's weak eyes.

"Your dinner will be getting cold!" snapped Agnes

Francis tugged characteristically at one side of his drooping moustache. He pointed to the puppet on the bench.

"Will you make Johnny a new costume?" he asked, weakly.

"He'll have to have something!" retorted Agnes. "It seems strange to me how quickly they wear their costumes out."

"It's the wooden joints, you know——" began Francis pathetically.

Agnes sniffed derisively. She followed the old man out of the workshop and slammed the door with unnecessary violence. She stalked ahead of him on those hard, angular legs of hers and, looking at her sadly and helplessly, the old man got the impression that she was not really a

woman of flesh and blood at all. She was a puppet, an effigy, that was operated by strings, or unseen wires. . . The thought struck him as being particularly horrible and macabre. Yet Agnes' horrible coldness, the frostiness and rigidity of her personality, seemed to give her more in common with a creature of wood and metal than with a living human soul.

The old man sighed deeply as he sat at the table. Agnes nodded at the plate she had placed in front of him.

"Begin," she said coldly. Francis closed his eyes and hesitated for a moment as though he was saying a silent grace to himself. Agnes sniffed.

"You've got religious mania as well, have you?" she demanded coldly. The old fellow shook his head, not only at her but at life. He was in a mood of deep self pity as he thought of what life had done to him. He thought of the still, pathetic, motionless figure of flabby little Johnny, lying on the bench, waiting for his new costume. Somehow, Agnes' coldness towards the puppets hurt old Francis more than the woman's coldness towards him himself. The little wooden man worked so hard, thought Francis. Now that the winter season was on he would go out with Johnny and Bimbo and the others, the wooden horses, the wooden reindeer, the puppet Father Christmas, and the puppet fairies, the dolls and marionettes that made up his show. They would dance and sing as he manipulated them with his skilful, shaky old fingers. Their voices would come out of the tape recorder and the amplifier in response to the pressure of his foot on the switch. He thought of the money that he and his puppets would earn. He thought of what would happen to it. What little appetite he had vanished as he thought. Agnes would have yet another new hat. Agnes would buy yet another thick winter coat, trimmed with fur. Agnes would equip herself with yet more dresses. Agnes would spend every penny

that the old man could earn, and more. He would drag along in the same old suit. He would eke out his colourless existence on such culinary frugalities as Agnes cared to place before him.

"You'd better get on with your dinner. You're just playing with the food!" The voice of Agnes, sharp as a razor, jagged as an old hacksaw, attacked his eardrums, and he twitched noticeably.

"I'm sure you ought to see the doctor, Francis! Your nerves are very bad indeed!"

"I'm all right, me dear. It's just that the sudden sound of your voice startled me."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Agnes. "Your nerves are bad. You need a tonic of some kind. I don't think you get enough exercise, that's a lot of your trouble!"

"But I do—I have to keep on the move with the show, you know, my dear. It keeps me quite active."

He smiled up at her pathetically, hopefully, like a dog that has come cringing to its master, wondering whether it is going to be thrashed. The spirit of Francis Simmel, could it have been projected as an animal symbol, might well have been projected in the form of a cringing dog. The potentialities were there. He was a man who could have scintillated, who could have been gay, charming and the possessor of flashes of genius. He could have been a dedicated artist in his own small, rather homely medium. . . . But he was none of these things. His world had been soured, embittered, diminished by this dragonlike sister, who had overwhelmed him and stifled his personality until scarcely any of it remained.

"You're not attending to what I say!" The voice cut through his thoughts again. He blinked at her, with the weak, watery eyes.

"I was lost in my own thoughts; I'm sorry, me dear."

"Daydreaming again! It's a sign of senility, of course."

He sighed wearily. "Do you know that you have a show this afternoon?" she demanded.

"I didn't know."

"You are very forgetful."

"I have been so absorbed in my work."

"If you don't pay more attention to what you are doing, you will be getting absorbed into the earth!" said Agnes meaningfully.

Francis Simnel shuddered. The idea of earth revolted him. The grim reminder which Agnes had just thrown at him with cold deliberation was a particularly unkind trick of hers. To talk to Francis Simnel about death was like taunting a cripple because he was unable to take part in athletic performances, or mocking a man with rheumatic hands because he was unable to repair watches. Agnes pressed home her advantage with shrewish triumph.

"You're at Sullybridge village hall," she said. "Lady Sullybridge is giving a party for the poor children of the village."

"Oh, God!" muttered Simnel to himself.

"You should think yourself lucky that her ladyship decided to have you!" snapped Agnes.

"I've been to some of their 'do's' before," mumbled the old man. "Why didn't you refuse the job?"

"Refuse money? You must be out of your mind, Francis! You know very well that we need every penny we can get. There's my budget account at the milliners——"

"Budget account," muttered the old man.

"What did you say?" she demanded.

"Nothing, my dear, nothing."

"I should think not. If it wasn't for me, you'd be in an old people's home, where you belong! You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"No, my dear, I wouldn't like that."

"You couldn't manage without me at all! You couldn't

cook your meals, see to the laundry, or anything. You take advantage of me, Francis. I come here and act as an unpaid housekeeper."

"But I do keep you, my dear."

"Yes, but in what a poor style! A woman of my quality shouldn't have to consider money when she's choosing her clothes!"

"I'm sorry about that," replied Francis. There was a note of gentle irony in his voice.

Agnes was grinding home her triumph ruthlessly and relentlessly. At last Francis pushed his plate away.

"What time is the show?" he asked grimly.

"At four o'clock!" replied his sister. There was ill-concealed malevolence in her voice.

"Oh, dear, I shan't have time to get fitted up properly!"

"You'll have to learn to get your stage up faster."

"I can't do it like I used to!" exclaimed the old man.

"You only delude yourself that you're getting old," said Agnes. "It's in the mind."

"It's in the fingers, in the arms, in the legs and in the body, in myself," expostulated the old man. He looked at her with those weak, bleary eyes. "It's called age, Agnes. It's called age. It's called *anno domini*. It comes to all of us in time. You don't seem to know about it yet, but you will." He nodded at her sagely. "You will—if you live long enough. You'll know what it's like to be so weak you can hardly find the energy to drag one leg after the other. And when you'd like to sit and rest, perhaps there'll be somebody goading you along, telling you that you've got to keep working. Perhaps it will happen like that, Agnes. Perhaps it will."

"Drive! Absolute drive!" snapped Agnes, coldly, powerfully.

The old man shuffled off in the direction of his workshop. He sorted puppets systematically into a box, then

went to the garage, unlocked the door with unsteady fingers and climbed into his battered old pre-war saloon. He ran his hand over the dashboard and steering wheel with familiarity born of long practice, long acquaintance. He had had the old car from new. He regarded it very much as a friend, perhaps the only friend he had, he thought, apart from Johnny, Bimbo and the others. But he didn't have to pull strings to make the car go. It had a power of its own. Although that power was erratic and uncertain now, it was, nevertheless, something that came to life in the heart of the car. It was not something that was only a reflection of Francis himself. He switched on the ignition, pulled out the choke and pressed the starter button. There was a low, mournful, grinding sound from the starter. "Oooooo-uh," went the starter.

"Oh, dear!" Francis shook his head and sighed. "Down again, are we? Where is the handle?" He got out and groped under the driving seat for the starting handle. He found it and inserted it into the well-worn cogs of the receiving device. He went back to check that the choke was set correctly and that the ignition was still on, then, with a certain amount of trepidation, the old man tried to turn the handle. The compression of the aged engine was nowhere near what it would have been had the car been new or had the engine recently been rebored, or resleeved. The compression, in fact, was so weak on one of the cylinders that it was almost non-existent, and over that part of its revolution the handle turned with such ease that even though Francis Simnel knew what was likely to happen, he was still slightly taken by surprise and clung to the radiator for support. His old fingers tangled in the grid like the fingers of an inexperienced harpist trying to play an appoggio.

Five breathless minutes later the engine of the ancient machine was rumbling into a kind of life. It was the kind

of life that would have been of more interest to the diagnostic mechanic than to the owner of the car who was hoping to take it out. But, despite loose pistons, sticking valves, and an over-abundance of coke, in places where it ought not to have been, the car was making a hopeful sound.

Before the joyful noise could die away, Francis Simnel climbed back behind the wheel, depressed the clutch, engaged the gear, let the clutch pedal slide back to normal on its soft, weak old spring, and then the car was chugging out of the garage with the enthusiasm of a new-born steam-roller determined to discover the joys of flattening tar-macadamed roadways.

The old man drew the car up from the garage to the back door and, leaving the engine running, potted to his workshop. It took him a long time to load up the puppets. During this loading operation Agnes appeared and made derogatory remarks which were designed to increase the old man's efforts. As far as lay within him, he attempted to ignore her.

At last the puppets were loaded; the boot, the roofrack, the back seat and the driving seat beside him were full of stage pieces, lighting equipment, gramophones, loud speakers, microphones and the other assorted bric-a-brac and complex etceteras of the puppeteer's craft.

"You're sure you haven't forgotten anything?" Agnes Simnel's voice grated in his ears again. He revved up deliberately, harder than he need have done. Belching exhaust fumes enveloped her for a second, and Francis felt a small but significant triumph as he saw the haughty grandeur of her expression change to a look of overwhelmed disgust. Before she could make some verbal retaliation, he had engaged gear, let in the clutch and was off in the direction of Sullybridge.

He arrived at the hall about an hour before the show

was due to commence. Lady Sullybridge was an aristocratic version of Agnes Simnel, and the old puppet master found her even more unpleasant than the sister whom he feared and detested. A grubby urchin with freckles, a running nose and discoloured teeth appeared as though by magic.

"Can I help you unload your stuff, guv'nor?"

Francis Simnel looked down at the boy. "Yes, please."

The boy's grin broadened and he wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Wot d'yer want off first, guv'nor?"

Francis indicated the stage parts which lay on the roof rack of the car.

"Do you require any other help?" demanded her ladyship.

"Well, I wouldn't say no," answered the old man.

"I'll get one of the women," said her ladyship, in a voice of such incredible superiority that it made Francis Simnel wince visibly. He wondered what this old travesty of female humanity thought gave her the right to address her fellow creatures as 'wimmen'. Perhaps, thought Francis with a grin, the old lady thought she was some kind of demi-god! He laughed softly to himself. If the heavens were populated by demi-gods like Agnes and Lady Sullybridge, then he wanted to go the other way. . . .

The unprepossessing-looking urchin, together with his cronies, carried the old puppet master's equipment into the hall and spread it along the stage—itself a rickety affair—like so much inferior junk at a rural auction. Francis began laboriously fitting his stage together. The poles were too tight in their sockets for his ageing muscles to manipulate. At last, however, he had forced the recalcitrant rods into the cylindrical apertures, into which, theoretically, they ought to have fitted snugly and easily. The trouble was, and always had been, the weather. The wood of the poles expanded when the rain soaked into

them as they travelled through the English winter on the top of the battered old car, which was the puppet's Odyssey. Then, too, a number of assembling and disassembling minor accidents had produced some minor but significant irregularities in the sockets. Old Francis reflected that although it was difficult to put a square peg into a round hole, it was even more difficult to put a round peg into a bent, oval hole! The general effect now, he thought, rather cynically, was one of decrepitude and senility. Some of his own personality seemed to have got involved in the show. Just as his bodily functions were no longer efficient, so his miniature, portable puppet theatre was not the edifice that it had been in its youth.

He stood staring at it for a moment, going through the mental experience that comes to many men, the experience of going into a room and then forgetting why they have gone in; the experience of going to shelves to fetch something, then standing staring at a shelf and wondering just what it was he had gone to fetch. Simnel pulled himself out of the mood and took hold of the head board. The grubby lad with the effusively effective mucous membrane looked at him with a pair of bright, mudlark eyes.

"Do you want any 'elp, then?"

Simnel interpreted the remark with sufficient accuracy to understand its gist, and showed the lad how to raise the far end of the puppet stage top. There was then a fumbling for nuts and bolts, and during the fumbling Simnel first dropped his end, and then the boy had to drop the other.

The old man sighed wearily, paused, took out a large, old-fashioned pocket watch, the case of which was as battered and worn as the body work of his own saloon car.

"I shall have to hurry," said Francis, "there isn't very much time now." The urchin sniffed and succeeded in securing his end of the head board with the nut and bolt



with which Simnel had provided him. He came across and steadied Simnel's end while Francis bolted it.

"That's better," said the old man, "that's the worst of the job done. Now, if you'd like to take one of those curtains, my boy, and thread it on to this rod, you'll see that the rod goes on to a socket at the top." He pointed to the place and took a few paces backwards to see whether they had the headboard straight. He realised it was an inch and a half higher at one end than the other. Somehow there just didn't seem to be time to bother to put it back.

Agnes would have created the very devil if she had come along. She would have given him a lecture on carelessness and untidiness. She would have told him that he was old and inefficient. Somehow, deep down within himself, he knew these things, but leaving the headboard at an angle was, in its own way, a reproof to the sister whom he could not master in real life. It was a silent, unknown, invisible challenge to the superiority of Agnes, and all that she stood for. Lady Sullybridge strode imperiously over to the stage and looked up at the trembling edifice.

"Will you be *long*?" Her voice boomed out like the note of the hoopoe.

"I trust not, your ladyship," replied Francis. He got the other side curtain out, and then took the sawn-off broom handles on which he assembled his lights. The stage was now beginning to look like a stage. As he moved round to the front once more his eyes fell on the rather faded legend of the headboard:

*"Simnel's Puppets."*

He nodded his head as he looked at the faded lettering. Fame, he thought. Such was fame! Perhaps even this little niche in the rock of eternity was better than no niche at all. Some men cut hand and foot holds in the rock of eternity, and climbed to its very height, to be remembered for ever. Francis Simnel had a minute crevice—but a

crevice, he reflected, was better than nothing. He felt that his crushed, stifled personality was so small, due mainly to the administrations of Agnes, that he had no need of anything much larger than a crevice. Big men cut themselves hand and foot holds, big men climbed to the top of the rock of eternity. Little men, like Simnel, had crevices or nothing. . . .

Of the two, Francis Simnel preferred the tiny niche to entire oblivion. Another glance at his watch told him that he would be late in starting. This in turn would annoy Lady Sullybridge, the woman of imperious and meticulous demeanour, methodical to a fault, he thought. Agnes—damn and blast her!—was methodical as well. Even in his youth, before the inroads of senility had disorganised him almost beyond recognition, Francis Simnel had been a man who deplored too much regularity, too much monotony, too much method. Looking at himself, in what he felt was an objective manner, he hoped that there had been times in which he had experienced a flash of genius. But if he had ever had brilliance, his brilliance was an erratic brilliance. Steadiness and a fixed orbit were in themselves anathema to him, and yet he felt that the irony of life was, that if any man was predictable, it was he. Here I am, he thought to himself, trapped; *trapped* in a great web of circumstances, with Agnes as the Queen Spider, weaving her inescapable threads more thickly round me with each succeeding day. "Agnes!" he muttered the name angrily; it was so like the epitomisation of all that he hated. She stood for everything that he was against. It was as though the woman and her way of life could be summed up under the heading "Agnes-ism" and Agnes-ism was a religion, a political party, and a philosophy which he hated and loathed with a deep, burning and frustrated detestation.

The puppets, as though feeling sympathetic, came out

of their bags and strung themselves straight as though they were alive and trying to help him. Johnny and Bimbo, together with the rest of the troupe, made up for the trouble that he had had with the stage. He found that he was ready on time after all. He stood on his boxes at the back of the stage. The lights were on. The rest of the room was in darkness; he could hear the little excited sounds of the children, a shuffling of feet, the whispers of toddlers. The derogatory mumblings of teenagers who thought that puppet shows were stupid came to his ears. Then he had Johnny in his hands, and the little clown danced on to the stage. There was a murmur of greeting from the children, a few chuckles, a snigger or two from the older ones at the back.

"Hello, boys and girls," said old Simnel, "my name is Johnny, and when I come in I'm going to say 'Hallo, boys and girls', and I want you to say 'Hallo, Johnny!' Will you do that for me?"

"Yeeesss!" yelled the children.

It was a loud, full-throated 'yes', as though their acclaim was not so much appreciation as the desire to make a noise for its own sake. If he had asked, 'Would you help me to burn down the village hall?' they would still have shouted 'yes' with the same vociferation and enthusiasm. Old Francis smiled to himself a little cynically. Perhaps he thought, there would have been a little more sincerity in the 'yes' if he had suggested such incendiary practices!

Johnny the puppet looked at the children with his bright black eyes. He danced and strutted in his, as yet, unrenewed costume.

"'Ere!" called one of the kids suddenly. "You've got a 'ole in your jacket, mister!"

"Oh, I shall have to darn that when I get home," said Johnny. Francis Simnel thought of Agnes and winced. Some of the children were smiling at the feeble joke, but

the older ones were on the verge of blowing raspberries and, thought Simnel, this wasn't even the first act.

"Well, now, we're going to start off with a circus," said Johnny, "and here come the horses!" He trotted off and old Simnel switched on the circus music with the foot switch of his tape recorder. The music blared out discordantly, harshly, and with the distortions that are the inevitable companions of over-amplification. Two horses pranced wearily on to the stage. Simnel had one in each hand. The horses skipped and danced, stood up on their hind legs and cavorted a little. Then he took them off, hanging them on the stand behind them. He brought in a pair of extending clowns. These, he thought, were clever. They usually got a good response from his children. The trick was their hollowness of leg and the heavily weighted boots—this, and a clever arrangement of strings, made the bodies of the clowns go up and down like concertinas, contracting and expanding in time with the music. They looked incongruous, and Francis Simnel knew from experience that the incongruous is always funny.

The extending clowns got a round of thin, rather watery applause, but at least it was applause, and that, as far as Simnel was concerned, was a pleasant change.

Even the teenagers at the back of the hall had stopped making their ribald remarks. They were laughing genuinely with the clowns, and not at the pathetic old puppet master. Simnel took the clowns off and brought in a pair of dancers. A movement of his foot on the tape recorder switch and a loud rumba vociferated its way into the hall.

"Come on," shouted one teenager from the back, "give us the twist, then!"

I really must get myself up to date, thought poor old Francis, smiling a little as his lavishly Latin-American dancing puppets rumba-ed across the stage. The man

carried a pair of maraccas, and at the crucial moment one of these came off. Francis hastily whisked the puppet off the stage and hung it up on the stand at the back. Another repair job, he thought to himself. Perhaps, he mused, I'm getting careless with them, perhaps I am treating them too roughly. Or else it was the quality of the thread. But no, that couldn't be so, for the stout nylon that he used nowadays was, as far as he could understand it, far stronger than the old thread he had been wont to use in pre-war times, before the magical mystery of plastic had become an industrial possibility.

The circus ended and Johnny the clown came on to the stage again.

"Here I am again, boys and girls," boomed Johnny's voice on the tape recorder, in response to Francis Simnel's foot. Francis Simnel switched the recorder off and waited. There came a chorus of "Hello, Johnny!" punctuated with a few raspberries, and other noises associated with derision. Old Simnel winced. Johnny didn't deserve that. He was a nice little puppet. Children ought to love him . . . The children did, he thought, but it was the teen age rowdies at the back. He wished Lady Sullybridge had limited the party to the under-tens or, perhaps, had two parties. Teen age children didn't want puppets. He shrugged his weary old shoulders. Did anybody want puppets? He wondered if anybody wanted *him*. . . .

He wondered, for that matter, whether he wanted anybody. He was filled by a mood of deep self-pity which was tinged with something that might almost have been self-loathing. Francis Simnel operated his puppets and looked at himself deeply and introspectively. He didn't like very much what he saw.

The show ended. The skeletons, the pirates, the fish and the mermaids were all back in their bags. He was dismembering the stage and grubby urchins were running

about, prodding, poking and touching his puppets. Pathetically, the old man raised his voice:

"Don't—don't touch them, you'll break them, dears."

Why couldn't Lady Sullybridge and her organizers get the brats off the stage, he thought. At last, somehow, miraculously, he had them all off; most of them, at least, back in the battered old car. The mood of deep weariness and loneliness came over him. He went back into the hall to say 'Good night' to Lady Sullybridge.

"So nice to have you, Mr. Simnel," said her ladyship. "You will come next year, won't you?"

"I hope to, if I'm spared," affirmed the old man.

"Oh, I'm sure we shall have you and your puppets for many years to come!" said Lady Sullybridge graciously. "You'll send the account in the usual way?"

Francis Simnel's heart sank. Unless he went home and presented Agnes with crisp, crinkly pound notes at the end of a show, there was always a mood of bitter irony. He could hear Agnes saying:

"Fine sort of business man you are! You can't afford to give credit. You should have told Lady Sullybridge so. Money's nothing to her!" He wondered whether to risk offending Lady Sullybridge by asking for cash now.

"We'll send the account in, your ladyship. It's entirely at your convenience, as you know."

I'm a liar, he said to himself. I need it desperately. I need it to keep Agnes quiet. I need it to keep a few crumbs of food in my body. I need it for cloth for puppet dresses, for wood for puppet bodies, for hooks, and for screws, and for tools, for petrol for the car. I need it. He looked at Lady Sullybridge, his eyes screamed out, 'I need it now,' but he smiled with his lips and repeated softly:

"At your convenience, of course, Lady Sullybridge." She extended a hand. He took it, smiled again and bade her 'Good night'; he wished her a Happy Christmas, and

then he was outside, sitting in the car, knowing that Johnny and Bimbo, the fish, the skeleton, and the mermaids were in the back.

It was quite a fair drive back from Sullybridge to his home. The roads were narrow and winding, and there was a treacherous layer of ice, black, December ice, over the surface. Francise Simnel drove carefully, for the tyres on the ancient saloon were practically innocent of tread. The transmission jerked, and there were a number of wheels in the gearbox that were only partially toothed. Nobody but Francis Simnel could have done much with that car at all, but somehow he kept it going. Chugging and grinding, doing somewhere between twenty and twenty-five miles an hour, the old saloon found its way down the long, twisting slope to Gallows Crossroads.

Gallows Crossroads was not a spot that appealed very much to Francis Simnel. . . .

## CHAPTER II

### *Disaster*

THE old car, slithering and sliding, approached the sinister spot where the ancient gibbet still stood. It must have been there for the best part of two hundred years, reflected Simnel, and two hundred years, by anybody's reckoning, was a very long time. Grim reminder, thought Simnel, a

grim reminder of earlier, more vicious days, when human life was cheaper than it was now. Yet he wondered if the thought had any basis in truth. Was human life really prized in the Twentieth Century, where refugees still starved in the gutters of cold, inhospitable cities, and when the hand of one iconoclast on the button of a nuclear device could destroy civilization as we know it? Was life cheaper now? Or was it cheaper then?

He thought of the puppets in the back and their little world. The life of man, the life of a puppet. . . . Were men puppets? Had puppets got little personalities of their own? Had he created Johnny and Bimbo and the others out of nothing? Was he really a kind of god? Were men puppets? Was God a puppet master? If so, thought old Francis Simnel, he didn't like the plays which the Puppet Master Supreme had arranged for homo sapiens. He didn't like the villains, and particularly he didn't like the villainesses. He didn't like the Lady Sullybridges, and he didn't like the Agneses of this world. He didn't like poverty, illness, ignorance, hatred, hunger, thirst, want, depravity. He heaved a deep sigh.

Concentrate on your driving, said a voice deep down within his mind; concentrate, *concentrate*, the road is slippery and there is a bad corner at the crossroads.

He thought he saw a shadowy form moving across the road in front of him, and in that fatal moment of indecision, Francis Simnel braked. Although the pre-war, wheel-locking system was by no means efficient compared with modern disc brakes, there was sufficient friction on the worn old shoes to send the pre-war saloon into a two-wheel skid. The old man fumbled desperately and helplessly at the wheel. All he succeeded in doing was to turn the two-wheel skid into a four-wheel skid. The car spun helplessly, as though in defiance of all the laws of dynamics and friction; as though in direct rebellion against the

carefully worked out principles of physics, the car seemed to accelerate as it skidded. It hit the side of the road, the steeply rising bank, just below the gallows. It rebounded, rolled over, a door sprang open, a melee of puppets cascaded across the road. Simnel struck his head against the steering wheel, the car rolled over, it came to rest finally on its side. The old man had been flung completely out and lay on the crisp, icy grass, battered and bruised. A thin trickle of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. His breathing was very deep and heavy. His eyes were closed. Above him the darkness of the evening sky was perforated and punctuated by crisp, cold stars. Simnel was oblivious of the stars. The dark, shadowy form which he had seen cross his path fluttered across once more. It paused, a cowed, shrouded figure, and looked—if such a thing *could* look—at the puppets, strewn as they were across the frozen earth below the gallows. The shadowy thing hovered, not quite touching the ground, and yet not really levitating. There was movement, not so much in the air as in the ether, that strangely controversial ether, which exists in the uncanny realm of superstition. Dark spirits hovered weirdly around the gallows as though they were emanating from the wood. It was as if the shame, the ignominy and the misery, not only of the condemned, but of the society whose bestial ignorance had condemned them, were now finding a gruesome form.

Perhaps the deeds of men are psychic seeds which can grow into good and bad plants in the spirit world. Perhaps, metaphorically, the black deeds of dark, sinister personalities can tear holes in the fabric of everyday life, through which strange beasts from other realms can enter the mortal world. But the traffic between Time and Eternity was not altogether a one-way affair. It was not a ferry that carried only passengers from the kingdom of darkness. Other beings seemed to be hovering around the

gallows mound. There were light, misty forms glowing with white opalescence, moving slowly but surely towards the unconscious figure of the concussed puppet master.

Old Francis Simnel, helpless and oblivious, hovered between life and death, a toy for the forces of good and evil. The white figures seemed to come together in what an imaginative man would have said was a solemn conclave, and thoughts, or perhaps even voices, moved between white, misty patches.

"It would be better for him to go now to the other side."

"He has done no ill."

"He is weak."

"It does not seem likely that he will resist temptation."

"It would be better for him to leave this mortal world."

"He will be safe with us."

"The time has come for him."

The white spirits drifted towards the motionless form, and then the black shapes merged in the same direction.

An insensitive observer would have seen nothing, but a poet, an artist, a dreamer or a visionary would have sensed that a tremendous conflict was taking place there on that spot. A man whose spiritual eyes were opened would have been able to understand that here, on this plot of earth, where so much misery and shame had been centred, light and darkness were struggling for the soul of a living being.

The white spirits were very close to Francis Simnel, driving the dark spirits back, inexorably, relentlessly, and then—for if we are to believe that man has free will, then we must believe that his free will makes it possible for him to perform actions which are not necessarily the best in the long run—there was an interruption. A car moved cautiously down the slope, its headlights struck the spot where the spirit battle appeared to have been raging a few seconds before. The lights showed nothing. A few yards

more and the driver applied his brakes cautiously. He was an extremely skilful driver, and the hands that held the wheel were young and strong. He was, in fact, a police patrol man, with a companion wearing a similar blue uniform. They had a door open within a split second of the termination of the car's movement.

"What do you make of this lot, Frank?" The driver was out of the car, standing beside the constable with him.

"Looks as if the old boy skidded." The constable shone his light on the recumbent form of Francis Simnel.

"What the hell are these things?" The driver flashed a light on the puppets strewn around the base of the gallows.

"They look a bit weird, like something out of an Alfred Hitchcock film," grinned the driver.

"Oh, I dunno," replied the constable. "The old boy's been out doing a puppet show."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, it's Francis Simnel, poor old fellow; he lives over in the next town."

They were stooping over the old man.

"He's alive," commented the driver, rather dubiously. He was checking over the old man's body with gentle, skilful fingers. "There's no bones broken by the feel of it, but I don't like the look of that blood on his mouth. Bit of haemorrhage from somewhere. He's had a nasty crack on the head."

"Lucky we came this way," said the constable.

The driver nodded.

"If he'd lain here a few hours in the frost, he'd have been a goner from that alone," he said grimly. "Let's see if we can get him into the car."

Slowly and carefully, with surprising tenderness, the constables got Francis Simnel into the back of the police car and made him as comfortable as possible. They covered him with a rug, and put the heater on full blast.

Then, driving as fast as it was safe to do so on such roads, the police driver took the unconscious man to hospital.

For a long, long time Francis Simnel remained in that strange comatose condition.

## CHAPTER III

*Choose!*

FRANCIS SIMNEL found himself standing beside a tall, white-robed figure in a beautiful, crystalline building full of light, warmth and fragrance. He looked at the features of the white-robed man who stood beside him. The face was strong but there were lines of humour around the eyes. His forehead was broad; his jaw was firm. There was something vaguely familiar about the man's face, but Simnel couldn't put a name to him. That robe was difficult to place, as well. . . . It made him think vaguely of a doctor or a dentist, a healer of some sort, and yet it wasn't quite that. There was something different about it; it made him think of some religious order, or was it a clerical garment of some kind? Simnel—not a churchman himself—was never quite sure whether a surplice was the long black thing that went on first, or whether that was a cassock, but the tall, friendly looking stranger seemed to have some kind of ecclesiastical office. Old Simnel had no idea of where he was, or how he had got there, but something in him was deeply impressed by the beauty of the crystalline building, and even his aged nostrils were enchanted by the soft, fresh fragrance, like pinewoods in spring.

"Francis, we wish to talk with you," said his guide. "come this way, please." Francis followed the white-robed stranger. They walked through crystal corridors and beyond the transparent walls Simnel saw vistas of flower-filled gardens where birds, children and animals romped happily on fresh, inviting grass. It looked like some kind of Utopia. It was like the gayest Disney film he had ever seen brought thrillingly and exotically to life, and yet it had a quality that surpassed even the superb magic of the wonderful kingdoms that Disney had created.

Simnel followed his guide until they arrived at a large domed hall. Ornaments of carved crystal, cut in perfect symmetry, flashed back the light in a thousand glorious rainbow beams. The whole place was a symphony of colour and shape. Simnel wondered why he should have thought of this beauty of form and colour in musical terms, and then he realised that, playing so softly as to be almost inaudible, there was music in the room as well. But it was music of such power, such spirituality, that it made all earthly harmonies sound like discords. He had never heard such sweetness, or such thrilling, creative harmony before. His guide indicated a chair drawn up in front of a long bench. Rather hesitantly, Francis Rimnel sat in the beautiful crystal chair and looked at the line of strong, friendly faces as they smiled down at him from the dais above.

"We wish to make you an offer," said the man in the centre.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," replied old Francis. "What sort of offer? What could I possibly have that could be of use to you?" He gestured around, indicated the palatial surroundings.

"You have something that is of infinite worth to us, and of infinite value to you," said the chairman of what Simnel was coming to think of as the Bench. "We want you, we

need you for your own sake, because we value you as a human personality. We want you to be one of us."

"To be one of *you*? But who are you?" There was silence for a moment, then the chairman spoke again.

"It is very difficult for us to tell you in truth who we are. Falsehood is completely alien to our natures. May I say then that it is better that we do not answer your question as such, except in allegorical terms. If you believe in Darkness and Light, we are Light; if you believe in Good and Evil, we are Good. If you believe in Order and Chaos, we are Order."

The old man blinked.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he quavered.

"I'm sorry, but I can say no more."

"Why can't you tell me? I feel very confused."

"To say too much would destroy that most vital of all human possessions, free will."

"Oh!" exclaimed Simnel.

"Already we have taken unprecedented steps in your case. These are due to cosmic circumstances not entirely beyond our control, but cosmic circumstances which we do not *choose* to control, because that would, in turn, endanger true free will."

"I feel like a college gardener who has found himself accidentally listening to a lecture on advanced theology," quavered the old man.

One or two of the white-robed figures at the Bench smiled good-humouredly.

"We wish to show you, not your future, but a *possible* future," announced the chairman suddenly.

"Future?" echoed the old man. "Is this some kind of magic?"

"Call it what you will," said the chairman, "the name is quite unimportant. Just look over there, will you, at that crystal screen?"

Something like a twenty-foot television screen lit up on the wall to the left of the tribunal and the right of old Francis Simnel.

"It could be possible that you will just die peacefully, there will be no more trouble, no more worry, no more care. You will drift out of the world of Time and Space to this world, and you will become one of us. You have done nothing which prohibits your becoming one of us, you have done nothing deliberately evil, you have done nothing to shut yourself off from the light and life of this place."

On the television screen arrangement, Simnel saw an old man, white and pale, lying in a neat, clean, hospital bed. He saw the old man's features grow very still and mask-like. Then he saw something else. As the nurse in attendance pulled the sheet carefully over the lifeless flesh that had once housed a human personality, something like a patch of white light drifted upwards. The nurse and the doctor whom she had called were impervious to the passing white glow, but as Francis watched it he seemed to feel an intense urge to touch it. He made half a movement towards the screen. The chairman of the committee motioned to him to sit still.

"This is only one possibility that you are watching," he said.

The white, amorphous patch travelled a long, complicated orbit that seemed to involve both Space and Time. At least, that was how it appeared to Simnel. Then the screen showed him a picture of the crystal palace in which he now stood. The chairman motioned him back once more into his seat. Absently he lowered himself to the chair again. Fascinated by the picture that he was watching on the screen; the nebular patch of light which had emerged from the corpse of the old man in the hospital had now reached the crystal palace. It was changing even

as he looked at it. It seemed to take upon itself something like human form. It looked uncertain and bewildered, but it was now dressed in one of the white robes, and although he half-recognised the features of the newly condensed being, there was a strength and happiness in the eyes that had not been present in the eyes of the old man during his earthly life. Simnel continued to watch.

He saw other white-robed figures coming forward to welcome the stranger. Then the picture faded from the screen.

"You see," murmured the chairman, "that is one possibility, that you come straight to us."

"You mean that I might—might—just die—and that my soul would come up here? Is this some kind of heaven, then?" queried the old man.

"This is your representation of heaven, if you like to put it that way, but more than this I must not say," replied the chairman hurriedly. "However, in all fairness, I must tell you that you would be a thousand times happier here, all the time, than you have ever been in your earthly life. And I will tell you this also; this stage, the stage at which you first arrive, is only the dimmest of beginnings. There is a greater happiness and a greater beyond that. There is eternal progress in each state which is incomparably more wonderful than the last one."

"Sounds like a sermon," quavered the old man.

"You may call it that if you will," said the chairman smilingly. "And if you do choose to give it that name, remember that there are worse things than sermons in the world."

Simnel looked inquiringly along the bench. They were smiling and nodding encouragingly to him.

"Now, I must show you another possibility," said the chairman. "Watch."

Francis Simnel looked at the screen again. Once more



it clouded over and then a new picture began to form. He saw the dazed sick old man tottering down hospital steps; then he saw a woman. She looked shrewish, angular—*Agnes!* He recognised the harsh, strident, unprepossessing woman with whom he had spent so many miserable years.

“Agnes!” he gasped. He saw the woman’s mouth moving, but he could hear no words. He saw the old man cowering and shrinking away from her. Time seemed to be telescoped on this moving phantasmagoria in front of him. He saw the masterful, unpleasant woman stifling, crushing the personality of the tottering wreck that had emerged from the hospital. Then he saw the old man being taken away to an institution for old people. Not one of the modern, well-designed, humanitarian institutes for the aged, but a cold, bleak, barren place. A place of high walls and small windows. A place where miserable old caricatures of humanity doddered and tottered their way into the welcome peace of the soft brown earth, unloved, unwanted, like so much human flotsam.

The institution itself seemed to be nothing more than an undertaker’s ante-room. He shuddered as he felt the misery in those blank, hopeless faces.

He knew there were such old people’s homes. Thank God, he thought, most of them had been done away with, and the well-run council homes were more like hotels for the aged. But this place! This place was *unendurable!* The word ‘spike’ went through his mind.

What was the other joking name that the locals gave the one at Sullybridge?

Hotel Cecil! The bitter-sweet irony! He saw the simple funeral of the old man. Even though time was telescoped in this screen presentation, it was a surprisingly short time after his admission. . . . He saw the gloating triumph on the face of Agnes. He saw her collecting insurance poli-

cies, and rubbing her thin, greedy hands together, like a vulture waiting with beak and claw. A burning anger filled him. He saw the wisp of white light reascending to the crystal palaces above, enjoying the perfume, the beauty and the music. He saw the old man transformed into one of these strong-eyed, white-robed ones. It seemed that the triumph of Agnes and the misery of the spike were wiped out as infinitesimal things. It seemed as though they were of no importance compared to the unspeakable joy which the soul of the man on the screen was enjoying here. The picture faded once more.

“We have shown you nothing which is inevitable, only that which is possible and probable,” said the chairman. “And now you must leave this place. It may be that you will be shown other things. It may be that you will be shown strangely tempting things, but remember, it is the eternal which counts. Remember that eternity is for ever, and that what men call Here-and-Now is for a moment only.”

“I will try to remember this, sir,” replied old Francis Simnel.

“Farewell,” said the white-robed chairman. He stood and extended an arm in Simnel’s direction. Next instant the crystal palace seemed to dissolve in a grey cloud, a grey cloud that was, nevertheless, possessed of a certain tangibility.

Simnel lay back on it and relaxed. It was bearing him gently downwards . . . down . . . and down . . . he seemed to be sinking. He seemed to have been sinking for ever. Was it only seconds, he asked himself as he floated strongly downwards, or were they *magic seconds* during each of which an eternity had come and gone? Consciousness faded and there was a period of blackness.

When Simnel opened his eyes again he was standing beside a young man. The man was handsome in a dark,

swarthy way. His hair came to a Mephistophelian point in the centre of his forehead. His eyes were as black as the hair. His brows were very thick and dark. He wore a small, neat moustache and a little pointed beard, smaller than a goatee, but giving much the same effect. He smiled, revealing a row of sharp white teeth. Although the smile was wide, expansive almost, there was something frighteningly artificial about it, thought Simnel. It was like looking down the throat of a grinning crocodile.

"How do you do, Mr. Simnel." The man spoke with the polish of a well-to-do, high-class salesman.

"I'm well, as far as I know," said the old man.

"Splendid, splendid," said the other. "Come with me." He put a friendly hand on Simnel's arm and began leading the old man along. Gradually Simnel became aware of his environment. Underneath him there seemed to be something smooth and black. It was like walking on well-set pitch or asphalt; it was like walking on wet, black slate. It was like stepping on slabs of unbroken coal or shale. Simnel found the going easy and, in a way, strangely fascinating.

"I don't think I know you," he said. There were one or two features of the young man's face that seemed vaguely familiar to the old puppet master.

"I shouldn't let that worry you," said his guide, and turned the question aside with practised ease. Something about this man was so plausible and persuasive. Simnel was always afraid of salesmen. They carried him along. They made him feel that he was being pushed into things he didn't want to do. For this reason he greatly preferred self-service shops, or mail-order catalogues, where no direct personal pressure was exerted.

Time seemed to be passing and yet, with all the walking they were doing over the strange black substance, Simnel had no feeling of tiredness. It was as though he and the

rather saturnine young man were marking time while a moving film of a road unwound itself behind them.

Gradually Simnel became more aware of the environment on his left and right. It seemed to him that there were walls—black shining walls of the same substance as the floor. He glanced up curiously and noticed that there was a black ceiling to the corridor, if it was a corridor, along which he and the Mephistophelian young man were walking. Old Simnel sniffed appreciatively at the air. Then he stopped sniffing and coughed. There was something acrid and sharp which made him choke. He turned to the other, as though for explanation.

"Got a cold?" asked the young man solicitously. And yet his solicitousness seemed frighteningly artificial. The voice was almost blatantly insincere, although it seemed to old Francis that the man was trying very hard to give an impression of effusive sincerity.

"What is that smell?" quavered old Francis.

"I hadn't really noticed."

They walked on a little further. Simnel was having great difficulty in breathing. At last, reluctantly, the young man stopped. He sniffed, as though noticing the smell for the first time.

"It's a little sulphurous, isn't it?" he remarked. "Perhaps somebody's burning something. Are you all right now?" He looked at Simnel inquiringly.

"I think so," murmured the old man, still coughing hard and breathing with difficulty. The old puppeteer and his guide continued on their way.

The tunnel, passage or corridor along which they were walking seemed to be growing narrower. Its dimensions were diminishing.

"Where are you taking me?" asked the old man, coughing as he spoke, for the atmosphere was now so decidedly acrid that wisps of smoke were clearly discernible. They

seemed to be coming from small fissures in the shiny black surface.

"We're nearly there," said his guide, avoiding the question again with practised expertise. Old Simmel was about to utter a feeble protest when he found his way barred by a large steel door, crossed with metal strips and strengthened with thick rivets and bolts. It was a singularly final and frightening looking door. The old man backed away from it until his further retreat was prevented by the undeniable arm of his saturnine guide. With his other hand the Mephistophelian courier made a mysterious pass in the air and the great steel portal slid back. Old Simmel peered uncertainly into a vast, subterranean amphitheatre. It was huge, enormous, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was lit by numerous smokey red and yellow torches. As the old man looked at them, he was reminded of Dante's 'Inferno'.

"Here we are," announced his guide. And once the door had closed behind him the saturnine young man seemed to undergo a surprising change. The brows became thicker; the hair and eyes became blacker. The face seemed to force itself into a more angular mould, until he looked more like a gargoyle on a medieval cathedral than a human being!

The transformation frightened old Simmel and he backed away.

"Now," said his guide, who seemed to be moving with an animal gait.

"Now *what?*" quavered the old man in fear.

"I have something to show you," said the fiendish-looking thing that guided him. He led Simmel across the floor of the great subterranean amphitheatre to where a semi-circular dais was erected before a black stone altar.

From time to time Simmel got the impression that he could hear screams of pain and anguish, moans of bitter

sorrow, cries of despair, and soul-searing sobs, but the sounds were only a background; most of them were so far away and they terminated so abruptly that he was not really certain what he was hearing.

He contrasted this background of miserable sound to the joyful music that he had heard in the crystal palace. There was, he decided, no comparison whatsoever. There was a number of *things* sitting around the semi-circular dais. Simmel's guide sat down with the others, and one bestial, satanic-faced thing in the centre of the semi-circle stood up and addressed the old man, acting as spokesman, in the way that the chairman had acted for the group of white-robed individuals in the crystal palace.

"We have a proposition to put to you," said the speaker. Simmel, almost overcome by fear, stuttered:

"Yes—yes," and then waited. He felt like a very nervous first-year boy, standing on the carpet outside the headmaster's study. In the days when Simmel had been a schoolboy, the cane had been a much more evident piece of educational apparatus than it was in later times. Whether this was altogether a good thing Simmel was doubtful. The majority of experienced schoolmasters would very likely have agreed with him! His thoughts were jerked back to his immediate situation. The strange, quasi-human thing was looking at him with eyes that brooked no denial, they wanted an answer, and they wanted it immediately. But Simmel, in his confusion, was unaware of the question to which they wanted an answer.

"I'm sorry, I'm a little confused," he said awkwardly.

"We have a proposition to put to you. Now watch. Watch carefully!" said the spokesman of the demonic group. Simmel found himself looking at a picture that had formed on the shiny black surface of the floor at his feet, a picture that was illuminated and thrown into frightening relief by the red glow illuminating the subterranean amphi-

theatre. He saw an old man, an old man lying in a hospital bed. The old man appeared to be unconscious. He recognised the features of the pathetic old creature as his own. He saw the baldness, the drooping moustache, the lack-lustre eyes. Then he saw a nurse covering up the old man's face, grinning a little to herself as she did so. He had not noticed *that* in the picture he had seen before. He saw a doctor, who gave the body a derisive prod, nodded and smiled to the nurse, then pointed to the door of the ward in the manner of a householder who points to a dust cart and indicates that it is time the refuse was emptied. Old Simnel felt terribly hurt. He realised that the saturnine figures around the semi-circular dais were laughing. The body was taken out and dumped unceremoniously on a marble slab by cold, pitiless hands. After its removal he watched it being buried. Callous men treated it like so much old meat. It was thrown rather than laid into a coffin. The coffin was made from the cheapest possible timber. It was lowered unceremoniously into a damp grave. The gravel was shovelled back on to the lid, and nothing but a mound marked the spot.

"Look now," ordered the saturnine individual. Old Simnel continued to look. He saw no white patch leaving the body. He saw no nebulous outline of light flying up to the Elysian Fields, or the *Celestial Pastures*. He saw nothing but the body. The body seemed to be all that there was to see.

"Time passes," said the spokesman of the group. "Look now, Simnel, look *now*." He watched and closed his eyes in horror. "More time passes." As though by some hideous process of X-ray vision, he was looking into his own grave. He saw corruption and putrefaction. More time passed. He looked again and there was nothing but dust, dry, lifeless dust.

"And this is the end! Life is all there is. Enjoy it!

Who wants to die?" announced the saturnine spokesman.

"Man doesn't have a soul! Man is only an intelligent animal. An intelligent animal gets all it can out of life while it lives! Life is just a cosmic accident. There is no God, there is no scheme, no purpose; you're here. You don't know where you came from, you don't know where you're going. And why? Because you came from nowhere, and you're going nowhere. You come out of Infinity, and when your little spark of life is over Infinity closes round you again; it is as though you had never been. This is the truth. Don't listen to the lies that are thrown at you by priests! And prophets! And seers! Don't listen to the nonsense that the spiritualists talk! Accept the truth, be strong, be stark, be courageous, be a realist! Say to yourself, this life is all—I will live it, and live it, and *live it!* Until it is torn from me! I will never lay it down of my own accord."

Tears were running down old Simnel's cheeks.

"What can I do?" he said pathetically. "I am old; I am weak; is the grave *all!*"

"No, oh no. There is a great future for you, if you have the courage to take it. But wait, first I must show you something else, another possibility."

A picture appeared, red and black, on the floor at the old man's feet. He took a step back and stared aghast. There was Agnes. He saw himself emerging from the hospital; he saw himself emerging in a wheel chair, pale and thin, sick and old. And he saw Agnes stifling his personality, grinding him down into the dust, making him as nothing, and as less than nothing.

He saw himself in the old people's home, the misery, the frustration, the hopelessness of it. He saw the grim walls, high and forbidding. He saw the narrow windows, small and miserable, like the lives of the inmates. And again he saw himself dead, dead and rotting.

"No, no," he sobbed, "there must be more than this! There must! Don't do this to me!"

"This is what lies before you, unless you accept our proposition."

"What is your proposition?" begged the old man.

The memory of the crystal palaces, the animals, and the children playing among the flowers had faded from Simnel's mind like a dream. He could think only of the stifling misery of the superior presence of Agnes. The abject horror of the old people's home! The loathsome thought of rotting in damp earth. . . .

"Look at this!" hissed the saturnine spokesman in a voice of sibilant triumph. His tone reminded the old puppeteer of a snake. The idea of a snake took him back to the mythology of Genesis. A Garden of Eden, a Man, a Woman, and a *Serpent!*

Those thoughts passed, passed quickly, as though dark forces were trying to drive them from his mind, prevent his consciousness from battenning on to them. At his feet now he saw a picture of himself dressed in a rich, fur-collared coat; a curly brimmed hat was poised at a jaunty angle over his brow. He had thick-rimmed, expensive spectacles over his once weak, watery-rimmed old eyes, and he had about him the air of a man who has character and purpose. He was apparently signing autograph books. He was surrounded by a fascinated crowd of enthusiastic fans. The picture shifted. He saw television cameras

Crews were busy moving round a huge glossy stage. He saw the words:

#### SIMNEL'S WONDER PUPPETS

up in lights. He saw advertisements declaiming the merits of Simnel's Super Puppets. He blinked at these pictures. He saw himself in a luxurious apartment, surrounded by the kind of girls whom he had only seen on the covers of the magazines which Agnes forbade him to read. He saw

himself doing other things, and his mouth went dry with anticipation. Simnel's old eyes nearly darted from his head. He saw himself eating at the best restaurants, attended by fawning, psychophantic waiters. He saw himself driving a car that must have cost thousands. He saw himself with a chauffeur, a butler, and a valet. He saw himself in a mansion with his own private swimming pool. He saw Francis Simnel surrounded by luxury on every hand, and he saw Agnes, too.

He saw Agnes, not as superior, but only an equal. He saw himself able to keep her in her place. He saw Agnes having to obey his orders. He saw Agnes being forced to listen to his demands. At the sight of this new personality his whole being throbbled with joy and unbelief.

"Is this the truth?" he whispered. "Could this be?"

He thought for a few seconds of the crystal palaces.

"They never showed me these things," he whispered.

"They?" The saturnine individual who had been speaking raised one of its great eyebrows quizzically. "Oh, *they* wouldn't show you this! This is *our* offer, not theirs."

The shiny blackness of the corridors, the unholy red of the illumination, the sinister qualities of this huge subterranean amphitheatre dimmed into insignificance. Simnel could think only of the pictures he had been shown.

"Let me see the girls again!" he whispered. The troupe came back. He saw himself in the luxury apartment. There was a procession of exciting young women. He watched himself with them.

"Could this really happen?" he asked.

"It could," assured the saturnine demonstrator, "and look at this."

Now he saw himself in a neon-lit bar, with chromium, and glass thick to every square inch of it. "You can have all this, too." He saw himself drinking best quality whiskies and vodkas. Liqueurs flowed like water; he saw him-

self puffing expensive cigars, living a life of utmost luxury. Fame and sensual pleasure surrounded him on every hand.

"This is not a cruel joke on a feeble old man?"

"This is no joke; this is no dream," affirmed the saturnine spokesman.

"What must I do for this?"

"You must join us, and we will give you the power that will enable you to unlock this future. Do you accept?"

"I accept! Of course I accept!" Simnel's voice sank to an excited whisper. "Not only do I accept. I *thank* you for the offer!"

"We rarely get any thanks; it makes a pleasant change. You must be what is called a 'gentleman of the old school' on earth," said the Satanic minion.

Simnel sensed a note of mockery but he was so wrapped up in his vision of equality with Agnes, and the wealth and power that seemed to have been promised, that the thought died away.

"What is my power to be?" he asked in a hushed whisper.

"You shall make puppets like no man on earth has ever made puppets before," said the Mephistophelian spokesman. "Your puppets shall live. They shall have personality and power. Their power shall be your power, their life, your life. You will receive fame and wealth. Simnel's Puppets will be known throughout the length and breadth of the land, and across half the world. None will know your secret, except our agent and yourself."

"Who is your agent?" quavered the old man.

"That is not for you to know—*yet*," smiled the sharp-toothed, demon-faced thing. "But you will know in good time."

Simnel nodded. "Very well," he said.

"Now you must go back, back to the place from whence you came, and there, remember *the power will be given*, the opportunities must be *taken*. . . ."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Return to Reality*

OLD Francis Simnel opened his eyes and found himself looking up through a strange, whitish mist. The whitish mist cleared, its edges tinged with pink for a second or so, and then he realised that he was looking up at a white ceiling. He was lying on his back, and the whiteness of the ceiling was interrupted by another whiteness with a pink blob at the top. The pink blob was framed with a dark brown fuzz. Out of a babel of sound, distant and purposeful, Francis heard a voice.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Simnel?" The voice was strong, cultured and kindly.

"Why yes, who are you? Where am I?"

Francis tried to sit up and found that his body was largely devoid of strength.

"Don't try to move. You'll feel better in a few minutes."

Francis gradually got one hand up towards his face and found that his spectacles were missing. Obviously the voice which he did recognise belonged to the strange pink and brown blur, which must, he reasoned, be a man.

"I'm afraid your spectacles were broken," said the voice as the doctor saw Francis groping towards his face, "but we were able to get the prescription for the lenses from some of the larger pieces, and we have had a temporary pair made for you, on adjustable frames."

"Oh, thank you. You are most kind. Please can you tell me what's happened to me? I feel so confused. I—I—"

"You had rather a nasty motor accident, not far from the old Gallows Crossroads. You were found by some policemen, who brought you here, and we've patched you up as best we can. Nothing really serious. You were actually very fortunate in many ways. Some of your puppets suffered more damage than you did."

"Oh, dear." Francis sounded genuinely distressed. "Is Johnny all right?"

"I'm afraid we don't know which one Johnny is."

"Johnny's the clown. Everybody knows Johnny." Francis sounded almost petulant. "Could I sit up now?" He sat up and one of the nurses helped him to adjust his spectacles.

"Oh, that's fine." The blobs crystallised and condensed until he could make out a tall young doctor.

"You'll have to stay with us a few days more, and then we shall want you to come back for a check over to make sure everything's all right," said the doctor.

"Have my puppets been taken care of?" asked the old man, rather pathetically.

"Yes, the local police are looking after them."

"I wonder if they've taken them to my house," murmured Francis.

"They are probably waiting at the police station to be claimed."

"Has my sister Agnes been to see me?"

"No; she telephoned two or three times to see how you were getting on. There wasn't really much point in coming while you were in this condition."

"What's been happening to me?"

"You were in a very deep coma; we were worried about you at one time, but you made a startling improvement just a few minutes ago."

"Oh—this coma, would it be—would it be possible for a man to have dreams in a coma?"

"Possible," agreed the doctor, with a smile. "Why? Have you been dreaming? Would you like to tell me about them?" The doctor sat on the edge of the bed. He looked very gentle and kindly, despite the strength in his eyes and the purpose in his face.

"I seemed to be in a sort of crystal place, and there were a lot of bright lights." The doctor raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"It may be some kind of symbolic interpretation of the operating theatre," he said. "We did just have you down to the theatre and have a good look at you. There was no bone damage to the skull, so we didn't have to operate to relieve pressure, or anything of that kind. I wonder whether, in spite of the anaesthetic, your subconscious gave you some kind of interpretation of that?"

"It's interesting that you should say that, doctor, because"—he paused and readjusted his spectacles—"because when I was actually down there—if that was what was happening—I did see some men in white coats, but the men I saw," he paused, chuckling, "said they were some sort of angels, or elder spirits or something."

"I'm afraid we're not angels, though we try and do our best," said the doctor. "If you could see some of us off duty, you would realise that we were anything but angels." He grinned. It was a pleasant, infectious, very good-natured grin. The kind of grin that a Rugby-playing internee usually reserved for his team mates when a match was won.

"The dream had another aspect," quavered old Francis.

"Oh, what was that?" asked the doctor.

"Well, you see, there was——" The old man paused yet again.

"Please go on," prompted the medical man.

"There was another place, very black and hot."

"Well, we have been keeping you as warm as we possibly can, in an effort to get you out of the coma. I don't think we've been cooking you, but we've tucked you in with hot water bottles and that sort of thing."

"Oh! Tell me, has it been dark?"

"Well, we've had the screens round the bed once or twice when we had a look at you, but apart from the normal succession of nights and days, about which man—even the cleverest man—can do little or nothing, it's not been unusually dark."

"I seemed to be in a shiny black tunnel," said Francis.

"Yes," murmured the doctor, interestedly.

"A shiny black tunnel," repeated the old man. He was feeling very tired. Talking had ceased to interest him because it had become an effort. "And I spoke to some other people, and there were some fires and things."

"I think you're overtaxing your strength, Mr. Simnel. You ought to lie down again now. Nurse, help Mr. Simnel to lie down, he ought to get some rest."

The doctor moved on, making his round of the ward.

The old man closed his eyes and felt tiny rivulets of strength flowing back, slowly, very, very slowly, into his tired, battered old body. He felt strangely light-headed, but memory was coming back much more clearly now. Had it been a dream? he asked himself. Had it all been some strange kind of mental phenomena? Was it more than a dream, was it more than the creation of 'a half-oppressed brain'? as Shakespeare would have said?

It was a far cry from the swan of Avon to the little puppet theatre, thought Francis Simnel. But, nevertheless, I have a claim to belong to the same great profession. He smiled a little, as he lay there with his weak old head on the pillow. "I have two claims, I write my own little plays for my puppets, as well as act in them. So I am actor,

manager, author, producer—everything, *everything*." The first time the thought went through his head with a strange surge of elation. The second time it fell pathetically flat. The idea of being everything lost its sparkle. He was everything because there was no one else. He thought of Agnes, and the grudging, bitter 'help' which she offered. She'd help him to spend the meagre fees which the show afforded. By the time he had paid for a few unostentatious advertisements and paid for the wear and tear on the puppets, there was very little left. Certainly there was not enough left to keep Agnes in the style to which she was apparently accustomed! *Agnes!* He reflected bitterly. The thought almost made him wish he had not recovered from the accident. The memory of the accident took his mind back to his car. Francis Simnel was the kind of old-fashioned man who called a car a 'motor-car'. Sometimes he called it a 'motor'. He wondered whether enough of his battered old pre-war saloon had survived to make it a repairable proposition. He would have to ask the doctor or the nurses if some inquiries of that kind could be made as soon as possible. He lay and worried about it for a few minutes, then he slept. And as he slept, he dreamed. . . . During his dreams he heard voices.

"Francis Simnel," said a voice, soft and faraway, but nevertheless strong and possessing a good carrying quality. "Francis Simnel, you have made a wrong decision," came the voice. "There is still time. Think again. Which is worth more to you? A few snatched moments of time? A few cheap sinful pleasures? Pleasures which have scarcely any real value and which you will not truly enjoy, or"—the voice paused, as though for emphasis—"or the treasures of eternity? Remember the crystal palace, remember the perfume, remember the sweetness of the air. Remember the gardens, the flowers, the innocence. Remember these things. Remember and rejoice, for these



things can still be yours. We made the promise. There will be little for you in this life, but you can come to us in the next . . . in the next . . . in the next." The voice died softly away like summer wind murmuring in the tree tops.

Then, stronger and clearer, in the course of Francis Simnel's dream, there came a more familiar voice, a voice that spoke more directly to the old man's baser instincts and lower nature.

"Francis Simnel, Francis Simnel, I offer you what I offered you before. You have already accepted. You cannot go back on us now. Francis—power—money—the chance to hold Agnes at bay—luxury! All the joys of life! Gratification of all the senses. *All* of them, Francis. Remember *the girls!*" The images moved before his eyes again. He licked his lips and half woke from the dream. "The power will be yours, yours to grasp," persisted the voice, strong and insistent, a dark brown voice with sharp edges. "The power will be yours, Francis Simnel, power, power, POWER! Power to make puppets live, give them personality, then get the best deal that you can for yourself. Think of that. Your power, we'll help you! We'll do all we can! Our agent will contact you soon. Get out of this place as quickly as you can. Get out of this place and start on your career of power!"

The old man woke from his dream. He sniffed. It seemed to him that there was almost a smell of brimstone lingering, lingering faintly in the air.

He drew himself into a sitting position again.

"Nurse," he called faintly. Within a matter of seconds a nurse was by his side.

"Yes, Mr. Simnel. What did you want?"

"I—I wonder how long it will be before I can go home? I'm feeling very much better."

"You can't possibly go home yet."

"But I want to go home! I've got a lot of work to do!"

She smiled at him, almost patronisingly. "I'm afraid you can't go home for some time," she affirmed.

"Why not? I can get my discharge if I want to, can't I?"

"You're not serious, Mr. Simnel? You've been dangerously ill."

"I don't care! I want to go home as soon as I can! Tell my sister, I demand that my sister be told!" He was raising his voice, some of the other patients looked in his direction. The nurse called the Ward Sister.

"Now, then," the Ward Sister bore down on Francis Simnel like a battleship in full sail. She had the same commanding personality as Agnes, perhaps even more so, thought Francis, but where Agnes was as thin as a rake, as bony and angular as a broomstick, this woman was massive. Agnes was a venomous snake, this woman was a boa-constrictor that had just swallowed its prey. Agnes hissed, this woman tended to boom like a bittern.

"Now, Mr. Simnel, what's all this nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense," said Simnel. The dream was coming back to him. They had said that he would have power. He had to prove to himself that he had the power. It was no good having power if you couldn't use it; no good having power if there was something in your mind that held you back from its full employment. You had to be able to use your power to get the things you wanted, and one of the things he wanted most was to end the awful domination that had crushed him all his life. This woman was only a kind of projection of Agnes. Agnes had always been there, saying 'No' to the things he wanted to do. Laughing to scorn all the things he had ever fancied doing. Agnes had stifled his personality until it had practically ceased to exist. By getting back at this woman, he was getting back at Agnes.

"You've no right to keep me here against my will," he

said. And now his voice sounded angry rather than petulant. "I demand to see someone in authority. I want my discharge, please. I'm going home."

"You're in no condition to go home. Don't be so foolish and ridiculous, you're being light-headed. I'll send someone along to give you an injection, I think," retorted the Ward Sister.

"Don't want an injection. I require no further treatment," returned old Francis with increasing firmness.

The Ward Sister looked at him incredulously. This little worm of a man was daring to defy *her*. She could make the boldest and most brazen nurse tremble in her shoes. Who was this man? Who did he think he *was*? She tried to overwhelm him again, but despite his weakness, old Francis Simnel had the bit between his teeth at long last. He had found that with this new confidence—that came from he did not really care to know where—he could defy this woman, who was a kind of representation of Agnes. A kind of personification of Agnes, and all that Agnes stood for, what Francis had himself dubbed as Agnes-ism.

"I'm not very impressed with your tone," he said coldly and quietly.

"How dare you speak to me like that!" exploded the enormous Ward Sister.

"I dare speak to anyone in any manner that I choose," said Francis Simnel, "and if you adopt that bombastic manner with me, my good woman, I shall be considerably ruder to you!" It occurred to him that one or two of the nurses were fore-gathering within earshot, and were apparently listening to his rhetoric with considerable enjoyment. He deduced from this that the Ward Sister was not as popular as she might have been.

With a stifled, explosive exclamation, the battleship weighed anchor and sailed down the ward in a state that could only have been described as the highest possible

dudgeon. The battleship disappeared through a door at the end of the ward and it became obvious to Simnel that it had gone off to confer with the flagship.

A little time passed, and the young doctor whom Simnel had seen when he first regained consciousness appeared. Simnel was quiet but firmly polite, and in a remarkably short time Agnes had rolled up to the hospital to collect him. Although he looked very frail and thin, Agnes looked with some suspicion at the light that shone from his eyes.

"I understood that you were very gravely ill, in fact that you were not expected to live," she said, quite bluntly.

"I hope you're not disappointed, my dear," replied Francis. Agnes hissed slightly, as though that sibilant sound promised vitriol to come. It was like a little wisp of steam oozing round the edge of a safety valve when a boiler is close to dangerous pressure.

"Why do you insist on being taken home?" said Agnes.

Francis drew a deep breath. "I'm so happy and comfortable with you, dear Agnes, I couldn't bear to be separated from you a moment longer than is absolutely necessary." He said it with such gentle but, at the same time, biting sarcasm that Agnes hissed again. Her lips half moved as though she was on the verge of saying something, but the remark died before it ever reached coherence. The still-born sound faded like the winds of Yesterday when the clock strikes midnight.

There was no further noise until old Simnel himself spoke again.

"You may find me a little different, Agnes, but I've been through a most trying experience, as you will understand, and I feel I shall be entitled to any little idiosyncracies that I may have."

"You do seem different," replied Agnes; there was a trace of suspicion and something that might even have been fear in her voice. As though she was half-aware

that something might have happened, and as though this half-awareness was irritating her almost beyond endurance.

They reached home and Simnel demanded to be taken into his work room and propped up with cushions. Agnes had never bothered to listen to any of his demands before. In fact, he had never made any demands. He had only made the gentlest of requests, and his requests had invariably been phrased so politely and innocuously that they were scarcely more than pleadings. Now the very tone of his voice had changed. There was a physical ring to it which Agnes found hard to disobey. If truth has a ring, confidence has a ring also.

"I want the puppets brought in here."

"Puppets? The police have returned a certain amount of wreckage," said Agnes. "You don't expect *me* to handle it, do you?"

"Well, I'm not capable of doing so, and I want them in here," said Simnel angrily. "What do you expect them to do? Walk in here on their own, you fool?" He had never used anything in the nature of insulting language to his sister before. Agnes blanched.

"What did you call me?"

"I called you a fool, and deservedly, too, because you just made the most absurd remark," said Samuel.

"Francis, what have they done to you in that hospital?" wailed Agnes.

"If anything has happened to me," retorted Simnel, "it was nothing that happened in the hospital."

"Well, whatever's happened to you," replied Agnes, regaining her former composure, "it'll have to be put right again pretty soon! I'll soon get you back where I want you, Francis Simnel. Don't forget you're dependent on me!"

"Rubbish!" That was one of Agnes' favourite expressions, and Simnel threw it back at her with a dexterity

which showed he could bounce the ball back into her court as and when he felt like doing so.

"Don't you speak to me like that? Who do you think you are?"

"I might ask you who you think you are! You've spoken to me like that for years, and I've just taken it."

"Well?" gasped Agnes.

"Well—the boot is now on the other foot with a vengeance, my dear Agnes."

"You're bullying me!"

"No one could ever bully you. All I'm trying to get is equal rights! Emancipation, with a vicious reversal to it! I've been hag-ridden since I've been old enough to remember. You've seen to that!"

"Oh, I haven't! I've done everything for you, you ungrateful wretch!"

"I? Ungrateful? What have you ever done for me that has not been done with contempt and a haughty, patronising, superior attitude?" retorted the old man. "You vixen! You shrew!"

"I will not stay here to be insulted a moment longer!"

"Then go, and good riddance to you," snapped Simnel. "I can get a housekeeper a damn sight cheaper than I can keep you! Your extravagant tastes, and your reluctance to do any real work!"

Agnes, her eyes opened as wide as saucers, stood hesitantly in the doorway of the workshop. She made one last attempt to regain control.

"If you apologise immediately——"

"I have no intention of apologising immediately, or in a thousand years time," answered Simnel. "Will you go and fetch the puppets for me, so I can see how much damage has been done? Don't forget they're your living as well as mine! If you want half the money, you'll have to do at least half the work, and to make up for the long

years when I've done it, you can do a damn sight more than half till I get meself a bit fitter! You can start by making me a nice cup of tea, as soon as you've got the puppets in here! I'll have it hot and strong, not the usual rubbish you dish up."

Agnes suddenly burst into tears and fled from the room. "Come on!" shouted Simnel. "No time for a tantrum! I want the puppets."

It was twenty minutes before she finally brought them; then, red-eyed and tight-lipped, she set them down without a word.

"Took your time about it! Now, where's my cup of tea?" said old Simnel.

Still without a word, Agnes went through to the kitchen and put the kettle on. The old man, propped up on his cushions, began taking the puppets out of the box and examining them. Johnny the clown and his companion Bimbo were both all right. That, decided Simnel, was more than half the battle. He spent the afternoon drinking tea and re-stringing the puppets. Apart from a little superficial damage, which he was able to touch up with paint, none of them had been seriously shattered by the impact. He was particularly glad about that.

In his own strange way, Francis Simnel regarded the little people as having personalities of their own. It would have grieved him as much to think of the death of a friend as of the loss of one of his precious puppets.

Agnes began to thaw out a little, as time continued to pass but, even so, she spoke in monosyllables. Before they retired for the night she cast one agonised, inquiring glance at Francis.

"Tell me," she said softly, "what *has* happened to you?"

"I have accepted an offer that was made to me," said Simnel. More than that he refused to say, and Agnes was left with that sole enigmatic remark.

That night, as he lay asleep, Francis dreamed again. He dreamed of the saturnine, Mephistophelian individual whom he had meet in the strange black tunnel.

The Mephistophelian one came to him in the dream and spoke. He did not stay long, and his message was so short and to the point that it was almost terse.

"Francis Simnel, so far you are beginning to realise your potential . . . continue . . . *continue*. Tomorrow you shall be told who the agent is."

The old man finished his dream and dropped into a deep, undisturbed sleep. Agnes, however, was passing the night in a very different way.

## CHAPTER V.

### *The Agent*

AGNES SIMNEL seemed scarcely to have fallen asleep before she awoke with an overwhelming sense of terror, and the impression that she was not alone in the room. She could see nothing, could hear nothing; but she was convinced that although the room seemed empty, there was some other presence there with her. She held her breath, straining her ears, every nerve alert, awake, and strained to the limit.

Her eyes opened wider and wider, but she was unable to see anything except the moonlit gloom of her bedroom.

The curtains, the wallpaper, the ceiling, the light fitting, the mirror, the shelves, the wardrobe, the chest of drawers and the door, all these things were vaguely, dimly discernible, all of them were in their accustomed places. None seemed to hide the form of an intruder. Agnes overcame her fear sufficiently to get out of bed and turn on the light. She switched it on with a frighteningly loud click. Because of the intensity of the silence, the click sounded terrifying by comparison.

Agnes jumped at the movement of the tumbler. As though the switch had been in itself some kind of signalling device, she heard a voice hiss: "Put out the light at once!" Scarcely knowing why she did so, she switched the toggle back to the other position. Darkness and gloom descended on the room once more. Comparatively, it seemed darker than it had been earlier, because Agnes' eyes had been dazzled by the influx of light when she had switched on.

"Agnes Simnel," said the voice, "you have noticed the change that has come over your brother Francis. You do not like the change. It means that your power is lessened. Now, Agnes, would you like the chance to restore your power?"

Scarcely knowing what she did, or why, not stopping to think that all she was doing was to answer a disembodied voice, which might, or might not, have any basis in reality, Agnes Simnel said, "Yes."

Her hatred of Francis was such that to be able to regain her old position, or at least to prevent herself slipping any further back, was now of paramount importance to her.

"We are looking for a suitable person to carry out a difficult and dangerous task."

"Dangerous?" quavered Agnes.

"It would not do to be caught performing the kind of work which must be done for us," said the voice.

"What is it?" quavered the angular Miss Simnel.

"We are looking for an agent," said the voice, "an agent who will control part of the power which we have given to Francis."

"You are responsible for making him disobey me?" screeched Agnes.

"That is right. We are responsible."

Agnes lapsed into furious silence.

"I don't know who you are," she said, with a certain degree of petulance, "but I wish you'd show yourself. I can't carry on a conversation with an invisible voice."

"I am not an invisible voice," came the reply. "I can show you quickly, and all too plainly, if you really wish to see." Agnes felt the touch of an icy hand that seemed to tug at her very heart, at her innermost being.

"No, no. I don't want to see!"

"But you *shall* see!"

There was a noted increase in the sulphur content of the air. Agnes found herself coughing and choking. It was by no means easy to breathe.

"What's happening?" she gasped breathlessly. The only answer was a cloud of green and yellow illumination, a further increase in the sulphurous smell, and a demoniac laugh.

"Help!" wailed Agnes. The pathetic, quavering call for aid was so incongruous that it sounded funny. There was another demoniac laugh, and then a crash of thunder. A *thing* appeared at the foot of Agnes Simnel's bed. It was tall, very tall—frighteningly tall, in fact. If it had not been actually leaning over the foot of the bed and reaching towards her, it would have been too tall to stand in the room. The head was a kind of diamond-shaped caricature of a human head. There were eyes, slanting and vicious looking, and a nose that was more like a bronze beak than any human nose had ever been. The lips were

thin, like smoking wire and drawn back to reveal sharp, white teeth. There was a beard, a fringe of some kind of infernal hair, around the lower edge of the face, following the angle of the jaw bone. The eyes lit up even as she watched, until they were boring into her with a power that was not of the mortal world. The creature's shoulders were broad, so broad, in fact, that the width of the monster was in keeping with its height. Had the shoulders not been as broad as they were, the strange beast would have had every appearance of thinness. But it wasn't thin—it was just big! Its height in no way detracted from its appearance of massiveness.

The laughing stopped, and it gave a deep, guttural growl from the lowest part of its throat.

"Agnes," it said, in that same gravel-throated voice. "Agnes, you are to be our agent! If you do not obey—in every particular—I will come again. I will come again, and I will destroy you! Do you understand this?"

"Yes," gasped Agnes hoarsely.

"Then do you accept my offer? Be our agent and you will be able to control Francis again!"

"Very well, very well!" Agnes watched in horror as the thing underwent a peculiar metamorphosis. It seemed to change shape a hundred times before her astonished eyes, and then, with a flash and a crash of thunder, it vanished from the bedroom.

She fell back against her pillows in a dead faint. When she awoke it was morning. She sat up and memory of the strange events of the night before flooded into her mind. Had it been real?

Could the supernatural shatter the flimsy borders of habitual reality which men call Everyday Life? Or, much more likely in her opinion, had she merely experienced a frighteningly vivid dream?

If it had only been a dream, however, what accounted

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for this peculiar feeling she had inside herself? This peculiar feeling that she would now be able to hold her own with her brother once more?

She got up and, making her way to the landing, was interrupted by the sound of Francis' voice.

"Is that you, Agnes?" he asked.

"Yes, of course it's me!" she replied tersely, angrily.

"I want my breakfast."

"Then get up and I'll serve it in the breakfast room," she called sharply.

"Agnes, don't speak to me like that!"

"I'll speak to you as I like, you worm!" said Agnes, flinging open Francis' bedroom door. "You're a worm!" she said. "You're a microbe! Something less than a worm!"

"A microbe is more dangerous than a worm, I think," he returned.

She snorted angrily. "Ah, but I fancy microbes are susceptible to some ills which a worm would be able to survive!" said Francis. Nevertheless, he got up slowly and made his way down to the breakfast room.

Agnes toyed with her porage for a few minutes, and then, unable to restrain the impulse any longer, she turned and said to Francis:

"Do you know anything about an *agent*?"

He gulped and swallowed, his face turned a shade pale.

"An-agent?" he asked. "What—er—what do you know about it?"

"I know a great deal," said Agnes, and suddenly, inside her mind, the voice that had terrified her almost out of existence last night prompted her, like the cue-man in a dramatic production. The invisible prompter hissed silently inside her mind—if such a mixed metaphor is permissible:

"Tell him you are his agent! And watch his expression change! Tell him we have appointed *you*."

Obedient to the voice in her mind, Agnes said: "I am the new agent. I am *your* agent. They have appointed me."

"No!" gasped Francis in horror, and yet, somehow, he could see the irony of it. He could see the diabolical humour at the back of it all. "You are the agent, so although my power is meant to give me power over you, it is through you that I shall get my power!"

"A paradox, apparently," rejoined Agnes.

"And a damnable one," said old Francis.

"Now that we understand each other," said Agnes, "let's work out some kind of formula for peaceful co-existence."

"Looks like being the only way, doesn't it?" said Francis. He spoke bitterly and with disappointment. Then his eyes brightened a little. "But, at any rate, you don't dominate me any more."

"No," agreed Agnes, "and you don't dominate me, either, do you?" There was a cold, angry silence between them as they finished their breakfast. Domination had gone, leaving its ugly sister, hatred, to reign in its stead.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The First Trial*

FRANCIS SIMNEL leaned pensively against the door post, looking out into the street beyond. The sun was warm and comparatively pleasant for the time of year, but

Francis felt no pleasure in the warmth of the great golden orb. In fact, he looked at it rather cynically. He was becoming increasingly disillusioned about everything. He thought of the grandiose phrases that poets, and writers in general, used to describe the vast orb. "The eye of heaven." "The chariot of Apollo." Francis Simnel found the descriptions whimsical and inexact. In fact, they annoyed him considerably.

His thoughts were taken off the sun and its descriptions by the entry of the baker's cart into the street. The baker's roundsman was one of those cheery, ready conversationalists for whom life was very largely a matter of lightening a routine burden, which became so much a part of his being that he could do it without thinking.

The way which he chose was gregarious chatter with anybody who had time to stop and listen. He often foisted himself on to those who hadn't got the time to stop and listen. Today he descended on Francis Simnel like a vulture descending on a carcass.

"How're you getting on, ol' partner?" The baker's voice, rich, friendly and rural in the extreme, jarred across the old puppet master's thoughts. "What is it your sister wants today?"

"I really don't know." Francis Simnel looked at the baker with an angry glint in his eyes which was far from characteristic. The jovial roundsman was a little taken a-back, then he grinned.

"What's the ol' dragon bin givin' you a rough time, boy?"

"Do you mean Agnes?" Francis glared at the roundsman angrily. Who was this tradesman to speak to him? He was considerably above the kind of conversation which he normally suffered at the hands—or rather, at the lips and tongue—of this fellow.

"If you can't be more civil, we shall get another baker," said Francis, coldly.

The roundsman scratched his head in amazement.

"Whatever's come over you, boy? You always did stop and have a jaw! She must have upset you this morning."

Ignoring the presence of the expression, reminiscent of a gathering thunder cloud, which was darkening with increasing savagery on the old puppet master's face, the baker's roundsman went on with his morning gossip.

"Thass a great pity about poor ol' Tom Winter. you know."

Despite himself, Francis Simnel was interested. Tom Winter was something of a 'character'. He lived in a village about six miles away and was very well known locally, something of a dialect *raconteur* and general rural 'do-good-er'. In his normal mood, Francis Simnel would have felt sorry to hear that Tom Winter was not feeling well. Now, however, he saw Tom Winter in another light. His charitable doings appeared only as unwarranted meddling in the affairs of others. His country wit and fame as a *raconteur* stirred only the entertainer's professional jealousy in Francis Simnel. The puppeteer continued staring at the baker's roundsman.

"What's the matter with him, then?"

"Well, he had the bronchitis very bad, and at his age there's no knowin' which way thass a-goin'."

"How old is he, then?" demanded Simnel, without much sympathy in his voice.

"I reckon he mus' be werry near ninety—if he's not over."

"Hm, as old as that, hey?" said Simnel.

"Wonderful ol' fella Tom was——"

"Was?" Francis raised an eyebrow. "You're talking about him in the past tense. He's not dead yet, is he?"

"No, but doctor reckon he won't last more than another week. Nurse Starr has bin goin' every day."

"Is she the new one?"



"Arr! Smart young gal. too!"

"Josephine Starr, wasn't it?" asked Simnel now, interested in spite of himself. His natural love of gossip, a deep, even innate thing, had replaced his irritation with the baker's roundman. The roundman's eyes lit up as he sensed a deep, psychic victory.

"Arr, she's a bit o' all right, Josephine Starr! Dark, curly-haired girl. Bit on the big side, perhaps, but werra nice. They want to be strong in their job, lifting old folks about."

"Yes, yes—I should think it would be quite an asset," replied Simnel. He looked at the cart and suddenly an overwhelming desire to be rid of the baker filled him.

"Two large white and a small brown," he said decisively.

"That i'n't what she usually have," reproved the roundsman. "I doan wanna get you wrong with her." He winked. "I know what she's like."

"I'd rather you didn't discuss my sister in that tone of voice," said Francis, drawing himself up to his full height. "If I order the bread I shall tell her what bread has been ordered, and there the matter will end."

"Corr, you have come on a rum 'un. What, you come into some money or suffin'?" The roundsman raised an eyebrow.

Francis took the bread and walked indoors with as much aloofness in his demeanour as his rather insignificant body was capable of sustaining. Francis put the bread down on the hall table and paused. A strange feeling seemed to come over him. Something else seemed to be moving in his mind. He got the oddest sensation that he was watching himself from some distance away. He felt frightened, seriously frightened. Then the feeling passed.

The next second he got a powerful urge to go down to

his workshop. Without knowing why, simply obeying the urge, he moved purposefully towards the door. He closed and locked it behind him and made his way to the work bench. Taking a new block of wood, he placed it securely in the vice and began to carve. Whatever it was that had come over him knew how to carve wood. It was as though some power other than his own had now taken possession of his fingers. As the mallet fell across the chisel handle, chips went flying energetically all around the floor and under the bench. Francis himself scarcely knew what it was that he was carving, except that he was carving the head for a new puppet, which was going to be his greatest and most life-like creation yet. He worked with increasing energy until it seemed to him that the chisel had actually come alive in his hands, as though he was a medium of some sort, through which a powerful, psychic agency was working. The chisel continued to make its own way around the block of wood, cutting with power, and yet, at the same time, with a fineness and a delicacy of reproduction which Francis Simnel had never achieved before, even in his most outstanding moments.

He paused, with the head half finished. It was carved down as far as the nose. The eyes were looking back at him so realistically that even without any paint or pigment of any kind upon them, he felt that they were looking at him. He trembled a little as he took up the chisel again. This puppet frightened him. Over the blows of the mallet he was able to hear another knocking sound. He paused again in his work and called out angrily, "Who's there?"

"It is I, Agnes," replied a voice.

"Go away," he called, more angrily. "I'm working and I mustn't be disturbed for anything or anybody! Go away."

There was a louder, more furious knock than ever. Francis Simnel strode towards the door, put the chisel

against it, and crashed the mallet up against the side of the chisel. The sound was frightening.

"What are you doing?" screeched Agnes. He heard her take a step back. He brought the mallet down on the chisel again, and this time the chisel went completely through the door panel.

"If you disturb me again, that's what you'll get!" screeched Francis, and wrenching out the chisel with surprising strength for so old a man, he went back to the head that was two-thirds finished. There was something strangely familiar about it, but he couldn't think what it was. He applied the chisel again, adding the finest of fine detail to his work.

Another hour passed, and at the end of it Francis Simnel put down his chisel and looked, in rather horrified bewilderment, at a head which was the exact image of old Tom Winter. The twinkly kindness was there in the wooden eyes, the lines of the rugged, country-wise face; the ears, long in the lobes, the jaw, still strong and prominent, even in extreme age. The characteristic scragginess of the old man's antediluvian neck was reproduced perfectly.

Francis Simnel took the head off the bench and set it up on his painting tray. He walked quietly across to the door, unlocked it and called out quietly:

"Agnes." His voice was almost meek and mild again. It was placatory, if nothing else. A moment later Agnes appeared. She still looked white and shaken.

"What were you doing with that chisel?" she asked, in an awestricken whisper.

"When I tell you not to disturb me, I'm afraid I mean just that," said Francis. "I was working on a very important carving. I have never done one as good as this. Come and have a look at it."

In tight-lipped silence, Agnes followed him into the

workshop. At sight of the head, she gave a gasp of admiration.

"Francis!" she said softly. She very rarely addressed him by name. "Francis, it's marvellous! You've never done anything as good as that, never!"

"That's what I thought," he replied. "Now I want you to get the clothes ready."

"I know that man—that's old Tom Winter!" exclaimed Agnes.

"Yes," agreed Francis. "Old Tom Winter."

"I heard one of the women in the grocer's saying that he was very ill," murmured Agnes. Strange thoughts were crowding into her mind, and the thoughts seemed objective rather than subjective in origin.

"It's a pity," said Francis. He looked as sad and solemn as a crocodile bemoaning the fact that a tender young monkey had just fallen into the water.

"What—er—what made you carve it like that, then?" asked Agnes.

"I'm not really sure." Although Francis could hear his own voice, he felt that he was listening to a record that someone else had made.

"What about the clothes, then?" asked Agnes, trying to sound prosaic, matter-of-fact and mundane.

"Well, I—I—think—I see him in a homespun suit, sort of pepper and salt mixture, perhaps, with a cloth cap."

"Definitely a cloth cap," agreed Agnes.

"We'll have one that can be raised or lowered on a string."

"Of course."

"I see it being worn at rather a jolly angle."

"Yes, definitely jaunty," said Agnes, as she studied the head. "It needs a jaunty cap."

"How long will it take you to finish the suit, me dear?"

Agnes raised a thin, grey eyebrow. Her ascetic face

broadened into something that might have been a smile on a more human countenance.

"Oh, I think I could have it ready by tomorrow night."

"Excellent!" Old Francis was rubbing his hands together. "Absolutely excellent."

He had the appearance now of an unctious, parsimonious shopkeeper from the kind of Victorian slum envisaged by Dickens and Kingsley. Agnes and Francis discussed measurements for a few minutes, then she withdrew to her sewing machine while the old man began work on the puppet's body. He used the traditional construction of wood, jointed with metal rings, and weighted here and there to give additional realism and effectiveness.

But he added one or two little touches which he did not always bother to add for less important puppets. He rounded off the shoulders neatly and smoothly with sandpaper. Normally he considered that they could be left square, and any undue angularity would be taken care of by the clothing. As he studied the body that he had just jointed together, pictures of old Tom Winter kept flashing through his mind. The old man was no longer upright. He had a very pronounced stoop and his shoulders were rounded. Francis Simmel took plastic wood and began adding a subtle round-shouldered, stooped effect to the body that he had prepared.

When he had finished he took the body up to Agnes, while he got on with painting the head. He found it singularly convivial. The pigment seemed to jump from the tip of the brush to the places where he wanted it. Just as the carving had never gone so well previously, so he thought, this painting was going better than any he had done before. Yet it seemed amazing that his hospitalization, and the after effects of the accident, had not ruined his craftsmanship.

His energy had come back. He felt surprisingly younger,

fitter, more purposeful. He wondered whether the effect was transitory, or whether it would stay for some time. He hoped it would; he liked the feeling.

The painting completed, he reached for the white, artificial hair and began glueing it in position, skilfully and adroitly. He worked with artistry and finesse. With every stroke of the paint brush, the likeness between the puppet head and old Tom Winter had increased, but the skilfully arranged artificial hair added more to the effect than the paint or the carving had done. When the last strand of hair was in place, old Francis felt a flooding, enervating loss of energy that overwhelmed him, and absorbed his whole being into himself. He seemed to be dissolving in tiredness. It took the last of his strength to stagger from his workshop to his bedroom.

"Agnes," he called feebly, "Agnes, I'm very tired. I'm —I'm—" He stumbled and fell asleep where he lay—on top of the landing, his hand resting against the bedroom door. With some difficulty Agnes got him first to his knees and then to his feet. She half-dragged and half-carried her elder brother to his bed and settled him between the sheets.

He opened his eyes and looked at her feebly.

"It's finished," he whispered. "Best I ever made! It's finished. It looks so good, as if it might walk off the bench."

"It won't walk very far without a body, will it dear?"

"How's the suit coming on?" Francis seemed almost to have lost his voice.

"It's coming on splendidly," said Agnes, "much better than I thought. Everything went just exactly right."

"Yes, it did for me, too."

"Must be the devil looking after his own," commented Agnes, with a thin, tight-lipped smile.

Francis raised an eyebrow. "You're probably very close

to the truth," he agreed, and then he fell asleep. His sleep, although deep and heavy, was punctuated by strange dreams. He dreamed of a girl with dark, curly hair and a face full of character and beautiful at the same time. Francis, even in his dream, had a discerning eye. There were some women who can be described as pretty; in fact, they are in the majority. There are very few who are beautiful, but there was no denying the beauty of the girl in the dream. The background of old Francis Simnel's strange mental imagery shifted and changed with the subtle persistence of a rotating kaleidoscope. The girl seemed to be shrinking, and out of the shadows he saw small forms moving. He tossed and turned fretfully. The girl was the central figure in the peculiar phantasmagoria. The shadowy edges of the picture began crystallising and re-forming until they condensed into the margins of a forest clearing. Old Francis Simnel suddenly realised that he was looking at Snow White, surrounded by the Seven Dwarfs, dancing and singing in front of their home.

He awoke from the dream suddenly and pulled himself upright in bed. The familiar walls of his bedroom glowed back at him in the soft moonlight. He knew now what he must use as a basis for his first masterpiece—a puppet version of Snow White—but done as it had never been done before. Each character must be new, alive and different, each dwarf a vibrant, living *personality*, and Snow White—that would be the centrepiece of the whole play. She would have the breathless beauty of Helen of Troy, the mysterious allure of Ayesha. She would be an Aphrodite; a puppet Venus. She would be so entrancing that the children—and, for that matter, the adults in the audience—would stare in disbelief.

Francis Simnel got out of bed and went down to his workshop. He had to start now on another dwarf; he wasn't ready for Snow White yet, but he felt certain that he could produce another of those characterful little men.

## CHAPTER VII

*The Shadow of Death*

AGNES SIMNEL was as troubled by weird dreams as her brother. Tossing and turning, her fitful sleep punctuated by weird dreams, she seemed to hear eerie voices coming from some immeasurable distance of space or time. There was an indescribable quality about them, and if Agnes had been a mathematician, which she was not, it might have occurred to her to say they had an extra-dimensional quality.

"You are our agent," whispered one of the weird, hollow, bizarre voices. "Rise up and do our bidding."

It occurred to Agnes as odd that the commands should be couched in archaic prose. Although she was trembling with fear and excitement, she thought about the words as words. Agnes knew little or no psychology, but she was possessed of considerable common sense. Perhaps, she thought to herself, what seemed to be a voice was not really a voice. If those things, whatever they are, are contacting me, then they are having to do it by using the kind of symbolism I would understand. They are using words from my own mind which I would traditionally associate with the macabre and the unusual.

They are speaking as most of us would expect a supernatural entity to speak, if ever we encountered one. Far from finding comfort in the explanation that she had just worked out, Agnes felt an increased fear.

“Go now, take the puppet.” She moved like a somnambulist, yet she was aware of all that she did. Before she realised quite what was happening, Agnes Simnel was heading out of the house, clutching the miniature figure which Francis had so recently made, the miniature figure which bore an uncanny resemblance to old Tom Winter.

The anguine Agnes seemed to glide rather than walk. It was as though some power other than her own had hold of her. It was as if dark spirits bore her up, so that she rode on the wings of some evil nocturnal wind, some deadly breeze of night. The moon was beginning to descend from its zenith, although as yet its nadir was far away. Agnes paused in the shadows. Her hand rested on the gate of old Tom Winter’s cottage.

The cottage was in darkness. Agnes drew in her breath sharply and opened the gate silently. The path was grass and soil, not gravel, and her feet made no noise as she walked, stealthily, towards the house. There was too much moonlight on the front door for Agnes’ liking, and her dark guides prompted her to the shadowy side of the cottage. A few seconds more and her fingers crooked stealthily round the latch. The door was not locked, she inched it open, so that it made no sound. She advanced, noiseless as a shadow, into the old man’s kitchen. There was no moonlight on this side of the house at all, yet Agnes seemed to be guided by a kind of extra-sensory perception which she had never experienced before. To the best of her knowledge she had never been inside old Winter’s cottage in her life, yet she seemed to know instinctively where everything was. It was as though some external power, some objective thing, was perceiving, and then giving her a mental image of its own perceptions. . .

Agnes opened the door at the foot of the stairs. It gave the faintest of faint creaks, but she ignored it. Then, on feet of black velvet, Agnes Simnel began to mount the

stairs. Like the cottage, they were old, and though she trod very carefully, they creaked at her passing. But the creaks were faint and they were lost in the soft night noises of the old cottage. With bated breath, Agnes paused on the landing and then, prompted by some dark, inner voice, she turned to her left and, with sinister movements, slid through the open door of old Tom Winter’s bedroom.

There was moonlight here, one pale shaft of it. Agnes looked at the still figure in the old-fashioned bed. The moonlight caught a brass nail, making it shine like a bar of electron with a silver-golden gleam.

A strange change seemed to have overtaken Francis Simnel’s sister. It was as though the powers who were now directing her actions registered something of their own nature on the woman’s face. She was still recognisably Agnes, but the recognition would have been made difficult by the strange distortions which had affected her features. Her hair had become a seemingly matted tangle. Her jaw had altered its line subtly to accommodate teeth that were more bestial than human. The gaunt thinness of her features had become more cadaverous than ever. Her fingers were crooked into claws. The creases and furrows of the flesh of the face had become deeper and more pronounced, so that even the moonlight was powerless to soften them.

The Simnelesque hag moved forward towards the bed. Sounds of breathing were tired but regular, and there seemed little or no doubt that the rumours of the impending decease of old Tom Winter were all too well founded.

The old *raconteur* was slipping peacefully away. Agnes reached the bed and drew back the covers a little. The eyes, affected by the weird transformation which had taken place in the rest of her body, glared now like radiant discs of furious evil. She touched the old man’s cheek and,

with a weak, startled cry, he blinked his rheumy eyes open and regarded her. He shrank back into the pillows, as though trying to escape from the evil thing which now confronted him.

Agnes, possessed of a strength that was not her own, took the old man's shoulders in her claw-like hands and hissed: "You are in my power, Tom Winter! You are in my power! Soon you will sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep . . . heavily, deeply, *sleep*."

Without knowing why, and without realising the basic plan the dark prompters in her mind were putting into operation, Agnes Simnel continued to work on the old man. The hypnotic quality of her voice was something that had come to her from outside. It was part of her new power as the *agent*. Tom Winter lay back, straight and still, his eyes very wide, Agnes withdrew in the gloom, chuckling a little to herself in a voice that she scarcely recognised as her own.

"The fools, the stupid fools," she whispered, "they'll think he's dead. . . ." She paused beside the door and held the puppet up symbolically. A shaft of moonlight fell full on the features of old Tom represented in wood and paint. There was an awful silence, and then Agnes tiptoed down the stairs as silently as she had come, sidled out of the house and glided back to her own home.

## CHAPTER VIII

*Dark Awakening*

AGNES SIMNEL, together with her brother, and a number of other local semi-pro entertainers, trekked to Tom Winter's cottage to pay their last respects to the old man. The coffin stood on trestles in the front room. Curtains were drawn and a number of candles burned with slow, solemn flames about the dark oak casket. Agnes shook her head sorrowfully. The old man looked so peaceful, someone had said. The events of three nights before seemed almost like a dream to her. Had she really come to this cottage and induced a kind of hypnotic catalepsy or narcolepsy to this body? Was it really possible that she had given the old man this sleeping death? Had her dark masters given her the power to do this?

She stared at the motionless figure in its last resting place. Francis and the others moved out of the room. Agnes remained. When she was sure that she was quite alone, she stepped swiftly towards the foot of the coffin, undid her handbag, one of the large, leather variety, drew out the puppet, and *concealed it beneath Tom Winter's feet*. The deed was done in a matter of seconds, then Agnes walked slowly from the room, dabbing politely at the corners of her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief. The undertaker and his assistants screwed down the lid, the floral tributes were placed in position, and the *cortège* began to move off.

Agnes watched with a shudder of excited revulsion as the earth spattered down on to the oak lid with its simple brass plate. The crowd of mourners moved away from the grave side in small groups and chatted among themselves. Francis and Agnes went home. The old man went into his workshop and continued to carve the new puppet he was making.

"It's very good," commented Agnes, looking over his shoulder. She set down a tea cup in front of him, Francis raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think it will be as good as the last one?"

"Should be," returned Agnes.

"By the way," said Francis petulantly, "where is the other one?"

"I'm still making some slight alterations to the dress," said Agnes. "It's in my workroom."

"Oh, all right. Take good care of it."

"I'll take good care of it," promised Agnes.

"It's very valuable, you know," said the old man.

"Oh, yes, I know that!" affirmed Agnes.

"Only five to go after this."

"Five to go?" said Agnes, inquiringly.

"I had a dream the other night," said Francis confidentially. "I dreamed of a presentation of Snow White such as no puppet theatre has ever seen, with every dwarf a personality in its own right, and with a Snow White so beautiful she could capture the hearts of men, women and children, a Snow White like Helen of Troy. They will remember this show for a thousand years! *Fame!*" He looked at Agnes and his eyes glittered avariciously. "*Fortune!*" he whispered. "Fame and fortune beyond the dreams of avarice, my dear Agnes, and all for us!"

The old man worked in steady concentration for several hours, then he placed the largely completed head on the bench in front of him and made his way slowly and rather

unsteadily towards his bedroom. He paused at the foot of the stairs.

"Agnes, I think I'd like some hot milk."

Somewhere in the house a grandfather clock struck midnight.

"Agnes!" he called. "Where are you, Agnes?"

The brass tones of midnight died away. There was a strange, frightening, lonely emptiness everywhere. Old Francis frowned, his lips pursed thoughtfully. It was very odd. He wondered why she had gone out without telling him and, if so, where had she gone? He potted through to the kitchen and heated some milk for himself. A few sprinklings of nutmeg and a dash of cinnamon, stirred in well with a spoonful of sugar, made his nightcap more palatable. Having drunk his milk, old Francis tottered upstairs and threw his weary old body down on the bed. Sleep, when it came, was spasmodic and interlaced with weird dreams of macabre graveyard scenes featuring Agnes and a tiny little string figure which seemed to be playing a gruesome tag with her around the stones of the cemetery. . . .

\* \* \*

The moonlight was weaker, duller and paler than it had been on the last occasion when Agnes had made a grim nocturnal journey. The voices were whispering inside her head, deep, sibilant, dangerous and insistent voices. She continued on her gliding journey between tall yew hedges, which seemed themselves animated. At any moment, thought Agnes, those leafy branches will reach out of the pale silver darkness and take hold of me. Occasionally the hedges thinned and, glancing through the gaps, Agnes could see unwelcome black shapes—moonlight on marble, pale memorials to the long-forgotten. At the end of the long yew hedge was a gate. Agnes opened it and her features distorted as they had done on the night when she

entered Tom Winer's cottage; she clawed her way among the tombs to the mound of newly turned earth where they had laid old Tom's coffin.

Agnes' thoughts were centred on the thing that she had placed beneath the old man's feet. Now that the possessors were dominating her mind again to such a large degree, Agnes felt no fear, no revulsion, only an unwholesome excitement. Her pulses were racing as she reached the mound of newly turned earth and knelt beside it. She put her face so close to the soil that her lips brushed against the earth as she spoke.

"Tom Winter, Tom Winter, awake, awake and realise your doom!"

Deep below it seemed to her that she could hear faint scufflings and scratching sounds. . . .

\* \* \*

*Old Tom Winter opened his eyes and wondered why it was dark. He wondered what it was that pressed against his sides and his back. He struggled to sit up, but it was scarcely possible to move. He tried to roll over on his side, but that was also impossible. He remembered his illness, and the terrible truth was borne in upon him. He gasped and choked, coughing and screaming in a final horror.*

"Air," he gasped, "air! Help me, save me!" His old mind seemed to explode into a terrible eruption of emotion.

"Help!" He choked again. He was clawing wildly at the merciless lid, but it would not yield. Down at his feet something seemed to be trying to move. His very soul became involved in the terror, the despair that welled from his trapped body. The enormity of the horror of the situation was like a tangible, living thing. Then a last long darkness overwhelmed his mortal remains, and the only movement came from the foot of the coffin.

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You can have thicker, healthier, lustrous hair in 2-6 weeks—or money back. **NEW Nature Treatment** grows strong hair, ends falling, scurf, etc. 30 days' treatment, 10/- Full Intensive Course, 25/- **Nature Treatment, 28 U.S.111 Dean Road, London, N.W.2.**

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\* \* \*

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and today I have won £12 10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931"

## JOAN THE WAD



**GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER FROM THE LUCKY SAINTS' WELL**

"For 10 years I have enjoyed the most unbelievable good fortune and have always had my J.T.W. by me. Unfortunately I have lost her and feel exactly as if I had lost a human relative. My friend tells me her wife's mother has had Joan for 40 years and would not part with her for all the tea in China."

**SUCCESS FOR SEVEN YEARS.** Another writes . . . "I sent for Joan the Wad seven years ago, during which time I have had many wins on Pools, including one of £72 2s. 0d. and another of £542 15s. 0d. I lost Joan and things immediately began to go wrong. Please send me another, for which I enclose P.O. 6s." Mr. D. H. R., Greatham, Hants. 26.1.56. **WON HOLIDAY CONTEST.** Mrs. B. E. H., of Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, writes, 12.4.56 . . . "I really feel I must write and tell you of my good fortune. After having J.T.W. for only a month or so I have just won a Holiday Contest and I feel I owe my good luck to the little lady. It has made me feel very happy."

**ANOTHER POOLS WINNER.** "Please send me 3 Histories. Enclosed is 3s. I want them for friends. By the way, you may be interested to know that I had only received my J.T.W. two weeks when I won £1,068 on the Football Pools—thanks to Joan the Wad, and since I have sent for 4 others for friends and now want 3 more as soon as possible please." writes Mrs. E. M., of Bebbington, Cheshire, 6.2.56.

**COMPLETELY CURED, FOUND A JOB, PROMOTION TWICE, OWN HOME.** Mrs. D. J., of Stockport, writes, 29.5.56: "On coming to England 2½ years ago we were dogged by ill-luck. A friend told me I ought to have 'Joan' for my husband and 'Jack O' Lantern' for myself. I did, and from that very week all our luck changed for the better. My husband was a very sick man and is now completely cured. He had no job, and very soon he got a job and promotion twice. I myself bettered my position. We are now in our own house, which we are succeeding to buy. We are a happy and most contented little family and attribute all our present happiness and success to J.T.W. and J.O.L. Thank you for all you have done for us. I tell everyone about it."

**JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard before of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish selections from time to time. We unreservedly GUARANTEE that these letters were absolutely spontaneous and the originals are open to inspection at JOAN'S COTTAGE. Send at once for full information about this PROVED Luck Bringer. You, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.**

All you have to do is to send a Shilling (Savings Stamps accepted) and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to:

736, JOAN'S COTTAGE, POLPERRO, CORNWALL, ENGLAND

For Canada and U.S.A., send 50 cents for History, or 2 dollars for both History and Mascot. For Australia, S. Africa, New Zealand, Rhodesia, Barbados and other Colonies, send 2s. for History or 10s. for both History and Mascot.

is the **LUCKY CORNISH PISKEY** who Sees All, Hears All, Does All. **JOAN THE WAD** is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness. **HISTORY FREE FOR A SHILLING** If you will send me your name and address, a Shilling and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish. **JOAN THE WAD** is the Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys and with whom good luck and good health always attend.

**ENJOYED THE MOST UNBELIEVABLE GOOD FORTUNE**

Mr. D. H. of Leeds writes 3.10.55

"I sent for Joan the Wad seven years ago, during which time I have had many wins on Pools, including one of £72 2s. 0d. and another of £542 15s. 0d. I lost Joan and things immediately began to go wrong. Please send me another, for which I enclose P.O. 6s." Mr. D. H. R., Greatham, Hants. 26.1.56.

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The distorted features of Agnes Simmel twisted themselves into a smile of evil triumph as she realised that, as far as old Tom Winter was concerned, the end had come. But now her excitement reached a new height. The black forces that had settled themselves inside Agnes' twisted mind seemed to send out a kind of psychic pseudopod, a dark, ethereal probe, a veritable limb of Satan. It stabbed out into the ground until, by some blemished alliance of necromancy and the other black arts, it met the centre of evil that was lodged in the crawling figure of the puppet. The grotesque little wooden hands seemed to take into themselves a power that was not of this world. Like a mole or a dark unknown species of humanoid rodent, *the puppet began digging its way out of the coffin.* Agnes Simmel dug her way down to meet it. The same black power that gave strength and direction to the little wooden figurine gave strength and direction to the clawlike hands of the distorted Agnes Simmel. Groping evilly in the mire and clay, Agnes' hand encountered the mannikin. She held up the tiny effigy triumphantly in the moonlight.

"My beauty!" she whispered. "My little beauty!"

Carefully, with a devotion that seemed in itself a blemished travesty of the maternal instinct, Agnes Simmel brushed out the soil from the features of the tiny puppet, then, holding the jointed, wooden body tightly in her arms, the hag made her way out of the burial ground.

The Sexton was not the kind of man who made a fuss about trifles. He was a particularly dour, phlegmatic and unimaginative man. His temperament and personality were ideally suited to the unenviable job which he undertook as a last service for those of his fellows whose mortal remains were dealt with in the traditional manner. He was surprised to find, on making his morning round of the cemetery, that there had been some considerable disturb-

ance in the newly dug Winter grave. He surveyed the damage with the air of a rustic Sherlock Holmes for several minutes. On reaching his decision, he went to the grim little shed beside the funereal chapel, the grim little shed in which his excavating equipment was kept. The excavating equipment was simple in the extreme. It consisted of a shovel with a long handle, a shovel with a short handle, and two spades with sharp cutting blades. There were also a number of forks of different sizes. They all worked on the basic principle that one hand was used as a fulcrum and the other as a source of power. This was the sum total of the sexton's mechanical assistance.

Taking a large, flat, finishing shovel with him, the interment operative, as the civil servants directly concerned with administrating his duties called him, replaced the soil which had been pulled away by Agnes Simnel's clawlike hands.

"Some fules'd make a lot o' fuss about that I s'pose," muttered the old sexton. "They might think it was Black Magic, but I know a rat hole when I see one!"

Although his speech might have been metaphorically true, its literal accuracy was extremely doubted. He patted the newly repaired grave top.

"If one sniff of Black Magic got goin' the rounds, we'd have them there newspaper men all over the place, walkin' about here, jammin' on the edgings, askin' a lot o' fule questions! That'd take weeks to get it right agin! They got no respect, some on 'em h'ant. No respect for the living, let alone the dead!"

He spat expressively on the gravel path as he spoke, and worked the saliva into the porous grains with his boot. "No respect," he said once more adamantly, addressing his remarks as much to the shovel handle as to anything or anyone else. He replaced the shovel, locked the shed door carefully, an experienced precaution against vandalism.

then completing his round of the cemetery, he went back to his lodge-cottage for breakfast.

The fullest extent of his phlegmatic, dour temperament could probably best be judged by witnessing the stolid satisfaction with which he chewed buttered kippers while gazing happily at a misty grey landscape, peopled with headstones, vases, and assorted mossy marble angels!

Breakfast in the Simnel household was not an affair of stolidly munched kippers, either with or without butter. There would have been a time—in fact, there *had* been a time—when Francis would have been content with any and every morsel, palatable or unpalatable, which Agnes might have chosen to lay before him. But since his weird experience following the crash, Francis Simnel was able to hold his own at the very least, and a careful observer might have thought the old man was doing even better than that. As a result of the old puppet master's emancipation, breakfast had improved out of all recognition in the Simnel ménage. There was hot, well-made coffee, bacon and eggs, crisp, succulent toast, well buttered and thickly spread with marmalade. There was fruit juice and crisp, good-quality eating apples. Francis pushed his plate away contentedly, and look at Agnes rather inquiringly.

"Tell me," he said slowly, "where were you last night, me dear?"

Her face took on a momentary expression that might have been fright. "I was—er—er—I was asleep in my room."

"No, you weren't," replied Francis. "Tell me where you were." He put a shaky old hand across the table and got hold of his sister's wrist. "Were you anywhere near Tom Winter's grave, Agnes?"

"Don't say that!" She jumped visibly.

"Then you were!" He looked at her accusingly. "You were!" He rose to his feet. "Don't deny it!"

"All right, I was."

"Why did you go?"

"I had to get the puppet."

"You had to get the puppet? What puppet?"

"The first one you made. The one that looked like Tom."

"Where—was—it?" he asked in a voice of grey horror.

"You told me it was in the workroom, Agnes! You were lying to me."

Hideous memories of the confused dreams of the night before were flooding through the old puppeteer's mind.

"Agnes, was it in the coffin?"

She made no sound, no movement. There was a look in her eyes that betrayed the truth to her brother.

"Ooooh!" The monosyllabic groan was torn from the old man's lips. He slumped back into his chair. "Then the dream was true!"

"Dream? What dream?" she demanded.

"I dreamt of graveyards, puppets and you. I dreamt of old Tom Winter——" Francis shook his head sadly from side to side. "I dreamt of unspeakable happenings below the soil. . . ."

"We had to have his soul," said Agnes, in a voice of terrible quietness. "We had to have his soul, Francis, don't you understand?"

"The dark ones made me a promise," said Francis. "They promised me power and wealth, they promised me fame, but they said nothing about the price. Now I'm beginning to understand a little. I understand where I was wrong." He half-rose and took two or three faltering paces towards his workshop, then he turned. "What have you done with it now, Agnes?"

"It's in my bag," replied his sister.

"Get it," said Francis.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Agnes.

"I'm going to destroy it before it destroys us!"

There was a reverberating roar and a crash of distant thunder. A dark, shadowy shape seemed to half fill the breakfast room, cutting out the light of the morning and looking down powerfully on the old man and his sister. Thoughts far stronger than his own feeble consciousness forced their way into Francis Simnel's tottering, senile mind, and he realised that he could no more destroy the puppet than he could tear the earth apart with his bare hands.

"Too late! It's too late, for both of us, Agnes." He staggered back towards the table, took her hands in his for a moment. There was a look of agonised despair on his face. "It's too late! We're committed to the Dark Forces."

## CHAPTER IX

### *Test Piece*

DURING the days that followed the insidious dark powers tightened their malevolent grip upon Agnes and her brother. The hideous psychic manœuvres which she had performed upon the old *raconteur* were repeated, not once, but several times. As often as Agnes, with her strangely transformed, claw-like hands, "resurrected" the life-like puppets from the coffins of her victims, the collection of

living marionettes grew. There was something which might have been called a 'soul,' or a personality, in each of the small but frighteningly life-like figures.

The last one was finished.

"Seven," said the old man, as he finished arranging them on his puppet stand.

"Seven," repeated Agnes, as though the number had some kind of mystic significance.

"We must start looking for the woman," said the old man, very quietly.

"Oh, yes," agreed Agnes. She pursed her thin, merciless lips.

"We need someone young——" began Francis.

"Very young," agreed Agnes, as though savouring the thought.

"The traditional Snow White must be very dark," said old Francis.

"With a nice, light complexion," agreed Agnes.

"A sort of milky complexion, I would say," went on the man.

"Do milky complexions exist outside the cosmetic experts' advertisements and Grimm's fairy tales?" asked Agnes.

Francis was looking at his sister very closely. He had seen her once or twice when she had actually been in the grip of the dark powers. He had seen the hideous transformation which they had been able to bring about in the woman's features, her hands, the way she carried her body. At the end of her nocturnal missions, she had reverted to more or less her old self. Each time, however, the occasion had left its mark upon her. Every transformation made her revert less completely than the previous time, and now it seemed that traces of the hag-fiend remained with her all the time. Never, even as a girl, had Agnes Simmel been a beauty, but she had at least looked human,

thought Francis. It seemed now as if the devil himself looked out from her eyes.

She saw him staring at her and withdrew from him a little, as though aware of his gaze, and deliberately avoiding it. The old man was breathing heavily down his nose, Agnes raised an eyebrow quizzically. It accentuated the fiendish cast of her features. For a few seconds Francis felt fear, and then, as though on impulse from the dark things that now prompted them both, the puppeteer went across and looked in his mirror. The devilry that looked out from Agnes' eyes *also looked out from his own!*

There would have been a time when his changed reflection would have filled him with fear and self-loathing, a kind of deep psychological abnegation. Now, however, it gave him a certain confidence, a satisfaction, and a pleasure. It seemed to him that he had a weapon equal to hers. If there was a dark, evil fire burning in his sister's eyes, he had one, too. Whatever malevolence Agnes could produce, he could equal it, if not surpass it. He drew a deep breath and took a pace towards her. His features moulded themselves into a mask of impassive evil.

"There's a booking," said Agnes, changing the subject suddenly.

"A booking?" asked Francis. "We are not ready to launch ourselves to fame yet."

"A little local booking, like you've done before," went on Agnes.

"Very well," said Simmel. "I think it's time we did a show!"

"*We?*" she echoed.

"I have done it on my own too long!" retorted Francis.

"But I help with the costumes. What more do you want?" Agnes was on the defensive. Her attitude, her voice, everything about her seemed to be retreating a little. The black powers inside Francis Simmel's mind were

buoying up his confidence. He wagged a rather bony finger at her. It was a lean, unpleasant looking finger, the kind of finger that artists who are experienced in illustrating the supernatural would frequently depict sliding round the cobwebbed lid of an open sarcophagus.

"You're going to help do the show," said Francis. "You're going to pass me the puppets, you're going to see to the music. You're going to help to erect the theatre."

"But, but—I never have done!"

"No, because I've been a fool. I've been a damned stupid fool! You've dominated me for too long, Agnes. But the tide has turned, and so has the worm—if I may mix my metaphors. You will find that the worm which the tide has brought in is capable of devouring you now! It wasn't before. . . ."

"Very well, Francis." She sounded prim and Victorian, like an echo from the 'Barrets of Wimpole Street', or 'East Lynn'. "Very well, Francis," she said again, "I will accompany you."

"You sound as though you are about to put on a clean pinafore, and go and fetch the governess cart!" said Simmel sarcastically. "You're talking like something out of a Dickensian novel—only you lack the depths and the realism. You lack the punch and the urgency. You're artificial, Agnes, and you're not even attractively artificial." He could see her wincing into herself. He was enjoying hurting her. He wagged that long, misanthropic finger again. "You're going to do some work for a change, you hag!" he croaked. He thought that the final, well-considered insult would have reduced her to tears but it didn't.

"Hag?" she retorted. "Have *you* looked in the mirror, brother Francis? You will see the ruined face of a pathetic old man!"

"I'm not old!" His voice was like the cawing of a rook. "I'm *not!*" he croaked again.

"Your voice belies your words," said Agnes sinisterly.

Francis turned and stamped off back to his work room. It had not been an economic proposition to repair the car which he had wrecked near the gallows. Instead, he had purchased a large, rumbling 1950 saloon which, in its heyday, had been quite an acceptable car but which had passed, since its heyday, through the increasingly careless hands of a number of farmers, builders, contractors, and general dealers. Little remained of the original upholstery and interior, and the bodywork was rusted in numerous places. But it had a roof rack and was a voluminous old thing. It had also been extremely cheap. Old Francis Simmel had decided that as a temporary stopgap it was the ideal vehicle for his purposes. Once he was ready for the bright lights, once he was ready for the heights, once he was ready to take his show amidst the glare of the television lights and the film cameras, then a new car, a mass of gleaming chromium and shining paintwork, would follow as inevitably as the night followed the day. For the moment the rumbling saloon, with its rusts, its leaks and its torn upholstery, would have to serve.

He watched with ill-concealed delight as Agnes struggled back and forth from the puppet room to the car.

"Aren't you going to do any loading?" she asked.

Nonchalantly he picked up a small toy piano and a piece of lighting equipment. She frowned angrily as he struggled with a weighty box of puppets. He put the two light burdens that he carried on the back seat and watched while she reached for another box.

"Not that!" His voice was sharp and sudden as a whip-lash. "I'll take those!" She nodded soundlessly, and watched as he picked up a strong wooden case with a velvet lining, which contained the seven new puppets, reclining like little old men asleep after a heavy lunch.

"I don't trust them in any hands but mine," said Francis, petulantly.

"You're welcome!" retaliated Agnes rather ineffectually.

"They're not puppets," said Francis, "they're gold, living gold. You know that as well as I do, Agnes! They're our passports to a new life."

"Our passports?" she asked, rather sarcastically. "Am I to have some share in your ill-gotten gains?"

"Oh, yes. I can't leave you out of this!" retorted Francis; there was an edge of relish to his voice. "After all, you contributed as much to these puppets as I did, didn't you?"

"As much?" She hissed the rhetorical question at him viciously. "*As much?*"

"All right, then, *more!* But that was our masters' choice, not mine. Do you argue with their commands?"

Agnes shrugged thin shoulders. "What's the use?" she whispered. "What is the use of arguing with their commands?"

"No use at all," agreed Francis. "A man might as well batter his head against a granite cliff, or claw with his fingers against a coffin lid."

They finished loading and the old man climbed unsteadily behind the wheel.

"Be careful," said Agnes.

He looked at her. "I'll be careful," he said scathingly. "I have a valuable cargo."

"You don't mean me, of course," said Agnes, sarcastically.

"How right you are!" he retorted, and jerked his head in the direction of the puppets. "I mean them, of course. I mean *them.*"

"I wonder how they'll perform in public," said Agnes. A worried frown crossed her blemished face. "Francis, you don't think they're so life-like they'll give us away?"

"No, they won't do that."

"I mean, what if someone should—er"—she hesitated—"should *recognise* them?"

"Pure coincidence!" he laughed. "Any resemblance between characters in this puppet show and actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental."

"I have heard it said that that declaration isn't sufficient protection," said Agnes nervously.

"It won't be long before we shall be in a position to hire any lawyer we need. Money talks." The old man looked at her scathingly, and took a corner rather badly as he did so. Agnes blanched and clung tightly to the seat.

"Not so fast, Francis," she urged.

"I drive how I like," said old Simmel viciously, taking another corner too fast and too wide.

Agnes tried to pray, tried to pray that there would be nothing coming the opposite way at the crucial moment. She found she could only pray now to the dark things which she served, and although she felt that they heard her, she got the impression that they were laughing at her. That they were taking her enfeebled prayer and tossing it from one to the other, like eaglets amusing themselves with their prey, or like kittens practising their hunting on a battered, captured mouse.

Agnes did not speak to her brother again until the car reached the village school. The headmaster was a short, bouncy, jovial and loquacious individual. He had an accent which was either Irish or Scottish. Agnes found it pleasant but difficult to trace. Francis was aware that the man's English was loaded, but the geographical origin of its loading troubled the old puppeteer not a whit.

"At which end would you like to set up the show?" inquired the headmaster of the village school.

Francis looked interestedly round the classrooms. A partition had been folded back upon itself. The chairs and desks had been moved around against the walls. The building was old and high. The acoustics, thought Francis, would be far from good. It would make the show a harder

job than it need be. The worst of the bad acoustics, however, could be obviated by the simple expedient of turning up the volume of the amplifier.

The headmaster found some senior pupils who carried in most of the equipment from the car, much to Agnes' relief. As the children brought it in, Francis busied himself setting it up. He began by putting little table tops together, securing them with a 'G' lamp, and inserting the front poles into their sockets. The poles still did not fit well. He and Agnes bolted the head board into position, and as they secured it, he looked across at her and wondered why he had ever been such a fool as to struggle with this creation on his own. Then he put up the puppet stand and detailed Agnes to unwind the ordinary marionettes, while he put up the rest of the stage, fastened the lighting equipment into position, and attached the switchboard to the pole. Then, with what he termed the basic functions completed, he turned his attention to the seven new puppets. He had no new material for them, but he intended to incorporate them in the existing playlets. He used the puppeteer's stock items, circus with extending clowns, horses and dancers. The haunted castle, involving the skeleton, the policeman and the policeman's nervous assistant. He did a Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit satire, and then an underwater scene. He did a Punch and Judy, and a number of other turns that were so old and hackneyed that even he was a little tired of them. His favourites, however, were his clowns, Johnny and Bimbo. They kept popping up right through the show, talking to the children. They had always gone down better than any of the other puppets but, as he began his first act, he decided to bring in one of the new personality puppets, one of the strange little figurines that had been released from the coffins of the men they resembled.

The little figure responded to the strings more readily

than any other puppet which Simnel had ever manipulated. It was as though the tiny arms and legs were endowed with animation of their own. The little character was to all intents and purposes autonomous. It seemed almost to possess a will of its own. Once or twice it moved a little further and a little faster than the strings would seem to have rendered possible. Francis Simnel frowned a little. Once or twice the little grey head looked up at him and the expression changed. It seemed as if the puppet was angry with him. A quick jerk on the strings and it was obedient once more.

The children loved it. There were a number of adults in the audience, teachers, governors, parents, friends, the Vicar—somehow, Francis Simnel felt decidedly uncomfortable in the presence of the vicar.

There was a young woman there as well. He could see her quite clearly. She had a very light complexion and dark curly hair.

## CHAPTER X

### *The Wooden Witch*

AS old Francis Simnel looked at the girl, he realised that this must be Josephine Starr, the District Nurse. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. There were no promptings as yet from his nark masters; nothing moved inside his brain;

nothing urged him towards the girl. He felt quite an acute sense of disappointment. He looked at Agnes to see whether she had noticed the nurse, but Agnes was intently winding puppets back on to the stand.

Francis completed the show and there was tumultuous applause. There was no doubt this show was the best they had ever done here. Neither was there any doubt that its success depended on the weird new puppets, which he preferred to think of euphemistically as having had *special* treatment. Just what that treatment entailed he did not like to dwell upon too profoundly. . . .

The lack of communication from his dark masters worried him a little, and then, as he helped Agnes to clear up, he became aware of a message in his mind. They were telling him to do something. They were, in fact, telling him that his next move was not Snow White, *but the Wicked Queen!*

For one devastating moment he hoped, and almost prayed, that it was Agnes whom they were going to designate. But no. Another picture swam before his mind. A picture framed in the dark shadows that were his new masters. He held his breath; hatred welled up within him like a living thing. It was Lady Sullybridge!

Old Francis was rubbing his hands as he packed the puppets away with loving care. What a witch she would make! And how he hated her!

Oh, how he hated her, and all she stood for!

Francis could hardly wait to get to his workshop. There were times when—although he enjoyed his work—he found it tedious, irksome, tiresome, when he had to force himself to manipulate chisels, when carving the heads was a discipline, something that required a degree of self-control, a degree of will power versus instinct. . . . But now instinct and volition joined in a great surge of enthusiasm of effort. It seemed essential to the old man that he

should work undisturbed. He saw to it that Agnes had strict orders to admit no one. He took precautions even against Agnes, as though watching against his own watchdog; he locked the door of the workshop. Nothing—not even a meal—was to be allowed to disturb his concentration. Stamped indelibly before his mind's eye was a picture of Lady Sullybridge, the haughty aristocratic features, the snobbish confidence. The old man was breathing hard. The pupils of his eyes were dilated, as though he were under the excitation of a drug. The chisels seemed to be alive in his hands. From time to time he felt as though dark forces were moving the wood in the vice just to assist him. He did not seem to be carving alone. His incredible masters were at his side, helping and inspiring him.

Time passed. Minutes, hours, more hours; how much time passed, or how much time was passing, seemed completely unimportant. All that mattered to Francis was the shape of the wood he was carving. Nothing but that.

Gradually, bit by bit, then more rapidly, more noticeably, the wood began to resemble Lady Sullybridge. It was there—small and subtle—but it was there, nevertheless. There was the aristocratic Sullybridge nose, the Sullybridge eyes, and the line of the Sullybridge brow. He had the old lady. He had her as surely as though she had been tied hand and foot, lying at his feet in the workshop.

He stopped and patted the wood, as though to reassure himself that it actually stood there in the vice before him. A wild, cackling laugh escaped the old man's lips. The whole thing seemed indescribably funny to him. And yet its humour was not the normal, healthy, everyday humour of the incongruous. This was not the kind of humour which he would have been able to share with a fellow human being. This was the kind of humour which would only be appreciated in the concentric pits of hell! This was the kind of humour at which Mephistopheles would



have laughed, at which Satan would guffaw. This was the kind of joke which would rock Beezlebub on his pedestal. This was the kind of macabre wit which would convulse the grotesque features of Moloch. This was the irony that would amuse Dagon and Ashtoreth.

The last piece of wood curled contemptuously around the chisel blade, and flew off to join the pile of discarded shavings on the floor. Francis Simnel tugged at the vice. Its iron bar almost defeated his near-senility, but at last it moved. A cry of "Eureka!" sounded, as he held the wooden head aloft. In his hand he held a miniature Lady Sullybridge.

"Now, madam," he whispered mockingly, "now, madam, we shall see who is the aristocrat and who is the peasant! We shall see who is the lord, the noble, and who is the artisan! Listen!" He placed the wooden lips of the head against his ear. "They say the people have no bread, Marie Antoinette!"

"Then let them eat cake!"

"They say that puppets have no strings!"

"Then let them use wire!"

Laughing strangely at the strange joke which only he and his dark masters understood, Francis Simnel unlocked the workshop door. Cradling the head in his hands, as though it had become a precious, neonate thing, he went in search of Agnes.

She sat working at the sewing machine in her room. Taffeta was taking shape beneath her thin, long fingers. She looked up like a bitch that looks to her master for approval when it retrieves a fallen bird on a sports field. She held up the dress, the dress that went so well with the head.

"You like it?" she asked. The hag attitude was making itself obvious in every line of her body.

"It's very good," approved Francis. He held it between finger and thumb and placed it below the head.

"Curtsey to her ladyship, Agnes! Curtsey to the wooden witch! Snow White's step-mother! A suitable role for you, Lady Sullybridge!"

He laid the head down and bowed to it with hideous mock courtesy. Then his eyes alight with a fire that was not of this world, he cast a baleful glance at Agnes. "You will be able to fulfil your part of the work, as you have done?" She drew herself up to her full height.

"Am I not their *agent*? Have I not always fulfilled my part of the task?"

"This is more important than any of the others," he answered. His voice was a whisper from the gates of hell; it matched his own.

"I will not fail." Although her voice was even quieter than it had been on the previous occasion, it was now strangely sinister.

"Our masters have no room for failure!"

Was that a warning, he wondered.

"Our masters have no room for incompetence!" She savoured each syllable of the words like a Nazi commander making a funeral speech in a concentration camp. Still he made her no answer. She looked at him questioningly.

"Now," said Francis at last, and it seemed even to him that the silence had gone on too long. "Now, we will complete the puppet."

"Will it be ready tonight?"

"It is possible," said Francis.

"It will be best not to hurry and risk spoiling the work," said Agnes warningly. "It will be best to let the work take its time."

"Isn't there a line from 'Macbeth' about someone's soul finding heaven on a certain night?" asked the old puppet master.

"Yes, yes, there is," agreed Agnes.

"Thy soul's flight,

If it find heaven,

Must find it out tonight." She paused.

"It's a long time since I've read 'Macbeth'."

"A good play, a good play that," said Francis. "Yet I feel sorry for Macbeth."

"And I feel sorry for Lady Macbeth, she was misunderstood. They should have succeeded!"

"I admire their ruthlessness," said Francis. "It was real courage, you know. No moral scruples held them back! No false loyalties to a standard of ethics that had no sanction, that could deter them from their purpose!"

There was silence in the sewing room, then Francis took the head back to his workshop to paint it. When the painting was finished and the jointed wooden body completed, he delivered them to Agnes, and staggered off to bed. He slept the clock round and awoke feeling rather weak but excited.

Agnes brought the finished puppet up to show him. They drooled over it like elderly maiden aunts at a baby show.

"Such a beautiful likeness," said Agnes.

"You've dressed it wonderfully, wonderfully, my dear!" returned Francis. "It's going to be the finest we have yet made. But there must be one yet finer."

"The girl," said Agnes, prompting him.

"The girl, yes, the girl," he agreed.

"Have you any ideas?" she queried.

"One or two—one in particular," grated Francis.

Her eyes met his for a second. "Whom do you have in mind?"

"The nurse—the girl Starr—she has the right hair and the right complexion."

"Yes—and she's very young. She would suit us well, very well! But the witch first! She must be made complete in every detail. The physical part is done——"

"The psychic part is up to you," said Francis.

"Ah, but the power is not mine!" said Agnes.

"No, not yours, this I know, this I know!" retorted Francis.

"It is up to our masters now, I am only their agent," said Agnes. She fell suddenly on to her knees in an attitude of supplication in front of a dark shadow that had drifted apparently out of the wall. "I am their humble agent. I will worship them and serve them," she murmured.

The dark shadow seemed to be swaying rhythmically as though in response to her worshipful attitude. Francis also knelt and raised his hands in a blemished gesture of obeisance.

"I also worship the dark powers," the voice seemed to drift through the sides of his skull.

"Your worship is noted, your reward will come. Do not forget the visions of the power, the luxury, the voluptuous pleasure that shall be yours. Do not forget. Worship and serve and the reward shall come. Think on these things."

The last line sounded to Agnes as though it had been stolen from the prayer book or Bible. It had the sound of Scripture or liturgy, originally sacred, but now wrenched from its context and perverted to evil use. This, after all, she thought, is the basic pattern of the Satanist's black Mass, a reversal of the most sacred of all Christian mysteries.

The black shadow to which he and Agnes had been kneeling dissolved back into the wall and vanished.

"I need an excuse to visit the house; I need an excuse to visit Sullybridge Manor. Give me an excuse, Francis."

He rose and paced the room for several moments.

"It's not so easy, not so easy, my dear," he said at last.

"There must be some way in there! The place is no fortress; it's not impregnable."

"Ah but we are not dealing with an old man in a cottage, we are dealing with Lady Sullybridge. There are servants, secretaries, companions, all the trimmings. This is no impoverished aristocracy. This is the real thing. This is like a page from Debrett, like a page from Burke. This is like some potent entry from 'Who's Who'. This is not a fence that can be taken lightly or easily. We are up against considerable opposition here. And if we underestimate it, then it is a rock upon which the ship of our success will surely founder."

"Our dark masters will not permit failure. Our dark masters will not permit incompetence, and with their help our ship will not founder," said Agnes sternly.

"True, true," agreed Francis.

"Think, man, think," urged Agnes.

"It is easier to give the order to think than to put the order into effect," reminded her brother. "Do you think that if I knew the answer I would delay in the telling of it?"

"Of course not!"

"I don't know——"

They were both pacing up and down. It could have looked almost incongruous, almost humorously incongruous, but it didn't—it just looked grotesque. The evil purpose in their faces, the dark determination to accomplish their objective, at all and any cost.

"Do you suppose," said Agnes softly, "that I could collect for some fashionable charity? Perhaps some entertainers' charity, the Puppeteers' Guild, or the Puppet Masters' Widows' and Orphans' Fund?"

Francis chuckled.

"The Puppet Masters' Widows' and Orphans' Guild."

"Do you think such a body genuinely exists?" asked Agnes, in a voice of sibilant interrogation.

"I very much doubt it, and even if it does, I don't sup-

pose their canvassers have been round 'to see Lady Sullybridge during the last year. I don't suppose they'd be a very big organization!"

"No, I don't suppose they would," said Agnes.

"We'll need to get some paper printed, with subscription forms. We mustn't hurry," warned Francis.

"We'll give them an address in Mayfair, or even Park Lane! Knightsbridge or Bloomsbury, at the very least," said Agnes.

"We'll get a few distinguished names on the paper," he mused.

"The printing?" intoned Agnes.

"I've got that little press in the attic still," muttered Francis.

"Ideal," purred Agnes, "absolutely ideal, *dear* brother."

"And an authorization card," went on Francis. "I always think that the more printing one has, the better, don't you?"

"Indeed," agreed Agnes.

It took an hour or two to produce the necessary documentation. Old Francis Simmel could use a small printing press almost as skilfully as he could use the tools of his puppet trade. When it was done it looked very good indeed.

"Of course, if she checked up, she would find that no such body existed, but then she won't have *time* to check up, will she?"

Agnes shook her head. "No time," she agreed darkly.

It was eight o'clock that evening when Agnes Simmel presented herself at the door of Sullybridge Manor. Simpson admitted her with a polished, practised professionalism which Agnes could not help but admire. When the day came for them to have wealth, she thought, then a butler like Simpson would be ideal. He took her card through to inform Lady Sullybridge of the nature of her business.

Lady Sullybridge sat like someone from a Victorian melodrama, embroidering in the blue drawing room. The butler showed Agnes in and withdrew discreetly.

"Do sit down, my dear Miss Simnel. I happen to have seen some of your brother's shows," said Lady Sullybridge with just the faintest condescension in her voice.

"And what did you think of them, your ladyship?"

"Oh, quite amusing and entertaining in their way," said the old aristocrat, patronisingly.

"I do hope you didn't mind my coming to you first, your ladyship. It seemed natural, somehow," said Agnes. That one had apparently scored a direct hit.

"Quite right, quite right," beamed Lady Sullybridge.

"As the natural leader of our little community," went on Agnes. That one also scored.

Lady Sullybridge was purring and preening. Agnes could imagine the old aristocrat reaching for her cheque book at any moment.

"I see you have some well known patrons," said Lady Sullybridge, adjusting her lorgnettes and studying the various documents which Agnes had spread before her as credentials.

"It is a most deserving charity, your ladyship," said Agnes. Her voice throbbed with an earnestness, which was in itself a tribute to her histrionic capabilities.

"Quate, quate," murmured Lady Sullybridge.

"What is the normal subscription from your titled patrons?" Agnes thought hard for a moment.

"It varies, your ladyship. For instance, *he* gave twenty guineas, but this lady," she pointed to another name, "only gave five."

"You may put me down for twenty guineas," said Lady Sullybridge with an air of cool magnanimity. "Tell me, is that the highest subscription you have?"

"It has been equalled but not surpassed, your ladyship."

"Then you may put me down for twenty-five guineas," cooed Lady Sullybridge.

Agnes dipped into her handbag as though to produce a pen. Instead she took out a small, glittering disc and began to rotate it in front of the old aristocrat's face. A power that was not her own radiated from the disc. A voice, with a command that was not her own, issued from her throat. Dark shadows seemed to dance dangerously along the walls of the blue drawing room.

"Sleep . . . sleep . . . *sleep* . . ." said Agnes Simnel.

## CHAPTER XI

*The Vault*

THE funeral of Lady Sullybridge was one of those prim, socially elite affairs which was a combination of the macabre, the grotesque, the proud and the pathetic. There was a sense, though the watching Agnes Simnel, in which death is a great leveller of the social scale. There was another sense in which death emphasised not so much the equality of man as the hopeless inequality of man. A starving Asiatic child claws at its distended abdomen and flies like a dog in a ditch. A king, an emperor, a courtier, may die with the presses of Fleet Street thick with obituary notices, and with half the world following every step of his funeral *cortège*. Agnes was thinking of old men—even

popular old men, kindly old men, who died comparatively unnoticed in their cottages. But now Lady Sullybridge, *apparently* dead, was being laid to rest in the Sullybridge family vault. Unlike the other occasions on which she had performed her gruesome ritual with the puppets, Agnes had not been able on this occasion to insert the figurine into Lady Sullybridge's coffin. For one thing, her ladyship had been lying 'in state' and that had made it very difficult. For another, the cottage of a pauper, or the home of an ordinary man, is a comparatively unattended and practically unguarded place.

Lady Sullybridge had a staff who, with all their faults, were by no means slack in their duties. Martinet she had been but, in their own way, her employees were devoted to her. Agnes thought of them as barnacles on the Sullybridge ship of state. They had no more desire to see her ladyship depart this life 'in the faith and fear of the Lord' than they would have desired to see Sullybridge Manor burned down around their ears.

Agnes knew that her opportunity to insert the terrifyingly accurate marionette would come *after* the coffin had been placed in the vault. It might be a day or two before the opportunity presented itself, but she knew that ultimately the opportunity would come. So it was with more than neighbourly interest that she watched the sombre procession, rich in black crêpe, making its ceremonial way to the Sullybridge family vault. Particularly interesting to Agnes were the *fastenings* of the vault, and the position of the coffin on the shelves within. It was the evening following the funeral that saw Agnes Simnel creeping furtively through the grounds towards her sombre destination. The dark powers, which inspired and guided her, were making their presence obvious in the blemished features and crouching gait that the woman now adopted automatically.

She passed through the shrubbery of laurel, yew and arbutus. The night air was heavy with the scent of sickly sweet evergreens. Wet leaves brushed her face like the cold kiss of dark spirits. A gibbous moon peered down fitfully through strato-cumulus clouds. Agnes looked up into the patterned darkness and smiled an evil smile. She carried a number of implements and tools in a large leather handbag. Some of these implements had been brought from her brother's workroom, others she had purchased.

Excitement welled up within her. She was aware of a feeling of tension as she fingered the marionette that lay carefully on top of the tools in the handbag. She reached the door of the Sullybridge vault. Night spiders ran in the ivy as Agnes crouched in the doorway and groped with her talon fingers for the securing mechanism which she had studied in daylight. Excitement grew stronger as she tried various tools against the lock. She was filled with the superhuman strength which was the heritage of those who served the shadowy dark powers to which she was now committed. Agnes Simnel forced the lock to yield, and pushed open the left-hand door of the vault.

There was an unmistakable smell of death and decay in the crypt, but Agnes moved purposefully forward until her hands encountered the bevelled lid of the newest casket. She took a short, stubby handled screw driver from her bag and, working entirely by a sense of touch in the gloomy interior of the vault, she began to unfasten the screws that secured Lady Sullybridge's coffin lid.

The screws screeched eerily in their sockets as Agnes unfastened them. She did not remove them completely, but left them standing like eerie, twisted sentinels in the wood. Then, sliding the lid to one side, she groped at the foot of the coffin and placed the hideous marionette beside the still, cold feet of Lady Sullybridge. Callously she re-

placed the lid and refastened the screws. The lid was thick, padded, sound absorbing. The screws were long and strong. There would be no chance that Lady Sullybridge would escape, thought Agnes. She rapped with her shrivelled claw on the coffin lid.

"Lady Sullybridge, *wake up!*" There was a muffled stirring from within. Agnes could feel her heart beat faster. She rapped again.

"Wake up, Lady Sullybridge."

There came the sound of a muffled voice, it sounded frightened and bewildered.

"You've been buried alive!" cackled Agnes. "Soon you'll be really dead!"

There was another muffled cry from inside and the sound of frantic scraping movements, together with angry curses. Agnes retreated from the vault, closed the door carefully, replaced the damaged lock in such a way that it looked as if nothing had happened, then, like some harpie, hag or siren in the mythology of the ancient world, Agnes Simnel crept out of the grounds of Sullybridge Manor and made her way homeward. As she travelled, borne along by the black things which she served, macabre calculations were taking place in her warped and twisted mind.

Ten or twelve minutes would have been enough below the ground but perhaps there were slight air spaces around the lid. There wouldn't be much, but there was air in the vault, it wouldn't do to go back too soon. Leave it till tomorrow, tomorrow night? Perhaps even the day after would be better still. One mustn't grow impatient over a task as important as this! The dark masters would let her know. . . . The dark masters would be able to advise her.

She and Francis spent two strangely uneventful days as they waited to ensure that the inevitable had occurred. Then the twisted, warped silhouette of Agnes Simnel made its way into the grounds of Sullybridge Manor once more.

It made its way to the door with the broken lock, opened it in the grim darkness, moved inside, selected the casket with sinister precision, unscrewed the lid and took out the weird marionette, into which Lady Sullybridge's soul had been hideously poured in a tide of fear, anger and mental agony. Agnes clutched the little figure like the witch-mother embracing her infant Caliban in "The Tempest." She moved swiftly from the darkness of the crypt into the pale moonlight of the night. Pausing only to reclose the door with the broken lock, Agnes made her way out of the grounds of Sullybridge Manor, through the evergreen shrubbery, through the wrought iron gates, to the road beyond. It seemed that the dead aristocrat's vengeful thoughts pursued her. But what could the dead woman do, thought Agnes.

She arrived back at the home which she shared with Francis and set the figurine down before him, with the pride of a blemished Diana setting the trophies of the hunt before Zeus. Francis took the marionette and strung it carefully, then standing on a stool at the side of the bench in his workshop he began manipulating the controls.

"Perfect, perfect! See how its dances. See how it has her mannerisms and the *pride!* Excellent! Excellent!"

The thing seemed to be alive in the old man's hands. A miniature Lady Sullybridge, full of a proud hatred and a desire for revenge, but hopelessly impotent in the puppet master's control.

"And now we need only the Snow White!" said the old man.

\* \* \*

Josephine Starr was a busy girl. She had a large rural area to cover and, like many healthy rural communities, there were a great many very old people in it who needed a nurse's attention. . . . Josephine had enormous energy, like so many of her profession, but even she grew tired at

the end of long, useful days, days of blanket bathing, and nail trimming, injections and medicines. As though her actual medical work was not enough, there were the administrative and clerical duties to be dealt with in addition. Still, between all these things, Josephine Starr found time to be a personality, found time to think. She was a thoughtful girl, and the same highly developed social conscience which had led her into nursing as a vocation led her to think seriously about the puppet show she had seen at the village school. There had been something horribly frightening about the similarity which the elderly puppet had borne to old Tom Winter, the raconteur. In the last stages of his decline Josephine had attended the old man quite regularly, and she was sure that the resemblance between Tom Winter and the little puppet must be *more* than coincidental. It was not simply that the puppet had features like Tom Winter, or that it carried its jointed little wooden body in the way that old Tom had been wont to walk before he had taken to his bed for the last time. Every mannerism, thought Jo, had been exact, identical. Only Tom Winter, or someone who knew him intimately, could have put so much of his personality into the puppet. She did not think that Tom and Simnel the puppet master had been such close friends as all that.

No doubt, as fellow entertainers, they had *met*, perhaps they had been passing friends, but that in itself would not explain the phenomenon which now perturbed the young district nurse.

The Tom Winter affair, though, was not the only problem that troubled her mind. If only *one* puppet had borne a resemblance to someone she had known, that in itself would have been no cause for either alarm or deep despondency. There was something horribly familiar about several of the dolls. Not *all* of them—Johnny and Bimbo the clowns, she remembered; she had quite enjoyed their

innocuous humour. They had been straightforward, honest-to-goodness puppets with no sinister undertones. It had been the little old men who had featured in the various playlets who had worried Josephine Starr. Several of them bore a striking resemblance to elderly patients of hers who had died. She wondered why nobody else had noticed anything amiss, and as she gave the problem more thought, she realised that the explanation probably lay in her going around a number of villages. Those puppets did not resemble the dead of one place. Her rounds took her further afield than most people. She had an unusually wide range of social contacts.

Josephine Starr finished her breakfast and looked at her day's appointments. Oddly enough, it was one of the lightest mornings she had had for some considerable time. Jo was the kind of girl who had the courage of her convictions. If she thought that something needed doing, if she thought that something ought to be done, then she would take her courage and her resolution in both her strong, dainty hands and do it. It never occurred to her for a moment to consider the aspect of personal danger. For Josephine Starr was that rare and wonderful thing, a natural altruist, an innate idealist. If she felt that something was wrong, it was almost instinctive behaviour for her to go and see what she could *do* about it.

She consulted her morning schedule again and decided there would be time for her to visit Simnel the puppet man and have it out with him. Accordingly she put on her coat, got her shiny new bicycle out of the shed, and cycled off in the direction of the Simnel's domicile.

Agnes and Francis had finished breakfast when the bell rang with firm insistence. Agnes went to the door with a puzzled frown creasing her brows. She had no idea who would be calling at this time of day. Neither she nor Francis were expecting anyone as far as she knew.

The door opened and Nurse Starr found herself looking at a tall, thin, forbidding woman with a malevolent, unhappy expression and an air of brooding evil surrounding her like an invisible cloud. Many a girl might have been overawed by the unprepossessing figure of Agnes Simnel, but Josephine Starr came of redoubtable stock. One of her cousins, of whom she was inordinately proud, was an internationally famous figure, and although they did not bear the same surname, Josephine felt a kind of vicarious pleasure and excitement when she read of cousin Val's exploits. She could read between the lines, and in her mind's eye she could see what it was that made him tick. She could experience the same kind of zest that he must take with him as his *aperitif* for the banquet of life.

"I wonder if I could see Mr. Simnel?" asked Josephine.

"What exactly did you wish to see him about?" asked Agnes primly.

"It's to do with the puppets," said Josephine. Although the morning was comparatively light—for her—she still had a lot of calls to make.

"Oh—the—the puppets?" Somehow the old hag was on the defensive. There was a power in Josephine Starr's personality which seemed to push the dark shadows which supported Agnes into retreat and confusion. They fled like dust before a new broom; they went back like crepuscular shades when a bright beam of light is thrown in their direction.

"You'd better come in." Agnes looked and felt decidedly uncomfortable. Josephine entered, feeling as she did so that she was crossing the Rubicon. Agnes led the way to the breakfast room.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee, Miss—er——"

"Starr!"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Agnes muttered something under her breath.

"Yes, I will have some coffee, thank you." Josephine sat down and looked at Francis Simnel. He tried to avoid her gaze; he felt as though some of the evil power had been drained from him. He had the impression that his supply line to the dark powers had been cut, and that he was almost alone as he faced this girl. There was such an air of goodness about her that the dark things which supported the puppeteers could not breathe their dark psychic effluva in the girl's presence.

Gradually Simnel's resolve came back to him. This was Snow White; this was the girl he must have at all costs.

Agnes brought the coffee. She glanced meaningfully at Francis

"Care to have anything with it?"

"No thanks." Josephine looked at Agnes and the crone seemed to retreat into her own blemished, hag-like body. Normally, Josephine felt nothing but sympathy for the old. She felt for their physical helplessness very keenly, her heart went out to them. Some old people she found extremely lovable. Others were less easy to love. But these two were an anathema to her. There was something about them that seemed to brook of evil. Jo wondered what Val and his wife, the beautiful La Noire, would have made of these two. She wished that they were there. She said suddenly.

"Mr. Simnel, I am very disturbed about the resemblance which your puppets bear to a number of my late patients."

There was a five-minute silence in the Simnel breakfast room, during which the air could have been cut with a knife. The atmosphere was tense, charged with a strange psychic power. Old Francis trembled a little.

"I don't understand you, my dear young lady," he said at last.

"I think you do," returned Josephine. "It must have been deliberate. It couldn't have been accidental. It's far, far too close a likeness."



"I don't really know what you're driving at," said the old puppeteer.

"Let me put it another way," urged Josephine. "I think that you have been deliberately copying dead people for some strange reason of your own. Is it a kind of joke? A sick humour, or something?"

"What makes you think that our puppets do resemble dead people?" asked Agnes.

"I have seen the show."

"Oh, and what dead people do you think our little puppets resemble? Can you put any names to them?"

"Yes, of course." Josephine mentioned Tom Winter, and six other names, and every name seemed to strike home at Francis and Agnes, like shafts of light fired from some celestial bow fired into a dark, writhing target.

"That's an impressive list," affirmed Agnes.

"Do you deny it?" demanded Josephine.

"You don't seem to be in any mood to listen to denials," returned Francis. "Perhaps you would like to come along and see the puppets in my workshop. It might make you change your mind."

Josephine could feel drowsiness creeping over her.

"Come into the work room," invited old Francis Simnel again. This time there was a little more power, a little more strength in his voice. As Josephine made to rise, the breakfast room seemed to spin around her.

"The coffee——" she said, but already her voice seemed to come from a distance.

"Yes, my child, it was in the coffee. Just a little something to keep you quiet, to make you sleep while we decide what is to be done."

"You—can't get—away—with—this," said Nurse Starr.

"Can't we?" replied Francis. "We'll see what the dark masters have to say about that."

As the nurse slumped unconscious across the table, the

dark powers seemed to be able to reassert their communications with the unwholesome Simnels again. The fire in the eyes of the hag glittered and then burnt brightly again. Power returned to the trembling Francis. He became less doddering. He and Agnes carried Josephine through to the workroom.

"She will be out for several hours," said Agnes.

"The bicycle is something of a problem," said Francis, as one of the dark guides prompted him deep down in his twisted old consciousness. "We must do something about the bicycle, otherwise we shall have inquiries levelled in this direction."

"If I took it around a corner or two and just left it propped against a wall," suggested Agnes.

"Be careful you don't meet anybody," he warned.

"One bicycle is much like another," said the woman.

"I don't suppose anyone would pay much attention to a middle-aged lady pushing a bicycle, do you?" She emphasised middle-aged.

"They might," said Francis. He was smiling a little.

"What are we going to do with her, anyway?"

"I can get the puppet ready quite soon, and then you can go into your usual routine."

"What about the body?" asked Agnes practically.

"We shall have to take her somewhere in the car," said Francis. "Take her somewhere in the car," he repeated.

"Then you can put her into that cataleptic trance, and when they find her they will just think she died in mysterious circumstances." He looked at the sleeping girl. "Now to carve the puppet," he said. "It's better still having the model in front of you."

The dark powers filled the old puppet master with fiendish energy, and he worked at the Snow White head with an artistry that was breathtaking, despite its diabolical purpose.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" said Agnes, as the head began to take shape.

"Go and get on with the clothes," said Francis. "Time is going to run out on us fairly soon." He looked at her suddenly. "You did dispose of the bicycle, didn't you?"

"Yes, I took it nearly a mile," replied Agnes. "I met no one, and I came back by another route."

"Oh, splendid, splendid," said her brother. "What about fingerprints?" asked the old man with sudden practical thoughtfulness, as the dark masters again prompted him.

"I wore gloves, of course," said Agnes.

The dark shadows had also been inspiring her.

"Well, that's just about everything taken care of, then," said Francis. "We'll have to get her back to her own house, or some equally suitable place, before you put the 'fluence' on her."

"Right," replied Agnes. "We'll wait for darkness and then take her over in the car."

As the sun set and the dark shades of evening draped the bricky shoulders of the sleeping town, Agnes and Francis folded the sleeping Josephine Starr into a trunk and carried her out to the car. They placed the trunk in the boot and drove slowly and carefully back to the district nurse's house. Agnes had taken the latch key from Josephine's pocket and now, with a furtive glance up and down the street, the sinister Simnels carried the trunk inside, lifted Josephine out and placed her in an easy chair in her own sitting room. Then Agnes went to work with her Satanic hypnotic power.

When the Simnel's left, carrying the empty trunk, Josephine Starr sat in a trance-like state, so resembling death that even the best medical minds would have been deluded by it.

## CHAPTER XII

### *The Equaliser*

VAL STEARMAN sat in his office in the *Daily Globe* building, a cup of coffee in one hand and a sheet of copy in the other. He took a heavy swig at the coffee, grimaced when he realised it had either not been sugared or not been stirred, yelled for the copy boy to remedy the error if he valued his life, and returned his attention to the paper he was holding. It was one of those mornings when things were *not* working out as they should have done. If there was one thing that Stearman hated, it was working against the clock. Maybe men who hate working against clocks should keep out of journalism, but there were so many things about his chosen profession that he liked, that Val was prepared for the occupational hazard of clock racing.

Pressure was building up in the *Globe* building that morning. Val and his fellow journalists were under the impression that Mac, the irascible Scots editor, was either suffering from his liver, his ulcer, or possibly both—Mac was a man who believed in sharing. When Mac suffered, everybody else suffered. And, by God, *how* they suffered, thought Stearman! The copy boy returned bearing sugar and a spoon and wearing an apologetic smile.

"Very sorry, Mr. Stearman."

"All right," growled Val.

The boy sugared and stirred the coffee carefully, and Val got it down absently as he re-studied the article that it had taken him most of the morning to pound out.

"I don't like it," he grated.

"I'm very sorry, sir. I put two in."

"Not the coffee! This blasted article!" snarled Val.

"Never mind, take it down to the Feuhrrer and see what he says!"

When Mac was in one of his most irascible moods, "Feuhrrer was possibly one of the aptest of nicknames; for the Editor's ravings, when life really got him down, as it had done this morning, were reminiscent of the furious outbursts of the preposterous German megalomaniac who had brought tragedy to millions between 1939 and 1945. A whimsical thought passed fleetingly through Stearman's mind. He would have liked to bring Hitler and Mac face to face while both of them were shouting their loudest. Somehow, Val felt, all things else being equal, Mac would have blasted the insane moustached corporal from one end of the *Reichstag* to the other.

Val was surprised when his copy did not come bouncing straight back. Mac was obviously now so desperate that he was prepared to let anything in competent English go through to the printer. It had been an exceedingly poor day for news, thought Val.

There came a loud, angry noise from Mac's office which was not far from Stearman's, and a covey of copy boys fluttered away bearing sheets and photographs. Stearman unwrapped his six-foot-plus physique from the desk and chair and made his way interestedly into Mack's office.

"Do you want me to do some subbing?" he asked quietly.

"Shearman, at your best there's a decidedly human streak in you," said the voluble, choleric Scot. "If you'd offered me a blood transfusion when I lay dying, ye

couldn't have said a kinder word. Get those big round eyes of yours poring over that lot of gibberish, will ye? I hope ye understand the sports stuff."

"What's happened to Monty, then?" asked Val.

"Like all sports editors, he's gone sick when he's needed," snarled Mac.

"You're being unfair," protested Val. "Monty's been on the *Globe* as long as I have, and I think he's had one week off with flu in all that time!"

"I dinna want him to establish a precedent," said Mac. "Even one day off is one day too much!"

"You've got it bad this morning, Mac," said Val.

"I don't want to get involved in one of those interminable arguments with you," snapped the Scot. "Get on with your work."

"Thank you for those few kind words," said Stearman, "especially when I *volunteered* in the first place!"

"I'm sorry, Val. It's just one of those blasted days! We'll get the paper put to bed, then we'll have a drink."

"Mind the little ulcer," said Val with a grin.

"To hell with the ulcer. I'm coming to the conclusion that whisky's the only cure!"

"It'll be a permanent cure if you swill too much round it," said Stearman cautiously, and then there was silence as Val assisted Mac with the editing.

With a great sigh of relief, the old Scot pushed the last sheet of copy into place and reached for the whisky decanter in the left-hand drawer of his desk. He dragged out two rather grimy tumblers, half-filled one, pushed it across to Stearman, and half-filled the other for himself.

"Don't you think you ought to have some soda with that?" asked Val.

"How long have you been a doctor?" demanded Mac.

"Suit yourself," grinned Val. "It's your gut you're burning!"

Mac took a long hard pull at his whisky, coughed, spluttered and heaved a deep sigh. "That's better! In recognition of your kind help," he was feeling generous and relieved, "you can have the rest of the day off."

"Seeing I'm entitled to it anyway, that's very kind of you," said Stearman.

"I mean it. Go and pick up that pretty little wife of yours and take her to a show or something."

"That's not a bad idea," agreed Val. "O.K., Mac." He slapped the irascible little editor on the shoulder. "And don't keep hitting that damned 'Screech' so hard. I'll come back and find a small, charred cinder sitting behind the desk, wearing a kilt and sporran!"

"You damned Sassenach!" retorted Mac good-naturedly.

Val made his way out of the Editor's office and down to the basement car park where his powerful sports saloon was ready and waiting. He drove out into Fleet Street.

It was about half-past one as he turned and headed West towards the luxury flat which he shared with La Noire. As he pulled up outside, he ran his fingers characteristically through the tousled mop of iron grey hair that crowned his rugged, pleasantly ugly face. He took the stairs in preference to the elevator, slipped the key into the latch and walked in, to find that La Noire had got a chicken salad ready on the off chance. He slid her into his arms, kissed her warmly, went through to the kitchen, washed his hands, and set himself in front of the delectable looking half-chicken with its raw vegetable accompaniments. Val was something of a salad connoisseur but he had to agree that nobody—but nobody—could concoct a salad like La Noire could. It seemed as if she had an unlimited store of experience to call on. She was for ever finding those delicate, dainty, interesting and unusual items with which to complete the dish.

There was always just a touch of Eastern mystery and

Oriental promise in the things that La Noire blended into a salad. Val ate in quiet enthusiasm until there was nothing left but a neatly picked stack of chicken bones on the side of the plate.

"Did you like it, darling?"

He looked at the full, smiling, moist red lips, the big, jet black eyes, the almost blue-black hair, cut on the Egyptian style, the perfect beauty of her face, the timeless, limitless, flawless beauty of her complexion.

"Yes, it was wonderful," he said. La Noire's culinary ability was not her only mystery, he thought; he sighed a little to himself, and then, quite suddenly La Noire closed her eyes and held up her hand for silence. Val knew her well enough to make no interruption at all. Her lips were moving but no sound came out. She sat trance-like, statuesque and immobile for nearly ten minutes, then she opened her eyes and shook her head slightly as though to clear it.

"Val," she whispered.

"Yes, darling?"

"Val, I—I've just been in contact with your cousin Josephine."

"Cousin Josephine?" said Stearman. He raised an eyebrow. "Jo Starr, the nurse!"

"Yes, darling." Val looked at La Noire, searchingly.

"I'd nearly forgotten the kid existed!"

"She won't if we don't do something," said La Noire.

"What do you mean?" Val's voice was an anxious whisper. He had known Josephine as a child; he still thought of her as a little girl rather than as a young woman. People grow up, he thought. We reach maturity and then stagnate. Others are growing up all around us, all the time. We lose track of them.

"It's very difficult to explain," said La Noire. "It's all weirdly symbolic."

"What did you see?" asked Val.

"There was a face, a face like the face of a witch. A hideous, blemished caricature of a human face, with teeth like fangs, hands like talons."

"And Josephine?" asked Val.

"This is where the symbolism becomes very strange," said La Noire. "Telepathy is something that works in a way that none of us really understand. The picture sometimes gets confused. You receive an impression of someone else's thought and your mind translates it into pictures of your own. She was dancing."

"Dancing?" asked Val. "I didn't think Jo was much for dancing. Still, you never know. Was it ballroom stuff, slow, slow, quick, slow, slow?"

"No, this was slow, Eastern dancing, almost a ritual dance. She was trying to tell us she was in the power of some dark evil entity, just as a slave girl is in the power of a Sultan."

"I'm not altogether sure that I follow that logic," said Stearman.

"Well, I may be wrong, but that's how I would interpret it, and the expression on her face—she seemed to be fighting evil forces that were too strong for her. Yet it wasn't fear on her face so much as anger, and the determination to fight them."

"It's the Stearman blood," said Val.

La Noire smiled. "There is a sort of characteristic family likeness," she said.

"God help any girl with a face like mine!" joked Stearman, holding up his hands in horror.

"I think you've got a wonderful face," said La Noire. She stroked his cheek with her finger tips. "It's character, Val. I can't stand 'pretty' men, they make me feel sick."

"It takes a real woman to appreciate rugged masculine qualities," rejoined Stearman with a grin. Then he was all seriousness again. "This danger that Josephine is in?"

"I'm thinking of the symbolism again," said La Noire. "The idea of the dancing . . . it was more than being in the power of someone, the dancing had another symbolism as if she was controlled by something. . . ."

Val began to hum: "Popo the puppet can do anything when somebody else pulls the string."

"I think that's a pop song," he added.

La Noire gave a sudden exclamation of surprise.

"Puppets," she said. "I get an intense feeling, a telepathic feeling connected with the word 'puppets', a strong signal. Val, I think you're on to it. The way you began humming that song was in a sense a telepathic communication. Perhaps, though you are not aware of it, as I am, you have *some* telepathic ability."

"I know you and I can get in touch in certain circumstances," said Val. "We have done, haven't we?"

"Yes, we have," said La Noire.

"But I have always felt that this has been due to your power," said Val.

"I have always been able to help you, rather like a relay station," said La Noire.

Val nodded. "That was how I figured it, insofar as you can describe telepathy in electronic terms."

"I hadn't got that puppet thought that seemed to come direct to you," said La Noire.

"Perhaps that's natural and feasible. After all, she is my cousin," said Stearman.

"Yes, yes, she is," agreed La Noire.

"Tell me," said Val quietly, "what do you think we ought to do next, darling? How serious do you think the danger is?"

"I think it's mortal," returned La Noire. She looked at him very seriously and took his hand in hers. "I have a horrible fear that we may already be too late, Val. The signal was so desperate, it sounded like the crowning cry

of a heart's despair. It was a now-or-never cry from a mind in the last extremity."

"Come on," said Stearman, "let's go. The car's outside!" He stopped. "Where the devil is Josephine working now?" La Noire went to her address book, thumbed through the pages, and came back with the information Val needed.

"Let's hope she's still there," said Stearman. "If we bolt over there and then find that she's been posted to the other side of England, it isn't going to help us."

"No, it isn't," agreed La Noire. "Nor will it help her!" They piled into their big sports saloon; the massive four litre plus engine began singing a song of turbulent power. It roared and bayed as it ate up the miles between London and the group of towns and villages near Sullybridge, where Val's cousin tended the sick. It was not a particularly eventful journey. Once or twice Stearman got impatient with traffic congestions, but he was too experienced a hand to allow that to colour his judgment. There is a difference between the fast driving of the veteran speed man like Val Stearman and the desperate near-lunacy of the novice, who prays for a miracle every time he takes a blind corner on the wrong side.

Stearman knew what risks to take and what risks to avoid. Once he had untangled the powerful sports saloon from the traffic snarl-ups, and got her long nose out on to the open road, he put his foot down almost to the boards and watched the needle creep up into the hundred and fifty region.

They reached Josephine Starr's house and pulled up outside. It was dark, and the house had a silent atmosphere, a frightening panoply of foreboding that came at them like a tangible living thing. Val and La Noire exchanged glances, and then Stearman rang the bell vigorously. A neighbour appeared. She had the look of a woman who was used to popping round with messages for the nurse.

"I'm afraid Nurse Starr is out. She has been out all day. Can I take a message?" She was a pleasant, motherly looking soul.

"I'm Nurse Starr's cousin," said Val. "I'm rather anxious about her. I have reason to believe she is not well."

"She was all right when I last saw her."

"We had a message to the contrary," answered Val, rather ambiguously.

The neighbour looked at the rugged might of Stearman, studying him closely in the street lamp light.

"Yes, I can see you look a bit like the nurse," replied the neighbour thoughtfully. "Would you like to come in a few minutes and wait till she gets back?"

"I'd like to very much," answered Val, "and thank you for the invitation, but, if she's not at home, I feel I ought to go and look for her. Have you any idea where she'd be?"

"No. She usually lets me know, and that's what I can't understand."

By itself, that wasn't very much, but coupled with the weird telepathic experience which he and La Noire had, it made Val suspicious. It was just unusual enough to warrant taking action.

"You have got a key, I suppose?" he asked hopefully.

"No," answered the neighbour. "It's a Yale lock and Nurse always has her own key, keeps it herself."

"That's natural," answered Val.

"Might be a window open round the back," suggested the neighbour.

"Do you think she'd mind if I went in and had a look? You come in as well, and we'll see if she's left an appointment book anywhere that would help us."

"I don't suppose she'd mind, she's not the sort who'd mind; she likes a bit of fun and adventure." The neigh-

bour was looking as worried as Stearman was feeling. "She's such a nice girl, I do hope nothing has happened."

"So do we," agreed Val, fervently.

There was a small window open at the back. It would not admit the great bulk of Stearman's shoulders, but La Noire was just able to wriggle lithely through it. She opened the latch for them and Val and the neighbour stepped inside.

They opened the door of the living room and switched on the light.

Josephine Starr sat stiff, still and unnaturally upright in a chair. Her eyes were wide and staring.

"Oh, God," cried the neighbour, "she's dead!" The woman covered her face with her hands and ran from the room.

"Phone the police!" called Val after her retreating back. He and La Noire moved closer to the motionless figure of Josephine Starr. They were looking for anything that might provide a clue to the mystery when a police car and a doctor arrived. The medical man took Josephine's pulse. It was practically non-existent, and even as he continued to feel for it, it eluded him entirely.

"I could have sworn I felt just the faintest pulse when I first took the wrist," he said to Stearman, "but there's nothing there now at all. I'm afraid she's gone."

Val and La Noire also tried to find a pulse near the girl's still, cold hand. But their efforts were as fruitless as those of the doctor had been. La Noire brought a mirror across and held it in front of Josephine's parted lips, but there was no tell-tale condensation.

Apparently respiration had ceased.

"I don't understand it," commented the doctor. "If you had asked me for an example of perfect, healthy vigorous young womanhood, I'd have said that Josephine Starr was it."

"Any evidence of foul play do you think?" asked Val.

"You found the body," said the doctor. "What do you think?"

Val shook his head. "Nothing. It looks as if life was withdrawn from her by some weird dark power."

"Oh, don't invoke the supernatural, please!" said the medical man.

"Why not?" demanded Stearman. "It's all around us, waiting to be invoked!"

The doctor withdrew a little as though he found Val's presence, and particularly his conversation, irksome.

Val and La Noire gave their statements to the police officers and went back to the car.

"I suppose we'd better find somewhere for the night," said Val. They booked in at the Green Dragon. It was a pleasant enough two-star hotel. The rooms were old and quaint, and at any other time Val would have found himself admiring the beautifully beamed ceilings. Now, however, he was in no mood at all to enjoy either architectural satisfaction or archaeological significance. It was just a bedroom, somewhere to sleep, somewhere to pass the night, somewhere to be alone with La Noire to talk and think. As Val turned out the light and put his arms around La Noire and kissed her gently on the cheek, he murmured: "There has to be an answer to this problem."

Her arms were around him as she answered: "That girl may be legally, physically and medically dead, but she's still *complete*."

"I don't get you," said Val. "What do you mean, darling?"

"Her soul is still trapped in her body, and as long as separation of soul and body has not taken place, there's always hope of revival."

"You mean she's in some kind of deep trance, a coma?" suggested Val.

"It's not a natural trance or coma, the doctor would have been able to detect that. It's as though the supernatural has taken over. It's as though some dark force has stepped in to prevent the silver cord from being cut, to prevent the golden bowl from being broken."

"That sounds like a piece from Ecclesiastes," said Stearman.

La Noire smiled. "Yes, it is."

It always worried Stearman a little when he thought about the way La Noire quoted from ancient documents. Sometimes she would give the words with the exactitude of a scholar, sometimes she would quote chapter and verse with almost pedantic precision. There were other times when she spoke about some of the ancient writings as though they were contemporary literature, as far as she was concerned, and it was this that Stearman found particularly disconcerting. He had once heard her reading from a translation of the "Epic of Gilgamesh," and smiling with wistful nostalgia, as the ancient Chaldean syntax came so easily to her tongue. Listening to her reading of it, Stearman got the impression that he was listening to an adult woman re-reading a book that had delighted her in distant childhood.

There were so many mysteries about La Noire; thoughts of them temporarily crowded out other ideas from Val's mind. It was obvious to him by the gentle touch of La Noire's hand on his cheek that she was aware of his thoughts.

"Don't concern yourself, Val," she whispered. "Accept and enjoy. You don't know what electricity is, but you can turn on a switch and fill a room with light. If you try to probe too far into the meaning, you will lose what you already have. Please believe me. When the time comes, as it must come, I will answer the questions, I promise, but for now trust and believe. Perhaps when the

time comes it will be possible for me to give you the ultimate gift."

Val looked at the soft contours of her face in the dim light filtering through the window. He smiled.

"I've taken you on trust all these years," he answered gently. "It doesn't matter about anything else, but sometimes it worries me, darling. I can't help it."

He ran a hand through his tousled iron grey curls and looked at the jet black of La Noire's hair. "No 'silver threads among the gold' as far as you're concerned," he said softly.

"Jealous?" she whispered.

"No—glad. Glad, but puzzled."

She kissed him again, gently, warmly.

"Let's get back to Josephine," said Val thoughtfully. "There has to be a *reason*."

"Puppets!" exclaimed La Noire. "That's the clue we have to follow, Val, I'm sure of it. Whatever has happened to Josephine has some connection with puppets."

"What could the connection be?" asked Val.

"I don't know, but somewhere there has to be a nexus, a connection. Somewhere there has to be a link between what happened to Josephine and puppets."

"The thought of puppets," said Val, "is an odd one. In many ways they're charming, amusing, harmless, innocuous little things; and yet there is another aspect of them which seems to go back to the deepest roots of antiquity. Punch and Judy go back to the late Middle Ages, and some of the old court jesters had their dolls that danced on strings. Before that there were toys in ancient Egypt?" His voice was interrogative.

"Yes," agreed La Noire, "there were dolls on strings in ancient Egypt, and in ancient Babylon they were used in religious ceremonies. Puppets of that kind go back to the dim dawn of history. Little animated figures were part of



strange old barbaric religious rituals. I've——" She left the sentence unfinished. Val looked at her questioningly in the darkness. He wondered what it was she had been about to say. But although the question filled his mind, it never reached his lips. If she had wanted to finish the sentence, he knew she would have told him, and if she had left it unfinished deliberately, then no amount of questioning would get it from her.

Val thought again about Josephine Starr. There had to be some sort of clue they could follow, but how could they follow a clue as nebulous as a puppet?

His mind still filled with a confused *melée* of thoughts, Val Stearman rolled over and went to sleep, but La Noire, her arm still around her husband's shoulders, lay awake thinking for several hours in the darkness, sending out her strange, inexplicable, telepathic probe in a search for information.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### *The String Puller*

EARLY next morning Val and La Noire went down to police headquarters to make a few inquiries. The sergeant was one of those stalwart policemen of the old school who had been in the area for a very long time and knew it thoroughly. Val was very careful to introduce an idea of

puppetry gently and gradually, but when he did drop just the most casual of chance remarks, the police sergeant rose to the bait like a hungry salmon jumping for a fat, succulent, slow buzzing fly.

"Francis Simnel's the chap with the puppets, Mr. Stearman."

"Where can I find him?" asked Val. The sergeant gave him Simnel's address. Val tried to conceal his excitement as best he could. He took the subject off puppets and on to Josephine again. The sergeant seemed very genuinely distressed by the tragedy.

"There doesn't seem no rhyme nor reason," he began.

"I don't know whether I'm next of kin," said Stearman, "although I do know that her parents are dead."

"You were thinking in terms of a post mortem then, were you?"

"No," answered Stearman, "not a post mortem exactly, but certainly an inquest. I would like to delay the interment as long as possible."

The sergeant looked at him quizzically. "Why is that, sir?"

"Despite all the medical evidence," said Stearman, "I have very serious doubts as to whether or not she *is* dead."

"You felt her pulse yourself, sir. I was there. . . ."

"I know," agreed Val, "but despite all the advances that have been made in medical science during the last decades, there are still some mysteries which remain unsolved. These deep cataleptic trances and narcoleptic states border on the mysterious. It's as though something other than the physically comprehensible is linking the soul and body together."

"I don't know whether I'd go so far as to say that," replied the sergeant. He sounded just a little belligerent.

"No, perhaps I'm being whimsical or fanciful, sergeant, but on the other hand, I *do* want the interment delayed as long as possible."

"Unless anybody else should turn up, I dare say you could act as next of kin," said the sergeant. "You will want to see the undertakers, of course. You could arrange it with them."

"Yes I'll do that. Who are the local people?" asked Val.

"Well, Chambers does most of it," said the sergeant.

"Does he now?" said Val. "Where can I find him?"

He got an address, chatted for a few more minutes, left the police station and then made his way to Chambers's Funeral Parlour. Mr. Chambers looked more like a music hall undertaker than any real mortician had a right to look. He was a very tall, thin, droopy man with long sad features, a trailing moustache and neo-Victorian mutton chop whiskers. He belonged to an older, sadder, more sentimental generation than Val Stearman.

The waiting period could be extended for a few days if Mr. Stearman really required it. Yes, the nurse's body could be brought around and left in the chapel of rest. It was all very sad and all very touching, intimated Mr. Chambers. The financial details were tucked in at the end of his speech so tactfully and so tastefully that they were almost unnoticeable. For his job, thought Val, the man was probably ideal. He made the unpleasant as unobtrusive as possible.

"There is one final point," said Val, as he finished the arrangements. "I don't want *anyone*, except the police and ourselves, to have access to the body, and I don't want the lid on. Is that clear?"

"Not even laid on--loosely?" inquired Chambers, raising a melancholy eyebrow.

"No lid," said Val, firmly.

"As you wish, sir. As you wish, madam," said the undertaker. He set off towards the nurse's house, where the blinds were drawn and the neighbours strangely silent. The whole street seemed to be in mourning for Josephine Starr.

Having made the necessary arrangements, Val and La Noire piled into the big sports saloon and drove rapidly in search of Simnel, the puppeteer. Val found the address without much difficulty. A glance at his watch told him that it was nearly eleven o'clock and quite a reasonable hour in the morning for calling. He bounded up the steps to the house with considerable aplomb, and despising anything in the form of a bell push, he pounded with his great knuckle-scarred fist on the woodwork until it seemed that the Simnelian door was about to part company with its frame and its hinges.

Agnes Simnel flung the door open, ready to utter an ascetic rebuke to whoever it was had dared to knock so violently. Then her eyes travelled upwards and something that might have been a flame of fear flickered in her eyes. The family likeness between Josephine Starr and Val Stearman was sufficiently vivid to impress itself sharply upon a conscience as guilty as Agnes Simnel's.

"I'm looking for Francis Simnel, the puppeteer," said Stearman. La Noire stood immediately behind him, and the guilty look on Agnes' face had not been lost on the observant Mrs. Stearman. She gave Val an almost imperceptible nudge. He flashed her a quick, meaningful glance. Agnes stood, frightened and hesitant, on the doorstep.

"Is Mr. Simnel in?" grated Val, and already one of his big solid feet had crossed the threshold.

"I—I—I—I—" stuttered Agnes.

La Noire slipped lithely past Agnes Simnel. Val took a firm pace into the house and closed the door behind him, taking the knob violently out of the old woman's hand. She stood trembling, over-awed. Something that might have been a dark shadow moved angrily along the wall. La Noire followed it with her eyes. Stearman drew a deep breath. He, too, had noticed the strange shadowy something. But it had gone, vanished as though it had never been. . . .

"Mr. Simnel is in," said Agnes suddenly. "Would you like to see him?"

"Yes," said Stearman. "Tell him we have called to see him regarding the death of Miss Josephine Starr, will you?"

Agnes stiffened visibly. "Are you the police?"

"Worse than the police," said Stearman.

Agnes looked into his eyes and what she read there filled her with a fear that gripped her black soul in a hand of pure white ice, wrung it, twisted it, until it tottered on the edge of destruction. Never in the whole of her life had Agnes Simnel ever encountered a man of Val Stearman's calibre. There had been a certain power, a certain purity and light, radiating from the girl, Josephine, but her light was a pale and gentle flame compared to the power beam that radiated from Val Stearman. The man was a human dynamo. An iron man. He was a human Armada. There was a terrifying, invincible quality about Stearman. He was all confidence. It was not a false or ill-founded confidence, either.

The fluttering black heart of Agnes Simnel knew it was in the presence of a man who acted as though he was unbeatable because he had never been beaten..

Val Stearman followed the old woman down the passage. She tapped at a workshop door. From the other side Val could hear the sound of a lathe turning. He kicked the door open with unnecessary anger and violence. His mind was full of thoughts of the girl, the girl who had been so full of life and fun and service to others. The workshop was full of puppets such as Stearman had never seen before, and the one that took his attention to the exclusion of all the rest was an incredibly life-like model of his cousin, Josephine Starr. The likeness was quite unmistakable and totally undeniable. Val strode across the workshop floor, pushed the doddering old man roughly to

one side, and held up the puppet like an accusing barrister holding up a charge sheet.

"Well?" demanded Stearman. "What is the meaning of this?" There was a terrible silence in the workshop. He could read hatred and fear in the Simnels' faces.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Stalemate*

STEARMAN continued to look with accusing anger, first at Francis and then at Agnes. The old puppeteer shrank within himself, retreating, a cringing jelly of impotent senility, before the rugged fire of Stearman's anger. Val and La Noire became increasingly aware of black shadows that moved, like two dimensional images, around the walls of old Francis Simnel's work room. The significance of the sinister shapes was not lost on a psychic investigator of Val Stearman's experience. Most men would have been completely unnerved by the weird phenomena of the threatening, dancing black shadows. Stearman raised one eyebrow laconically.

"I see we've got company," he remarked to La Noire.

The shadows were sinister and foreboding, but to a man like Stearman, who had, in the course of a long and chequered career, faced werewolves, vampires, ghouls and other blemished denizens of the dark world, these shadows

were no more frightening than a well-made X certificate horror film.

The shadows were massing behind Francis and his sister, they were moving like iron filings tracing the lines of force near the north and south poles of a magnet. Val watched as flurries of black evil power entered old Francis and Agnes. To the mind of Val Stearman—an organ which thought very frequently in imaginative allegories—the old puppeteer and his evil sister looked for all the world like two aged accumulators that were being charged by some black, blemished, psychic current of ethereal and ungodly power.

Val's hand, his left hand, still held the puppet accusingly. His right slid inexorably towards his jacket pocket. Val Stearman's jacket pocket housed a beautifully balanced Browning automatic. It was a heavy calibre weapon with the accuracy of a guided missile, and the force of a rogue elephant. It was an unusual gun in that it was habitually loaded with silver. In the course of his work, Val had come across more than one dark entity which would not have been checked by lead. Silver, the holy metal, had been the thin white line between Stearman and an untimely grave on many occasions. Now, as he drew the gun, it was as though the dark powers present in that evil room sensed that they were at a desperate disadvantage. Even as the powerful weapon leapt into Val's massive, muscular bronzed hand, the dark shadows massed in such quantities that they cut off the light entirely. Although it was only a little after eleven in the morning, the room was as black as midnight. It was a thick, solid darkness. It was a blackness so intense that it was almost tangible. It was the kind of darkness you could *feel*. It seemed to be breathed in by the lungs and absorbed by the pores of the skin. It was a velvet darkness; it was ultimate opacity, and for a second Val Stearman was taken aback by it. He

fired a warning shot into the ceiling at a point which he believed to be a foot or two above Francis Simmel's head. Then he found himself grappling with a huge dark shape. Something from the *other side* had materialised. It was something huge and horrible, amorphous and tenuous. It was like wrestling an octopus and a gorilla at the same time. The thing seemed to be concentrating its power in a vicelike grip around Stearman's gun hand. He in turn was exerting every ounce of his colossal strength, trying to bring the gun to bear on the foul body. But he was a little dubious about letting off another shot at random. In the course of the struggle he had moved around several times, and he was not sure where La Noire was. He dared not risk pulling the trigger while he was still in a vertical position. If he could have flung his enormous assailant to the floor, and been assured that the shot was going downwards, he would have fired enthusiastically.

He was aware of footsteps, hurrying, scurrying footsteps. It sounded as though, supercharged by the ethereal power of their dark, sinister masters, Simmel and his sister were making good their escape.

Val felt the puppet of Josephine Starr being torn from his left hand. He muttered a stifled oath and attacked his assailant with renewed ferocity. La Noire, meanwhile, had not been idle. Producing a beautifully engraved Renaissance silver cross from a chain of the same precious metal, which hung around her graceful neck, she advanced towards the sounds of the struggle that told her Val was fighting for his life against the great black thing.

There was a sound of bestial, inhuman fury as La Noire's silver cross made contact with the monstrous entity that was locked in a grotesque grapple with Val Stearman. The thing seemed to shrink and the darkness lifted as La Noire continued to thrust her silver cross towards the dark enemy who had materialised to assist the escape

of the Simnels. The black shadows had cut out all the light in the room as far as Val and La Noire were concerned, but the illumination was adequate outside the immediate area of the shadows to enable Francis and his sister to make their escape. Obeying the promptings of his dark masters, and charged with a demonic strength that was not his by right, old Francis had snatched the Snow White puppet out of Stearman's hand. Agnes picked up the case containing the seven dwarfs and the wicked queen, in the likeness of Lady Sullybridge. Then the Simnels scrambled past the dark area, in the centre of which Stearman and the weird thing fought a life and death struggle. La Noire worked her way round behind Val so that she was holding the silver cross in front of them both, yet at the same time showing him where she was, so that he would be able to use the gun. The shrinkage which the application of the silver cross had effected in the dark entity had enabled Stearman to twist his gun hand round into a firing position, and now that his hyper-keen senses and his quick reactions told him that his precious La Noire was safe behind him, he lost no time in loosing off a couple of devastating shots into the shrinking bulk of his opponent. There was another horrific ululation from the ghastly thing which Stearman had been fighting, then the darkness cleared with a suddenness that made him blink. Francis Simnel's workroom was empty except for Val and La Noire.

Agnes and Francis headed for their garage, clutching the strange puppets which had cost such a tremendous psychic price to produce. Prompted by their shadowy dark masters, they drove towards Chambers' chapel of rest. It was a few minutes before noon when they arrived. The black shadows moved almost imperceptibly into the funeral chapel. Agnes and her brother opened the door of the undertaking parlour and stood a little dubiously at the reception counter.

Mr. Chambers himself, cadaverous, lugubrious and funereal as ever, appeared behind the counter, looking like a sad, sallow, Dickensian ghost. If he had only been dressed differently, thought Agnes, he would have looked very decorative on the battlements of Elsinore!

"And how may I be of service to you?" intoned Mr. Chambers. Agnes, imbued with the power of the Dark Shadows, stared full into the undertaker's eyes.

"The girl's body," she whispered. "I wish for it. I want it now. *Now*, do you understand?"

Agnes was giving her orders in harmony with the commands she was receiving from the dark shadows. She had no idea what her black masters wanted her and Francis to do. She only knew that the intervention and interference of Val and La Noire Stearman had made it necessary for the evil entities whom she and Francis served to amend their plans completely. The undertaker looked even more sallow and cadaverous as his mind retreated before Agnes' satanically inspired hypnotic onslaught.

Without a word, he moved into his chapel of rest and pointed to an open coffin where the body of Josephine Starr lay motionless and, to all intents and purposes, lifeless.

"Help us," said Agnes.

Rigor mortis would have passed if Josephine Starr had been genuinely dead, but the mesmerised undertaker was in no condition to notice details. In her cataleptic trance Josephine was flexible enough for the Simnels—assisted by the undertaker—to get her into the car. The black powers saw to it that no one was on the street during the few vital minutes that it took to transfer the body from the chapel of rest to the back seat of the Simnel's automobile. Francis clambered in behind the wheel and, with their silent passenger helpless behind them, he and Agnes drove swiftly away from the mortician's premises.

"Where are we going?" asked Agnes suddenly.

"I don't know," replied Francis. An anguine black shadow slithered snake-like on to the seat between them. It made deep mental contact with Francis as he drove. He took lefts and rights in obedience to the shadow's orders. The car left the town, heading south-east. A few miles down the main road they turned off on to a 'B' road, and a little way along this they turned off again on to a road that was so poorly surfaced that Francis wondered whether it was categorised at all on the map. The scenery seemed vaguely familiar to the old puppeteer, and when they crossed a Seventeenth Century stone bridge, across a broad deep river, he knew where he was going, although it was a long time since he had been that way. He took only one wrong turn and found the road blocked by a deep ford. There was a fisherman near by.

"Black River Mill!" he whispered to Agnes, in a voice rich with fear.

"Black River Mill," echoed his unwholesome sister. "Surely that's——" She left the sentence unfinished, but Francis finished it for her.

"The Jurgan's place," he said grimly.

"Is he still here?" asked Agnes.

"Difficult to say," answered Francis. He thought for a moment about the promptings of their dark masters, the strange black shadows, and an idea leapt into his mind.

"Perhaps he *also* serves our masters," quavered the old puppeteer. "They must have more than one servant in this district. They must have more than two. And the things that people used to say about Jurgans of Mill House!"

"They say he's an eccentric millionaire," said Agnes.

"Aye, but where does eccentricity end and Black Magic begin?" echoed Francis.

"If he's a fellow-servant of the dark masters, perhaps

we shall be safe here. Now that our original work has been spoilt, maybe they have some other purpose for the girl."

"They must have a reason for ordering us to bring her."

"Yes, they must."

The Simnels were on the right road again. They crossed the bridge again. It was obvious to Francis that the dark shadow acting as pilot was directing him to drive towards the mill. He stopped at the gate, for on the three sides that were not bordered by the river, the mill grounds were protected by a high brick wall surmounted by tall spikes. They looked wicked and dangerous as they glinted in the midday sun. The old puppet master sounded the horn, and from a small lodge house by the side of the gate a ghastly hunchback emerged. He was a foul, vicious-looking creature, like a cross between Caliban and Quasimodo. The blemished eyes with which he regarded them were so vile and so vicious that old Simnel took a pace or two back in sheer fright. Agnes, however, glared back ferociously at the hunchback.

"What do you want?" His voice was as distorted as his twisted body.

"We want to see Jurgans," said Agnes boldly, prompted by the dark shadow, invisible almost on the seat beside them.

"He doesn't see many people," said the hunchback. "What is your business?"

"We serve the same shadows as he serves, and we need help," replied Agnes. The words had not really seemed to be hers, they seemed to come from some external source.

"Very well, but drive carefully and slowly, and do not stop or get out of your car for any reason."

The hunchback's words seemed to hold a note of warning. The hunchback regarded the motionless figure in the

back seat, and his eyes lit up, as though he understood the purpose of their bringing her there.

Agnes and Francis drove up to the front door of the mill house. Evidently the hunchback at the lodge was in communication with the house itself, because the door opened. . . .

## CHAPTER XV

### *Place of Fear*

VAL and La Noire hurried from Simnel's house and drove rapidly back to the police station. The sergeant to whom Val had spoken previously was just going off duty, but he stopped as Val began asking pertinent questions.

"Just been over to see the puppet man," said Val.

The sergeant nodded. He could tell by Val's rugged, purposeful face that something was *on*. The sergeant was a good judge of men, a good enough judge to know that a man of Stearman's character and maturity would not be likely to waste his time with wild stories, or be likely to over-exaggerate a minor incident to an important fact.

"There was something very unpleasant there," said Val.

"In what way, sir?" asked the sergeant. His face creased into a thoughtful frown.

"It's difficult to say but, broadly speaking, *black magic* of the worst kind. Not a few harmless, innocuous cranks

dancing round an empty churchyard at midnight and deluding themselves into thinking that they are getting a kick out of it. Not a few perverts peeling off their clothes and daubing themselves with foul-smelling ointment for a little bit of erotic flagellation. *This is the real thing!*"

The sergeant's eyes narrowed. "You mean like those ritual murders that crop up from time to time, sir? We've never had anything like it in this part of the country before."

"You mean that you've never *discovered* one before, sergeant. Believe me, black magic is like a dirty, dark thread running through the whole fabric of human society. It's covered by the business that we call everyday life. but even though it lives in holes and corners, it's none the less real, and its influence is felt. I've spent years investigating it. Now, you're obviously a practical man of the world, solid, reliable, a hard-headed police officer. You find it difficult to accept the kind of thing I am asking you to accept now. But believe me, the supernatural has a territory; just like Sullybridge and the villages round about, and the neighbouring towns, are your territory. I've been investigating it for as long as you've been in this area, I should think maybe even longer. It's no illusion, it's no idle product of a feverish imagination."

"What is it you'd like me to do, sir?" asked the sergeant. Stearman's own sincerity and conviction were making their impact on the police officer.

"I want you to give me some ideas," said Val. "Have you got a map of the area?"

The sergeant crossed the charge room to where a large scale Ordnance Survey map hung on the wall.

"Fine," said Stearman. "Now, Simnel and his rather unpleasant sister just escaped from their house. They took with them a nasty little box of puppets that appeared singularly unusual as far as I'm concerned. It's my guess

they've gone to some other black magician in the area. Is there anybody who has that kind of reputation.

The sergeant shook his head.

"Come on," urged Stearman, "you're a local man. Any kind of whisper, or rumour, at all?"

"I can't think of anything at the moment," answered the sergeant.

"Are there any big old halls, or houses where there's a notorious eccentric?" demanded Val. "Eccentricity is very often a cover for this kind of thing."

"Please try very hard to think," said La Noire. "Any piece of chance information, no matter how unimportant it may seem to you, could be the vital clue."

The telephone rang suddenly, sharply, shrilly, jarringly. The sergeant jumped, then gave a half-apologetic smile.

"My nerves are on edge," he said, "It must be all this talk of black magic!" He picked up the phone and as he listened he cast an interested look in Stearman's direction. He put the phone down and drew a deep breath.

"The plot thickens," he said grimly. "That was Chambers, the undertaker. The girl's body has been taken!"

"How?" demanded Val. "He was told to guard it!"

"He says he thinks he was hypnotised—a man and a woman——"

"The Simnels!" exclaimed La Noire.

"Sounds like it," agreed the sergeant. "What do we do now?" he went on.

"We think as hard as we possibly can about this place," said Stearman. "It's now absolutely imperative, utterly essential that we guess right and that we guess fast."

"It's a bit of a tall order, you know, sir." Then suddenly it seemed that the powers of light prompted the police officer, or perhaps it was just that his memory started to function. Perhaps it was rather more than that. He snapped his fingers as a thought flashed up into his mind, like a card being thrown out of a filing system.

"Got it!"

"You've thought of somewhere?" Val's interrogation was full of excitement.

"I have thought of somewhere!"

"Where?" demanded Stearman.

"It's several miles away and it may be a complete wild goose chase," answered the sergeant. "On the other hand, it may be just what we're looking for."

"For goodness' sake, man, where?" urged Val.

The sergeant pointed to the map. "Down here."

Val saw the thin blue line of a river cross the point the sergeant was indicating. "What is it?" he asked.

The sergeant's stubby, powerful finger rested on a spot adjoining the river. It was a dark, rectangular spot.

"A mill!" said Stearman.

"Aye, that's right, a mill," agreed the sergeant.

"What sort of mill?" asked La Noire.

"A water mill, naturally enough," answered the policeman, "but a very old one. Black River Mill it's called. Belongs to a fellow named Jurgans, been there for years. He's reputed to be a millionaire, and he's also reputed to be as mad as a hatter."

"It could be the place," said Val.

"Mind you, we haven't got anything on Jurgans, but he's a man who keeps himself very much to himself. I understand the local people won't go near the place. There's a high wall, you know. The servants are all strangers to these parts. The whole Jurgans' entourage moved in together as far as I know."

"This begins to wind things up," said Stearman. "It could be the kind of place we want. Anyway, it's well worth a try, and if we are on a wild goose chase, and something else turns up, you'll know where to find us, won't you, sergeant?"

"Aye, I'll know where to look."



Val and La Noire left the police station, piled into their powerful sports saloon, and drove off in the direction of Black River Mill. They passed a stationer's on their way out of town. Val stopped and dashed inside for an Ordnance Survey map of the district. He had a good memory for places, and a good sense of direction, but the mill had not looked easy to reach on the map which he had seen in the police office. Even with the map, Stearman lost his way two or three times in the maze of narrow, twisting by-roads, and his impatience was reaching danger point. It was infuriating to have a car which could have covered the distance in minutes and to be held up by neolithic road conditions and an absence of an intimate personal knowledge of the district.

\* \* \*

As the door swung open in front of them, Agnes and Francis Simmel climbed out of their car and stood hesitantly peering into the hall of Black River Mill.

She and Francis took hold of the motionless Josephine Starr and half-dragged, half-carried the apparently lifeless nurse through the door which had opened in such a sinister yet inviting fashion. They set the girl down near the hall table and moved on a little further into the weird interior of Black River Mill itself. The whole house seemed to vibrate gently to the turn of the wheel, and from somewhere far below them came the sinister sound of deep water turning ancient wooden blades.

A figure appeared at the top of the huge oaken stairway. It was a short, squat, toad-like figure. The features were simian. The eyes were dark and compelling. The brows were craggy and protuberant, the teeth uneven yellow fangs. It wore a black velvet robe, like a stage magician. The robe was emblazoned with various signs of the Zodiac, and other magical abracadabra. Agnes noticed that black shadows, dark, sinister things, loaded with evil,

were making their way down the stairs behind the strange figure. As though by magic, or as though they were in some kind of telepathic communication with the weirdly robed Jurgans, two vast men, more ape-like than human, moved out of the shadows at the foot of the stairs and formed up, one on either side of him, as he advanced to meet Agnes and Francis. The voice that emerged from the squat man's throat was horribly akin to the scratching of fingers on a blackboard, or the scraping of a knife against a plate. It was the kind of voice that had the power to set your teeth on edge. It was shrill, hideous. Agnes and Francis winced a little at the sound of it.

"You have brought the girl?" said the voice. It was part statement, part question.

"We have brought the girl, Mr. Jurgans," said Agnes Simmel. One of the muscular brutes who accompanied the black-robed Jurgans stepped forward and flung Agnes Simmel brutally to the ground.

"You call him 'master'," said the brute. Its general intonation and verbal inflection were basically neanderthal. The strange Jurgans smiled approvingly at his pithecanthropic pet. He put a hand on its simian forehead. The ape man grunted and gurgled low in its throat like a dog that basks in its master's approval. Francis Simmel felt nauseated at the sight. A wave of black, bitter disappointment swept over him. He thought of the visions that he had been shown, visions of erotic pleasure, visions of power and opulence, visions of voluptuous delight, none of which now had the remotest likelihood of being fulfilled.

"I've been cheated!" he croaked. "The black powers have cheated me!"

"The black powers have not cheated you, fool!" Jurgans snapped. "The black powers promised you certain rewards if you were successful. They gave you powers which you have used moderately well but which you have

not used well enough. They said that opportunities would come, but that they had to be *grasped*."

"The man, master," said Francis, whimpering. "We were doing all right till the man came. . . ."

"I know; the black powers have been in touch with me. The black masters have kept me informed," replied Jurgans. He made a flourish with his robe and the black shadows behind him seemed to dance as he made the flourish. "The plans have been completely revised. The girl will still be used. She will be sacrificed!"

"Sacrificed, master?" Agnes looked up from the floor. She was bruised and shaken, and she knew when she was beaten. She knew that her one hope of survival was to grovel in co-operation with this man Jurgans.

"We have left the puppets in the car," said old Simnel suddenly.

"They may be useful later. Go and bring them," ordered Jurgans. "Then bring the girl down to the cellar. My men will show you where to put her. Revive her, for you alone have that power, and then you will begin preparing for the sacrifice. It is a great ceremony that we are to perform. One which is marked only yearly, even by great masters of the dark arts, like myself. If the ceremony pleases our masters, they will let you live, and you shall join our establishment here. Maybe the time will come when we shall be able to use those puppets, in which you have imprisoned the souls of your victims."

Agnes looked surprised.

"You wonder that I know so much?" laughed Jurgans. "You are as children in the black powers compared to me. I am a master, nay, a past-master. I am close to the dark hierarchy itself. But you shall learn more of this in due time—in due time," he repeated as though he liked the phrase.

With the help of one of Jurgans' enormous bodyguards,

Francis Simnel and Agnes took the apparently lifeless form of Josephine Starr down to a low-ceilinged cellar, deep, thick-walled and soundproof, below the old mill house. The waters of Black River could be heard pounding . . . *pounding*. Agnes and her brother looked a little apprehensively at the damp that seeped through the old stone walls. There were strange, hideous objects, some rusted with age, fastened around that cellar. Not *all* had rusted and fallen into disuse, however, and some appeared to have been operated *quite recently*.

Francis shuddered a little as he realised that in days gone by this terrible room must have been one of the most fiendish and ingeniously equipped torture chambers in the country. The simian guard who had assisted them down to the cellar was looking around and laughing. He pointed to a place on the wall where chains were rivetted to enormous iron staples.

"Fasten girl there," said the monster.

Agnes and Francis obeyed.

"Now wake her," growled the simian bodyguard.

Agnes could feel black shadows moving in her mind. She could feel their power flying along her fingers. She made a number of mesmeric gestures in front of Josephine Starr's motionless face. The girl gave a little shudder, drew a deep, sudden breath, and opened her eyes. She blinked in the dim light of the hideous cellar.

"Where am I? What has happened?" she asked.

Agnes, miserable at the ruin of her own plans, felt that at last she had a victim on whom she could vent some of her spleen.

"You're our prisoner, my dear," she croaked, and as the black powers filled her, as her own bitter, vicious anger welled up within her, she reassumed the crooked, bent, hag-like shape which had been hers on the nights when she had crept into graveyards to waken her victims

for brief, suffocating moments, so that the fiendish puppets could absorb their dying emotions and their very souls.

"This is a torture chamber," hissed Agnes. She made a sweeping gesture, indicating the foul instruments that hung in silent anticipation around the damp walls. "You may soon find that out!" threatened the hag.

Josephine gasped and shuddered as she looked around at her terrible environment.

"But that is not all," threatened Agnes again. Her eyes blazed with an evil light. Her talons raked the air in front of Josephine's face, causing the girl to draw back sharply. "You are to be sacrificed to the dark powers!"

"You're mad!" gasped the young nurse. "You're stark, raving mad!"

"Mad or not, you're in my power," cackled the old hag.

"You're in our power," muttered Francis, "and soon you shall know what that means."

"It will not be long before you're sacrificed," croaked Agnes.

"It will not be quick or easy," laughed the great simian bodyguard who had accompanied the Simnels to the hideous cellar. "Now we leave you alone to think." The ape man laughed deep in his throat. It was a guttural, growling sound. Agnes, Francis and the bodyguard left Josephine tugging bravely but futilely at the chains securing her to the wall of that hideous underground room.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *The Final Reckoning*

VAL'S powerful sports saloon screeched to a halt as the narrow track along which he had been driving ended suddenly at a broad expanse of water.

"What the hell!" he exploded angrily, and leapt out, slamming the door with unnecessary violence behind him. He went to survey the water.

"It's supposed to be a ford," said La Noire.

"It may be a ford for a 'duck'," yelled back Val, "but if we attempt it in this it will come way up over the distributor." The water licked at him mockingly.

"Then we shall have to go back," said La Noire.

"Brilliant logic!" snorted Val, but by now the worst of his angry outburst was over and he was grinning broadly in mock indignation. A man sat fishing a few yards upstream. He was frowning angrily in Stearman's direction. Ignoring the unwelcoming expression on the man's face, Stearman roared: "You haven't seen another car this way recently, have you?"

"Matter of fact, I have," returned the fisherman.

"Did you see who was in it?" bellowed Stearman.

"An elderly man and an elderly woman, I think," said the fisherman. "This place is usually peaceful," he concluded testily.

"This car," said Stearman, "which way did it go?"

"They did what you've just done, came down to the ford and then turned. You trying to get to Black River Mill?"

"Yes, I am," agreed Val.

"Then turn round, take the first right, the road runs along parallel with the river for a mile or two, then as it moves a little way from it, you need to take the next right and that'll bring you right up over the old bridge. You a friend of Mr. Jurgans, then?"

The man sounded hostile and suspicious.

"No, I'm *not*," said Stearman.

The fisherman sounded less hostile. "Good," he said grimly. "Queer chap, Jurgans! You be careful if you're going visiting there, young fella."

It was a long time since anyone had called Val 'young fella', and he smiled. It seemed vaguely complimentary.

"Is there a phone box anywhere near here?" he called.

"I pass one on the way back to my village. Why?"

Val walked over to the man and gave him a couple of silver coins. "I'd like you to call the police and ask for the sergeant who spoke to Mr. Stearman this morning."

"Mr. Stearman, you say?"

"That's right," said Val. "Tell him that I've gone to the mill, and if I'm not back by six o'clock, I'd appreciate it if he'd come looking for me with a search warrant."

The fisherman looked at Val curiously.

"I've just thought of something," said Val. "He's probably off duty and I don't know his name. If you can't get him, just get anybody you can, and tell them what I told you. We'll hope for the best."

"I'll do what I can," said the fisherman. "I haven't had much luck today, anyway, what with *disturbances*," he frowned again. "I think river's a bit high for them, not biting well at all. I might as well get on to the phone now."

"I'd be grateful if you would," said Val.

The fisherman climbed on to an ancient upright bicycle loaded up with gear, but Val didn't wait to see him pedal

away. He was already reversing his enormous sports saloon and heading back in the direction which the piscatorial expert had indicated.

Val took the first right and saw, just as the fisherman had said, that the road ran parallel with the river for some considerable way. They drove in anxious silence, pushing the powerful car as fast as road conditions would permit. Val was, in fact, going so fast that he very nearly missed the right turn for which he had been looking. He did just manage to brake in time and swing the big car in the direction of the mill. He could see it already in the distance and hear the sound of the water over its great wheel. There was something sinister and forbidding about it, something that made his pulses tingle. His nostrils sniffed keenly at the air, like the nostrils of a great cavalry horse that scents the battle and longs to join it.

The vast gates were closed, the wall was tall, and its top was spiked. Val pulled up a few feet from the gate, leapt out and dragged savagely on a wrought-iron handle. The hunchback appeared.

"I'm a friend of Mr. Jurgans, it's very urgent," said Val.

"I don't know you," said the hunchback, he leered up at Stearman.

"You will," said Stearman, "if you don't open these blasted gates!"

"What's the pass word, then?" intoned the hunchback thickly.

"Abracadabra and stewed rhubarb, as far as I'm concerned," snapped Val angrily.

The hunchback shook his misshapen head. "You're not one of us!"

"No, I'm not, thank God!" snapped Stearman. He had decided that subterfuge was not going to get him anywhere, a frontal attack was what was needed. He eyed the gates carefully. They were heavy, three or four hundred-

weight apiece, if not more, and they rested on two thick iron sockets. The weight of the gates was all that held them in position, and thoughts began to go swiftly through Val Stearman's mind. Somebody had lifted off the gates of a Philistine city, and what Samson had done might well be within the prowess of Val Stearman!

"Are you going to open these gates, or do I bust 'em open?" he demanded of the hunchback.

"You won't shake those gates," said the blemished caricature of a human being. He spat derogatively on the ground near Stearman's feet and then loped back to his lodge gate. If there was one insult that Stearman would not take, it was being ignored. A surge of anger swept through his vast physique and, with a running bound, he seized the gates close to their hinge-sockets and heaved. It took all of his colossal strength to overcome the inertia and stiffness of the ancient sockets. As his massive muscles and sinews began to crack with exertion, there was a sudden upward movement and the gate came clean off its hinges. Val flung it forward four or five feet; as it scraped the ground, the other socket twisted and jammed. Val decided not to waste time forcing it further so he could drive the car through it. It might be a good idea to leave the car where it was in case they needed a quick escape. Beckoning to La Noire, and with his hand near the jacket pocket where the Browning .45 nestled, he began running down the drive. The hunchback gangled out of its lodge gate as La Noire came through the gap.

"Stop!" said the hunchback throatily, and reached for her with a long, claw-like hand. La Noire caught the arm skilfully, ducked under it, twisted and jerked hard.

The hunchback somersaulted through the air and landed with a bone-jarring thud on its deformed spine. It lay for a minute like a great, grotesque beetle, with its legs waving in the air, then La Noire was running swiftly behind Val down the drive towards Black River Mill.

Stearman rounded a bend in the drive and suddenly his foot caught in a wire or nylon noose. He wasn't sure which and he was in no position to take an academic interest in it, for the noose jerked tight and snarled suddenly into the air. With a cry of surprise, Stearman found himself hanging upside down with his head four or five feet above the gravel drive. He reached up strenuously in an effort to grab the noose but, muscular and athletic though he was, he couldn't quite reach it. He was swearing volubly by the time La Noire reached the spot. He looked for all the world like a shark which had been caught on a fisherman's line, to the dismay of both the fish and the fisherman. The noose appeared to be fastened to a very powerful spring mechanism in the branches of the tree. La Noire paused, grinned unashamedly for a moment, and then began to climb. She leant over the branch and caught Val's hand as he jerked himself towards the noose once more. La Noire was strong and lithe, but it took all her strength and agility to retain her hold on the tree and at the same time pull Val up into a position from which he could free his feet.

It took only a matter of seconds for the big journalist adventurer to tear the noose away from his ankles and drop lightly to the ground. After that he *walked* down the drive. They were about thirty yards from the house when the door opened and two gargantuan, pithecanthropic-looking gentlemen came forward to meet them. Stearman's hand dived into his jacket pocket, and in that instant he realised that he had made a serious mistake. When the booby trap had snatched him off the ground, the big Browning automatic must have fallen from his pocket, and in the flurry to get free neither he nor La Noire had noticed it! He withdrew the hand from his pocket again and stood looking at the two neanderthal specimens.

They looked to Val as though they might be the kind of

men who could have been constructed around the spurious Piltown Skull.

They split up as they came closer and suddenly rushed at Val from each side. He ducked and dived to his right, catching the nearer of the two ape men in a souplex and hurling him over his back, so that he crashed on to the other. The two submen staggered and jerked together in a breathless tangle, and then Val dived in. His hand came down like the edge of a leather axe against the side of the nearer man's head. It was a blow that would have laid most opponents out for a week. The ape man grunted, staggered to his knees and lay rolling on the drive with his legs in the air. The second one came at Stearman like a bullock, its head lowered, its fists working like piston rods. Val let it come, sidestepped and smashed home a steel-hard knee into the creature's face. The ape man doubled up, but the first one had now recovered himself. Grabbing the branch of an overhanging tree, Val swung into the air in a supported drop kick and landed both his enormous feet in the geometric centre of the ape man's chest. The neanderthal humanoid went down with a coughing thud and lay gasping and winded for several seconds.

Number Two now came back into the fray, blood pouring from its face and murder shining from his eyes. Val seized his shaggy, matted hair with his left hand, jerked its head back and stabbed for the throat with the fingers of his right hand held in a stiff, murderous *karati* position. The thing went down and stayed down. The first one was on its feet once more, circling him warily. It stooped and, with a low, animal cunning of which Stearman had not really thought it capable, it snatched a handful of loose gravel and hurled it in the big journalist-adventurer's face. As he wiped stones and soil from his eyes, the thing ploughed in and managed to get a bear hug round his waist. Stearman had abdominal muscles like corrugated

steel and, drawing a deep breath, he withstood the pressure of those colossal, pithecanthropic arms. The face was buried in his shoulder so that he couldn't reach it. But he got both hands into the ape man's matted, tangled hair and pulled back. As he bent the neck backwards, he wriggled a little lower in the bear hug so that he was in a position to deliver a head butt. There were not many fighting men who would have felt like hazarding a head butt at a thing so obviously ape-like as this sub-man whom Stearman now fought. But Val, with a sharp, jerking movement, crashed his head like a cannon ball into the visage of the bear-hugging subman. The grip broke for a second, and although Val himself felt a little dazed at the impact of the head butt which he had delivered, his right came up like a rocket. It made contact with the point of the ape-man's jaw and Stearman's pithecanthropic attacker sank to the ground. Within a second, however, it was on its knees and this time as it staggered up, Stearman came in with a knee smash and a karati chop that had the speed of a swooping hawk and the cutting edge of a steam guillotine. The ape-man went down and stayed down.

Val moved on towards the mill house itself. The front door was closed but Stearman, now that his fighting blood was aroused, was not the kind of man to be stopped by a wooden door. Sixteen stone of muscle and bone smashed into the wood, and although the door was stout and strong, it went down like paper before Stearman's offensive. He staggered through into the hall beyond, with La Noire close on his heels. Jurgans appeared suddenly at the head of the stairs.

The black shadows behind him fanned out like vapour trails. Val reached instinctively to the empty pocket and then cursed the ill fortune that had allowed him to overlook the loss of the gun. La Noire reached for the silver crass at the end of its chain and then her beautiful face

clouded with anxiety. That too had gone! She had either lost it in the climb to rescue Val from the booby trap, or during her brief scuffle with the hideous hunchback at the lodge gate. The Stearmans began backing towards the door. The shadows that fanned out behind the mad Jurgans like a smoke trail grew in volume and expanded until they seemed to fill the room.

Black shadows thick and menacing got between the Stearmans and the door. Val held his breath. He wondered whether the fisherman had got through to the police. He wondered if they had believed him if he had got through, if they would be able to act on that tiny shred of information. There were too many ifs. The black shadows touched him like cold, clammy, dead fish. The tactile sensation of them was hideous. Val felt his colossal strength ebbing from him like a shorn Samson in the presence of Delilah. The room was swimming around him. He sank to his knees. He was aware of the presence of other *evil* people. With a superhuman effort he staggered to his feet again, like some smitten Titan. He made a fumbling grab for Jurgans but the mad magician stepped aside, and Stearman's hand brushed against the taffeta of the sinister Agnes Simnel. She was carrying a puppet by the feel of it. Stearman's great hand closed over the little wooden figurine and tore it from the old woman's grasp. Why, exactly, he didn't know, but perhaps the invisible powers of light were giving him direct inspiration at that point. With the last of his strength he staggered across the room to where a magician's brazier burned fitfully, its obnoxious smoke spiralling haphazardly towards the roof. Val thrust the puppet deep into the glowing coal with his leathery hand; then he leapt back as a sheet of blue-green flame exploded upwards from the brazier.

There were cries of consternation from Jurgans and the Simnells, then, as though from miles away, echoing and

hollow, Stearman heard a female voice cry, "Free! Revenge!" Blackness overwhelmed him and he collapsed inert.

When he opened his eyes he found himself chained to the wall of a long, low-ceilinged, damp room. La Noire was fastened on his left and, to his amazement, very much alive and struggling. Josephine Starr was stapled to the wall on his right.

"Jo!" he gasped. "We'd practically given you up for dead!"

"Dead?" asked Jo. "I don't understand!"

Briefly, the nurse and the Stearman's filled in for one another the episodes in the macabre adventure which they did not know. As the pieces fell into place, the whole pattern took shape in Stearman's mind.

"The great question now," said Val grimly, "is how to get out of this place." Mentally he was calling himself every kind of fool for dropping that gun."

"How long do you think we've been here, Jo?" he said.

"It seems hours since they brought you and La Noire in, and I seemed to be here a long time before that."

"They must be waiting for dark," commented Val. "Perhaps they're even waiting for *midnight*."

Val kept thinking about the puppet he had thrown into the fire. He knew that in some way he had been led to do that, but he couldn't quite see the purpose of it.

"There is a destiny that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will," he quoted, half to himself.

"What was that?" asked La Noire.

He explained to them about the puppet.

"Which one was it?" asked Jo.

"I don't know, but I think it was wearing a *dress* of some kind," answered Val.

Jo creased her brows into a puzzled little frown.

"There was one I saw in their workshop that looked just like Lady Sullybridge, who died recently."

"Oh," said Val, not very much enlightened.

"She was a haughty aristocrat of the old school," said Jo, "and yet a woman with incredible strength of character, even though it was difficult to agree with her."

Val was wondering whether the destruction of the puppet would permit the unlocking of some psychic door, but the chance was so remote, and he understood so little of the etheric mechanics that were involved that he dismissed the thought from his mind. Stearman was a realist. They continued talking for some time and then the black shadows moving around the cellar walls swirled excitedly towards the door. Footsteps sounded, Jurgans and the Simnells arrived.

"His bodyguards aren't there," said Josephine. "There was a horrible man like an ape, down in the cellar with the Simnells," she added.

"If he's the one I met a little while ago," said Val, "he's either dead or in no condition to fight for months."

The black shapes closed around them again and Val felt his strength ebbing. The hunchback, who had apparently recovered from the throw La Noire had given him, joined the party in the cellar and, despite Stearman's treatment of the black magician's two murderous minions, Jurgans apparently had others for two or three more bestial-looking sub-men filtered into the cellar to assist in the ceremony.

"First things first," said Jurgans, as though he were reciting some kind of magic ritual. Two of the creatures dragged Josephine Starr towards an altar at the far end of the chamber. Stearman, surrounded by the black shadows, was as helpless as Gulliver pinned to the beach by the Lilliputians. He could do nothing but wait and pray for a miracle, which probably wouldn't happen.

The ape men stretched the girl out on the altar and held her fast while Jurgans walked around the room to select

one of the hideous instruments. Stearman succeeded in moving a little, then collapsed on his face as helpless as a baby. Jurgans looked at him and laughed.

"The dark masters are too much for you even with your animal strength," he said disdainfully. La Noire, too, was utterly helpless in the black, enervating grip of the evil dark things. There was a footstep outside the cellar door. Police? wondered Val. Had that fisherman finally got through with a message? Or was it something else? He thought of a something else—a *puppet*. The puppet of Lady Sullybridge.

Jurgans paused in his search of the walls and his eyes darted uncertainly towards the door. It opened with a strangely imperious creak and there, framed in the aperture, was a jerking ungainly figure. It was the figure of an old woman dressed in a silken shroud. The face was haughty and aristocratic, but it was a dead face. The thing moved purposefully towards Stearman who, although unchained, still remained completely helpless in the grip of the black, swirling shadows. An incredible psychic duel was now being fought. The proud, weird, indescribable, female zombie staggered across the cellar as the black shadows swarmed all around her like angry bees clustered around a disturbed honeycomb. It seemed that their evil power must make the faltering zombie halt, but it seemed also that such was the purposive depth of vengeance in the dead Lady Sullybridge that *nothing* could stop her.

With the proud composure of the doomed Jezebel faced with the wrath of Jehu, the old woman's corpse continued to stagger towards Stearman. Then he noticed that the zombie held something—two somethings—the silver cross which La Noire had dropped and the vital Browning automatic which had fallen from his own pocket when he had been caught in Jurgans' snare-trap. Stearman's own will reached its zenith and he took another faltering half-pace



## THE MACABRE ONES

through the enervating black shadows. His hand touched the outstretched fingers of the dead aristocrat. He grasped the silver cross and held it up. Power surged back into him as the black enervators shrank away in dread. Passing the cross to La Noire, Val checked the loading of the big Browning and then, with cold, ruthless, calculating accuracy, *he shot dead the two beast-men who held Jo on the altar.*

Jurgans was making frantic passes in the air when a third bullet took him between the eyes and hurled him back like an invisible giant hand. He was dead before his body hit the cellar floor.

The Simnels cowered away pathetically, looking as helpless as puppets with broken strings. The black shadows were dispersing to a pale grey ineffectiveness in the presence of the gun and the Sacred Symbol, which La Noire now held. The evil puppeteers were still grovelling pitifully a few moments later when the police arrived.

\* \* \*

Black River Mill seemed a cleaner, purer, more normal place as the Stearmans drove away, taking their cousin Jo for a well-deserved holiday in the Metropolis.

THE END