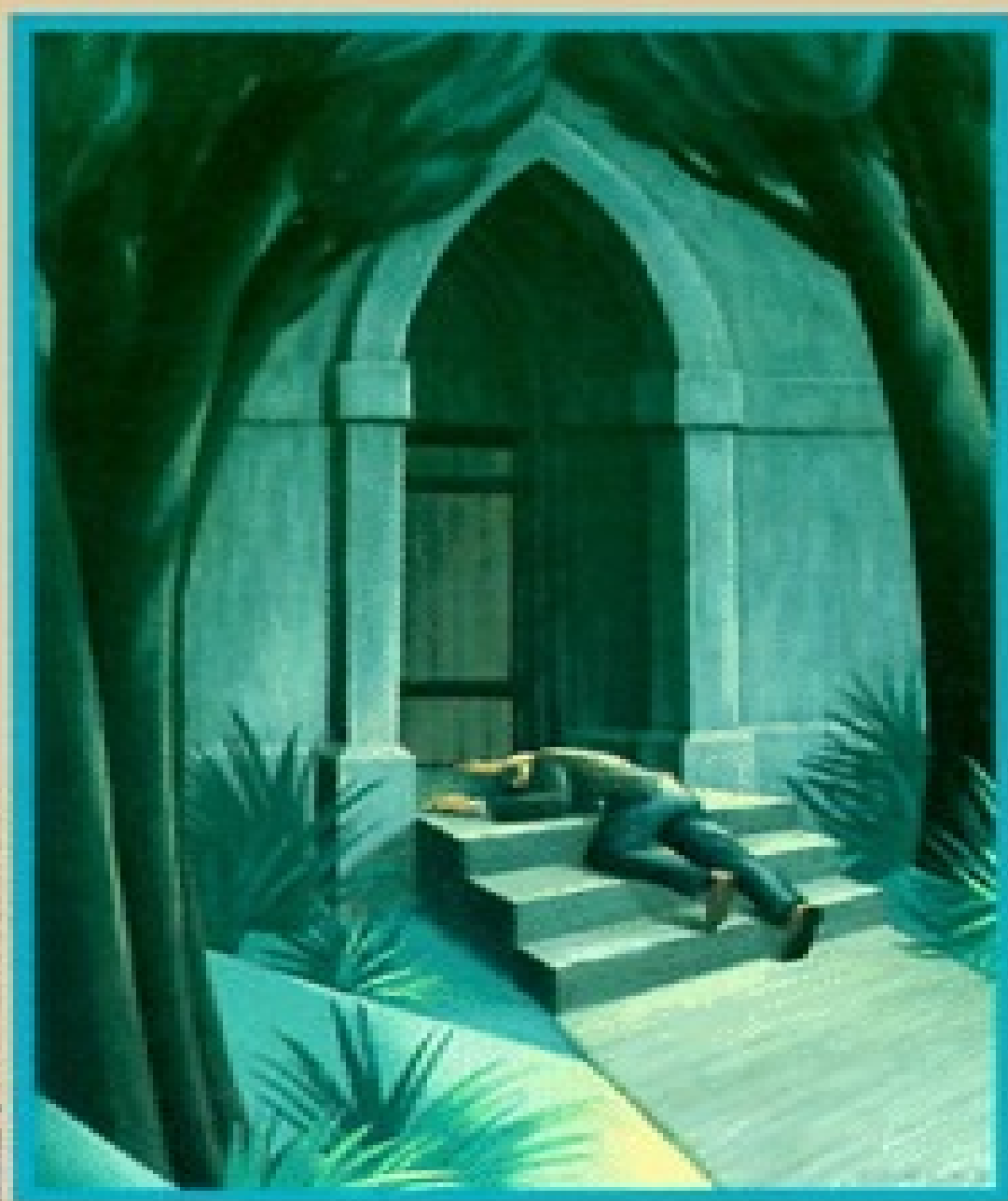


AUTHOR OF THE
BESTSELLING BROTHER CADFAEL MYSTERIES

ELLIS PIETTERS



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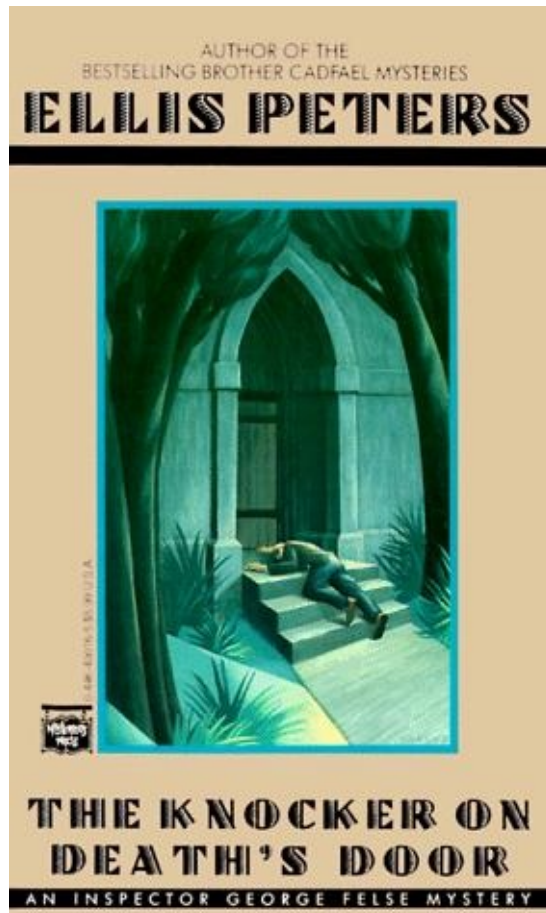
**THE KNOCKER ON
DEATH'S DOOR**

AN INSPECTOR GEORGE ELSE MYSTERY

The Knocker On Death's Door

Ellis Peters

Felse 10



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CHAPTER 1



THE door was of oak, roughly five feet wide by more than seven feet high, with a top in the form of a flattened late-Gothic arch. The timbers from which it had been made, with loving care, some five hundred or more years ago, were nearly six inches thick, and carved on the outer side into crucial vertical folds, and with the wear and tear of centuries, and the rigours of recent cleaning to remove the gloss of dirt from accumulated time and the touch of many hands, the colour of the wood had clarified into an exquisite matt brown fading away into pure grey, the colour of subdued light at the onset of evening after a clear day, and the grain to a veining of liquid silver, so that the carved folds were no longer related in any way to anything so solid as linen, but appeared rather as shot silk of a cobweb fineness. In certain lights the door seemed almost translucent, so that you might have tried to walk through it in the belief that it was mere mirage, and no more palpable than mist. Actually it weighed an unconscionable amount, and had elicited fervent curses from the modern workmen who had had the job of moving it. They were accustomed to the gimcrack soft-woods of today, and only one of them had so far forgotten himself as to stroke the silken meshes with a loving and wondering hand, and feel for a moment deprived and born out of time. He was an old man, of course, reared in the trade. The others thought it was simply a quarter of a ton of over-valued junk.

The crowning arch of the door had a carved border of leaves, undercut so deeply that they could almost have been plucked at will, though only by Titans. Beneath this canopy two elongated angelic hieratic and crude and modern now as Modigliani, though certainly years out of date when they were carved, spread large hands and rigid wings over the entering worshipper. Or, of course, butler depending on the period in question, but reverence was always equally implied.

For the door had hung for centuries on the massive hinges of the wine-cellar in the house known as the Abbey, in the village of Mottisham, in West Midshire. It was now being restored to its ancient place (hypothetically, at least, for the actual evidence was slim and ambiguous) in the south porch of the church of Saint Eata in the above-named village. A very rare dedication indeed, and territorial limits limited, and if there was a person in the parish who had any very clear idea of who St. Eata was, certainly was not the vicar, the Reverend Andrew Bright, who was thirty-one, and devoted to Rugby, God (or his extremely simple idea of God), rock-climbing, youth-clubs and his own advancement, that order. He was himself, however, solid, worthy and real, and knew a real, solid, worthy work of art when he saw one. He had jumped at the offer of the door, and ruthlessly adapted the nineteenth-century south porch, the latest of many renovations to St. Eata's long-suffering fabric, to accommodate it. With the effect achieved he was more than content. It was a very beautiful, though provoking and virtually permanent door. That it had other and more disquieting properties was not yet apparent.

As for the knocker, it was of antique iron, rust-proof practically for ever, of a lovely, crude texture that gave acute tactile pleasure to anyone handling it. The surface was not quite smooth, being very slightly pitted all over, so that it clung to the hand with a live, bracing contact. It was made in the form of a beast's head, wreathed in leaves that never grew on any tree, as the beast had never roamed

in any jungle but that of Apocalypse; and in the wide, generous, patently amiable jaws was proffered rather than gripped, a large, twisted ring of iron, thick enough to fill the palm.

Through this door the bishop emerged, radiant and serene, beautifully robed and crozier in hand, the conclusion of the service, with the Reverend Andrew and the living representatives of the Macsew Martel family at his heels, on his way to the vicarage for tea with muffins, scones and fruit cake suitable to an English Sunday. Traffic on the B road through the village was halted to allow his procession to make its way across the green with becoming dignity and deliberation, which took some time. The village itself looked on from a discreet distance, tolerantly unsmiling and unfrowning, missing not a trick. Comparatively few of the inhabitants had been among the congregation inside St Eata's. Mottisham was a reassuringly normal English village.

Motorists, impatient but resigned, sat back and waited for the magnificently aesthetic old man, less ingenuous than he appeared, to withdraw his train inside the confines of the vicarage grounds, a manoeuvre over which he took his time. Who knows when the arrested mind will open and the light dawn?

Detective Chief Inspector George Felse and his wife Bunty were on their way back from a weekend end by the Welsh coast; probably the last of the year, for it was mid-October and the best of the weather was already gone. They had left immediately after lunch, to avoid the normal concerted rush back to the Midlands, only to find that even more people than usual had been visited by the same idea. The trouble with mid-Wales is that the mountains render whole tracts of it impossible for major, or indeed any, roads, and confine the motorist to the few main arteries. The inevitable boring, irritating nose-to-tail procession home was something George detested, but for many miles could not escape. But towards the Midshire border he swung thankfully off to the right, and took the minor road that threaded the long cleft of Middlehope, between the hills. It was longer, and probably a few of the regular commuters to the Welsh coast had discovered its advantages by now, but even so it was a relief after the main road.

Through the few stark villages, with their half-Welsh, half-English names, they made better time and had something better to look at than the butt-end of the car in front. Road and river wound inextricably along the valley, crossing and re-crossing in an antique dance of their own. In some of those bridges there was Roman masonry. There was even a short stretch of Roman causeway still exposed at the approach to one of them, perhaps twelve yards of huge stones laid like crazy paving, none too smooth even now, after centuries of weathering. Those who knew the road slowed to a crawl and shambled over them with respect; the unwary from the cities hit them at speed, and banged their heads on their car roofs at the first bound. Strangers, hearing they were Roman, assumed they had been carefully preserved for archeological purposes. The truth was that in Middlehope things survived; no one preserved them. They had always been there, and were still serviceable, why move them?

Outside the narrow ribbon of level fields that fringed the road, this was sheep country, and the pastures rose steeply into rough slopes of grass and heather, broken at the crests by a few outcrops of rock. Gradually the red and white brick chapels of Wales gave place to the small, squat-towered stone churches of England. The bracken along the hills was already russet, the heather a brownish purple, as dark as to match the occasional patch of bare, peaty soil. Sheep minced along the contours with slow, delicate movements, heads down, as deliberately as though they possessed the whole of time, the elders still showing the shapeliness of their summer clipping, the yearlings fat rolls of wool. Life d

not change much in Middlehope. Why should it? The basic way of living here, in a hard but beautiful solitude, had been evolved long ago, and only minor adaptations had been made to them since.

Until they drew near to the village of Mottisham, that is. Along with several other similar attractive places scattered round the rim of a ten-mile circle surrounding the county town of Comerbourne, Mottisham was just beginning to feel the effect of the progressive withdrawal of the wealthier townspeople from their town. The latest ripple of the expanding ring had only just reached them; but there in the opening bowl were the first two new estates, one of council houses but the other more significantly, of that curious modern phenomenon, the “executive-type” dwelling. A few of the older houses at the edge of the village had also been taken over and done up by new and obvious well-to-do owners. And in the thin copse behind the churchyard half a dozen artfully deployed “desirable residences”—one step higher up the social scale—were just being built, so carefully arranged that no one should look into anyone else’s windows, or, indeed, see anyone else’s roof, and most of the trees should be retained in what would certainly be advertised as “picturesque wooded grounds.”

The road made a great loop all round the churchyard, shrinking between old buildings; and there stationed at the curve by “The Sitting Duck,” was a white-gloved police sergeant, waving all traffic to a standstill with a palm the size of a spade. George pulled in obediently to the side and stopped. Within seconds there were three more cars drawn up behind him.

“Now what’s going on?” he wondered aloud, and wound down the window to peer ahead. The sergeant, having secured the desired effect, rolled ponderously alongside and stooped to the obvious inquiry. The car was new, along with George’s recent promotion, and country members of the constabulary had as yet no reason to associate a pale grey VW 1500 with the deputy head of the County C.I.D.

“Shan’t be keeping you more than a few minutes, sir...”

He did a double take with admirable equanimity, and continued in the same tone and the same tempo: “Well, well, I see I caught a big one. How are you, George? And Mrs. Felse, ma’am... we haven’t seen you up this way for quite some time. How’s the boy?” Sergeant Moon was a very old acquaintance, and but for the remoteness of his chosen solitude, now apparently becoming rapidly less remote, he would have ranked as a close friend.

“Fine, thanks, Jack!” Dominic was away in France with his fiancée, as it happened, recovering, he said, from post-examination exhaustion and pre-life cold feet, and considering for the first time entirely seriously and for the first time with trepidation, what he was to do with himself and his career. “How about your own family? Well, I hope?”

Sergeant Moon acknowledged the inquiry gravely; his wife and daughter were well. “You don’t find us much to do up here, or you’d see more of us,” George said. At the time this was a strictly truthful statement, but somebody somewhere was certainly listening, and took malicious note.

“Ah, that’s right,” acknowledged Sergeant Moon, leaning a sharp blue elbow on the VW’s roof. “Crime, by and large, we don’t go in for. A bit of riotous behaviour now and again, that’s about it. Sinners now, sinners more in our line.” The distinction was clear, thoughtful and comforting. The sins of Middlehope were time-honoured, the contrivances of an enclosed community still governed by primitive feudal sanctions, and generally speaking the sinners were disciplined by their own society and did not totally shirk responsibility for their acts. The sergeant knew where the law ought to restrain its hand and leave older laws to function, with profounder humanity and sounder common sense. “Today,” he

said, “we should be whiter than snow. We’ve got company.”

“So I see,” said George. “What exactly is going on?”

“You haven’t been reading the ecclesiastical news and notes, have you? We’ve got the bishop, n less. Look out, here he comes!”

And here he came. The church, a square-towered conglomeration of seventeenth- and nineteenth-century renovations on the poor remnants of a very ancient foundation, lay on the left of the road, half-screened by old trees and ringed by its crowded graves. To the right, on the other side of the road was the nineteenth-century vicarage, three-coloured brick with dozens of gables and mock-Gothic windows, a pretentious and unmanageable mess. It had, however, a generous and well-stocked garden with plenty of fruit trees. Towards this green shade the bishop took his unhurried way. He was undoubtedly impressive. All the women watching from windows, doorways and pavement touched their hair and smoothed their dresses at the sight of him. The word that entered George’s head was “bridled.” The word that entered Bunty’s was “blossomed.” Six feet tall and something over, fragile and ascetic as a primitive saint (and every bit as durable), with a fleshless face honed into an incredible refinement of benevolence and beauty, and longish silvery hair framing it, the bishop paced slowly along the flagged path, his frilled sleeves falling back from emaciated hands, posed exquisitely in the frame of the lych-gate for half a dozen photographers who materialised surprisingly out of nowhere in particular, and flowed majestically across the road towards his promised vicarage tea.

“If you’re going to do a thing,” observed Sergeant Moon approvingly, “I like to see it done well. These hearty modern clerics don’t know they’re born.”

“But what’s he been up to?” George wanted to know.

“Re-dedicating our south door. Hadn’t you heard? It’s been hung somewhere in the cellars of the Abbey ever since the dissolution of the monasteries, and now they’ve been clearing up the old place with the hope that the National Trust will take it over, they wanted to put back the things that were pinched and get everything in order. Done a very nice restoration job on that door, so they tell me.”

The vicar, walking behind his bishop, was half a head shorter and about three times as wide, a burly young man with a round, ingenuous face and muscles befitting a wing three-quarter. A late shaft of sun bounced from his red hair like singed fingers recoiling from a burning bush.

“You’ve got the press on the run,” said George. “I never thought a door could bring in so many cameras!”

“It’s said to be something special, all right. The experts got the word, apparently. The thing’s never been on view before, you see. Nobody writes up the Abbey, not these days.”

“Nor the family?” said George curiously. “I take it that’s the squire following on?”

“Don’t mention that word here, George, we’re allergic to it. Even if they used it at all, it would be about old Thwaites who bought up the Court fifty years ago—and if they used it about *him* it would have inverted commas round it, and nasty implications. We’re tribal, not feudal. And even the old princes of Powis didn’t venture to show their faces here unless they were invited.”

“The lords of shop and bank are coming, by the look of your housing plans,” said Bunty.

“Let ’em come, they’ll learn. But, yes,” he said, returning to the little procession which had just reached the vicarage gate, “that’s Robert Macsen-Martel and his mother. Don’t see her often these days. He works for Poole, Reed and Poole, in the estate office—talking of historical ironies, though I know we weren’t. Sells expensive little gimcrack houses all round what’s left of his own—and aft

all, they've been there best part of nine centuries. God knows how they stuck it out, they never were wealthy. Probably the best they ever did was out of that dissolution business, when the monks got kicked out. Count for nothing now. Never will again. Never *did*, for all that much."

It was an epitaph; and there was something about the two figures now vanishing into the vicarage garden that suggested that even the epitaph was an afterthought, long after the event of dissolution.

The old woman was exceedingly tall and ramrod erect, a residue of desiccated flesh shrunk tight to attenuated bones, and draped with old-fashioned and shapeless tweeds of no particular colour. Under an ancient felt hat, worn dead straight on lank grey hair drawn into a bun on her neck, the long narrow, aristocratic face looked out with chill disapproval at the world, as though she had ceased to expect anything good from present or future.

"She looks," said Bunty thoughtfully, "like that bronze bishop at Augsburg—the one with the bad smell under his nose."

"Bishop Wolfhart Roth," said Sergeant Moon understandingly. "Now you come to mention it, she does." And it was entirely typical of him that he should be able to haul out of his capacious memory not only the face but even the name of a German bishop some unknown artist had caricatured in bronze in the fourteenth century.

Her son was like her, but not yet mummified. Tall, thin, with long, narrow bones and a long narrow face, withdrawn, distrustful, austere. An uncomfortable family, Bunty thought, watching them disappear under the vicar's trees, but too faded now to discomfort the populace of Mottisham overmuch.

They were gone, it was over. The sergeant flapped a huge white hand in a final salute, and withdrew to his duty, waving the VW on towards home. Bunty turned to stare into the porch as the car passed by, and try to catch a glimpse of the door that had brought press photographers and scholars into the wild territory of Middlehope. Old trees crowded close, darkening the cavity of the porch. She caught a faint flash of pale, pure colour, old wood restored to the light from under the patina of centuries of dirt and neglect; but that was all.

"Sorry!" said George. "Did you want to stop and have a look at it? I couldn't hold up the procession, but we can pull round into the pub yard if you like, and walk back."

"No, never mind." Bunty settled back in her seat, her thoughts returning pleasantly to the prospect of getting home and getting the Aga lit and the house warmed. "I don't suppose there's anything so remarkable about it. Nothing to fetch us back for another look."

Whatever minor fate had been jolted by George's assessment of the Middlehope crime potential and Moon's acceptance of it, must also have recorded, and with the same malice, this complacent comment—probably under the category of famous last words!

There were still three reporters and one press photographer left over from the jamboree when Hugh Macsen-Martel and Dinah and Dave Cressett entered the public bar of "The Sitting Duck" that evening. Saul Trimble, trading on his antediluvian appearance as usual, had already lured two of the visitors into his corner, one on either side, and was furnishing them with a few impromptu fragments of folk-history in return for the pints with which, alternately, they furnished him. He had left out his false teeth for the occasion, which added twenty years to his appearance, and put on his old leather elbowed jacket and a muffler instead of his usual smart Sunday rig. By good luck the bar itself still looked every inch the antiquated country pub for which it was cast, since Sam Crouch, who owned

was too mean to spend money on modernising it, and had no need to worry about competition. The ~~were two other pubs within reach, but both were tied, while~~ “The Sitting Duck” was not merely a free house, but a home-brewed house into the bargain, one of only three left in the entire county. So the public bar was still all quarries and high-backed settles, furnished with bright red pew cushions, and every evening the place was full. This Sunday evening it was perhaps even a little fuller than usual. The newsmen, strangers from the town, were fair game, and there was the afternoon’s show to talk about.

Saul was in full cry when Hugh’s party entered. He was using his folk-lore voice, half singing Welsh, half quavering, superstitious old age, and all the regulars were there to egg him on. William Swayne, alias Willie the Twig, the forestry officer from the plantations beyond the Hallowmount, had driven down in the Land-Rover, Eli Platt had closed his by-pass fruit and flower stands early, and come in from the market-garden on the fringe of Comerbourne, Joe Lyon, smelling warmly of his own sheep, steamed gently by the fire with a pint of home-brewed in one hand. It may even have been the beer, rather than the company, that had caused the strangers to prolong their visit into licensing hours.

“Normans?” Saul was saying with tremulous disdain. “Normans, is it? The Normans were mere incomers here, and never got a toehold, not in Middlehope, not for hundreds of years. The few that got in by marrying here, them we tolerated if they minded their step, the rest—out! Normans, indeed!”

“I was going by the name,” said the oldest reporter reasonably.

“Martel? Oh, ah, that’s Norman, that is. The Martel got in with one o’ these marriages I was telling you about. In Henry One, that was, there was no sons to the family, and the heiress, she took up with this Martel, who was an earl’s man from Comerbourne, but had fallen out with his master. Let him alone, they did, when he had the clans of Middlehope behind him, they wanted no extra trouble up on this border. Been Macsen-Martels ever since, they have, right enough, but they’d been here many hundred years before that—ah, right back to King Arthur and the Romans afore him...”

“This,” said Hugh in Dinah’s ear, as he found her a chair in the bow window, “is going to be good. He caught Saul’s impervious blue eye, bright beneath a deliberately ruffled eyebrow, and winked. Saul looked through him stonily into the far distances of inspiration.

“I’ll get them,” volunteered Dave, and went off through the crowd to the bar, where Ellie Croucher and her nineteen-year-old daughter, christened Zenobia but Nobbie to her friends, dispensed home-brewed and presided over the scene like a couple of knowing blonde cherubs, deceptively guileless eye.

“If you’re going by names,” pursued Saul, warming almost into song, “it’s the Macsen you want to think about, my lads. You know who Macsen was? He was the same person as Maximus, King of the Britons, back in the fifth century. And if you don’t believe me, go and look for yourselves at the inscription on the Pillar of Eliseg, up north there by Valle Crucis, and there you’ll see it in Latin...”

“Are you telling us you can read Latin?” demanded the youngest reporter dubiously.

“Course I can’t, nor never needed to, and if I could, I couldn’t make out the letters on that stone, but there’s those who have, and turned it into English for you and me both. Look it up in the libraries. ‘Maximus the King,’ it says, ‘who slew the King of the Romans...’ Macsen Wledig, the Welsh called him. And do you know who the King of the Romans was, the one he slew? He was the Emperor Constans, that’s who, and uncle to King Arthur himself. And ever since Macsen Wledig was Prince of Powis there’ve been Macsens in Middlehope.”

“How do you know?” objected the young reporter boldly. “Are there still records of all this? After

all that length of time?”

“There’s better than written records. There’s the records that have come down by word of mouth from father to son and mother to daughter. Why, my old granny could have recited you the pedigree of every family in this village nearly back to Adam, just like in the Bible. The women... the women were the keepers of the traditions ever, since time started. Now that’s all gone. Progress we’ve got, and it cost us everything else we had, whether we wanted it or not...”

“He’s beginning to ramble,” Dinah said softly. “Hadn’t you better give him a shove back on to the rails?”

Someone else, however, did that in Hugh’s place, and very effectively. The last of the photographers sat on a high stool at the end of the bar, a big, hearty man just running slightly to flesh with a shock of untidy straw-coloured hair and inquisitive eyes. He hadn’t been priming Saul, but hadn’t been doing much talking, but it was plain that he had missed nothing.

“What about this door?” he said. “If it was originally one door of the church, how did it get into their house in the first place?”

Saul trimmed his sails nimbly, got halfway through an unplanned sentence, decided to revise it, and created a mild diversion by peering meaningfully into his empty pint-pot. One of his two interlocutors took the hint and filled it again.

“It got there because they took it, along with a few other things, when the monastery here was closed down under Henry Eight, that’s how. A very nice bit of carving it is, you can see that, and made locally, so the experts say, and there’s bits inside the old part o’ the church by the same hand. Closed down, the monastery was, and the brothers turned out on to the road. The abbey church was looted and abandoned for a while, and then it was took over for the parish church and repaired again. And the Macsen-Martels sided with the commission, they did, and they got the abbot’s lodging to live in, and that’s how the door came to be there.”

“And what,” the photographer wanted to know, “put it into their heads to give it back now? Nobody knew about it. Nobody was asking for it. Nobody was in any position to ask for it. Are you telling me they suddenly went to the trouble and expense of having the thing cleaned and restored, after all this time, just in a fit of belated honesty? It doesn’t make sense.”

They all turned to look at him more carefully, for the tone of his questioning was curiously more purposeful than that of his colleagues. Dave came back with the drinks, and put Dinah’s half-pint in her hand. Hugh levelled black eyes above the rim of his pint-pot. “Who is he?” he asked softly. “Not a Comerbourne man, I know them all.”

“Brummagem, I think. Some freelance.” Dave was uninterested; he didn’t question other people’s declared motives for what they did.

“Don’t,” warned Saul unexpectedly, his voice receding hollowly into a cavern of senile solemnity. “don’t ask me about that! There’s reasons for wanting to have things—like a good cellar door when you’re setting up house and there’s one standing handy—and reasons for wanting not to have things any longer when they begin to turn malignant towards them that took them out of their right place. Don’t forget ’tis a *church* door. Better for everybody, maybe, to put it back where it was afore, and have the bishop say the good words over it that it might be glad to hear. Mind, I’m not saying it *is* so. I’ve only said it *might* be so. I haven’t even said it would be effective, have I? Just that there’s no harm in trying.” And he shook his grey head as though he foresaw the failure of this belated attempt at exorcism of something unnamed and undefined. “Did you know what sort of monastery we had u

here at the finish?" he asked mildly. "There were only four o' the brothers left to take to the roads, and a beggarly sort of place they kept here. Hospitality for the stranger, my eye! There were strange people who slept here overnight that never got where they were going. It was a long way for any bishop to come to see for himself what was going on. And then, bishops are as fond of sleeping safe as the next man. No, I wouldn't say Mottisham Abbey had a particularly holy reputation in its last days. Even the church, they say, saw some very odd goings-on before the finish."

"Are you saying," demanded the photographer bluntly, "that there's something uncanny about the door?"

"I'm saying nothing, except that it's better to be safe than sorry," mumbled Saul darkly, "and back in the church is the best place for a door the like of that one. Don't you get too inquisitive, my lad. About things that's best let alone."

"But *what* went on in the church?" the youngest reporter pressed avidly. "Do you mean black masses, and things like that?"

"Tisn't for me to say. There were tales... there were tales..." The veiled eye and withdrawn manner implied that he had heard them all at firsthand, but didn't propose to share them.

"Oh, go on!" urged Willie the Twig, fixing Hugh across the smoky room with an innocent green stare. "Tell 'em about the family curse. Tell 'em what happens in every third generation, ever since the Dissolution..."

"Young man," said Saul weightily, playing for time while he readjusted to this uninvited assistance, "there's some things better not spoke of..."

"Why?" asked Hugh with interest. "It won't just go away, whether you speak about it or not. Everybody knows it happens."

"Every third generation," prompted Willie the Twig gently.

"Ever since the last abbot was thrown out to beg, and put a curse on the usurpers for all time..." confirmed Hugh. Dinah dug her elbow sharply into his ribs, but he only smothered a small convulsion of laughter in what was left of his beer, and looked round to claim Dave's empty pint-pot. "You Dinah? No? Here you are, Nobbie, love, same again!"

Saul's stony eye fixed him balefully. Hugh suppressed his charming smile and gazed back in monumental and brazen innocence.

"But what *does* happen every third generation?" the youngest reporter insisted.

"Every third generation," Saul said with vengeful deliberation, and his voice sank into the cellar like the demon king disappearing down a stage trap, "the second son is born a witless idiot."

"Or a degenerate monster," Hugh added helpfully.

"Go on, you're having us on!" protested the reporter.

"You think so? *You didn't see the second son at the service this afternoon, did you?*"

"*You devil!*" whispered Dinah.

Hugh didn't even trouble to warn her to silence; he knew she disapproved, or at the very best withheld her approval, but he also knew she wouldn't do anything to spoil the game, if it amused him.

"I didn't even know there *was* another son," admitted the oldest reporter, and looked round the assembled and now oddly quiet company for confirmation. Heads nodded and voices murmured; there was another son.

“Oh, yes, he exists, all right,” Hugh said sombrely, handing along the refilled pint-pot to Dave, and passing a pound note back to Nobbie at the bar. He made a brief, impressive pause, and the interested onlookers obligingly provided him with absolute silence, which he knew exactly when to break. “*I’ve seen him!*” he said in a sepulchral whisper; and that was all.

In the electric hush that followed, Nobbie’s sense of mischief got the better of her. She looked round the circle of intense faces, the natives and the strangers, and then deliberately smacked down a handful of silver and coppers on the bar.

“Your change, Mr. Macsen-Martel!”

The awful pause felt like a year, but was actually no more than a couple of seconds. Then, with exquisite tact, everyone not directly involved turned, formed new and casual groups, and began to talk about the weather and football. It was done, and seen to be done, not in order to bury the shock for ever but merely to keep it on ice while the victims were given a chance to slip away, so that their discomfiture could be properly and privately enjoyed by those who belonged here. And slip away they did, scarlet and speechless and hideously embarrassed. The youngest one, without so much as a word to anyone, simply picked up his coat and slunk out, the other two made a pitiful attempt to carry it off with forced smiles and a sudden pretence that they had just noticed how late it was. The barman, the photographer, who had said least and committed himself least, took his time about withdrawing, and looked round the room defiantly before he went. In particular he looked with fixed interest at Hugh who had not moved a muscle or said a word to ease the situation.

“You know, I *thought* you looked a bit like the old lady.”

It was an artificial exit line, and Hugh could quite well have said: “Liar!” Instead, and just as devastatingly, he said: “God forbid!” which shook the photographer considerably more.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said uneasily. “Fine, straight old lady for her age. Must be seventy, or thereabouts, I suppose?” His eye flickered round the bar once again. “Very interesting evening! And a very interesting door!” he added with recovered assurance, and walked out with a curious private smile on his face.

The inhabitants stirred, sighed, cautiously stretched, expanding to fill the quitted space.

“Did you *have* to do that?” Hugh asked Nobbie reproachfully.

“Did *you* have to?” murmured Dinah resignedly.

“Coming to something,” marvelled Willie the Twig, “when those boys get hypersensitive.”

Saul put back his teeth, and ordered one of Ellie Crouch’s pork pies. And Nobbie, patting her blonde kiss-curl into place, said complacently. “I reckon I won, anyhow. And *they* won’t be back in a hurry.” For so far from inviting alien custom, “The Sitting Duck” was constantly compelled to protect its limited supplies of home-brewed in the interests of its regulars.

Nevertheless, within ten days one of the strangers did come back. And this time to stay.

CHAPTER 2



THE photographer from Birmingham reappeared in Mottisham unexpectedly on a Tuesday morning, mid-October, shortly before noon. It was the first foggy day of the autumn, in a month which tended to be productive of thick mists in the deep, river-threaded cleft of Middlehope; but it was not the low visibility that brought the stranger crawling into the forecourt of Cressett and Martel at approximately fifteen miles an hour, and caused him to heave a sigh of relief at his safe arrival. Somewhere along the road from Comerbourne he had hit a stray stone, probably shed from a lorry, and his steering had begun to afflict him at the most inconvenient moments with a terrifying judder. He had no intention of driving a car with that sort of handicap any farther than he had to on a foggy day, and Dave's was the first garage at the Comerbourne side of the village. The driver clambered out thankfully, and Dave came out from the workshop to serve him.

He recognised the shock-head of straw-coloured hair and the slightly racy clothes at once. "Oh hullo, back again? What's the trouble?"

The photographer was willing to talk. His name was Gerry Bracewell, he lived in Edgbaston—he produced a business card to prove it—and he had just driven over to take one more look at that church door, and maybe the house it came from, too. Very interesting thing, that, he said with a sly, self-satisfied smile. And now his steering had practically packed it in on him, and could Dave do anything about it by this evening? Or tomorrow morning, if necessary, he might be staying overnight in any case.

"Taking photographs in this weather?" Dave couldn't refrain from asking him casually.

Bracewell grinned. He had an amiable, cocky, knowing smile that belonged to the city. "Haven't even brought a camera along this time. No, just interested. You never know where there may be a story lurking, do you? Pictures I can get later if there's anything in it." He prowled the yard while Dave looked at the sick Morris, and for the first time his eye fell upon the two names above the entrance. "*Martel*? Is that the same one?"

"It's all right," said Dave from the driving-seat, "he's gone into Comerbourne with a respray job. Yes, it's the same one. He's my partner."

"One of the Macsen-Martels? That lot that gave the door back to the church?"

"The one that got away," said Dave. "He's been working here with me nearly four years. It's what he likes doing, and what he's good at."

"Well, bully for him! A bit of a card, isn't he?"

"That leg-pull in the 'Duck'? They like their fun. I wouldn't take too much notice, if I were you."

Bracewell came closer. "He fall out with his folks, or something? I mean, it's a bit unusual to find somebody like him cutting loose like this and working with his hands, isn't it?"

"Not particularly. Inevitable, I should say. Feudal families are living in changed circumstances these days. All the land that went with the house is gone long ago, there never was much money

Robert works in an office, Hugh works here. They have to live.”

Not a talkative chap, Bracewell thought. Dave had told him nothing he couldn't have got from anyone in the village. “This National Trust business. You think they'll take the place on?”

“I think they will. It's more or less agreed, I believe.” He himself did not think all that highly of the Abbey as an architectural monument; just a stark grey stone house with a single vast expanse of roof, and blunt, massive chimneys; but apparently there were those who did. Parts of it dated from Edward the Fourth, so they said, notably the vaulted cellars, but Dave was as little impressed by medieval age as was Hugh himself. But the urgent fact was that there was no money to maintain the property: the roof, according to Hugh, leaked in half a dozen places, and something had to be done about it quickly. Either sell it—which would probably mean selling it for demolition and redevelopment—or else get the National Trust to take it over, help to maintain it, and permit the former owners to continue in residence on condition that they showed it perhaps once a week. Well, that was about as good a deal as Robert was likely to get.

“But what's the door got to do with it? Why move a door?” Bracewell's tone had sunk to confidential level. “Won't the National Trust people object, anyhow?”

“Not if it didn't belong there, why should they? They'll want to take over something as authentic as possible.” He slid out of the car again, and wiped his hands. “All right, leave her with me, and I'll see what I can do. I don't think it's so bad. I'll try and have it ready for you this evening, barring emergencies.”

“Fine! How late are you on the job?”

“Six, officially, but I'll be here.” He nodded towards the house, solid and stolid in pleasant mottled brick beyond the yard and the pumps.

“Right, but if I'm not here before six, I'll probably be staying over, so don't wait around for me. I don't show tonight, I'll be in pretty early tomorrow. O.K.?” He fished a plump and elderly briefcase out of the back of the Morris, and departed with a confident and springy step towards the village.

Dave Cressett had run the garage for twelve years, ever since his father's early death. He was thirty-four now, and a highly responsible, taciturn and resolute thirty-four into the bargain, having assumed mature cares early. His stature was small, his manner neat, unobtrusive and workmanlike, and his appearance nondescript, with a set of pleasant, good-natured features that seemed to be made up of oddments until he smiled, when everything fell beautifully into place. He didn't smile too often because he was by inclination a serious soul; but it was worth waiting for. Not a firework display like Hugh's dazzling laughter, which he shed so prodigally all around him, but the comforting and dependable radiance of a good fire. Everything about him was equally reliable; which was why his business had prospered for Cressett and Martel. Hugh tuned and raced the firm's cars, with dash and success, but it was on Dave that the clients depended.

Dave had known Hugh since school days, though there were five years between them. He had known Robert, too, for he was within a year of Robert's age; but nobody had ever really known Robert, sunk as he had been beneath the weight of being the heir, even if there was precious little to inherit, and threatened to be progressively less, and ultimately nothing at all, barring a monstrous minus of debts, if his father lived much longer. Hugh was different. Hugh was carefree, did what he liked and asked afterwards, mixed with whatever company he pleased and never asked at all, got his face dirty and his nails broken playing around with motors when he should have been accumulating degrees and A levels, and didn't give a damn for his Norman blood or his aristocratic status. In fact, he was s

like his delightful, unpredictable, eighteenth-century anachronism of a father that there was no mistaking the implications. They represented, between them, a late burst of demoniac energy in a line practically burned out. You had only to look at the mother—seven years older than her husband, and his first cousin; they always interbred—and the elder brother to see what had happened to the race long since bled into debility, overtaken and left standing by history. Tenacious stock, time had shown that, but exhausted at last. Somebody had to break out, marry fresh blood, get fresh heirs and plunge into fresh activities. The ghost of the name would take some laying, but Hugh already stood clear of it, neutral as a clinical observer from outer space. After all, the crude reality was that the name meant nothing now; the doctor and the hotel-keeper ranked higher in importance than the attenuated representatives of past glory, and the vigorous incomers from the towns far higher. Hugh was the one who took the realities as they came, and did not feel his powers and possibilities in any way limited.

For Dave all these considerations were very relevant indeed, because Hugh had worked himself into a partnership nearly four years ago, and the tacit understanding between him and Dinah had been growing and proliferating ever since. It wasn't even a question of waiting for a concrete proposal; people like Dinah and Hugh didn't function in that way, they simply grew together without words, and some day, still without words and without question, got married. If Dave knew his sister and her partner, that day was creeping up on them fast.

As far as Dave could see, it wasn't going to have much to do with him, when it came to the point. Dinah was ten years his junior, and he had had to be father and mother to her, as well as brother, but she was twenty-four years old now, and a remarkably self-sufficient young woman, who ran the house, did the firm's books and occasionally relieved Jenny Pelsall in the office, with apparent ease. She had all the equipment she needed, a heart, a head, a chin and a backbone. She was a pocket edition, like her brother, but good stuff lies in little compass. He wasn't worried about Dinah, she'd find her own way, and if she chose Hugh, she wouldn't be choosing him just for a blinding smile and a light hand on the gear-lever.

He'd got her as far as consenting to go and spend this particular evening with his people at the Abbey; the first formal encounter, this would be, but no amount of Norman blood—or blood of the princes of Powis, either, for that matter—could intimidate Dinah. And, as Hugh said, what the hell, we're not tied to the place, we don't have to stick around here if we don't want to. Admittedly it's a bit of an ordeal, Robert's pretty dreary, to say the least of it, and the old girl's virtually petrified in her devotion to her sacred line. But don't let it throw you, we don't have to see much of them when we're married. And Dinah had said thoughtfully that she supposed they had to get it over sooner or later. Just so long, she had said, as you bring me home before I blow my top. We may not have to live in the same village afterwards, but we do have to live in the same world. And he had promised gaily, all the more readily because bringing Dinah home gave him the best excuse possible for not sleeping overnight at the Abbey. He retained his room there to please his mother, and slept in it when he had to, but he much preferred the free life in the flatlet they'd made for him over the workshop in the yard. Grooms, he said, ought to live above the stable.

Sometimes he sounded, sometimes he even looked, like his dead father, who had come head-over-heels off a horse at an impossible fence five winters ago, when the Middlehope hounds drew to the shoulder of Callow, and everyone else diverged cravenly towards the gate. He had fallen on his head and shoulders and broken his neck, and there went the last survivor of the eighteenth century in the borders, trailing his comet's-tail of heroic stories, amorous, bibulous and equestrian. For years he arrived and departed as unpredictably as hurricane weather, vanishing whenever he got too far in

debt or into difficulties, or too many local girls were in full cry after him with paternity suits reappearing after his wife and son had got things under control again, and always finding a warm welcome waiting. Hugh had his fierce good looks and sudden disarming moods of sweetness and hilarity; but Hugh didn't run after women or plunge head-down into debt. He doted on cars, raced them, doctored them, made respectable money out of them. And Dinah was his only girl.

The fog thickened a little again towards evening, and Hugh was late getting back from Comerbourne. The resprayed car had to be delivered to one of the new houses on the other side of the village, which meant a ten-minute walk back from there; and Dinah was ready and waiting some time before the back door crashed open in the usual headlong style, to indicate that the junior partner was home. He came in wreathed in chilly mist and glowing apologies, six feet of tightly strung nervous energy even at the end of the working day.

Dinah rose and picked up her coat. She was wearing a plain, long-sleeved shift in a delirious orange-and-olive print, that stopped short five inches above her knees.

"You'll shake the old lady rigid," Dave observed, eyeing her impartially.

"From all accounts she already is rigid, anyhow. Begin as you mean to go on, I say. After all, she knows her darling boy, she wouldn't expect him to come around with a nun."

Hugh took the wheel as of right. It was rare for him to consent to be a passenger. She thought he touched a little edgy, though as assured as ever. Very revealing, that, Dinah considered. It looked as if he was a little more worked up about this confrontation than he pretended, and certainly more than she was.

"You won't like it," he said, confirming her speculations as to his state of mind. It was as near an apology for his family as he was ever likely to get.

"You never know, I might. I'm contra-suggestible. I might even like your folks, it has been known to happen in these cases."

He gave a hollow laugh. "That'll be the day! Still, we needn't even stay within range, when we're married. We could go abroad, if you'd like it. I bet you and I could do well in Canada. Did you ever think about it?—clearing out and starting fresh somewhere else?"

"No," said Dinah comfortably, "I never did. And you never did, either, until tonight. Anyhow, who said we were going to be married? Relax, boy, it won't be that bad!"

He relaxed a little. They were feeling their way steadily along the misty green lane behind the hotel, watching for the open gate that led into the Abbey drive. The entrance was narrow and dark, shrouded in trees. Nothing was left of the monastic buildings that had once stretched clean across the centre of the present village, except the lumpy bases of walls just breaking the ground in two places among the shrubberies. Only the abbot's lodging remained. They saw the long level of the high roof faintly against a clearing sky, the thick column of the chimneys. Only two lighted windows broke the murky dimness. The house looked dank, dilapidated and cold.

"Look, Dinah, once we're installed, I'll take Robert away for a bit—don't you think?—and let you get down to it in earnest with Mother. You won't mind, will you? We won't stay away long. But I'm betting on it that once you've broken the ice she'll be eating out of your hand." He rolled the car to a halt before the crumbling porch, and turned and gave her a slightly strained smile. "After all, that's the way you affected *me*, isn't it?"

"Straight in at the deep end!" mused Dinah. He was evidently more disturbed by the whole thing

than she had guessed. "All right, kill or cure. Maybe we'll end up in Canada, after all."

The door opened ponderously but silently on a long, flagged hall, none too adequately lit, the stretched clean through the house and ended at a broad Gothic window. Dinah's alert eye noted worn mats, bare panelling, a vast oaken staircase, the stone newels of what must be the steps down to the cellar, just to the left of the terminal window, and a narrow little lobby bearing away to the right, and ending in a garden door. The coats that hung in the lobby were so old and so frequently dry-cleaned that they had outlived all their original quality and cut, and most of their colour. Even if there had been nothing else to betray their age, the length of the nearest, a woman's classic camel coat, would have been enough. Mrs. Macsen-Martel was tall, but even on her this skirt would practically reach to the ankle. Everything had been good in its day; and for everything within sight its day was long over.

Someone had heard them come. A door on the right, beyond the stairs, opened, and Robert came out to greet them.

It was the first time Dinah had had the opportunity to study him at such close quarters, and she gazed at him with candid interest, looking for some resemblance to Hugh. The long, lightweight bones were the same, the hollowed cheeks, even the deep setting of the eyes, but in place of Hugh's vivacious colouring and mobility, this one was neutral-tinted and hesitant, almost deprecating, of movement. A profound, almost a fastidious reserve dominated everything in his face, the brown eyes that were such pains to avoid staring at her, the long, level mouth that opened stiffly to welcome her.

"Miss Cressett, I'm so glad you could come. Let me take your coat." But he moved too slowly, and Hugh had already taken it. "Do come in, my mother's looking forward to meeting you." She was surprised but thankful that he didn't say: "We've heard so much about you from Hugh." Maybe he was leaving that for the old lady. Someone was certainly due to say it before the evening was over.

Hugh took her possessively by the elbow, and steered her into the drawing-room. Large, lofty, chilly, with a vast fireplace and a very modest fire in the distant wall, and a few good but threadbare rugs deployed artfully to make the maximum impression of comfort where there was little that was comfortable. A great deal of splendid but sombre furniture—there was money there, at any rate, they cared to realise it—and one superb, high-backed, erect chair placed near the fire and facing the door, with the old woman enthroned in it. A tableau especially for Dinah's benefit; she had to walk approximately twenty-five feet across the bare centre of the room to reach her hostess, with the faded, lofty-lidded eyes watching and appraising her every step of the way. All those exposed inches of smooth, slim thigh in honey-beige tights, the short, almost boyish cap of dark-brown hair, and the greenish eye-shadow, the fashionable chunky shoes that Dave called her football boots... But if I had worn a crinoline, she thought, watching the old woman's face every bit as narrowly as her own face was being watched, I should still have come as a shock.

Hugh did the only thing he could do to break the tension, and did it beautifully. He dropped Dinah's elbow and swooped ahead of her, shearing through the invisible cord that linked the two pairs of hostile female eyes; he stooped and kissed his mother's grey and fallen cheek, and warmed her face for a moment into genuine life.

"Hullo, Mother! Here's Dinah, I promised I'd bring her to see you, didn't I?" He reached for Dinah's other hand as his mother put up an emaciated claw and allowed her bony fingers to be clasped for a moment in Dinah's short-nailed, well-scrubbed, capable hand. It was like holding a dead bird starved in the winter cold. Two rings, old-fashioned ones, but those were surely real rubies in them. And that long string of beads dangling into her lap to complete the elongated effect of every line of her

body was neither of glass nor cultures, but pearls. Of course, she'd been from the branch of the family with some money left, until she married Robert senior, and he got his hands on most of it and sent it flying like skittles... I am a right *bitch*, thought Dinah, shocked behind her dutiful smile. I should blame her for walking round me with her hackles up, what else do I deserve? And penitence gave her a surge of positive benevolence. She wondered if she dared kiss... No, there was no invitation being signalled. On the contrary, the released hand was flexing inflexible fingers delicately under the edge of the dun-coloured lace stole, as if the clasp had bruised them.

"So kind of you to give up an evening to a dull old woman like me, Miss Cressett. Do sit down..." She gestured vaguely towards a velvet hassock that would have installed Dinah at her feet, but Hugh was splendidly blind, and whisked up a comfortable leather chair close to his mother's, to establish them as equals. Dinah gave him a lightning glance that would have liked to turn into a wink, and sat down with as little display of leg as she could manage. Appeasement was not in her nature, but whenever she looked at poor Hugh she had pacific thoughts.

"Perhaps you would care for a glass of something? I don't drink myself, but perhaps a sherry...?"

"I brought a case of Traminer," said Hugh unexpectedly, "we can try it with dinner if it suits. I was in town, and had to wait all day for my job, so I went shopping, and got hold of a real bargain. It's Yugoslav, but it's as good as most that comes out of Alsace. I know, I've tried it! Come and help me fetch it in, Rob, it's in the boot of the car."

If it really was, Dinah thought with deep interest, then he'd popped it in there before he even came into the house. Indeed he must have dropped it off inside the yard before he delivered the respray job across in Greenfields, and installed it ready for delivery on his return. Her attention was caught in a new and grave way. If Hugh was as keyed up as all that, scheming with cases of wine and worrying about the impression she was going to make on his mother (not to mention the impression his mother was probably going to make on her!) then there was really nothing else for it, he *must* be in love. And she thought, calmed, assuaged and flattered, having someone like Hugh that much in love is a good reason for being in love with him. She had always wondered. Now she began to feel certain.

Robert—how silent he was, did he never have anything to say in this household?—brought her a glass of sherry. She looked up in his face as she accepted it; such a middle-aged face, and he was only thirty-five, after all. Bleached, brownish hair, straight as pen-feathers, cropped close; not a bad shaped head at all, but so defeated, so inanimate. Tired eyes, darker brown, so withdrawn that there was no knowing whether they were indifferent to her, or simply burdened past caring. He almost never spoke, but his voice was low, pleasantly pitched and sad; yet distantly disapproving, too. He was not on her side. Beware of the gentle people who do not rant, but nevertheless are not amenable to anyone's wiles. In his way he was as rigid as his mother.

And that, as Dinah discovered when they were left alone together, was pretty rigid. The air seemed to clarify as soon as the men were out of the way. Like a sudden change of wind sweeping the mist from a battlefield.

"Hugh has told me so much about you, Miss Cressett." (She'd known that was coming, sooner or later! It meant: Be careful, I'm warned, I'm on the alert!) "He thinks very highly of you. Do tell me something about yourself, my dear, I don't think I'm acquainted with your family. What was your father?"

"He owned the same garage we run now. *His* father was a very early motorist in these parts, a pioneer, and Father followed in his footsteps. And so has my brother David— Hugh's partner..."

“Ah, yes, of course. I know from Hugh that your brother is in trade.” It sounded like a category, the way she said it, and probably it was. “And where were you at school, Miss Cressett?”

Dinah told her, bluntly: the village primary, then the secondary modern at Abbot’s Bale. “I wasn’t an academic type. Mine are mostly manual skills. I keep house. Quite well, I believe. At least no one complains.”

“I’m quite sure you are good at everything you attempt. One feels so out of date these days.” Her long fingers strayed languidly among her pearls. The long, straight lines of brow, nose and chin, in profile, looked like a caricature of Edith Sitwell. The grey hair, drawn closely back into that great knot on her nape, weighed down her whole head and shoulders into an effete arc the moment she relaxed her guard. “In my day gels were educated to such different ends. We had not to reckon with trade, of course... This has become such a commercial world, has it not?” She leaned back with a sigh, and against the oblique grey planes of her face, and shoulders, and fleshless bust slithered downwards into a pyramid of discouragement and decay. “The name Cressett is old... are you connected with the Northamptonshire Cressetts, by any chance?”

“I doubt it,” said Dinah cheerfully. “But I don’t suppose there’s anyone in my family who can trace his ancestors back more than three generations, four at the most, so of course we could be. As far as we know, we’re Middlehope stock from way back.”

The old lady closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, perhaps praying for strength. The catechism went on steadily: What were your mother’s family? What are your interests? Are you fond of music? You play of course? (Naturally a lady plays the piano, however badly.)

Thank God, they were coming back. There went the outer door, hollowly closing, and in a moment more the two brothers came rather quietly, rather warily, into the room. At least the Traminer was ready enough, Hugh had a bottle in one hand and a corkscrew in the other. They bore themselves, Dinah thought, a little stiffly, as if there was some related awkwardness even between them. They had so little in common that with all the goodwill in the world communication might well be an effort for both.

“Dinner’s ready,” Robert said. “Will you come, Mother?”

Over dinner it was much easier, though the table in the large, chilly room, even when reduced to its minimum proportions, was too big for comfortable conversation between four people. But at least there *were* four of them, and every time the catechism showed signs of being resumed Dinah could answer monosyllabically, and then address some quick remark to one of the men, even if Hugh did not anticipate her need, as he frequently did. She had felt a certain amount of childish curiosity about the meal itself, and the manner of its presentation. Would the old lady have cooked it herself? Not much doubt that she could, that was one of the things gels in her day had been expected to master. But in all probability on this occasion the cooking had been done by the same local help who brought in the dishes. Plain, good English cottage cooking, nothing elaborate and nothing expensive. And having installed the joint and vegetables on the sideboard—the pudding being cold—the cook said goodnight and departed, plainly for home. It was Robert who served everything, silently, unobtrusively and attentively. Once there had been some four or five servants living in at the Abbey; now there was Robert, and Robert was everything. Dinah tried to imagine Hugh shouldering this load, tamed into that grey tameness, and the picture was so absurd as to be almost indecent.

Mrs. Macsen-Martel could even say: “I’m so glad you find the veal to your liking, Miss Cressett” in such a way as to make Dinah feel that she had been eating like a hungry wolf. And indeed she was.

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