

5 It was somewhere at the back of beyond. Maybury would have found it difficult to be more precise.

10 He was one who, when motoring outside his own territory, preferred to follow a route “given” by one of the automobile organizations, and, on this very occasion, as on other previous ones, he had found reasons to deplore all deviation. This time it had been the works manager’s fault. The man had not only poured ridicule on the official route, but had stood at the yard gate in order to make quite certain that Maybury set off by the short cut which, according to him, all the fellows in the firm used, and which departed in the exactly opposite direction.

15 The most that could be said was that Maybury was presumably at the outer edge of the immense West Midlands conurbation. The outer edge it by now surely must be, as he seemed to have been driving for hours since he left the works, going round and round in large or small circles, asking the way and being unable to understand the answers (when answers were vouchsafed), all the time seemingly more off-course than ever.

20 Maybury looked at his watch. He had been driving for hours. By rights he should have been more than halfway home – considerably more. Even the dashboard light seemed feebler than usual; but by it Maybury saw that soon he would be out of petrol. His mind had not been on that particular matter of petrol.

25 Dark though it was, Maybury was aware of many trees, mountainous and opaque. It was not, however, that there were no houses. Houses there must be, because on both sides of the road, there were gates; broad single gates, commonly painted white: and, even where there were no gates, there were dim entrances. Presumably it was a costly nineteenth-century housing estate. Almost identical roads seemed to curve away in all directions. The straightforward had been genteelly avoided. As often in such places, the racer-through, the taker of a short cut, was quite systematically penalized. Probably this attitude accounted also for the failure to bring the street lighting fully up-to-date.

30 Maybury came to a specific bifurcation. It was impossible to make any reasoned choice, and he doubted whether it mattered much in any case.

Maybury stopped the car by the side of the road, then stopped the engine in order to save the waning petrol while he thought. In the end, he opened the door and stepped out into the road. He looked upwards. The moon and stars were almost hidden by the thick trees. It was quiet. The houses were set too far back from the road for the noise of the television sets to be heard, or the blue glare thereof seen. Pedestrians are nowadays rare in such a district at any hour, but now there was no traffic either, nor sound of traffic more remote. Maybury was disturbed by the silence.

He advanced a short distance on foot, as one does at such times. In any case, he had no map, but only a route, from which he had departed quite hopelessly. None the less, even that second and locally preferred route, the one used by all the fellows, had seemed perfectly clear at the time, and as the manager had described it. He supposed that otherwise he might not have been persuaded to embark upon it; not even overpersuaded. As things were, his wonted expedient of merely driving straight ahead until one found some definite sign or other indication, would be dubious, because the petrol might run out first.

Parallel with each side of each road was a narrow made-up footway, with a central gravelly strip. Beyond the strip to Maybury's left was a wilderness of vegetation, traversed by a ditch, beyond which was the hedge-line of the different properties. By the light of the occasional street-lamp, Maybury could see that sometimes there was an owner who had his hedge trimmed, and sometimes an owner who did not. It would be futile to walk any further along the road, though the air was pleasantly warm and aromatic. There were Angela and their son, Tony, awaiting him; and he must resume the fight to rejoin them.

Something shot out at him from the boskage on his left.

He had disturbed a cat, returned to its feral habitude. The first he knew of it was its claws, or conceivably its teeth, sunk into his left leg. There had been no question of ingratiating or cuddling up. Maybury kicked out furiously. The strange sequel was total silence. He must have kicked the cat a long way, because on the instant there was no hint of it. Nor had he seen the colour of the cat, though there was a pool of light at that point on the footway. He fancied he had seen two flaming eyes, but he was not sure even of that. There had been no mew, no scream.

Maybury faltered. His leg really hurt. It hurt so much that he could not bring himself to touch the limb, even to look at it in the lamplight.

He faltered back to the car, and, though his leg made difficulties even in starting it, set off indecisively down the road along which he had just walked. It might well have become a case of its being wise for him to seek a hospital. The deep scratch or bite of a cat might well hold venom, and it was not pleasant to think where the particular cat

had been treading, or what it might have been devouring. Maybury again looked at his watch. It was fourteen minutes past eight. Only nine minutes had passed since he had looked at it last.

5 The road was beginning to straighten out, and the number of entrances to diminish, though the trees remained dense. Possibly, as so often happens, the money had run out before the full development had reached this region of the property. There were still occasional houses, with entries at long and irregular intervals. Lamp posts were becoming fewer also, but Maybury saw that one of them bore a hanging sign of some kind. It was most unlikely to indicate a destination, let alone a destination of use to
10 Maybury, but he eased and stopped none the less, so urgently did he need a clue of some kind. The sign was shaped like a club in a pack of cards, and read:

THE HOSPICE

GOOD FARE

SOME ACCOMMODATION

15 The modest words relating to accommodation were curved round the downward pointing extremity of the club.

Maybury decided almost instantly. He was hungry. He was injured. He was lost. He was almost without petrol.

20 He would enquire for dinner and, if he could telephone home, might even stay the night, though he had neither pyjamas nor electric razor. The gate, made of iron, and more suited, Maybury would have thought, to a farmyard bullpen, was, none the less, wide open. Maybury drove through.

The drive had likewise been surfaced with rather unattractive concrete, and it appeared to have been done some time ago, since there were now many potholes, as if
25 heavy vehicles passed frequently. Maybury's headlights bounced and lurched disconcertingly as he proceeded, but suddenly the drive, which had run quite straight, again as on a modern farm, swerved, and there, on Maybury's left, was The Hospice. He realized that the drive he had come down, if indeed it had been a drive, was not the original main entrance. There was an older, more traditional drive,
30 winding away between rhododendron bushes. All this was visible in bright light from a fixture high above the cornice of the building: almost a floodlight, Maybury thought. He supposed that a new entry had been made for the vehicles of the various suppliers when the place had become – whatever exactly it had become, a private hotel? a guest house? a club? No doubt the management aspired to cater for the
35 occupants of the big houses, now that there were no longer servants in the world.

Maybury locked the car and pushed at the door of the house. It was a solid Victorian door, and it did not respond to Maybury's pressure. Maybury was discouraged by the need to ring, but he rang. He noticed that there was a second bell, lower down, marked NIGHT. Surely it could not yet be Night? The great thing was to get in, to feed (the works had offered only packeted sandwiches and flavourless coffee by way of luncheon), to ingratiate himself: before raising questions of petrol, whereabouts, possible accommodation for the night, a telephone call to Angela, disinfectant for his leg. He did not much care for standing alone in a strange place under the bright floodlight, uncertain what was going to happen.

But quite soon the door was opened by a lad with curly fair hair and an untroubled face. He looked like a young athlete, as Maybury at once thought. He was wearing a white jacket and smiling helpfully.

"Dinner? Yes, certainly, sir. I fear we've just started, but I'm sure we can fit you in."

To Maybury, the words brought back the seaside boarding houses where he had been taken for holidays when a boy. Punctuality in those days had been almost as important as sobriety.

"If you can give me just a couple of minutes to wash..."

"Certainly, sir. This way, please."

Inside, it was not at all like those boarding houses of Maybury's youth. Maybury happened to know exactly what it was like. The effect was that produced by the efforts of an expensive and, therefore, rather old-fashioned, furniture emporium if one placed one's whole abode and most of one's cheque-book in its hands. There were hangings on all the walls, and every chair and sofa was upholstered. Colours and fabrics were harmonious but rich. The several standard lamps had immense shades. The polished tables derived from Italian originals. One could perhaps feel that a few upholstered occupants should have been designed and purveyed to harmonize also. As it was, the room was empty, except for the two of them.

The lad held open the door marked "Gentlemen" in script, but then followed Maybury in, which Maybury had not particularly expected. But the lad did not proceed to fuss tiresomely, with soap and towel, as happens sometimes in very expensive hotels, and happened formerly in clubs. All he did was stand about. Maybury reflected that doubtless he was concerned to prevent all possible delay, dinner having started.

The dining-room struck Maybury, immediately he entered, as rather too hot. The central heating must be working with full efficiency. The room was lined with

hangings similar to those Maybury had seen in the hall, but apparently even heavier. Possibly noise reduction was among the objects. The ceiling of the room had been brought down in the modern manner, as if to serve the stunted; and any window or windows had disappeared behind swathes.

- 5 It is true that knives and forks make a clatter, but there appeared to be no other immediate necessity for costly noise abatement, as the diners were all extremely quiet; which at first seemed the more unexpected in that most of them were seated, fairly closely packed, at a single long table running down the central axis of the room. Maybury soon reflected, however, that if he had been wedged together with a party
10 of total strangers, he might have found little to say to them either.

This was not put to the test. On each side of the room were four smaller tables, set endways against the walls, every table set for a single person, even though big enough to accommodate four, two on either side; and at one of these, Maybury was settled by the handsome lad in the white jacket.

- 15 Immediately, soup arrived.

The instantaneity of the service (apart from the fact that Maybury was late) could be accounted for by the large number of the staff. There were quite certainly four men, all, like the lad, in white jackets; and two women, both in dark blue dresses. The six of them were noticeably deft and well set-up, though all were past their first youth.

- 20 Maybury could not see more because he had been placed with his back to the end wall which contained the service door (as well as, on the other side, the door by which the guests entered from the lounge). At every table, the single place had been positioned in that way, so that the occupant saw neither the service door opening and shutting, nor, in front of him, the face of another diner.

- 25 As a matter of fact, Maybury was the only single diner on that side of the room (he had been given the second table down, but did not think that anyone had entered to sit behind him at the first table); and, on the other side of the room, there was only a single diner also, he thought, a lady, seated at the second table likewise, and thus precisely parallel with him.

- 30 There was an enormous quantity of soup, in what Maybury realized was an unusually deep and wide plate. The amplitude of the plate had at first been masked by the circumstance that round much of its wide rim was inscribed, in large black letters, THE HOSPICE; rather in the style of a baby's plate, Maybury thought, if both lettering and plate had not been so immense. The soup itself was unusually weighty
35 too: it undoubtedly contained eggs as well as pulses, and steps have been taken to add "thickening" also.

Maybury was hungry, as has been said, but he was faintly disconcerted to realize that one of the middle-aged women was standing quietly behind him as he consumed the not inconsiderable number of final spoonfuls. The spoons seemed very large also, at least for modern usages. The woman removed his empty plate with a reassuring smile.

The second course was there. As she set it before him, the woman spoke confidentially in his ear of the third course: "It's turkey tonight." Her tone was exactly that in which promise is conveyed to a little boy of his favourite dish. It was as if she were Maybury's nanny; even though Maybury had never had a nanny, not exactly. Meanwhile, the second course was a proliferating elaboration of pasta; plainly homemade pasta, probably fabricated that morning. Cheese, in fairly large granules, was strewn across the heap from a large porcelain bowl without Maybury being noticeably consulted.

"Can I have something to drink? A lager will do."

"We have nothing like that, sir." It was as if Maybury knew this perfectly well, but she was prepared to play with him. There might, he thought, have been some warning that the place was unlicensed.

"A pity," said Maybury.

The woman's inflections were beginning to bore him; and he was wondering how much the rich food, all palpably fresh, and homegrown, and of almost unattainable quality, was about to cost him. He doubted very much whether it would be sensible to think of staying the night at The Hospice.

"When you have finished your second course, you may have the opportunity of a word with Mr Falkner." Maybury recollected that, after all, he had started behind all the others. He must doubtless expect to be a little hustled while he caught up with them. In any case, he was not sure whether or not the implication was that Mr Falkner might, under certain circumstances, unlock a private liquor store.

Obviously it would help the catching-up process if Maybury ate no more than two-thirds of the pasta fantasy. But the woman in the dark blue dress did not seem to see it like that.

"Can't you eat any more?" she enquired baldly, and no longer addressing Maybury as sir.

"Not if I'm to attempt another course," replied Maybury, quite equably.

“It’s turkey tonight,” said the woman. “You know how turkey just slips down you?” She still had not removed his plate.

“It’s very good,” said Maybury firmly. “But I’ve had enough.”

5 It was as if the woman were not used to such conduct, but, as this was no longer a nursery, she took the plate away.

10 There was even a slight pause, during which Maybury tried to look round the room without giving an appearance of doing so. The main point seemed to be that everyone was dressed rather formally: all the men in “dark suits”, all the women in “long dresses”. There was a wide variety of age, but, curiously again, there were more men than women. Conversation still seemed far from general. Maybury could not help wondering whether the solidity of the diet did not contribute here. Then it occurred to him that it was as if most of these people had been with one another for a long time, during which things to talk about might have run out, and possibly with little opportunity for renewal through fresh experience. He had met that in hotels.
15 Naturally, Maybury could not, without seeming rude, examine the one-third of the assembly which was seated behind him.

20 His slab of turkey appeared. He had caught up, even though by cheating. It was an enormous pile, steaming slightly, and also seeping slightly with a colourless, oily fluid. With it appeared five separate varieties of vegetable in separate dishes, brought on a tray; and a sauceboat, apparently for him alone, of specially compounded fluid, dark red and turgid. A sizeable mound of stuffing completed the repast. The middle-aged woman set it all before him swiftly but, this time, silently, with unmistakable reserve.

25 The truth was that Maybury had little appetite left. He gazed around, less furtively, to see how the rest were managing. He had to admit that, as far as he could see, they were one and all eating as if their lives depended on it: old as well as young, female as well as male; it was as if all had spent a long, unfed day in the hunting field. “Eating as if their lives depended on it,” he said again to himself; then, struck by the absurdity of the phrase when applied to eating, he picked up his knife and fork with resolution.

30 “Is everything to your liking, Mr Maybury?”

Again he had been gently taken by surprise. Mr Falkner was at his shoulder: a sleek man in the most beautiful dinner jacket, an instantly ameliorative maître d’hôtel.

“Perfect, thank you,” said Maybury. “But how did you know my name?”

“We like to remember the names of all our guests,” said Falkner, smiling.

“Yes, but how did you find out my name in the first place?”

“We like to think we are proficient at that too, Mr Maybury.”

“I am much impressed,” said Maybury. Really he felt irritated (irritated, at least), but his firm had trained him never to display irritation outside the family circle.

5 “Not at all,” said Falkner genially. “Whatever our vocation in life, we may as well do what we can to excel.” He settled the matter by dropping the subject. “Is there anything I can get for you? Anything you would like?”

“No, thank you very much. I have plenty.”

10 “Thank you, Mr Maybury. If you wish to speak to me at any time, I am normally available in my office. Now I will leave you to the enjoyment of your meal. I may tell you, in confidence, that there is steamed fruit pudding to follow.”

He went quietly forward on his round of the room, speaking to perhaps one person in three at the long, central table; mainly, it seemed, to the older people, as was no doubt to be expected. Falkner wore very elegant black suede shoes, which reminded
15 Maybury of the injury to his own leg, about which he had done nothing, though it might well be septic, even endangering the limb itself, perhaps the whole system.

He was considerably enraged by Falkner’s performance about his name, especially as he could find no answer to the puzzle. He felt that he had been placed, almost deliberately, at an undignified disadvantage. Falkner’s patronizing conduct in this
20 trifling matter was of a piece with the nannying attitude of the waitress. Moreover, was the unexplained discovery of his name such a trifle, after all? Maybury felt that it had made him vulnerable in other matters also, however undefined. It was the last straw in the matter of his eating any more turkey. He no longer had any appetite whatever.

25 He began to pass everything systematically through his mind, as he had been trained to do; and almost immediately surmised the answer. In his car was a blue-bound file which on its front bore his name: “Mr Lucas Maybury”; and this file he supposed that he must have left, name-upwards, on the driving seat, as he commonly did. All the same, the name was merely typed on a sticky label, and would not have been easy to
30 make out through the car window. But he then remembered the floodlight. Even so, quite an effort had been necessary on someone’s part, and he wondered who had made that effort. Again he guessed the answer: it was Falkner himself who had been snooping. What would Falkner have done if Maybury had parked the car outside the floodlighted area, as would have been perfectly possible? Used a torch? Perhaps even
35 skeleton keys?

That was absurd.

And how much did the whole thing matter? People in business often had these little vanities, and often had he encountered them. People would do almost anything to feed them. Probably he had one or two himself. The great thing when meeting any situation was to extract the essentials and to concentrate upon them.

To some of the people Falkner was speaking for quite a period of time, while, as Maybury noticed, those seated next to them, previously saying little in most cases, now said nothing at all, but confined themselves entirely to eating. Some of the people at the long table were not merely elderly, he had observed, but positively senile: drooling, watery-eyed, and almost hairless; but even they seemed to be eating away with the best. Maybury had the horrid idea about them that eating was all they did do. "They lived for eating": another nursery expression, Maybury reflected; and at last he had come upon those of whom it might be true. Some of these people might well relate to rich foods as alcoholics relate to excisable spirits. He found it more nauseating than any sottishness; of which he had seen a certain amount.

Falkner was proceeding so slowly, showing so much professional consideration, that he had not yet reached the lady who sat by herself parallel with Maybury, on the other side of the room. At her Maybury now stared more frankly. Black hair reached her shoulders, and she wore what appeared to be a silk evening dress, a real "model", Maybury thought (though he did not really know), in many colours; but her expression was of such sadness, suffering, and exhaustion that Maybury was sincerely shocked, especially as once she must, he was sure, have been beautiful, indeed, in a way, still was. Surely so unhappy, even tragic, a figure as that could not be ploughing through a big slab of turkey with five vegetables? Without caution or courtesy, Maybury half rose to his feet in order to look.

"Eat up, sir. Why you've hardly started!" His tormentor had quietly returned to him. What was more, the tragic lady did appear to be eating.

"I've had enough. I'm sorry, it's very good, but I've had enough."

"You said that before, sir, and, look, here you are, still eating away." He knew that he had, indeed, used those exact words. Crises are met by clichés.

"I've eaten quite enough."

"That's not necessarily for each of us to say, is it?"

"I want no more to eat of any kind. Please take all this away and just bring me a black coffee. When the time comes, if you like. I don't mind waiting." Though Maybury did mind waiting, it was necessary to remain in control.

5 The woman did the last thing Maybury could have expected her to do. She picked up his laden plate (he had at least helped himself to everything) and, with force, dashed it on the floor. Even then the plate itself did not break, but gravy and five vegetables and rich stuffing spread across the thick, patterned, wall-to-wall carpet. Complete, in place of comparative, silence followed in the whole room; though there was still, as Maybury even then observed, the muted clashing of cutlery. Indeed, his own knife
10 and fork were still in his hands.

Falkner returned round the bottom end of the long table.

"Mulligan," he asked, "how many more times?" His tone was as quiet as ever. Maybury had not realized that the alarming woman was Irish.

15 "Mr Maybury," Falkner continued. "I entirely understand your difficulty. There is naturally no obligation to partake of anything you do not wish. I am only sorry for what has happened. It must seem very poor service on our part. Perhaps you would prefer to go into our lounge? Would you care simply for some coffee?"

"Yes," said Maybury, concentrating upon the essential. "I should, please. Indeed, I had already ordered a black coffee. Could I possibly have a pot of it?"

20 He had to step with care over the mess on the floor, looking downwards. As he did so, he saw something most curious. A central rail ran the length of the long table a few inches above the floor. To this rail, one of the male guests was attached by a fetter round his left ankle.

25 Maybury, now considerably shaken, had rather expected to be alone in the lounge until the coffee arrived. But he had no sooner dropped down upon one of the massive sofas (it could easily have seated five in a row, at least two of them stout), than the handsome boy appeared from somewhere and proceeded merely to stand about, as at an earlier phase of the evening. There were no illustrated papers to be seen, nor even brochures about Beautiful Britain, and Maybury found the lad's presence irksome. All
30 the same, he did not quite dare to say, "There's nothing I want." He could think of nothing to say or to do; nor did the boy speak, or seem to have anything particular to do either. It was obvious that his presence could hardly be required there when everyone was in the dining room. Presumably they would soon be passing on to fruit pudding. Maybury was aware that he had yet to pay his bill. There was a baffled but
35 considerable pause.

Much to his surprise, it was Mulligan who in the end brought him the coffee. It was a single cup, not a pot; and even the cup was of such a size that Maybury, for once that evening, could have done with a bigger. At once he divined that coffee was outside the regime of the place, and that he was being specially compensated, though he might well have to pay extra for it. He had vaguely supposed that Mulligan would have been helping to mop up in the dining-room. Mulligan, in fact, seemed quite undisturbed.

“Sugar, sir?” she said.

“One lump, please,” said Maybury, eyeing the size of the cup.

He did not fail to notice that, before going, she exchanged a glance with the handsome lad. He was young enough to be her son, and the glance might mean anything or nothing.

While Maybury was trying to make the most of his meagre coffee and to ignore the presence of the lad, who must surely be bored, the door from the dining-room opened, and the tragic lady from the other side of the room appeared.

“Close the door, will you?” she said to the boy. The boy closed the door, and then stood about again, watching them.

“Do you mind if I join you?” the lady asked Maybury.

“I should be delighted.”

She was really rather lovely in her melancholy way, her dress was as splendid as Maybury had supposed, and there was in her demeanour an element that could only be called stately. Maybury was unaccustomed to that.

She sat, not at the other end of the sofa, but at the centre of it. It struck Maybury that the rich way she was dressed might almost have been devised to harmonize with the rich way the room was decorated. She wore complicated, oriental-looking earrings, with pink translucent stones, like rosé diamonds (perhaps they were diamonds); and silver shoes. Her perfume was heavy and distinctive.

“My name is Cecile Celimena,” she said. “How do you do? I am supposed to be related to the composer, Chaminade.”

“How do you do?” said Maybury. “My name is Lucas Maybury, and my only important relation is Solway Short. In fact, he’s my cousin.”

They shook hands. Her hand was very soft and white, and she wore a number of rings, which Maybury thought looked real and valuable (though he could not really tell). In order to shake hands with him, she turned the whole upper part of her body towards him.

5 “Who is that gentleman you mention?” she asked.

“Solway Short? The racing motorist. You must have seen him on the television.”

“I do not watch the television.”

“Quite right. It’s almost entirely a waste of time.”

“If you do not wish to waste time, why are you at The Hospice?”

10 The lad, still observing them, shifted, noticeably, from one leg to the other.

“I am here for dinner. I am just passing through.”

“Oh! You are going then?”

Maybury hesitated. She was attractive and, for the moment, he did not wish to go. “I suppose so. When I’ve paid my bill and found out where I can get some petrol. My tank’s almost empty. As a matter of fact, I’m lost. I’ve lost my way.”

15 “Most of us here are lost.”

“Why here? What makes you come here?”

“We come for the food and the peace and the warmth and the rest.”

“A tremendous amount of food, I thought.”

20 “That’s necessary. It’s the restorative, you might say.”

“I’m not sure that I quite fit in,” said Maybury. And then he added: “I shouldn’t have thought that you did either.”

“Oh, but I do! Whatever makes you think not?” She seemed quite anxious about it, so that Maybury supposed he had taken the wrong line.

25 He made the best of it. “It’s just that you seem a little different from what I have seen of the others.”

“In what way, different?” she asked, really anxious, and looking at him with concentration.

“To start with, more beautiful. You are very beautiful,” he said, even though the lad was there, certainly taking in every word.

5 “That is kind of you to say.” Unexpectedly she stretched across the short distance between them and took his hand. “What did you say your name was?”

“Lucas Maybury.”

“Do people call you Luke?”

“No, I dislike it. I’m not a Luke sort of person.”

10 “But your wife can’t call you Lucas?”

“I’m afraid she does.” It was a fishing question he could have done without.

“Lucas? Oh no, it’s such a cold name.” She was still holding his hand.

“I’m very sorry about it. Would you like me to order you some coffee?”

15 “No, no. Coffee is not right; it is stimulating, wakeful, overexerting, unquiet.” She was gazing at him again with sad eyes.

“This is a curious place,” said Maybury, giving her hand a squeeze. It was surely becoming remarkable that none of the other guests had yet appeared.

“I could not live without The Hospice,” she replied.

“Do you come here often?” It was a ludicrously conventional form of words.

20 “Of course. Life would be impossible otherwise. All those people in the world without enough food, living without love, without even proper clothes to keep the cold out.”

During dinner it had become as hot in the lounge, Maybury thought, as it had been in the dining-room.

25 Her tragic face sought his understanding. None the less, the line she had taken up was not a favourite of his. He preferred problems to which solutions were at least possible. He had been warned against the other kind.

“Yes,” he said. “I know what you mean, of course.”

“There are millions and millions of people all over the world with no clothes at all,” she cried, withdrawing her hand.

“Not quite,” Maybury said, smiling. “Not quite that. Or not yet.”

5 He knew the risks perfectly well, and thought as little about them as possible. One had to survive, and also to look after one’s dependents.

“In any case,” he continued, trying to lighten the tone, “that hardly applies to you. I have seldom seen a more gorgeous dress.”

10 “Yes,” she replied with simple gravity. “It comes from Rome. Would you like to touch it?” Naturally, Maybury would have liked, but, equally naturally, was held back by the presence of the watchful lad.

“Touch it,” she commanded in a low voice. “God, what are you waiting for? Touch it.” She seized his left hand again and forced it against her warm, silky breast. The lad seemed to take no more and no less notice than of anything else.

15 “Forget. Let go. What is life for, for God’s sake?” There was a passionate earnestness about her which might rob any such man as Maybury of all assessment, but he was still essentially outside the situation. As a matter of fact, he had never in his life lost all control, and he was pretty sure by now that, for better or for worse, he was incapable of it.

20 She twisted round until her legs were extended the length of the sofa, and her head was on his lap, or more precisely on his thighs. She had moved so deftly as not even to have disordered her skirt. Her perfume wafted upwards.

25 “Stop glancing at Vincent,” she gurgled up at him. “I’ll tell you something about Vincent. Though you may think he looks like a Greek God, the simple fact is that he hasn’t got what it takes, he’s impotent.”

Maybury was embarrassed, of course. All the same, what he reflected was that often there were horses for courses, and often no more to be said about a certain kind of situation than that one thing.

30 It did not matter much what he reflected, because when she had spoken, Vincent had brusquely left the room through what Maybury supposed to be the service door.

“Thank the Lord,” he could not help remarking naïvely. “He’s gone for reinforcements,” she said. “We’ll soon see.”

5 Where were the other guests? Where, by now, could they be? All the same, Maybury’s spirits were authentically rising, and he began caressing her more intimately.

Then, suddenly, it seemed that everyone was in the room at once, and this time all talking and fussing.

She sat herself up, none too precipitately, and with her lips close to his ear, said, “Come to me later. Number 23.”

10 It was quite impossible for Maybury to point out that he was not staying the night in The Hospice.

Falkner had appeared.

“To bed, all,” he cried genially, subduing the crepitation on the instant.

15 Maybury, unentangled once more, looked at his watch. It seemed to be precisely ten o’clock. That, no doubt, was the point. Still it seemed very close upon a heavy meal.

No one moved much, but no one spoke either.

“To bed, all of you,” said Falkner again, this time in a tone which might almost be described as roguish. Maybury’s lady rose to her feet.

20 All of them filtered away, Maybury’s lady among them. She had spoken no further word, made no further gesture.

Maybury was alone with Falkner.

“Let me remove your cup,” said Falkner courteously.

“Before I ask for my bill,” said Maybury, “I wonder if you could tell me where I might possibly find some petrol at this hour?”

25 “Are you out of petrol?” enquired Falkner.

“Almost.”

“There’s nothing open at night within twenty miles. Not nowadays. Something to do with our new friends, the Arabs, I believe. All I can suggest is that I syphon some petrol from the tank of our own vehicle. It is a quite large vehicle and it has a large tank.”

- 5 “I couldn’t possibly put you to that trouble.” In any case, he, Maybury, did not know exactly how to do it. He had heard of it, but it had never arisen before in his own life.

The lad, Vincent, reappeared, still looking pink, Maybury thought, though it was difficult to be sure with such a glowing skin. Vincent began to lock up; a quite serious process, it seemed, rather as in great-grandparental days, when prowling
10 desperadoes were to be feared.

“No trouble at all, Mr Maybury,” said Falkner. “Vincent here can do it easily, or another member of my staff.”

“Well,” said Maybury, “if it would be all right...”

- 15 “Vincent,” directed Falkner, “don’t bolt and padlock the front door yet. Mr Maybury intends to leave us.”

“Very good,” said Vincent, gruffly.

“Now if we could go to your car, Mr Maybury, you could then drive it round to the back. I will show you the way. I must apologise for putting you to this extra trouble, but the other vehicle takes some time to start, especially at night.”

- 20 Vincent had opened the front door for them. “After you, Mr Maybury,” said Falkner.

Where it had been excessively hot within, it duly proved to be excessively cold without. The floodlight had been turned off. The moon had “gone in”, as Maybury believed the saying was; and all the stars had apparently gone in with it.

- 25 Still, the distance to the car was not great. Maybury soon found it in the thick darkness, with Falkner coming quietly step by step behind him.

“Perhaps I had better go back and get a torch?” remarked Falkner.

- 30 So there duly was a torch. It brought to Maybury’s mind the matter of the office file with his name on it, and, as he unlocked the car door, there the file was, exactly as he had supposed, and, assuredly, name uppermost. Maybury threw it across to the back seat.

Falkner's electric torch was a heavy service object which drenched a wide area in cold, white light.

"May I sit beside you, Mr Maybury?" He closed the offside door behind him.

5 Maybury had already turned on the headlights, torch or no torch, and was pushing at the starter, which seemed obdurate.

10 It was not, he thought, that there was anything wrong with it, but rather that there was something wrong with him. The sensation was exactly like a nightmare. He had of course done it hundreds of times, probably thousands of times; but now, when after all it really mattered, he simply could not manage it, had, quite incredibly, somehow lost the simple knack of it. He often endured bad dreams of just this kind. He found time with part of his mind to wonder whether this was not a bad dream. But it was to be presumed not, since now he did not wake, as we soon do when once we realize that we are dreaming.

15 "I wish I could be of some help," remarked Falkner, who had shut off his torch, "but I am not accustomed to the make of car. I might easily do more harm than good." He spoke with his usual bland geniality.

20 Maybury was irritated again. The make of car was one of the commonest there is: trust the firm for that. All the same, he knew it was entirely his own fault that he could not make the car start, and not in the least Falkner's. He felt as if he were going mad. "I don't quite know what to suggest," he said; and added: "If, as you say, there's no garage."

"Perhaps Cromie could be of assistance," said Falkner. "Cromie has been with us quite a long time and is a wizard with any mechanical problem."

25 No one could say that Falkner was pressing Maybury to stay the night, or even hinting towards it, as one might expect. Maybury wondered whether the funny place was not, in fact, full up. It seemed the most likely answer. Not that Maybury wished to stay the night: far from it.

"I'm not sure," he said, "that I have the right to disturb anyone else."

30 "Cromie is on night duty," replied Falkner. "He is always on night duty. That is what we employ him for. I will fetch him."

He turned on the torch once more, stepped out of the car, and disappeared into the house, shutting the front door behind him, lest the cold air enter.

In the end, the front door reopened, and Falkner re-emerged. He still wore no coat over his dinner suit, and seemed to ignore the cold. Falkner was followed by a burly but shapeless and shambling figure, whom Maybury first saw indistinctly standing behind Falkner in the light from inside the house.

- 5 “Cromie will soon put things to rights,” said Falkner, opening the door of the car. “Won’t you, Cromie?” It was much as one speaks to a friendly retriever.

But there was little, Maybury felt, that was friendly about Cromie. Maybury had to admit to himself that on the instant he found Cromie alarming, even though, what with one thing and another, there was little to be seen of him.

- 10 “Now what exactly seems wrong, Mr Maybury?” asked Falkner. “Just tell Cromie what it is.”

- Falkner himself had not attempted to re-enter the car, but Cromie forced himself in and was sprawling in the front seat, next to Maybury, where Angela normally sat. He really did seem a very big, bulging person, but Maybury decisively preferred not to look at him, though the glow cast backwards from the headlights provided a certain illumination.
- 15

- Maybury could not acknowledge that for some degrading reason he was unable to operate the starter, and so had to claim there was something wrong with it. He was unable not to see Cromie’s huge, badly misshapen, yellow hands, both of them, as he tugged with both of them at the knob, forcing it in and out with such violence that Maybury cried out: “Less force. You’ll wreck it.”
- 20

“Careful, Cromie,” said Falkner from outside the car. “Most of Cromie’s work is on a big scale,” he explained to Maybury.

- But violence proved effective, as so often. Within seconds, the car engine was humming away.
- 25

“Thank you very much,” said Maybury.

Cromie made no detectable response, nor did he move.

“Come on out, Cromie,” said Falkner. “Come on out of it.”

Cromie duly extricated himself and shambled off into the darkness.

- 30 “Now,” said Maybury, brisking up as the engine purred. “Where do we go for the petrol?”

There was the slightest of pauses. Then Falkner spoke from the dimness outside. "Mr Maybury, I have remembered something. It is not petrol that we have in our tank. It is, of course, diesel oil. I must apologise for such a stupid mistake."

5 Maybury was not merely irritated, not merely scared: he was infuriated. With rage and confusion he found it impossible to speak at all. No one in the modern world could confuse diesel oil and petrol in that way. But what could he possibly do?

Falkner, standing outside the open door of the car, spoke again. "I am extremely sorry, Mr Maybury. Would you permit me to make some amends by inviting you to spend the night with us free of charge, except perhaps for the dinner?"

10 Within the last few minutes Maybury had suspected that this moment was bound to come in one form or another.

"Thank you," he said less than graciously. "I suppose I had better accept."

"We shall try to make you comfortable," said Falkner.

15 Maybury turned off the headlights, climbed out of the car once more, shut and, for what it was worth, locked the door, and followed Falkner back into the house. This time Falkner completed the locking and bolting of the front door that he had instructed Vincent to omit.

"I have no luggage of any kind," remarked Maybury, still very much on the defensive.

20 "That may solve itself," said Falkner, straightening up from the bottom bolt and smoothing his dinner jacket. "There's something I ought to explain. But will you first excuse me a moment?" He went out through the door at the back of the lounge.

Hotels really have become far too hot, thought Maybury. It positively addled the brain.

25 Falkner returned. "There is something I ought to explain," he said again. "We have no single rooms, partly because many of our visitors prefer not to be alone at night. The best we can do for you in your emergency, Mr Maybury, is to offer you the share of a room with another guest. It is a large room and there are two beds. It is a sheer stroke of good luck that at present there is only one guest in the room, Mr Bannard.
30 Mr Bannard will be glad of your company, I am certain, and you will be quite safe with him. He is a very pleasant person, I can assure you. I have just sent a message up asking him if he can possibly come down, so that I can introduce you. He is always very helpful, and I think he will be here in a moment. Mr Bannard has been with us

for some time, so that I am sure he will be able to fit you up with pyjamas and so forth."

5 It was just about the last thing that Maybury wanted from any point of view, but he had learned that it was of a kind that is peculiarly difficult to protest against, without somehow putting oneself in the wrong with other people. Besides he supposed that he was now committed to a night in the place, and therefore to all the implications, whatever they might be, or very nearly so.

"I should like to telephone my wife, if I may," Maybury said. Angela had been steadily on his mind for some time.

10 "I fear that's impossible, Mr Maybury," replied Falkner. "I'm so sorry."

"How can it be impossible?"

"In order to reduce tension and sustain the atmosphere that our guests prefer, we have no external telephone. Only an internal link between my quarters and the proprietors."

15 "But how can you run an hotel in the modern world without a telephone?"

"Most of our guests are regulars. Many of them come again and again, and the last thing they come for is to hear a telephone ringing the whole time with all the strain it involves."

"They must be half round the bend," snapped Maybury, before he could stop himself.

20 "Mr Maybury," replied Falkner, "I have to remind you of two things. The first is that I have invited you to be our guest in the fuller sense of the word. The second is that, although you attach so much importance to efficiency, you none the less appear to have set out on a long journey at night with very little petrol in your tank. Possibly you should think yourself fortunate that you are not spending the night stranded on
25 some motorway."

"I'm sorry," said Maybury, "but I simply must telephone my wife. Soon she'll be out of her mind with worry."

"I shouldn't think so, Mr Maybury," said Falkner smiling. "Concerned, we must hope; but not quite out of her mind."

30 Maybury could have hit him, but at that moment a stranger entered.

“Ah, Mr Bannard,” said Falkner, and introduced them. They actually shook hands.
“You won’t mind, Mr Bannard, if Mr Maybury shares your room?”

5 Bannard was a slender, bony little man, of about Maybury’s age. He was bald, with a rim of curly red hair. He had slightly glaucous grey-green eyes of the kind that often go with red hair. In the present environment, he was quite perky, but Maybury wondered how he would make out in the world beyond. Perhaps, however, this was because Bannard was too shrimp-like to look his best in pyjamas.

“I should be delighted to share my room with anyone,” replied Bannard. “I’m lonely by myself.”

10 “Splendid,” said Falkner coolly. “Perhaps you’d lead Mr Maybury upstairs and lend him some pyjamas? You must remember that he is a stranger to us and doesn’t yet know all our ways.”

“Delighted, delighted,” exclaimed Bannard.

15 “Well, then,” said Falkner. “Is there anything you would like, Mr Maybury, before you go upstairs?”

“Only a telephone,” rejoined Maybury, still recalcitrant. He simply did not believe Falkner. No one in the modern world could live without a telephone, let alone run a business without one. He had begun uneasily to wonder if Falkner had spoken the whole truth about the petrol and the diesel fuel either.

20 “Anything you would like that we are in a position to provide, Mr Maybury?” persisted Falkner, with offensive specificity.

“There’s no telephone here,” put in Bannard, whose voice was noticeably high, even squeaky.

25 “In that case, nothing,” said Maybury. “But I don’t know what my wife will do with herself.”

“None of us knows that,” said Bannard superfluously, and cackled for a second.

“Good-night, Mr Maybury. Thank you, Mr Bannard.”

30 Maybury was almost surprised to discover, as he followed Bannard upstairs, that it seemed a perfectly normal hotel, though overheated and decorated over-heavily. On the first landing was a full-size reproduction of a chieftain in scarlet tartan by Raeburn. Maybury knew the picture, because it had been chosen for the firm’s

calendar one year, though ever since they had used girls. Bannard lived on the second floor, where the picture on the landing was smaller, and depicted ladies and gentlemen in riding dress taking refreshments together.

“Not too much noise,” said Bannard. “We have some very light sleepers amongst us.”

- 5 The corridors were down to half-illumination for the night watches, and distinctly sinister. Maybury crept foolishly along and almost stole into Bannard’s room.

“No,” said Bannard in a giggling whisper. “Not Number 13, not yet Number 12 A.”

As a matter of fact Maybury had not noticed the number on the door that Bannard was now cautiously closing, and he did not feel called upon to rejoin.

- 10 “Do be quiet taking your things off, old man,” said Bannard softly. “When once you’ve woken people who’ve been properly asleep, you can never quite tell. It’s a bad thing to do.”

- It was a large square room, and the two beds were in exactly opposite corners, somewhat to Maybury’s relief. The light had been on when they entered. Maybury
15 surmised that even the unnecessary clicking of switches was to be eschewed.

“That’s your bed,” whispered Bannard, pointing jocularly.

So far Maybury had removed only his shoes. He could have done without Bannard staring at him and without Bannard’s affable grin.

- 20 “Or perhaps you’d rather we did something before settling down?” whispered Bannard.

“No, thank you,” replied Maybury. “It’s been a long day.” He was trying to keep his voice reasonably low, but he absolutely refused to whisper.

- 25 “To be sure it has,” said Bannard, rising to match the volume that Maybury had employed. “Night-night then. The best thing is to get to sleep quickly.” His tone was similar to that which seemed habitual with Falkner.

Bannard climbed agilely into his own bed, and lay on his back peering at Maybury over the sheets.

“Hang your suit in the cupboard,” said Bannard, who had already done likewise. “There’s room.”

“Thank you,” said Maybury. “Where do I find the pyjamas?”

“Top drawer,” said Bannard. “Help yourself. They’re all alike.”

And, indeed, the drawer proved to be virtually filled with apparently identical suits of pyjamas.

5 “It’s between seasons,” said Bannard. “Neither proper summer, nor proper winter.”

“Many thanks for the loan,” said Maybury, though the pyjamas were considerably too small for him.

“The bathroom’s in there,” said Bannard.

10 When Maybury returned, he opened the door of the cupboard. It was a big cupboard and it was almost filled by a long line of (presumably) Bannard’s suits.

“There’s room,” said Bannard once more. “Find yourself an empty hanger. Make yourself at home.”

15 While balancing his trousers on the hanger and suspending it from the rail, Maybury again became aware of the injury to his leg. He had hustled so rapidly into Bannard’s pyjamas that, for better or for worse, he had not even looked at the scar.

“What’s the matter?” asked Bannard on the instant. “Hurt yourself, have you?”

“It was a damned cat scratched me,” replied Maybury, without thinking very much.

20 But this time he decided to look. With some difficulty and some pain, he rolled up the tight pyjama leg. It was a quite nasty gash and there was much dried blood. He realized that he had not even thought about washing the wound. In so far as he had been worrying about anything habitual, he had been worrying about Angela.

“Don’t show it to me,” squeaked out Bannard, forgetting not to make a noise. All the same, he was sitting up in bed and staring as if his eyes would pop. “It’s bad for me to see things like that. I’m upset by them.”

25 “Don’t worry,” said Maybury. “I’m sure it’s not as serious as it looks.” In fact, he was far from sure; and he was aware also that it had not been quite what Bannard was concerned about.

“I don’t want to know anything about it,” said Bannard.

Maybury made no reply but simply rolled down the pyjama leg. About his injury too there was plainly nothing to be done. Even a request for Vaseline might lead to hysterics. Maybury tried to concentrate upon the reflection that if nothing worse had followed from the gash by now, then nothing worse might ever follow.

- 5 Bannard, however, was still sitting up in bed. He was looking pale. "I come here to forget things like that," he said. "We all do." His voice was shaking.

"Shall I turn the light out?" enquired Maybury. "As I'm the one who's still up?"

"I don't usually do that " said Bannard, reclining once more, none the less. "It can make things unnecessarily difficult But there's you to be considered too."

- 10 "It's your room," said Maybury, hesitating.

"All right," said Bannard. "If you wish. Turn it out. Tonight anyway." Maybury did his injured leg no good when stumbling back to his bed. All the same, he managed to arrive there.

- 15 "I'm only here for one night," he said more to the darkness than to Bannard. "You'll be on your own again tomorrow."

- Bannard made no reply, and, indeed, it seemed to Maybury as if he were no longer there, that Bannard was not an organism that could function in the dark. Maybury refrained from raising any question of drawing back a curtain (the curtains were as long and heavy as elsewhere), or of letting in a little night air. Things, he felt, were
20 better left more or less as they were.

It was completely dark. It was completely silent. It was far too hot.

Maybury wondered what the time was. He had lost all touch. Unfortunately, his watch lacked a luminous dial.

- 25 He doubted whether he would ever sleep, but the night had to be endured somehow. For Angela it must be even harder – far harder. At the best, he had never seen himself as a first-class husband, able to provide a superfluity, eager to be protective. Things would become quite impossible, if he were to lose a leg. But, with modern medicine, that might be avoidable, even at the worst: he should be able to continue struggling on for some time yet.

- 30 As stealthily as possible he insinuated himself from between the burning blankets and sheets on to the surface of the bed. He lay there like a dying fish, trying not to make another movement of any kind.

He became almost cataleptic with inner exertion. It was not a promising recipe for slumber. In the end, he thought he could detect Bannard's breathing, far, far away. So Bannard was still there. Fantasy and reality are different things. No one could tell whether Bannard slept or waked, but it had in any case become a quite important aim not to resume general conversation with Bannard. Half a lifetime passed.

There could be no doubt, now, that Bannard was both still in the room and also awake. Perceptibly, he was on the move. Maybury's body contracted with speculation as to whether Bannard in the total blackness was making towards his corner. Maybury felt that he was only half his normal size.

Bannard edged and groped interminably. Of course Maybury had been unfair to him in extinguishing the light, and the present anxiety was doubtless no more than the price to be paid.

Bannard himself seemed certainly to be entering into the spirit of the situation: possibly he had not turned the light on because he could not reach the switch; but there seemed more to it than that. Bannard could be thought of as committed to a positive effort in the direction of silence, in order that Maybury, the guest for a night, should not be disturbed. Maybury could hardly hear him moving at all, though perhaps it was a gamble whether this was consideration or menace. Maybury would hardly have been surprised if the next event had been hands on his throat.

But, in fact, the next event was Bannard reaching the door and opening it, with vast delicacy and slowness. It was a considerable anticlimax, and not palpably outside the order of nature, but Maybury did not feel fully reassured as he rigidly watched the column of dim light from the passage slowly widen and then slowly narrow until it vanished with the faint click of the handle. Plainly there was little to worry about, after all, but Maybury had probably reached that level of anxiety where almost any new event merely causes new stress. Soon, moreover, there would be the stress of Bannard's return. Maybury half realized that he was in a grotesque condition to be so upset, when Bannard was, in fact, showing him all possible consideration. Once more he reflected that poor Angela's plight was far worse.

Thinking about Angela's plight, and how sweet, at the bottom of everything, she really was, Maybury felt more wakeful than ever, as he awaited Bannard's return, surely imminent, surely. Sleep was impossible until Bannard had returned.

But still Bannard did not return. Maybury began to wonder whether something had gone wrong with his own time faculty, such as it was; something, that is, of medical significance. That whole evening and night, from soon after his commitment to the recommended route, he had been in doubt about his place in the universe, about what

people called the state of his nerves. Here was evidence that he had good reason for anxiety.

Then, from somewhere within the house, came a shattering, ear-piercing scream, and then another, and another. It was impossible to tell whether the din came from
5 near or far; still less whether it was female or male. Maybury had not known that the human organism could make so loud a noise, even in the bitterest distress. It was shattering to listen to; especially in the enclosed, hot, total darkness. And this was nothing momentary: the screaming went on and on, a paroxysm, until Maybury had to clutch at himself not to scream in response.

10 He fell off the bed and floundered about for the heavy curtains. Some light on the scene there must be; if possible, some new air in the room. He found the curtains within a moment, and dragged back first one, and then the other.

There was no more light than before.

Shutters, perhaps? Maybury's arm stretched out gingerly. He could feel neither wood
15 nor metal.

The light switch. It must be found.

While Maybury fell about in the darkness, the screaming stopped on a ghoulis
gurg: perhaps as if the sufferer had vomited immensely and then passed out; or
perhaps as if the sufferer had in mercy passed away altogether. Maybury continued
20 to search.

It was harder than ever to say how long it took, but in the end he found the switch, and the immediate mystery was explained. Behind the drawn-back curtains was, as the children say, just wall. The room apparently had no window. The curtains were mere decoration.

25 All was silent once more: once more extremely silent. Bannard's bed was turned back as neatly as if in the full light of day.

Maybury cast off Bannard's pyjamas and, as quickly as his state permitted, resumed his own clothes. Not that he had any very definite course of action. Simply it seemed better to be fully dressed. He looked vaguely inside his pocket-book to confirm that
30 his money was still there.

He went to the door and made cautiously to open it and seek some hint into the best thing for him to do, the best way to make off.

The door was unopenable. There was no movement in it at all. It had been locked at the least; perhaps more. If Bannard had done it, he had been astonishingly quiet about it: conceivably experienced.

Maybury tried to apply himself to thinking calmly.

- 5 The upshot was that once more, and even more hurriedly, he removed his clothes, disposed of them suitably, and resumed Bannard's pyjamas.

10 It would be sensible once more to turn out the light; to withdraw to bed, between the sheets, if possible; to stand by, as before. But Maybury found that turning out the light, the resultant total blackness, were more than he could face, however expedient.

Ineptly, he sat on the side of his bed, still trying to think things out, to plan sensibly. Would Bannard, after all this time, ever, in fact, return? At least during the course of that night?

15 He became aware that the electric light bulb had begun to crackle and fizzle. Then, with no further sound, it simply failed. It was not, Maybury thought, some final authoritative lights-out all over the house. It was merely that the single bulb had given out, however unfortunately from his own point of view: an isolated industrial incident.

20 He lay there, half in and half out, for a long time. He concentrated on the thought that nothing had actually happened that was dangerous. Ever since his schooldays (and, indeed, during them) he had become increasingly aware that there were many things strange to him, most of which had proved in the end to be apparently quite harmless.

25 Then Bannard was creeping back into the dark room. Maybury's ears had picked up no faint sound of a step in the passage, and, more remarkable, there had been no noise, either, of a turned key, let alone, perhaps, of a drawn bolt. Maybury's view of the bulb failure was confirmed by a repetition of the widening and narrowing column of light, dim, but probably no dimmer than before. Up to a point, lights were still on elsewhere. Bannard, considerate as before, did not try to turn on the light in the
30 room. He shut the door with extraordinary skill, and Maybury could just, though only just, hear him slithering into his bed.

Still, there was one unmistakable development: at Bannard's return, the dark room had filled with perfume; the perfume favoured, long ago, as it seemed, by the lady who had been so charming to Maybury in the lounge. Smell is, in any case,

notoriously the most recollective of the senses. Almost at once, this time, Bannard not merely fell obtrusively asleep, but was so-on snoring quite loudly.

5 Maybury had every reason to be at least irritated by everything that was happening, but instead he soon fell asleep himself. So long as Bannard was asleep, he was at least in abeyance as an active factor in the situation; and many perfumes have their own drowsiness, as Iago remarked. Angela passed temporarily from the forefront of Maybury's mind.

10 Then he was awake again. The light was on once more, and Maybury supposed that he had been awakened deliberately, because Bannard was standing there by his bed. Where and how had he found a new light bulb? Perhaps he kept a supply in a drawer. This seemed so likely that Maybury thought no more of the matter.

It was very odd, however, in another way also.

15 When Maybury had been at school, he had sometimes found difficulty in distinguishing certain boys from certain other boys. It had been a very large school, and boys do often look alike. None the less, it was a situation that Maybury thought best to keep to himself, at the time and since. He had occasionally made responses or approaches based upon misidentifications: but had been fortunate in never being made to suffer for it bodily, even though he had suffered much in his self-regard.

20 And now it was the same. Was the man standing there really Bannard? One obvious thing was that Bannard had an aureole or fringe of red hair, whereas this man's fringe was quite grey. There was also a different expression and general look, but Maybury was more likely to have been mistaken about that. The pyjamas seemed to be the same, but that meant little.

25 "I was just wondering if you'd care to talk for a bit," said Bannard. One had to assume that Bannard it was; at least to start off with. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I was just making sure."

"That's all right, I suppose," said Maybury.

30 "I'm over my first beauty sleep," said Bannard. "It can be lonely during the night." Under all the circumstances it was a distinctly absurd remark, but undoubtedly it was in Bannard's idiom.

"What was all that screaming?" enquired Maybury.

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Bannard. “I suppose I slept through it. But I can imagine. We soon learn to take no notice. There are sleepwalkers for that matter, from time to time.”

“I suppose that’s why the bedroom doors are so hard to open?”

5 “Not a bit,” said Bannard, but he then added, “Well, partly, perhaps. Yes, partly. I think so. But it’s just a knack really. We’re not actually locked in, you know.” He giggled. “But what makes you ask? You don’t need to leave the room in order to go to the loo. I showed you, old man.”

10 So it really must be Bannard, even though his eyes seemed to be a different shape, and even a different colour, as the hard light caught them when he laughed.

“I expect I was sleepwalking myself,” said Maybury warily.

15 “There’s no need to get the wind up,” said Bannard, “like a kid at a new school. All that goes on here is based on the simplest of natural principles: eating good food regularly, sleeping long hours, not taxing the overworked brain. The food is particularly important. You just wait for breakfast, old man, and see what you get. The most tremendous spread, I promise you.”

“How do you manage to eat it all?” asked Maybury. Dinner alone was too much for me.”

20 “We simply let Nature have its way. Or rather, perhaps, her way. We give Nature her head.”

“But it’s not natural to eat so much.”

“That’s all you know,” said Bannard. “What you are old man, is effete.” He giggled as Bannard had giggled, but he looked somehow unlike Maybury’s recollection of Bannard. Maybury was almost certain there was some decisive difference.

25 The room still smelt of the woman’s perfume; or perhaps it was largely Bannard who smelt of it, Bannard who now stood so close to Maybury. It was embarrassing that Bannard, if he really had to rise from his bed and wake Maybury up, did not sit down; though preferably not on Maybury’s blanket.

30 “I’m not saying there’s no suffering here,” continued Bannard. “But where in the world are you exempt from suffering? At least no one rots away in some attic – or wretched bed-sitter, more likely. Here there are no single rooms. We all help one another. What can you and I do for one another, old man?”

He took a step nearer and bent slightly over Maybury's face. His pyjamas really reeked of perfume.

It was essential to be rid of him; but essential to do it uncontentiously. The prospect should accept the representative's point of view as far as possible unawares.

- 5 "Perhaps we could talk for just five or ten minutes more," said Maybury, "and then I should like to go to sleep again, if you will excuse me. I ought to explain that I slept very little last night owing to my wife's illness."

"Is your wife pretty?" asked Bannard. "Really pretty? With this and that?" He made a couple of gestures, quite conventional though not aforetime seen in drawing rooms.

- 10 "Of course she is," said Maybury. "What do you think?"

"Does she really turn you on? Make you lose control of yourself?"

"Naturally," said Maybury. He tried to smile, to show he had a sense of humour which could help him to cope with tasteless questions.

- 15 Bannard now not merely sat on Maybury's bed, but pushed his frame against Maybury's legs, which there was not much room to withdraw, owing to the tightness of the blanket, as Bannard sat on it.

"Tell us about it," said Bannard. "Tell us exactly what it's like to be a married man. Has it changed your whole life? Transformed everything?"

"Not exactly. In any case, I married years ago."

- 20 "So now there is someone else. I understand."

"No, actually there is not."

"Love's old sweet song still sings to you?"

"If you like to put it like that, yes. I love my wife. Besides she's ill. And we have a son. There's him to consider too."

- 25 "How old is your son?"

"Nearly sixteen."

"What colour are his hair and eyes?"

“Really, I’m not sure. No particular colour. He’s not a baby, you know.”

“Are his hands still soft?”

“I shouldn’t think so.”

“Do you love your son, then?”

5 “In his own way, yes, of course.”

“I should love him, were he mine, and my wife too.” It seemed to Maybury that Bannard said it with real sentiment. What was more, he looked at least twice as sad as when Maybury had first seen him: twice as old, and twice as sad. It was all
10 ludicrous, and Maybury at last felt really tired, despite the lump of Bannard looming over him, and looking different.

“Time’s up for me,” said Maybury. “I’m sorry. Do you mind if we go to sleep again?”

Bannard rose at once to his feet, turned his back on Maybury’s corner, and went to his bed without a word, thus causing further embarrassment.

15 It was again left to Maybury to turn out the light, and to shove his way back to bed through the blackness.

Bannard had left more than a waft of the perfume behind him; which perhaps helped Maybury to sleep once more almost immediately, despite all things.

20 Could the absurd conversation with Bannard have been a dream? Certainly what happened next was a dream: for there was Angela in her nightdress with her hands on her poor head, crying out “Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” Maybury could not but comply, and in Angela’s place, there was the boy, Vincent, with early morning tea for him. Perforce the light was on once more: but that was not a matter to be gone into.

“Good morning, Mr Maybury.”

“Good morning, Vincent.” Bannard already had his tea.

25 Each of them had a pot, a cup, jugs of milk and hot water, and a plate of bread and butter, all set on a tray. There were eight large triangular slices each.

“No sugar,” cried out Bannard genially. “Sugar kills appetite.”

Perfect rubbish, Maybury reflected; and squinted across at Bannard, recollecting his last rubbishy conversation. By the light of morning, even if it were but the same electric light, Bannard looked much more himself, fluffy red aureole and all. He looked quite rested. He munched away at his bread and butter. Maybury thought it best to go through the motions of following suit. From over there Bannard could hardly see the details.

“Race you to the bathroom, old man,” Bannard cried out.

“Please go first,” responded Maybury soberly. As he had no means of conveying the bread and butter off the premises, he hoped, with the aid of the towel, to conceal it in his skimpy pyjamas jacket, and push it down the water closet. Even Bannard would probably not attempt to throw his arms round him and so uncover the offence.

Down in the lounge, there they all were, with Falkner presiding indefinably but genially. Wan though authentic sunlight trickled in from the outer world, but Maybury observed that the front door was still bolted and chained. It was the first thing he looked for. Universal expectation was detectable: of breakfast, Maybury assumed. Bannard, at all times shrimpish, was simply lost in the throng. Cecile he could not see, but he made a point of not looking very hard. In any case, several of the people looked new, or at least different. Possibly it was a further example of the phenomenon Maybury had encountered with Bannard.

Falkner crossed to him at once: the recalcitrant but still privileged outsider. “I can promise you a good breakfast, Mr Maybury,” he said confidentially. “Lentils. Fresh fish. Rump steak. Apple pie made by ourselves, with lots and lots of cream.”

“I mustn’t stay for it,” said Maybury. “I simply mustn’t. I have my living to earn. I must go at once.”

He was quite prepared to walk a couple of miles; indeed, all set for it. The automobile organisation, which had given him the route from which he should never have diverged, could recover his car. They had done it for him before, several times.

A faint shadow passed over Falkner’s face, but he merely said in a low voice, “If you really insist, Mr Maybury...”

“I’m afraid I have to,” said Maybury.

“Then I’ll have a word with you in a moment.”

None of the others seemed to concern themselves. Soon they all filed off, talking quietly among themselves, or, in many cases, saying nothing.

“Mr Maybury,” said Falkner, “you can respect a confidence?”

“Yes,” said Maybury steadily.

“There was an incident here last night. A death. We do not talk about such things. Our guests do not expect it.”

5 “I am sorry,” said Maybury.

“Such things still upset me,” said Falkner. “None the less I must not think about that. My immediate task is to dispose of the body. While the guests are preoccupied. To spare them all knowledge, all pain.”

“How is that to be done?” enquired Maybury.

10 “In the usual manner, Mr Maybury. The hearse is drawing up outside the door even as we speak. Where you are concerned, the point is this. If you wish for what in other circumstances I could call a lift, I could arrange for you to join the vehicle. It is travelling quite a distance. We find that best.” Falkner was progressively unfastening the front door. “It seems the best solution, don’t you think, Mr Maybury? At least it
15 is the best I can offer. Though you will not be able to thank Mr Bannard, of course.”

A coffin was already coming down the stairs, borne on the shoulders of four men in black, with Vincent, in his white jacket, coming first, in order to leave no doubt of the way and to prevent any loss of time.

20 “I agree,” said Maybury. “I accept. Perhaps you would let me know my bill for dinner?”

“I shall waive that too, Mr Maybury,” replied Falkner, “in the present circumstances. We have a duty to hasten. We have others to think of. I shall simply say how glad we have all been to have you with us.” He held out his hand. “Good-bye, Mr Maybury.”

25 Maybury was compelled to travel with the coffin itself, because there simply was not room for him on the front seat, where a director of the firm, a corpulent man, had to be accommodated with the driver. The nearness of death compelled a respectful silence among the company in the rear compartment, especially when a living stranger was in the midst; and Maybury alighted unobtrusively when a bus stop was reached. One of the undertaker’s men said that he should not have to wait long.