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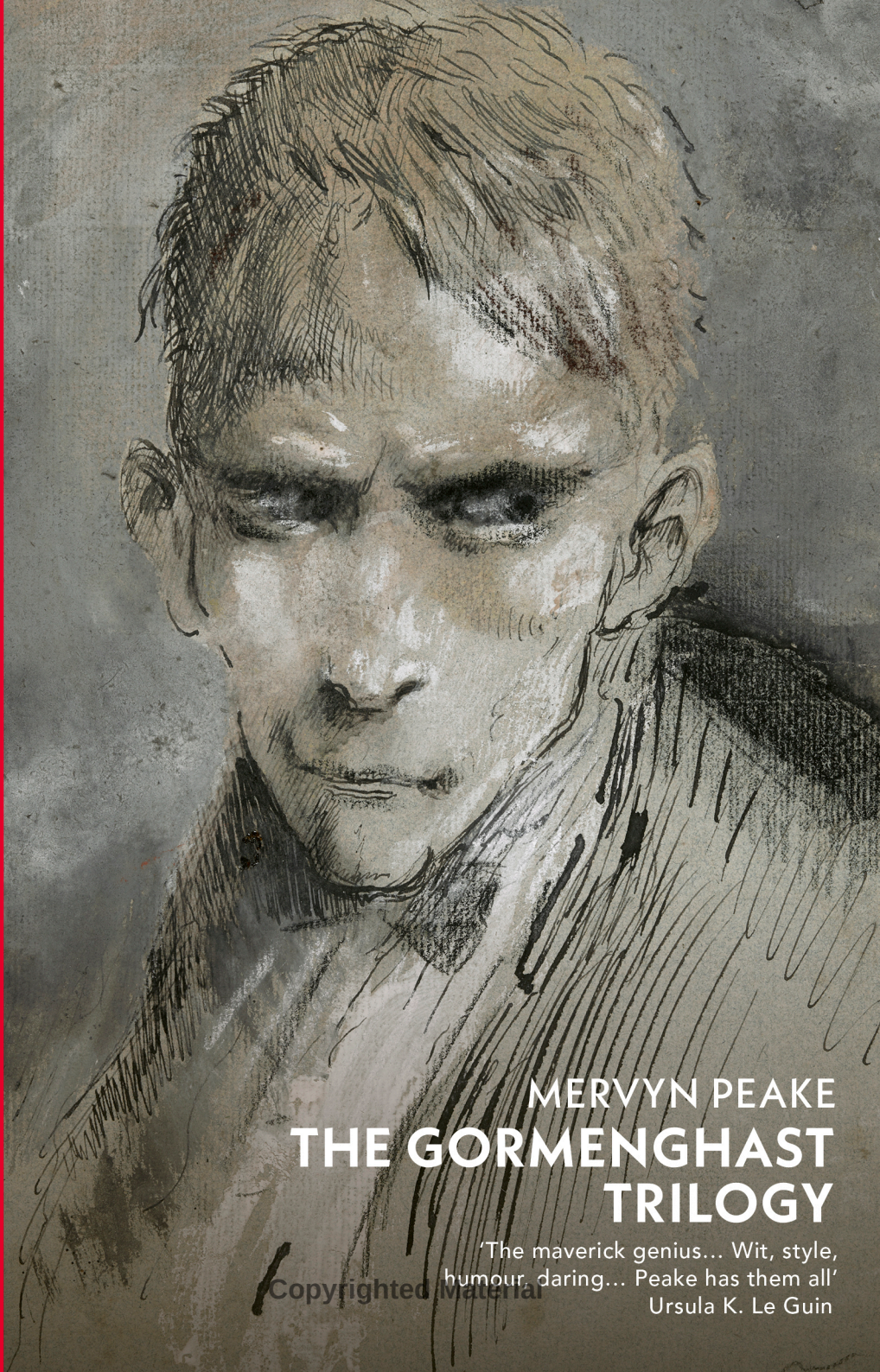

MERVYN PEAKE

THE GORMENGHAST TRILOGY

'The maverick genius... Wit, style, humour, daring... Peake has them all'
Ursula K. Le Guin

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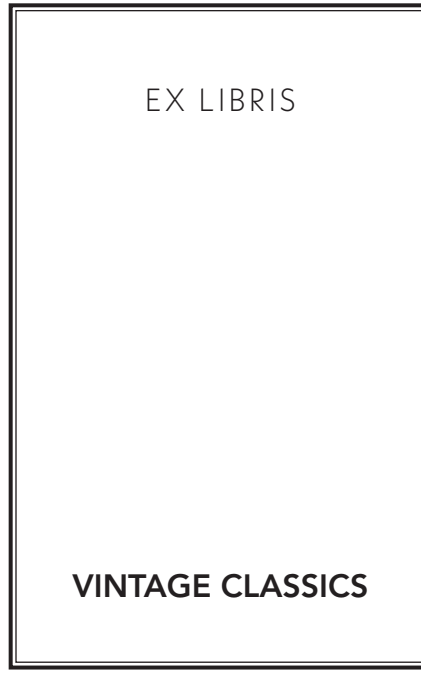

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MERVYN PEAKE

Mervyn Peake was born in 1911 in Guling, Central Southern China, where his father was a medical missionary. Within a year, the family moved to the northern city of Tianjin. Peake was educated at Tianjin Grammar School then at Eltham College in southeast London. During the Second World War, while serving with the army, he established a reputation as a gifted book illustrator with his pictures for *Ride a Cock Horse* (1940), *The Hunting of the Snark* (1941) and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1943). *Titus Groan* was published in 1946 and was followed, in 1950, by *Gormenghast*. The third volume of the Gormenghast saga, *Titus Alone*, was published in 1959. His other works include *Shapes and Sounds* (1941), *Rhymes Without Reason* (1944), *Letters from a Lost Uncle* (1948) and *Mr Pye* (1953), and a play, *The Wit to Woo* (1957). He died in 1968.

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ALSO BY MERVYN PEAKE

FICTION

Shapes and Sounds

The Craft of the Lead Pencil

Letters from a Lost Uncle

Mr Pye

Peake's Progress

POEMS

Rhymes Without Reason

The Glassblowers

The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb

FOR CHILDREN

Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor

PLAYS

The Wit to Woo

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MERVYN PEAKE

THE GORMENGHAST TRILOGY

Titus Groan
Gormenghast
Titus Alone

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Alan Moore

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INTRODUCTION

Mervyn Peake: Language as Architecture

There is more to the story of a book than the story it contains. From the most lavish hardback first edition to the most creased and mistreated charity-shop paperback, each seems to me to be possessed of its own aura, a charisma predicated on a wide variety of personal associations: where and when it was first purchased, and one's memories of that specific, since-closed bookshop, that specific Saturday; the cover illustration and the lettering that will, with age, come to seem emblematic of its period, its post-war pastels or its 1960s stab at psychedelia; the narrative of how it found its way to us.

My own first entry into the stone lanes of Mervyn Peake's extraordinary trilogy occurred when I was fifteen, drifting on the paisley tides of 1969 and at the time enamoured of the fantasy and science-fiction genres. To this end, I had somehow procured the duplicated and stab-stapled catalogue of Dark They Were and Golden Eyed – quite possibly the world's first comics or science-fiction bookshop, then on Bedfordbury at the heart of Covent Garden. Among the columns of typed titles – an array of cutting-edge SF or sword-and-sorcery, or both, if it was Michael Moorcock – I discovered the name *Titus Groan*, with an appended note which recommended Peake's book as a tale of 'crumbling Castle Gormenghast and its lord, Titus'. There was just something about the notion of a dissolute and crumbling castle, in a genre filled with shining fortresses, which instantly intrigued me, but, as with the other items on the list, though very reasonably priced it was beyond the reach of schoolboy pocket money. Fortunately, back then in Elizabethan times, we had quaint and old-fashioned institutions known as libraries, where I was thrilled to learn that I could order *Titus Groan* and the succeeding volumes. Although potentially entailing weeks or even months before the next book was available, this was a free service and therefore within the limits of my non-existent budget.

A short while thereafter, my initial introduction to the House of Groan came in the hefty form of the old Eyre & Spottiswoode edition with, if I remember accurately, a Peake illustration of a raven and an ancient crown – both wet with inky, energetic shadows – on its laminated boards. Opened and read, it was immediately apparent that this was a very different use of the word 'fantasy', a narrative devoid of wizards, trolls, barbarian warriors or, indeed, any supernatural element at all. The opening – with its careful description of the castle's architecture having a certain ponderous quality, with its account of the Bright Carvers and their yearly

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ceremonial competition, its conjuring of Mr Rottcodd in his hall of winning sculptures, his dusty isolation interrupted by the driven, terse manservant Flay and his explosive knees – implied a narrative like nothing that I'd ever read before, peopled by characters with names that sounded more like Dickens than the Elvish tongue, and written so exquisitely that, even more than all the unforgettable cast members, more than the titular Gothic pile itself, Peake's language rapidly established itself as the work's most forceful and imposing presence.

The impact of the book, followed by that of *Gormenghast* and then the overwhelming, estranged sense of loss that is *Titus Alone*, was vast, but it was impact on a fifteen-year-old boy, as yet too immature to fully comprehend the grandeur Peake had hewn out of twenty-six characters and a fine dust of punctuation: constructed out of nothing but the English language. Back then, Peake's influence was largely wasted on me, surfacing in a couple of my traditional short fantasy tales in which the only evidence of having learned from him is limited to sketchily delineated characters with names like 'Elly Blacklungs' and 'Tobias Firebowels'. Though an evangelical exponent of Peake's work, whether it be his *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* or his wonderful 'The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb', it would be more than fifty years later, rereading the Gormenghast novels as probably inappropriate bedtime tales to my grandchildren, that I realised the true scale of his achievement and the profound impression he had made on almost every word that I have subsequently written.

I saw for the first time how his impossibly rich prose style would fixate obsessively upon some miniaturist detail of the landscape or a character's appearance, thus implying that the scene he's painting would be everywhere as opulent and jewelled in texture, if he could be bothered to describe it, and in this way manifesting a continuum that's almost hyper-real: the world as it might be perceived by readers if their senses were augmented by Peake's poetry, his melancholic and ecstatic vision. I also came to understand the riotous and wildly unrestricted nature of his writing, where he can spend a weighty, image-laden paragraph recounting how Swelter and Flay glare at each other with such furious hatred that their eyeballs burst – figuratively – out of their sockets and pursue each other through the castle's dank maze as two pairs of blazing jelly comets. I grasped at last the opulence of Gormenghast as literary experience and also fathomed the tremendous effort and commitment that it must have taken for Peake to achieve his unique masterpiece.

Within that sprawling labyrinth of chiselled language, I found marvels previously unnoticed – the prescient psychological portraiture of Peake's characters: autistic Gertrude, sociopathic Steerpike and bipolar Sepulchrave; the suddenly apparent self-reflecting symbols, like the weird twins' Room of Roots that seems a physicalised version of Peake's byzantine story structure; and, above all, the tremendous sense that we are witnessing a feat of psychological stonemasonry, the building of a meaningful and poignant edifice within the human mind itself,

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a mental edifice that will endure and cast its gloomy, fascinating shadows when material monuments have long since gone to dust.

For those embarking on this guided tour of the collapsing property for the first time, try to pay careful attention, as there's more to it than meets the eye. For those revisiting a much-loved and familiar landmark, you might find new rooms and chambers that weren't there upon your previous excursion. It may help to leave a jotted trail of thread or breadcrumbs in the dimly lighted margins.

ALAN MOORE
2026

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TITUS GROAN

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Dost thou love picking meat? Or would's't thou see
A man in the clouds, and have him speak to thee?

Bunyan

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THE HALL OF THE BRIGHT CARVINGS

Gormenghast, that is, the main massing of the original stone, taken by itself would have displayed a certain ponderous architectural quality were it possible to have ignored the circumfusion of those mean dwellings that swarmed like an epidemic around its outer walls. They sprawled over the sloping earth, each one half way over its neighbour until, held back by the castle ramparts, the innermost of these hovels laid hold on the great walls, clamping themselves thereto like limpets to a rock. These dwellings, by ancient law, were granted this chill intimacy with the stronghold that loomed above them. Over their irregular roofs would fall throughout the seasons, the shadows of time-eaten buttresses, of broken and lofty turrets, and, most enormous of all, the shadow of the Tower of Flints. This tower, patched unevenly with black ivy, arose like a mutilated finger from among the fists of knuckled masonry and pointed blasphemously at heaven. At night the owls made of it an echoing throat; by day it stood voiceless and cast its long shadow.

Very little communication passed between the denizens of these outer quarters and those who lived *within* the walls, save when, on the first June morning of each year, the entire population of the clay dwellings had sanction to enter the Grounds in order to display the wooden carvings on which they had been working during the year. These carvings, blazoned in strange colour, were generally of animals or figures and were treated in a highly stylized manner peculiar to themselves. The competition among them to display the finest object of the year was bitter and rabid. Their sole passion was directed, once their days of love had guttered, on the production of this wooden sculpture, and among the muddle of huts at the foot of the outer wall, existed a score of creative craftsmen whose position as leading carvers gave them pride of place among the shadows.

At one point *within* the Outer Wall, a few feet from the earth, the great stones of which the wall itself was constructed, jutted forward in the form of a massive shelf stretching from east to west for about two hundred to three hundred feet. These protruding stones were painted white, and it was upon this shelf that on the first morning of June the carvings were ranged every year for judgement by the Earl of Groan. Those works judged to be the most consummate, and there were never more than three chosen, were subsequently relegated to the Hall of the Bright Carvings.

Standing immobile throughout the day, these vivid objects, with their fantastic shadows on the wall behind them shifting and elongating hour by hour with the sun's rotation, exuded a kind of darkness for all their colour. The

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air between them was turgid with contempt and jealousy. The craftsmen stood about like beggars, their families clustered in silent groups. They were uncouth and prematurely aged. All radiance gone.

The carvings that were left unselected were burned the same evening in the courtyard below Lord Groan's western balcony, and it was customary for him to stand there at the time of the burning and to bow his head silently as if in pain, and then as a gong beat thrice from within, the three carvings to escape the flames would be brought forth in the moonlight. They were stood upon the balustrade of the balcony in full view of the crowd below, and the Earl of Groan would call for their authors to come forward. When they had stationed themselves immediately beneath where he was standing, the Earl would throw down to them the traditional scrolls of vellum, which, as the writings upon them verified, permitted these men to walk the battlements above their cantonment at the full moon of each alternate month. On these particular nights, from a window in the southern wall of Gormenghast, an observer might watch the minute moonlit figures whose skill had won for them this honour which they so coveted, moving to and fro along the battlements.

Saving this exception of the day of carvings, and the latitude permitted to the most peerless, there was no other opportunity for those who lived within the walls to know of these 'outer' folk, nor in fact were they of interest to the 'inner' world, being submerged within the shadows of the great walls.

They were all-but forgotten people: the breed that was remembered with a start, or with the unreality of a recrudescent dream. The day of carvings alone brought them into the sunlight and reawakened the memory of former times. For as far back as even Nettel, the octogenarian who lived in the tower above the rusting armoury, could remember, the ceremony had been held. Innumerable carvings had smouldered to ashes in obedience to the law, but the choicest were still housed in the Hall of the Bright Carvings.

This hall which ran along the top storey of the north wing was presided over by the curator, Rottcodd, who, as no one ever visited the room, slept during most of his life in the hammock he had erected at the far end. For all his dozing, he had never been known to relinquish the feather duster from his grasp; the duster with which he would perform one of the only two regular tasks which appeared to be necessary in that long and silent hall, namely to flick the dust from the Bright Carvings.

As objects of beauty, these works held little interest to him and yet in spite of himself he had become attached in a propinquital way to a few of the carvings. He would be more than thorough when dusting the Emerald Horse. The black-and-olive Head which faced it across the boards and the Piebald Shark were also his especial care. Not that there were any on which the dust was allowed to settle.

Entering at seven o'clock, winter and summer, year in and year out, Rottcodd would disengage himself of his jacket and draw over his head a long

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grey overall which descended shapelessly to his ankles. With his feather duster tucked beneath his arm, it was his habit to peer sagaciously over his glasses down the length of the hall. His skull was dark and small like a corroded musket bullet and his eyes behind the gleaming of his glasses were the twin miniatures of his head. All three were constantly on the move, as though to make up for the time they spent asleep, the head wobbling in a mechanical way from side to side when Mr Rottcodd walked, and the eyes, as though taking their cue from the parent sphere to which they were attached, peering here, there, and everywhere at nothing in particular. Having peered quickly over his glasses on entering and having repeated the performance along the length of the north wing after enveloping himself in his overall, it was the custom of Rottcodd to relieve his left armpit of the feather duster, and with that weapon raised, to advance towards the first of the carvings on his right hand side, without more ado. Being on the top floor of the north wing, this hall was not in any real sense a hall at all, but was more in the nature of a loft. The only window was at its far end, and opposite the door through which Rottcodd would enter from the upper body of the building. It gave little light. The shutters were invariably lowered. The Hall of the Bright Carvings was illumined night and day by seven great candelabra suspended from the ceiling at intervals of nine feet. The candles were never allowed to fail or even to gutter, Rottcodd himself seeing to their replenishment before retiring at nine o'clock in the evening. There was a stock of white candles in the small dark ante-room beyond the door of the hall, where also were kept ready for use Rottcodd's overall, a huge visitors' book, white with dust, and a step-ladder. There were no chairs or tables, nor indeed any furniture save the hammock at the window end where Mr Rottcodd slept. The boarded floor was white with dust which, so assiduously kept from the carvings, had no alternative resting place and had collected deep and ash-like, accumulating especially in the four corners of the hall.

Having flicked at the first carving on his right, Rottcodd would move mechanically down the long phalanx of colour standing a moment before each carving, his eyes running up and down it and all over it, and his head wobbling knowingly on his neck before he introduced his feather duster. Rottcodd was unmarried. An aloofness and even a nervousness was apparent on first acquaintance and the ladies held a peculiar horror for him. His, then, was an ideal existence, living alone day and night in a long loft. Yet occasionally, for one reason or another, a servant or a member of the household would make an unexpected appearance and startle him with some question appertaining to ritual, and then the dust would settle once more in the hall and on the soul of Mr Rottcodd.

What were his reveries as he lay in his hammock with his dark bullet head tucked in the crook of his arm? What would he be dreaming of, hour after hour, year after year? It is not easy to feel that any great thoughts haunted his

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mind nor – in spite of the sculpture whose bright files surged over the dust in narrowing perspective like the highway for an emperor – that Rottcodd made any attempt to avail himself of his isolation, but rather that he was enjoying the solitude for its Own Sake, with, at the back of his mind, the dread of an intruder.

One humid afternoon a visitor *did* arrive to disturb Rottcodd as he lay deeply hammocked, for his siesta was broken sharply by a rattling of the door handle which was apparently performed in lieu of the more popular practice of knocking at the panels. The sound echoed down the long room and then settled into the fine dust on the boarded floor. The sunlight squeezed itself between the thin cracks of the window blind. Even on a hot, stifling, unhealthy afternoon such as this, the blinds were down and the candlelight filled the room with an incongruous radiance. At the sound of the door handle being rattled Rottcodd sat up suddenly. The thin bands of moted light edging their way through the shutters barred his dark head with the brilliance of the outer world. As he lowered himself over the hammock, it wobbled on his shoulders, and his eyes darted up and down the door returning again and again after their rapid and precipitous journeys to the agitations of the door handle. Gripping his feather duster in his right hand, Rottcodd began to advance down the bright avenue, his feet giving rise at each step to little clouds of dust. When he had at last reached the door the handle had ceased to vibrate. Lowering himself suddenly to his knees he placed his right eye at the keyhole, and controlling the oscillation of his head and the vagaries of his left eye (which was for ever trying to dash up and down the vertical surface of the door), he was able by dint of concentration to observe, within three inches of his keyholed eye, an eye which was *not* his, being not only a different colour to his own iron marble but being, which is more convincing, on the other side of the door. This third eye which was going through the same performance as the one belonging to Rottcodd, belonged to Flay, the taciturn servant of Sepulchrave, Earl of Gormenghast. For Flay to be four rooms horizontally or one floor vertically away from his lordship was a rare enough thing in the castle. For him to be absent at all from his master's side was abnormal, yet here apparently on this stifling summer afternoon was the eye of Mr Flay at the outer keyhole of the Hall of the Bright Carvings, and presumably the rest of Mr Flay was joined on behind it. On mutual recognition the eyes withdrew simultaneously and the brass doorknob rattled again in the grip of the visitor's hand. Rottcodd turned the key in the lock and the door opened slowly.

Mr Flay appeared to clutter up the doorway as he stood revealed, his arms folded, surveying the smaller man before him in an expressionless way. It did not look as though such a bony face as his could give normal utterance, but rather that instead of sounds, something more brittle, more ancient, something dryer would emerge, something perhaps more in the nature of a splinter or a fragment of stone. Nevertheless, the harsh lips parted. 'It's me,' he said, and

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took a step forward into the room, his knee joints cracking as he did so. His passage across a room – in fact his passage through life – was accompanied by these cracking sounds, one per step, which might be likened to the breaking of dry twigs.

Rottcodd, seeing that it was indeed he, motioned him to advance by an irritable gesture of the hand and closed the door behind him.

Conversation was never one of Mr Flay's accomplishments and for some time he gazed mirthlessly ahead of him, and then, after what seemed an eternity to Rottcodd he raised a bony hand and scratched himself behind the ear. Then he made his second remark, 'Still here, eh?' he said, his voice forcing its way out of his face.

Rottcodd, feeling presumably that there was little need to answer such a question, shrugged his shoulders and gave his eyes the run of the ceiling.

Mr Flay pulled himself together and continued: 'I said still here, eh. Rottcodd?' He stared bitterly at the carving of the Emerald Horse. 'You're still here, eh?'

'I'm invariably here,' said Rottcodd, lowering his gleaming glasses and running his eyes all over Mr Flay's visage. 'Day in, day out, invariably. Very hot weather. Extremely stifling. Did you want anything?'

'Nothing,' said Flay and he turned towards Rottcodd with something menacing in his attitude. 'I want *nothing*.' He wiped the palms of his hands on his hips where the dark cloth shone like silk.

Rottcodd flicked ash from his shoes with the feather duster and tilted his bullet head. 'Ah,' he said in a non-committal way.

'You say "ah",' said Flay, turning his back on Rottcodd and beginning to walk down the coloured avenue, 'but I tell you, it is more than "ah".'

'Of course,' said Rottcodd. 'Much more, I dare say. But I fail to understand. I am a Curator.' At this he drew his body up to full height and stood on the tips of his toes in the dust.

'A what?' said Flay, straggling above him for he had returned. 'A curator?'

'That is so,' said Rottcodd, shaking his head.

Flay made a hard noise in his throat. To Rottcodd it signified a complete lack of understanding and it annoyed him that the man should invade his province.

'Curator,' said Flay, after a ghastly silence, 'I will tell you something. I know something. Eh?'

'Well?' said Rottcodd.

'I'll tell you,' said Flay. 'But first, what day is it? What month, and what year is it? Answer me.'

Rottcodd was puzzled at this question, but he was becoming a little intrigued. It was so obvious that the bony man had something on his mind, and he replied, 'It is the eighth day of the eighth month, I am uncertain about the year. But why?'

In a voice almost inaudible Flay repeated 'The eighth day of the eighth

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month'. His eyes were almost transparent as though in a country of ugly hills one were to find among the harsh rocks two sky-reflecting lakes. 'Come here,' he said, 'come closer, Rottcodd, I will tell you. You don't understand Gormenghast, what happens in Gormenghast – the things that happen – no, no. Below you, that's where it all is, under this north wing. What are these things up here? These wooden things? No use now. Keep them, but no use now. Everything is moving. The castle is moving. Today, first time for years he's alone, his Lordship. Not in my sight.' Flay bit at his knuckle. 'Bedchamber of Ladyship, that's where he is. Lordship is beside himself: won't have me, won't let me in to see the New One. The New One. He's come. He's downstairs. I haven't seen him.' Flay bit at the corresponding knuckle on the other hand as though to balance the sensation. 'No one's been in. Of course not. I'll be next. The birds are lined along the bedrail. Ravens, starlings, all the perishers, and the white rook. There's a kestrel; claws through the pillow. My lady feeds them with crusts. Grain and crusts. Hardly seen her new-born. Heir to Gormenghast. Doesn't look at him. But my lord keeps staring. Seen him through the grating. Needs me. Won't let me in. Are you listening?'

Mr Rottcodd certainly was listening. In the first place he had never heard Mr Flay talk so much in his life before, and in the second place the news that a son had been born at long last to the ancient and historic house of Groan was, after all, an interesting tit-bit for a curator living alone on the upper storey of the desolate north wing. Here was something with which he could occupy his mind for some time to come. It was true, as Mr Flay pointed out, that he, Rottcodd, could not possibly feel the pulse of the castle as he lay in his hammock, for in point of fact Rottcodd had not even suspected that an heir was on its way. His meals came up in a miniature lift through darkness from the servants' quarters many floors below and he slept in the ante-room at night and consequently he was completely cut off from the world and all its happenings. Flay had brought him real news. All the same he disliked being disturbed even when information of this magnitude was brought. What was passing through the bullet-shaped head was a question concerning Mr Flay's entry. Why had Flay, who never in the normal course of events would have raised an eyebrow to acknowledge his presence – why had he now gone to the trouble of climbing to a part of the castle so foreign to him? And to force a conversation on a personality as unexpansive as his own. He ran his eyes over Mr Flay in his own peculiarly rapid way and surprised himself by saying suddenly, 'To what may I attribute your presence, Mr Flay?'

'What?' said Flay, 'what's that?' He looked down on Rottcodd and his eyes became glassy.

In truth Mr Flay had surprised himself. Why, indeed, he thought to himself, had he troubled to tell Rottcodd the news which meant so much to him? Why Rottcodd, of all people? He continued staring at the curator for some while, and the more he stood and pondered the clearer it became to him that the

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question he had been asked was, to say the very least, uncomfortably pertinent.

The little man in front of him had asked a simple and forthright question. It had been rather a poser. He took a couple of shambling steps towards Mr Rottcodd and then, forcing his hands into his trouser pockets, turned round very slowly on one heel.

'Ah,' he said at last, 'I see what you mean, Rottcodd – I see what you mean.'

Rottcodd was longing to get back to his hammock and enjoy the luxury of being quite alone again, but his eye travelled even more speedily towards the visitor's face when he heard the remark. Mr Flay had said that he saw what Rottcodd had meant. Had he really? Very interesting. What, by the way, *had* he meant? What precisely was it that Mr Flay had seen? He flecked an imaginary speck of dust from the gilded head of a dryad.

'You are interested in the birth below?' he inquired.

Flay stood for a while as though he had heard nothing, but after a few minutes it became obvious he was thunderstruck. 'Interested!' he cried in a deep, husky voice. 'Interested! The child is a Groan. An authentic male Groan. Challenge to Change! No *Change*, Rottcodd. No Change!'

'Ah,' said Rottcodd. 'I see your point, Mr Flay. But his lordship was not dying?'

'No,' said Mr Flay, 'he was not dying, but *teeth lengthen*!' and he strode to the wooden shutters with long, slow heron-like paces, and the dust rose behind him. When it had settled Rottcodd could see his angular parchment-coloured head leaning itself against the lintel of the window.

Mr Flay could not feel entirely satisfied with his answer to Rottcodd's question covering the reason for his appearance in the Hall of the Bright Carvings. As he stood there by the window the question repeated itself to him again and again. Why Rottcodd? Why on earth Rottcodd? And yet he knew that directly he heard of the birth of the heir, when his dour nature had been stirred so violently that he had found himself itching to communicate his enthusiasm to another being - from that moment Rottcodd had leapt to his mind. Never of a communicative or enthusiastic nature he had found it difficult even under the emotional stress of the advent to inform Rottcodd of the facts. And, as has been remarked, he had surprised even himself not only for having unburdened himself at all, but for having done so in so short a time.

He turned, and saw that the Curator was standing wearily by the Piebald Shark, his small cropped round head moving to and fro like a bird's, and his hands clasped before him with the feather duster between his fingers. He could see that Rottcodd was politely waiting for him to go. Altogether Mr Flay was in a peculiar state of mind. He was surprised at Mr Rottcodd for being so unimpressed at the news, and he was surprised at himself for having brought it. He took from his pocket a vast watch of silver and held it horizontally on the

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flat of his palm. 'Must go,' he said awkwardly. 'Do you hear me, Rottcodd, I must go?'

'Good of you to call,' said Rottcodd. 'Will you sign your name in the visitors' book as you go out?'

'No! Not a visitor.' Flay brought his shoulders up to his ears. 'Been with lordship thirty-seven years. Sign a *book*,' he added contemptuously, and he spat into a far corner of the room.

'As you wish,' said Mr Rottcodd, 'It was to the section of the visitors' book devoted to the staff that I was referring.'

'No!' said Flay.

As he passed the curator on his way to the door he looked carefully at him as he came abreast, and the question rankled. Why? The castle was filled with the excitement of the nativity. All was alive with conjecture. There was no control. Rumour swept through the stronghold. Everywhere, in passage, archway, cloister, refectory, kitchen, dormitory, and hall it was the same. Why had he chosen the unenthusiastic Rottcodd? And then, in a flash he realized. He must have subconsciously known that the news would be new to no one else; that Rottcodd was virgin soil for his message, Rottcodd the curator who lived alone among the Bright Carvings was the only one on whom he could vent the tidings without jeopardizing his sullen dignity, and to whom although the knowledge would give rise to but little enthusiasm it would at least be new.

Having solved the problem in his mind and having realized in a dullish way that the conclusion was particularly mundane and uninspired, and that there was no question of his soul calling along the corridors and up the stairs to the soul of Rottcodd, Mr Flay in a thin straddling manner moved along the passages of the north wing and down the curve of stone steps that led to the stone quadrangle, feeling the while a curious disillusion, a sense of having suffered a loss of dignity, and a feeling of being thankful that his visit to Rottcodd had been unobserved and that Rottcodd himself was well hidden from the world in the Hall of the Bright Carvings.

THE GREAT KITCHEN

As Flay passed through the servants' archway and descended the twelve steps that led into the main corridor of the kitchen quarters, he became aware of an acute transformation of mood. The solitude of Mr Rottcodd's sanctum, which had been lingering in his mind, was violated. Here among the stone passages were all the symptoms of ribald excitement. Mr Flay hunched his bony shoulders and with his hands in his jacket pockets dragged them to the front so that only the black cloth divided his clenched fists. The material was stretched as though it would split at the small of his back. He stared mirthlessly to right

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and left and then advanced, his long spidery legs cracking as he shouldered his way through a heaving group of menials. They were guffawing to each other coarsely and one of them, evidently the wit, was contorting his face, as pliable as putty, into shapes that appeared to be independent of the skull, if indeed he had a skull beneath that elastic flesh. Mr Flay pushed past.

The corridor was alive. Clusters of aproned figures mixed and disengaged. Some were singing. Some were arguing and some were draped against the wall, quite silent from exhaustion, their hands dangling from their wrists or flapping stupidly to the beat of some kitchen catch-song. The clamour was pitiless. Technically this was more the spirit which Flay liked to see, or at all events thought to be more appropriate to the occasion. Rottcodd's lack of enthusiasm had shocked him and here, at any rate, the traditional observance of felicity at the birth of an heir to Gormenghast was being observed. But it would have been impossible for him to show any signs of enthusiasm himself when surrounded by it in others. As he moved along the crowded corridor and passed in turn the dark passages that led to the slaughter-house with its stench of fresh blood, the bakeries with their sweet loaves and the stairs that led down to the wine vaults and the underground network of the castle cellars, he felt a certain satisfaction at seeing how many of the roysterers staggered aside to let him pass, for his station as retainer-in-chief to his Lordship was commanding and his sour mouth and the frown that had made a permanent nest upon his jutting forehead were a warning.

It was not often that Flay approved of happiness in others. He saw in happiness the seeds of independence, and in independence the seeds of revolt. But on an occasion such as this it was different, for the spirit of convention was being rigorously adhered to, and in between his ribs Mr Flay experienced twinges of pleasure.

He had come to where, on his left, and halfway along the servants' corridor, the heavy wooden doors of the Great Kitchen stood ajar. Ahead of him, narrowing in dark perspective, for there were no windows, the rest of the corridor stretched silently away. It had no doors on either side and at the far end it was terminated by a wall of flints. This useless passage was, as might be supposed, usually deserted, but Mr Flay noticed that several figures were lying stretched in the shadows. At the same time he was momentarily deafened by a great bellowing and clattering and stamping.

As Mr Flay entered the Great Kitchen the steaming, airless concentration of a ghastly heat struck him. He felt that his body had received a blow. Not only was the normal sickening atmosphere of the kitchen augmented by the sun's rays streaming into the room at various points through the high windows, but, in the riot of the festivities, the fires had been banked dangerously. But Mr Flay realized that it was *right* that this should be as insufferable as it was. He even realized that the four grillers who were forcing joint after joint between the metal doors with their clumsy boots, until the oven began to give under the

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immoderate strain, were in key with the legitimate temper of the occasion. The fact that they had no idea what they were doing nor why they were doing it was irrelevant. The Countess had given birth; was this a moment for rational behaviour?

The walls of the vast room which were streaming with calid moisture, were built with grey slabs of stone and were the personal concern of a company of eighteen men known as the 'Grey Scrubbers'. It had been their privilege on reaching adolescence to discover that, being the sons of their fathers, their careers had been arranged for them and that stretching ahead of them lay their identical lives consisting of an unimaginative if praiseworthy duty. This was to restore, each morning to the great grey floor and the lofty walls of the kitchen a stainless complexion. On every day of the year from three hours before daybreak until about eleven o'clock, when the scaffolding and ladders became a hindrance to the cooks, the Grey Scrubbers fulfilled their hereditary calling. Through the character of their trade, their arms had become unusually powerful, and when they let their huge hands hang loosely at their sides, there was more than an echo of the simian. Coarse as these men appeared, they were an integral part of the Great Kitchen. Without the Grey Scrubbers something very earthy, very heavy, very real would be missing to any sociologist searching in that steaming room, for the completion of a circle of temperaments, a gamut of the lower human values.

Through daily proximity to the great slabs of stone, the faces of the Grey Scrubbers had become like slabs themselves. There was no expression whatever upon the eighteen faces, unless the lack of expression is in itself an expression. They were simply slabs that the Grey Scrubbers spoke from occasionally, stared from incessantly, heard with, hardly ever. They were traditionally deaf. The eyes were there, small and flat as coins, and the colour of the walls themselves, as though during the long hours of professional staring the grey stone had at last reflected itself indelibly once and for all. Yes, the eyes were there, thirty-six of them and the eighteen noses were there, and the lines of the mouths that resembled the harsh cracks that divided the stone slabs, they were there too. Although nothing physical was missing from any one of their eighteen faces yet it would be impossible to perceive the faintest sign of animation and, even if a basinful of their features had been shaken together and if each feature had been picked out at random and stuck upon some dummy-head of wax at any capricious spot or angle, it would have made no difference, for even the most fantastic, the most ingenious of arrangements could not have tempted into life a design whose component parts were dead. In all, counting the ears, which on occasion may be monstrously expressive, the one hundred and eight features were unable, at the best of times, to muster between them, individually or taken *en masse*, the faintest shadow of anything that might hint at the workings of what lay beneath.

Having watched the excitement developing around them in the Great

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Kitchen, and being unable to comprehend what it was all about for lack of hearing, they had up to the last hour or two been unable to enter into that festive spirit which had attacked the very heart and bowels of the kitchen staff.

But here and now, on this day of days, cognisant at last of the arrival of the new Lord, the eighteen Grey Scrubbers were lying side by side upon the flagstones beneath a great table, dead drunk to a man. They had done honour to the occasion and were out of the picture, having been rolled under the table one by one like so many barrels of ale, as indeed they were.

Through the clamour of the voices in the Great Kitchen that rose and fell, that changed tempo, and lingered, until a strident rush or a wheezy slide of sound came to a new pause, only to be shattered by a hideous croak of laughter or a thrilled whisper, or a clearing of some coarse throat – through all this thick and interwoven skein of bedlam, the ponderous snoring of the Grey Scrubbers had continued as a recognizable theme of dolorous persistence.

In favour of the Grey Scrubbers it must be said that it was not until the walls and floor of the kitchen were shining from their exertions that they attacked the bungs as though unweaned. But it was not only they who had succumbed. The same unquestionable proof of loyalty could be observed in no less than forty members of the kitchen, who, like the Grey Scrubbers, recognizing the bottle as the true medium through which to externalize their affection for the family of Groan, were seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

Mr Flay, wiping away with the back of his claw-like hand the perspiration that had already gathered on his brow, allowed his eyes to remain a moment on the inert and foreshortened bodies of the inebriate Grey Scrubbers. Their heads were towards him, and were cropped to a gun-grey stubble. Beneath the table a shadow had roosted, and the rest of their bodies, receding in parallel lines, were soon devoured in the darkness. At first glance he had been reminded of nothing so much as a row of curled-up hedgehogs, and it was some time before he realized that he was regarding a line of prickly skulls. When he had satisfied himself on this point his eyes travelled sourly around the Great Kitchen. Everything was confusion, but behind the flux of the shifting figures and the temporary chaos of overturned mixing tables, of the floor littered with stockpots, basting pans, broken bowls and dishes, and oddments of food, Mr Flay could see the main fixtures in the room and keep then in his mind as a means of reference, for the kitchen swam before his eyes in a clammy mist. Divided by the heavy stone wall in which was situated a hatch of strong timber, was the *garde-manger* with its stacks of cold meat and hanging carcases and on the inside of the wall the spit. On a fixed table running along a length of the wall were huge bowls capable of holding fifty portions. The stock-pots were perpetually simmering, having boiled over, and the floor about then was a mess of sepia fluid and egg-shells that had been floating in the pots for the purpose of clearing the soup. The sawdust that was spread neatly over the floor each morning was by now kicked into heaps and

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soaked in the splashings of wine. And where scattered about the floor little blobs of fat had been rolled or trodden in, the sawdust stuck to them giving them the appearance of rissoles. Hanging along the dripping walls were rows of sticking knives and steels, boning knives, skinning knives and two-handed cleavers, and beneath them a twelve-foot by nine-foot chopping block, cross-hatched and hollowed by decades of long wounds.

On the other side of the room, to Mr Flay's left, a capacious enormous copper, a row of ovens and a narrow doorway acted as his landmarks. The doors of the ovens were flying wide and acid flames were leaping dangerously, as the fat that had been thrown into the fires bubbled and stank.

Mr Flay was in two minds. He hated what he saw, for of all the rooms in the castle, it was the kitchen he detested most, and for a very real reason; and yet a thrill in his scarecrow body made him aware of how right it all was. He could not, of course, analyse his feelings nor would the idea have occurred to him, but he was so much a part and parcel of Gormenghast that he could instinctively tell when the essence of its tradition was running in a true channel, powerfully and with no deviation.

But the fact that Mr Flay appreciated, as from the profoundest of motives, the vulgarity of the Great Kitchen in no way mitigated his contempt for the figures he saw before him as individuals. As he looked from one to another the satisfaction which he had at first experienced in seeing them collectively gave way to a detestation as he observed them piecemeal.

A prodigious twisted beam, warped into a spiral, floated, or so it seemed in the haze, across the breadth of the Great Kitchen. Here and there along its undersurface, iron hooks were screwed into its grain. Slung over it like sacks half filled with sawdust, so absolutely lifeless they appeared, were two pastry-cooks, an ancient *poissonnier*, a *rôtier* with legs so bandy as to describe a rugged circle, a red-headed *légumier*, and five *sauciers* with their green scarves around their necks. One of them near the far end from where Flay stood twitched a little, but apart from this all was stillness. They were very happy.

Mr Flay took a few paces and the atmosphere closed around him. He had stood by the door unobserved, but now as he came forward a roysterer leaping suddenly into the air caught hold of one of the hooks in the dark beam above them. He was suspended by one arm, a cretinous little man with a face of concentrated impudence. He must have possessed a strength out of all proportions to his size, for with the weight of his body hanging on the end of one arm he yet drew himself up so that his head reached the level of the iron hook. As Mr Flay passed beneath, the dwarf, twisting himself upside down with incredible speed, coiled his legs around the twisted beam and dropping the rest of himself vertically with his face a few inches from that of Mr Flay, grinned at him grotesquely with his head upside down, before Flay could do anything save come to an abrupt halt. The dwarf had then swung himself on to the beam again and was running along it on all fours with an agility more

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likely to be found in jungles than in kitchens.

A prodigious bellow outvoicing all cacophony caused him to turn his head away from the dwarf. Away to his left in the shade of a supporting pillar he could make out the vague unmistakable shape of what had really been at the back of his brain like a tumour, ever since he had entered the great kitchen.

SWELTER

The chef of Gormenghast, balancing his body with difficulty upon a cask of wine, was addressing a group of apprentices in their striped and sodden jackets and small white caps. They clasped each other's shoulders for their support. Their adolescent faces steaming with the heat of the adjacent ovens were quite stupefied, and when they laughed or applauded the enormity above them, it was with a crazed and sycophantic fervour. As Mr Flay approached to within a few yards of the cluster, another roar, such as he had heard a moment or two earlier, rolled into the heat above the wine-barrel.

The young scullions had heard this roar many times before but had never associated it with anything other than anger. At first, consequently, it had frightened them, but they had soon perceived that there was no irritation in its note today.

The chef, as he loomed over them, drunken, arrogant and pedantic, was enjoying himself.

As the apprentices swayed tipsily around the wine cask, their faces catching and losing the light that streamed through a high window, they also, in a delirious fashion – were enjoying themselves. The echoes died from the apparently reasonless bellow of the chief chef and the sagging circle about the barrel stamped its feet feverishly and gave high shrill cries of delight, for they had seen an inane smile evolving from the blur of the huge head above them. Never before had they enjoyed such latitude in the presence of the chef. They struggled to outdo one another in the taking of liberties unheard of hitherto. They vied for favours, screaming his name at the tops of their voices. They tried to catch his eye. They were very tired, very heavy and sick with the drink and the heat, but were living fiercely on their fuddled reserves of nervous energy. All saving one high-shouldered boy, who throughout the scene had preserved a moody silence. He loathed the figure above him and he despised his fellow-apprentices. He leaned against the shadowy side of the pillar, out of the chef's line of vision.

Mr Flay was annoyed, even on such a day, by the scene. Although approving in theory, in practice it seemed to him that the spectacle was unpleasant. He remembered, when he had first come across Swelter, how he and the chef had instantaneously entertained a mutual dislike, and how this antipathy festered.

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To Swelter it was irksome to see the bony straggly figure of Lord Sepulchrave's first servant in his kitchen at all, the only palliative to this annoyance being the opportunity which it afforded for the display of his superior wit at Mr Flay's expense.

Mr Flay entered Swelter's steaming province for one purpose only. To prove to himself as much as to others, that he, as Lord Groan's personal attendant, would on no account be intimidated by any member of the staff.

To keep this fact well in front of his own mind, he made a tour of the servants' quarters every so often, never entering the kitchen, however, without a queasiness of stomach, never departing from it without a renewal of spleen.

The long beams of sunlight, which were reflected from the moist walls in a shimmering haze, had pranked the chef's body with blotches of ghost-light. The effect from below was that of a dappled volume of warm vague whiteness and of a grey that dissolved into swamps of midnight - of a volume that towered and dissolved among the rafters. As occasion merited he supported himself against the stone pillar at his side and as he did so the patches of light shifted across the degraded whiteness of the stretched uniform he wore. When Mr Flay had first eyed him, the cook's head had been entirely in shadow. Upon it the tall cap of office rose coldly, a vague topsail half lost in a fitful sky. In the total effect there was indeed something of the galleon.

One of the blotches of reflected sunlight swayed to and fro across the paunch. This particular pool of light moving in a mesmeric manner backwards and forwards picked out from time to time a long red island of spilt wine. It seemed to leap forward from the mottled cloth when the light fastened upon it in startling contrast to the chiaroscuro and to defy the laws of tone. This ungarnished sign of Swelter's debauche, taking the swollen curve of linen, had somehow, to Mr Flay's surprise, a fascination. For a minute he watched it appear, and disappear to reappear again – a lozenge of crimson, as the body behind it swayed.

Another senseless bout of foot-stamping and screaming broke the spell, and lifting his eyes he scowled about him. Suddenly, for a moment, the memory of Mr Rottcodd in his dusty deserted hall stole into his consciousness and he was shocked to realize how much he had really preferred – to this inferno of time-hallowed revelry – the limp and seemingly disloyal self-sufficiency of the curator. He straddled his way to a vantage point, from where he could see and remain unseen, and from there he noticed that Swelter was steadying himself on his legs and with a huge soft hand making signs to the adolescents below him to hold their voices. Flay noticed how the habitual truculence of his tone and manner had today altered to something mealy, to a conviviality weighted with lead and sugar, a ghastly intimacy more dreadful than his most dreaded rages. His voice came down from the shadows in huge wads of sound, or like the warm, sick notes of some prodigous mouldering bell of felt.

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His soft hand had silenced the seething of the apprentices and he allowed his thick voice to drop out of his face.

'Gallstones!' and in the dimness he flung his arms apart so that the buttons of his tunic were torn away, one of them whizzing across the room and stunning a cockroach on the opposite wall. 'Close your ranks and close your ranks and listen mosht attentivesome. Come closer then, my little sea of faces, come ever closer in, my little ones.'

The apprentices edged themselves forward, tripping and treading upon each other's feet, the foremost of them being wedged against the wine-barrel itself.

'Thatsh the way. Thatsh jusht the way,' said Swelter, leering down at them. 'Now we're quite a happly little family. Mosht shelect and advanced.'

He then slid a fat hand through a slit in his white garment of office and removed from a deep pocket a bottle. Plucking out the cork with his lips, that had gripped it with an uncanny muscularity, he poured half a pint down his throat without displacing the cork, for he laid a finger at the mouth of the bottle, so dividing the rush of wine into two separate spurts that shot adroitly into either cheek, and so, making contact at the back of his mouth, down his throat in one dull gurgle to those unmentionable gulches that lay below.

The apprentices screamed and stamped and tore at each other in an access of delight and of admiration.

The chef removed the cork and twisted it around between his thumb and forefinger and satisfying himself that it had remained perfectly dry during the operation, recorked the bottle and returned it through the slit into his pocket.

Again he put up his hand and silence was restored save for the heavy, excited breathing.

'Now tell me thish, my stenching cherubs. Tell me thish and tell me exshtra quickly, who am *I*? Now tell me exshtra quickly.'

'Swelter,' they cried, 'Swelter, sir! Swelter!'

'Is that *all* you know?' came the voice. 'Is that *all* you know, my little sea of faces? Silence now! and lishen well to me, chief chef of Gormenghast, man and boy forty years, fair and foul, rain or shine, sand and sawdust, hags and stags and all the resht of them done to a turn and spread with sauce of aloes and a dash of prickling pepper.'

'With a dash of prickling pepper,' yelled the apprentices hugging themselves and each other in turn. 'Shall we cook it, sir? We'll do it now, sir, and slosh it in the copper, sir, and stir it up. Oh! what a tasty dish, Sir. Oh! what a tasty dish!'

'Shilence.' roared the chef. 'Silensh, my fairy boys. Silence, my belching angels. Come closer here, come closer with your little creamy faces and I'll tell you who I am.'

The high-shouldered boy, who had taken no part in the excitement, pulled out a small pipe of knotted worm-wood and filled it deliberately. His mouth was quite expressionless, curving neither up nor down, but his eyes were dark

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and hot with a mature hatred. They were half closed but their eloquence smouldered through the lashes as he watched the figure on the barrel lean forward precariously.

'Now lishen well', continued the voice, 'and I'll tell you exactly who I am and then I'll shing to you a shong and you will know who's shinging to you, my ghastly little ineffectual fillets.'

'A song! A song!' came the shrill chorus.

'Firshtly,' said the chef leaning forward and dropping each confidential word like a cannon ball smeared with syrup. 'Firshtly. I am none other than Abiatha Swelter, which meansh, for you would not know, that I am the shymbol of both excellence and plenty. I am the *father* of exchellence and plenty. Who did I shay I was?'

'Abafer Swelter,' came the scream.

The chef leaned back on his swollen legs and drew the corners of his mouth down until they lost themselves among the shadows of his hot dewlaps.

'Abi*a*tha.' he repeated slowly, stressing the central 'A'. 'Abi*a*tha. What did I shay my name wash?'

'Abi*a*tha,' came the scream again.

'Thatsh right, thatsh right. Abi*a*tha. Are you lishening, my pretty vermin, are you lishening?'

The apprentices gave him to understand that they were listening very hard.

Before the chef continued he applied himself to the bottle once again. This time he held the glass neck between his teeth and tilting his head back until the bottle was vertical, drained it and spat it out over the heads of the fascinated throng. The sound of black glass smashing on the flagstones was drowned in screams of approval.

'Food.' said Swelter, 'is shelestial and drink is mosht entrancing - such flowers of flatulence. Sush gaseous buds. Come closer in, *steal* in, and I will shing, I will lift my sweetest heart into the rafters, and will shing to you a shong. An old shong of great shadness, a most dolorous piece. Come closer in.'

It was impossible for the apprentices to force themselves any closer to the chef, but they struggled and shouted for the song, and turned their glistening faces upwards.

'Oh what a pleasant lot of little joints you are,' said Swelter, peering at them and wiping his hands up and down his fat hips. 'What a very drippy lot of little joints. Oh yesh you are, but so underdone. Lishen cocks, I'll twisht your grandma's so shweetly in their graves. We'll make them turn, my dears, we'll make them turn – and what a turn for them, my own, and for the worms that nibble. Where's Steerpike?'

'Steerpike! Steerpike!' yelled the youths, the ones in front twisting their heads and standing upon their toes, the ones in the rear craning forward and peering about them. 'Steerpike! Steerpike! He's somewhere here, sir! Oh there he is sir! There he is sir! Behind the pillar sir!'

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'Silence.' bellowed the chef, turning his gourd of a head in the direction of the pointed hands as the high-shouldered boy was pushed forward.

'Here he is, sir! Here he is, sir!'

The boy Steerpike looked impossibly small as he stood beneath the monstrous monument.

'I shall shing to *you*, Steerpike, to *you*,' whispered the cook, reeling and supporting himself with one hand against the stone pillar that was glistening with condensed heat, little trickles of moisture moving down its fluted sides. 'To you, the newcomer, the blue mummer and the slug of summer – to you the hideous, and insidious, and appallingly cretinous goat in a house of stenches.'

The apprentices rocked with joy.

'To you, only to *you*, my core of curdled cat-bile. To you alone, sho hearken diligentiums. Are you sharkening? Are you all lishening for this his how's it goesh. My shong of a hundred yearsh ago, my plaintivly mosht melancholic shong.'

Swelter seemed to forget he was about to sing, and after wiping the sweat from his hands on the head of a youth below him, peered for Steerpike again.

'And why to you, my ray of addled sunshine? Why to you aslone? Shtaking it for granted, my dear little Steerpike – taking it for more than for mosht granted, that you, a creature of lesh consequence than stoat's-blood, are sho far removal'd from anything approaching nature – yet tell me, more rather, don't tell me why your ears which musht originally have been deshigned for fly-papers, are, for shome reason butter known to yourself, kept imodeshtly unfurled. What do you proposhe to do next in thish batter? You move here and there on your little measly legs, I have sheen you at it. You breathe all over my kitchen. You look at thingsh with your insholent animal eyes. I've sheen you doing it. I have sheen you look at me. Your looking at me now. Shteerpike, my impatient love-bird, what doesh it all mean, and why should I shing for you?'

Swelter leaned back and seemed to be considering his own question a moment as he wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his forearm. But he waited for no reply and flung his pendulent arms out sideways and somewhere on the orbit of an immense arc something or other gave way.

Steerpike was not drunk. As he stood below Mr Swelter, he had nothing but contempt for the man who had but yesterday struck him across the head. He could do nothing, however, except stay where he was, prodded and nudged from behind by the excited minions, and wait.

The voice recurred from above. 'It is a shong, my Steerpike, to an imaginawary monshter, jusht like yourshelf if only you were a twifle bigger and more monshtrous shtill. It is a shong to a hard-hearted monshter sho lishen mosht shfixedly, my pretty wart. Closher, closher! Can't you come a little closher to a dirgeous mashterpeesh?'

The wine was beginning to redouble its subversive activity in the chef's brain. He was now supporting himself almost the whole of the while against

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the sweating pillar and was sagging hideously.

Steerpike stared up at him from under his high bony brow. The cook's eyes were protruding like bloodshot bubbles. One arm hung, a dead-weight, down the fluted surface of the support. The enormous area of the face had fallen loose. It glistened like a jelly.

A hole appeared in the face. Out of it came a voice that had suddenly become weaker.

'I am Shwelter,' it repeated, 'the great chef Abi*a*tha Shwelter, scook to hish Lordshipsh, boardshipsh and all shorts of ships that shail on shlippery sheas. Abiafa Shwelter, man and boy and girls and ribbonsh, lots of kittensh, forty year of cold and shunny, where'sh the money, thick and hairy, I'm a fairy! I'm a shongshter! Lishen well, lishen well!'

Mr Swelter lowered his head downwards over his wine-raddled breast without moving his shoulders and made an effort to see whether his audience was sufficiently keyed up for his opening chords. But he could make out nothing below him saying the 'little sea of faces' which he had alluded to, but the little sea had now become practically obliterated from him by a swimming mist.

'Are you lishening?'

'Yes, yes! The song, the song!'

Swelter lowered his head yet again into the hot spindrift and then held up his right hand weakly. He made one feeble effort to heave himself away from the pillar and to deliver his verses at a more imposing angle, but, incapable of mustering the strength he sank back, and then, as a vast inane smile opened up the lower half of his face, and as Mr Flay watched him, his hard little mouth twisted downwards, the chef began gradually to curl in upon himself, as though folding himself up for death. The kitchen had become as silent as a hot tomb. At last, through the silence, a weak gurgling sound began to percolate but whether it was the first verse of the long awaited poem, none could tell for the chef, like a galleon, lurched in his anchorage. The great ship's canvas sagged and crumpled and then suddenly an enormousness foundered and sank. There was a sound of something spreading as an area of seven flagstones became hidden from view beneath a catalyptic mass of wine-drenched blubber.

THE STONE LANES

Mr Flay's gorge had risen steadily and, as the dreadful minutes passed, he had been filled with a revulsion so consuming that but for the fact that the chef was surrounded by the youths he would have attacked the drunkard. As it was he bared his sand-coloured teeth, and fixed his eyes for a last moment on the cook

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with an expression of unbelievable menace. He had turned his head away at last and spat, and then brushing aside whoever stood in his path, had made his way with great skeleton strides, to a narrow doorway in the wall opposite that through which he had entered. By the time Swelter's monologue was dragging to its crapulous close, Mr Flay was pacing onwards, every step taking him another five feet further from the reek and horror of the Great Kitchen.

His black suit, patched on the elbows and near the collar with a greasy sepia-coloured cloth, fitted him badly but belonged to him as inevitably as the head of a tortoise emerging from its shell or the vulture's from a rubble of feathers belong to that reptile or that bird. His head, parchment coloured and bony, was indigenous to that greasy fabric. It stuck out from the top window of its high black building as though it had known no other residence.

While Mr Flay was pacing along the passages to that part of the castle where Lord Sepulchrave had been left alone for the first time for many weeks, the curator, sleeping peacefully in the Hall of the Bright Carvings, snored beneath the venetian blind. The hammock was still swinging a little, a very little, from the movement caused by Mr Rottcodd's depositing himself therein directly he had turned the key on Mr Flay. The sun burned through the shutters, made bands of gold around the pedestals that supported the sculpture and laid its tiger stripes across the dusty floor boarding.

The sunlight, as Mr Flay strolled on, still had one finger through the kitchen window, lighting the perspiring stone pillar which was now relieved of its office of supporting the chef for the soak had fallen from the wine-barrel a moment after the disappearance of Mr Flay and lay stretched at the foot of his rostrum.

Around him lay scattered a few small flattened lumps of meat, coated with sawdust. There was a strong smell of burning fat, but apart from the prone bulk of the chef, the Grey Scrubbers under the table, and the gentlemen who were suspended from the beam, there was no one left in the huge, hot, empty hall. Every man and boy who had been able to move his legs had made his way to cooler quarters.

Steerpike had viewed with a mixture of amazement, relief and malignant amusement the dramatic cessation of Mr Swelter's oratory. For a few moments he had gazed at the wine-spattered form of his overlord spread below him, then glancing around and finding that he was alone he had made for the door through which Mr Flay had passed and was soon racing down the passages turning left and right as he ran in a mad effort to reach the fresh air.

He had never before been through that particular door, but he imagined that he would soon find his way into the open and to some spot where he could be on his own. Turning this way and that he found that he was lost in a labyrinth of stone corridors, lit here and there by candles sunk in their own wax and placed in niches in the walls. In desperation he put his hands to his head as he ran, when suddenly, as he rounded the curve of a wall a figure passed rapidly

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across the passage before him, neither looking to right or left.

As soon as Mr Flay – for it was his lordship's servant on his way to the residential apartments – as soon as he had passed from sight, Steerpike peered around the corner and followed, keeping as much as possible in step to hide the sound of his own feet. This was almost impossible, as Mr Flay's spider-like gait besides being particularly long of stride, had like the slow-march, a time-lag before the ultimate descent of the foot. However, young Steerpike, feeling that here at any rate was his one chance of escaping from these endless corridors, followed as best he could in the hope that Mr Flay would eventually turn into some cool quadrangle or open space where get-away could be effected. At times, when the candles were thirty or forty feet apart, Mr Flay would be lost to view and only the sound of his feet on the flagstones would guide his follower. Then slowly, as his erratic shape approached the next guttering aura he would begin by degrees to become a silhouette, until immediately before the candle he would for a moment appear like an inky

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scarecrow, a mantis of pitch-black cardboard worked with strings. Then the progression of the lighting would be reversed and for a moment immediately after passing the flame Steerpike would see him quite clearly as a lit object against the depths of the still-to-be-trodden avenues of stone. The grease at those moments shone from the threadbare cloth across his shoulders, the twin vertical muscles of his neck rose out of the tattered collar nakedly and sharply. As he moved forward the light would dim upon his back and Steerpike would lose him, only hearing the cracking of his knee-joints and his feet striking the stones, until the ensuing candle carved him anew. Practically exhausted, first by the unendurable atmosphere of the Great Kitchen and now with this seemingly endless journey, the boy, for he was barely seventeen, sank suddenly to the ground with exhaustion, striking the flags with a thud, his boots dragging harshly on the stone. The noise brought Flay to a sudden halt and he turned himself slowly about, drawing his shoulders up to his ears as he did so. 'What's that?' he croaked, peering into the darkness behind him.

There was no answer. Mr Flay began to retrace his steps, his head forward, his eyes peering. As he proceeded he came into the light of one of the candles in the wall. He approached it, still keeping his small eyes directed into the darkness beyond, and wrenched the candle, with a great subtratum of ancient tallow with it, from the wall and with this to help him he soon came across the boy in the centre of the corridor several yards further on.

He bent forward and lowered the great lump of lambent wax within a few inches of Steerpike, who had fallen face downwards and peered at the immobile huddle of limbs. The sound of his footsteps and the cracking of his knee-joints had given place to an absolute silence. He drew back his teeth and straightened himself a little. Then he turned the boy over with his foot. This roused Steerpike from his faintness and he raised himself weakly on one elbow.

'Where am I?' he said in a whisper. 'Where am I?'

'One of Swelter's little rats', thought Flay to himself, taking no notice of the question. 'One of Swelter's, eh? One of his striped rats.' 'Get up', said Mr Flay aloud. 'What you doing here?' and he put the candle close to the boy's face.

'I don't know where I am', said young Steerpike. 'I'm lost here. Lost. Give me daylight.'

'What you doing here, I said . . . what you doing here?' said Flay. 'I don't want Swelter's boys here. Curse them!'

'I don't *want* to be here. Give me daylight and I'll go away. Far away.'

'Away? Where?'

Steerpike had recovered control of his mind, although he still felt hot and desperately tired. He had noticed the sneer in Mr Flay's voice as he had said 'I don't want Swelter's boys here,' and so, at Mr Flay's question 'Away where?' Steerpike answered quickly, 'Oh anywhere, anywhere from that dreadful Mr Swelter.'

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Flay peered at him for a moment or two, opening his mouth several times to speak, only to close it again.

'New?' said Flay looking expressionlessly through the boy.

'Me?' said young Steerpike.

'*You*,' said Flay, still looking clean through the top of the boy's head, 'New?'

'Seventeen years old, sir.' said young Steerpike, 'but new to that kitchen.'

'When?' said Flay, who left out most of every sentence.

Steerpike, who seemed able to interpret this sort of shorthand talk, answered.

'Last month. I want to leave that dreadful Swelter,' he added, replaying his only possible card and glancing up at the candlelit head.

'Lost' were you?' said Flay after a pause, but with perhaps less darkness in his tone. 'Lost in the Stone Lanes, were you? One of Swelter's little rats, lost in the Stone Lanes, eh?' and Mr Flay raised his gaunt shoulders again.

'Swelter fell like a log,' said Steerpike.

'Quite right,' said Flay. 'doing honours. What have *you* done?'

'Done, sir?' said Steerpike, 'when?'

'What Happiness?' said Flay, looking like a death's-head. The candle was beginning to fail. 'How much Happiness?'

'I haven't any happiness,' said Steerpike.

'What! no Great Happiness? Rebellion. Is it rebellion?'

'No, except against Mr Swelter.'

'Swelter! Swelter! Leave his name in its fat and grease. Don't talk of that name in the Stone Lanes. Swelter, always Swelter! Hold your tongue. Take this candle. Lead the way, put it in the niche. Rebellion is it? Lead the way, left, left, right, keep to the left, now right . . . I'll teach you to be unhappy when a Groan is born . . . keep on . . . straight on . . .'

Young Steerpike obeyed these instructions from the shadows behind him.

'A Groan is born', said Steerpike with an inflection of voice which might be interpreted as a question or a statement.

'Born,' said Flay. 'And you mope in the Lanes. With me, Swelter's boy. Show you what it means. A male Groan. New, eh? Seventeen? Ugh! Never understand. Never. Turn right and left again – again . . . through the arch. Ugh! A new body under the old stones – one of Swelter's, too . . . don't like him, eh?'

'No, sir.'

'H'm,' said Flay. 'Wait here.'

Steerpike waited as he was told and Mr Flay, drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket and selecting one with great care as though he were dealing with objects of rarity inserted it into the lock of an invisible door, for the blackness was profound. Steerpike heard the iron grinding in the lock.

'Here!' said Flay out of the darkness. 'Where's that Swelter boy? Come here.'

Steerpike moved forward towards the voice, feeling with his hands along the

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wall of a low arch. Suddenly he found himself next to the dank smelling garments of Mr Flay and he put forward his hand and held Lord Groan's servant by a loose portion of the long jacket. Mr Flay brought down his bony hand suddenly over the boy's arm, knocking it away and a t'ck, t'ck, t'ck, sounded in the tall creature's throat, warning him against any further attempts at intimacy.

'Cat room,' said Flay, putting his hand to the iron knob of the door.

'Oh,' said Steerpike, thinking hard and repeating 'Cat room' to fill in time, for he saw no reason for the remark. The only interpretation he could give to the ejaculation was that Flay was referring to him as a cat and asking to be given more room. Yet there had been no irritation in the voice.

'Cat room,' said Flay again, ruminatively, and turned the iron door-knob. He opened the door slowly and Steerpike, peering past him, found no longer any need for an explanation.

A room was filled with the late sunbeams. Steerpike stood quite still, a twinge of pleasure running through his body. He grinned. A carpet filled the floor with blue pasture. Thereon were seated in a hundred decorative attitudes, or stood immobile like carvings, or walked superbly across their sapphire setting, inter-weaving with each other like a living arabesque, a swarm of snow-white cats.

As Mr Flay passed down the centre of the room, Steerpike could not but notice the contrast between the dark rambling figure with his ungainly movements and the monotonous cracking of his knees, the contrast between this and the superb elegance and silence of the white cats. They took not the slightest notice of either Mr Flay or of himself save for the sudden cessation of their purring. When they had stood in the darkness, and before Mr Flay had removed the bunch of keys from his pocket, Steerpike had imagined he had heard a heavy, deep throbbing, a monotonous sea-like drumming of sound, and he now knew that it must have been the pullulation of the tribe.

As they passed through a carved archway at the far end of the room and had closed the door behind them he heard the vibration of their throats, for now that the white cats were once more alone it was revived, and the deep unhurried purring was like the voice of an ocean in the throat of a shell.

'THE SPY-HOLE'

'Whose are they?' asked Steerpike. They were climbing stone stairs. The wall on their right was draped with hideous papers that were peeling off and showed rotting surfaces of chill plaster behind. A mingling of many weird colours enlivened this nether surface, dark patches of which had a submarine and incredible beauty. In another dryer area, where a great sail of paper hung away

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from the wall, the plaster had cracked into a network of intricate fissures varying in depth and resembling a bird's-eye view, or map of some fabulous delta. A thousand imaginary journeys might be made along the banks of these rivers of an unexplored world.

Steerpike repeated his question, 'Whose are they?' he said.

'Whose what?' said Flay, stopping on the stairs and turning round. 'Still here are you? Still following me?'

'You suggested that I should,' said Steerpike.

'Ch! Ch!' said Flay, 'what d'you want, Swelter's boy?'

'Nauseating Swelter,' said Steerpike between his teeth but with one eye on Mr Flay, 'vile Swelter.'

There was a pause during which Steerpike tapped the iron banisters with his thumb-nail.

'Name?' said Mr Flay.

'My name?' asked Steerpike.

'Your name, yes, your name, I know what *my* name is.' Mr Flay put a knuckly hand on the banisters preparatory to mounting the stairs again, but waited, frowning over his shoulder, for the reply.

'Steerpike sir,' said the boy.

'Queerpike, eh? eh?' said Flay.

'No, Steerpike.'

'What?'

'Steerpike. Steerpike.'

'What for?' said Flay.

'I beg your pardon?'

'What for, eh? Two Squeertikes, two of you. Twice over. What for? One's enough for a Swelter's boy.'

The youth felt it would be useless to clear up the problem of his name. He concentrated his dark eyes on the gawky figure above him for a few moments and shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly. Then he spoke again, showing no sign of irritation.

'Whose cats were those, sir? May I ask?'

'Cats?' said Flay, 'who said cats?'

'The white cats,' said Steerpike. 'All the white cats in the Cat room. Who do they belong to?'

Mr Flay held up a finger. 'My Lady's,' he said. His hard voice seemed a part of this cold narrow stairway of stone and iron. 'They belong to my Lady. Lady's white cats they are. Swelter's boy. All hers.'

Steerpike pricked his ears up, 'Where does she live?' he said. 'Are we close to where she lives?'

For answer Mr Flay shot his head forward out of his collar and croaked, 'Silence! you kitchen thing. Hold your tongue you greasy fork. Talk too much,' and he straddled up the stairs, passing two landings in his ascent, and then at

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the third he turned sharply to his left and entered an octagonal apartment where full-length portraits in huge dusty gold frames stared from seven of the eight walls. Steerpike followed him in.

Mr Flay had been longer away from his lordship than he had intended or thought right and it was on his mind that the earl might be needing him. Directly he entered the octagonal room he approached one of the portraits at the far end and pushing the suspended frame a little to one side, revealed a small round hole in the panelling the size of a farthing. He placed his eye to this hole and Steerpike watched the wrinkles of his parchment-coloured skin gather below the protruding bone at the base of the skull, for Mr Flay both had to stoop and then to raise his head in order to apply his eye at the necessary angle. What Mr Flay saw was what he had expected to see.

From his vantage point he was able to get a clear view of three doors in a corridor, the central one belonging to the chamber of her ladyship, the seventy-sixth Countess of Groan. It was stained black and had painted upon it an enormous white cat. The wall of the landing was covered with pictures of birds and there were three engravings of cacti in bloom. This door was shut, but as Mr Flay watched the doors on either side were being constantly opened and closed and figures moved quickly in and out or up and down the landing, or conversed with many gesticulations or stood with their chins in the curled palms of their hands as though in profound meditation.

'Here', said Flay without turning round.

Steerpike was immediately at Flay's elbow. 'Yes?' he said.

'Cat door's hers', said Flay removing his eye, and then, stretching his arms out he spread his long fingers to their tips and yawned cavernously.

Young Steerpike glued his eye to the hole, keeping the heavy gold frame from swinging back with his shoulder. All at once he found himself contemplating a narrow-chested man with a shock of grey hair and glasses which magnified his eyes so that they filled the lenses up to their gold rims, when the central door opened, and a dark figure stole forth, closing the door behind him quietly, and with an air of the deepest dejection. Steerpike watched him turn his eyes to the shock-headed man, who inclined his body forward clasping his hands before him. No notice was taken of this by the other, who began to pace up and down the landing, his dark cloak clasped around him and trailing on the floor at his heels. Each time he passed the doctor, for such it was, that gentleman inclined his body, but as before there was no response, until suddenly, stopping immediately before the physician in attendance, he drew from his cape a slender rod of silver mounted at the end with a rough globe of black jade that burned around its edges with emerald fire. With this unusual weapon the mournful figure beat sadly at the doctor's chest as though to inquire whether there was anyone at home. The doctor coughed. The silver and jade implement was pointed to the floor, and Steerpike was amazed to see the doctor, after hitching his exquisitely creased trousers to a few inches above

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his ankle, squat down. His great vague eyes swam about beneath the magnifying lenses like a pair of jellyfish seen through a fathom of water. His dark grey hair was brushed out over his eyes like thatch. For all the indignity of his position it was with a great sense of style that he became seated following with his eyes the gentleman who had begun to walk around him slowly. Eventually the figure with the silver rod came to a halt.

'Prunesquallor', he said.

'My Lord?' said the doctor, inclining his grey hayrick to the left.

'Satisfactory, Prunesquallor?'

The doctor placed the tips of his fingers together. 'I am exceptionally gratified my lord, exceptionally. Indeed I am. Very, very much so; ha, ha, ha. Very, very much so.'

'Professionally you mean, I imagine?' said Lord Sepulchrave, for as Steerpike had begun to realize to his amazement, the tragic-looking man was none other than the seventy-sixth Earl of Groan and the owner of, as Steerpike put it to himself, the whole caboodle, bricks, guns and glory.

'Professionally . . .' queried the doctor to himself, ' . . .what does he mean?' Aloud he said, 'professionally, my lord, I am unspeakably satisfied, ha, ha, ha, ha, and socially, that is to say, er, as a gesture, ha, ha, I am over-awed. I am a proud fellow, my lord, ha, ha, ha, ha, a very proud fellow.'

The laugh of doctor Prunesquallor was part of his conversation and quite alarming when heard for the first time. It appeared to be out of control as though it were a part of his voice, a top-storey of his vocal range that only came into its own when the doctor laughed. There was something about it of wind whistling through high rafters and there was a good deal of the horse's whinny, with a touch of the curlew. When giving vent to it, the doctor's mouth would be practically immobile like the door of a cabinet left ajar. Between the laughs be would speak very rapidly, which made the sudden stillness of his beautifully shaven jaws at the time of laughter all the more extraordinary. The laugh was not necessarily connected with humour at all. It was simply a part of his conversation.

'Technically, I am so satisfied as to be unbearable even to myself, ha, ha, ha, he, he, ha. Oh very, very satisfactory it all was. Very much so.'

'I am glad', said his lordship, gazing down at him for a moment. 'Did you notice anything?' (Lord Sepulchrave glanced up and down the corridor.) 'Strange? Anything unusual about him?'

'Unusual?' said Prunesquallor. 'Did you say unusual, my lord?'

'I did', said Lord Sepulchrave, biting his lower lip. 'Anything wrong with him? You need not be afraid to speak out.'

Again his lordship glanced up and down the landing but there was no one to be seen.

'Structurally, a sound child, sound as a bell, tinkle, tinkle, structurally, ha, ha, ha.' said the doctor.

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'Damn the structure!' said Lord Groan.

'I am at a loss, my lord, ha, ha. Completely at a loss, sir. If not structurally, then how, my lord?'

'His face', said the earl. 'Didn't you see his face?'

Here the doctor frowned profoundly to himself and rubbed his chin with his hand. Out of the corner of his eyes he looked up to find his lordship scrutinizing him. 'Ah!' he said lamely, 'the face. The face of his little lordship. Aha!'

'Did you notice it, I say? ' continued Lord Groan. 'Speak man!'

'I noticed his face, sir. Oh yes, definitely I noticed it.' This time the doctor did not laugh but drew a deep breath from his narrow chest.

'Did you or did you not think it was strange? Did you or did you not?'

'Speaking professionally,' said Doctor Prunesquallor, 'I should say the face was irregular.'

'Do you mean it's ugly?' said Lord Groan.

'It is unnatural', said Prunesquallor.

'What is the difference, man', said Lord Groan.

'Sir?' questioned the doctor.

'I asked if it was ugly, sir, and you answer that it is unnatural. Why must you hedge?'

'Sir!' said Prunesquallor, but as he gave no colour to the utterance, very little could be made of it.

'When I say "ugly" have the goodness to use the word. Do you understand?' Lord Groan spoke quietly.

'I comprehend, sir. I comprehend.'

'Is the boy hideous,' persisted Lord Groan as though he wished to thrash the matter out. 'Have you ever delivered a more hideous child? Be honest.'

'Never', said the doctor. 'Never, ha, ha, ha, ha. Never. And never a boy with such – er, ha, ha, ha, never a boy with such extraordinary eyes.'

'Eyes?' said Lord Groan, 'what's wrong with them?'

'Wrong?' cried Prunesquallor. 'Did you say "wrong" your lordship? Have you not seen them?'

'No, quick, man. Hurry yourself. What is it? What is the matter with my son's eyes?'

'They are violet.'

FUCHSIA

As his lordship stared at the doctor another figure appeared, a girl of about fifteen with long, rather wild black hair. She was gauche in movement and in a sense, ugly of face, but with how small a twist might she not suddenly have become beautiful. Her sullen mouth was full and rich – her eyes smouldered.

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A yellow scarf hung loosely around her neck. Her shapeless dress was a flaming red.

For all the straightness of her back she walked with a slouch.

'Come here', said Lord Groan as she was about to pass him and the doctor.

'Yes father', she said huskily.

'Where have you been for the last fortnight, Fuchsia?'

'Oh, here and there, father', she said, staring at her shoes. She tossed her long hair and it flapped down her back like a pirate's flag. She stood in about as awkward a manner as could be conceived. Utterly un-feminine – no man could have invented it.

'Here and there?' echoed her father in a weary voice. 'What does "here and there" mean? You've been in hiding. Where, girl?'

"N the libr'y and 'n the armoury, 'n walking about a lot', said Lady Fuchsia, and her sullen eyes narrowed. 'I just heard silly rumours about mother. They said I've got a brother – idiots! idiots! I hate them. I haven't, have I? Have I?'

'A little brother', broke in Doctor Prunesquallor. 'Yes, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, a minute, infinitesimal, microscopic addition to the famous line is now behind this bedroom door. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, he, he, he! Oh yes! Ha, ha! Oh yes indeed! Very much so.'

'No!' said Fuchsia so loudly that the doctor coughed crisply and his lordship took a step forward with his eyebrows drawn together and a sad curl at the corner of his mouth.

'It's not true!' shouted Fuchsia, turning from them and twirling a great lock of black hair round and round her wrist. 'I don't believe it! Let me go! Let me go!'

As no one was touching her, her cry was unnecessary and she turned and ran with strange bounds along the corridor that led from the landing. Before she was lost to view, Steerpike could hear her voice shouting from the distance, 'Oh how I hate! hate! hate! How I *hate* people! Oh how I *hate* people!'

All this while Mr Flay had been gazing out of a narrow window in the octagonal room and was preoccupied with certain matters relating to how he could best let Lord Groan know that he, Flay, his servant for over forty years, disapproved of having been put aside as it were at the one moment when a son had been born – at the one moment when he, Flay, would have been invaluable as an ally. Mr Flay was rather hurt about the whole business, and he very much wanted Lord Groan to know this, and yet at the same time it was very difficult to think of away in which he could tactfully communicate his chagrin to a man quite as sullen as himself. Mr Flay bit his nails sourly. He had been at the window for a much longer time than he had intended and he turned with his shoulders raised, an attitude typical of him and saw young Steerpike, whose presence he had forgotten. He strode over to the boy and catching him by his coat-tails jerked him backwards into the centre of the room. The great picture swung back across the spy-hole.

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'Now,' he said, 'back! You've seen her door, Swelter's boy.'

Steerpike, who had been lost in the world beyond the oak partition, was dazed, and took a moment to come to.

'Back to that loathsome chef? ' he cried at last, 'oh no! couldn't!'

'Too busy to have you here', said Flay, 'too busy, can't wait.'

'He's ugly', said Steerpike fiercely.

'Who?' said Flay. 'Don't stop here talking.'

'Oh so ugly, he is. Lord Groan said so. The doctor said so. Ugh! So hideous.'

'Who's hideous, you kitchen thing', said Flay, jerking his head forward grotesquely.

'Who?' said Steerpike. 'The baby. The new baby. They both said so. Most terrible he is.'

'What's this?' cried Flay. 'What's these lies all about? Who've you heard talking? Who've you been listening to? I'll tear your little ears off, you snippet thing! Where've you been? Come here!'

Steerpike, who had determined to escape from the Great Kitchen, was now bent on finding an occupation among those apartments where he might pry into the affairs of those above him.

'If I go back to Swelter I'll tell him and all of them what I heard his lordship say and then . . .'

'Come here!' said Flay between his teeth, 'come here or I'll break your bones. Been agaping, have you? I'll fix you.' Flay propelled Steerpike through the entrance at a great pace and halted halfway down a narrow passage before a door. This he unlocked with one of his many keys and thrusting Steerpike inside turned it upon the boy.

'TALLOW AND BIRDSEED'

Like a vast spider suspended by a metal chord, a candelabrum presided over the room nine feet above the floor boards. From its sweeping arms of iron, long stalactites of wax lowered their pale spilths drip by drip, drip by drip. A rough table with a drawer half open, which appeared to be full of bird-seed, was in such a position below the iron spider that a cone of tallow was mounting by degrees at one corner into a lambent pyramid the size of a hat.

The room was untidy to the extent of being a shambles. Everything had the appearance of being put aside for the moment. Even the bed was at an angle, slanting away from the wall and crying out to be pushed back flush against the red wallpaper. As the candles guttered or flared, so the shadows moved from side to side, or up and down the wall, and with those movements behind the bed there swayed the shadows of four birds. Between them vacillated an

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enormous head. This umbrage was cast by her ladyship, the seventy-sixth Countess of Groan. She was propped against several pillows and a black shawl was draped around her shoulders. Her hair, a very dark red colour of great lustre, appeared to have been left suddenly while being woven into a knotted structure on the top of her head. Thick coils still fell about her shoulders, or clustered upon the pillows like burning snakes.

Her eyes were of the pale green that is common among cats. They were large eyes, yet seemed, in proportion to the pale area of her face, to be small. The nose was big enough to appear so in spite of the expanse that surrounded it. The effect which she produced was one of bulk, although only her head, neck, shoulders and arms could be seen above the bedclothes.

A magpie moving sideways up and down her left forearm, which lay supine upon the bedclothes, pecked intermittently at a heap of grain which lay in the palm of her hand. On her shoulders sat a stonechat, and a huge raven which was asleep. The bed-rail boasted two starlings, a missel-thrush and a small owl. Every now and then a bird would appear between the bars of a small high window which let in less than no light. The ivy had climbed through it from the outside and had begun to send its tendrils down the inner wall itself and over the crimson wallpaper. Although this ivy had choked out what little light might have trickled into the room, it was not strong enough to prevent the birds from finding a way through and from visiting Lady Gertrude at any hour of night or day.

'That's enough, that's enough, that's enough!' said the Countess in a deep husky voice, to the magpie. 'That's enough for you today, my dear.' The magpie jumped a few inches into the air and landed again on her wrist and shook his feathers; his long tail tapped on the eiderdown.

Lady Groan flung what remained of the grain across the room and the stonechat hopping from the bed-rail to her head, took off again from that rabous landing ground with a flutter, circled twice around the room steering during his second circuit through the stalactites of shining wax, and landed on the floor beside the grain.

The Countess of Groan dug her elbows into the pillows behind her, which had become flattened and uncomfortable and levered her bulk up with her strong, heavy arms. Then she relaxed again, and spread out her arms to left and right along the bed-rail behind her and her hands drooped from the wrists at either extremity, overhanging the edges of the bed. The line of her mouth was neither sad nor amused, as she gazed abstractedly at the pyramid of wax that was mounting upon the table. She watched each slow drip as it descended upon the blunt apex of the mound, move sluggishly down the uneven side and solidify into along pulpy petal.

Whether the Countess was thinking deeply or was lost in vacant reverie it would have been impossible to guess. She reclined hugely and motionlessly, her arms extended along the iron rail, when suddenly a great fluttering and

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scrambling broke into the wax-smelling silence of the room and turning her eyes to the ivy-filled window, fourteen feet from the ground, the Countess without moving her head, could see the leaves part and the white head and shoulders of an albino rook emerge guiltily.

'Ah-ha,' she said slowly, as though she had come to a conclusion, 'so it is you, is it? So it is the truant back again. Where has he been? What has he been doing? What trees has he been sitting in? What clouds has he been flying through? What a boy he is! What a bunch of feathered whiteness. What a bunch of wickedness!'

The rook had been sitting fringed on all sides with the ivy leaves, with his head now on one side, now on the other; listening or appearing to listen with great interest and a certain show of embarrassment, for from the movement that showed itself in the ivy leaves from time to time, the white rook was evidently shifting from foot to foot.

'Three weeks it is,' continued the Countess, 'three weeks I've been without him; I wasn't good enough for *him*, oh no, not for Master Chalk, and here he is back again, wants to be forgiven! Oh yes! Wants a great treeful of forgiveness, for his heavy old beak and months of absolution for his plumage.'

Then the Countess hoisted herself up in bed again, twisted a strand of her dark hair round a long forefinger, and with her face directed at the doorway, but her eyes still on the bird, said as though to herself and almost inaudibly, 'Come on then.' The ivy rustled again, and before that sound was over the bed itself vibrated with the sudden arrival of the white rook.

He stood on the foot-rail, his claws curled around it, and stared at Lady Groan. After a moment or two of stillness the white rook moved his feet up and down on the rail in a treading motion and then, flopping on to the bedclothes at her ladyship's feet, twisted his head around and pecked at his own tail, the feathers of his neck standing out as he did so, crisply like a ruff. The pecking over he made his way over the undulating terrain of the bed, until within a few inches of her ladyship's face, when he tilted his big head in a characteristic manner and cawed.

'So you beg my pardon, do you?' said Lady Groan, 'and you think that's the end of it? No more questions about where you've been or where you've flown these three long weeks? So that's it, is it, Master Chalk? You want me to forgive you for old sakes' sake? Come here with your old beak and rub it on my arm. Come along my whitest one, come along, then. Come along.' The raven on Lady Groan's shoulder awoke from his sleep and raised his ethiopian wing an inch or two, sleepily. Then his eyes focused upon the rook in a hard stare. He sat there wide awake, a lock of dark red hair between his feet. The small owl as though to take the place of the raven fell asleep. One of the starlings turned about in three slow paces and faced the wall. The missel-thrush made no motion, and as a candle guttered, a ghoul of shadow from under a tall cupboard dislodged itself and moved across the floorboards,

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climbed the bed, and crawled half way across the eiderdown before it returned by the same route, to curl up and roost beneath the cupboard again.

Lady Groan's gaze had returned to the mounting pyramid of tallow. Her pale eyes would either concentrate upon an object in a remorseless way or would appear to be without sight, vacant, with the merest suggestion of something childish. It was in this abstracted manner that she gazed through the pale pyramid, while her hands, as though working on their own account, moved gently over the breast, head and throat of the white rook.

For some time there was complete silence in the room and it was with something of a shock that a rapping at the panels of her bedroom door awakened Lady Groan from her reverie.

Her eyes now took on the concentrated, loveless, cat-like look.

The birds coming to life at once, flapped simultaneously to the end rail of the bed, where they stood balancing in a long uneven line, each one on the alert, their heads turned towards the door.

'Who's that?' said Lady Groan heavily.

'It's me, my lady,' cried a quavering voice.

'Who's that hitting my door?'

'It's me with his lordship,' replied the voice.

'What?' shouted Lady Groan. 'What d'you want? What are you hitting my door for?'

Whoever it was raised her voice nervously and cried, 'Nannie Slagg, it is. It's me, my lady; Nannie Slagg.'

'What d'you want?' repeated her ladyship, settling herself more comfortably.

'I've brought his Lordship for you to see', shouted Nannie Slagg, a little less nervously.

'Oh, you have, have you? You've brought his lordship. So you want to come in, do you? With his lordship.' There was a moment's silence. 'What for? What have you brought him to me for?'

'For you to see, if you please, my lady,' replied Nannie Slagg. 'He's had his bath.'

Lady Groan relaxed still further into the pillows. 'Oh, you mean the *new* one, do you?' she muttered.

'Can I come in?' cried Nannie Slagg.

'Hurry up then! Hurry up then! Stop scratching at my door. What are you waiting for?'

A rattling at the door handle froze the birds along the iron bed-rail and as the door opened they were all at once in the air, and were forcing their way, one after another through the bitter leaves of the small window.

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A GOLD RING FOR TITUS

Nannie Slagg entered, bearing in her arms the heir to the miles of rambling stone and mortar; to the Tower of Flints and the stagnant moat; to the angular mountains and the lime-green river where twelve years later he would be angling for the hideous fishes of his inheritance.

She carried the child towards the bed and turned the little face to the mother, who gazed right through it and said:

'Where's that doctor? Where's Prunesquallor? Put the child down and open the door.'

Mrs Slagg obeyed, and as her back was turned Lady Groan bent forward and peered at the child. The little eyes were glazed with sleep and the candlelight played upon the bald head, moulding the structure of the skull with shifting shade.

'H'm', said Lady Groan, 'what d'you want me to do with him?'

Nannie Slagg, who was very grey and old, with red rims around her eyes and whose intelligence was limited, gazed vacantly at her ladyship.

'He's had his bath,' she said. 'He's just had his bath, bless his little lordship's heart.'

'What about it?' said Lady Groan.

The old nurse picked the baby up dexterously and began to rock him gently by way of an answer.

'Is Prunesquallor there?' repeated Lady Groan.

'Down', whispered Nannie, pointing a little wrinkled finger at the floor, 'd-downstairs: oh yes, I think he is still downstairs taking punch in the Coldroom. Oh dear, yes, bless the little thing.'

Her last remark presumably referred to Titus and not to Doctor Prunesquallor. Lady Groan raised herself in bed and looking fiercely at the open door, bellowed in the deepest and loudest voice, 'SQUALLOR!'

The word echoed along the corridors and down the stairs, and creeping under the door and along the black rug in the Coldroom, just managed, after climbing the doctor's body, to find its way into both his ears simultaneously, in a peremptory if modified condition. Modified though it was, it brought doctor Prunesquallor to his feet at once. His fish eyes swam all round his glasses before finishing at the top, where they gave him an expression of fantastic martyrdom. Running his long, exquisitely formed fingers through his mop of grey hair, he drained his glass of punch at a draught and started for the door, flicking small globules of the drink from his waistcoat.

Before he had reached her room he had begun a rehearsal of the conversation he expected, his insufferable laughter punctuating every other sentence whatever its gist.

'My lady,' he said, when he had reached her door and was showing the

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Countess and Mrs Slagg nothing except his head around the door-post in a decapitated manner, before entering. 'My lady, ha, ha, he he. I heard your voice downstairs as I er – was –'

'Tippling,' said Lady Groan.

'Ha, ha – how very right you are, how very very right you are, ha, ha, ha, he, as I was, as you so graphically put it, ha, ha, tippling. Down it came, ha, ha – down it came.'

'What came?' interrupted the Countess loudly.

'Your voice,' said Prunesquallor, raising his right hand and deliberately placing the tips of his thumb and little finger together, 'your voice located me in the Coldroom. Oh yes, it did!'

The Countess stared at him heavily and then dug her elbows into the pillow.

Mrs Slagg had rocked the baby to sleep.

Doctor Prunesquallor was running along tapering forefinger up and down a stalactite of wax and smiling horribly.

'I called you', said the Countess, 'to tell you, Prunesquallor, that tomorrow I get up.'

'Oh, he, ha, ha, oh ha, ha, my ladyship, oh, ha, ha, my ladyship – *tomorrow?*'

'Tomorrow,' said the Countess, 'why not?'

'Professionally speaking –' began Doctor Prunesquallor.

'Why not?' repeated the Countess interrupting him.

'Ha, ha, most abnormal, most unusual, ha, ha, ha, most unique, so *very* soon.'

'So you would docket me, would you, Prunesquallor? I thought you would; I guessed it. I get up tomorrow – tomorrow *at dawn.*'

Doctor Prunesquallor shrugged his narrow shoulders and raised his eyes. Then placing the tips of his fingers together and addressing the dark ceiling above him, 'I *advise*, but never order', he said, in a tone which implied that he could have done any amount of ordering had he thought it necessary. 'Ha ha, ha, oh no! I only advise.'

'Rubbish', said the Countess.

'I do not think so', replied Prunesquallor, still gazing upwards. 'Ha, ha, ha, ha, oh no! not at all.' As he finished speaking his eyes for a second travelled downwards at great speed and took in the image of the Countess in bed and then even more rapidly swam up the glasses. What he had seen disquieted him, for he had found in her expression such a concentration of distaste that as he deflected his gaze away from her he found that his feet were moving backwards one after the other and that he was at the door before he knew that he had decided what to do. Bowing quickly he withdrew his body from the bedroom.

'Isn't he sweet, oh isn't he the sweetest drop of sugar that ever was?' said Mrs Slagg.

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'Who?' shouted the Countess so loudly that a string of tallow wavered in the shifting light.

The baby awoke at the sound and moaned, and Nannie Slagg retreated.

'His little lordship,' she whimpered weakly, 'his pretty little lordship.'

'Slagg.' said the Countess, 'go away! I would like to see the boy when he is six. Find a wet nurse from the Outer Dwellings. Make him green dresses from the velvet curtains. Take this gold ring of mine. Fix a chain to it. Let him wear it around his wry little neck. Call him Titus. Go away and leave the door six inches open.'

The Countess put her hand under the pillow and drew forth a small reed, placed it in her vast mouth and gave it breath. Two long sweet notes sang out through the dark air. At the sound. Mrs Slagg, grabbing the gold ring from the bedclothes, where the Countess had thrown it, hurried as fast as her old legs could carry her from the room as though a werewolf were at her heels. Lady Groan was leaning forward in bed, her eyes were like a child's: wide, sweet and excited. They were fixed upon the door. Her hands were gripping the edges of her pillow. She became rigid.

In the distance, a vibration was becoming louder and louder until the volume seemed to have filled the chamber itself, when suddenly there slid through the narrow opening of the door and moved into the fumid atmosphere of the room an undulation of whiteness, so that, within a breath, there was no shadow in all the room that was not blanched with cats.

SEPULCHRAVE

Every morning of the year, between the hours of nine and ten, he may be found, seated in the Stone Hall, it is there, at the long table that he takes his breakfast. The table is raised upon a dais, and from where he sits he can gaze down the length of the grey refectory. On either side and running the entire length, great pillars prop the painted ceiling where cherubs pursue each other across a waste of flaking sky. There must be about a thousand of them all told, interweaving among the clouds, their fat limbs for ever on the move and yet never moving, for they are imperfectly articulated. The colours, once garish, have faded and peeled away and the ceiling is now a very subtle shade of grey and lichen green, old rose and silver.

Lord Sepulchrave may have noticed the cherubs long ago. Probably when a child he had attempted more than once to count them, as his father had done, and as young Titus in his turn will try to do; but however that might be, Lord Groan had not cast up his eyes to the old welkin for many years. Nor did he ever stare about him now. How could he *love* this place? He was a part of it. He could not imagine a world outside it; and the idea of loving Gormenghast

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would have shocked him. To have asked him of his feelings for his hereditary home would be like asking a man what his feelings were towards his own hand or his own throat. But his lordship remembered the cherubs in the ceiling. His great grandfather had painted them with the help of an enthusiastic servant who had fallen seventy feet from the scaffolding and had been killed instantly. But it seemed that Lord Sepulchrave found his only interest in these days among the volumes in his library and in a knob of jade on his silver rod, which he would scrutinize for hours on end.

Arriving, as was his consistent habit, at exactly nine o'clock every morning, he would enter the long hall and move with a most melancholy air between rows of long tables, where servants of every grade would be awaiting him, standing at their places, their heads bowed.

Mounting the dais he would move around to the far side of the table where hung a heavy brass bell. He would strike it. The servants sitting down at once, would begin their meal of bread, rice wine and cake.

Lord Groan's menu was otherwise. As he sat, this morning, in his high-backed chair he saw before him – through a haze of melancholia that filmed his brain and sickened his heart, robbing it of power and his limbs of health – he saw before him a snow-white tablecloth, It was set for two. The silver shone and the napkins were folded into the shapes of peacocks and were perched decoratively on the two plates. There was a delicious scent of bread, sweet and wholesome. There were eggs painted in gay colours, toast piled up pagoda-wise, tier upon tier and each as frail as a dead leaf; and fish with their tails in their mouths lay coiled in sea-blue saucers. There was coffee in an urn shaped like a lion, the spout protruding from that animal's silver jaws. There were all varieties of coloured fruits that looked strangely tropical in that dark hall. There were honeys and jams, jellies, nuts and spices and the ancestral breakfast plate was spread out to the greatest advantage amid the golden cutlery of the Groans. In the centre of the table was a small tin bowl of dandelions and nettles.

Lord Sepulchrave sat silently. He did not seem to notice the delicacies spread before him, nor when for a moment or two at a time his head was raised, did he appear to see the long cold dining-hall nor the servants at their tables. To his right, at the adjacent corner of the board, was arranged the cutlery and earthenware crockery that implied the imminent arrival of his lordship's breakfast companion. Lord Groan, his eyes upon the jade knob of the rod which he was twisting slowly upon its ferrule, again rang the brass bell and a door opened in the wall behind him. Sourdust entered with great books under his arm. He was arrayed in crimson sacking. His beard was knotted and the hairs that composed it were black and white. His face was very lined, as though it had been made of brown paper that had been crunched by some savage hand before being hastily smoothed out and spread over the tissues. His eyes were deep-set and almost lost in the shadows cast by his fine brow, which for all its

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wrinkles, retained a sweeping breadth of bone.

The old man seated himself at the end of the table, and stacked the four volumes beside a porcelain decanter, and raising his sunken eyes to Lord Groan, murmured these words in a weak and shaking voice and yet with a certain dignity as though it were not simply a case of having to get through the ritual, but that it was now, as always, well worth getting through.

'I, Sourdust, lord of the library, personal adviser to your lordship, nonagenarian, and student of the Groan lore, proffer to your lordship the salutations of a dark morning, robed as I am in rags, student as I am of the tomes, and nonagenarian as I happen to be in the matter of years.'

This was delivered in one breath and then he coughed unpleasantly several times, his hand at his chest.

Lord Groan propped his chin on the knuckles of his hands that were cupping the jade knob. His face was very long and was olive coloured. The eyes were large, and of an eloquence, withdrawn. His nostrils were mobile and sensitive. His mouth, a narrow line. On his head was the iron crown of the Groans that fastens with a strap under the chin. It had four prongs that were shaped like arrow heads. Between these barbs small chains hung in loops. The prerogative of precedent on his side, he was wrapped in his dark grey dressing-gown.

He did not seem to have heard Sourdust's salutations, but focusing his eyes for the first time upon the table, he broke a corner off a piece of toast, and placed it mechanically in his mouth. This he muzzled in his cheek for the major part of the meal. The fish became cold on the plate. Sourdust had helped himself to one of them, a slice of water-melon and a fire-green egg, but all else lost its freshness or its heat upon the ritualistic table.

Below in the long basement of the hall the clattering of the knives had ceased. The rice wine had been passed up and down the table, and the jugs were empty. They were waiting for the sign to go about their duties.

Sourdust, having wiped his old mouth with the napkin, turned his eyes to his lordship, who was now leaning back in the chair and sipping at a glass of black tea, his eyes un-focused as usual. The Librarian was watching the left eyebrow of his lordship. It was twenty-one minutes to ten by the clock at the far end of the hall. Lord Groan appeared to be looking through this clock. Three-quarters of a minute went by, it was ten seconds – five seconds – three seconds – one second – to twenty to ten. It was twenty minutes to ten. Lord Groan's left eyebrow rose up his forehead mechanically and stayed suspended beneath three wrinkles. Then it slowly lowered itself. At the movement, Sourdust arose and stamped upon the ground with an old thin leg. The crimson sacking about his body shook as he did so and his beard of black and white knots swung madly to and fro.

The tables were at once emptied and within half a minute the last of the retainers had vanished from the hall, and the servants' door at the far end had been closed and bolted.

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Sourdust re-seated himself, panting a little and coughing in an ugly way. Then he leaned across the table and scratched the white cloth in front of Lord Groan with a fork.

His lordship turned his black and liquid eyes towards the old librarian and adviser. 'Well? ' he said, in a far-away voice, 'what is it, Sourdust?'

'It is the ninth day of the month', said Sourdust.

'Ah', said his lordship.

There was a period of silence, Sourdust making use of the interim by re-knotting several tassels of his beard.

'The ninth', repeated his lordship.

'The ninth', muttered Sourdust.

'A heavy day,' mused his lordship, 'very heavy.'

Sourdust, bending his deep-set eyes upon his master, echoed him: 'A heavy day, the ninth . . . always a heavy day.'

A great tear rolled down Sourdust's cheek threading its way over the crumpled surface. The eyes were too deeply set in their sockets of shadow to be seen. By not so much as the faintest sign or movement had Sourdust suggested that he was in a state of emotional stress. Nor was he, ever, save that at moments of reflection upon matters connected with the traditions of the Castle, it so happened that great tears emerged from the shadows beneath his brow. He fingered the great tomes beside his plate. His lordship, as though making the resolve after long deliberation, leaned forward, placed his rod on the table and adjusted his iron crown. Then, supporting his long olive chin with his hands, he turned his head to the old man: 'Proceed', he whispered.

Sourdust gathered the sacking about himself in a quick shaky way, and getting to his feet moved round to the back of his own chair which he pushed a few inches closer to the table, and squeezing between the table and the chair he re-seated himself carefully and was apparently more comfortable than before. Then with great deliberation, bending his corrugated brow upon each in turn he pushed the varied assortment of dishes, cruets, glasses, cutlery and by now tepid delicacies away from before him, clearing a semi-circle of white cloth. Only then did he remove the three tomes from beside his elbow. He opened them one after the other by balancing them carefully on their vellum spines and allowing them to break open at pages indicated by embroidered book-markers.

The left hand pages were headed with the date and in the first of the three books this was followed by a list of the activities to be performed hour by hour during the day by his lordship. The exact times; the garments to be worn for each occasion and the symbolic gestures to be used. Diagrams facing the left hand page gave particulars of the routes by which his lordship should approach the various scenes of operation. The diagrams were hand tinted.

The second tome was full of blank pages and was entirely symbolic, while the third was amass of cross references. If, for instance, his lordship, Sepul-

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chrave, the present Earl of Groan, had been three inches shorter, the costumes, gestures and even the routes would have differed from the ones described in the first tome, and from the enormous library, another volume would have had to have been chosen which would have applied. Had he been of a fair skin, or had he been heavier than he was, had his eyes been green, blue or brown instead of black, then, automatically another set of archaic regulations would have appeared this morning on the breakfast table. This complex system was understood in its entirety only by Sourdust – the technicalities demanding the devotion of a lifetime, though the sacred spirit of tradition implied by the daily manifestations was understood by all.

For the next twenty minutes Sourdust instructed his lordship in the less obvious details of the day's work that lay ahead, in a high cracked old voice, the cross-hatching of the skin at the corners of his mouth twitching between the sentences. His lordship nodded silently. Occasionally the routes marked down for the 'ninth' in the diagrams of the first tome are obsolete, as for instance, where at 2.37 in the afternoon Lord Groan was to have moved down the iron stairway in the grey vestibule that led to the pool of carp. That stairway had been warped and twisted out of shape seventy years ago when the vestibule had been razed to the ground in the great fire. An alternative route had to be planned. A plan approaching as far as possible to the spirit of the original conception, and taking the same amount of time. Sourdust scoured the new route shakily on the tablecloth with the point of a fork. His lordship nodded.

The day's duties being clear, and with only a minute to run before ten, Sourdust relaxed in his chair and dribbled into his black-and-white beard. Every few seconds he glanced at the clock.

A long sigh came from his lordship. For a moment a light appeared in his eyes and then dulled. The line of his mouth seemed for a moment to have softened.

'Sourdust,' he said, 'have you heard about my son?'

Sourdust, with his eyes on the clock, had not heard his lordship's question. He was making noises in his throat and chest, his mouth working at the corners.

Lord Groan looked at him quickly and his face whitened under the olive. Taking a spoon he bent it into three-quarters of a circle.

The door opened suddenly in the wall behind the dais and Flay entered.

'T's time', he said, when he reached the table.

Lord Sepulchrave rose and moved to the door.

Flay nodded sullenly at the man in crimson sacking, and after filling his pockets with peaches followed his lordship between the pillars of the Stone Hall.

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PRUNESQUALLOR'S KNEE-CAP

Fuchsia's bedroom was stacked at its four corners with her discarded toys, books and lengths of coloured cloth. It lay in the centre of the western wing and upon the second floor. A walnut bed monopolized the inner wall in which stood the doorway. The two triangular windows in the opposite wall gave upon the battlements where the master sculptors from the mud huts moved in silhouette across the sunset at the full moon of alternate months. Beyond the battlements the flat pastures spread and beyond the pastures were the Twisted Woods of thorn that climbed the ever steepening sides of Gormenghast mountain.

Fuchsia had covered the walls of her room with impetuous drawings in charcoal. There had been no attempt to create a design of any kind upon the coral plaster at either end of the bedroom. The drawings had been done at many an odd moment of loathing or excitement and although lacking in subtlety or proportion were filled with an extraordinary energy. These violent devices gave the two walls of her bedroom such an appearance of riot that the huddled heaps of toys and books in the four corners looked, by comparison, compact.

The attic, her kingdom, could be approached only through this bed-chamber. The door of the spiral staircase that ascended into the darkness was immediately behind the bedstead, so that to open this door which resembled the door of a cupboard, the bed had to be pulled forward into the room.

Fuchsia never failed to return the bed to its position as a precaution against her sanctum being invaded. It was unnecessary, for no one saving Mrs Slagg ever entered her bedroom and the old nurse in any case could never have manoeuvred herself up the hundred or so narrow, darkened steps that gave eventually on the attic, which since the earliest days Fuchsia could remember had been for her a world undesecrate.

Through succeeding generations a portion of the lumber of Gormenghast had found its way into this zone of moted half-light, this warm, breathless, timeless region where the great rafters moved across the air, clouded with moths. Where the dust was like pollen and lay softly on all things.

The attic was composed of two main galleries and a cock loft, the second gallery leading at right angles from the first after a descent of three rickety steps. At its far end a wooden ladder rose to a balcony resembling a narrow verandah. At the left extremity of this balcony a doorway, with its door hanging mutely by one hinge, led to the third of the three rooms that composed the attic. This was the loft which was for Fuchsia a very secret place, a kind of pagan chapel, an eyrie, a citadel, a kingdom never mentioned, for that would have been a breach of faith – a kind of blasphemy.

On the day of her brother's birth, while the castle beneath her, reaching in

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room below room, gallery below gallery, down, down to the very cellars, was alive with rumour, Fuchsia, like Rottcodd, in his Hall of the Bright Carvings was unaware of the excitement that filled it.

She had pulled at the long black pigtail of a chord which hung from the ceiling in one corner of her bedroom and had set a bell jangling in the remote apartment which Mrs Slagg had inhabited for two decades.

The sunlight was streaming through the eastern turrets and was lighting the Carvers' Battlement and touching the sides of the mountain beyond. As the sun rose, thorn tree after thorn tree on Gormenghast mountain emerged in the pale light and became a spectre, one following another, now here, now there, over the huge mass until the whole shape was flattened into a radiant jagged triangle against the darkness. Seven clouds like a group of naked cherubs or sucking-pigs, floated their plump pink bodies across a sky of slate. Fuchsia watched them through her window sullenly. Then she thrust her lower lip forward. Her hands were on her hips. Her bare feet were quite still on the floorboards.

'Seven', she said, scowling at each. 'There's seven of them. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven clouds.'

She drew a yellow shawl more tightly around her shoulders for she was shivering in her nightdress, and pulled the pigtail again for Mrs Slagg. Rummaging in a drawer, she found a stick of black chalk and approaching an area of wall that was comparatively vacant she chalked a vicious 7 and drew a circle round it with the word 'CLOWDS' written beneath in heavy, uncompromising letters.

As Fuchsia turned away from the wall she took an awkward shuffling step towards the bed. Her jet black hair hung loosely across her shoulders. Her eyes, that were always smouldering, were fixed on the door. Thus she remained with one foot forward as the door knob turned and Mrs Slagg entered.

Seeing her, Fuchsia continued her walk from where she had left off, but instead of going towards the bed, she approached Mrs Slagg with five strides, and putting her arms quickly around the old woman's neck, kissed her savagely, broke away, and then beckoning her to the window, pointed towards the sky. Mrs Slagg peered along Fuchsia's outstretched arm and finger and inquired what there was to look at.

'Fat clouds', said Fuchsia. 'There's seven of them.'

The old woman screwed up her eyes and peered once more but only for a moment. Then she made a little noise which seemed to indicate that she was not impressed.

'Why seven?' said Fuchsia. 'Seven is for something. What's seven for? One for a glorious golden grave – two for a terrible torch of tin; three for a hundred hollow horses; four for a knight with a spur of speargrass; five for a fish with fortunate fins, six – I've forgotten six, and seven – what's seven for? Eight for a frog with eyes like marbles, nine, what's nine? Nine for a nine, nine – ten for a

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tower of turbulent toast – but what is seven. What is seven?'

Fuchsia stamped her foot and peered into the poor old nurse's face.

Nannie Slagg made little noises in her throat which was her way of filling in time and then said, 'Would you like some hot milk, my precious? Tell me now because I'm busy, and must feed your mother's white cats, dear. Just because I'm of the energetic system, my dear heart, they give me everything to do. What did you ring for? Quickly, quickly my caution. What did you ring for?'

Fuchsia bit her big red Lower lip, tossed a mop of midnight from her brow and gazed out of the window, her hands grasping her elbows behind her. Very stiff she had become and angular.

'I want a big breakfast', said Fuchsia at last. 'I want a lot to eat, I'm going to think today.'

Nannie Slagg was scrutinizing a wart on her left forearm.

'You don't know where I'm going, but I'm going somewhere where I can think.'

'Yes, dear', said the old nurse.

'I want hot milk and eggs and lots of toast done only on one side'. Fuchsia frowned as she paused; 'and I want a bag of apples to take along with me for the whole of the day, for I get hungry when I think.'

'Yes, dear', said Mrs Slagg again, pulling a loose thread from the hem of Fuchsia's skirt. 'Put some more on the fire, my caution, and I'll bring your breakfast and make your bed for you, though I'm not very well.'

Fuchsia descended suddenly upon her old nurse again and kissing her cheek, released her from the room, closing the door on her retreating figure with a crash that echoed down the gloomy corridors.

As soon as the door had closed, Fuchsia leaped at her bed and diving between the blankets head first, wriggled her way to the far end, where from all appearances, she became engaged in a life and death struggle with some ambushed monster. The heavings of the bedclothes ended as suddenly as they had begun and she emerged with a pair of long woollen stockings which she must have kicked off during the night. Sitting on her pillows she began pulling them on in a series of heaves, twisting with difficulty, at a very late stage, the heel of each from the front to the back.

'I won't see anybody today,' she said to herself – 'no, not anybody at all. I will go to my secret room and think things over.' She smiled a smile to herself. It was sly but it was so childishly sly that it was lovable. Her lips, big and well-formed and extraordinarily mature, curled up like plump petals and showed between them her white teeth.

As soon as she had smiled her face altered again, and the petulant expression peregrine to her features took control. Her black eyebrows were drawn together.

Her dressing became interrupted between the addition of each garment by dance movements of her own invention. There was nothing elegant in these

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attitudes into which she flung herself, standing sometimes for a dozen of seconds at a time in some extraordinary position of balance. Her eyes would become glazed like her mother's and an expression of abstract calm would for an instant defy the natural concentration of her face. Finally her blood-red dress, absolutely shapeless, was pulled over her head. It fitted nowhere except where a green cord was knotted at her waist. She appeared rather to inhabit, than to wear her clothes.

Meanwhile Mrs Slagg had not only prepared the breakfast for Fuchsia in her own little room, but was on the way back with the loaded tray shaking in her hands. As she turned a corner of the corridor she was brought to a clattering standstill by the sudden appearance of Doctor Prunesquallor, who also halting with great suddenness, avoided a collision.

'Well, well, well, well, well, ha, ha, ha, if it isn't dear Mrs Slagg, ha, ha, ha, how very very, very dramatic', said the doctor, his long hands clasped before him at his chin, his high-pitched laugh creaking along the timber ceiling of the passage. His spectacles held in either lens the minute reflection of Nannie Slagg.

The old nurse had never really approved of Doctor Prunesquallor. It was true that he belonged to Gormenghast as much as the Tower itself. He was no intruder, but somehow, in Mrs Slagg's eyes he was definitely *wrong*. He was not her idea of a doctor in the first place, although she could never have argued why. Nor could she pin her dislike down to any other cause. Nannie Slagg found it very difficult to marshal her thoughts at the best of times, but when they became tied up with her emotions she became quite helpless. What she felt but had never analysed was that Doctor Prunesquallor rather played down to her and even in an obtuse way made fun of her. She had never thought this, but her bones knew of it.

She gazed up at the shock-headed man before her and wondered why he never brushed his hair, and then she felt guilty for allowing herself such thoughts about a gentleman and her tray shook and her eyes wavered a little.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, my dear Mrs Slagg, let me take your tray, ha, ha, until you have tasted the fruits of discourse and told me what you have been up to for the last month or more. Why have I not seen you, Nannie Slagg? Why have my ears not heard your footfall on the stairs, and your voice at nightfall, calling . . . calling . . .?'

'Her ladyship don't want me any more, sir', said Nannie Slagg, looking up at the doctor reproachfully. 'I am kept in the west wing now, sir.'

'So that's it, is it?' said Doctor Prunesquallor, removing the loaded tray from Nannie Slagg and lowering both it and himself at the same time to the floor of the long passage. He sat there on his heels with the tray at his side and peered up at the old lady, who gazed in a frightened way at his eye swimming hugely beneath his magnifying spectacles.

'You are *kept* in the west wing? So that's it?' Doctor Prunesquallor with his

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forefinger and thumb stroked his chin in a profound manner and frowned magnificently. 'It is the word "kept", my dear Mrs Slagg, that galls me. Are you an animal, Mrs Slagg? I repeat are you an animal?' As he said this he rose halfway to his feet and with his neck stretched forward repeated his question a third time.

Poor Nannie Slagg was too frightened to be able to give her answer to the query.

The doctor sank back on his heels.

'I will answer my own question, Mrs Slagg. I have known you for some time. For, shall we say, a decade? It is true we have never plumbed the depths of sorcery together nor argued the meaning of existence – but it is enough for me to say that I have known you for a considerable time, and that you are *no animal*. No animal *whatsoever*. Sit upon my knee.'

Nannie Slagg, terrified at this suggestion, raised her little bony hands to her mouth and raised her shoulders to her ears. Then she gave one frightened look down the passage and was about to make a run for it when she was gripped about the knees, not unkindly, but firmly and without knowing how she got there found herself sitting upon the high bony knee-cap of the squatting doctor.

'You are *not* an animal', repeated Prunesquallor, 'are you?'

The old nurse turned her wrinkled face to the doctor and shook her head in little jerks.

'Of course you're not. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, of course you're not. Tell me what you *are?*'

Nannie's fist again came to her mouth and the frightened look in her eyes reappeared.

'I'm . . . I'm an old woman', she said.

'You're a very unique old woman', said the doctor, 'and if I am not mistaken, you will very soon prove to be an exceptionally invaluable old woman. Oh yes, ha, ha, ha, oh yes, a very invaluable old woman indeed.' (There was a pause.) 'How long is it since you saw her ladyship, the Countess? It must be a very long time.'

'It is, it is', said Nannie Slagg, 'a very long time. Months and months and months.'

'As I thought'. said the doctor. 'Ha, ha, ha, as I very much thought. Then you can have no idea of why you will be indispensable?'

'Oh no, sir!' said Nannie Slagg, looking at the breakfast tray whose load was fast becoming cold.

'Do you like babies, my very dear Mrs Slagg?' asked the doctor, shifting the poor woman on to his other acutely bended knee joint and stretching out his former leg as though to ease it. 'Are you fond of the little creatures, taken by and large?'

'Babies?' said Mrs Slagg in the most animated tone that she had so far used.

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'I could eat the little darlings, sir, I could eat them up!'

'Quite,' said Doctor Prunesquallor, 'quite so, my good woman. You could eat them up. That will be unnecessary. In fact it would be positively injurious, my dear Mrs Slagg, and especially under the circumstances about which I must now enlighten you. A child will be placed in your keeping. Do not devour him Nannie Slagg. It is for you to bring him up, that is true, but there will be no need for you to swallow him first. You would be, ha, ha, ha, ha – swallowing a Groan.'

This news filtered by degrees through Nannie Slagg's brain and all at once her eyes looked very wide indeed.

'No, oh no, sir!'

'Yes, oh yes, sir!' replied the physician. 'Although the Countess has of late banished you from her presence, yet, Nannie Slagg, you will of necessity be restored, ha, ha, ha, be restored to a very important state. Sometime today, if I am not mistaken, my wide-eyed Nannie Slagg. I shall be delivering a brand new Groan. Do you remember when I delivered the Countess of Lady Fuchsia?'

Nannie Slagg began to shake all over and a tear ran down her cheek as she clasped her hands between her knees, very nearly overbalancing from her precarious perch.

'I can remember every little thing sir – every little thing. Who would have thought?'

'Exactly,' interrupted Doctor Prunesquallor. 'Who would have thought. But I must be going, ha, ha, ha, I must dislodge you, Nannie Slagg, from my patella – but tell me, did you know nothing of her ladyship's condition?'

'Oh, sir,' said the old lady, biting her knuckle and shifting her gaze. 'Nothing! nothing! No one ever tells me anything.'

'Yet all the duties will devolve on you', said Doctor Prunesquallor. 'Though you will doubtless enjoy yourself. There is no doubt at all about that. Is there?'

'Oh, sir, another baby, after all this time! Oh, I could smack him already.'

'Him?' queried the doctor. 'Ha, ha, ha, you are very sure of the gender, my dear Mrs Slagg.'

'Oh yes, sir, it's a him, sir. Oh, what a blessing that it is. They *will* let me have him, sir? They will let me won't they?'

'They have no choice', said the doctor somewhat too briskly for a gentleman and he smiled a wide inane smile, his thin nose pointing straight at Mrs Slagg. His grey hayrick of hair removed itself from the wall. 'What of my Fuchsia? Has she an inkling?'

'Oh, no, not an inkling. Not an inkling, sir, bless her. She hardly ever leaves her room except at night, sir. She don't know nothing, sir, and never talks to no one but me.'

The doctor, removing Nannie Slagg from his knee, rose to his feet. 'The rest

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of Gormenghast talks of nothing else, but the western wing is in darkness. Very, very, very strange. The child's nurse and the child's sister are in darkness, ha, ha, ha. But not for long, not for long. By all that's enlightened, very much not so!'

'Sir?' queried Nannie Slagg as the doctor was about to move away.

'What?' said Doctor Prunesquallor, scrutinizing his finger nails. 'What is it my dear Mrs Slagg? Be quick.'

'Er – how is *she*, sir? How is her ladyship?'

'Tough as behemoth', said Prunesquallor, and was around the corner in an instant, and Nannie Slagg, with her mouth and eyes wide open, could, as she lifted up the cold tray, hear his feet in a far passage tapping an elegant tattoo as he moved like a bird towards the bedroom of the Countess of Groan.

As Mrs Slagg knocked at Fuchsia's door, her heart was beating very fast. It was always a long time before she realized the import of whatever she were told, and it was only now that the full measure of what the doctor had divulged was having its effect. To be again, after all these years, the nurse of an heir to the house of Groan – to be able to bathe the helpless limbs, to iron out the little garments and to select the wet nurse from the outer dwellings! To have complete authority in anything connected with the care of the precious mite – all this was now weighing with a great load of painful pride across her heart that was beating rapidly.

So overpowered was she by this emotion that she had knocked twice before she noticed that there was a note pinned upon the outside of the door. Peering at it she at last made out what Fuchsia had scrawled in her invariable charcoal.

Can't wait until the doomsday – you're so SLOW!

Mrs Slagg tried the door handle although she knew that the door would be locked. Leaving the tray and the apples on the mat outside she retreated to her own room where she might indulge herself in halcyon glimpses of the future. Life, it seemed, was not over for her.

THE ATTIC

Meanwhile Fuchsia had, after waiting impatiently for her breakfast, gone to a cupboard where she kept an emergency supply of eatables – half an old seed cake and some dandelion wine. There was also a box of dates which Flay had purloined and brought up for her several weeks before, and two wrinkled pears. These she wrapped in a piece of cloth. Next she lit a candle and placed it on the floor near the wall, then hollowing her strong young back she laid hold of the foot-rail of her bed and dragged it back sufficiently for her to squeeze herself between the rail and the wall and to unlatch the cupboard door. Stretching over the head-rail she grasped her bundle of food and then picked

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up the candle from near her feet, and ducking her head crept through the narrow opening and found herself at the lowermost steps of the flight that led upwards in dark spirals. Closing the door behind her, she dragged a bolt into position and the tremors which she always experienced at this moment of locking herself in, took hold of her and for a moment she shook from head to foot.

Then, with her candle lighting her face and the three sliding steps before her as she climbed, she ascended into her region.

As Fuchsia climbed into the winding darkness her body was impregnated and made faint by a qualm as of green April. Her heart beat painfully.

This is a love that equals in its power the love of man for woman and reaches inwards as deeply. It is the love of a man or of a woman for their world. For the world of their centre where their lives burn genuinely and with a free flame.

The love of the diver for his world of wavering light. His world of pearls and tendrils and his breath at his breast. Born as a plunger into the deeps he is at one with every swarm of lime-green fish, with every coloured sponge. As he holds himself to the ocean's faery floor, one hand clasped to a bedded whale's rib, he is complete and infinite. Pulse, power and universe sway in his body. He is in love.

The love of the painter standing alone and staring, staring at the great coloured surface he is making. Standing with him in the room the rearing canvas stares back with tentative shapes halted in their growth, moving in a new rhythm from floor to ceiling. The twisted tubes, the fresh paint squeezed and smeared across the dry upon his palette. The dust beneath the easel. The paint has edged along the brushes' handles. The white light in a northern sky is silent. The window gapes as he inhales his world. His world: a rented room, and turpentine. He moves towards his half-born. He is in love.

The rich soil crumbles through the yeoman's fingers. As the pearl diver murmurs, 'I am home' as he moves dimly in strange water-lights, and as the painter mutters, 'I am me' on his lone raft of floorboards, so the slow landsman on his acre'd marl – says with dark Fuchsia on her twisting staircase, 'I am home.'

It was this feeling of belonging to the winding stair and the attic which Fuchsia experienced as she ran her right hand along the wooden wall as she climbed and encountered after some time the loose board which she expected. She knew that only eighteen steps remained and that after two more turns in the staircase the indescribable grey-gold filtering glow of the attic would greet her.

Reaching the top-most step she stooped and leaned over a three foot swing door, like the door of a byre, unfastened the latch and entered the first of the three sections of the attic.

An infiltration of the morning's sun gave the various objects a certain vague structure but in no way dispelled the darkness. Here and there a thin beam of

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light threaded the warm brooding dusk and was filled with slowly moving motes like an attenuate firmament of stars revolving in grave order.

One of these narrow beams lit Fuchsia's forehead and shoulder, and another plucked a note of crimson from her dress. To her right was an enormous crumbling organ. Its pipes were broken and the keyboard shattered. Across its front the labour of a decade of grey spiders had woven their webs into a shawl of lace. It needed but the ghost of an infanta to arise from the dust to gather it about her head and shoulders as the most fabulous of all mantillas.

In the gloom Fuchsia's eyes could barely be seen for the light upon her forehead sank deeper shadows, by contrast, through her face. But they were calm. The excitement that had wakened within them on the stairway had given place to this strange calm. She stood at the stairhead almost another being.

This room was the darkest. In the summer the light seemed to penetrate through the fissures in the warped wood and through the dislodged portions of stone slating in a less direct way than was the case in the larger room or gallery to its right. The third. the smallest attic, with its steps leading upwards from the gallery with the banistered verandah was the best lit, for it boasted a window with shutters which, when opened, gave upon a panorama of roof-tops, towers and battlements that lay in a great half-circle below. Between high bastions might be seen, hundreds of feet beneath, a portion of quadrangle wherein, were a figure to move across, he would appear no taller than a thimble.

Fuchsia took three paces forward in the first of the attics and then paused a moment to re-tie a string above her knee. Over her head vague rafters loomed and while she straightened herself she noticed them and unconsciously loved them. This was the lumber room. Though very long and lofty it looked relatively smaller than it was, for the fantastic piles of every imaginable kind of thing, from the great organ to the lost and painted head of a broken toy lion that must one day have been the plaything of one of Fuchsia's ancestors, spread from every wall until only an avenue was left to the adjacent room. This high, narrow avenue wound down the centre of the first attic before suddenly turning at a sharp angle to the right. The fact that this room was filled with lumber did not mean that she ignored it and used it only as a place of transit. Oh no, for it was here that many long afternoons had been spent as she crawled deep into the recesses and found for herself many a strange cavern among the incongruous relics of the past. She knew of ways through the centre of what appeared to be hills of furniture, boxes, musical instruments and toys, kites, pictures, bamboo armour and helmets, flags and relics of every kind, as an Indian knows his green and secret trail. Within reach of her hand the hide and head of a skinned baboon hung dustily over a broken drum that rose beyond above the dim ranges of this attic medley. Huge and impregnable they looked in the warm still half-light, but Fuchsia, had she wished to, could

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have disappeared awkwardly but very suddenly into these fantastic mountains, reached their centre and lain down upon an ancient couch with a picture book at her elbow and been entirely lost to view within a few moments.

This morning, she was bound for the third of her rooms and moved forward through the canyon, ducking beneath the stuffed leg of a giraffe that caught a thread of the moted sunlight and which, propped across Fuchsia's path, made a kind of low lintel immediately before the passage curved away to the right. As Fuchsia rounded this bend she saw what she expected to see. Twelve feet away were the wooden steps which led down to the second attic. The rafters above the steps were warped into a sagging curve so that it was not possible to obtain more than a restricted view of the room beyond. But the area of empty floor that was visible gave an indication of the whole. She descended the steps. There was a ripping away of clouds; a sky, a desert, a forsaken shore spread through her.

As she stepped forward on the empty board, it was for her like walking into space. Space, such as the condors have shrill inklings of, and the cock-eagle glimpses through his blood.

Silence was there with a loud rhythm. The halls, towers, the rooms of Gormenghast were of another planet. Fuchsia caught at a thick lock of her hair and dragged her own head back as her heart beat loudly and, tingling from head to foot little diamonds appeared at the inner corners of her eyes.

With what characters she had filled this lost stage of emptiness! It was here that she would see the people of her imagination, the fierce figures of her making, as they strolled from corner to corner, brooded like monsters or flew through the air like seraphs with burning wings, or danced, or fought, or laughed, or cried. This was her attic of make-believe, where she would watch her mind's companions advancing or retreating across the dusty floor.

Gripping her eatables tightly in their cloth, her feet echoing dully, she walked onwards towards the fixed ladder that led to the balcony at the far end. She climbed the ladder, both feet coming together on each rung for it was difficult for her to climb with the bottle and her food for the day tucked under her arm. There was no one to see her strong straight back and shoulders and the gauche, indecorous movements of her legs as she climbed in her crimson dress; nor the length of her tangled and inky hair. Half-way up she was able to lift her bundle above her head and push it on to the balcony, and then to swarm after it and find herself standing with the great stage below her as empty as an unremembered heart.

As she looked down, her hands on the wooden banister that ran along the attic verandah, she knew that at a call she could set in motion the five main figures of her making. Those whom she had so often watched below her, almost as though they were really there. At first it had not been easy to understand them nor to tell them what to do. But now it would be easy, at any rate for them to enact the scenes that she had watched them so often perform.

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Munster, who would crawl along the rafters and drop chuckling into the middle of the floor in a cloud of dust and then bow to Fuchsia before turning and searching for his barrel of bright gold. Or the Rain Man, who moved always with his head lowered and his hands clasped behind him and who had but to lift his eyelid to quell the tiger that followed him on a chain.

These and the dramas in which they took part were now latent in the room below her, but Fuchsia passed the high-backed chair where she would sit at the verandah edge, pulled back the door carefully on its one hinge, and entered into the third of the three rooms.

She put her bundle upon a table in one corner, went to the window and pushed open the two shutters. Her stocking was half-way down her leg again and she knotted the string more firmly round her thigh. It was often her habit in this room to think aloud to herself. To argue with herself. Looking down from her little window upon the roofs of the castle and its adjacent buildings she tasted the pleasure of her isolation. 'I am alone', she said, her chin in her hands and her elbows on the sill. 'I am quite alone, like I enjoy it. Now I can think for there's no one to provoke me here. Not in my room. No one to tell me what I ought to do because I'm a Lady. Oh no. I do just what I like here. Fuchsia is quite alright here. None of them knows where I go to. Flay doesn't know. Father doesn't know. Mother doesn't know. None of them knows. Even Nannie doesn't know. Only I know. I know where I go, I go here. This is where I go. Up the stairs and into my lumber room. Through my lumber room and into my acting room. All across my acting room and up the ladder and on to my verandah. Through the door and into my secret attic. And here it is I am. I am here now. I have been here lots of times but that is in the past. That is over, but now I'm here it's in the present. This is the present. I'm looking on the roofs of the present and I'm leaning on the present window-sill and later on when I'm older I will lean on this window-sill again. Over and over again.

'Now I'll make myself comfortable and eat my breakfast', she continued to herself, but as she turned away her quick eyes noticed in the corner of one of the diminished quadrangles far below her an unusually large gathering of what she could just make out to be servants from the kitchen quarters. She was so used to the panorama below her being deserted at that hour in the morning, the menials being at their multifarious duties about the castle that she turned suddenly back to the window and stared down with a sense of suspicion and almost of fear. What was it that quickened her to a sense of something irreparable having been done? To an outsider there would have been nothing untoward or extraordinary in the fact that a group had gathered hundreds of feet below in the corner of a sunny stone quadrangle, but Fuchsia born and bred to the iron ritual of Gormenghast knew that something unprecedented was afoot. She stared, and as she stared the group grew. It was enough to throw Fuchsia out of her mood and to make her uneasy and angry.

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'Something has happened.' she said. 'something no one's told me of. They haven't told me, I don't like them. I don't like any of them. What are they all doing like a lot of ants down there? Why aren't they working like they should be?' She turned around and faced her little room.

Everything was changed, she picked up one of the pears and bit a piece out of it abstractedly. She had looked forward to a morning of rumination and perhaps a play or two in the empty attic before she climbed down the stairs again to demand a big tea from Mrs Slagg. There was something portentous in the group far below her. Her day was disrupted.

She looked around at the walls of her room. They were hung with pictures once chosen as her favourites from among the scores that she had unearthed in the lumber room. One wall was filled with a great mountain scene where a road like a snake winding around and around the most impressive of crags was filled with two armies, one in yellow and the other, the invading force battling up from below, in purple. Lit as it were by torch-light the whole scene was a constant source of wonder to Fuchsia, yet this morning she gazed ar it blankly. The other walls were less imposingly arranged, fifteen pictures being distributed among the three. The head of a jaguar; a portrait of the twenty-second Earl of Groan with pure white hair and a face the colour of smoke as a result of immoderate tattooing, and a group of children in pink and white muslin dresses playing with a viper were among the works which pleased her most. Hundreds of very dull heads and full-length portraits of her ancestors had been left in the lumber room. What Fuchsia wanted from a picture was something unexpected. It was as though she enjoyed the artist telling her something quite fresh and new. Something she had never thought of before.

A great writhing root, long since dragged from the woods of Gormenghast mountain, stood in the centre of the room. It had been polished to a rare gloss, its every wrinkle gleaming. Fuchsia flung herself down on the most imposing article in the room, a couch of faded splendour and suavity of contour in which the angles of Fuchsia's body as she lay in a half sprawl were thrown out with uncompromising severity. Her eyes which, since she had entered the attic, had taken on the calm expression so alien to her, were now smouldering again. They moved about the room as though they were seeking in vain a resting place, but neither the fantastic root, nor the ingenious pattern in the carpet below her had the power to hold them.

'Everything's wrong. Everything. Everything', said Fuchsia. Again she went to the window and peered down at the group in the quadrangle. By now it had grown until it filled all that was visible of the stone square. Through a flying buttress to the left of her she could command a view of four distant alleys in a poor district of Gormenghast. These alley-ways were pranked with little knots of folk, and Fuchsia believed that she could hear the far sound of their voices rising through the air. It was not that Fuchsia felt any particular interest in 'occasions' or festivities which might cause excitement below, but that this

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morning she felt acutely aware that something in which she would become involved was taking place.

On the table lay a big coloured book of verses and pictures. It was always ready for her to open and devour. Fuchsia would turn over the pages and read the verses aloud in a deep dramatic voice. This morning she leaned forward and turned over the pages listlessly. As she came upon a great favourite she paused and read it through slowly, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

THE FRIVOLOUS CAKE

A freckled and frivolous cake there was
  That sailed on a pointless sea,
Or any lugubrious lake there was
  In a manner emphatic and free.
How jointlessly, and how jointlessly
  The frivolous cake sailed by
On the waves of the ocean that pointlessly
  Threw fish to the lilac sky.

Oh, plenty and plenty of hake there was
  Of a glory beyond compare,
And every conceivable make there was
  Was tossed through the lilac air.

Up the smooth billows and over the crests
  Of the cumbersome combers flew
The frivolous cake with a knife in the wake
  Of herself and her curranty crew.
Like a swordfish grim it would bounce and skim
  (This dinner knife fierce and blue),
And the frivolous cake was filled to the brim
  With the fun of her curranty crew.

Oh, plenty and plenty of hake there was
  Of a glory beyond compare –
And every conceivable make there was
  Was tossed through the lilac air.

Around the shores of the Elegant Isles
  Where the cat-fish bask and purr
And lick their paws with adhesive smiles
  And wriggle their fins of fur,
They fly and fly 'neath the lilac sky –
  The frivolous cake, and the knife
Who winketh his glamorous indigo eye

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In the wake of his future wife.

The crumbs blow free down the pointless sea
To the beat of a cakey heart
And the sensitive steel of the knife can feel
That love is a race apart.
In the speed of the lingering light are blown
The crumbs to the hake above,
And the tropical air vibrates to the drone
Of a cake in the throes of love.

She ended the final verse with a rush, taking in nothing at all of its meaning. As she ended the last line mechanically, she found herself getting to her feet and making for the door. Her bundle was left behind, open, but, save for the pear, untouched on the table. She found herself on the balcony and lowering herself down the ladder was in the empty attic and within a few moments had reached the head of the stairs in the lumber room. As she descended the spiral staircase her thoughts were turning over and over.

'What have they done? What have they done?' And it was in a precipitous mood that she entered her room and ran to the corner where, catching hold of the pigtail bell-rope she pulled it as though to wrench it from the ceiling.

Within a few moments Mrs Slagg came running up to the door, her slippered feet scraping along unevenly on the floorboards. Fuchsia opened the door to her and as soon as the poor old head appeared around the panels, she shouted at it, 'What's happening Nannie, what's happening down there? Tell me at once, Nannie, or I won't love you. Tell me, tell me.'

'Quiet, my caution, quiet', said Mrs Slagg. 'What's all the bother, my conscience! oh my poor heart. You'll be the death of me.'

'You must tell me, Nannie. Now! now! or I'll hit you,' said Fuchsia.

From so small a beginning of suspicion Fuchsia's fears had grown until now, convinced by a mounting intuition, she was almost on the point of striking her old nurse, whom she loved so desperately. Nannie Slagg took hold of Fuchsia's hand between eight old fingers and squeezed it.

'A little brother for you, my pretty. Now *there's* a surprise to quieten you; a little *brother*. Just like you, my ugly darling – born in the lapsury.'

'No!' shouted Fuchsia, the blood rushing to her cheek. 'No! no! I won't have it. Oh no, no, no! I won't! I won't! It *mustn't* be, it *mustn't* be!' And Fuchsia flinging herself to the floor burst into a passion of tears.

'MRS SLAGG BY MOONLIGHT'

These then, Lord Sepulchrave, the Countess Gertrude, Fuchsia their eldest child, Doctor Prunesquallor, Mr Rottcodd, Flay, Swelter, Nannie Slagg. Steerpike and Sourdust, have been discovered at their pursuits on the day of the

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advent, and have perhaps indicated the atmosphere into which it was the lot of Titus to be born.

For his first few years of life, Titus was to be left to the care of Nannie Slagg, who bore this prodigious responsibility proudly upon her thin little sloping shoulders. During the first half of this early period only two major ceremonies befell the child and of these Titus was happily unaware, namely the christening, which took place twelve days after his birth, and a ceremonial breakfast on his first birthday. Needless to say, to Mrs Slagg, every day presented a series of major happenings, so entirely was she involved in the practicalities of his upbringing.

She made her way along the narrow stone path between the acacia trees on this memorable nativity evening and downhill to the gate in the castle wall which led into the heart of the mud dwellings. As she hurried along, the sun was setting behind Gormenghast mountain in a swamp of saffron light and her shadow hurried alongside between the acacia trees. It was seldom that she ventured out of doors and it was with quite a flutter that she had opened with difficulty the heavy lid of a chest in her room and extricated, from beneath a knoll of camphor, her best hat. It was very black indeed, but by way of relief it had upon its high crown a brittle bunch of glass grapes. Four or five of them had been broken but this was not very noticeable.

Nannie Slagg had lifted the hat up to her shoulder level and peered at it obliquely before puffing at the glass grapes to remove any possible dust. Seeing that she had dulled them with her breath she lifted up her petticoat and doubling up over her hat she gave a quick little polish to each fruit in turn.

Then she had approached the door of her room almost furtively and placed her ear at the panel. She had heard nothing, but whenever she found herself doing anything unorthodox, no matter how necessary, she would feel very guilty inside and look around her with her red rimmed eyes opened wide and her head shaking a little, or if alone in a room, as at the moment, she would run to the door and listen.

When she felt quite certain that there was no one there she would open the door very quickly and stare out into the empty passage and then go to her task again with renewed confidence. This time, the putting on of her best hat at nine o'clock at night with the idea of sallying forth from the castle down the long drive and then northwards along the acacia avenue, had been enough to send her to her own doorway as though she suspected someone might be there, someone who was listening to her thoughts. Tiptoeing back to her bed she had added fourteen inches to her stature by climbing into her velvet hat. Then she had left the room, and the stairs had seemed frighteningly empty to her as she descended the two flights.

Remembering, as she turned through the main doorway of the west wing, that the Countess herself had given her the orders to pursue this unusual mission, she had felt a little stronger, but whatever factual authority, it was

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something much deeper that had worried her, something based upon the unspoken and iron-bound tradition of the place. It had made her feel she was doing wrong. However, a wet nurse had to be found for the infant and the immediate logic of this had jostled her forward. As she had left her own room she had picked up a pair of black woollen gloves. It was a soft, warm, summer evening but Nannie Slagg felt stronger in her gloves.

The acacia trees, silhouetted on her right, cut patterns against the mountain and on her left glowed dimly with a sort of subterranean light. Her path was striped like the dim hide of a zebra from the shadows of the acacia trunks. Mrs Slagg, a midget figure beneath the rearing and overhanging of the aisle of dark foliage, awakened small echoes in the neighbouring rocks as she had moved, for her heels beat a quick uneven measure on the stone path.

This avenue lasted for some considerable distance, and when at last the old nurse found herself at its northern end she was welcomed by the cold light of the rising moon. The outer wall of Gormenghast had suddenly reared above her. She passed through an archway.

Mrs Slagg knew that about this hour the Dwellers would be at their supper. As she pattered onwards the memory of a very similar occasion worked its way into her consciousness: The time when she had been delegated to make a similar choice for Fuchsia. That time it had also been in the evening although an hour or so earlier. The weather had been gusty and she remembered how her voice had failed to carry in the wind, and how they had all misunderstood her and had imagined that Lord Groan had died.

Only three times since that day had she been to this part of the Dwellers' province, and on those occasions it had been to take Fuchsia for the long walks that at one time she had so insisted upon, rain or shine.

Mrs Slagg's days of long walks were over, but she had on one of those occasions passed the mud huts when the Dwellers were having their last meal. She knew that the Dwellers always had their supper in the open, at tables that reached in four long rows over the drab, grey-coloured dust. In this dust, she remembered, a few cactus trees were alone able to take root.

Following the gradual decline of a scarred green that sloped from the arch in the wall and petered out into the dust upon which the hovels were built, she saw suddenly, on raising her eyes from the path, one of these cactus trees.

Fifteen years is a difficult depth of time for an old woman's memory to plumb – more difficult than the waters of her childhood, but when Mrs Slagg saw the cactus tree she remembered clearly and in detail how she had stopped and stared at the great scarred monster on the day of Fuchsia's birth.

Here it was again, its flaking bole dividing into four uprights like the arms of a huge grey candlestick studded with thorns, each one as large and brutal as the horn of a rhinoceros. No flaming flower relieved its black achromatism although that tree had been known long ago to burst open with a three hour glory. Beyond this tree the ground rose into a little dreary hill, and it was only

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when she had climbed this hill that Mrs Slagg saw before her the Dwellers at their long tables. Behind them the clay huts were huddled together in a grey swarm, spreading to the foot of the wall. Four or five cacti grew between and reared over the supper tables.

The cacti were similar both in size and in the way they split into high uncouth prongs to the one which Mrs Slagg first saw, and as she approached, were edged with the hot afterglow of the sun.

At the line of tables nearest the outer wall were ranged the elderly, the grandparents, the infirm. To their left, were the married women and their children whom they were tending.

The remaining two tables were filled with men and boys. The girls from the age of twelve to twenty-three had their meals in a low mud building on their own, a few of them being delegated to wait each day upon the ancients at their tables immediately under the battlements.

Beyond, the land dipped into a dry shallow valley which held the dwellings, so that as she came forward step by step the figures at the tables had for their background the rough roofs of mud, the walls of their huts being hidden by the contour of the ground. It was a dreary prospect. From the lush shadows of the acacia drive Mrs Slagg had suddenly broken in upon an arid world. She saw the rough sections of white jarl root and their bowls of sloe wine standing before them. The long tubular jarl root which they dug each day from a wood in the vicinity, stood upon the tables every evening, sliced up into scores of narrow cylinders. This, she remembered, was their traditional diet.

Noting the white roots spreading away in perspective, each piece with its shadow, she remembered with a flutter that her social status was very much in advance of that held by these poor mud-hut dwellers. It was true that they made pretty carvings, but they were not *within* the walls of Gormenghast. and Nannie Slagg, as she approached the nearest table, pulled on her gloves more tightly still and worked them up around her fingers, pursing her little wrinkled mouth.

The Dwellers had seen her immediately her hat had appeared above the dry brow of the hill, and every head had been turned, and every eye focused upon her. The mothers had paused, some of them with spoons halfway to their children's mouths.

It was unusual for them to have the 'Castles', as they termed any who came from within the walls, approach them at their meals. They stared without moving and without speaking.

Mrs Slagg had stopped. The moonlight flared on the glass grapes.

A very old man like a prophet arose and approached her. When he reached her he stood silently until an elderly woman who had waited until he halted, was helped to her feet and, following his example, had reached Mrs Slagg and stood silently by the old man's side. Thereupon two magnificent urchins of five or six years of age had been sent forward from the table of mothers. These two,

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when they reached Mrs Slagg stood quietly and then, lifting their arms in imitation of their elders and, placing their wrists together cupped their hands and bowed their heads.

They remained in this attitude for a few moments until the old man lifted his shaggy head and parted the long rough line of his mouth.

'Gormenghast', he said, and his voice was like the noise of boulders rolling through far valleys, and as he had said 'Gormenghast' the intonation was such as implied reverence. This was the greeting of the Dwellers to any who were of the Castle and once that word had been spoken the person to whom it was addressed replied – 'The Bright Carvers'. Conversation could then proceed. This response, deaf as the Dwellers were to any flattery, holding themselves to be the supreme judges of their work and indifferent to the outside interest, was in its way a palliative in the sense that it put them where they felt in their bones they belonged – on a spiritual if not a worldly or hereditary level. It introduced a certain concord at the outset. It was a master stroke of judgement, a tower of tact, in the seventeenth Earl of Groan, when hundreds of years before he had introduced this tenet into the ritual of the Castle.

Very, very far from bright were the Carvers themselves. They were uniformly dressed in dark grey cloth, tied about the waist with tough thongs which were stripped from the outer surface of the jarl root, whose inner hard white flesh they ate. Nothing was bright about their appearance, save one thing. The light in the eyes of the younger children. Indeed, in the youths and maidens also up to the age of nineteen and sometimes twenty. These young Dwellers were in such contrast to their elders, even to those in their mid-twenties, that it was difficult to imagine that they were of the same stock. The tragic reason was that after they had come to their physical maturity of form their loveliness crumbled away and they became withered as flowers after their few fresh hours of brilliance and strength.

No one looked middle aged. The mothers were, save for the few who had borne their children in their late teens, as ancient in appearance as their own parents.

And yet they did not die as might be imagined, any earlier than is normal. On the contrary, from the long line of ancient faces at the three tables nearest the great wall, it might be imagined that their longevity was abnormal.

Only their children's had radiance, their eyes, the sheen on their hair, and in another way, their movements and their voices. Bright with a kind of *unnatural* brightness. It was not the wholesome lustre of a free flame, but of the hectic radiance that sheet-lightning gives suddenly to limbs of trees at midnight; of sudden flares in the darkness, of a fragment that is lit by torchlight into a spectre.

Even this unnatural emanation died in these youths and girls when they had reached their nineteenth year; along with the beauty of their features, this radiance vanished too. Only *within* the bodies of the adult Dwellers was there a

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kind of light, or if not light, at least hotness – the hotness of creative restlessness. These were the Bright Carvers.

Mrs Slagg hoisted her little claw of a hand very high in the air. The four who were lined in front of her had taken less formal stances, the children peering up at her with their slim, dusty arms around each others' shoulders.

'I have come', she said in a voice which, thin as a curlew, carried along the tables, 'I have come – although it is so late – to tell you a wonderful thing.' She readjusted her hat and felt as she did so, with great pleasure, the shining volume of the glass grapes.

The old man turned to the tables and his voice rolled out along them. 'She has come to tell us a wonderful thing', and the old woman followed him up like a distorted echo and screamed, 'A wonderful thing.'

'Yes, yes, it is wonderful news for you,' the old nurse continued. 'You will all be very proud, I am quite sure.'

Mrs Slagg, now she had started was rather enjoying herself. She clasped her gloved hands together more tightly whenever she felt a qualm of nervousness.

'We are all proud. All of us. The Castle', (she said this in a rather vain way) 'is very very satisfied and when I tell you what has happened, then, you'll be happy as well; oh yes, I am sure you will. Because I know you are *dependent* on the castle.'

Mrs Slagg was never very tactful. 'You have some food thrown down to you from the battlements every morning. don't you?' She had pursed her mouth and stopped a moment for breath.

A young man lifted his thick black eyebrows and spat.

'So you are very much thought of by the Castle. Every day you are thought of, aren't you? And that's why you'll be so happy when I tell you the wonderful thing that I'm going to tell you.'

Mrs Slagg smiled to herself for a moment, but suddenly felt a little nervous in spite of her superior knowledge and had glanced quickly, like a bird, from one face to another. She had bridled up her wispy head and had peered as sternly as she could at a small boy who answered her with a flashing smile. His hair was clustered over his shoulders. Between his teeth as he grinned glistened a white nugget of jarl root.

She shifted her gaze and clapped her hands together sharply two or three times as though for silence, although there was no noise at all. Then she suddenly felt she wanted to be back in the castle and in her own little room and she said before she knew it, 'A new little Groan has been born, a little boy. A little boy of the Blood, I am in charge, of course, and I want a wet nurse for him *at once*. I must have one *at once* to come back with me. There now! I've told you everything.'

The old women had turned to one another and had then walked away to their huts. They returned with little cakes and bottles of sloe wine. Meanwhile the men formed a large circle and repeated the name Gormenghast seventy-

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seven times. While Mrs Slagg waited and watched the children who had been set playing, a woman had come forward. She told Mrs Slagg that her child had died a few hours after he had been born some days ago but that she was strong enough and would come. She was, perhaps, twenty, and was well built, but the tragic disintegration of her beauty had begun although her eyes still had the after-glow upon them. She fetched a basket and did not seem to expect any sort of refusal to her offer. And Nannie Slagg was about to ask a few questions, as she felt would be correct, but the Dweller, packing the sloe wine and cakes into a basket, had taken Mrs Slagg quietly by the arm and the old nurse found herself to be making for the Great Wall. She glanced up at the young woman beside her and wondered whether she had chosen correctly, and then, realizing that she hadn't chosen at all, she half stopped and glanced back nervously over her shoulder.

KEDA

The cactus trees stood hueless between the long tables. The Dwellers were all in their places again. Mrs Slagg ceased to interest them. There were no shadows save immediately below every object. The moon was overhead. It was a picture painted on silver. Mrs Slagg's companion had waited with her quietly. There was a kind of strength in the way she walked and in the way she kept silent. With the dark cloth hanging to her ankles and caught in at her waist with the thong of jarl root; with her bare legs and feet and her head still holding the sunset of her darkened day, she was in strange contrast to little Nannie Slagg, with her quick jerky walk, her dark satin dress, her black gloves, and her monumental hat of glass grapes. Before they descended the dry knoll towards the archway in the wall, a sudden guttural cry as of someone being strangled, froze the old woman's blood and she clutched at the strong arm beside her and clung to it like a child. Then she peered towards the tables. They were too far for her to see clearly with her weak eyes, but she thought she could make out figures standing and there seemed to be someone crouching like a creature about to spring.

Mrs Slagg's companion appeared, after glancing casually in the direction of the sound, to take no more notice of the incident, but keeping a firmer grip this time on the old lady, propelled her forward towards the stone gate.

'It is nothing', was the sole reply which Mrs Slagg received and by the time the two were in the acacia avenue her blood had quietened.

When they were turning from the long drive into the doorway of Gormenghast through which Nannie had stepped out into the evening air so surreptitiously an hour or so before, she glanced up at her companion and shrugging her shoulders a little, contrived to take on an expression of mock importance.

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'Your name? Your name?' she said.

'Keda.'

'Well, Keda, dear, if you will follow me, I will take you to the little boy. I'll show you him myself. He is by the window in *my* room.' Nannie's voice suddenly took on a confidential, almost pathetic note. 'I haven't a very big room', she said, 'but I've always had the same one, I don't like any of the other ones,' she added rather untruthfully, 'I'm nearer Lady Fuchsia.'

'Perhaps I shall see her', said the girl, after a pause.

Nannie suddenly stopped on the stairs. 'I don't *know* about that,' she said, 'oh no, I'm not *sure* about that. She is very strange, I never know what she's going to do next.'

'To do?' said Keda. 'How do you mean?'

'About little Titus.' Nannie's eyes began to wander. 'No, I don't know what she'll do. She's such a terror – the naughtiest terror in the castle – she can be.'

'Why are you frightened?' said Keda.

'I know she'll hate him. She likes to be the only one, you know. She likes to dream that she's the queen and that when the rest are dead there'll be no one who can order her to do anything. She said, dear, that she'd burn down the whole place, burn down Gormenghast when she was the ruler and she'd live on her own, and I said she was wicked, and she said that everyone was – everyone and everything except rivers, clouds, and some rabbits. She makes me frightened sometimes.'

They climbed up remaining steps, along a passageway and up the remaining flight to the second floor in silence.

When they had come to the room Mrs Slagg placed her finger at her lips and gave a smile which it would be impossible to describe. It was a mixture of the cunning and the maudlin. Then turning the handle very carefully she opened the door by degrees and putting her high hat of glass grapes through the narrow opening by way of a vanguard, followed it stealthily with all that remained of her.

Keda entered the room. Her bare feet made no noise on the floor. When Mrs Slagg reached the cradle she put her fingers to her mouth and peered over it as though into the deepest recesses of an undiscovered world. There he was. The infant Titus. His eyes were open but he was quite still. The puckered-up face of the newly-born child, old as the world, wise as the roots of trees. Sin was there and goodness, love, pity and horror, and even beauty for his eyes were pure violet. Earth's passions. earth's griefs, earth's incongruous, ridiculous humours – dormant, yet visible in the wry pippin of a face.

Nannie Slagg bending over him waggled a crooked finger before his eyes. 'My little sugar,' she tittered. 'How *could* you? how *could* you?'

Mrs Slagg turned round to Keda with a new look in her face. 'Do you think I should have left him?' she said. 'When I went to fetch you. Do you think I should have left him?'

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Keda stared down at Titus. Tears were in her eyes as she watched the child. Then she turned to the window. She could see the great wall that held in Gormenghast. The wall that cut her own people away, as though to keep out a plague; the walls that barred from her view the stretches of arid earth beyond the mud huts where her child had so recently been buried.

To come within the walls was itself something of an excitement to those of the mud huts and something which in the normal course of events was reserved for the day of the Bright Carvings, but to be within the castle itself was something unique. Yet Keda did not seem impressed and had not troubled to ask Mrs Slagg any questions nor even so much as glance about her. Poor Mrs Slagg felt this was something of an impertinence but did not know whether or not she ought to say something about it.

But Titus had stolen the limelight and Keda's indifference was soon forgotten, for he was beginning to cry, and his crying grew and grew in spite of Mrs Slagg's dangling a necklace in front of his screwed up eyes and an attempt at singing a lullaby from her half-forgotten store. She had him over her shoulder, but his shrill cries rose in volume. Keda's eyes were still upon the wall, but of a sudden, breaking herself away from the window, she moved up behind Nannie Slagg and, as she did so, parted the dark brown material from her throat and freeing her left breast, took the child from the shoulders of the old woman. Within a few moments the little face was pressed against her and struggles and sobs were over. Then as she turned and sat at the window a calm came upon her as from her very centre, the milk of her body and the riches of her frustrated love welled up and succoured the infant creature in her keeping.

'FIRST BLOOD'

Titus, under the care of Nannie Slagg and Keda, developed hourly in the western wing. His weird little head had changed shape, from day to day as the heads of infants do, and at last settled to its own proportion. It was both long and of a bulk that promised to develop into something approaching the unique.

His violet eyes made up, in the opinion of Mrs Slagg, for any strangeness in the shape of his head and features which were, after all, nothing extraordinary for a member of his family.

Even from the very first there was something lovable about Titus. It is true that his thin crying could be almost unbearable, and Mrs Slagg, who insisted upon having the whole charge of him between his meals, was driven at times to a kind of fluttering despair.

On the fourth day the preparations for his christening were well in hand.

This ceremony was always held in the afternoon of the twelfth day, in a

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pleasant open room on the ground level, which, with its bay windows, gave upon the cedar trees and shaven lawns that sloped away to the Gormenghast terraces where the Countess walked at dawn with her snow-white cats.

The room was perhaps the most homely and at the same time the most elegant in the castle. There were no shadows lurking in the corners. The whole feeling was of quiet and pleasing distinction, and when the afternoon sun lit up the lawns beyond the bay windows into a green-gold carpet, the room with its cooler tints became a place to linger in. It was seldom used.

The Countess never entered it, preferring those parts of the castle where the lights and the shadows were on the move and where there was no such clarity. Lord Sepulchrave was known to walk up and down its length on rare occasions and to stop and stare at the cedars on the lawn as he passed the window, and then to leave the room again for a month or two until the next whim moved him.

Nannie Slagg had on a few occasions sat there, furtively knitting with her paper bag of wool on the long refectory table in the centre, and the high back of the carved chair towering over her. Around her the spaciousness of the temperate room. The tables with their vases of garden flowers, plucked by Pentecost, the head gardener. But for the most part the room was left empty week after week, saving for an hour in the morning of each day when Pentecost would arrange the flowers. Deserted as the room was, Pentecost would never permit a day to pass in which he had not changed the water in the vases and refilled them again with taste and artistry, for he had been born in the mud huts and had in his marrow the love and understanding of colour that was the hallmark of the Bright Carvers.

On the morning of the christening he had been out to cut the flowers for the room. The towers of Gormenghast rose into the morning mists and blocked away a commotion of raw cloud in the eastern sky. As he stood for a moment on the lawns he looked up at the enormous piles of masonry and could vaguely discern among the shadows the corroded carvings and broken heads of grey stone.

The lawns beneath the west wall where he stood were black with dew, but where, at the foot of one of the seven cedars, a grazing shaft of sun fell in a little pool of light, the wet grass blazed with diamonds of every colour. The dawn air was cold, and he drew more closely about him the leather cape which he wore over his head like a monk. It was strong and supple and had been stained and darkened by many storms and by the dripping of the rain from moss-gloved trees. From a cord hanging at his side hung his gardening knife.

Above the turrets, like a wing ripped from the body of an eagle, a solitary cloud moved northwards through the awakening air quilled with blood.

Above Pentecost the cedars, like great charcoal drawings, suddenly began to expose their structure, the layers of flat foliage rising tier above tier, their edges ribbed with sunrise.

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Pentecost turned his back upon the castle and made his way through the cedars, leaving in his wake upon the glittering blotches of the dew, black imprints of feet that turned inwards. As he walked it seemed that he was moving into the earth. Each stride was a gesture, a probing. It was a kind of downward, inward search, as though he knew that what was important for him, what he really understood and cared for, was below him, beneath his slowly moving feet. It was in the earth – it was the earth.

Pentecost, with his leather cowl was not of impressive dimensions, and his walk, although filled with meaning, had nevertheless something ridiculous about it. His legs were too short in proportion to his body, but his head, ancient and lined, was nobly formed and majestic with its big-boned, wrinkled brow and straight nose.

Of flowers he had a knowledge beyond that of the botanist, or the artist, being moved by the growth rather than the fulfilment, the organic surge that found its climax in the gold or the blue rather than in the colours, the patterns or anything visible.

As the mother who would not love the child the less were its face to be mutilated, so was he with flowers. To all growing things he brought this knowledge and love, but to the apple tree he gave himself up wholly.

Upon the northern slope of a low hill that dropped gradually to a stream, his orchard trees arose clearly, each one to Pentecost a personality in its own right.

On August days Fuchsia from her window in the attic could see him far below standing at times upon a short ladder, and sometimes when the boughs were low enough, upon the grass, his long body and little legs foreshortened and his cowl over his fine head hiding his features; and diminutive as he appeared from that immense height, she could make out that he was polishing the apples into a mirror-like gloss as they hung from the boughs, bending forward to breathe upon them and then with silk cloth rubbing them until she could see the glint upon their crimson skins – even from the height of her eirie in the shadowy loft.

Then he would move away from the tree that he had burnished and pace around it slowly, enjoying the varied grouping of its apples and the twisted stem of the supporting bole.

Pentecost spent some time in the walled-in garden, where he cut the flowers for the christening room. He moved from one part to another until he knew and could visualize the vases filled in the room and had decided upon the colour for the day.

The sun was by now clear of the mists and like a bright plate in the sky, rose as though drawn up by an invisible string. In the Christening Room there was still no light, but Pentecost entered by the bay-window, a dark mis-proportioned figure with the flowers smouldering in his arms.

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Meanwhile the castle was either awaking or awakened. Lord Sepulchrave was having his breakfast with Sourdust in the refectory. Mrs Slagg was pushing and prodding at a heap of blankets beneath which Fuchsia lay curled up in darkness. Swelter was having a glass of wine in bed, which one of the apprentices had brought him, and was only half awake, his huge bulk wrinkled in upon itself in a ghastly manner. Flay was muttering to himself as he walked up and down an endless grey passage, his knee joints, like a clock, ticking off his every step. Rottcodd was dusting the third of the carvings, and sending up little clouds with his feet as he moved; and Doctor Prunesquallor was singing to himself in his morning bath. The walls of the bathroom were hung with anatomical diagrams painted on long scrolls. Even in his bath he was wearing his glasses and as he peered over the side to recover a piece of scented soap, he sang to his external oblique as though it were his love.

Steerpike was looking at himself in a mirror and examining an insipid moustache, and Keda in her room in the northern wing was watching the sunlight as it moved across the Twisted Woods.

Lord Titus Groan, innocent that the breaking day heralded the hour of his christening, was fast asleep. His head was lolling over on one side and his face was nearly obscured by the pillow, one of his little fists rammed in his mouth. He wore a yellow silk nightdress, covered with blue stars, and the light through the half-drawn blinds crept over his face.

The morning moved on. There was a great deal of coming and going. Nannie was practically insane with excitement and without Keda's silent help would have been incapable of coping with the situation.

The christening dress had to be ironed, the christening rings and the little jewelled crown to be procured from the iron case in the armoury, and only Shrattle had the key and he was stone deaf.

The bath and dressing of Titus had to be especially perfect, and with everything to do the hours slipped away all too quickly for Mrs Slagg and it was two o'clock in the afternoon before she knew where she was.

Keda had found Shrattle at last and had persuaded him by ingenious signs that there was a christening that afternoon and that the crown was necessary and that she would return it as soon as the ceremony was over, and had in fact smoothed over, or solved all the difficulties that made Nannie Slagg wring her hands together and shake her old head in despair.

The afternoon was perfect. The great cedars basked magnificently in the still air. The lawns had been cut and were like dull emerald glass. The carvings upon the walls that had been engulfed in the night and had faltered through the dawn were now chiselled and free in the brightness.

The Christening Room itself looked cool and clear and unperturbed. With space and dignity it awaited the entrance of the characters. The flowers in their vases were incredibly gracious. Pentecost had chosen lavender as the dominant note for the room, but here and there a white flower spoke coolly to a white

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flower across the green carpet spaces and one gold orchid was echoed by another.

Great activity might have been observed in many of the rooms of Gormenghast as the hour of three approached, but the cool room waited in a serene silence. The only life in the room lay in the throats of the flowers.

Suddenly the door opened and Flay came in. He was wearing his long black moth-eaten suit, but there had been some attempt on his part at getting rid of the major stains and clipping the more ragged edges of cuff and trouser into straight raw lines. Over and above these improvements he wore around his neck a heavy chain of brass. In one hand he balanced, on a tray, a bowl of water. The negative dignity of the room threw him out in relief as a positive scarecrow. Of this he was quite unconscious. He had been helping to dress Lord Sepulchrave, and had made a rapid journey with the christening bowl as his lordship stood polishing his nails at the window of his bedroom, his toilet completed. The filling of the bowl and placing it on the central table in the cool room was his only duty, until the actual ceremony took place. Putting the bowl down unceremoniously on the table he scratched the back of his head and then drove his hands deep into his trouser pockets. It was some time since he was last in the Cool Room. It was not a room that he cared for. To his mind it was not apart of Gormenghast at all. With a gesture of defiance he shot his chin forward like a piece of machinery and began to pace around the room glancing malevolently at the flowers, when he heard a voice beyond the door, a thick, murderously unctuous voice.

'Woah, back there, woah! back there; watch your feet, my little rats' eyes! To the *side*. To the *side*, or I'll fillet you! Stand still! stand *still*! Merciful flesh that I should have to deal with puts!'

The door knob moved and then the door began to open and Flay's physical opposite began to appear around the opening. For some time, so it seemed to Flay, taut areas of cloth evolved in a great arc and then at last above them a head around the panels and the eyes embedded in that head concentrated their gaze upon Mr Flay.

Flay stiffened – if it is possible for something already as stiff as a piece of teak to stiffen still further – and he lowered his head to the level of his clavicles and brought his shoulders up like a vulture. His arms were absolutely straight from the high shoulders to where the fists were clenched in his trouser pockets.

Swelter, as soon as he saw who it was, stopped dead, and across his face little billows of flesh ran swiftly here and there until, as though they had determined to adhere to the same impulse, they swept up into both oceans of soft cheek, leaving between them a vacuum, a gaping segment like a slice cut from a melon. It was horrible. It was as though nature had lost control. As though the smile, as a concept, as a manifestation of pleasure, had been a mistake, for here on the face of Swelter the idea had been abused.

A voice came out of the face: 'Well, well, well,' it said, 'may I be boiled to a

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frazzle if it isn't Mr Flee. The one and only Flee. Well, well, well. Here before me in the Cool Room. Dived through the keyhole, I do believe. Oh, my adorable lights and liver, if it isn't the Flee itself.'

The line of Mr Flay's mouth, always thin and hard, became even thinner as though scored with a needle. His eyes looked up and down the white mountain, crowned with its snowy, high cloth hat of office, for even the slovenly Swelter had dressed himself up for the occasion.

Although Mr Flay had avoided the cook whenever possible, an occasional accidental meeting such as today's was unavoidable, and from their chance meetings in the past Mr Flay had learned that the huge house of flesh before him, whatever its faults, had certainly a gift for sarcasm beyond the limits of his own taciturn nature. It had therefore been Mr Flay's practice, whenever possible, to ignore the chef as one ignores a cesspool by the side of a road, and although his pride was wounded by Swelter's mis-pronunciation of his name and the reference to his thinness, Flay held his spiky passions in control, merely striding to the doorway after his examination of the other's bulk and spitting out of the bay window as though to clear his whole system of something noxious. Silent though he had learned by experience to be, each galling word from Swelter did not fail to add to the growing core of hatred that burned beneath his ribs.

Swelter, as Mr Flay spat, had leaned back in his traces as though in mock alarm, his head folded back on his shoulders, and with an expression of comic concentration, had gazed alternately at Mr Flay and then out of the window several times. 'Well, well, well,' he said in his most provoking voice that seemed to seep out of dough – 'well, well, well – your accomplishments will never end. Baste me! Never. One lives and learns. By the little eel I skinned last Friday night, one lives and one learns.' Wheeling round he presented his back to Mr Flay and bellowed, 'Advance and make it sprightly! Advance the triumvirate, the little creatures who have wound themselves around my heart. Advance and be recognized.'

Into the room filed three boys of about twelve years of age. They each carried a large tray stacked with delicacies.

'Mr Flee, I will introduce you, said Swelter, as the boys approached, glueing their frightened eyes on their precarious cargoes. 'Mr Flee – Master Springers – Master Springers – Mr Flee. Mr Flee – Master Wrattle, Master Wrattle – Mr Flee. Mr Flee – Master Spurter, Master Spurter – Mr Flee. Flee – Springers – Flee – Wrattle – Flee – Spurter – Flee!'

This was brought out with such a mixture of eloquence and impertinence that it was too much for Mr Flay. That he, the first servant of Gormenghast – Lord Sepulchrave's confidant should be introduced to Swelter's ten-a-penny kitchen boys was trying him too hard, and as he suddenly strode past the chef towards the door (for he was in any event due back with his lordship), he pulled the chain over his head and slashed the heavy brass links across the face

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of his taunter. Before Swelter had recovered, Mr Flay was well on his way along the passages. The chef's face had suffered a transformation. All the vast *media* of his head became, as clay becomes under the hand of the modeller, bent to the externalization of a passion. Upon it, written in letters of pulp, was spelt the word *revenge*. The eyes had almost instantly ceased to blaze and had become like little pieces of glass.

The three boys had spread the delicacies upon the table, and, leaving in the centre the simple christening bowl, they now cowered in the bay window, longing in their hearts to run, to run as they had never run before, out into the sunshine and across the lawns and over streams and fields until they were far, far away from the white presence with the hectic red marks of the chain-links across its face.

The chef, with his hatred so riveted upon the person of Flay, had forgotten them and did not vent his spleen upon them. His was not the hatred that rises suddenly like a storm and as suddenly abates. It was, once the initial shock of anger and pain was over, a calculated thing that grew in a bloodless way. The fact that three minions had seen their dreaded overlord suffer an indignity was nothing to Swelter at this moment, for he could see the situation in proportion and in it these children had no part.

Without a word he walked to the centre of the room. His fat hands rearranged a few of the dishes nimbly upon the table. Then he advanced to a mirror that hung above a vase of flowers and examined his wounds critically. They hurt him. Catching sight of the three boys as he shifted his head in order to peer again more closely at himself, for he was only able to see portions of his face at one and the same time, he signalled to them to be gone. He followed shortly afterwards and made his way to his room above the bakeries.

By this time the hour was practically at hand for the gathering and from their various apartments the persons concerned were sallying forth. Each one with his or her particular stride. His or her particular eyes, nose, mouth, hair, thoughts and feelings. Self-contained, carrying their whole selves with them as they moved, as a vessel that holds its own distinctive wine, bitter or sweet. These seven closed their doors behind them, terrifyingly *themselves*, as they set out for the Cool Room.

There were, in the Castle, two ladies, who, though very seldom encountered, were of the Groan blood, and so, when it came to a family ceremony such as this, were of course invited. They were their ladyships Cora and Clarice, sisters-in-law to Gertrude, sisters of Sepulchrave, and twins in their own right. They lived in a set of rooms in the southern wing and shared with each other an all-absorbing passion for brooding upon an irony of fate which decreed that they should have no say in the affairs of Gormenghast. These two along with the others were on their way to the Cool Room.

Tradition playing its remorseless part had forced Swelter and Flay to return

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to the Cool Room to await the first arrival, but luckily someone was there before them – Sourdust, in his sacking garment. He stood behind the table, his book open before him. In front of him the bowl of water, around which the examples of Swelter's art sat, perched on golden salvers and goblets that twinkled in the reflected sunlight.

Swelter, who had managed to conceal the welts on his face by an admixture of flour and white honey, took up his place to the left of the ancient librarian, over whom he towered as a galleon above a tooth of rock. Around his neck he also wore a ceremonial chain similar to that of Flay, who appeared a few moments later. He stalked across the room without glancing at the chef, and stood upon the other side of Sourdust, balancing from the artist's point of view if not the rationalist's, the components of the picture.

All was ready. The participants in the ceremony would be arriving one by one, the less important entering first, until the penultimate entrance of the Countess harbingered a necessary piece of walking furniture, Nannie Slagg, who would be carrying in her arms a shawl-full of destiny – the Future of the Blood Line. A tiny weight that was Gormenghast, a Groan of the strict lineage – Titus, the Seventy-Seventh.

'ASSEMBLAGE'

First to arrive was the outsider – the commoner – who through his service to the family was honoured by a certain artificial equality of status, liable at any moment to be undermined – Doctor Prunesquallor.

He entered fluttering his perfect hands, and, mincing to the table, rubbed them together at the level of his chin in a quick, animated way as his eyes travelled over the spread that lay before him.

'My very dear Swelter, ha, ha, may I offer you my congratulations, ha, ha, as a doctor who knows something of stomachs, my dear Swelter, something indeed of stomachs? Not only of stomachs but of palates, of tongues, and of the membrane, my dear man, that covers the roof of the mouth, and not only of the membrane that covers the roof of the mouth but of the sensitized nerve endings that I can positively assure you are tingling, my dear and very excellent Swelter, at the very thought of coming into contact with these delicious-looking oddments that you've no doubt tossed off at an odd moment, ha, ha, very, very likely I should say, oh yes, very, very likely.'

Doctor Prunesquallor smiled and exhibited two brand new rows of grave-stones between his lips, and darting his beautiful white hand forward with the little finger crooked to a right angle, he lifted a small emerald cake with a blob of cream atop of it, as neatly off the top of a plate of such trifles as though he were at home in his dissecting room and were removing some organ from a

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frog. But before he had got it to his mouth, a hissing note stopped him short. It came from Sourdust, and it caused the doctor to replace the green cake on the top of the pile even more swiftly than he had removed it. He had forgotten for the moment, or had pretended to forget, what a stickler for etiquette old Sourdust was. Until the Countess herself was in the room no eating could begin.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, very very right and proper Mr Sourdust, very right and proper indeed', said the doctor, winking at Swelter. The magnified appearance of his eyes gave this familiarity a peculiar unpleasantness. Very, very right indeed. But that's what this man Swelter does to one, with his irresistible little lumps of paradise – ha, ha, he makes one quite barbarian he does, don't you Swelter? You barbarize one, ha, ha, don't you? You positively barbarize one.'

Swelter, who was in no mood for this sort of badinage, and in any case preferred to hold the floor if there was to be any eloquence, merely gave a mirthless twitch to his mouth and continued to stare out of the window. Sourdust was running his finger along a line in his book which he was re-reading, and Flay was a wooden effigy.

Nothing, however, seemed to be able to keep the mercury out of Doctor Prunesquallor, and after looking quickly from face to face, he examined his finger nails, one by one, with a ridiculous interest; and then turning suddenly from his task as he completed the scrutiny of the tenth nail, be skipped to the window, a performance grotesquely incongruous in one of his years, and leaning in an over-elegant posture against the window frame, he made that peculiarly effeminate gesture of the left hand that he was so fond of, the placing of the tips of thumb and index finger together, and thus forming an O, while the remaining three fingers were strained back and curled into letter C's of dwindling sizes. His left elbow, bent acutely, brought his hand about a foot away from him and on a level with the flower in his buttonhole. His narrow chest, like a black tube, for he was dressed in a cloth of death's colour, gave forth a series of those irritating laughs that can only be symbolized by '*ha, ha, ha,*' but whose pitch scraped at the inner wall of the skull.

'Cedars', said Doctor Prunesquallor, squinting at the trees before him with his head tilted and his eyes half closed, 'are excellent trees. Very, very excellent. I positively enjoy cedars, but do cedars positively enjoy me? Ha, ha – do they, my dear Mr Flay, do they? – or is this rather above you, my man, is my philosophy a trifle above you? For if I enjoy a cedar but a cedar does not, ha, ha, enjoy me, then surely I am at once in a position of compromise, being, as it were, ignored by the vegetable world, which would think twice, mark you, my dear fellow, would think twice about ignoring a cart load of mulch, ha, ha, or to put it in another way . . .'

But here Doctor Prunesquallor's reflections were interrupted by the first of the family arrivals, the twin sisters, their ladyships Cora and Clarice. They opened the door very slowly and peered around it before advancing. It had

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been several months since they had ventured from their apartments and they were suspicious of everyone and of everything.

Doctor Prunesquallor advanced at once from the window. 'Your ladyships will forgive me, ha, ha, the presumption of receiving you into what is, ha, ha, after all more your own room than mine, ha, ha, ha, but which is nevertheless, I have reason to suspect, a little strange to you if I may be so extraordinarily flagrant; so ludicrously indiscreet, in fact . . .'

'It's the doctor, my dear', the lady Cora whispered flatly to her twin sister, interrupting Prunesquallor.

Lady Clarice merely stared at the thin gentleman in question until anyone but the doctor would have turned and fled.

'I know it is,' she said at last. 'What's wrong with his eyes?'

'He's got some disease of course, I suppose. Didn't you know?' replied Lady Cora.

She and her sister were dressed in purple, with gold buckles at their throats by way of brooches, and another gold buckle each at the end of hatpins which they wore through their grey hair in order apparently to match their brooches. Their faces, identical to the point of indecency, were quite expressionless, as though they were the preliminary lay-outs for faces and were waiting for sentience to be injected.

'What are you doing here?' said Cora, staring remorselessly.

Doctor Prunesquallor bent forward towards her and showed her his teeth. Then he clasped his hands together. 'I am privileged', he said, 'very, very much so, oh yes, very, very much.'

'Why?' said Lady Clarice. Her voice was so perfect a replica of her sister's as might lead one to suppose that her vocal cords had been snipped from the same line of gut in those obscure regions where such creatures are compounded.

The sisters were now standing, one on either side of the doctor, and they stared up at him with an emptiness of expression that caused him to turn his eyes hurriedly to the ceiling, for he had switched them from one to the other for respite from either, but had found no relief. The white ceiling by contrast teemed with interest and he kept his eyes on it.

'Your ladyships,' he said, 'can it be that you are ignorant of the part I play in the social life of Gormenghast? I say the social life, but who, ha, ha, ha, who could gain say me if I boast that it is more than the *social* life, ha, ha, ha, and is, my very dear ladyships, positively the organic life of the castle that I foster, and control, ha, ha, in the sense that, trained as I undoubtedly am in the science of this, that, and the other, ha, ha, ha, in connection with the whole anomatical caboodle from head to foot, I, as part of my work here, deliver the new generations to the old – the sinless to the sinful, ha, ha, ha, the stainless to the tarnished – oh dear me, the white to the black, the healthy to the diseased. And this ceremony today, my very dear ladyships, is a

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result of my professional adroitness, ha, ha, ha, on the occasion of a brand new Groan.'

'What did you say?' said Lady Clarice, who had been staring at him the whole time without moving a muscle.

Doctor Prunesquallor closed his eyes and kept them closed for a very long time. Then opening them he took a pace forward and breathed in as much as his narrow chest would allow. Then turning suddenly he wagged his finger at the two in purple.

'Your ladyships', he said. 'You must *listen*, you will never get on in life unless you *listen*.'

'Get *on* in life?' said Lady Cora at once, 'get *on* in life, I like that. What chance have we, when Gertrude has what we ought to have?'

'Yes, yes,' said the other, like a continuation of her sister's voice in another part of the room. 'We ought to have what she has.'

'And what is *that*, my very dear ladyships?' queried Doctor Prunesquallor, tilting his head at them.

'Power', they replied blankly and both together, as though they had rehearsed the scene. The utter tonelessness of their voices contrasted so incongruously with the gist of the subject that even Doctor Prunesquallor was for a moment taken aback and loosened his stiff white collar around his throat with his forefinger.

'It's power we want', lady Clarice repeated. 'We'd like to have that.'

'Yes, it's that we want,' echoed Cora, 'lots of power. Then we could make people do things', said the voice.

'But Gertrude has all the power', came the echo, 'which we ought to have but which we haven't got.'

Then they stared at Swelter, Sourdust and Flay in turn.

'*They* have to be here, I suppose?' said Cora, pointing at them before returning her gaze to Doctor Prunesquallor, who had reverted to examining the ceiling. But before he could reply the door opened and Fuchsia came in, dressed in white.

Twelve days had elapsed since she had discovered that she was no longer the only child. She had steadily refused to see her brother and today for the first time she would be obliged to be with him. Her first anguish, inexplicable to herself, had dulled to a grudging acceptance. For what reason she did not know, but her grief had been very real. She did not know what it was that she resented.

Mrs Slagg had had no time to help Fuchsia to look presentable, only telling her to comb her hair and to put her white dress on at the *last* minute so that it should not be creased, and then to appear in the Cool Room at two minutes past three.

The sunlight on the lawns and the flowers in the vases and the room itself had seemed pleasant auguries for the afternoon before the entrance of the two

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servants, and the unfortunate incident that occurred. This violence had set a bitter keynote to the ensuing hours.

Fuchsia came in with her eyes red from crying. She curtseyed awkwardly to her mother's cousins and then sat down in a far corner, but she was almost at once forced to regain her feet, for her father, followed closely by the Countess, entered and walked slowly to the centre of the room.

Without a word of warning Sourdust rapped his knuckles on the table and cried out with his old voice: 'All are gathered save only him, for whom this gathering is gathered. All are here save only he for whom we all are here. Form now before the table of his baptism in the array of waiting, while I pronounce the entrance of Life's enterer and of the Groan inheritor, of Gormenghast's untarnished child-shaped mirror.'

Sourdust coughed in a very ill way and put his hand to his chest. He glanced down at the book and ran his finger along a new line. Then he tottered around the table, his knotted grey-and-white beard swinging a little from side to side, and ushered the five into a semi-circle around the table, with their backs to the window. In the centre were the Countess and Lord Sepulchrave. Fuchsia was to her father's left and Doctor Prunesquallor on the right of Lady Groan, but a little behind the semi-circle. The twin sisters were separated, one standing at either extremity of the arc. Flay and Swelter had retreated a few paces backwards and stood quite still. Flay bit at his knuckles.

Sourdust returned to his position behind the table which he held alone, and was relatively more impressive now that the crag of Flay and the mound of Swelter no longer dwarfed him. He lifted his voice again, but it was hard for him to speak, for there were tears in his throat and the magnitude of his office weighed heavily on him. As a savant in the Groan lore he knew himself to be spiritually responsible for the correct procedure. Moments such as this were the highlights in the ritualistic cycle of his life.

'Suns and the changing of the seasonal moons; the leaves from trees that cannot keep their leaves, and the fish from olive waters have their voices!'

His hands were held before him as though in prayer, and his wrinkled head was startlingly apparent in the clear light of the room. His voice grew stronger.

'Stones have their voices and the quills of birds; the anger of the thorns, the wounded spirits, the antlers, ribs that curve, bread, tears and needles. Blunt boulders and the silence of cold marshes – these have their voices - the insurgent clouds, the cockerel and the worm.'

Sourdust bent down over his book and found the place with his finger and then turned the page.

'Voices that grind at night from lungs of granite. Lungs of blue air and the white lungs of rivers. All voices haunt all moments of all days; all voices fill the crannies of all regions. Voices that he shall hear when he has listened, and when his ear is tuned to Gormenghast; whose voice is endlessness of endlessness. This is the ancient sound that he must follow. The voice of stones

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heaped up into grey towers, until he dies across the Groan's death-turret. And banners are ripped down from wall and buttress and he is carried to the Tower of Towers and laid among the moulderings of his fathers.'

'How much more is there?' said the Countess. She had been listening less attentively than the occasion merited and was feeding with crumbs from a pocket in her dress a grey bird on her shoulder.

Sourdust looked up from his book at Lady Groan's question. His eyes grew misty for he was pained by the irritation in her voice.

'The ancient word of the twelfth lord is complete, your ladyship', he said, his eyes on the book.

'Good', said Lady Groan. 'What now?'

'We turn about, I think, and look out on the garden', said Clarice vaguely, 'don't we, Cora? You remember just before baby Fuchsia was carried in, we all turned round and looked at the garden through the window. I'm sure we did – long ago.'

'Where have you been since then?' said Lady Groan, suddenly addressing her sisters-in-law and staring at them one after the other. Her dark-red hair was beginning to come loose over her neck, and the bird had scarred with its feet the soft inky-black pile of her velvet dress so that it looked ragged and grey at her shoulder.

'We've been in the south wing all the time, Gertrude', replied Cora.

'That's where we've been', said Clarice. 'In the south wing all the time.'

Lady Groan emptied a look of love across her left shoulder, and the grey bird that stood there with its head beneath its wing moved three quick steps nearer to her throat. Then she turned her eyes upon her sisters-in-law: 'Doing what?' she said.

'Thinking', said the twins together, 'that's what we've been doing – thinking a lot.'

A high uncontrolled laugh broke out from slightly behind the Countess. Doctor Prunesquallor had disgraced himself. It was no time for him to emphasize his presence. He was there on sufferance, but a violent rapping on the table saved him and all attention was turned to Sourdust.

'Your lordship', said Sourdust slowly, 'as the seventy-sixth Earl of Groan and Lord of Gormenghast, it is written in the laws that you do now proceed to the doorway of the Christening Room and call for your son along the empty passage.'

Lord Sepulchrave, who up to this moment, had, like his daughter beside him, remained perfectly still and silent, his melancholy eyes fixed upon the dirty vest of his servant Flay which he could just see over the table, turned towards the door, and on reaching it, coughed to clear his throat.

The Countess followed with her eyes, but her expression was too vague to understand. The twins followed him with their faces – two areas of identical flesh. Fuchsia was sucking her knuckles and seemed to be the only one in the

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room uninterested in the progress of her father. Flay and Swelter had their eyes fixed upon him, for although their thoughts were still engaged with the violence of half an hour earlier, they were so much a part of the Groan ritual that they followed his lordship's every movement with a kind of surly fascination.

Sourdust, in his anxiety to witness a perfect piece of traditional procedure, was twisting his black-and-white beard into what must surely have been inextricable knots. He leaned forward over the christening bowl, his hands on the refectory table.

Meanwhile, hiding behind a turn in the passage, Nannie Slagg, with Titus in her arms, was being soothed by Keda as she waited for her call.

'Now, now be quiet, Mrs Slagg, be quiet and it will be over soon', said Keda to the little shaking thing that was dressed up in the shiniest of dark-green satin and upon whose head the grape hat arose in magnificent misproportion to her tiny face.

'Be quiet, indeed', said Nannie Slagg in a thin animated voice. 'If you only knew what it means to be in such a position of honour – oh, my poor heart! You would not dare to try to make me quiet indeed! I have never heard such ignorance. Why is he so long? Isn't it time for him to call me? And the precious thing so quiet and good and ready to cry any minute – oh, my poor heart! Why is he so long? Brush my dress again.'

Keda, who had been commanded to bring a soft brush with her, would have been brushing Nannie's satin dress for practically the whole morning had the old nurse had her way. She was now instructed by an irritable gesture of Mrs Slagg's hand to brush her anew and to soothe the old woman she complied with a few strokes.

Titus watched Keda's face with his violet eyes, his grotesque little features modified by the dull light at the corner of the passage. There was the history of man in his face. A fragment from the enormous rock of mankind. A leaf from the forest of man's passion and man's knowledge and man's pain. That was the ancientness of Titus.

Nannie's head was old with lines and sunken skin, with the red rims of her eyes and the puckers of her mouth. A vacant anatomical ancientry.

Keda's oldness was the work of fate, alchemy. An occult agedness. A transparent darkness. A broken and mysterious grove. A tragedy, a glory, a decay.

These three sere beings at the shadowy corner waited on. Nannie was sixty-nine, Keda was twenty-two, Titus was twelve days old.

Lord Sepulchrave had cleared his throat. Then he called:

'My Son.'

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'TITUS IS CHRISTENED'

His voice moved down the corridor and turned about the stone corner, and when he first heard the sound of Mrs Slagg's excited footsteps be continued with that part of the procedure which Sourdust had recited to him over their breakfast for the last three mornings.

Ideally, the length of time which it took him to complete the speech should have coincided with the time it took Nannie Slagg to reach the door of the Cool Room from the darkened corner.

'Inheritor of the powers I hold,' came his brooding voice from the doorway, 'continuer of the blood-stock of the stones, freshet of the unending river, approach me now. I, a mere link in the dynastic chain, adjure you to advance, as a white bird on iron skies through walls of solemn cloud. Approach now to the bowl, where, named and feted, you shall be consecrate in Gormenghast. Child! Welcome!'

Unfortunately Nannie, having tripped over a loose flagstone, was ten feet away at the word 'Welcome' and Sourdust, upon whose massive forehead a few beads of perspiration had suddenly appeared, felt the three long seconds pass with a ghastly slowness before she appeared at the door of the room. Immediately before she had left the corner Keda had placed the little iron crown gently on the infant's head to Nannie's satisfaction, and the two of them as they appeared before the assembly made up for their three seconds' tardiness by a preposterous quality that was in perfect harmony with the situation.

Sourdust felt satisfied as he saw them, and their delay that had rankled was forgotten. He approached Mrs Slagg carrying his great book with him, and when he had reached them he opened the volume so that it fell apart in two equal halves and then, extending it forward towards Nannie Slagg, he said:

'It is written, and the writing is adhered to, that between these pages where the flax is grey with wisdom, the first-born male-child of the House of Groan shall be lowered and laid lengthways, his head directed to the christening bowl, and that the pages that are heavy with words shall be bent in and over him, so that he is engulfed in the sere Text encircled with the Profound, and is as one with the inviolable Law.'

Nannie Slagg, an inane expression of importance on her face, lowered Titus within the obtuse V shape of the half-opened book so that the crown of his head just overlapped the spine of the volume at Sourdust's end and his feet at Mrs Slagg's.

Then Lord Sepulchrave folded the two pages over the helpless body and joined the tube of thick parchment at its centre with a safety-pin.

Resting upon the spine of the volume, his minute feet protruding from one end of the paper trunk and the iron spikes of the little crown protruding from

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the other, he was, to Sourdust, the very quintessential of traditional propriety. So much so that as he carried the loaded book towards the refectory table his eyes became so blurred with tears of satisfaction, that it was difficult for him to make his way between the small tables that lay in his path, and the two vases of flowers that stood so still and clear in the cool air of the room were each in his eyes a fume of lilac, and a blurr of snow.

He could not rub his eyes, and free his vision, for his hands were occupied, so he waited until they were at last clear of the moisture that filmed them.

Fuchsia, in spite of knowing that she should remain where she was, had joined Nannie Slagg. She had been irritated by an attempt that Clarice had made to nudge her in a furtive way whenever she thought that no one was watching.

'You never come to see me although you're a relation, but that's because I don't want you to come and never ask you', her aunt had said, and had then peered round to see whether she was being watched, and noticing that Gertrude was in a kind of enormous trance, she continued:

'You see, my poor child, I and my sister Cora are a good deal older than you and we both had convulsions when we were about your age. You may have noticed that our left arms are rather stiff and our left legs, too. That's not our fault.'

Her sister's voice came from the other side of the semi-circle of figures in a hoarse flat whisper, as though it was trying to reach the ears of Fuchsia without making contact with the row of ears that lay between. 'Not our fault at all', she said, 'not a bit our fault. Not any of it.'

'The epileptic fits, my poor child', continued Cora, after nodding at her sister's interruption, 'have left us practically starved all down the right side. Practically starved. We had these fits you see.'

'When we were about your age', came the empty echo.

'Yes, just about your age,' said Cora, 'and being practically starved all down the right side we have to do our embroidered tapestries with one hand.'

'Only one hand', said Clarice. 'It's very clever of us. But no one sees us.'

She leaned forward as she wedged in this remark, forcing it upon Fuchsia as though the whole future of Gormenghast hung upon it.

Fuchsia fiddled and wound her hair round her fingers savagely.

'Don't do that', said Cora. 'Your hair is too black. Don't do that.'

'Much too black', came the flat echo.

'Especially when your dress is so white.'

Cora bent forward from her hips so that her face was within a foot of Fuchsia's. Then with only her eyes turned away, but her face broadside on to her niece, 'We don't *like* your mother', she said.

Fuchsia was startled. Then she heard the same voice from the other side, 'That's true,' said the voice, 'we don't.'

Fuchsia turned suddenly, swinging her inky bulk of hair. Cora had dis-

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obeyed all the rules and unable to be so far from the conversation had moved like a sleep-walker round the back of the group, keeping an eye on the black-velvet mass of the Countess.

But she was doomed to disappointment, for as soon as she arrived, Fuchsia, glancing around wildly, caught sight of Mrs Slagg and she mooched away from her cousins and watched the ceremony at the table where Sourdust held her brother in the leaves of the book. As soon as Nannie was unburdened of Titus Fuchsia went to her side, and held her thin green-satin arm. Sourdust had reached the table with Lord Sepulchrave behind him. He re-instated himself. But his pleasure at the way things were proceeding was suddenly disrupted when his eyes, having cleared themselves of the haze, encountered no ceremonial curve of the select, but a room of scattered individuals. He was shocked. The only persons in alignment were the Countess, who through no sense of obedience, but rather from a kind of coma, was in the same position in which she had first anchored herself, and her husband who had returned to her side. Sourdust hobbled round the table with the tome-full. Cora and Clarice were standing close together, their bodies facing each other but their heads staring in Fuchsia's direction. Mrs Slagg and Fuchsia were together and Prunesquallor, on tip-toe, was peering at the stamen of a white flower in a vase through a magnifying lens he had whipped from his pocket. There was no need for him to be on tip-toe for it was neither a tall table nor a tall vase nor indeed a tall flower. But the attitude which pleased him most when peering at flowers was one in which the body was bent over the petals in an elegant curve.

Sourdust was shocked. His mouth worked at the corners. His old, fissured face became a fantastic area of cross-hatching and his weak eyes grew desperate. Attempting to lower the heavy volume to the table before the christening bowl where a space had been left for it, his fingers grew numb and lost their grip on the leather and the book slid from his hands, Titus slipping through the pages to the ground and tearing as he did so a corner from the leaf in which he had lain sheathed, for his little hand had clutched at it as he had fallen. This was his first recorded act of blasphemy. He had violated the Book of Baptism. The metal crown fell from his head. Nannie Slagg clutched Fuchsia's arm, and then with a scream of 'Oh my poor heart!' stumbled to where the baby lay crying piteously on the floor.

Sourdust was trying to tear the sacking of his clothes and moaning with impotence as he strained with his old fingers. He was in torture. Doctor Prunesquallor's white knuckles had travelled to his mouth with amazing speed, and he stood swaying a little. He had turned a moment later to Lady Groan.

'They resemble rubber, your ladyship, ha, ha, ha, ha. Just a core of india-rubber, with an elastic centre. Oh yes, they are. Very, very much so. Resilience is no word for it. Ha, ha, ha, absolutely no word for it – oh dear me,

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no. Every ounce, a bounce, ha, ha, ha! Every ounce, a bounce.'

'What are you talking about man!' said the Countess.

'I was referring to your child, who has just fallen on the floor.'

'Fallen?' queried the Countess in a gruff voice. 'Where?'

'To earth, your ladyship, ha, ha, ha. Fallen positively to earth. Earth, that is, with a veneer or two of stone, wood and carpet, in between its barbaric self and his minute lordship whom you can no doubt hear screaming.'

'So that's what it is.' said Lady Groan, from whose mouth, which was shaped as though she were whistling, the grey bird was picking a morsel of dry cake.

'Yes', said Cora on her right, who had run up to her directly the baby had fallen and was staring up at her sister-in-law's face. 'Yes, that's what it is.'

Clarice, who had appeared on the other side in a reverse of her sister's position, confirmed her sister's interpretation, 'that's just what it is.'

Then they both peered around the edge of the Countess and caught each other's eyes knowingly.

When the grey bird had removed the piece of cake from her ladyship's big pursed-up mouth it fluttered from her shoulder to perch upon her crooked finger where it clung as still as a carving, while she, leaving the twins (who, as though her departure had left a vacuum between them came together at once to fill it) proceeded to the site of the tragedy. There she saw Sourdust recovering his dignity, but shaking in his crimson sacking while he did so. Her husband, who knew that it was no situation for a man to deal with, stood aside from the scene, but looked nervously at his son. He was biting the ferrule of his jade-headed rod and his sad eyes moved here and there but constantly returned to the crying crownless infant in the nurse's arms.

The Countess took Titus from Mrs Slagg and walked to the bay window.

Fuchsia, watching her mother, felt in spite of herself a quickening of something akin to pity for the little burden she carried. Almost a qualm of nearness, of fondness, for since she had seen her brother tear at the leaves that encased him, she had known that there was another being in the room for whom the whole fustian of Gormenghast was a thing to flee from. She had imagined in a hot blurr of jealousy that her brother would be a beautiful baby, but when she saw him and found that he was anything but beautiful, she warmed to him, her smouldering eyes taking on, for a second, something of that look which her mother kept exclusively for her birds and the white cats.

The Countess held Titus up into the sunlight of the window and examined his face, making noises in her cheek to the grey bird as she did so. Then she turned him around and examined the back of his head for some considerable time.

'Bring the crown', she said.

Doctor Prunesquallor came up with his elbows raised and the fingers of both

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