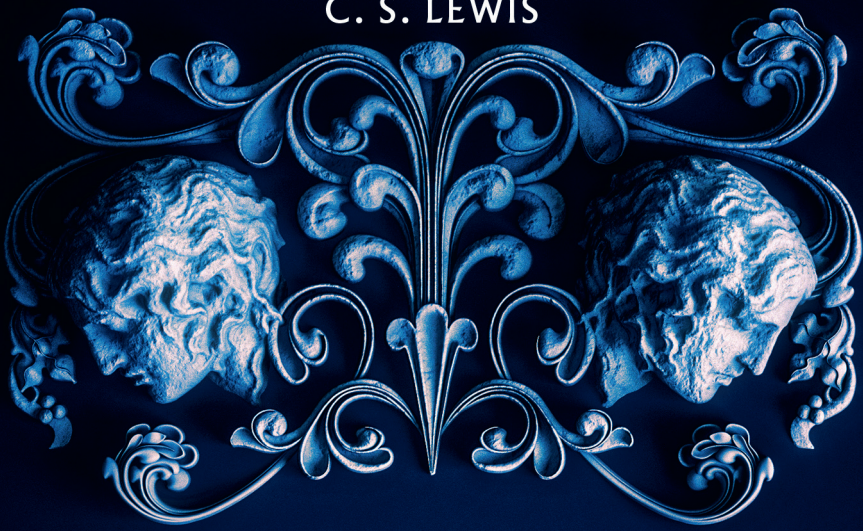
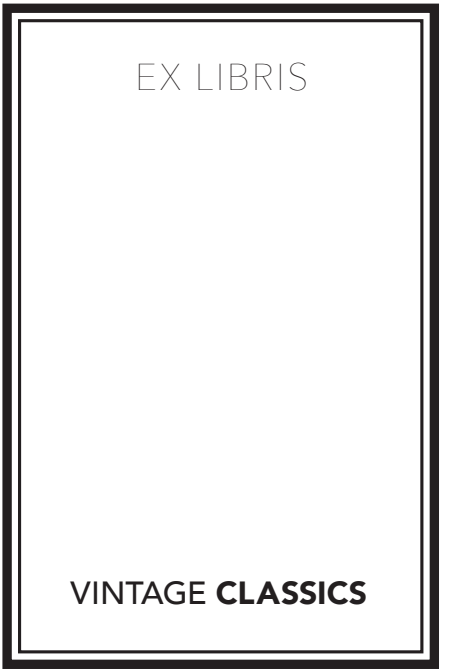
'I would not for anything have missed *Gormenghast*'
C. S. LEWIS



GORMENGHAST

MERVYN PEAKE



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 South East 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.

ALSO BY MERVYN PEAKE

Titus Groan
Titus Alone

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

MERVYN PEAKE

Gormenghast

VINTAGE

FOR MAEVE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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ONE

I

TITUS is seven. His confines, Gormenghast. Suckled on shadows; weaned, as it were, on webs of ritual: for his ears, echoes, for his eyes, a labyrinth of stone: and yet within his body something other – other than this umbrageous legacy. For first and ever foremost he is *child*.

A ritual, more compelling than ever man devised, is fighting anchored darkness. A ritual of the blood; of the jumping blood. These quicks of sentience owe nothing to his forbears, but to those feckless hosts, a trillion deep, of the globe's childhood.

The gift of the bright blood. Of blood that laughs when the tenets mutter 'Weep'. Of blood that mourns when the sere laws croak 'Rejoice!' O little revolution in great shades!

*

Titus the seventy-seventh. Heir to a crumbling summit: to a sea of nettles: to an empire of red rust: to rituals' footprints ankle-deep in stone.

Gormenghast.

Withdrawn and ruinous it broods in umbra: the immemorial masonry: the towers, the tracts. Is all corroding? No. Through an avenue of spires a zephyr floats; a bird whistles; a freshet bears away from a choked river. Deep in a fist of stone a doll's hand wriggles, warm rebellious on the frozen palm. A shadow shifts its length. A spider stirs . . .

And darkness winds between the characters.

II

Who are the characters? And what has he learned of them and of his home since that far day when he was born to the Countess of Groan in a room alive with birds?

He has learned an alphabet of arch and aisle: the language of dim stairs and moth-hung rafters. Great halls are his dim

playgrounds: his fields are quadrangles: his trees are pillars.

And he has learned that there are always eyes. Eyes that watch. Feet that follow, and hands to hold him when he struggles, to lift him when he falls. Upon his feet again he stares unsmiling. Tall figures bow. Some in jewellery; some in rags.

The characters.

The quick and the dead. The shapes, the voices that throng his mind, for there are days when the living have no substance and the dead are active.

Who are these dead – these victims of violence who no longer influence the tenor of Gormenghast save by a deathless repercussion? For ripples are still widening in dark rings and a movement runs over the gooseflesh waters though the drowned stones lie still. The characters who are but names to Titus, though one of them his father, and all of them alive when he was born. Who are they? For the child will hear of them.

III

Let them appear for a quick, earthless moment, as ghosts, separate, dissimilar and complete. They are even now moving, as before death, on their own ground. Is Time's cold scroll recoiling on itself until the dead years speak, or is it in the throb of *now* that the spectres wake and wander through the walls?

There was a library and it is ashes. Let its long length assemble. Than its stone walls its paper walls are thicker; armoured with learning, with philosophy, with poetry that drifts or dances clamped though it is in midnight. Shielded with flax and calfskin and a cold weight of ink, there broods the ghost of Sepulchrave, the melancholy Earl, seventy-sixth lord of half-light.

It is five years ago. Witless of how his death by owls approaches he mourns through each languid gesture, each fine-boned feature, as though his body were glass and at its centre his inverted heart like a pendant tear.

His every breath a kind of ebb that leaves him further from himself, he floats rather than steers to the island of the mad

– beyond all trade-routes, in a doldrum sea, its high crags burning.

*

Of how he died Titus has no idea. For as yet he has not so much as seen, let alone spoken to the long Man of the Woods, Flay, who was his father's servant and the only witness of Sepulchrave's death when, climbing demented into the Tower of Flints, the Earl gave himself up to the hunger of the owls.

Flay, the cadaverous and taciturn, his knee joints reporting his progress at every spider-like step, he alone among these marshalled ghosts is still alive, though banished from the castle. But so inextricably has Flay been woven into the skein of the castle's central life, that if ever a man was destined to fill in the gap of his own absence with his own ghost it is he.

For excommunication is a kind of death, and it is a different man who moves in the woods from the Earl's first servant of seven years ago. Simultaneously, then, as ragged and bearded he lays his rabbit snares in a gully of ferns, his ghost is sitting in the high corridor, beardless, and long ago, outside his master's door. How can he know that it will not be long before he adds, by his own hand, a name to the roll of the murdered? All that he knows is that his life is in immediate peril: that he is crying with every nerve in his long, tense, awkward body for an end to this insufferable rivalry, hatred and apprehension. And he knows that this cannot be unless either he or the gross and pendulous horror in question be destroyed.

*

And so it happened. The pendulous horror, the chef of Gormenghast, floating like a moon-bathed sea-cow, a long sword bristling like a mast from his huge breast, had been struck down but an hour before the death of the earl. And here he comes again in a province he has made peculiarly his own in soft and ruthless ways. Of all ponderous volumes, surely the most illusory, if there's no weight or substance in a ghost, is Abiatha Swelter, who wades in a slug-like illness of fat through the humid ground mists of the Great Kitchen. From hazy progs and flesh-pots half afloat, from bowls as big as baths, there rises and drifts like a miasmic tide the all but palpable odour

of the day's belly-timber. Sailing, his canvas stretched and spread, through the hot mists the ghost of Swelter is still further rarefied by the veiling fumes; he has become the ghost of a ghost, only his swede-like head retaining the solidity of nature. The arrogance of this fat head exudes itself like an evil sweat.

*

Vicious and vain as it is, the enormous ghost retreats a step to make way for the phantom Sourdust on a tour of inspection. Master of Ritual, perhaps the most indispensable figure of all, corner-stone and guardian of the Groan law, his weak and horny hands are working at the knots of his tangled beard. As he shambles forward, the red rags of his office fall about his bleak old body in dirty festoons. He is in the worst of health, even for a ghost, coughing incessantly in a dry, horrible manner, the black-and-white strands of his beard jerking to and fro. Theoretically he is rejoicing that in Titus an heir has been born to the House, but his responsibilities have become too heavy to allow him any lightness of heart, even supposing he could ever have lured into that stuttering organ so trivial a sensation. Shuffling from ceremony to ceremony, his sere head raised against its natural desire to drop forward on his chest and covered with as many pits and fissures as a cracked cheese, he personifies the ancientry of his high office.

It was for his real body to die in the same fated library which now, in spectre form, is housing the wraith of Sepulchrave. As the old master of Ritual moves away and fades through the feverish air of Swelter's kitchen, he cannot foresee or remember (for who can tell in which direction the minds of phantoms move?) that filled to his wrinkled mouth with acrid smoke he shall die, or has already died, by fire and suffocation, the great flames licking at his wrinkled hide with red and golden tongues.

He cannot know that Steerpike burned him up: that his lordship's sisters, Cora and Clarice, lit the fuse, and that from that hour on, his overlord, the sacrosanct earl, should find the road to lunacy so clear before him.

And lastly, Keda, Titus' foster-mother, moving quietly along a dappled corridor of light and pearl-grey shadow. That she should be a ghost seems natural, for even when alive there was something intangible, distant and occult about her. To have died leaping into a great well of twilight air was pitiless enough, but less horrible than the last moments of the Earl, the chef and the decrepit master of ritual – and a swifter ending to life's gall than the banishment of the long man of the woods. As in those days, before she fled from the castle to her death, she is caring for Titus as though all the mothers who have ever lived advise her through her blood. Dark, almost lambent like a topaz, she is still young, her sole disfigurement the universal bane of the Outer Dwellers, the premature erosion of an exceptional beauty – a deterioration that follows with merciless speed upon an adolescence almost spectral. She alone among these fate-struck figures is of that poverty-stricken and intolerable realm of the ostracized, whose drear cantonment, like a growth of mud and limpets, clamps itself to Gormenghast's outer wall.

*

The sun's rays searing a skein of cloud, burn with unhampered radiance through a hundred windows of the Southern walls. It is a light too violent for ghosts, and Keda, Sourdust, Flay, Swelter and Sepulchrave dissolve in sunbeams.

*

These, then, in thumbnail, the Lost Characters. The initial few, who, dying, deserted the hub of the castle's life before Titus was three. The future hung on their activities. Titus himself is meaningless without them, for in his infancy he fed on footsteps, on the patterns that figures made against high ceilings, their hazy outlines, their slow or rapid movements, their varying odours and voices.

Nothing that stirs but has its repercussions, and it may well be that Titus will hear the echoes, when a man, of what was whispered then. For it was no static assembly of personalities into which Titus was launched – no mere pattern, but an arabesque in motion whose thoughts were actions, or if not, hung like bats from an attic rafter or veered between towers on leaf-like wings.

TWO

WHAT of the living?

His mother, half asleep and half aware: with the awareness of anger, the detachment of trance. She saw him seven times in seven years. Then she forgot the halls that harboured him. But now she watches him from hidden windows. Her love for him is as heavy and as formless as loam. A furlong of white cats trails after her. A bullfinch has a nest in her red hair. She is the Countess Gertrude of huge clay.

*

Less formidable, yet sullen as her mother and as incalculable, is Titus' sister. Sensitive as was her father without his intellect, Fuchsia tosses her black flag of hair, bites at her childish underlip, scowls, laughs, broods, is tender, is intemperate, suspicious, and credulous all in a day. Her crimson dress inflames grey corridors, or flaring in a sunshaft through high branches makes of the deep green shadows a greenness darker yet, and a darkness greener.

*

Who else is there of the direct blood-line? Only the vacant Aunts, Cora and Clarice, the identical twins and sisters of Sepulchrave. So limp of brain that for them to conceive an idea is to risk a haemorrhage. So limp of body that their purple dresses appear no more indicative of housing nerves and sinews than when they hang suspended from their hooks.

Of the others? The lesser breed? In order of social precedence, possibly the Prunesquallors first, that is, the Doctor and his closely-swathed and bone-protruding sister. The doctor with his hyena laugh, his bizarre and elegant body, his celluloid face.

His main defects? The unsufferable pitch of his voice; his maddening laughter and his affected gestures. His cardinal virtue? An undamaged brain.

His sister Irma. Vain as a child; thin as a stork's leg, and, in her black glasses, as blind as an owl in daylight. She misses

her footing on the social ladder at least three times a week, only to start climbing again, wriggling her pelvis the while. She clasps her dead, white hands beneath her chin in the high hope of hiding the flatness of her chest.

Who next? Socially, there is no one else. That is to say no one who, during the first few years of Titus' life, plays any part that bears upon the child's future: unless it be the Poet, a wedge-headed and uncomfortable figure little known to the hierophants of Gormenghast, though reputed to be the only man capable of holding the earl's attention in conversation. An all-but-forgotten figure in his room above a precipice of stone. No one reads his poems, but he holds a remote status – a gentleman, as it were, by rumour.

Blue blood aside, however, and a shoal of names floats forward. The lynch-pin son of the dead Sourdust, by name Barquentine, Master of Ritual, is a stunted and cantankerous pedant of seventy, who stepped into his father's shoes (or, to be exact, into his *shoe*, for this Barquentine is a one-legged thing who smites his way through ill-lit corridors on a grim and echoing crutch).

Flay, who has already appeared as his own ghost, is very much alive in Gormenghast forest. Taciturn and cadaverous, he is no less than Barquentine a traditionalist of the old school. But, unlike Barquentine, his angers when the Law is flouted are uprisings of a hot loyalty that blinds him, and not the merciless and stony intolerance of the cripple.

*

To speak of Mrs Slagg at this late juncture seems unfair. That Titus himself, heir to Gormenghast, is her charge, as was Fuchsia in *her* childhood, is surely enough to place her at the head of any register. But she is so minute, so frightened, so old, so querulous, she neither could, nor would, head any procession, even on paper. Her peevish cry goes out: 'Oh, my weak heart! how *could* they?' and she hurries to Fuchsia either to smack the abstracted girl in order to ease herself, or to bury the wrinkled prune of her face in Fuchsia's side. Alone in her small room again, she lies upon her bed and bites her minute knuckles.

There is nothing frightened or querulous about young Steerpike. If ever he had harboured a conscience in his tough narrow breast he had by now dug out and flung away the awkward thing – flung it so far away that were he ever to need it again he could never find it.

The day of Titus' birth had seen the commencement of his climb across the roofs of Gormenghast and the end of his servitude in Swelter's kitchen – that steaming province which was both too unpleasant and too small to allow for his flexuous talents and expanding ambition.

High-shouldered to a degree little short of malformation, slender and adroit of limb and frame, his eyes close-set and the colour of dried blood, he is still climbing, not now across the back of Gormenghast but up the spiral staircase of its soul, bound for some pinnacle of the itching fancy – some wild, invulnerable eyrie best known to himself; where he can watch the world spread out below him, and shake exultantly his clotted wings.

*

Rottcodd is fast asleep in his hammock at the far end of the hall of the Bright Carvings, that long attic room that houses the finest examples of the Mud Dwellers' art. It is seven years since he watched from the attic window the procession far below him wind back from Gormenghast lake, where Titus had come into his Earldom, but nothing has happened to him during the long years apart from the annual arrival of fresh works to be added to the coloured carvings in the long room.

His small cannon-ball of a head is asleep on his arm and the hammock is swaying gently to the drone of a vinegar-fly.

THREE

ABOUT the rough margins of the castle life – margins irregular as the coastline of a squall-rent island, there were characters that stood or moved gradually to the central hub. They were wading out of the tides of limitless negation – the timeless, opaque waters. Yet what are these that set foot on the cold

beach? Surely so portentous an expanse should unburden itself of gods at least; scaled kings, or creatures whose outstretched wings might darken two horizons. Or dappled Satan with his brow of brass.

But no. There were no scales or wings at all.

It was too dark to see them where they waded; although a blotch of shadow, too big for a single figure, augured the approach of that hoary band of Professors, through whose hands for a while Titus will have to wriggle.

But there was no veil of half-light over the high-shouldered young man who was entering a small room rather like a cell that opened from a passage-way of stones as dry and grey and rough as an elephant's hide. As he turned at the doorway to glance back along the corridor, the cold light shone on the high white lump of his brow.

As soon as entered he closed the door behind him and slid the bolt. Surrounded by the whiteness of the walls he appeared, as he moved across the room, weirdly detached from the small world surrounding him. It was more like the shadow of a young man, a shadow with high shoulders, that moved across whiteness, than an actual body moving in space.

In the centre of the room was a simple stone table. Upon it, and grouped roughly at its centre, were a whorl-necked decanter of wine, a few sheafs of paper, a pen, a few books, a moth pinned to a cork, and half an apple.

As he moved past the table he removed the apple, took a bite and replaced it without slackening his pace, and then suddenly looked for all the world as though his legs were shrinking from the ground up, but the floor of the room sloped curiously and he was on his way down a decline in the floor that sank to a curtain-hung opening in the wall.

He was through this in a moment, and the darkness that lay beyond took him, as it were, to herself, muffling the edges of his sharp body.

He had entered a disused chimney at the ground level. It was very dark, and this darkness was not so much mitigated as intensified by a series of little shining mirrors that held the terminal reflections of what was going on in those rooms which, one above the other, flanked the high chimney-like

funnel that rose from where the young man stood in the darkness to where the high air meandered over the weather-broken roofs, which, rough and cracked as stale bread, blushed horribly in the prying rays of sundown.

Over the course of the last year, he had managed to gain entrance to these particular rooms and halls, one above the other, which flanked the chimney, and had drilled holes through the stone-work, wood and plaster – no easy work when the knees and back are strained against the opposite walls of a lightless funnel – so that the light pierced through to him in his funnel'd darkness from apertures no wider than coins. These drilling operations had, of course, to be carried out at carefully chosen times, so that no suspicion should be aroused. Moreover, the holes had as nearly as possible to be drilled at selected points, so as to coincide with whatever natural advantages the rooms might hold.

Not only had he carefully selected the rooms which he felt it would be worth his while watching from time to time either for the mere amusement of eavesdropping for its own sake – or for the furtherance of his own designs.

His methods of disguising the holes which might so easily have been detected if badly positioned, were varied and ingenious, as for example in the chamber of the ancient Barquentine, Master of Ritual. This room, filthy as a fox's earth, had upon its right-hand wall a blistered portrait in oils of a rider on a piebald horse, and the young man had not only cut a couple of holes in the canvas immediately beneath the frame where its shadow lay like a long black ruler, but he had cut away the rider's buttons, the pupils of his eyes as well as those of the horse's. These circular openings at their various heights and latitudes afforded him alternative views of the room according to where Barquentine chose to propel his miserable body on that dreaded crutch of his. The horse's eye, the most frequently used of the apertures, offered a magnificent view of a mattress on the floor on which Barquentine spent most of his leisure moments, knotting and re-knotting his beard, or sending up clouds of dust every time he raised and let fall his only leg, a withered one at that, in bouts of irritation. In the chimney itself, and immediately behind the holes, a

complicated series of wires and mirrors reflected the occupants of the de-privatized rooms and sent them down the black funnel, mirror glancing to mirror, and carrying the secrets of each action that fell within their deadly orbit – passing them from one to another, until at the base a constellation of glass provided the young man with constant entertainment and information.

In the darkness he would turn his eyes, for instance, from Craggmire, the acrobat, who crossing his apartment upon his hands might frequently be seen tossing from the sole of one foot to the sole of the other a small pig in a green nightdress – would turn his eyes from this diversion to the next mirror which might disclose the Poet, tearing at a loaf of bread with his small mouth, his long wedge of a head tilted at an angle, and flushed with the exertion, for he could not use both hands – one being engaged in writing; while his eyes (so completely out of focus that they looked as though they'd never get in again) were more spirit than anything corporeal.

But from the young man's point of view there were bigger fish than these – which were, with the exception of Barquentine, no more than the shrimps of Gormenghast – and he turned to mirrors more deadly, more thrilling: mirrors that reflected the daughter of the Groans herself – the strange raven-haired Fuchsia and her mother, the Countess, her shoulders thronged with birds.

FOUR

I

ONE summer morning of bland air, the huge, corroding bell-like heart of Gormenghast was half asleep and there appeared to be no reverberation from its muffled thudding. In a hall of plaster walls the silence yawned.

Nailed above a doorway of this hall a helmet or casque, red with rust, gave forth into the stillness a sandy and fluttering sound, and a moment later the beak of a jackdaw was

thrust through an eye-slit and withdrawn. The plaster walls arose on every side into a dusky and apparently ceilingless gloom, lit only by a high, solitary window. The warm light that found its way through the web-choked glass of this window gave hint of galleries yet further above but no suggestion of doors beyond, nor any indication of how these galleries could be reached. From this high window a few rays of sunlight, like copper wires, were strung steeply and diagonally across the hall, each one terminating in its amber pool of dust on the floorboards. A spider lowered itself, fathom by fathom, on a perilous length of thread and was suddenly transfixed in the path of a sunbeam and, for an instant, was a thing of radiant gold.

There was no sound, and then – as though timed to break the tension, the high window was swung open and the sunbeams were blotted out, for a hand was thrust through and a bell was shaken. Almost at once there was a sound of footsteps, and a moment later a dozen doors were opening and shutting, and the hall was thronged with the criss-crossing of figures.

The bell ceased clanging. The hand was withdrawn and the figures were gone. There was no sign that any living thing had ever moved or breathed between the plaster walls, or that the many doors had ever opened, save that a small whitish flower lay in the dust beneath the rusting helmet, and that a door was swinging gently to and fro.

II

As it swung, broken glimpses were obtained of a whitewashed corridor that wound in so slow and ample a curve that by the time the right-hand wall had disappeared from view the roof of the passageway appeared no more than the height of an ankle from the ground.

This long, narrowing, ash-white perspective, curving with the effortless ease of a gull in air, was suddenly the setting for action. For something, hardly distinguishable as a horse and rider until it had cantered a full third of the long curve to the deserted hall, was rapidly approaching. The sharp clacking of

hooves was all at once immediately behind the swinging door, which was pushed wide by the nose of a small grey pony.

Titus sat astride.

He was dressed in the coarse, loosely fitting garments that were worn by the castle children. For the first nine years of his life the heir to the Earldom was made to mix with, and attempt to understand the ways of, the lower orders. On his fifteenth birthday such friendships as he had struck would have to cease. His demeanour would have to change and a more austere and selective relationship with the personnel of the castle would take its place. But it was a tradition that in the early years, the child of the Family must, for certain hours, at least, of every day, be as the less exalted children, feed with them, sleep in their dormitories, attend with them the classes of the Professors, and join in the various time-honoured games and observances like any other minor. Yet for all that, Titus was conscious of always being watched: of a discrepancy in the attitude of the officials and even at times of the boys. He was too young to understand the implications of his status, but old enough to sense his uniqueness.

Once a week, before the morning classes, he was allowed to ride his grey horse for an hour beneath the high southern walls, where the early sun would send his fantastic shadow careering along the tall stones at his side. And when he waved his arm, his shadow-self on a shadow-horse would wave its huge shadow-arm as they galloped together.

But today, instead of trotting away to his beloved southern wall he had, in a moment of devilment, turned his horse through a moss-black arch and into the castle itself. In the still silence his heart beat rapidly as he clattered along stone corridors he had never seen before.

He knew that it would not be worth his while to take French leave of the morning classes, for he had been locked up more than once during the long summer evenings for such acts of disobedience. But he tasted the sharp fruits of the quick bridle-wrench which had freed him from the ostler. It was only for a few minutes that he was alone, but when he came to a halt in the high plaster-walled hall, with the rusting helmet above him, and far above the helmet the dim mysterious

balconies, he had already dulled his sudden itch for rebellion.

Small though he looked on the grey, there was something commanding in the confident air with which he sat the saddle – something impressive in his childish frame, as though there was a kind of weight there, or strength – a compound of spirit and matter; something solid that underlay the whims, terrors, tears and laughter and vitality of his seven years.

By no means good-looking, he had, nevertheless, this presence. Like his mother, there was a certain *scale* about him, as though his height and breadth bore no relation to the logic of feet and inches.

The ostler entered the hall, slow, shuffling, hissing gently, a perpetual habit of his whether grooming a horse or not, and the grey pony was at once led away in the direction of the school-rooms to the west.

Titus watched the back of the ostler's head as he was led along but said nothing. It was as though what had just occurred was something they had rehearsed many times before, and that there was no need for comment. The child had known this man and his hissing, which were as inseparable as a rough sea from the sound that it makes, for little more than a year, when the grey was given him at a ceremony known as 'The Pony Giving', a ceremony that took place without fail on the third Friday after the sixth birthday of any son of the Line who was also, by reason of his father's death, an earl in his minority. But for all this length of time – and fifteen months was a considerable span for a child who could only remember with any distinctness his last four years – the ostler and Titus had exchanged not more than a dozen sentences. It was not that they disliked one another, the ostler merely preferring to give the boy pieces of stolen seed-cake to making any effort at conversation, and Titus quite content to have it so, for the ostler was to him simply the shuffling figure who took care of his pony, and it was enough to know his mannerisms, the way his feet shuffled, the white scar above his eye, and to hear him hissing.

Within an hour the morning classes were under way. At an ink-stained desk, with his chin cupped in his hands, Titus was contemplating, as in a dream, the chalk-marks on the black-

board. They represented a sum in short division, but might as well have been some hieroglyphic message from a moon-struck prophet to his lost tribe a thousand years ago. His mind, and the minds of his small companions in that leather-walled schoolroom, was far away, but in a world, not of prophets, but of swopped marbles, birds' eggs, wooden daggers, secrets and catapults, midnight feasts, heroes, deadly rivalries and desperate friendships.

FIVE

FUCHSIA was leaning on her window-sill and staring out over the rough roofs below her. Her crimson dress burned with the peculiar red more often found in paintings than in Nature. The window-frame, surrounding not only her but the impalpable dusk behind her, enclosed a masterpiece. Her stillness accentuated the hallucinatory effect, but even if she were to have moved it would have seemed that a picture had come to life rather than that a movement had taken place in Nature. But the pattern did not alter. The inky black of her hair fell motionlessly and gave infinite subtlety to the porous shadowland beyond her, showing it for what it was, not so much a darkness in itself as something starved for sunbeams. Her face, throat and arms were warm and tawny, yet seemed pale against her red dress. She stared down, out of this picture, at the world below her – at the north cloisters, at Barquentine, heaving his miserable and vicious body forwards on his crutch, and cursing the flies that followed him as he passed across a gap between two roofs and disappeared from sight.

Then she moved, suddenly turning about at a sound behind her and found Mrs Slagg looking up at her. In her hands the midget held a tray weighted with a tumbler of milk and a bunch of grapes.

She was peeved and irritable, for she had spent the last hour searching for Titus, who had outgrown the fussings of her love. 'Where is he? Oh, where *is* he?' she had whimpered, her face puckered up with anxiety and her weak legs, like

twigs, that were forever tottering from one duty to another, aching. 'Where is his wickedness, that naughty Earl of mine? God help my poor weak heart! Where can he be?'

Her peevish voice raised thin echoes far above her as though, in hall after hall, she had awakened nests of fledgelings from their sleep.

'Oh, it's you,' said Fuchsia, throwing a lock of hair from her face with a quick jerk of her hand. 'I didn't know who it was.'

'Of course it's me! Who else could it be, you *stupid*? Who else ever comes in your room? You ought to know that by *now*, oughtn't you? Oughtn't you?'

'I didn't see you,' said Fuchsia.

'But I saw *you* – leaning out of the window like a great heavy thing – and never listening though I called you and called you and called you to open the door. Oh, my weak heart! – it's always the same – call, call, call, with no one to answer. Why do I trouble to live?' She peered at Fuchsia. 'Why should I live for *you?* Perhaps I'll die tonight,' she added maliciously, squinting at Fuchsia again. 'Why don't you take your milk?'

'Put it on the chair,' said Fuchsia, 'I'll have it later – and the grapes. Thank you. Goodbye.'

At Fuchsia's peremptory dismissal, which had not been meant unkindly, abrupt as it had sounded, Mrs Slagg's eyes filled with tears. But ancient, tiny and hurt though she was, her anger rose again like a miniature tempest, and instead of her usual peevish cry of 'Oh, my weak heart! how *could* you?' she caught hold of Fuchsia's hand and tried to bend back the girl's fingers and, failing, was about to try and bite her ladyship's arm when she found herself being carried to the bed. Denied of her little revenge, she closed her eyes for a few moments, her chicken bosom rising and falling with fantastic rapidity. When she opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was Fuchsia's hand spread out before her and, rising on one elbow, she smacked at it again and again until exhausted, when she buried her wrinkled face in Fuchsia's side.

'I'm sorry,' said the girl. 'I didn't mean Goodbye in that way. I only meant that I wanted to be left alone.'

'Why?' (Mrs Slagg's voice was hardly audible, so closely was her face pressed into Fuchsia's dress.) 'Why? why? why? Anyone would think I got in your way. Anyone would think I didn't know you inside out. Haven't I taught you everything since you were a baby? Didn't I rock you to sleep, you beastly thing? Didn't I?' She raised her old tearful face to Fuchsia. 'Didn't I?'

'You did,' said Fuchsia.

'*Well*, then!' said Nanny Slagg. '*Well*, then!' And she crawled off the bed and made her descent to the ground.

'Get off the counterpane at *once*, you *thing*, and don't stare at me! Perhaps I'll come and see you tonight. Perhaps. I don't know. Perhaps I don't want to.' She made for the door, reached for the handle and was within a few moments alone once more in her small room, where with her red-rimmed eyes wide open, she lay upon her bed like a discarded doll.

Fuchsia, with the room to herself, sat down in front of a mirror that had smallpox so badly at its centre that in order to see herself properly she was forced to peer into a comparatively unblemished corner. Her comb, with a number of its teeth missing, was eventually found in a drawer below the mirror when, just as she was about to start combing her hair – a performance she had but lately taken to – the room darkened, for half the light from her window was suddenly obscured by the miraculous appearance of the young man with high shoulders.

Before Fuchsia had had a moment to ponder how any human being could appear on her window-sill a hundred feet above the ground – let alone recognize the silhouette – she snatched a hair brush from the table before her and brandished it behind her head in readiness for she knew not what. At a moment when others might have screamed or shrunk away, she had showed fight – with what at that startling moment might have been a bat-winged monster for all she knew. But in the instant before she flung the brush she recognized Steerpike.

He knocked with his knuckle on the lintel of the window.

'Good afternoon, madam,' he said. 'May I present my card?' And he handed Fuchsia a slip of paper bearing the words:

'His Infernal Slyness, the Arch-fluke Steerpike.'

But before Fuchsia had read it she had begun to laugh in her short, breathless way, at the mock-solemn tone of his 'Good afternoon, madam.' It had been so perfectly ponderous.

But until she had motioned him to descend to the floor of the room – and she had no alternative – he had not moved an inch in that direction, but stood, with his hands clasped and his head cocked on one side. At her gesture he suddenly came to life again, as though a trigger had been touched, and within a moment had unknotted a rope from his belt and flung the loose end out of the window, where it dangled. Fuchsia, leaning out of the window, gazed upwards and saw the rest of the rope ascending the seven remaining storeys to a ragged roof, where presumably it was attached to some turret or chimney.

'All ready for my return,' said Steerpike. 'Nothing like rope, madam. Better than a horse. Climbs down a wall whenever you ask it, and never needs feeding.'

'You can leave off "Madaming" me,' said Fuchsia, somewhat loudly, and to Steerpike's surprise. 'You know my name.'

Steerpike, rapidly swallowing, digesting and purging his irritation, for he never wasted his time by mouthing his setbacks, seated himself on a chair in the reverse direction and placed his chin on the chair back.

'I will never forget,' he said, 'to always call you by your proper name, and in a very proper tone of voice, Lady Fuchsia.'

Fuchsia smiled vaguely, but she was thinking of something else.

'You are certainly one for climbing,' she said at last. 'You climbed to my attic – do you remember?'

Steerpike nodded.

'And you climbed up the library wall when it was burning. It seems very long ago.'

'And the time, if I may say so, Lady Fuchsia, when I climbed through the thunderstorm and over the rocks with you in my arms.'

It was as though all the air had been suddenly drawn from

the room, so deathly silent and thin had the atmosphere become. Steerpike thought he could detect the faintest tinge of colour on Fuchsia's cheekbones.

At last he said: 'One day, Lady Fuchsia, will you explore with me the roofs of this great house of yours? I would like to show you what I have found, away to the south, your Ladyship, where the granite domes are elbow-deep in moss.'

'Yes,' she replied, 'yes . . .' His sharp, pallid face repelled her, but she was attracted by his vitality and air of secrecy.

She was about to ask him to leave, but he was on his feet before she could speak and had jumped through the window without touching its frame, and was swinging to and fro on the jerking rope before he started swarming it, hand over hand, on his long, upward climb to the ragged roof above.

*

When Fuchsia turned from the window she found upon her rough dressing-table a single rosebud.

*

As he climbed Steerpike remembered how the day of Titus' birth seven years previously had seen the commencement of his climb across the roofs of Gormenghast and the end of his servitude in Swelter's kitchen. The muscular effort required accentuated the hunching of his shoulders. But he was preternaturally nimble and revelled no less in physical than in mental tenacity and daring. His penetrating close-set eyes were fixed upon that point to which his rope was knotted as though it were the zenith of his fancy.

The sky had darkened, and with the rising of a swift wind came the driven rain. It hissed and spouted in the masonry. It found a hundred natural conduits where it slid. Air-shafts, flues and blowholes coughed with echoes, and huge flumes muttered. Lakes formed among the roofs, where they reflected the sky as though they had been there forever like waters in the mountains.

With the rope neatly coiled about his waist, Steerpike ran like a shadow across an acre of sloping slates. His collar was turned up. His white face was bearded with the rain.

High, sinister walls, like the walls of wharves, or dungeons for the damned, lifted into the watery air or swept in prodigious arcs of ruthless stone. Lost in the flying clouds the craggy summits of Gormenghast were wild with straining hair – the hanks of the drenched rock-weed. Buttresses and outcrops of unrecognizable masonry loomed over Steerpike's head like the hulks of mouldering ships, or stranded monsters whose streaming mouths and brows were the sardonic work of a thousand tempests. Roof after roof of every gradient rose or slid away before his eyes: terrace after terrace shone dimly below him through the rain, their long-forgotten flagstones dancing and hissing with the downpour.

A world of shapes fled past him, for he was as fleet as a cat and he ran without pause, turning now this way, now that, and only slackening his pace when some more than normally hazardous cat-walk compelled. From time to time as he ran he leaped into the air as though from excess of vitality. Suddenly, as he rounded a chimney-stack, black with dripping ivy, he dropped to walking-pace and then, ducking his head beneath an arch, he fell to his knees and hauled up, with a grating of hinges, a long-forgotten skylight. In a moment he was through and had dropped into a small empty room twelve feet beneath. It was very dark. Steerpike uncoiled himself of the rope and looped it over a nail in the wall. Then he glanced around the dark room. The walls were covered with glass-fronted showcases, filled with every kind of moth. Long thin pins impaled these insects to the cork lining of each box, but careful as the original collector must have been in his handling and mounting of the delicate things, yet time had told, and there was not a case without its damaged moth, and the floors of most of the little boxes smouldered with fallen wings.

Steerpike turned to the door, listening a moment, and then opened it. He had before him a dusty landing, and immediately on his left a ladder leading down to yet another empty room, as forlorn as the one he had just left. There was nothing in it except a great pyramidal stack of nibbled books, its dark interstices alive with the nests of mice. There was no door to this room, but a length of sacking hung limply over a fissure in the wall, which was broad enough for Steerpike to negotiate,

moving sideways. Again there were stairs, and again there was a room, but longer this time, a kind of gallery. At its far end stood a stuffed stag, its shoulders white with dust.

As he crossed the room he saw through the corner of his eye, and framed by a glass-less window, the sinister outline of Gormenghast mountain, its high crags gleaming against a flying sky. The rain streamed through the window and splashed on the boards, so that little beads of dust ran to and fro on the floor like globules of mercury.

Reaching the double door, he ran his hands through his dripping hair and turned down the collar of his coat; and then, passing through and veering to the left, followed a corridor for some way before he reached a stairhead.

No sooner had he peered over the banisters than he started back, for the Countess of Groan was passing through the lamp-lit room below. She seemed to be wading in white froth, and the hollow rooms behind Steerpike reverberated with a dull throbbing, a multitudinous sound, the echo of the genuine ululation which he could not hear, the droning of the cats. They passed from the hall below like the ebbing of a white tide through the mouth of a cave, at its centre, a rock that moved with them, crowned with red seaweed.

The echoes died. The silence was like a stretched sheet. Steerpike descended rapidly to the room below and made to the east.

The Countess walked with her head bowed a little and her arms akimbo. There was a frown on her brow. She was not satisfied that the immemorial sense of duty and observance was universally held sacrosanct in the wide network of the castle. Heavy and abstracted as she seemed, yet she was as quick as a snake to detect danger, and though she could not put a finger, as it were, on the exact area of her doubt, she was nevertheless suspicious, wary and revengeful of she knew not exactly what.

She was turning over all the fragments of knowledge which might relate to the mysterious burning of her late husband's library, to his disappearance and to the disappearance of his chef. She was using, almost for the first time, a naturally powerful brain – a brain that had been purred to sleep for so

long by her white cats that it was difficult at first for her to awaken it.

She was on her way to the Doctor's house. She had not visited him for several years, and on the last occasion it was only to have him attend to the broken wing of a wild swan. He had always irritated her, but against her own inclination she had always felt a certain peculiar confidence in him.

As she descended a long flight of stone stairs, the undulating tide at her feet had become a cascade in slow motion. At the foot of the stairs she stopped.

'Keep . . . close . . . keep . . . close . . . together,' she said aloud, using her words like stepping-stones – a noticeable gap between each, which in spite of the depth and huskiness of her voice had something childlike in its effect.

The cats were gone. She stood on solid earth again. The rain thrummed outside a leaded window. She walked slowly to the door that opened upon a line of cloisters. Through the arches she saw the Doctor's house on the far side of a quadrangle. Walking out into the rain as though it were not there, she moved through the downpour with a monumental and unhurried measure, her big head lifted.

SIX

PRUNESQUALLOR was in his study. He called it his 'study'. To his sister, Irma, it was a room in which her brother barricaded himself whenever she wished to talk to him about anything important. Once within and the door locked, the chain up and the windows bolted, there was very little she could do save beat upon the door.

This evening Irma had been more tiresome than ever. What was it, she had inquired, over and over again, which prevented her from meeting someone who could appreciate and admire her? She did not want him, this hypothetical admirer, necessarily to dedicate his *whole* life to her, for a man must have his work – (as long as it didn't take too long) – mustn't he? But if he was wealthy and *wished* to dedicate his life to her

– well, she wouldn't make promises, but would give the proposal a fair hearing. She had her long, unblemished neck. Her bosom was flat, it was true, and so were her feet, but after all a woman can't have everything. 'I *move* well, don't I, Alfred?' she had cried in a sudden passion. 'I say, I *move* well?'

Her brother, whose long pink face had been propped on his long white hand, raised his eyes from the tablecloth on which he had been drawing the skeleton of an ostrich. His mouth opened automatically into something that had more of a yawn than a smile about it, but a great many teeth were flashed. His smooth jaws came together again, and as he looked at his sister he pondered for the thousandth time upon the maddening coincidence of being saddled with such a sister. It being the thousandth time, he was well practised, and his ponder lasted no more than a couple of rueful seconds. But in those seconds he saw again the stark idiocy of her thin, lipless mouth, the twitching fatuity of the skin under her eyes, the roaring repression that could do no more than bleat through her voice; the smooth, blank forehead (from which the coarse, luxuriant masses of her iron-grey hair were strained back over her cranium, to meet in the compact huddle of a bun as hard as a boulder) – that forehead which was like the smoothly plastered front of an empty house, deserted save by the ghost of a bird-like tenant which hopped about in the dust and preened its feathers in front of tarnished mirrors.

'Lord! Lord!' he thought, 'why, out of all the globe's creatures, should I, innocent of murder, be punished in this way?'

He grinned again. This time there was nothing of the yawn left in the process. His jaws opened out like a crocodile's. How could any human head contain such terrible and dazzling teeth? It was a brand-new graveyard. But oh! how anonymous it was. Not a headstone chiselled with the owner's name. Had they died in battle, these nameless, dateless, dental dead, whose memorials, when the jaws opened, gleamed in the sunlight, and when the jaws met again rubbed shoulders in the night, scraping an ever closer acquaintance as the years

rolled by? Prunesquallor had smiled. For he had found relief in the notion that there were several worse things imaginable than being saddled with his sister metaphorically, and one of them was that he should have been saddled with her in all its literal horror. For his imagination had caught a startlingly vivid glimpse of her upon his back, her flat feet in the stirrups, her heels digging into his flanks as, careering round the table on all fours with the bit in his mouth and with his haunches being cross-hatched with the flicks of her whip, he galloped his miserable life away.

'When I ask you a question, Alfred – I say when I ask you a question, Alfred, I like to think that you can be civil enough, even if you *are* my brother, to answer me instead of smirking to yourself.'

Now if there was one thing that the doctor could never do it was to smirk. His face was the wrong shape. His muscles moved in another way altogether.

'Sister mine,' he said, 'since thus you are, forgive, if you can, your brother. He waits breathlessly your answer to his question. It is this, my turtle-dove. *What did you say to him?* For he has forgotten so utterly that were his death dependent on it, he would be forced to live – with you, his fruit-drop, with you alone.'

Irma never listened beyond the first five words of her brother's somewhat involved periods, and so a great many insults passed over her head. Insults, not vicious in themselves, they provided the Doctor with a form of verbal self-amusement without which he would have to remain locked in his study the entire time. And, in any case, it wasn't a study, for although its walls were lined with books, it held nothing else beyond a very comfortable arm-chair and a very beautiful carpet. There was no writing-desk. No paper or ink. Not even a wastepaper basket.

'What was it you asked me, flesh of my flesh? I will do what I can for you.'

'I have been saying, Alfred, that I am not without charm. Nor without grace, or intellect. Why is it I am never approached? Why do I never have advances made to me?'

'Are you speaking financially?' asked the doctor.

'I am speaking spiritually, Alfred, and you know it. What have others got that I haven't?'

'Or conversely,' said Prunesquallor, 'what haven't they got that you already have?'

'I don't follow you, Alfred. I said I don't follow you.'

'That's just what you do do,' said her brother, reaching out his arms and fluttering his fingers. 'And I wish you'd stop it.'

'But my deportment, Alfred. Haven't you noticed it? What's wrong with your sex – can't they see I move well?'

'Perhaps we're too spiritual,' said Doctor Prunesquallor.

'But my carriage! Alfred, my carriage!'

'Too powerful, sweet white-of-egg, far too powerful; you lurch from side to side of life's drear highway: those hips of yours rotating as you go. Oh, no, my dear one, your carriage scares them off, that's what it does. You terrify them, Irma.'

This was too much for her.

'You've never *believed* in me!' she cried, rising from the table, and a dreadful blush suffusing her perfect skin. 'But I can tell you' – her voice rose to a shrill scream – '*that I'm a lady!* What do you think I want with *men*? The beasts! I hate them. Blind, stupid, clumsy, horrible, heavy, vulgar things they are. And you're *one* of them!' she screamed, pointing at her brother, who, with his eyebrows raised a little, was continuing with his drawing of the ostrich from where he had left off. 'And *you* are one of them! Do you hear me, Alfred, one of *them*!'

The pitch of her voice had brought a servant to the door. Unwisely, he had opened it, ostensibly to ask whether she had rung for him, but in reality to see what was going on.

Irma's throat was quivering like a bowstring.

'What have ladies to do with men?' she screamed; and then, catching sight of the face of the servant at the door, she plucked a knife from the table and flung it at the face. But her aim was not all it might have been, possibly because she was so involved in being a lady, and the knife impaled itself on the ceiling immediately above her own head, where it gave a perfect imitation of the shuddering of her throat.

The doctor, adding with deliberation the last vertebra to the tail of the skeleton ostrich, turned his face firstly to the

door, where the servant, his mouth hanging open, was gazing spellbound at the shuddering knife.

'Would you be so kind as to remove your redundant carcass from the door of this room, my man,' he said, in his high, abstracted voice, 'and keep it in the kitchen, where it is paid to do this and that among the saucepans, I believe . . . would you? No one rang for you. Your mistress' voice, though high, is nothing like the ringing of a bell . . . nothing at all.'

The face withdrew.

'And what's more,' came a desperate cry from immediately below the knife, 'he never comes to see me any more! Never! Never!'

The doctor rose from the table. He knew she was referring to Steerpike, but for whom she would probably never have experienced the recrudescence of this thwarted passion which had grown upon her since the youth had first dispatched his flattering arrows at her all too sensitive heart.

Her brother wiped his mouth with a napkin, brushed a crumb from his trousers, and straightened his long, narrow back.

'I'll sing you a little song,' he said. 'I made it up in the bath last night, ha! ha! ha! ha! – a whimsy little jangle, I tell myself – a whimsy little jangle.'

He began to move round the table, his elegant white hands folded about one another. 'It went like this, I fancy . . .' But as he knew she would probably be deaf to what he recited, he took her glass from beside her plate and – 'A little wine is just what you need, Irma dear, before you go to bed – for you are going straight away, aren't you, my spasmic one, to Dreamland – ha, ha, ha! – where you can be a lady all night long.'

With the speed of a professional conjurer he whipped a small packet from his pocket and, extracting a tablet, dropped it into Irma's glass. He decanted a little wine into the glass and handed it to her with the exaggerated graciousness which seldom left him. 'And I will take some myself,' he said, 'and we will drink to each other.'

Irma had collapsed into a chair, and her long marmoreal face was buried in her hands. Her black glasses, which she

wore to protect her eyes from the light, were at a rakish slant across her cheek.

'Come, come, I am forgetting my promise!' cried the doctor, standing before her, very tall, slender and upright, with that celluloid head of his, all sentience and nervous intelligence, tilted to one side like a bird's.

'First a quaff of this delicious wine from a vineyard beneath a brooding hill – I can see it so clearly – and you, O Irma, can you see it, too? The peasants toiling and sweating in the sun – and why? Because they have no option, Irma. They are desperately poor, and their bowed necks are wry. And the husbandmen, like every good husband, tending his love – stroking the vines with his horny hand, whispering to them, coaxing them, "O little grapes," he whispers, "give up your wine. Irma is waiting." And here it is; here it is, ha, ha, ha, ha! Delicious and cold and white, in a cut-glass goblet. Toss back your coif and quaff, my querulous queen!'

Irma roused herself a little. She had not heard a word. She had been in her own private hell of humiliation. Her eyes turned to the knife in the ceiling. The thin line of her mouth twitched, but she took the glass from her brother's outstretched hand.

Her brother clinked his glass against hers and, duplicating the movement of his arm, she raised her own automatically and drank.

'And now for the little jingle which I threw off in that nonchalant way of mine. How did it go? How did it go?'

Prunesquallor knew that by the third verse the strong, tasteless soporific which had dissolved in her wine would begin to take effect. He sat on the floor at her knees and, quelling a revulsion, he patted her hand.

'Queen bee,' he said, 'look at me, if you can. Through your midnight spectacles. It shouldn't be too dreadful – for one who had fed on horrors. Now, listen . . .' Irma's eyes were already beginning to close.

'It goes like this, I think. I called it *The Osseous 'Orse*.'

Come, flick the ulna juggler-wise
And twang the tibia for me!

O Osseous 'orse, the future lies
Like serum on the sea.

Green fields and buttercups no more
Regale you with delight, no, no!
The tonic tempests leap and pour
Through your white pelvis ever so.

'Are you enjoying it, Irma?' She nodded sleepily.

Come, clap your scapulae and twitch
The pale pagoda of your spine,
Removed from life's eternal itch
What need for iodine?

The Osseous 'orse sat up at once
And clanged his ribs in biblic pride.
I fear I looked at him askance
Though he had naught to hide . . .

No hide at all . . . just . . .

At this point the doctor, having forgotten what came next, turned his eyes once more to his sister Irma; she was fast asleep. The doctor rang the bell.

'Your mistress's maid; a stretcher; and a couple of men to handle it.' (A face had appeared in the doorway.) '*And* be rapid.' The face withdrew.

When Irma had been put to bed and her lamp had been turned low and silence swam through the house, the doctor unlocked the door of his study, entered and sank back into his arm-chair. His friable-looking elbows rested upon the padded arms. His fingers were twined together into a delicate bunch, and on this bunch he supported his long and sunken jaw. After a few moments he removed his glasses and laid them on the arm of his chair. Then, with his fingers clasped together once again beneath his chin, he shut his eyes and sighed gently.

SEVEN

BUT he was not destined to more than a few moments of relaxation, for feet were soon to be heard outside his window. Only two of them, it was true, but there was something in the weight and deliberation of the tread that reminded him of an army moving in perfect unison, a dread and measured sound. The rain had quietened and the sound of each foot as it struck the ground was alarmingly clear.

Prunesquallor could recognize that portentous gait among a million. But in the silence of the evening his mind flew to the phantom army it awakened in his leap-frogging brain. What was there in the clockwork stepping of an upright host to contract the throat and bring, as does the thought of a sliced lemon, that sharp astringency to throat and jaw? Why do the tears begin to gather? And the heart to thud?

He had no time to ponder the matter now, so at one and the same time he tossed a mop of grey thatch from his brow and an army-on-the-march from his mind.

Reaching the door before his bell could clang the servants into redundance he opened it, and to the massive figure who was about to whack the door with her fist –

'I welcome your Ladyship,' he said. His body inclined itself a little from the hips and his teeth flashed, while he wondered what, in the name of all that was heterodox, the Countess thought she was doing in visiting her physician at this time of night. She visited nobody, by day *or* night. That was one of the things about her. Nevertheless, here she was.

'Hold your horses.' Her voice was heavy, but not loud.

One of Doctor Prunesquallor's eyebrows shot to the top of his forehead. It was a peculiar remark to be greeted with. It might have been supposed that he was about to embrace her. The very notion appalled him.

But when she said: 'You can come in now,' not only did his other eyebrow fly up his forehead, but it set its counterpart a-tremble with the speed of its uprush.

To be told he could 'come in now' when he was already

inside was weird enough; but the idea of being given permission to enter his own house by a guest was grotesque.

The slow, heavy, quiet authority in the voice made the situation even more embarrassing. She had entered his hall. 'I wish to see you,' she said, but her eyes were on the door which Prunesquallor was closing. When it had barely six inches to go before the night was locked out and the latch had clicked – 'Hold!' she said, in a rather deeper tone, 'hold hard!' And then, with her big lips pursed like a child's, she gave breath to a long whistle of peculiar sweetness. A tender and forlorn note to escape from so ponderous a being.

The doctor, as he turned to her, was a picture of perplexed inquiry, though his teeth were still shining gaily. But as he turned something caught the corner of his eye. Something white. Something that moved.

Between the space left by the all-but-closed door, and very close to the ground, Doctor Prunesquallor saw a face as round as a hunter's moon, as soft as fur. And this was no wonder, for it was a face of fur, peculiarly blanched in the dim light of the hall. No sooner had the Doctor reacted to this face than another took its place, and close upon it, silent as death, came a third, a fourth, a fifth . . . In single file there slid into the hall, so close upon each other's tails that they might have been a continuous entity, her ladyship's white clowder.

Prunesquallor, feeling a little dizzy, watched the undulating stream flow past his feet as he stood with his hand on the doorknob. Would they never end? He had watched them for over two minutes.

He turned to the Countess. She stood in coiling froth like a lighthouse. By the dim glow of the hall lamp her red hair threw out a sullen light.

Prunesquallor was perfectly happy again. For what had irked him was not the cats, but the obscure commands of the Countess. Their meaning was now self-evident. And yet, how peculiar to have enjoined a swarm of cats to hold their horses!

The very thought of it got hold of his eyebrows again, which had lowered themselves reluctantly while he waited for his chance to close the door, and they had leapt up his forehead as though a pistol had been cracked and a prize awaited the fastest.

'We're . . . all . . . here,' said the Countess. Prunesquallor turned to the door and saw that the stream had, indeed, run dry. He shut the door.

'Well, well, well, well!' he trilled, standing on his toes and fluttering his hands, as though he were about to take off like a fairy. 'How *delightful*! how very, very *delightful* that you should call, your Ladyship. God bless my ascetic soul! if you haven't whipped the old hermit out of his introspection. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! And here, as you put it, you all are. There's no doubt about that, is there? What a party we will have! *Mew*sical chairs and all! ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.'

The almost unbearable pitch of his laughter created an absolute stillness in the hall. The cats, sitting bolt upright, had their round eyes fixed on him.

'But I keep you waiting!' he cried. 'Waiting in my outer rooms! Are you a mere valetudinarian, my dear Ladyship, or some prolific mendicant whose bewitched offspring she hopes I can return to human shape? Of course you are not, by all that's evident, so why should you be left in this cold – this damp – this obnoxious hell of a hall, with the rain pouring off you in positive waterfalls . . . and so . . . and so, *if* you'll allow me to lead on . . .' – he waved a long, thin, delicate arm with as white a hand on the end of it, which fluttered like a silk flag – '. . . I'll throw a few doors open, light a lamp or two, flick away a few crumbs in readiness for . . . What wine shall it be?'

He began to tread his way to the sitting-room with a curious flicking movement of the feet.

The Countess followed him. The servants had cleared the table of the supper dishes and the room had been left with so serene a composure about it that it was hard to believe that it was but a short while ago in this same room that Irma had disgraced herself.

Prunesquallor flung wide the door of the sitting-room for the Countess to pass through. He flung it with a spectacular abandon: it seemed to imply that if the door broke, or the hinges snapped, or a picture was jerked off the wall, what of it? This was his house; he could do what he liked with it. If he chose to jeopardize his belongings, that was his affair. This

was an occasion when such meagre considerations would only enter the minds of the vulgar.

The Countess advanced down the centre of the room and then stopped. She stared about her abstractedly – at the long lemon-yellow curtain, the carved furniture, the deep green rug, the silver, the ceramics, the pale grey-and-white stripes of the wallpaper. Perhaps her mind reverted to her own candle-smelling, bird-filled, half-lit chaos of a bedroom, but there was no expression on her face.

'Are . . . all . . . your . . . rooms . . . like . . . this . . . ?' she muttered. She had just seated herself in a chair.

'Well, let me see,' said Prunesquallor. 'No, not exactly, your Ladyship . . . not *exactly*.'

'I . . . suppose . . . they're . . . spotless. Is . . . that it . . . eh?'

'I believe they are; yes, yes, I quite believe they are. Not that I see more than five or six of them during the course of a year; but what with the servants flitting here and there with dusters and brooms, and clanking their buckets and wringing things out – and what with my sister Irma flitting after them to see that the right things are wrung and the wrung things are right, I have no doubt that we are all but sterilized to extinction: no tartar on the banisters: not a microbe left to live its life in peace.'

'I see,' said the Countess. It was extraordinary how damning those two words sounded. 'But I have come to talk to you.'

For a moment she stared about her ruminatively. The cats, with not a whisker moving, were everywhere in the room. The mantelpiece was heraldic with them. The table was a solid block of whiteness. The couch was a snowdrift. The carpet was sewn with eyes.

Her ladyship's head, which always seemed far bigger than any human head had a right to be, was turned away from the doctor and down a little, so that her powerful throat was tautened: yet ample along the near side. Her profile was nearly hidden by her cheek. Her hair was built up, for the most part, into a series of red nests and for the rest smouldered as it fell in snakelike coils to her shoulders, where it all but hissed.

The doctor twirled about on his narrow feet and flung open

a silkwood cabinet door with a grandiose flourish, bringing his long white hands together beneath his chin and tossing a mop of grey hair from his forehead. He flashed his brilliant teeth at the Countess (who was still presenting him with her shoulder and about an eighth of her face), and then with eyebrows raised –

'Your Ladyship,' he said, 'that you should decide to visit me, and to discuss some subject with me, is an honour. But first, *what* will you drink?'

The doctor in flinging open the door of his cabinet had revealed as rare and delicately chosen a group of wines as he had ever selected from his cellar.

The Countess moved her great head through the air.

'A jug of goat's milk, Prunesquallor, if you please,' she said.

What there was in the doctor that loved beauty, selectivity, delicacy and excellence – and there was a good deal in him that responded to these abstractions – shrank up like the horn of a snail and all but died. But his hand, which was poised in the air and was half-way to the trapped sunlight of a long-lost vineyard, merely fluttered to and fro as though it was conducting some gnomic orchestra, while he turned about, apparently in full control of himself. He bowed, and his teeth flashed. Then he rang the bell, and when a face appeared at the door –

'Have we a goat?' he said. 'Come, come, my man – yes or no. Have we, or haven't we, a goat?'

The man was positive that they had no such thing.

'Then you will find one, if you please. You will find one immediately. It is wanted. That will do.'

The Countess had seated herself. Her feet were planted apart and her heavy freckled arms were along the sides of her chair. In the silence that followed even Prunesquallor could think of nothing to say. The stillness was eventually broken by the voice of the Countess.

'Why do you have knives sticking in your ceiling?'

The doctor recrossed his legs and followed her impassive gaze which was fixed on the long bread-knife that suddenly appeared to fill the room. A knife in the fender, on a pillow, or under a chair is one thing, but a knife surrounded by the

blank white wasteland of a ceiling has no shred of covering – is as naked and blatant as a pig in a cathedral.

But any subject was fruitful to the doctor. It was only a lack of material, a rare enough contingency in him, that he found appalling.

'That knife, your ladyship,' he said, giving the implement a glance of the deepest respect, 'bread-knife though it be, has a history. A history, madam! It has indeed.'

He turned his eyes to his guest. She waited impassively.

'Humble, unromantic, ill-proportioned, crude as it looks, yet it means much to me. Indeed, madam, it is so, and I am no sentimentalist. And *why*? you will be asking yourself. Why? Let me tell you all.'

He clasped his hands together and raised his narrow and elegant shoulders.

'It was with that knife, your ladyship, that I performed my first successful operation. I was among mountains. Huge tufted things. Full of character; but no charm. I was alone with my faithful mule. We were lost. A meteor flew overhead. What use was that to us? No use at all. It merely irritated us. For a moment it showed a track through the fever-dripping ferns. It was obviously the wrong one. It would only have taken us back to a morass we had just spent half a day struggling out of. What a sentence! What a vile sentence, your Ladyship, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Where was I? Ah, yes! Plunged in darkness. Miles from anywhere. What happened next? The strangest thing. Prodding my mule forward with my walking-cane – I was riding the brute at the time – it suddenly gave a cry like a child and began to collapse under me. As it subsided it turned its huge hairy head and what little light there was showed me its eyes were positively imploring me to free it from some agony or other. Now agony is an agonizing thing to happen to anyone, your Ladyship, but to locate the seat of the agony in a mule in the darkness of a mountainous and fever-dripping night is – er . . . not easy (Lytotis), ha, ha, ha! But *do* something I must. It was already upon its side in the darkness – the great thing. I had leapt from its collapsing spine and at once my faculties began to do their damndest. The brute's eyes, still fixed on mine, were like lamps that were running out of

oil. I put a couple of questions to myself – pertinent ones, I felt at the time – and still do; and the first was: IS the agony spiritual or physical? If the former, the darkness wouldn't matter, but the treatment would be tricky. If the latter, the darkness would be hell; but the problem was in my province – or very nearly. I plumped for the latter, and more by good fortune or that curious sixth sense one has when alone with a mule, among tufted mountains, I found almost at once it to have been a happy guess: for directly I had decided to work on a carnal basis I got hold of the mule's head, heaved it up, and swivelled it to such an angle that by the glow of its eyes I was able to illumine – faintly, of course, but to illumine, none the less – with a dull glow, the *rest* of its body. At once I was rewarded. It was a pure case of "foreign body". Coiled – I couldn't tell you how many times – round the beast's hind leg, was a python! Even at that ghastly and critical moment I could see what a beautiful thing it was. Far more beautiful than my old brute of a mule. But did it enter my head that I should transfer my allegiance to the reptile? No. After all, there is such a thing as loyalty as well as beauty. Besides, I hate walking, and the python would have taken some riding, your Ladyship: the very saddling would tax a man's patience. And besides . . .'

The doctor glanced at his guest and immediately wished he hadn't. Taking out his silk handkerchief, he wiped his brow. Then he flashed his teeth, and with somewhat less ebullience in his voice . . . 'It was then that I thought of my bread-knife,' he added.

For a moment there was silence. And then, as the doctor filled his lungs and was ready to continue –

'How old are you?' said the Countess. But before Doctor Prunesquallor could readjust himself there was a knock at the door and the servant entered with a goat.

'Wrong sex, you idiot!' As the Countess spoke she rose heavily from her chair and, approaching the goat, she fondled its head with her big hands. It strained towards her on the rope leash and licked her arm.

'You amaze me,' said the doctor to the servant. 'No wonder you cook badly. Away, my man, away! Unearth yet another,

and get the gender right, for the love of mammals! Sometimes one wonders what kind of a world one is living in – by all things fundamental, one really does.'

The servant disappeared.

'Prunesquallor,' said the Countess, who had moved to the window and was staring out across the quadrangle.

'Madam?' queried the doctor.

'I am not easy in my heart, Prunesquallor.'

'Your heart, madam?'

'My heart and my mind.'

She returned to her chair, where she seated herself again and laid her arms along the padded sides as before.

'In what way, your Ladyship?' Prunesquallor's voice had lost its facetious vapidity.

'There is mischief in the castle,' she replied. 'Where it is I do not know. But there is mischief.' She stared at the doctor.

'Mischief?' he said at last. 'Some influence, do you mean – some bad influence, madam?'

'I do not know for sure. But something has changed. My bones know it. There is someone.'

'Someone?'

'An enemy. Whether ghost or human I do not know. But an enemy. Do you understand?'

'I understand,' said the doctor. Every vestige of his waggery had disappeared. He leaned forward. 'It is not a ghost,' he said. 'Ghosts have no itch for rebellion.'

'Rebellion!' said the Countess loudly. 'By whom?'

'I do not know. But what else can it be you sense, as you say, in your bones, madam?'

'Who would *dare* to rebel?' she whispered, as though to herself. 'Who would dare? . . .' And then, after a pause: 'Have you *your* suspicions?'

'I have no proof. But I will watch for you. For, by the holy angels, since you have brought the matter up there is evil abroad and no mistake.'

'Worse,' she replied, 'worse than that. There is perfidy.'

She drew a deep breath and then, very slowly: '. . . and I will crush its life out: I will break it: not only for Titus' sake and for his dead father's, but more – for Gormenghast.'

‘You speak of your late husband, madam, the revered Lord Sepulchrave. Where are his remains, madam, if he is truly dead?’

‘And more than that, man, more than that! What of the fire that warped his brilliant brain? What of that fire in which, but for that youth Steerpike . . .’ She lapsed into a thick silence.

‘And what of the suicide of his sisters; and the disappearance of the chef on the same night as his Lordship your husband – and all within a year, or little more: and since then a hundred irregularities and strange affairs? What lies at the back of all this? By all that’s visionary, madam, your heart has reason to be uneasy.’

‘And there is Titus,’ said the Countess.

‘There is Titus,’ the doctor repeated as quick as an echo.

‘How old is he now?’

‘He is nearly eight.’ Prunesquallor raised his eyebrows. ‘Have you not seen him?’

‘From my window,’ said the Countess, ‘when he rides along the South Wall.’

‘You should be with him, your Ladyship, now and then,’ said the doctor. ‘By all that’s maternal, you really should see more of your son.’

The Countess stared at the doctor, but what she might have replied was stunned for ever by a rap at the door and the reappearance of the servant with a nannygoat.

‘Let her go!’ said the Countess.

The little white goat ran to her as though she were a magnet. She turned to Prunesquallor. ‘Have you a jug?’

The doctor turned his head to the door. ‘Fetch a jug,’ he said to the disappearing face.

‘Prunesquallor,’ she said, as she knelt down, a prodigious bulk in the lamplight, and stroked the sleek ears of the goat, ‘I will not ask you on whom your suspicions lie. No. Not yet. But I expect you to watch, Prunesquallor – to watch everything, as I do. You must be all aware, Prunesquallor, every moment of the day. I expect to be informed of heterodoxy, wherever it may be found. I have a kind of faith in you, man. A kind of faith in you. I don’t know why . . .’ she added.

‘Madam,’ said Prunesquallor, ‘I will be on tip-toe.’

The servant came in with a jug, and retired.

The elegant curtains fluttered a little in the night air. The light of the lamp was golden in the room, glimmering on the porcelain bowls, on the squat cut-glass vases and the tall cloisonné ware: on the vellum backs of books and the glazed drawings that hung upon the walls. But its light was reflected most vividly from the countless small white faces of the motionless cats. Their whiteness blanched the room and chilled the mellow light. It was a scene that Prunesquallor never forgot. The Countess on her knees by the dying fire: the goat standing quietly while she milked it with an authority in the deft movement of her fingers that affected him strangely. Was this heavy, brusque, uncompromising Countess, whose maternal instincts were so shockingly absent: who had not spoken to Titus for a year: who was held in awe, and even in fear, by the populace: who was more a legend than a woman – was this indeed *she*, with the half-smile of extraordinary tenderness on her wide lips?

And then he remembered her voice again, when she had whispered: 'Who would dare to rebel? Who would *dare*?' and then the full, ruthless organ-chord of her throat: 'And I will crush its life out! I will break it! Not only for Titus' sake . . .'

EIGHT

CORA and Clarice, although they did not know it, were imprisoned in their apartments. Steerpike had nailed and bolted from the outside all their means of exit. They had been incarcerated for two years, their tongues having loosened to the brink of Steerpike's undoing. Cunning and patient as he was with them, the young man could find no other foolproof way of ensuring their permanent silence on the subject of the library fire. No other way – but one. They believed that they alone among the inhabitants of the castle were free of a hideous disease of Steerpike's invention, and which he referred to as 'Weasel plague'.

The twins were like water. He could turn on or off at will the taps of their terror. They were pathetically grateful that through his superior wisdom they were able to remain in relative health. If a flat refusal to die in the face of a hundred reasons why they should, could be called health. They were obsessed by the fear of coming into contact with the carriers. He brought them daily news of the dead and dying.

Their quarters were no longer those spacious apartments where Steerpike first paid them his respects seven years ago. Far from them having a Room of Roots and a great tree leaning over space hundreds of feet above the earth, they were now on the ground level in an obscure precinct of the castle, a dead end, a promontory of dank stone, removed from even the less frequented routes. Not only was there no way through it, but it was shunned also for reason of its evil reputation. Unhealthy with noxious moisture, its very breath was double pneumonia.

Ironically enough, it was in such a place as this that the aunts rejoiced in the erroneous belief that they alone could escape the virulent and ghastly disease that was in their imaginations prostrating Gormenghast. They had by now become so self-centred under Steerpike's guidance as to be looking forward to the day when they, as sole survivors, would be able (after due precautions) to pace forth and be at last, after all these long years of frustration, the unopposed claimants to the Groan crown, that massive and lofty symbol of sovereignty, with its central sapphire the size of a hen's egg.

It was one of their hottest topics: whether the crown should be sawn in half and the sapphire split, so that they could always be wearing at least part of it, or whether it should be left intact and they should wear it on alternate days.

Hot and contested though this subject was, it stirred no visible animation. Not even their lips were seen to move, for they had acquired the habit of keeping them slightly parted and projecting their toneless voices without a tremor of the mouth. But for most of the time their long, solitary days were passed in silence. Steerpike's spasmodic appearances – and

they had become less and less frequent – were, apart from their wild, bizarre and paranoiac glimpses of a future of thrones and crowns, their sole excitement.

How was it that their Ladyships Cora and Clarice could be hidden away in this manner and the iniquity condoned?

It was not condoned; for two years previously they had been as far as Gormenghast was concerned buried with a wealth of symbolism in the tombs of the Groans, a couple of wax replicas having been modelled by Steerpike for the dread occasion. A week before these effigies were lowered into the sarcophagus, a letter, as from the twins, but in reality forged by the youth, had been discovered in their apartments. It divulged the dreadful information that the sisters of the seventy-sixth Earl, who had himself disappeared from the castle without a trace, bent upon their self-destruction, had stolen by night from the castle grounds to make an end of themselves among the ravines of Gormenghast mountain.

Search parties, organized by Steerpike, had found no trace.

On the night previous to the discovery of the note, Steerpike had conveyed the Twins to the rooms which they now occupied upon some pretext connected with an inspection of a couple of sceptres he had found and regilded.

All this seemed a long time ago. Titus had been a mere infant. Flay but lately banished. Sepulchrave and Swelter had melted into air. Like teeth missing from the jaw of Gormenghast, the disappearance of the Twins, added to those others, gave to the Castle for a time an unfamiliar visage and an aching bone. To some extent the wounds had healed and the change of face had been accepted. Titus was, after all, alive and well – and the continuation of the Family assured.

The Twins were sitting in their room, after a day of more than usual silence. A lamp, set on an iron table (it burnt all day), gave them sufficient light to do their embroidery; but for some while neither of them applied herself to her work.

'What a long time life takes!' said Clarice at last. 'Sometimes I think it's hardly worthy encroaching on.'

'I don't know anything about *encroaching*,' replied Cora; 'but since you have spoken I might as well tell you that you've forgotten something, as usual.'

'What have I forgotten?'

'You've forgotten that I did it yesterday and it is your turn today – thus.'

'My turn to what?'

'To *comfort* me,' said Cora, looking hard at a leg of the iron table. 'You can go on doing it until half-past seven, and then it will be your turn to be depressed.'

'Very well,' said Clarice; and she began at once to stroke her sister's arm.

'No, no, no!' said Cora, 'don't be so obvious. Do things without any mention – like getting tea, for instance, and laying it quietly before me.'

'All right,' answered Clarice, rather sullenly. 'But you've spoilt it now – haven't you? – telling me what to do. It won't be so thoughtful of me, will it? But perhaps I could get coffee instead.'

'Never mind all that,' Cora replied, 'you talk too much. I don't want to suddenly find it's your turn.'

'What! For *my* depression?'

'Yes, yes,' her sister said irritably; and she scratched the back of her round head.

'Not that I think you deserve one.'

Their conversation was disturbed, for a curtain parted behind them and Steerpike approached, a sword-stick in his hand.

The Twins rose together and faced him, their shoulders touching.

'How are my lovebirds?' he said. He lifted his slender stick and, with ghastly impudence, tickled their ladyships' ribs with its narrow ferruled end. No expression appeared on their faces, but they went through the slow, wriggling motions of Eastern dancers. A clock chimed from above the mantelpiece, and as it ceased the monotonous sound of the rain appeared to redouble its volume. The light had become very bad.

'You haven't been here for a long while,' said Cora.

'How true,' said Steerpike.

'Had you forgotten us?'

'Not a bit of it,' he said, 'not a bit of it.'

'What happened, then?' asked Clarice.

'Sit down!' said Steerpike harshly, 'and listen to me.' He stared them out of countenance until their heads dropped, abashed, and they found themselves staring at their own clavicles. 'Do you think it is easy for me to keep the plague from your door and to be at your beck and call at the same time? Do you?'

They shook their heads slowly like pendulums.

'Then have the grace not to interrogate me!' he cried in mock anger. 'How dare you snap at the hand that feeds you! How dare you!'

The Twins, acting together, rose from their chairs and started moving across the room. They paused a moment and turned their eyes to Steerpike in order to make sure that they were doing what was expected of them. Yes. The stern finger of the young man was pointing to the heavy damp carpet that covered the floor of the room.

Steerpike derived as much pleasure in watching these anile and pitiful creatures, dressed in their purple finery, as they crawled beneath the carpet as he got from anything. He had led them gradually, and by easy and cunning steps, from humiliation to humiliation, until the distorted satisfaction he experienced in this way had become little short of a necessity to him. Were it not that he found this grotesque pleasure in the exercise of his power over them, it is to be doubted whether he would have gone to all the trouble which was involved in keeping them alive.

As he stared at the twin hummocks under the carpet he did not realize that something very peculiar and unprecedented was happening. Cora, in her warren-like seclusion, crouched in the ignominious darkness, had conceived an idea. Where it came from she did not trouble to inquire of herself, nor *why* it should have come, for Steerpike, their benefactor, was a kind of god to her, as he was to Clarice. But the idea had suddenly flowered in her brain unbidden. It was that she would very much like to kill him. Directly she had conceived the idea she felt frightened, and her fear was hardly lessened by a flat voice in the darkness saying with empty deliberation: 'So . . . would . . . I. We could do it together, couldn't we? We could do it together.'

NINE

THERE was an all but forgotten landing high in the southern wing, a landing taken over for many a decade by succeeding generations of dove-grey mice, peculiarly small creatures, little larger than the joint of a finger and indigenous to this southern wing, for they were never seen elsewhere.

In years gone by this unfrequented stretch of floor, walled off on one side with high banisters, must have been of lively interest to some person or persons; for though the colours had to a large extent faded, yet the floor-boards must once have been a deep and glowing crimson, and the three walls the most brilliant of yellows. The banisters were alternately apple-green and azure, the frames of the doorless doorways being also this last colour. The corridors that led away in dwindling perspective, continued the crimson of the floor and the yellow of the walls, but were cast in a deep shade.

The balcony banisters were on the southern side, and, in the sloping roof above them, a window let in the light and, sometimes, the sun itself, whose beams made of this silent, forgotten landing a cosmos, a firmament of moving motes, brilliantly illumined, an astral and at the same time a solar province; for the sun would come through with its long rays and the rays would be dancing with stars. Where the sunbeams struck, the floor would flower like a rose, a wall break out in crocus-light, and the banisters would flame like rings of coloured snakes.

But even on the most cloudless of summer days, with the sunlight striking through, the colours had in their brilliance the pigment of decay. It was a red that had lost its flame that smouldered from the floor-boards.

And across this old circus-ground of bygone colours the families of the grey mice moved.

When Titus first came upon the coloured banisters of the staircase it was at a point two floors below the yellow-walled balcony. He had been exploring on that lower floor, and

finding himself lost he had taken fright, for room after room was cavernous with shadow or vacant and afloat with sunlight that lit the dust on the wide floors – somehow more frightening to the child in its golden dereliction than the deepest shadows. Had he not clenched his hands he would have screamed, for the very lack of ghosts in the deserted halls and chambers was in itself unnerving; for there was a sense that something had either just left each corridor, or each hall as he came upon it, or else that the stages were set and ready for its appearance.

It was with his imagination dilated and his heart hammering aloud that Titus, suddenly turning a corner, came upon a section of the staircase two floors below the haunt of the grey mice.

Directly Titus saw the stairway he ran to it, as though every banister were a friend. Even in the access of his relief, and even while the hollow echo of his footsteps was in his ears, his eyes widened at the apple-green – the azure of the banisters, each one a tall plinth of defiance. Only the rail which these bright things supported was hueless, being of a smooth, hand-worn ivory whiteness. Titus gripped the banisters and then peered through them and downward. There seemed little life in the fathoms beneath him. A bird flew slowly past a far landing; a section of plaster fell from a shadowy wall three floors below the bird, but that was all.

Titus glanced above him and saw how close he stood to the head of the stairway. Anxious as he was to escape from the atmosphere of these upper regions, yet he could not resist running to the top of the stairs, where he could see the colours burning. The small grey mice squeaked and scampered away down the passageways or into their holes. A few remained against the walls and watched Titus for a short while before returning to their sleeping or nibbling.

The atmosphere was indescribably golden and friendly to the boy: so friendly that his proximity to the hollow room below him did little to disturb his delight. He sat down, his back against a yellow wall, and watched the white motes manoeuvring in the long sunbeams.

'This is *mine! mine!* he said aloud. 'I found it.'