Christmas Eve

It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long entrance hall of Monk's Piece on my way from the dining room, where we had just enjoyed the first of the happy, festive meals, towards the drawing room and the fire around which my family were now assembled, I paused and then, as I often do in the course of an evening, went to the front door, opened it and stepped outside.

I have always liked to take a breath of the evening, to smell the air, whether it is sweetly scented and balmy with the flowers of midsummer, pungent with the bonfires and leaf-mould of autumn, or crackling cold from frost and snow. I like to look about me at the sky above my head, whether there are moon and stars or utter blackness, and into the darkness ahead of me; I like to listen for the cries of nocturnal

creatures and the moaning rise and fall of the wind, or the pattering of rain in the orchard trees, I enjoy the rush of air towards me up the hill from the flat pastures of the river valley.

Tonight, I smelled at once, and with a lightening heart, that there had been a change in the weather. All the previous week, we had had rain, chilling rain and a mist that lay low about the house and over the countryside. From the windows, the view stretched no farther than a yard or two down the garden. It was wretched weather, never seeming to come fully light, and raw, too. There had been no pleasure in walking, the visibility was too poor for any shooting and the dogs were permanently morose and muddy. Inside the house, the lamps were lit throughout the day and the walls of larder, outhouse and cellar oozed damp and smelled sour, the fires sputtered and smoked, burning dismally low.

My spirits have for many years now been excessively affected by the ways of the weather, and I confess that, had it not been for the air of cheerfulness and bustle that prevailed in the rest of the house, I should have been quite cast down in gloom and lethargy, unable to enjoy the flavour of life as I should like and irritated by my own susceptibility. But Esmé is merely stung by inclement weather into a spirited defiance, and so the preparations for our Christmas holiday had

this year been more than usually extensive and vigorous.

I took a step or two out from under the shadow of the house so that I could see around me in the moonlight. Monk's Piece stands at the summit of land that rises gently up for some four hundred feet from where the little River Nee traces its winding way in a north to south direction across this fertile, and sheltered, part of the country. Below us are pastures, interspersed with small clumps of mixed, broadleaf woodland. But at our backs for several square miles it is a quite different area of rough scrub and heathland, a patch of wildness in the midst of well-farmed country. We are but two miles from a good-sized village, seven from the principal market town, yet there is an air of remoteness and isolation which makes us feel ourselves to be much further from civilization.

I first saw Monk's Piece one afternoon in high summer, when out driving in the trap with Mr Bentley. Mr Bentley was formerly my employer, but I had lately risen to become a full partner in the firm of lawyers to which I had been articled as a young man (and with whom, indeed, I remained for my entire working life). He was at this time nearing the age when he had begun to feel inclined to let slip the reins of responsibility, little by little, from his own hands into mine, though he continued to travel up to our chambers in London

at least once a week, until he died in his eighty-second year. But he was becoming more and more of a country-dweller. He was no man for shooting and fishing but, instead, he had immersed himself in the roles of country magistrate and churchwarden, governor of this, that and the other county and parish board, body and committee. I had been both relieved and pleased when finally he took me into full partnership with himself, after so many years, while at the same time believing the position to be no more than my due, for I had done my fair share of the donkey work and borne a good deal of the burden of responsibility for directing the fortunes of the firm with, I felt, inadequate reward – at least in terms of position.

So it came about that I was sitting beside Mr Bentley on a Sunday afternoon, enjoying the view over the high hawthorn hedgerows across the green, drowsy countryside, as he let his pony take the road back, at a gentle pace, to his somewhat ugly and over-imposing manor house. It was rare for me to sit back and do nothing. In London I lived for my work, apart from some spare time spent in the study and collecting of watercolours. I was then thirty-five and I had been a widower for the past twelve years. I had no taste at all for social life and, although in good general health, was prone to occasional nervous illnesses and conditions, as a result of the experiences I will come to

= widowed at 23...?

relate. Truth to tell, I was growing old well before my time, a sombre, pale-complexioned man with a strained expression – a dull dog.

I remarked to Mr Bentley on the calm and sweetness of the day, and after a sideways glance in my direction he said, 'You should think of getting yourself something in this direction – why not? Pretty little cottage – down there, perhaps?' And he pointed with his whip to where a tiny hamlet was tucked snugly into a bend of the river below, white walls basking in the afternoon sunshine. 'Bring yourself out of town some of these Friday afternoons, take to walking, fill yourself up with fresh air and good eggs and cream.'

The idea had a charm, but only a distant one, seemingly unrelated to myself, and so I merely smiled and breathed in the warm scents of the grasses and the field flowers and watched the dust kicked up off the lane by the pony's hooves and thought no more about it. Until, that is, we reached a stretch of road leading past a long, perfectly proportioned stone house, set on a rise above a sweeping view down over the whole river valley and then for miles away to the violet-blue line of hills in the distance.

At that moment, I was seized by something I cannot precisely describe, an emotion, a desire – no, it was rather more, a knowledge, a simple *certainty*, which gripped me, and all so clear and striking that I cried

out involuntarily for Mr Bentley to stop, and, almost before he had time to do so, climbed out of the pony trap into the lane and stood on a grassy knoll, gazing first up at the house, so handsome, so utterly right for the position it occupied, a modest house and yet sure of itself, and then looking across at the country beyond. I had no sense of having been here before, but an absolute conviction that I would come here again, that the house was already mine, bound to me invisibly.

To one side of it, a stream ran between the banks towards the meadow beyond, whence it made its meandering way down to the river.

Mr Bentley was now looking at me curiously, from the trap. 'A fine place,' he called.

I nodded, but, quite unable to impart to him any of my extreme emotions, turned my back upon him and walked a few yards up the slope from where I could see the entrance to the old, overgrown orchard that lay behind the house and petered out in long grass and tangled thicket at the far end. Beyond that, I glimpsed the perimeter of some rough-looking, open land. The feeling of conviction I have described was still upon me, and I remember that I was alarmed by it, for I had never been an imaginative or fanciful man and certainly not one given to visions of the future. Indeed, since those earlier experiences I had deliberately

avoided all contemplation of any remotely nonmaterial matters, and clung to the prosaic, the visible and tangible.

Nevertheless, I was quite unable to escape the belief – nay, I must call it more, the certain knowledge – that this house was one day to be my own home, that sooner or later, though I had no idea when, I would become the owner of it. When finally I accepted and admitted this to myself, I felt on that instant a profound sense of peace and contentment settle upon me such as I had not known for very many years, and it was with a light heart that I returned to the pony trap, where Mr Bentley was awaiting me more than a little curiously.

The overwhelming feeling I had experienced at Monk's Piece remained with me, albeit not in the forefront of my mind, when I left the country that afternoon to return to London. I had told Mr Bentley that if ever he were to hear that the house was for sale, I should be eager to know of it.

Some years later, he did so. I contacted the agents that same day and hours later, without so much as returning to see it again, I had offered for it, and my offer was accepted. A few months prior to this, I had met Esmé Ainley. Our affection for one another had been increasing steadily, but, cursed as I still was by my indecisive nature in all personal and emotional

matters, I had remained silent as to my intentions for the future. I had enough sense to take the news about Monk's Piece as a good omen, however, and a week after I had formally become the owner of the house, travelled into the country with Esmé and proposed marriage to her among the trees of the old orchard. This offer, too, was accepted and very shortly afterwards we were married and moved at once to Monk's Piece. On that day, I truly believed that I had at last come out from under the long shadow cast by the events of the past and saw from his face and felt from the warmth of his handclasp that Mr Bentley believed it too, and that a burden had been lifted from his own shoulders. He had always blamed himself, at least in part, for what had happened to me – it had, after all, been he who had sent me on that first journey up to Crythin Gifford, and Eel Marsh House, and to the funeral of Mrs Drablow.

But all of that could not have been further from my conscious thought at least, as I stood taking in the night air at the door of my house, on that Christmas Eve. For some fourteen years now Monk's Piece had been the happiest of homes – Esmé's and mine, and that of her four children by her first marriage, to Captain Ainley. In the early days I had come here only at weekends and holidays but London life and business began to irk me from the day I bought

the place and I was glad indeed to retire permanently into the country at the earliest opportunity.

And, now, it was to this happy home that my family had once again repaired for Christmas. In a moment, I should open the front door and hear the sound of their voices from the drawing room – unless I was abruptly summoned by my wife, fussing about my catching a chill. Certainly, it was very cold and clear at last. The sky was pricked over with stars and the full moon rimmed with a halo of frost. The dampness and fogs of the past week had stolen away like thieves into the night, the paths and the stone walls of the house gleamed palely and my breath smoked on the air.

Upstairs, in the attic bedrooms, Isobel's three young sons – Esmé's grandsons – slept, with stockings tied to their bedposts. There would be no snow for them on the morrow, but Christmas Day would at least wear a bright and cheerful countenance.

There was something in the air that night, something, I suppose, remembered from my own childhood, together with an infection caught from the little boys, that excited me, old as I was. That my peace of mind was about to be disturbed, and memories awakened that I had thought forever dead, I had, naturally, no idea. That I should ever again renew my close acquaintance, if only in the course of vivid recollections and

dreams, with mortal dread and terror of spirit, would have seemed at that moment impossible.

I took one last look at the frosty darkness, sighed contentedly, called to the dogs, and went in, anticipating nothing more than a pipe and a glass of good malt whisky beside the crackling fire, in the happy company of my family. As I crossed the hall and entered the drawing room, I felt an uprush of well-being, of the kind I have experienced regularly during my life at Monk's Piece, a sensation that leads on naturally to another, of heartfelt thankfulness. And indeed I did give thanks, at the sight of my family ensconced around the huge fire which Oliver was at that moment building to a perilous height and a fierce blaze with the addition of a further great branch of applewood from an old tree we had felled in the orchard the previous autumn. Oliver is the eldest of Esmé's sons, and bore then, as now, a close resemblance both to his sister Isobel (seated beside her husband, the bearded Aubrey Pearce) and to the brother next in age, Will. All three of them have good, plain, open English faces, inclined to roundness and with hair and eyebrows and lashes of a light chestnut brown – the colour of their mother's hair before it became threaded with grey.

At that time, Isobel was only twenty-four years old but already the mother of three young sons, and set fair to produce more. She had the plump, settled air

of a matron and an inclination to mother and oversee her husband and brothers as well as her own children. She had been the most sensible, responsible of daughters, she was affectionate and charming, and she seemed to have found, in the calm and level-headed Aubrey Pearce, an ideal partner. Yet at times I caught Esmé looking at her wistfully, and she had more than once voiced, though gently and to me alone, a longing for Isobel to be a little less staid, a little more spirited, even frivolous.

In all honestly, I could not have wished it so. I would not have wished for anything to ruffle the surface of that calm, untroubled sea.

Oliver Ainley, at that time nineteen, and his brother Will, only fourteen months younger, were similarly serious, sober young men at heart, but for the time being they still enjoyed all the exuberance of young puppies, and indeed it seemed to me that Oliver showed rather too few signs of maturity for a young man in his first year at Cambridge and destined, if my advice prevailed with him, for a career at the Bar. Will lay on his stomach before the fire, his face aglow, chin propped upon his hands. Oliver sat nearby, and from time to time a scuffle of their long legs would break out, a kicking and shoving, accompanied by a sudden guffawing, for all the world as if they were ten years old all over again.

The youngest of the Ainleys, Edmund, sat a little apart, separating himself, as was his wont, a little distance from every other person, not out of any unfriendliness or sullen temper but because of an innate fastidiousness and reserve, a desire to be somewhat private, which had always singled him out from the rest of Esmé's family, just as he was also unlike the others in looks, being pale-skinned, and long-nosed, with hair of an extraordinary blackness, and blue eyes. Edmund was then fifteen. I knew him the least well, understood him scarcely at all, felt uneasy in his presence, and yet perhaps in a strange way loved him more deeply than any.

The drawing room at Monk's Piece is long and low, with tall windows at either end, close-curtained now, but by day letting in a great deal of light from both north and south. Tonight, festoons and swags of fresh greenery, gathered that afternoon by Esmé and Isobel, hung over the stone fireplace, and intertwined with the leaves were berries and ribbons of scarlet and gold. At the far end of the room stood the tree, candlelit and bedecked, and beneath it were piled the presents. There were flowers, too, vases of white chrysanthemums, and in the centre of the room, on a round table, a pyramid of gilded fruit and a bowl of oranges stuck all about with cloves, their spicy scent filling the air and mingling with that of the branches

and the wood-smoke to be the very aroma of Christmas.

I sat down in my own armchair, drew it back a little from the full blaze of the fire, and began the protracted and soothing business of lighting a pipe. As I did so, I became aware that I had interrupted the others in the midst of a lively conversation, and that Oliver and Will at least were restless to continue.

'Well,' I said, through the first, cautious puffs at my tobacco, 'and what's all this?'

There was a further pause, and Esmé shook her head, smiling over her embroidery.

'Come . . .'

Then Oliver got to his feet and began to go about the room rapidly switching off every lamp, save the lights upon the Christmas tree at the far end, so that, when he returned to his seat, we had only the immediate firelight by which to see one another, and Esmé was obliged to lay down her sewing – not without a murmur of protest.

'May as well do the job properly,' Oliver said with some satisfaction.

'Oh, you boys . . .'

'Now come on, Will, your turn, isn't it?'

'No, Edmund's.'

'Ah-ha,' said the youngest of the Ainley brothers, in an odd, deep voice. 'I could an' if I would!'

'*Must* we have the lights out?' Isobel spoke as if to much smaller boys.

'Yes, Sis, we must, that's if you want to get the authentic atmosphere.'

'But I'm not sure that I do.'

Oliver gave a low moan. 'Get on with it then, someone.'

Esmé leaned over towards me. 'They are telling ghost stories.'

'Yes,' said Will, his voice unsteady with both excitement and laughter. 'Just the thing for Christmas Eve. It's an ancient tradition!'

'The lonely country house, the guests huddled around the fireside in a darkened room, the wind howling at the casement . . .' Oliver moaned again.

And then came Aubrey's stolid, good-humoured tones. 'Better get on with it then.' And so they did, Oliver, Edmund and Will vying with one another to tell the horridest, most spine-chilling tale, with much dramatic effect and mock-terrified shrieking. They outdid one another in the far extremes of inventiveness, piling agony upon agony. They told of dripping stone walls in uninhabited castles and of ivy-clad monastery ruins by moonlight, of locked inner rooms and secret dungeons, dank charnel houses and overgrown graveyards, of footsteps creaking upon staircases and fingers tapping at casements, of howlings and

shriekings, groanings and scuttlings and the clanking of chains, of hooded monks and headless horsemen, swirling mists and sudden winds, insubstantial spectres and sheeted creatures, vampires and bloodhounds, bats and rats and spiders, of men found at dawn and women turned white-haired and raving lunatic, and of vanished corpses and curses upon heirs. The stories grew more and more lurid, wilder and sillier, and soon the gasps and cries merged into fits of choking laughter, as each one, even gentle Isobel, contributed more ghastly detail.

At first, I was amused, indulgent, but as I sat on, listening, in the firelight, I began to feel set apart from them all, an outsider to their circle. I was trying to suppress my mounting unease, to hold back the rising flood of memory.

This was a sport, a high-spirited and harmless game among young people, for the festive season, and an ancient tradition, too, as Will had rightly said, there was nothing to torment and trouble me, nothing of which I could possibly disapprove. I did not want to seem a killjoy, old and stodgy and unimaginative, I longed to enter into what was nothing more nor less than good fun. I fought a bitter battle within myself, my head turned away from the firelight so that none of them should chance to see my expression which I knew began to show signs of my discomfiture.

And then, to accompany a final, banshee howl from Edmund, the log that had been blazing on the hearth collapsed suddenly and, after sending up a light spatter of sparks and ash, died down so that there was near-darkness. And then silence in the room. I shuddered. I wanted to get up and go round putting on every light again, see the sparkle and glitter and colour of the Christmas decorations, have the fire blazing again cheerfully, I wanted to banish the chill that had settled upon me and the sensation of fear in my breast. Yet I could not move, it had, for the moment, paralysed me, just as it had always done, it was a long-forgotten, once too-familiar sensation.

Then, Edmund said, 'Now come, stepfather, your turn,' and at once the others took up the cry, the silence was broken by their urgings, with which even Esmé joined.

'No, no.' I tried to speak jocularly. 'Nothing from me.'

'Oh, Arthur . . .'

'You must know at least *one* ghost story, stepfather, everyone knows *one* . . .'

Ah, yes, yes, indeed. All the time I had been listening to their ghoulish, lurid inventions, and their howling and groans, the one thought that had been in my mind, and the only thing I could have said was, 'No, no, you have none of you any idea. This is all nonsense, fantasy,

it is not like this. Nothing so blood-curdling and becreepered and crude – not so . . . so laughable. The truth is quite other, and altogether more terrible.'

'Come *on*, stepfather.'

'Don't be an old spoilsport.'

'Arthur?'

'Do your stuff, stepfather, surely you're not going to let us down?'

I stood up, unable to bear it any longer.

'I am sorry to disappoint you,' I said. 'But I have no story to tell!' And went quickly from the room, and from the house.

Some fifteen minutes later, I came to my senses and found myself on the scrubland beyond the orchard, my heart pounding, my breathing short. I had walked about in a frenzy of agitation, and now, realizing that I must make an effort to calm myself, I sat down on a piece of old, moss-covered stone, and began to take deliberate, steady breaths in on a count of ten and out again, until I felt the tension within myself begin to slacken and my pulse become a little steadier, my head clearer. After a short while longer, I was able to realize my surroundings once again, to note the clearness of the sky and the brightness of the stars, the air's coldness and the crispiness of the frost-stiffened grass beneath my feet.

Behind me, in the house, I knew that I must have

left the family in a state of consternation and bewilderment, for they knew me normally as an even-tempered man of predictable emotions. Why they had aroused my apparent disapproval with the telling of a few silly tales and prompted such curt behaviour, the whole family would be quite at a loss to understand, and very soon I must return to them, make amends and endeavour to brush off the incident, renew some of the air of jollity. What I would not be able to do was explain. No. I would be cheerful and I would be steady again, if only for my dear wife's sake, but no more.

They had chided me with being a spoilsport, tried to encourage me to tell them the one ghost story I must surely, like any other man, have it in me to tell. And they were right. Yes, I had a story, a true story, a story of haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy. But it was not a story to be told for casual entertainment, around the fireside upon Christmas Eve.

I had always known in my heart that the experience would never leave me, that it was now woven into my very fibres, an inextricable part of my past, but I had hoped never to have to recollect it, consciously, and in full, ever again. Like an old wound, it gave off a faint twinge now and again, but less and less often, less and less painfully, as the years went on and my

happiness, sanity and equilibrium were assured. Of late, it had been like the outermost ripple on a pool, merely the faint memory of a memory.

Now, tonight, it again filled my mind to the exclusion of all else. I knew that I should have no rest from it, that I should lie awake in a chill of sweat, going over that time, those events, those places. So it had been night after night for years.

I got up and began to walk about again. Tomorrow was Christmas Day. Could I not be free of it at least for that blessed time, was there no way of keeping the memory, and the effects it had upon me, at bay, as an analgesic or a balm will stave off the pain of a wound, at least temporarily? And then, standing among the trunks of the fruit trees, silver-grey in the moonlight, I recalled that the way to banish an old ghost that continues its hauntings is to exorcise it. Well then, mine should be exorcised. I should tell my tale, not aloud, by the fireside, not as a diversion for idle listeners – it was too solemn, and too real, for that. But I should set it down on paper, with every care and in every detail. I would write my own ghost story. Then perhaps I should finally be free of it for whatever life remained for me to enjoy.

I decided at once that it should be, at least during my lifetime, a story for my eyes only. I was the one who had been haunted and who had suffered – not

the only one, no, but surely, I thought, the only one left alive, I was the one who, to judge by my agitation of this evening, was still affected by it deeply, it was from me alone that the ghost must be driven.

I glanced up at the moon, and at the bright, bright Pole star. Christmas Eve. And then I prayed, a heart-felt, simple prayer for peace of mind, and for strength and steadfastness to endure while I completed what would be the most agonizing task, and I prayed for a blessing upon my family, and for quiet rest to us all that night. For, although I was in control of my emotions now, I dreaded the hours of darkness that lay ahead.

For answer to my prayer, I received immediately the memory of some lines of poetry, lines I had once known but long forgotten. Later, I spoke them aloud to Esmé, and she identified the source for me at once.

'Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long.
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No Fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is that time.'

As I recited them aloud, a great peace came upon me, I was wholly myself again yet stiffened by my

resolution. After this holiday when the family had all departed, and Esmé and I were alone, I would begin to write my story.

When I returned to the house, Isobel and Aubrey had gone upstairs to share the delight of creeping about with bulging stockings for their young sons, Edmund was reading, Oliver and Will were in the old playroom at the far end of the house, where there was a battered billiard table, and Esmé was tidying the drawing room, preparatory to going to bed. About that evening's incident, nothing whatsoever was said, though she wore an anxious expression, and I had to invent a bad bout of acute indigestion to account for my abrupt behaviour. I saw to the fire, damping down the flames, and knocked out my pipe on the side of the hearth, feeling quiet and serene again, and no longer agitated about what lonely terrors I might have to endure, whether asleep or awake, during the small hours of the coming night.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day, and I looked forward to it eagerly and with gladness, it would be a time of family joy and merrymaking, love and friend-ship, fun and laughter.

When it was over, I would have work to do.

'No, sir.'

'Well, might not Mr Daily simply want to add a little more to his empire, for the sake of being able to say that he had got it? You imply he is that type of man.'

'Maybe he is.' He wiped his mouth on his napkin. 'But let me tell you that you won't find anybody, not even Mr Sam Daily, having to do with any of it.'

'And may I ask why?'

I spoke rather sharply, for I was growing impatient of the half-hints and dark mutterings made by grown men at the mention of Mrs Drablow and her property. I had been right, this was just the sort of place where superstition and tittle-tattle were rife, and even allowed to hold sway over commonsense. Now, I expected the otherwise stalwart countryman on my left to whisper that maybe he would and, then again, maybe he would not, and how he might tell a tale, if he chose . . . But, instead of replying to my question at all, he turned right away from me and engaged his neighbour on the other side in a complicated discussion of crops and, infuriated by the now-familiar mystery and nonsense, I rose abruptly and left the room. Ten minutes later, changed out of my funeral suit into less formal and more comfortable clothes, I was standing on the pavement awaiting the arrival of the car, driven by a man called Keckwick.

Across the Causeway

No car appeared. Instead, there drew up outside the Gifford Arms a rather worn and shabby pony and trap. It was not at all out of place in the market square – I had noticed a number of such vehicles that morning and, assuming that this one belonged to some farmer or stockman, I took no notice, but continued to look around me, for a motor. Then I heard my name called.

The pony was a small, shaggy-looking creature, wearing blinkers, and the driver with a large cap pulled down low over his brow, and a long, hairy brown coat, looked not unlike it, and blended with the whole equipage. I was delighted at the sight, eager for the ride, and climbed up with alacrity. Keckwick had scarcely given me a glance, and now, merely assuming that I was seated, clucked at the pony and set off,

picking his way out of the crowded market square and up the lane that led to the church. As we passed it, I tried to catch a glimpse of the grave of Mrs Drablow, but it was hidden from view behind some bushes. I remembered the ill-looking, solitary young woman, too, and Mr Jerome's reaction to my mention of her. But, within a few moments, I was too caught up in the present and my surroundings to speculate any further upon the funeral and its aftermath, for we had come out into open country, and Crythin Gifford lay quite behind us, small and self-contained as it was. Now, all around and above and way beyond there seemed to be sky, sky and only a thin strip of land. I saw this part of the world as those great landscape painters had seen Holland, or the country around Norwich. Today there were no clouds at all, but I could well imagine how magnificently the huge, brooding area of sky would look with grey, scudding rain and storm clouds lowering over the estuary, how it would be here in the floods of February time when the marshes turned to iron-grey and the sky seeped down into them, and in the high winds of March, when the light rippled, shadow chasing shadow across the ploughed fields.

Today, all was bright and clear, and there was a thin sun overall, though the light was pale now, the sky having lost the bright blue of the morning, to

become almost silver. As we drove briskly across the absolutely flat countryside, I saw scarcely a tree, but the hedgerows were dark and twiggy and low, and the earth that had been ploughed was at first a rich mole-brown, in straight furrows. But, gradually, soil gave way to rough grass and I began to see dykes and ditches filled with water, and then we were approaching the marshes themselves. They lay silent, still and shining under the November sky, and they seemed to stretch in every direction, as far as I could see, and to merge without a break into the waters of the estuary, and the line of the horizon.

My head reeled at the sheer and startling beauty, the wide, bare openness of it. The sense of space, the vastness of the sky above and on either side made my heart race. I would have travelled a thousand miles to see this. I had never imagined such a place.

The only sounds I could hear above the trotting of the pony's hooves, the rumble of the wheels and the creak of the cart, were sudden, harsh, weird cries from birds near and far. We had travelled perhaps three miles, and passed no farm or cottage, no kind of dwelling house at all, all was emptiness. Then, the hedgerows petered out, and we seemed to be driving towards the very edge of the world. Ahead, the water gleamed like metal and I began to make out a track, rather like the line left by the wake of a boat, that

ran across it. As we drew nearer, I saw that the water was lying only shallowly over the rippling sand on either side of us, and that the line was in fact a narrow track leading directly ahead, as if into the estuary itself. As we slipped onto it, I realized that this must be the Nine Lives Causeway – this and nothing more – and saw how, when the tide came in, it would quickly be quite submerged and untraceable.

At first the pony and then the trap met the sandy path, the smart noise we had been making ceased, and we went on almost in silence save for a hissing, silky sort of sound. Here and there were clumps of reeds, bleached bone-pale, and now and again the faintest of winds caused them to rattle dryly. The sun at our backs reflected in the water all around so that everything shone and glistened like the surface of a mirror, and the sky had taken on a faint pinkish tinge at the edges, and this in turn became reflected in the marsh and the water. Then, as it was so bright that it hurt my eyes to go on staring at it, I looked up ahead and saw, as if rising out of the water itself, a tall, gaunt house of grey stone with a slate roof, that now gleamed steelily in the light. It stood like some lighthouse or beacon or martello tower, facing the whole, wide expanse of marsh and estuary, the most astonishingly situated house I had ever seen or could ever conceivably have imagined, isolated, uncompromising but also, I

thought, handsome. As we neared it, I saw the land on which it stood was raised up a little, surrounding it on every side for perhaps three or four hundred yards, of plain, salt-bleached grass, and then gravel. This little island extended in a southerly direction across an area of scrub and field towards what looked like the fragmentary ruins of some old church or chapel.

There was a rough scraping, as the cart came onto the stones, and then pulled up. We had arrived at Eel Marsh House.

For a moment or two, I simply sat looking about me in amazement, hearing nothing save the faint keening of the winter wind that came across the marsh, and the sudden rawk-rawk of a hidden bird. I felt a strange sensation, an excitement mingled with alarm . . . I could not altogether tell what. Certainly, I felt loneliness, for in spite of the speechless Keckwick and the shaggy brown pony I felt quite alone, outside that gaunt, empty house. But I was not afraid – of what could I be afraid in this rare and beautiful spot? The wind? The marsh birds crying? Reeds and still water?

I got down from the trap and walked around to the man.

'How long will the causeway remain passable?'

'Till five.'

So I should scarcely be able to do more than look

around, get my bearings in the house, and make a start on the search for the papers, before it would be time for him to return to fetch me back again. I did not want to leave here so soon. I was fascinated by it, I wanted Keckwick to be gone, so that I could wander about freely and slowly, take it all in through every one of my senses, and by myself. 'Listen,' I said, making a sudden decision, 'it will be quite ridiculous for you to be driving to and fro twice a day. The best thing will be for me to bring my bags and some food and drink and stay a couple of nights here. That way I shall finish the business a good deal more efficiently and you will not be troubled. I'll return with you later this afternoon and then tomorrow, perhaps you could bring me back as early as is possible, according to the tides?'

I waited. I wondered if he was going to deter me, or argue, to try and put me off the enterprise, with those old dark hints. He thought for some time. But he must have recognized the firmness of my resolve at last, for he just nodded.

'Or perhaps you'd prefer to wait here for me now? Though I shall be a couple of hours. You know what suits you best.'

For answer, he simply pulled on the pony's rein, and began to turn the trap about. Minutes later, they were receding across the causeway, smaller and smaller

figures in the immensity and wideness of marsh and sky, and I had turned away and walked around to the front of Eel Marsh House, my left hand touching the shaft of the key that was in my pocket.

But I did not go inside. I did not want to, yet awhile. I wanted to drink in all the silence and the mysterious, shimmering beauty, to smell the strange, salt smell that was borne faintly on the wind, to listen for the slightest murmur. I was aware of a heightening of every one of my senses, and conscious that this extraordinary place was imprinting itself on my mind and deep in my imagination, too.

I thought it most likely that, if I were to stay here for any length of time, I should become quite addicted to the solitude and the quietness, and that I should turn birdwatcher, too, for there must be many rare birds, waders and divers, wild ducks and geese, especially in spring and autumn, and with the aid of books and good binoculars I should soon come to identify them by their flight and call. Indeed, as I wandered around the outside of the house, I began to speculate about living here, and to romanticize a little about how it would be for Stella and me, alone in this wild and remote spot – though the question of what I might actually do to earn our keep, and how we might occupy ourselves from day to day, I conveniently set aside.

Then, thinking thus fancifully, I walked away from the house in the direction of the field, and across it, towards the ruin. Away to the west, on my right hand, the sun was already beginning to slip down in a great, wintry, golden-red ball which shot arrows of fire and blood-red streaks across the water. To the east, sea and sky had darkened slightly to a uniform, leaden grey. The wind that came suddenly snaking off the estuary was cold.

As I neared the ruins, I could see clearly that they were indeed of some ancient chapel, perhaps monastic in origin, and all broken-down and crumbling, with some of the stones and rubble fallen, probably in recent gales, and lying about in the grass. The ground sloped a little down to the estuary shore and, as I passed under one of the old arches, I startled a bird, which rose up and away over my head with loudly beating wings and a harsh croaking cry that echoed all around the old walls and was taken up by another, some distance away. It was an ugly, satanic-looking thing, like some species of sea-vulture – if such a thing existed – and I could not suppress a shudder as its shadow passed over me, and I watched its ungainly flight away towards the sea with relief. Then I saw that the ground at my feet and the fallen stones between were a foul mess of droppings, and guessed that these birds must nest and roost in the walls above.

Otherwise, I rather liked this lonely spot, and thought how it would be on a warm evening at midsummer, when the breezes blew balmily from off the sea, across the tall grasses, and wild flowers of white and yellow and pink climbed and bloomed among the broken stones, the shadows lengthened gently, and June birds poured out their finest songs, with the faint lap and wash of water in the distance.

So musing, I emerged into a small burial ground. It was enclosed by the remains of a wall, and I stopped in astonishment at the sight. There were perhaps fifty old gravestones, most of them leaning over or completely fallen, covered in patches of greenish-yellow lichen and moss, scoured pale by the salt wind, and stained by years of driven rain. The mounds were grassy, and weed-covered, or else they had disappeared altogether, sunken and slipped down. No names or dates were now decipherable, and the whole place had a decayed and abandoned air.

Ahead, where the walls ended in a heap of dust and rubble, lay the grey water of the estuary. As I stood, wondering, the last light went from the sun, and the wind rose in a gust, and rustled through the grass. Above my head, that unpleasant, snake-necked bird came gliding back towards the ruins, and I saw that its beak was hooked around a fish that writhed and struggled helplessly. I watched the creature alight and, as

I did so, it disturbed some of the stones, which toppled and fell out of sight somewhere.

Suddenly conscious of the cold and the extreme bleakness and eeriness of the spot and of the gathering dusk of the November afternoon, and not wanting my spirits to become so depressed that I might begin to be affected by all sorts of morbid fancies, I was about to leave, and walk briskly back to the house, where I intended to switch on a good many lights and even light a small fire if it were possible, before beginning my preliminary work on Mrs Drablow's papers. But, as I turned away, I glanced once again round the burial ground and then I saw again the woman with the wasted face, who had been at Mrs Drablow's funeral. She was at the far end of the plot, close to one of the few upright headstones, and she wore the same clothing and bonnet, but it seemed to have slipped back so that I could make out her face a little more clearly.

In the greyness of the fading light, it had the sheen and pallor not of flesh so much as of bone itself. Earlier, when I had looked at her, although admittedly it had been scarcely more than a swift glance each time, I had not noticed any particular expression on her ravaged face, but then I had, after all, been entirely taken with the look of extreme illness. Now, however, as I stared at her, stared until my eyes

ached in their sockets, stared in surprise and bewilderment at her presence, now I saw that her face did wear an expression. It was one of what I can only describe – and the words seem hopelessly inadequate to express what I saw – as a desperate, yearning malevolence; it was as though she were searching for something she wanted, needed – *must have*, more than life itself, and which had been taken from her. And, towards whoever had taken it she directed the purest evil and hatred and loathing, with all the force that was available to her. Her face, in its extreme pallor, her eyes, sunken but unnaturally bright, were burning with the concentration of passionate emotion which was within her and which streamed from her. Whether or not this hatred and malevolence was directed towards me I had no means of telling – I had no reason at all to suppose that it could possibly have been, but at that moment I was far from able to base my reactions upon reason and logic. For the combination of the peculiar, isolated place and the sudden appearance of the woman and the dreadfulness of her expression began to fill me with fear. Indeed, I had never in my life been so possessed by it, never known my knees to tremble and my flesh to creep, and then to turn cold as stone, never known my heart to give a great lurch, as if it would almost leap up into my dry mouth and then begin pounding in my chest like

a hammer on an anvil, never known myself gripped and held fast by such dread and horror and apprehension of evil. It was as though I had become paralysed. I could not bear to stay there, for fear, but nor had I any strength left in my body to turn and run away, and I was as certain as I had ever been of anything that, at any second, I would drop dead on that wretched patch of ground.

It was the woman who moved. She slipped behind the gravestone and, keeping close to the shadow of the wall, went through one of the broken gaps and out of sight.

The very second that she had gone, my nerve and the power of speech and movement, my very sense of life itself, came flooding back through me, my head cleared and, all at once, I was angry, yes, *angry*, with her for the emotion she had aroused in me, for causing me to experience such fear, and the anger led at once to determination, to follow her and stop her, and then to ask some questions and receive proper replies, to get to the bottom of it all.

I ran quickly and lightly over the short stretch of rough grass between the graves towards the gap in the wall, and came out almost on the edge of the estuary. At my feet, the grass gave way within a yard or two to sand, then shallow water. All around me the marshes and the flat salt dunes stretched away

until they merged with the rising tide. I could see for miles. There was no sign at all of the woman in black, nor any place in which she could have concealed herself.

Who she was – or *what* – and how she had vanished, such questions I did not ask myself. I tried not to think about the matter at all but, with the very last of the energy that I could already feel draining out of me rapidly, I turned and began to run, to flee from the graveyard and the ruins and to put the woman at as great a distance behind as I possibly could. I concentrated everything upon my running, hearing only the thud of my own body on the grass, the escape of my own breath. And I did not look back.

By the time I reached the house again I was in a lather of sweat, from exertion and from the extremes of my emotions, and as I fumbled with the key my hand shook, so that I dropped it twice upon the step before managing at last to open the front door. Once inside, I slammed it shut behind me. The noise of it boomed through the house but, when the last reverberation had faded away, the place seemed to settle back into itself again and there was a great, seething silence. For a long time, I did not move from the dark, wood-panelled hall. I wanted company, and I had none, lights and warmth and a strong drink inside me, I needed reassurance. But, more than anything

else, I needed an *explanation*. It is remarkable how powerful a force simple curiosity can be. I had never realized that before now. In spite of my intense fear and sense of shock, I was consumed with the desire to find out exactly who it was that I had seen, and how, I could not rest until I had settled the business, for all that, while out there, I had not dared to stay and make any investigations.

I did not believe in ghosts. Or rather, until this day, I had not done so, and whatever stories I had heard of them I had, like most rational, sensible young men, dismissed as nothing more than stories indeed. That certain people claimed to have a stronger than normal intuition of such things and that certain old places were said to be haunted, of course I was aware, but I would have been loath to admit that there could possibly be anything in it, even if presented with any evidence. And I had never had any evidence. It was remarkable, I had always thought, that ghostly apparitions and similar strange occurrences always seemed to be experienced at several removes, by someone who had known someone who had heard of it from someone they knew!

But out on the marshes just now, in the peculiar, fading light and desolation of that burial ground, I had seen a woman whose form was quite substantial and yet in some essential respect also, I had no doubt,

ghostly. She had a ghostly pallor and a dreadful expression, she wore clothes that were out of keeping with the styles of the present-day; she had kept her distance from me and she had not spoken. Something emanating from her still, silent presence, in each case by a grave, had communicated itself to me so strongly that I had felt indescribable repulsion and fear. And she had appeared and then vanished in a way that surely no real, living, fleshly human being could possibly manage to do. And yet . . . she had not looked in any way – as I imagined the traditional 'ghost' was supposed to do – transparent or vaporous, she had been real, she had been there, I had seen her quite clearly, I was certain that I could have gone up to her, addressed her, touched her.

I did not believe in ghosts.

What other explanation was there?

From somewhere in the dark recesses of the house, a clock began to strike, and it brought me out of my reverie. Shaking myself, I deliberately turned my mind from the matter of the woman in the graveyards, to the house in which I was now standing.

Off the hall ahead led a wide oak staircase and, on one side, a passage to what I took to be the kitchen and scullery. There were various other doors, all of them closed. I switched on the light in the hall but the bulb was very weak, and I thought it best to go through

each of the rooms in turn and let in what daylight was left, before beginning any search for papers.

After what I had heard from Mr Bentley and from other people once I had arrived, about the late Mrs Drablow, I had had all sorts of wild imaginings about the state of her house. I had expected it, perhaps, to be a shrine to the memory of a past time, or to her youth, or to the memory of her husband of so short a time, like the house of poor Miss. Havisham. Or else to be simply cobwebbed and filthy, with old newspapers, rags and rubbish piled in corners, all the débris of a recluse – together with some half-starved cat or dog.

But, as I began to wander in and out of morning room and drawing room, sitting room and dining room and study, I found nothing so dramatic or unpleasant, though it is true that there was that faintly damp, musty, sweet-sour smell everywhere about, that will arise in any house that has been shut up for some time, and particularly in one which, surrounded as this was on all sides by marsh and estuary, was bound to be permanently damp.

The furniture was old-fashioned but good, solid, dark, and it had been reasonably well looked after, though many of the rooms had clearly not been much used or perhaps even entered for years. Only a small

parlour, at the far end of a narrow corridor off the hall, seemed to have been much lived in – probably it had been here that Mrs Drablow had passed most of her days. In every room were glass-fronted cases full of books and, besides the books, there were heavy pictures, dull portraits and oil paintings of old houses. But my heart sank when, after sorting through the bunch of keys Mr Bentley had given me, I found those which unlocked various desks, bureaux, and writing tables, for in all of them were bundles and boxes of papers – letters, receipts, legal documents, notebooks, tied with ribbon or string, and yellow with age. It looked as if Mrs Drablow had never thrown away a single piece of paper or letter in her life, and, clearly, the task of sorting through these, even in a preliminary way, was far greater than I had anticipated. Most of it might turn out to be quite worthless and redundant, but all of it would have to be examined nevertheless, before anything that Mr Bentley would have to deal with, pertaining to the disposal of the estate, could be packed up and sent to London. It was obvious that there would be little point in my making a start now, it was too late and I was too unnerved by the business in the graveyard. Instead, I simply went about the house looking in every room and finding nothing of much interest or elegance. Indeed, it was all curiously impersonal, the furniture, the

decoration, the ornaments, assembled by someone with little individuality or taste, a dull, rather gloomy and rather unwelcoming home. It was remarkable and extraordinary in only one respect – its situation. From every window – and they were tall and wide in each room – there was a view of one aspect or other of the marshes and the estuary and the immensity of the sky, all colour had been drained and blotted out of them now, the sun had set, the light was poor, there was no movement at all, no undulation of the water, and I could scarcely make out any break between land and water and sky. All was grey. I managed to let up every blind and to open one or two of the windows. The wind had dropped altogether, there was no sound save the faintest, softest suck of water as the tide crept in. How one old woman had endured day after day, night after night, of isolation in this house, let alone for so many years, I could not conceive. I should have gone mad – indeed, I intended to work every possible minute without a pause to get through the papers and be done. And yet, there was a strange fascination in looking out over the wild wide marshes, for they had an uncanny beauty, even now, in the grey twilight. There was nothing whatsoever to see for mile after mile and yet I could not take my eyes away. But for today I had had enough. Enough of solitude and no sound save the water and the moaning wind and the

melancholy calls of the birds, enough of monotonous greyness, enough of this gloomy old house. And, as it would be at least another hour before Keckwick would return in the pony trap, I decided that I would stir myself and put the place behind me. A good brisk walk would shake me up and put me in good heart, and work up my appetite and if I stepped out well I would arrive back in Crythin Gifford in time to save Keckwick from turning out. Even if I did not, I should meet him on the way. The causeway was still visible, the roads back were straight and I could not possibly lose myself.

So thinking, I closed up the windows and drew the blinds again and left Eel Marsh House to itself in the declining November light.