

I

They were generally represented as young, beautiful, modest virgins, were fond of solitude, and commonly appeared in different attire, according to the arts and sciences over which they presided.

Lemprière, under *Musae*

It was conscious of a luminous and infinite haze, as if it were floating, godlike, alpha and omega, over a sea of vapour and looking down; then less happily, after an interval of obscure duration, of murmured sounds and peripheral shadows, which reduced the impression of boundless space and empire to something much more contracted and unaccommodating. From there, with the swift fatality of a fall, the murmurs focused to voices, the shadows to faces. As in some obscure foreign film, nothing was familiar; not language, not location, not cast. Images and labels began to swim, here momentarily to coalesce, here to divide, like so many pond amoebae; obviously busy, but purposeless. These collocations of shapes and feelings, of associated morphs and phonemes, returned like the algebraic formulae of school-days, lodged in the mind by ancient rote, though what the formulae now applied to, why they existed, was entirely forgotten. It was conscious, evidently; but bereft of pronoun, all that distinguishes person from person; and bereft of time, all that distinguishes present from past and future.

For a while a pleasing intimation of superiority, of having somehow got to the top of the heap, still attached to this sense of impersonality. But even that was soon brutally dispersed by the relentless demon of reality. In a kind of mental somersault it was forced to the inescapable conclusion that far from augustly floating in the stratosphere, couched as it were in iambic pentameters, it was actually lying on its back in bed. Above the eyes presided a wall-lamp, a neat, rectangular, opaque white plastic panel.

Light. Night. A small grey room, a pale grey, the colour of a herring gull's wings. Eternal limbo, at least eventless, tolerably nothing. If it had not been for the two women staring down.

Obscurely reproached by the closer and more requiring face, it made another unwilling deduction: for some reason it was a centre of attention, an I of sorts. The face smiled, descended, with a mixture of the solicitous and the sceptical, concern tainted with a perhaps involuntary suspicion of malingering.

'Darling?'

With another painfully swift and reducing intuition it realized it was not just an I, but a male I. That must be where the inrushing sense of belowness, impotence, foolishness came from. It, I, it must be he, watched the mouth glide down like a parachutist and land on his forehead. Touch and scent, this could not be film or dream. Now the face hovered over his. Whispered words issued from the red orifice.

'Darling, you know who I am?'

He stared.

'I'm Claire.'

Not at all clear.

'Your wife, darling. Remember?'

'Wife?'

The most strangely alarming yet: to know one has spoken, but only by the proximity of the source of the sound. The brown eyes hinted at appalling depths of conjugal betrayal. He tried to attach word to person, person to self; failed; and finally shifted his eyes to the younger and more distant woman on the other side of the bed - who smiled as well, but professionally and indifferently. This person, hands in pockets, trimly observant, wore a white medical coat. Now her mouth also gave birth to words.

'Can you tell me your name?'

Of course. Name! No name. Nothing. No past, no whence or when. The abyss perceived, and almost simultaneously, its irremediability. He strained desperately, a falling man, but whatever he was trying to reach or grasp was not there. He clung to the white-coated woman's eyes, abruptly and intensely frightened. She came a step or two closer.

I'm a doctor. This is your wife. Please look at her. Do you remember her? Do you remember having seen her before? Anything about her?'

He looked. There was something expectant in the wife's expression, and yet hurt, almost peeved, as if its owner resented both the stupidity of the procedure and his silent stare. She looked nervous and tired, she wore too much make-up, the air of someone who has put on a mask to prevent a scream. Above all she demanded something he was not able to give.

Her mouth began to announce names, people's names, street names, place names, disjointed phrases. Some were repeated. He had perhaps heard them before, as words; but he had no idea what relevance they were supposed to have, nor why they should increasingly sound like evidence of crimes he had committed. In the end he shook his head. He would have liked to close his eyes, to have peace to reforget, to be one again with the sleeping blank page of oblivion. The woman bent closer still, scrutinizing him.

'Darling, please try. Please? Just for me?'

She waited a second or two, then glanced up. 'I'm afraid it's no good.'

Now the doctor leant over him. He felt her fingers gently widen his eyelids, as she examined something about his pupils. She smiled down at him as if he were a child.

'This is a private room in a hospital. You're quite safe.'
'Hospital?'

'You know what a hospital is?'

'Accident?'

'A power cut.' A hint of dryness enlivened her dark eyes, a merciful straw of humour. 'We'll soon have you switched on again.'

'I can't remember who . . . !'

'Yes, we know.'

The other woman spoke. 'Miles?'

'What miles?'

'Your name. Your name is Miles, darling. Miles Green.'

The faintest flit of an alien object, a bat's wing at dusk; but gone almost before it was apprehended.

'What's happened?'

'Nothing, darling. Nothing that can't be cured.'

He knew that was wrong; and that she knew he knew. There was altogether too much knowing about her.

'Who are you?'

'Claire. Your *wife*.'

She spoke the name again, queryingly, as if she began to doubt it herself. He looked away from her to the ceiling. It was odd, yet soothing; gull-grey, yes, gulls, one knew gulls; lightly domed, and quilted or padded into small squares, each of which was swollen out, pendent, with a little cloth-covered grey button at its centre. The effect was of endless upside-down rows of miniature but perfectly regular mole-hills, or antheps. Somewhere, in the momentary silence, a sound obtruded, the hitherto unnoticed ticking of a clock. The doctor leant over him again.

'What colour are my eyes?'

'Dark brown.'

'My hair?'

'Dark.'

'Complexion?'

'Pale. Smooth.'

'How old do you think I am?' He stared. 'Have a guess.'

'Twenty-seven. Eight.'

'Good.' She smiled, encouragingly; then went on in her briskly neutral voice. 'Now. Who wrote *Pickwick Papers*?'

'Dickens.'

'A *Midwinter Nights Dream*?' He stared again. 'Don't you know?'

'Midsummer.'

'Fine. Who?'

'Shakespeare.'

'Can you remember a character in it?'

'Bottom.' He added, 'Titania.'

'Why do you remember those two in particular?'

'God knows.'

'When did you last see it acted?'

He closed his eyes and thought, then opened them again and shook his head.

'Never mind. Now - eight times eight?'

'Sixty-four.'

'Nineteen from thirty?'

'Eleven.'

'Good. Full marks.'

She straightened. He wanted to say the answers had come from nowhere, that being mysteriously able to answer correctly only made incomprehension worse. He tried feebly to sit up, but something constrained him, the tight way the bedclothes were tucked in; and a volitional weakness, as in nightmares, where wanting to move and moving are aeons, or an eternal baby's cot, apart.

'Lie still, Mr Green. You've been under sedation.'

His secret alarm grew. Yet one could trust those alert and intent dark eyes. They held the muted irony of an old friend of the opposite sex - completely detached now, yet still harbouring the ghost of a more affectionate interest. The

other woman patted his shoulder, reclaiming her share of attention.

'We must take it easy. Just for a few days.'

He reluctantly transferred his look to her face; and derived from that 'we' an instinct to displease.

I've never seen you before.'

She laughed, a little noiseless gust, as if she were amused, he was so preposterous.

I'm afraid you have, my dear. Every day almost for the last ten years. We're *married*. We have children. You *must* remember that.'

'I don't remember anything.'

She took a breath, slightly bowed her head, then glanced again across at the doctor, who he now sensed shared, though it was veiled behind her bedside manner, his growing dislike of this implication of blame, or moral imperative. The woman was too anxious to establish an ownership of him; and one has to know who one is to wish to be owned. He felt an overwhelming desire to be inviolable: an object she might pretend to possess, he could not fight that, but not her tame pet to prove it. Best to regain the nothingness, the limbo, the grey, ticking silence. He let his eyelids fall. But almost at once he heard the doctor's voice again.

'I'd like to start some preliminary treatment now, Mrs Green.'

'Yes, of course.' He caught the wife-face making a simper across the bed, woman to woman. 'It's a relief to know he's in such good hands.' Then, 'You will let me know at once if. . .?'

'At once. Don't worry. This first disorientation is quite normal.'

The woman, his alleged wife, looked down at him, still unconvinced, still tacitly accusing. He realized, but with

irritation, not sympathy, that she was flustered, without a recipe for such situations.

'Miles, I'll be in again tomorrow.' He said nothing. 'Please try and help the doctor. Everything's going to be all right. The children are missing you.' She tried one last appeal. 'Jane? Tom? David?'

Her voice was almost wheedling, and made them sound more like overdue bills, past follies of spending, than children. She took another small breath, then bent and pecked him on the mouth. I plant this flag. This land is mine.

He did not watch her leave, but lay looking up at the ceiling, his hands by his sides beneath the bedclothes. The two women spoke by the door in low voices, out of sight. Sedation. Power cut. Anaesthetic. Operation. He shifted his feet, then felt for the side of his legs. Bare skin. He felt higher. Bare skin. A door closed, the doctor was back beside him. She reached and pressed a bell-stud beside the bed, and scrutinized him for a moment.

'You must try to understand it's a shock for them as well. People don't realize how much they rely on recognition as a proof they exist. When things like this happen, they feel scared. Insecure. Right?'

'I've got nothing on.'

She smiled briefly at the non sequitur; or perhaps at the notion that loss of clothes was more shocking than loss of memory.

'You don't need anything. It's very warm. Much too warm, in fact.' She touched her own white tunic. 'I wear nothing under this. They keep the thermostat so high, we've all complained about it. And not having any windows.' She said, 'You know what a thermostat is?'

'Somehow.'

He craned a little, looking for the first time round the room. There was indeed no window, and hardly any

furniture, no more than a small table and a chair in the far left-hand corner from where he lay. The walls were grey-quilted like the domed ceiling. Even the door opposite the foot of the bed was quilted. Only the floor had been spared, in some attempt to lighten the monotony of the rest: it was carpeted in a dull flesh-pink, the tone painters once called old rose. Quilting, padding, prison: the connection escaped him, but he sought the doctor's eyes, and she must have guessed what he lacked words for.

Tor silence. The latest thing. Acoustic insulation. We shall move you out as soon as you start picking up.'

'Clock.'

'Yes.' She pointed. It hung on the wall behind him, near the corner to his left, an absurdly fussy and over-ornamented Swiss cuckoo-clock, with an alpine gable and a small host of obscure shapes, peasants, cows, alpenhorns, edelweiss, heaven knows what else, carved on every available brown wooden surface. 'It was left us by a previous patient. An Irish gentlemen. We thought it added a human touch.'

'It's awful.'

'It won't disturb you. We've disconnected the striking mechanism. It doesn't cuckoo any more.'

He remained staring at the hideous clock: its lunatically cluttered front, its dropped intestines of weights and chains. It did disturb him, standing for something he feared, he couldn't say why; an anomaly, an incongruous reminder of all he could not remember.

'Was he cured?'

'His was rather a complex case.'

He turned his head and looked up at her again. 'He wasn't?'

'I'll tell you about him when you're better.'

He digested that. 'This isn't . . .'

'Isn't what?'

'Mad people?'

'Heavens no. You're as sane as I am. Probably saner.'

Now she sat on the edge of the bed, her arms folded, turned slightly towards him, as they waited for the bell to be answered. Two pens and a thermometer case were clipped inside an upper pocket of her tunic. Her dark hair was bound severely back at the nape, she wore no make-up; yet there was something elegantly classical about the face, of the Mediterranean. The skin was very clear, a warmth hidden in its paleness, perhaps she had Italian blood; not that she did not seem perfectly English in manner, obviously of well-bred, even upper class, background, the sort of young woman whose intelligence had made her choose a serious profession rather than live in idleness. He wondered if she were not after all Jewish, a scion of one of those distinguished families who had long combined great wealth with scholarship and public service; then wondered from where on earth he could even wonder that. She reached a hand and patted the side of his body, to reassure him.

'You're going to be fine. We've had far worse.'

'It's like being a child again.'

'I know. The treatment may not work at once. We must both be patient.' She smiled. 'So to speak.' She stood and pressed the bell again beside the bed, then resumed her seat.

'Where is this?'

'The Central.' She watched him. He shook his head. She glanced down, said nothing for a moment, then looked at him with one of her quick quizzes. 'I'm here to get that memory of yours back into circulation. You search. Everyone knows the Central.'

He sought; and in some peculiar way knew both that the seeking was a waste of time and that there was something

wise in not trying. It was not so unpleasant, after the first shock, this total severance from all one was or might be: to be not expected to do anything, to be free of a burden, forgotten in its kind, but deducible by its absence - a weight one had never seen, yet one's mental back felt relieved. Above all there was the restfulness of being in this coolly competent young woman's hands and care. A delicate neck and throat showed in the discreet V of the white tunic.

'I wish I could see my face.'

'I'm your mirror. Just for now.'

He consulted it, and saw nothing distinct at all.

'I haven't been in an accident?'

She looked grave. 'I'm afraid so. You've been turned into a toad.' Slowly, by something in her eyes, he realized he was being joked out of too much self-alarm. He managed a wan smile. She said, 'That's better.'

'Do you know who . . . what I was?'

'Am.'

'Am.'

'Yes.'

He waited for her to go on. But she watched him in silence: another test.

'You're not going to tell me.'

'You're going to tell me. One day soon.'

He was silent for a moment or two.

'I suppose you're a . . .'

'A what?'

'Couches. You know.'

'Psychiatrist?'

'That's it.'

'Neurologist. Abnormal brain function. My special field is mnemonology.'

'What's that?'

'How memory works.'

'Or doesn't.'

'Sometimes. Temporarily.'

Her hair was tied at the nape by a wisp of scarf, the only feminine touch about her clothes. The ends showed an alternate pattern of tiny printed roses and detached elliptical leaves, black on white.

'I don't know your name.'

She turned towards him on the edge of the bed and slipped her thumb under the left lapel of the tunic. There was a small plastic name-strip: DR A. DELFIE. But then, as if revealing even this tiny bureaucratic detail about herself was unclinical, she stood.

'Oh where *is* that nurse.'

She went to the door and looked out; in vain, since she returned once more beside the bed and pressed the bell, long and insistently this time. She glanced down, her mouth wryly pressed, exonerating him from any blame over her impatience.

'How long have I been here?'

'Just a few pages.'

'Pages?'

She folded her arms, and yet again there was the ghost of a quiz in her watching eyes. 'What should I have said?'

'Days?'

She smiled more openly. 'Good.'

'Why did you say pages?'

'You've mislaid your identity, Mr Green. What I have to work on is your basic sense of reality. And that seems in good shape.'

'It's like losing all one's luggage.'

'Better luggage than limbs. As they say.'

He stared at the ceiling, struggling to reconquer a past, a place, a purpose.

'I must be running away from something.'

'Perhaps. That's what we're here for. To help you dig back.' She touched his bare shoulder. 'But the thing now is not to worry. Just relax.'

She moved once more to the door. It was strangely dark beyond, he could see nothing. He stared at the domed and quilted ceiling, its forest of little hanging pods, each with its end-button. For all their greyness they were breastlike, line after line of schoolgirls' breasts, a canopy of nipples buds. He felt like pointing this out to the doctor, but she remained waiting in the open door; and then an instinct told him it was not something he could say to a woman physician. It was too personal, too whimsical, and might offend her.

At last the doctor turned. Someone came quickly in behind her: a young West Indian nurse, white cap and brown face over a starched blue-and-white uniform. In one hand she carried a coiled red cylinder of rubber sheeting. She rolled her eyes at the doctor.

'Sister on the warpath. For a change.'

The doctor gave a resigned nod, then spoke down to him.

'This is Nurse Cory.'

'Nice to have you with us, Mr Green.'

He made a sheepish grimace up at the nurse.

'Sorry.'

She raised a mock-stern finger; a flash of brown eyes, a rich Antillean voice.

'Now no sorry. Else you get smacked.'

A pretty girl, a humour, a jolly bossiness. By some rare coincidence in what otherwise must have been very different racial genes, her eyes were exactly the same colour as the doctor's.

'Close the door, nurse, would you? I want to do the primaries.'

'Sure.'

Once again Dr Delfie had her arms folded, in what was

evidently a favourite pose. Her gaze down at him seemed for a moment to be curiously speculative, as if she had not yet fully made up her mind what his treatment should be; as if she saw him less as a person than a problem. But then she gave a small smile.

They won't hurt. Many patients find them pleasantly relaxing.' She glanced across at the nurse, who had returned to the other side of the bed. 'Okay?'

They stooped and with a familiar expertise eased up the mattress first on one side, then on the other. The bed-clothes were released and in a quick series of folds stowed away to the end of the bed. He tried to sit. But the two were at once back beside him, forcing him firmly but gently down again.

Dr Delfie said, 'Lie still. Just as you are.' Though quiet, her voice was markedly more brisk; and she read his embarrassment. 'My dear man, I'm a doctor, this is a nurse. We see naked male bodies every day of our lives.'

'Yes.' He added, 'Sorry.'

'Now we have to put a rubber sheet under you. Turn towards me.' He turned, and felt the sheet laid close along his back by the nurse. 'Now the other way. Over the roll. That's right. Good. On your back again.' He stared up at the quilted ceiling. The sheet was pulled taut beneath him. 'Now raise your arms and put your hands under your head. Like so. Good. Now close your eyes. I want you to relax. You're in the best hospital in Europe for your problem. We have a very high success rate. You're not lost any more, you're on the way to recovery already. Just relax all your muscles. And your mind. Everything's going to be fine.' There was a pause. 'Now we're going to test for certain nervous reactions. You must lie quite still.'

'Yes.'

He kept his eyes obediently closed. There were a few

moments more of silence, only the ticking clock, then the doctor said quietly, 'Right, nurse.'

Two light hands touched the underside of the arms cocked back on the pillow, ran down to the armpits, then down his sides; stopped at the hip-bones, pressed down on them.

'My hands nice and warm, Mr Green?'

'Yes thank you.'

The nurse removed her hands, but only momentarily. One of them deftly lifted his limp penis and laid it back and rested on it; while the fingers of the other hand encircled his scrotal sac and began to massage it slowly. His eyes opened in alarm. The doctor leant over him.

'The memory nerve-centre in the brain is closely associated with the one controlling gonadic activity. We have to check that the latter is functioning normally. This is standard procedure. No reason to feel shy. Now please - close your eyes again.'

In her eyes there was no longer any humour or dryness at all, only medical seriousness. He closed his own again. The scrotal massaging continued. The other hand began to stroke the exposed underside of the penis. Though he did not feel relaxed at all, the manipulation did seem merely clinical, a routine matter; and as if to confirm it, the doctor spoke across the bed and his body to the nurse.

'Have they done anything about that sluice yet?'

'You're jokin!'

'I don't know what it is about Maintenance. The more you complain, the longer it takes.'

'All that lot do is play gin rummy in the boiler-room. I seen 'em.'

'I'll try to get Mr Peacock to chase them.'

'Best of luck.'

He guessed, from behind his closed eyes, that the doctor

liked the young nurse's sarcastic resignation; that they smiled at each other after that last remark. There was a silence. The gentle squeezing continued, and the stroking, with now and then a little rolling by the fingers. Yet something about the words they had spoken nagged at him. He seemed to recall that snatch of hospital shop, to have lived it before, even this before . . . yet how could he have, and not remembered?

The doctor murmured. 'Reaction?'

'Negative.'

He felt the penis, still limp, lifted and allowed to fall; then the manipulation recommenced. Desperately now, through the fog, the cruel grey wall of amnesia, he tried to regain the lost structure of experience and knowledge. Hospitals, doctors, nurses, medicine, treatments . . . there was a movement on the doctor's side of the bed.

'Give me your right hand, Mr Green.'

Frozen, he did nothing, but the doctor took the hand from beneath his head and led it upwards. It touched a bare breast. Once more shocked and horrified, he opened his eyes. Dr Delfie was leaning over him, with the white tunic open, staring at the wall above his head, as if she were doing no more than take his pulse. His hand was led to the other breast.

'What are you doing?'

She did not look down. 'Please don't talk, Mr Green. I want you to concentrate on tactile sensation.'

His eyes wandered down the opening of the white coat, and then up again, in a third access of astonishment, to her still averted face. He had not taken literally the remark about wearing nothing.

'I don't know what you're trying to do.'

'I've just told you. We must test your reflexes.'

'You mean . . .!'

She looked down with a distinct touch of impatience.

'You must have had to produce specimens during past examinations. This is no different.'

He pulled his hand away. 'But I . . . you . . .'

Her voice was suddenly strict and cold. 'Look, Mr Green, Nurse and I have many other patients to attend to. You do want to be cured, don't you?'

'Yes, of course, but - '

'Then close your eyes. And for goodness' sake try to be a little more erotic. We haven't got all day.' She leant across him, supporting herself on either side of the pillow. 'Now both hands. Anywhere you like.'

But he kept his hands where they were, back on the pillow.

'I can't. I don't know you from Adam.'

The doctor took a breath.

'Mr Green, the person I want you not to know me from is Eve. Or are you trying to tell me you'd rather have this treatment from a male nurse and doctor?'

'I take exception to that.'

She stared sternly down. 'Do you find my body repellent?' Her voice and eyes were peremptory now, brooking no refusal. He glanced down from the face to the shadowed breasts, then turned his head aside.

'I can't see what this has got to do with - '

'What you call "this" happens to be the most up-to-date and approved method for your condition.'

'I've never heard of it.'

'A few minutes ago you'd never heard of your wife and children. You are suffering from severe memory-loss.'

'I'd have remembered this.'

'Can you remember your politics?' He said nothing. 'Your religious beliefs? Your bank balance? Your profession?'

'You know I can't.'

'Then you will kindly trust me to know what I'm doing. We don't undergo long years of training in my particular specialism in order to have our professional judgement questioned - and above all on such silly grounds. You're in perfectly good physical health. I examined you thoroughly yesterday. Your genitalia are quite normal. I'm not asking for the impossible.'

He remained with his head turned away; then swallowed and spoke in a lower voice.

'Couldn't I . . . on my own?'

'We're not testing your ability to produce mere *sperm*, Mr Green.'

There was something he did not grasp about the contemptuous emphasis she gave 'sperm', as if it were synonymous with scum or froth.

'It's so embarrassing.'

'You're in hospital, for heavens' sake. There's nothing personal in this. Nurse and I are simply carrying out standard practice. All we ask is a little co-operation. Nurse?'

'Still negative, doctor.'

'Now no more nonsense, Mr Green. I have a perfectly ordinary female body. Shut your eyes and use it.'

Her voice and look were like nothing so much as those of a nanny, of the old school, admonishing a dilatory infant to perform another natural process.

'But why?'

'And will you *please* stop asking these pointless questions.'

She looked away at the wall behind the bed, forbidding any further discussion. In the end he closed his eyes and gingerly raised his hands to find the hanging breasts. He did not caress them, but merely held them. They were in themselves warm and firm, pleasant handfuls; and he

became aware of a faint tarry fragrance, like that of myrtle-flowers, no doubt from some antiseptic soap she used. But he was much less conscious of the doctor's femininity than of an anger inside himself. At least he knew he must very recently have undergone a severe trauma, that his mind must be in a particularly delicate and fragile state - and here they were, not only taking gross advantage of his weakness, his still partly drugged condition, but (far worse) disregarding totally any moral feelings he might have.

To his acute dismay, for Nurse Cory had not stopped her ministrations, he felt the beginning of an erection. Perhaps the nurse made some silent signal to the doctor, for she spoke in a slightly less carbohic voice; rather that of a Minister of Tourism addressing a delegation of foreign travel agents, and obedient to a hopeful text, composed by some civil servant who had never actually met a foreign travel agent in the flesh.

'Now I suggest you explore other regions of my body.'

It was too much. He let his hands fall back on the pillow, though he kept his eyes shut.

'This is obscene.'

Dr Delfie was silent a moment, then, exhibiting a much less pleasant aspect of her socially and intellectually superior background, curtly and coldly incisive.

'If you must know, Mr Green, your memory-loss may well be partly caused by an unconscious desire to fondle unknown female bodies.'

He opened his eyes in indignation.

'That's a totally unwarranted assumption!'

'On the contrary, it has every warrant. Monogamy is a biological nonsense, a mere transient accident of history. Your true evolutionary function, as a male, is to introduce your spermatozoa, that is, your genes, into as many wombs as possible.' She waited, but he said nothing. She went on in a lower voice. 'I repeat. Run your hands elsewhere.'

He sought for something in her eyes: the faintest trace of humour, of irony, of humanity even. But there was none. She was implacably indifferent to his scruples, his modesty, his sense of decorum. In the end he shut his eyes and found the breasts again, then felt cautiously upwards to the delicate throat, to the angles where the neck joined the shoulders; then down to the breasts again, to the sides, the curved indent of the waist, with the light linen of the opened tunic on the backs of his hands. The doctor shifted, and raised a knee on to the side of the bed.

'Anywhere you like.' His right hand moved inwards; stopped. 'Come on, Mr Green. You've touched the public area before. It won't bite you.'

He withdrew his hand.

'That's another thing. What about my wife?'

'Mrs Green is fully aware of the nature of this treatment. I explained it to her before you woke up. I have her signed consent in my office.'

One ancient fact, a merciful ally, suddenly blew back into his consciousness. He opened his eyes again, and stared up accusingly into hers.

'I thought there was a thing called the Hippocratic Oath.'

'A doctor shall use all the means in his or her power to cure a patient in care. If I remember.'

'Proper means.'

'The proper means is the most efficacious means. Which is what you are getting.'

The nurse's invisible hands would give him no peace. He looked a moment longer into the doctor's eyes, then found he could not bear their now quite overt irritation and disapproval. He once more closed his own. After a moment Dr Delfie crouched lower over him. A nipple touched his lips, then again, and the scent of the myrtle-flowers was stronger, evoking in some lost recess of mind sunlit slopes

above azure seas. He opened his eyes, in twilight now, tented beneath the sides of the tunic; once more he was invited to suckle the insistent breast. He twisted his head to one side.

'Brothel.'

'Excellent. Anything that spurs your libido.'

'You're no doctor.'

'Bonds. A whip. Black leather. Whatever you fancy.'

'This is monstrous.'

'Would you like Nurse to undress?'

'No!'

The doctor withdrew a little.

'I do hope you're not a racist, Mr Green.'

He kept his head averted. 'I demand to see the doctor in charge.'

'I am the doctor in charge.'

'Not when I get out of here. I'll have you struck off the register.'

'I trust you've noticed that already you are searching far less for words. So perhaps there is - '

'Go to hell. Piss off.'

There was a silence. The doctor's voice became even icier.

'You may not be aware of this, Mr Green. But all resorts to the imagery of defecation and urination are symptoms of culturally induced sexual guilt and repression.'

'Bugger off.'

There was yet another silence. Then the nurse spoke.

'We lost it, doctor.'

He heard an impatient outbreath from Dr Delfie; a hesitation, then she took her knee from where it rested and stood by the bed.

'Nurse, I'm afraid there's nothing for it. We'll have to do a PB.'

There was a rustle of fabric. He gave a newly alarmed look from the pillow, to see the doctor, who had taken off her tunic and now stood quite naked, hand it across the bed to the nurse. She glanced down at him with an equally naked vexation.

'You're only getting this because you're a private patient, Mr Green. I can tell you now I wouldn't tolerate your behaviour if you were on the National Health. Not for a moment.' She folded her arms. 'Quite apart from anything else there is a considerable waiting-list for beds in this ward. We work under great pressure.'

He summoned his strength and braved her eyes.

'What's a PB?'

'A plexicaulic booster.' She glanced impatiently back at the door. 'Nurse, do please hurry up. You know what a case-load I have today.'

Nurse Cory had, during this exchange, gone to the door and hung the white tunic on a hook there. She had not turned back, but unpinned the front and unfastened the back of her apron, and hung that up as well. Now she was absorbed in unbuttoning her blue dress. At the doctor's voice she hastened the task, slipped the dress down her brown arms, and placed it over the apron; crowned the hook with her cap, slipped out of her shoes. She walked back, supple and lightly, as naked as the doctor, to her side of the bed. He stared, both mesmerized and panic-stricken, at the dark and the light female bodies. They were the same height, though the twenty-year-old nurse was not so slim; nor so clinical, for he thought he detected a certain sardonic amusement in her look down at him, in the ghost of a pout that haunted her mouth. The doctor spoke again.

'Before we begin I think I had better inform you that your obstinacy may not be quite so moral as you imagine. We are by no means unfamiliar here with patients who resist

treatment because they hope we shall be forced to employ perverted practices . . . so called. We do very occasionally apply them in cases of genuine and persistent erotic recalcitrance. But never at an early stage like this. So if you are secretly attempting to drive us to coenonymphic or pseudo-terguminal stimulation, I can tell you now - no chance. Is that clearly understood?

'I don't even know what they are, for God's sake.'

'And the same applies to the Brazilian fork.'

'Or that!'

This brought another brief silence. The doctor assumed the look of a schoolmistress who knows she is being deliberately provoked to lose her temper. Her hands went to her hips.

'And one last thing, Mr Green. We also take the dimmest possible view of crypto-amnesia.' She paused, to make sure the warning had registered. 'Now on your side. Facing me.'

The nurse's hand slipped under his left shoulder, coaxing him round.

'Go on, Mr Green. Mrs Grundy says. Be a good boy.'

He cast a suspicious and resentful look at the smiling West Indian face, but eventually turned on his side. With a neatness of movement and simultaneity of timing that suggested considerable experience his two medical attendants were immediately on the bed as well, on their respective sides. Nurse Cory lay against his back, while the doctor disconcertingly pressed her back against his front. He felt them both squirm a little, respectively forwards and rearwards, as if to secure him more firmly in the vice of their two bodies. A gratuitous wriggle of the black girl's loins against his bottom, as she did this, confirmed what he had already suspected about her. He stared at the doctor's dark hair, the wisp of scarf an inch or two from his nose. There was a brief silence. Then the doctor spoke. Her voice was

quieter, in an evident, but not entirely successful attempt to make a less peremptory approach.

'Right. Now kindly place your left hand on my breasts.'

She lifted an arm towards the ceiling. He hesitated, but then did as he was told; as one might, at the behest of a driving instructor, place one's hand on some knob or switch. The doctor lowered her arm. Her hand came to rest on his, to keep it where it lay.

'Now listen closely, Mr Green. I will try to explain one last time. Memory is strongly attached to ego. Your ego has lost in a conflict with your super-ego, which has decided to repress it - to censor it. All Nurse and I wish to do is to enlist the aid of the third component in your psyche, the id. Your id is that flaccid member pressed against my posterior. It is potentially your best friend. And mine as your doctor. Do you understand what I am saying?'

He felt Nurse Cory kiss, then lick, the nape of his neck.

'This is an infamous abuse of personal privacy.'

'I'm afraid that is your super-ego speaking. This procedure bears some resemblance to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, just as amnesia is akin to drowning. Do you follow me?'

He stared at her. 'Under the very greatest protest.'

She took a breath, though her voice remained deliberately neutral and matter-of-fact. 'Mr Green, I'm bound to tell you that I expect this kind of attitude in the culturally deprived. But not in patients of your background and education.'

'Moral protest.'

'I cannot pass that. Your mind is where I need help.'

'I may for the moment not know who I am. But I'm damn sure it wasn't someone who'd have ever - '

'Forgive me, but that is hardly a logical statement. You don't know who you are. There is therefore an equal mathematical possibility that you were sexually promiscuous.'

Statistically I can reveal that it is rather more than an equal chance. In your particular social grouping and profession. Which latter is one, I must also warn you, that has an extremely long and well-recorded history of general incapacity to face up to the realities of life.'

That bloody woman did tell you something!'

'A good deal less than your hostile attitude to her.'

'I couldn't remember who she was, that was all.'

'But you appeared to prefer looking at me. Even though you no more knew who I was.'

'You seemed more understanding. Then.'

'And more attractive?'

He hesitated. 'Perhaps.' He added, 'Physically.'

'In common parlance, you fancied me?'

'I'm a very sick man. Sex was the last thing in my mind. And for God's sake tell this nurse to stop nibbling at my neck.'

'Would you prefer the attentions of her mouth elsewhere?'

He was silent a moment.

'That's revolting.'

'Why, Mr Green?'

'You know perfectly well why.'

'No. I don't know why.'

'My dear woman, I may have forgotten facts. I have not forgotten common decency. If I had, I should almost certainly have strangled you by now.'

She pressed his passive hand a little closer against her breasts. 'That's precisely my puzzle, Mr Green. Why your apparently violent dislike for our methods manifests itself only in words.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You've made no attempt to push us away, to get off the bed, to leave the room. All actions of which you are capable.'

And which would appear to be the normal physical equivalents of your state of mind.'

'It's not my fault if I'm half drugged.'

'Ah. But you aren't, Mr Green. You may have felt so at first waking. But you only woke because I had given you a counter-sedative. A stimulant. It would have taken full effect long before now. You can't put it down to that, I'm afraid.' He felt like someone in a chess game, trapped without warning. The doctor pressed his hand again. 'I'm not criticizing you, Mr Green. Merely asking.'

'Because . . . because I can't remember anything. I presume someone knew what they were doing when they sent me here.'

'Are you saying you concede it is possible our methods do have their reasons?'

'It's your manner I can't stand.'

The doctor did not answer for a moment; then she quietly removed his hand from her breast, shifted away a little, and turned round on her other side to face him. Her eyes were so close that he had difficulty in focusing them properly, but something in them, and her face, suggested that she realized he was not to be further bullied. For once it was she who lowered her eyes. She spoke in a near-whisper, almost as if she did not want Nurse Cory, just behind him, to hear.

'Mr Green, our work here is not easy. We are not totally devoid of ordinary human feelings. There are patients who . . . well, that frankly we can relate to more easily than others. I shouldn't be saying this, but when I examined you on admission, I did not, as I confess I sometimes do at that stage, secretly wish that I had followed my original ambition of specializing in paediatrics. As a matter of fact I have been looking forward to working on your case, partly because I anticipated from certain features special to it that you would be eager yourself to work on it in conjunction with me.

Inasmuch as a patient can, that is. I sincerely beg your pardon if I counted too much on that prognosis. On the other hand I hope you will believe that no one can work in this ward who does not put patients' health well above personal feeling. Who has not learnt to sacrifice extramural notions of modesty and privacy on the greater altar of human need.' Her eyes rose gravely to meet his. 'I trust you can accept at least this?'

'If I must.'

'Mr Green, in a moment or two I shall close my eyes. I would like you to kiss me, then to turn round and kiss Nurse. Purely a symbol of our common humanity in a situation that is difficult for all three of us. Then perhaps we can all make a fresh start and help you achieve the erection, and eroticism, I know you are capable of.'

Before he could answer she had tilted her mouth a little; no longer the doctor, the schoolmarm, or even a grown woman - but most of all like a demure and obedient niece waiting for a kiss from an uncle. He felt a pressure from his back, discreedy urging him to do what was asked. He looked at the face so close to his own, the dark eyelashes resting on the pale skin, the classical nose, the finely proportioned mouth. In other circumstances one might have called it a beautiful face, rather divinely balanced between intelligence and a latent sensuality. He wavered, still resisted, felt unfairly trapped. But he had to do something. He craned forward, touched his pressed lips briefly against hers, and drew back immediately.

'Thank you, Mr Green.' Her eyes opened, the medical persona reappeared. 'Now I'm sure you're not a racist, but you were less than kind to Nurse Cory just now. In case the fact is lost along with the rest of your memory, perhaps I may remind you of the very considerable West Indian contribution to the efficiency of our hospital services. I'm

sure Nurse would appreciate it if you would turn and extend the same token of understanding to her.'

She eased her body back a little, and he felt the body behind do the same. Dr Delfie's severely professional eyes held his, and perhaps it was above all to escape them that he finally turned. He kept his arm rigidly along the side of his body, as if he were standing to attention. Nurse Cory's hand came up to his shoulder. Her eyes were also closed, the fuller mouth tilted up in the same waiting, submissive child-like manner. However, her body seemed warmer, more curved and pliant than the doctor's; and though she lay quite still, he sensed a dormant agility.

He bent his head to deliver the second token of understanding. But this time he did not encounter the same passivity. The nurse's hand slipped up behind his head. Their mouths had barely lost contact after his quick peck than they met again. Her lips opened a little, and he detected the same tarry fragrance as with the doctor. It must have been used in mouthwash as well as soap, and by all the staff. A moment or two passed, he tried to draw back, but the hand behind his head insisted he should not, and the girl's body strained closer. Her tongue began to probe. Then a dark leg bent and slipped up across his, bringing them closer still.

He felt no less horrified, shocked and indignant than before, but somehow still lacked the will to push the persistent young nurse away. After all, she was a comparatively innocent party; and there was even a certain pleasure in putting the doctor's nose out of joint by being more cooperative with her junior. He had not been mistaken over the agility, for now the lithe and restless creature bore him backwards on the pillow and swarmed half across him, seemingly not to be denied this demonstration of her ability to prolong and deepen a kiss. In another few moments she

had managed to find her way entirely on top of him. The doctor must have got off the bed. He felt the nurse reach down and catch his limp wrist on the rubber sheet, then lead his hand to her on the rounded contour of her cheeks. To the now quite unashamedly suggestive synecdoches of her tongue were added quiverings and tremulous little borings in the surface beneath his hand. In a vain attempt to calm her he raised his right hand and placed it on the other cheek.

He knew, as in a nightmare, that he was slipping fatally towards disaster; and equally was powerless to prevent it. Yet somewhere inside his blinded psyche an entire moral being continued to protest at this abject surrender to animality, this blatant pandering to the basest instincts. It was seconded by an aesthetic being, a person of taste, a true if temporarily lost Miles Green - who would not, he knew it in his bones, have ordinarily been caught dead in such vulgar and humiliating physical circumstances, or for a moment listened to the doctor's specious justifications. It occurred to him, with a dawning excitement, that this intuitive sense of what he could never have been might be a useful clue to what he actually was, and he began to speculate - with some difficulty, as Nurse Cory had now raised herself on her arms and was teasing his face and mouth with her exuberant young breasts - as to a suitable profession. Almost at once he had evidence that he was on the right track, and that the doctor, in hinting at something vaguely louche, promiscuous, had once again been deliberately misleading him.

From nowhere, miraculously, came a first recall of something he knew was autobiographical, and to do with his occluded past. Though it was only the very haziest apprehension, without detail, he knew it had something to do with rows of watching, attentive faces; and that what

they were watching was he himself. Of that he was quite sure. Indeed in his excitement at this breakthrough he inadvertently dug his nails into the nurse's bottom, a gesture she misinterpreted, so that he had to suffer a paroxysm of breasts and loins in response. The last thing he wished was to be distracted from his train of thought. It therefore seemed wisest to encourage her in hers. Having improved his grip on the exposed cheeks, and undergone another bout of trembling, he was able to concentrate anew on his discovery.

More specific clues his crippled memory refused to surrender; but he felt convinced that he had been used to performing in some way in public. As he absentmindedly caressed an excited nipple with the end of his tongue, purely to still the body on top of him, he tried to evoke a suitably senior and respected profession. It was obviously something far removed from the frivolity of the arts, from mere entertaining - the law, perhaps. The Church did not feel quite right. A public-school headmaster was a possibility, or the Navy. Captain Miles Green, RN, had a very plausible sound - yet brought no more precise and clinching echo. It crossed his mind that the theatrical profession might just, after all, fit the bill, since there did seem something spellbound, as also something half hidden in the darkness, about this blurred, yet definite, sense of an audience. On the other hand actors were not socially responsible people, as he felt more and more certain the true Miles Green was.

For what his equally blurred yet definite real self rose against, as abruptly as Nurse Cory herself, suddenly erect, a knee on the bed on either side of his chest, was the idea that it would, in its right mind, ever have allowed any of this to happen. A further inspiration breathed upon him. Was it not actually most likely, he thought, as the black girl,

having seized his hands, now led them up, like lifeless flannels or sponge, over her smooth stomach to ablate the cones of dark-tipped flesh above, that he was a Member of Parliament? A determined opponent of the forces of evil and permissive morality in society?

And what had the wretched doctor said about inability to face up to the realities of life? Was not that just the sort of snide, childishly malicious remark the general public liked to make about their elected representatives? He felt a thrill of intuitive certainty that he was very warm . . . and then another thrill, for something else she had said still worried him. Why indeed had he not left the room at once? But wait: suppose he truly was a Member, stumbled on a flagrant medical malpractice of import far beyond the walls of this one hospital? Then it was clear. Between his personal repugnance and public duty, there was only one choice, as Gladstone had so amply witnessed in his work with prostitutes.

Gladstone - he had remembered Gladstone! He felt a third *frisson* of incipient self-discovery; for not only the memory of Gladstone, but that of more recent public figures selflessly braving the sex-hells of Hamburg and Copenhagen on behalf of their constituents returned to him. He felt profoundly relieved. Albeit unconsciously, he had, in not leaving this room, chosen the right, the responsible thing, and was doing what he began to feel sure he was elected to do.

If that were so - my God, a day would come when he would arraign doctor, hospital, treatment, all, in terms that would settle their hash for good. Now a hand was led down and invited to explore between the splayed thighs of the kneeling nurse. No silent Member, he: he would catch Mr Speaker's eye and rise, nothing could stop him rising, with aplomb and dignity and full force, to his most solemn and

convincing height. 'Is the Minister aware of the increasing incidence of gross sexual abuse of mentally incapacitated patients by nymphomaniacal and multiracial members of staff in a certain major hospital? Does he realize that their hapless victims...'

Alas, further composition of his speech became impossible, for Nurse Cory's attention must have been caught by something else riding behind her. Her hand released his, felt back.

'Mr Green! You've done it!'

The next moment she had sunk upon him. His mouth was briefly but violently kissed, then she seemed to writhe and slither down his body, like a snake. He felt his own nipples being licked, and gave up trying to imagine how this appalling scene might end.

That's enough, nurse. Nurse!'

The nurse lay still, at the second and sharper admonition, her cheek couched against his stomach. He opened his eyes. Dr Delfie was standing by the side of the bed, her arms folded, eyeing her prone assistant with more than a hint of the disapproval hitherto reserved for him. Nurse Cory raised herself from body and bed, then stood with her head bowed.

'Sorry, doctor.'

'How many times do I have to tell you we use the Hopkins-Sezscholsky sequence here?'

'I forgot.'

'That's the third time this week.'

'It did work, doctor.'

'It's not a question of what works. I'm talking about ward rules. It's for your own protection, nurse. As I keep telling you, over-stimulation just doubles our work-load. That's why we insist on Hopkins-Sezscholsky. You know that.' She added, not without a touch of the sanctimoniousness of

those who like to pull rank, 'I don't want to have to speak to sister.'

Nurse Cory looked across the bed in horror. 'Oh please don't, Dr Delfie. Please. I got the old cow up to here already.'

'Nurse, you also do *not* speak like that about senior staff in front of patients.'

The nurse bowed her head again. 'It's only what most of them say.'

'That's not the point.'

'Honest, I'll never do it again, doctor. Cross my heart.'

Dr Delfie softened a little. 'Very well. But I don't want to have to speak to you again.' At last she diverted her look back and down to their patient, with a very thin smile of token apology. 'Do forgive me, Mr Green. Nurse is still under training here.' Then she looked down at the middle of his body. 'Now. Let's see how the sensible part of you is doing.'

He felt her weigh and assess the size and rigidity of the sensible part. He closed his eyes.

'See if you can't make it a shade bolder still. Just another centimetre.' The part was tapped underneath. 'Splendid. Again. Again. Once more. Fine.' Her voice had acquired a new tone: it was almost one of praise, with even a hint of surprise. She stood over him again. 'I'll complete treatment myself today, as it is our first session. But generally it will be done by the nurses. I shall of course come and check progress from time to time. All right?'

He opened his eyes, but he was beyond words, and could answer only with a baleful stare; which she ignored. Without warning, her left knee was on the bed and then, with an easy athletic movement, she had straddled across him on all fours.

'Nurse will perform the insertion.'

Still he could only stare, unbelieving of what was happening, even as it happened. He felt the doctor, suspended on her arms, expertly lower her loins, camber, arch, adjust herself. Insertion. He was cased, sunk, buried deep.

'I hope that's not too uncomfortable?'

Still he stared. She seemed to have gained yet another personality. There was no irritation or impatience now, merely a quiet concentration. She spoke again, oblivious of his look and all it tried to express. 'Tour hands on my breasts, please.'

He closed his eyes. Something made his hands rise and find the breasts.

That's the spirit. Try and delay your orgasm. Purely for your own sake. I shan't have one.' She began to rock slowly up and down, still suspended on her arms. The pubis lingered a moment, held down against his own. 'I wish to retain you as long as possible, so please say if you find this motion over-stimulating.' He pressed his lips together, determined not to speak. There passed half a minute or so of a slow lumbar rising and falling. That's very good. Nicely sustained.'

He opened his eyes, driven beyond endurance.

'I don't know how you can even *think* of doing a thing like this.'

She gave him a condescending and cursory smile down. 'I expect that's because you're not scientifically trained, Mr Green.'

'Like a woman of the streets.'

'I'm afraid you'd find very few modern sociologists who did not see prostitutes as serving a most useful function.' Again the pubis pressed and lingered before it withdrew. 'For a start, the incidence of rape would be much higher without them. There is also abundant evidence that they relieve a great deal of personal and therefore community

stress in other ways.' She stopped the movement at their loins. 'Now we'll rest for a moment.'

He let his hands drop.

'That's exactly what this is. Rape. The other way round.'

'Oh come now, Mr Green. You're not going to suggest that just because I have temporary possession of a few medically and biologically already obsolescent inches of your anatomy . . . I thought that childish old male phobia was confined now to only the most primitive societies.' He closed his eyes. 'I'm not half your physical strength. A mere naked woman, Mr Green.'

'I had realized that.'

'I think you would realize it better if you opened your eyes and put your hands to more effective use. I should like you to see and feel my defencelessness. How small and weak I am, compared to you - how rapable, as it were.' He did not budge. 'Mr Green, I don't wish to sound vain of my skills, but I've worked long enough in this ward to know that your reluctance to give way to perfectly natural instincts is most unusual. One reason I can already detect is that you are over-attached to the verbalization of feeling, instead of to the direct act of feeling itself, which in turn means that - '

'For God's sake - who's doing all the talking?'

Now her voice assumed a tone of intolerably prim - were the adjective not so ill-descriptive of physical circumstances - knowingness.

'I talk only to explain. Also to see if your erection confirms your hostile verbal attitude. I am glad to note that it does not.'

'It would if I had anything to do with the accursed thing.'

She smiled.

'You really are quite a case, Mr Green. Castration anxiety. Now fear of pleasure. I think we shall have to have you stuffed and put in a museum.'

'I can tell you one pleasure I look forward to immensely - not paying your bill.'

'Mr Green, there's no need for all this - unless of course your threats make you feel even more sexually excited than you already are, in which case do please continue. We are well aware here that for some men the notion of copulation is inseparable from the notion of defilement, owing to an unresolved - '

'I can tell you another thing. That nurse knows a damned sight more about the handling of patients than you do. At least she did her bit with some warmth. You're the one who needs a few lessons.'

He had hoped to ruffle the doctor, but when she spoke it was in the same insufferably official, detached, superior voice.

I have already explained why I can show no feelings whatever for you, Mr Green. I'm afraid you must get used to that. So, incidentally, must Nurse Cory. That is why I spoke to her. Our sole function is to provide you with a source of erotic arousal. In anything in that area - in the domain of coital technique - you have only, within reason and depending on the availability of staff, to ask, and we will do our best. If you would prefer some other position, we can offer most of those in the *Kama Sutra*, Aretino, the *Hokuwata Monosaki*, Kinsey, Sjöström - that, is except the Brazilian fork, as already mentioned - Masters and - '

'You know something? You're about as erotic as a bloody iceberg.'

Thank you for mentioning that, Mr Green. I'm a great believer in full patient participation in therapy. I see some balancing oral treatment is indicated.'

Before he could answer, her arms bent and she sank on him. He did make a last-moment attempt to push her away, but it was too late. Half a minute later she propped herself

up on her elbows, just over his face. His eyes now had something obscurely stunned and patently puzzled about them. He tried to plumb the dark-brown irises above, but without success.

There, Mr Green. I hope that shows our clinical method does not preclude at least some mutual concession to erogenous reality.' She glanced down at his mouth, then bent and gave it a last small kiss. 'I think you're going to be one of my best patients.' She pushed up on her arms again. 'Now let's see if we can provide a climax to match. Nurse, are you ready?'

'Yes, doctor.'

He glanced sideways, and saw the now uniformed Nurse Cory rise from the chair by the table in the corner where she had been sitting, and come towards them. He felt Dr Delfie contract her vaginal muscles.

That's excellent, Mr Green. Well done. Now I shall increase the tempo slightly. If you'd put your hands on my hips. Good. Grip me as firmly as you like. I want you to set the rhythm.' The increased tempo began. 'Don't try to force it. Just time the thrusts. Delay as long as you can.' Her hanging head bent further, as she looked down to where their bodies joined. 'Lovely. Relax . . . thrust. All you have, Mr Green. Relax, thrust. Again. A good steady rhythm, that's the secret. Super. And again. A little faster. From deep as you can. Splendid. Push with your whole body. Keep the rhythm. It's better for you, it's better for your baby.'

'My baby!'

But the doctor seemed too absorbed in her therapy to answer now. He looked desperately at Nurse Cory, standing beside the bedhead.

'What does she mean - baby?'

The nurse raised a finger to the lips. 'You jus' concentrate, Mr Green. Won't be long now.'

'But I'm a man, for God's sake!'

The nurse winked. 'So enjoy it.'

'But - '

Dr Delfie's voice cut in.

'Please stop verbalizing, Mr Green.' She was beginning to breathe deeply, and had to pause between each sentence. 'Now. One last effort. I can feel it coming. Good. Good. Splendid. With the hips. Hard as you can.' Her head remained bowed. Apparently intent on the ever more forceful and accelerating movement of their loins. 'There we are . . . there we are . . . perfect. Perfect. Safe as houses. Keep going, don't stop. Right to the very last syllable. Nurse!'

He was vaguely aware of Nurse Cory moving to the end of the bed - out of his sight, since the energetic doctor, still suspended on her arms, blocked his view.

'One last push. One more. One more. One last one.'

There was a little gasp from her, as if she were the one who had really given birth; then an abrupt cessation of movement. A silence. He was conscious of Nurse Cory moving back to the corner of the room. The doctor's head remained bowed, the ends of her scarf hanging down. She was taking urgent breaths, like someone who has dived too deep. Then she slumped down on him. Her skin was damp with perspiration, he could feel her heart pounding. But the collapse was clearly an aftermath of physical effort, not emotion, since she averted her head.

For half a minute or so he stared at the ceiling, in a state of delayed shock. He had not managed, at the end, to stay as fully objective as he would have wished, but he had not been so far gone as not to remark some strange words, or misconceptions . . . the terrible thought swept over him that despite her denial he was indeed in a lunatic asylum, a mental institution, and had somehow fallen into the hands

of two other patients through some oversight of the proper medical staff. But what on earth would he be doing in such a place? And how could it be left so slackly superintended?

He looked surreptitiously across the room at the nurse. She sat with her back half turned away from him, bent over something at the table, papers, no doubt the file of his case. She did not suggest madness at all; if anything, so intently did she stop and read some passage of a report, she revealed an unexpectedly studious side. Nor did the body under whose weight he lay seem anything but unmistakably normal. There was no sobbing, no wild cackles of glee. In some odd way he found the doctor's silence, her obvious exhaustion, rather touching; and as one might want to comfort a woman miler who has run her heart out, even though she had failed to win (since recall of anything beyond his profession - and even that, he felt, had to rest a high probability rather than certainty - remained tantalizingly out of his reach), he let his arms come belatedly round her back and held her lightly embraced.

He reflected, in the comparative peace, and ticking silence. Perhaps there was, behind the Freudian jargon, some truth in what the doctor had said, some clinical backing. On second thoughts, he might do better not to be too quick with a Parliamentary speech of denunciation and exposure. Further research was clearly advisable. After all, a decent modern politician's prime duty is not to expose the wrong, but never in any circumstances to be caught in it.

His eyes once more drifted across the room to where Nurse Cory's neatly uniformed body still sat busied over his file. Her delicate brown hands, the slim dark calves and ankles beneath the hem of the starch-blue skirt . . . if his did prove to be a difficult case, as he began to have a presentiment that it was, then he must accept the likelihood of a long course of treatment, and take it like a man. He

experienced an anomalous desire to murmur something to that effect into the hair beside his cheek, but somehow it seemed a shade premature. One had to consider one's future position. However, he patted the doctor's moist back in a mildly fraternal sort of style, by way of a tacit and at least partial apology - to say that he acknowledged she had done her best, even though she had lost.

The doctor did not respond. He had a suspicion that she had momentarily dozed off. He did not mind; if anything he was further, if still somewhat reluctantly, touched. It showed she was human after all. The weight of her slim and well-shaped body, almost as well-shaped as that of Nurse Cory, was not disagreeable. One could hardly say one had, in the circumstances, landed on one's feet; but one might, it began to dawn, have done worse. One felt rather pleasantly exhausted oneself, now one came to think of it, and distinctly less worried about the loss of memory.

He closed his eyes, but a sound made him open them again. Nurse Cory had risen from the table, and was knocking and shuffling her papers together. She turned, gay and jauncy, recovered from her dressing-down, and came back towards the bed; her eyes on him, cradling the papers she had been sorting.

'Hey, Mr Green, who's a clever boy? Who's in luck?'

'What luck?'

She came a step or two closer, beside the bed, and gazed down at the small sheaf of paper crooked in her right arm; then smiled coyly and roguishly up at him.

'It's a lovely little story. And you made it all by yourself.'

He stared uncomprehendingly at her inanely sentimental grin down at him. The doubts he had dismissed flooded back. He was in a psychiatric hospital, the girl was mad, they were both mad. They must know he was a person of importance, almost certainly a Member of Parliament. Now

she seemed to be hinting that he was some scribbler, a mere novelist or something. It was too absurd; and very soon became absurder still, for suddenly the nurse, taking advantage of the doctor's seeming obliviousness and once again breaking all proper rules of nursing practice, sat on the edge of the bed.

'Look, Mr Green. Listen.' She bent her pretty capped head to read the top page, using a finger to trace the words, as she might have touched a new-born nose or tiny wrinkled lips.' "It was conscious of luminous and infinite haze, as if it were floating, godlike, alpha and o-me-ga . . ."' She flashed him a vivacious smile. 'Is that how you pronounce it, Mr Green? It's Greek, isn't it?' She did not wait for a reply, but went back to her reading. "' . . . over a sea of vapour and looking - "'

CRASH!