Aswarby Hall

by David Dean

"Whatever may have been expected by his neighbours, it is certain that Mr. Abney—the tall, the thin, the austere—seemed inclined to give his young cousin a kindly reception."

—M.R. James, "Lost Hearts"

"You're quite enjoying this, aren't you, Owens?" accused Dr. Marchland. "Don't bother to deny it. I know that you're grinning beneath that great moustache of yours."

"Sir . . . ?" Owens replied, his outward appearance its usual expression of thoughtful disapproval.

"How you've waited for this moment," Marchland continued, shrugging on the jacket Owens held open for him, "counting the hours, no doubt. It's April the first, eighteen ninety-one, and you have your fool."

"Shall I send her away then, Doctor?" the butler asked. He turned as if to commence this unpleasant task.

"Stop!" the younger man commanded, squaring his narrow shoulders and lifting his chin. "You are insidious, Owens, but I know my duty. You, *and* she, no doubt, will have your satisfaction." The lady in question, as her flowery calling card revealed, was Lydia Margaret Angelina Houghton.

The hulking Owens opened the door and stood aside for his employer. "Miss Houghton is in the drawing room, sir . . ." he informed Marchland, adding as he passed into the hallway, ". . . with your belongings."

Halting only long enough to glare at Owens from the corner of his eyes, Marchland drew himself up to his full dignity and proceeded to the drawing room. "Insufferable man," he muttered before entering. "Intolerable."

Inside sat a young woman with hair so dark it appeared black. Her eyes were sapphire blue and sparkling with amusement.

"My dear Miss Houghton," Marchland managed before stumbling to a halt when he saw the paper-wrapped parcel resting on her lap. "I cannot begin to tell you how inexpressibly embarrassed I am and how very sorry . . ."

"If it weren't for that wonderful mane of auburn hair you have," she interrupted him with a soft Irish accent, "I might not have recognized

David Dean, the author of *The Thirteenth Child,* is a short-story specialist whose evocative work spans a myriad of themes, settings, and atmosphere. This story is part of his historical series featuring alienist Dr. Beckett Marchland, who debuted in the March/April 2023 issue with "Mrs. Hyde." Dean is a three-time winner of the *EQMM* Readers Award.

you. I'm glad to see that you have clothes other than those you presented to me, which I've brought back cleaned and pressed." Unfolding her lithe frame, she rose to hand the package over.

Marchland blushed. "I'd been drugged, you see. A patient of mine had managed to doctor my tea with . . . oh, dear God, how stupid I must appear to you—the scandal of it all! I was out of my mind, hallucinating, and not in control of myself. I have no idea why I showed up at your door in a state of undress, nor can I explain the gift of my clothes. I can only beg your . . ."

"Oh really, Dr. Marchland, please don't bother going on," she laughed. "It was quite an entertaining introduction to London for a Dubliner. My uncle laughed himself silly over the entire thing; then asked if he should challenge you to a duel. I declined the offer, which is fortunate for you as he's a very good shot. However, my maid is still threatening to return to Ireland—she's the one that answered your ring, you see. When I heard her scream, I rushed to the door only to find—well, you know what I found. You introduced yourself, welcomed me to the neighborhood, then handed over your clothes with a smart little bow."

"Dear God in heaven," Marchland placed his face in his hands, shaking his head.

"The next thing I knew, this huge gentleman with a big moustache arrived, begged my pardon, threw you over his shoulder, and made off with you across the street."

"That was Owens, my butler and chief tormentor."

"Yes, I recognized him when he answered the door. He *is* formidable."

"Monstrous," the wilted Marchland agreed. "Would you mind very much if I had a whisky, Miss Houghton? May I offer you some sherry?"

"I'd prefer the whisky," she answered.

"Well, I must say that you're being very decent about this," Marchland replied, handing her a small glass as she placed his clothes back on the settee. Pouring one for himself, he asked, "Is everyone in your native land as broad minded as you?"

"I wouldn't think so," she replied after a sip of the liquor, "but we are a people that like a good lark." She grimaced a little, then held the glass up to the light streaming in through the nearest window. "I've had better whisky," she remarked, "my own, as a matter of fact. We make the stuff—my family."

Perking up at this, Marchland said, "Your family owns a distillery? I shall certainly make every effort to redeem myself."

Downing the remainder of her glass, Miss Houghton regarded Marchland for a moment, her lively eyes quickening. "If you really wish to do me a good turn, Dr. Marchland, then I'll tell you how it may be done."

Marchland stared helplessly back, finding that he wanted very much to please her. "Whatever you wish, you need only ask."

"Jolly good!" she cried, the smile returning, her eyes dancing. "Isn't that what you English say?" Not waiting for an answer, she added, "Dig out your jodhpurs then, as we've a country party to attend this weekend. My uncle arranged an invitation to a gathering at some dreary estate in Lincolnshire—says the squire is an eligible with a good income. I wouldn't have known a soul, of course, but now I shall. I'll have Maeve bring over the details this afternoon." Setting her glass down, she turned for the door as Marchland

rushed to open it. "You must promise to be clothed when she arrives, Dr. Marchland, another shock like the last and she'll be off to Dublin like a shot."

"I'll instruct Owens to ensure that I am."

Halting at the front door, she turned, her expression serious once more. "Speaking of that, have you any theories—you being an alienist—as to what brought you unclothed to *my* house, Doctor, and to no other, of all the houses you could have chosen?"

"I think . . ." Marchland spluttered, ". . . I may have caught a glimpse of you whilst you were moving in . . . and being curious by nature, you see . . . it's possible that you made an impression upon my subconscious . . ."

Laughing, Miss Houghton went out.

Arriving by train on a sparkling spring afternoon, Marchland and Owens found a pony trap awaiting them at the village station. The old man at the reins greeted them cheerfully enough and they set out for what Marchland had learned was Aswarby Hall.

"You'll see the hall at its best," the old man informed them, flicking the reins from time to time, his horse clip-clopping along at a good, if juddering, pace. "Young Mr. Elliott has set things a'right there, he has; been some time about it."

"Is he new to the neighborhood, Mister . . . ?" Marchland ventured.

"Farnsworthy, sir, thank you. No, not new. Been away since he went off to that school in Cambridge. Never come back from there either but went on to some foreign place to make his fortune. Which he did if the house is anything to go by. He's spent a packet on the hall, he has, it havin' fallen into disrepair since his departure."

After the long train ride with the taciturn Owens, Marchland found the driver delightful company. "So he's the heir to the estate, I take it, and this is to be his homecoming party."

Farnsworthy managed to fill and light a pipe before answering. "He is that, sir. He was old Mr. Abney's ward and cousin, what with Mr. Elliott's parents having been carried off by influenza and the squire havin' no young'uns of his own. As to a homecoming party, I couldn't answer that."

"Haven't a number of local folk been invited? It must be an event of some note in the area."

"Yes, 'tis," the old man agreed, puffing away now as they rattled past a row of fir trees that lined one side of the road. "All is glad to see it fixed up and give some employment, but it's not a place folks are easy with, I reckon."

After waiting several moments for the driver to resume his explanation, Marchland could not be contained. "Why on earth not, Mr. Farnsworthy? Was not the late Mr. Abney a reputable man?"

Taking the pipe from his mouth, the driver replied, "He was, sir, and well liked enough, but kept himself to himself for the most part. Was a scholar, you see, a learned man always about his books. And that's where he was found—amongst them books."

"Found?"

"Yes, sir—sittin' in a chair facing an open window onto the garden—his heart tore out—altogether gone as I was told."

"Good God," Marchland breathed, taking in the deserted countryside falling away to their right. Trails of grey smoke rose from the valley below them, the train that had brought them disappearing into a

dense forest that appeared blue-green in the gathering twilight.

"Was it our host that discovered this horror?"

"Aye, he was just a boy of twelve at that time and Mr. Abney were a growed man of some years. There was never no question of it being the child, for how could he have overpowered him? The only other person in the hall was the housekeeper, both able to speak for the other, and she a tiny thing. Mr. Stephen was sent off to school after that. Some says it was an animal of some kind."

Owens was, at last, stimulated to communicate. "I served with your good father in both India and Africa, Doctor, and in my experience there's not but one creature that would do that, and that'd be man."

"He speaks!" Marchland exclaimed.

The trap driver turned in his seat to take in the fearsome butler. Turning back to Marchland over his other shoulder, he asked in a low voice, apparently responding to the butler's accent. "Is he foreign, sir?"

"He is indeed, Mr. Farnsworthy!" Marchland answered with a smile for Owens. "*Welsh*, you know, even speaks the devilish language, which is known to induce insanity upon those of other races."

After a few moments, the driver burst into laughter, while Owens favored his employer with a dark gaze.

"Oh, come now, Owens! We needed a good laugh after that story!"

Still chuckling, Farnsworthy turned the horse into a broad graveled drive that branched off to their left. Here the trees ended, and they beheld Aswarby Hall, its numerous windows glowing golden in the last of the afternoon sun, a myriad of chimneys rising from its many-gabled roof. "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

"Indeed she is, Mr. Farnsworthy," Marchland agreed. "A gem of a house. What say you, Owens? Is she not grand?"

Pursing his lips in thought, the Welshman remarked, "A large staff is required and the upkeep considerable, I should think."

"This is your impression, Owens? I'll suggest to our host that he consider knocking some of it down—frugal and less labour-intensive, yes?"

Having brought them up to the entrance. the old man leapt down with surprising celerity and handed off his passengers' bags to the household staff that had come out to meet them. Their host greeted them at the door.

"Welcome to Aswarby Hall, Dr. Marchland," Stephen Elliott said, offering his hand. Over his shoulder, Marchland could see Lydia Houghton, along with several other guests. She was in profile, but he saw her eyes cut to him and thought he perceived the ghost of a smile. He felt a certain lightness enter his head and found that he was grinning like an idiot.

"So glad to have been invited," he assured his host, whom he observed to be in his late thirties or early forties and quite handsome; almost Greek-like in his beauty, and this he did not like.

It was after a long, drawn-out dinner—livened only by Marchland's proximity to Lydia Houghton—that the men withdrew to the study, whilst the women made their way to the drawing room for sherry.

Marchland had found the small party of guests to be a diverse group in terms of their various professions and backgrounds but gathered that few had been acquainted prior to Elliott's party. The result was the forced gaiety imposed upon fellow

travelers sharing the same railway carriage. Much wine had been drunk and now Marchland was enjoying an excellent brandy and cigar on the terrace that the room let onto. The fresh country air revived him, and he admired the large moon that illumined the edges of the clouds scudding across the black sky.

"It's like a dream to me," a voice spoke at his shoulder.

Turning with a slight start, Marchland beheld his host admiring the same view.

"How so?"

"In all the time I was away at school and later abroad, this place took on a certain unreality to me, as if I'd only dreamed that I had once lived here. Like most dreams, it grew more lovely, more . . . alluring . . . as the years drifted by. Now that I'm back and master here, it doesn't feel quite real."

Taking a sip of his brandy, Marchland studied Stephen Elliott as he stared skyward. Deep furrows lined a firm mouth, yet the eyes revealed a hint of uncertainty at odds with his resolute, handsome visage.

"I should think that you must be very happy to have returned to your home, Mr. Elliott. It is a very beautiful place."

"Yes, yes, it is," he replied, turning to Marchland.

"Where have you returned from, Elliott? I haven't heard it said."

"Burma. I was employed by the British East India Company, but later bought my way into a teak consortium and with the profits from that invested in ruby mining. I made far more money than I'd any right to. It's a brutal business—mining—yet one must do as one must. I got out as quickly as I could. Burma was a purgatorial existence, at best. All I could think about for all those years was Aswarby Hall and Lincolnshire. Yet, now that I'm here . . ."

"Yes . . . now that you're here?"

Downing the rest of his brandy, Elliott turned to face Marchland full on. From within the study, Marchland could hear the murmur of a young don from Cambridge—Montague Rhoades James—telling a story for the entertainment of the room. The rest were silent.

"Look here, Marchland, I'm awfully glad that you came, as I think you can be of some use to me. Miss Houghton tells me you're an alienist."

"That's true, but whatever is the matter?"

"I've seen a ghost."

Tossing his cigar onto the damp lawn, Marchland replied, "I can hardly help you there, I'm afraid. Alienists don't lay ghosts—you'll need a priest for that."

"You misunderstand me. I know that it's not real—I'm afraid I'm losing my mind. Perhaps someone's poisoning me."

"Is it that of your late cousin, Mr. Abney? I've heard that he came to a bad end here. I could see how such a thing might prey upon your mind."

"That gossip Farnsworthy must've told you about that. No, it wasn't him . . . nothing like him."

"Tell me."

"It was a young boy, ragged and terrible, his face that of a corpse, his features animated by a terrifying fury and . . . *hunger*. He looked something like *me* as a child, Marchland. But it wasn't me. He came close enough for me to see that the last time. I hope to God he never comes that close again! I don't think I could bear it!"

Elliott leant onto the balustrade to support himself and Marchland set down his glass and took him by the arm. "Steady on. Let's get you to a chair, shall we?"

Marchland signaled to a servant standing nearby and ordered them both fresh brandies. "So where have you encountered this apparition, Elliott, and when?"

"Twice now, both times on the grounds close to the house as I was having my evening strolls."

"You're quite sure that he's not a *real* boy—some starving child living rough? A Traveler's boy, perhaps?"

The sky cleared enough so that Marchland could see the effect that his question had on Elliott—he appeared startled and very pale in the moonlight.

"Elliott?"

"No . . . no . . . he can't be real. You haven't seen him, Marchland. He's quite horribly dead. Yet, when you mentioned the possibility of him being a Gypsy, it jogged something in my memory. But it's flown from my head now."

"Have there been any such bands in the area, or reports of any children gone missing?"

Shaking his head, Elliott took a long swallow of the brandy he'd been brought. "No . . . no such reports that I'm aware of, nor have I heard of any Traveler caravans in the area. I'm sure of it."

"I see," murmured Marchland. "Has Aswarby Hall a reputation for hauntings? Many old manor houses do, of course—deserved or not."

"Never have I heard any such thing from my late cousin or the servants. But for my guardian's dramatic death, the Hall has always been a tranquil place."

"Until your return," Marchland pointed out. "Have you shared these experiences with anyone else?"

"Not a soul. The locals already stay clear due to Mr. Abney's murder and that was decades ago. If I breathed a word I'd lose the few staff I've managed to bring onto the estate. They all live off premises, but for Mrs. Bunch—she's an elderly widow and runs the house for me. She was my rock as a child and my cousin's housekeeper in his day. Had she not come back none of the rest would've. Everyone snaps to for Mrs. B. The villagers even go to her for potions and such when they've colds or indigestion."

"Do you go to her for any ailments, Elliott?"

"She fixes me up for headaches, indigestion, that sort of thing."

There was a renewal of voices in the study and the two turned to see that the men inside had risen in order to join the ladies.

"We'd best go in," Elliott said, rising on shaky legs. "I've guests to see to, and there's a rather fetching Irish lass inside with whom I'd like to become better acquainted."

Experiencing an unpleasant sensation at this announcement, all Marchland could think to reply was, "Perhaps we can resume our conversation tomorrow, Elliott."

"Yes, perhaps, but it's all probably just a touch of fever. I suspect it's malarial. What else could it be, Marchland?"

"What else indeed?" Marchland murmured to himself.

The following morning dawned as fair as the previous day and Marchland managed to catch up to Miss Houghton after breakfast.

"Would you care for a stroll?"

"I would. A stretch of the legs would do me a world of good."

She slipped an arm through his, and they made their way out onto the grounds and began to walk toward a copse of elm and oak trees that lay at the top of a rise.

After a period of silence, Marchland ventured, "Our host is a most attentive fellow, is he not?"

Turning her head a little to regard him from beneath her long lashes, Lydia replied, "Now that you mention it, I found him very hospitable . . . and quite a good card player."

"Is he? Of course, *he'd* have the time for that sort of thing."

His companion began to laugh, and Marchland felt himself colouring.

"What on earth is that, do you think?" Marchland pointed to the spinney of trees that they were nearing.

Miss Houghton turned to see that he was indicating a brick structure that lay some fifty yards within the forest. "Let's take a look." She led the way and he hurried after.

The air beneath the branches felt damp; the ground, though free of undergrowth, was run through with large roots, spongy and uncertain beneath their weight.

Halting before the structure, Marchland realized that it was a wall almost hidden by dogwood trees and bilberry bushes. The bricks themselves were glistening with lichen and bearded with patches of moss.

Without speaking, they walked to opposite corners to ascertain the wall's size and shape. When they met once more they said as one, "It's a hidden garden."

"But how does one get in?" Marchland asked.

"I discovered a door on the east side beneath a tangle of vines," Miss Houghton answered, "but it's locked, I'm afraid."

"Why keep a garden hidden behind a wall?" Marchland asked. "I mean, really, what's the point?"

"What's the point of hiding anything? It's either because you treasure it and don't want to share it, or you fear it and don't want it released."

"Are you sure that you're not an alienist back in Dublin?"

"We've no need of them. Now lift me up!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Make a stirrup of your hands—I'll step into it—then you lift me up to see over the wall."

"I'm not sure that would be seen as . . . well . . . proper, do you think?"

"This from a man who introduced himself as naked as the day his mother bore him."

"Oh dear God, will it never end?" He bent to do as she instructed, finding her slender form more difficult to raise aloft than he had expected. Glancing up, he could see that Miss Houghton grasped the top of the wall and now peered intently over it. "What do you see?" he found himself whispering.

"It appears to be mostly brambles and nettles now, with a few fruit trees of some sort scattered about—all gone to seed," she whispered back. "From above like this, you can make out various cultivated spots that are grown over. Do stop shifting about, Marchland!"

"It's the earth—very soft and . . ."

"What are you doing there? Get down at once!" shouted Stephen Elliott. rushing upon them.

Like a house of cards, they collapsed.

Clambering up from his prone position, his suit covered with old leaves and loamy soil, Marchland helped Miss Houghton to her feet.

"Really, Mr. Elliott!" she scolded their irate host. "Do you always dash about startling your guests? Poor Dr. Marchland could've been seriously injured."

"What were you doing out here?" he demanded in turn. "That garden is off limits! That is why it's locked."

"I say, old man . . ." Marchland interrupted him.

Miss Houghton brushed him aside. "I'll have you know, sir, guests in Ireland are allowed the run of the . . ." but she was not allowed to finish.

"Oh dear God!" Elliott shrieked, pointing toward the walled garden and backing away, his face drained of colour, his eyes starting in his head. "It's her! *Her! She's* here now!" Then he fell onto the ground senseless or dead.

After a moment's stunned silence, Marchland managed to say, "I think we've killed him."

"Nonsense, he's just fainted. What's wrong with the man?"

"Ghosts, I believe."

Marchland knelt beside their stricken host, confirming his pulse even as he looked back toward the secret garden and the shadowed woods around them. Though no one was there, he felt his skin crawl with the unreasoning fear of the unknown and the unseen.

"Will you be all right for a few moments whilst I dash back to the hall for help?"

"Of course . . . but do be quick, Marchland."

"I took a ribbon for the hundred-yard dash when I was at Stony Brook," he assured her. Then, taking another sharp look around, raced for the house.

Having fetched Owens, Marchland had him carry the unconscious man back to Aswarby Hall, instructing him, "Have Dr. Melby see to him, Owens—he's one of the guests—then come straight back."

Turning to Miss Houghton, who appeared a trifle pale herself, he said, "Please go along with them, dear girl, and get yourself a whisky—*doctor's* orders."

"Only if you'll tell me what you find in the garden when you return *and* about the ghosts."

"Garden? Oh . . . yes, of course. But whilst I'm strolling about out here, perhaps you could manage a conversation with Mrs. Bunch, the head housekeeper.

"What shall we talk about?"

"Oh, this and that—old Mr. Abney, the hall, young Mr. Elliott, any friends he may've had—that sort of thing. Do you think you could do that?"

She didn't deign to answer him.

Upon Owens's return, Marchland said, "I need for you to lift me over that wall, Owens."

"If that is what you wish, Doctor," he replied. "However, if I may point out . . ."

"Upsy-daisy, Owens, there's a good man. You just form a stirrup with your hands, and I . . ."

With an expression of even more doubt than was usual, Owens complied, and Marchland was soon atop the wall and over it, landing with a soft thump on the other side.

"I'm quite all right, Owens!" he called back. "I landed as lightly as a panther."

With a slight limp, he proceeded to make his way through the tangle of undergrowth and brambles, carefully examining the various plants that had once been cultivated there. In a neglected corner he came upon one in particular that held his interest and, using his handkerchief, broke off a branch sporting shiny black berries and bell-shaped flowers, placing it in his jacket pocket.

Returning to the wall, he immediately grasped Owens' earlier concern. "I say, Owens, are you there? Perhaps you could . . ."

A rope was thrown over the wall to dangle in front of Marchland.

"You have anticipated my dilemma, Owens." Taking hold of his end, he prepared to climb the rope, only to find himself being hauled upwards by the mighty force on the other. Once atop the wall, he raised an eyebrow at his butler, saying, "You might have been a *touch* more articulate prior, you know."

Finding the guests had been gathered for some archery on the south lawn, Marchland noted the French windows to the library standing open. Crossing to them, and seeing no one within, he posted Owens as lookout and entered. Running his fingers along the spines of the well-stocked shelves, he came upon two volumes that gave him pause, one in which someone had written on the inside cover, "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook," the other the notorious, and extremely rare, *Necronomicon*. This last he opened and began to peruse, finding its dried, crumbling pages written in Latin, Greek, Arabic, and some arcane language with which he was wholly unacquainted. When he chanced upon a series of illustrations, Marchland almost cried out in horror and disgust. Resisting the urge to fling the book into the fireplace, he shoved it back into its space on the shelf. It seemed appropriate, when he considered its late owner's taste in books, that this room should've been the setting for a ghastly murder.

Resuming his search, he arrived at a few volumes dedicated to botany. Flipping through first one, then the other, he came upon some coloured drawings of dangerous plants. Retrieving the specimen from his pocket, he compared it to the illustrations until he came upon a match. "So I thought," he muttered.

"If that's what I think it is, you should avoid ingesting any part of it."

Spinning around, Marchland gasped, "God in heaven—I thought I was alone!"

"I'm so sorry to have startled you," the tall young man rising from his seat replied. "I guess you didn't noticed me in this wingback chair. I didn't notice you either, at first. I was engrossed in reading through the collected sermons and letters of the late Reverend Wallace of Stepney All Saints. It wasn't until you started flipping pages that I looked up."

Marchland recognized Montague James from the previous evening's introductions. "It's quite all right. I don't know why I should be so jumpy."

Peering through his wire rims at the withered plant Marchland still held, James observed, "Belladonna, I believe?"

"Quite so," Marchland agreed. "I chanced upon it in the wood and thought that it might be something rare. Not uncommon, I've now learned."

"It has a wicked reputation, Doctor—often mentioned in ancient texts as an ingredient much used by witches—both to kill and to do magic—flying, in particular. Do you suspect it had something to do with our host's fit this morning?"

"I cannot say, I'm afraid." Glancing back to the lawn party, Marchland asked, "You've no interest in archery, James?"

"Heavens, no. There's not a martial bone in my body. I'm a thoroughly dry and dusty antiquarian, I'm afraid. Church histories and architecture are more my passion. You'd be shocked to find out what went on in some of them."

Having succeeded in distracting James from his earlier question, Marchland asked, "And what have

you learned of this parish? Any juicy bits?"

Leaning forward, James replied, "Given the rather extraordinary murder of the late squire of Aswarby Hall—I dare say it *was* murder, of course—I did not find it surprising that the parson had had a few words to say about the goings-on here. What did surprise me, however, was that his sermon on witchcraft and demonology was *prior to,* not after, the death of Mr. Abney. Though the tract he drew up on the subject was vague in its geographical references, there can be little doubt that he was referring to this estate. Quite bold for a country parson to set himself up against the local potentate, don't you think?"

"Does he still live—this vicar?"

"No, I'm afraid not. He was quite old when he preached it, according to the parish records, and did not last out the remainder of the year."

"What was alleged—or implied—to have been going on?"

"He warned against many things, but specifically mentioned that the shedding of human blood in the furtherance of necromancy, or in order to gain mastery of supernatural forces, was in defiance of God's law. I paraphrase here, but it went something like this: 'To rend the veil that God placed between the natural world and that which dwells forever in darkness and eternal chaos is certain damnation, as it can only be accomplished by the slaying of innocents, as was done in Bethlehem by King Herod to his everlasting infamy.'"

"Golly," Marchland said after some moments had passed in silence. "What did this vicar die of, do you know?"

"Acute appendicitis, it was believed."

Outside, a round of applause was given for an archer. Glancing in that direction, Marchland took in the scene as if it were set upon a stage—his fellow guests actors upon a verdant lawn. The late-morning sun endowed the tableau with the sharp definition of a painting even as it rendered the line of trees beyond a wall of darkness. Miss Houghton came that moment into his view and he returned to himself.

"Appendicitis," he repeated to the bemused James. "How unfortunate . . . *and* painful. Poor man."

"Lovely woman." James nodded in Miss Houghton's direction as she took up bow and arrow.

"Quite so," Marchland agreed, placing the plant sample back into his pocket.

She loosed her arrow and it flew into the bull's-eye as if drawn by a string, her success followed by loud applause and huzzahs.

"I wouldn't want to cross her," James added.

"No, one wouldn't," Marchland concurred. "Do you think you could avoid mentioning our discussion to the other guests and our host, James? I'd be most grateful."

"Only if you'll promise I won't wake up murdered tomorrow morning, Dr. Marchland."

Taking in Marchland's startled expression, the young don burst into laughter, saying, "Of course you have my word, old man, so long as you swear to tell me the whole story of what you're up to at its conclusion. I'm something of a writer, you know, and always looking for inspiration."

They shook on it and Marchland made his way out onto the lawn.

Sidling up to Miss Houghton as she was nocking another arrow, he asked in a low voice, "Any joy from Mother Bunch?"

Taking aim, Houghton replied, "Not the most garrulous of women, but I

squeezed a few words from her." She released the arrow to join several others at the heart of the target.

Marchland noted that silence had now descended upon their fellow guests as it dawned upon them that Lydia's first successes had not been by chance. The men discreetly abandoned their bows and armed themselves with drink, whilst the women became mute for their own reasons.

Taking this in, Marchland suggested that he and Miss Houghton resume their earlier stroll.

"You really are very good with that bow," he observed, as they sauntered across the garden, "Could've been useful at Agincourt, I dare say."

"To which side?" she asked, then added by way of explanation, "I grew up at our house in Kilkenny with four brothers and two sisters, where we had scads of room for country pursuits."

"Speaking of pursuits . . . ?"

"I found Mrs. Bunch parked in the kitchen—a wee old thing, she is—and none too pleased at my arrival. When I told her I thought she should be informed right away of Mr. Elliott's bad turn, she went pale, then thanked me several times, saying, 'Most folks never give a thought to thems that serve—till we're late with their supper, that is, or missed a spot of dusting.'

"I asked if he had been in poor health since his return, and she answered that he'd always been of a nervous disposition and walked like a cat round the estate as a boy. Though he could be quite fierce if someone crossed him. He'd only taken to faints since he'd come home, so far as she knew. She put it down to the fever he brought back from the East, then asked if I didn't think him a handsome man. She's quite fond of him, I think."

"Handsome?" Marchland frowned. "Nonsense. Did she have anything to say about Elliott's childhood friends?"

Miss Houghton's expression grew serious. "She said that Mr. Abney had a tutor in for the boy and allowed him no traffic with the village children. However . . ."

Marchland raised an eyebrow.

". . . he was provided two companions, a boy and a girl—orphans, or runaways, that Abney took under his wing. Mrs. Bunch appeared troubled by the episode. She went on to say that the lad was an 'eye-talian'—a hurdy-gurdy player—he'd picked up off the streets of London while on a trip there with Master Stephen, the girl, a Traveler—a Gypsy's child that had ran away from her people—she was found on one of their rambles across the countryside. They weren't long about the place, though, she added, but run off as wild as they'd come in. She never saw them again. Mrs. Bunch opined that they could've passed for Mr. Stephen's brother and sister."

"It's her! *Her!*" Marchland repeated Stephen Elliott's words.

"Dr. Marchland, you promised to tell me what's going on."

"I'm not really sure myself, but Elliott told me that he's been troubled by the visitations of a phantom boy—a terrifying apparition by his own accounting—but being a modern man, he was well aware that he was hallucinating. He asked for my help in dispelling the delusion."

They had arrived once more at the edge of the wood, wherein lay the walled plot.

"And now a female spectre has arisen, as well," Miss Houghton continued his narrative, "and one that, like the boy, may have some grounding in reality."

"Did the old girl mention this place?"

"It's an herb garden, she informed me. She was allowed a plot for her cures and potions while Mr. Abney tended his own beds. But then he took away her key because he found children's footprints and his exotic plants trodden beneath them on several occasions. He blamed her for allowing village brats to play there. When he died, she was unable to find the key, and the house closed down shortly thereafter."

"The footprints were discovered before—or after—the children's disappearances?"

"After," Miss Houghton replied.

The secret garden skulked within its shroud of bilberry bushes and cotoneaster in the near distance, the dark brick of its walls appearing to creep deeper into the forest as the sun passed its apogee and began its long descent.

"Dr. Marchland," Lydia asked in an awed tone, "you don't think that Mr. Elliott fainted near the garden because . . ." She left her thoughts unfinished.

"When you told me of the Gypsy girl it did occur to me, of course, though it could be complete coincidence. He does claim to be afflicted with malaria, which might explain his visitations."

Pausing to retrieve the plant from his coat pocket, Marchland showed it to her, saying, "What I do know is that I found this plant within those walls, and its natural properties are capable of inducing intense hallucinations, madness, and death. Why it should have been cultivated there, I cannot answer, but there were other plants—hemlock, angel's trumpet, and the opium poppy—that can be just as sinister in their effects. Though, as you pointed out, the garden appears to have long been abandoned."

"What do you plan to do next?"

"Just what I said I would—attend to Elliott's demons."

Offering his arm, he added, "Let's go back, shall we? This is an unwholesome place."

Stephen Elliott's guests were surprised to find he had recovered sufficiently to join them for tea. The day having continued to be a pleasant one, it was being served in the French garden, which was characterized by geometrically precise flower beds and sculpted shrubberies intersected by graveled paths. Wicker tables and chairs had been brought out and placed on a grassy hummock that overlooked this pleasing arrangement.

"Glad to see that you're back in the pink, Elliott! You were as pale as a corpse when Marchland's man brought you in," Phillip Cavendish, a banker from the City, greeted him.

"It was nothing," Elliott assured him without returning his smile. "A touch of recurring fever." Slapping his palms together, he surveyed the trays of biscuits, petit fours, scones, and sandwiches, announcing, "By Jove, Cook has done us a treat! Let's dig in, shall we?"

Afterwards, Marchland rose to join his host as he stood smoking and talking to a broker named Basil deRais who appeared to be pitching an investment scheme. Lighting a cigaret, Marchland interrupted, "Could I borrow our host for just a moment? Dreadfully important."

As the other man stalked off, he said, "So, I take it there's now a second visitant."

Elliott stared back at him for some time, his brown eyes expressing something between anger and fear.

"Yes . . ." he croaked at last, ". . . she looks just like the boy—horribly dead and . . . *furious*. Am I losing my mind, Marchland?"

Picking a piece of tobacco from his tongue and flicking it away, Marchland replied, "Honestly, I cannot say . . . but there is clearly something that you're struggling with now that you've returned to Aswarby Hall." He took another drag from his gold tip, weighing the risks of his next words. "Do you not remember the boy and girl that Mr. Abney made available to you as companions before his death, Elliott?"

"Companions?" Elliott repeated. "I don't know what you're on about, Marchland!"

"Come, Elliot, your housekeeper mentioned them. From her description, they could have been your brother and sister. Did you have any siblings, Elliott?"

"I have no brothers or sisters! I'm an orphan, as I've told you. I have no family . . . no mother . . . no . . ." he stopped speaking, his mouth still open.

". . . no father?" Marchland finished for him.

Elliott appeared struck dumb.

"Do you have any *actual* memories of your parents, Elliott, anything before Mr. Abney brought you home?"

The silence went on, and Marchland feared he'd gone too far, and that Elliott might be in danger of another fit.

"Smee!!" a lady's voice screamed in delight, startling both men from their reveries.

"It's really quite simple," explained Lady Woodville to the other guests gathered after dinner in the long gallery. "I'm going to give each of you a slip of folded paper. When you open it—and you must be careful that no one else sees it—you'll find that it is either blank or has the word 'Smee' written upon it. Smee means, 'It's me,' of course. There will be only one of those."

She took a breath as she surveyed her audience, her husband sitting beside her as drooping as his moustache. "Then the lights will be doused, and Smee must creep away as quietly as possible to find a hiding place. After a few minutes, the rest of us will split up and find a quiet spot to await the signal. When Harry thinks we've had sufficient time," she gave her sagging husband a pat on his knee, "he'll strike the dinner gong. Then we all go in search of Smee! When you come upon anyone you simply say, 'Smee.' If it's another searcher, then that person replies, 'Smee,' and you continue looking. If the person you challenge remains silent, then you've found Smee and you must wait there quietly beside him . . . or her . . . until each of the party finds you. The last to do so must pay a forfeit. Isn't that much better than hide and seek?" she laughed. "And it won't be easy in such a large place as this!"

Marchland observed that Elliott looked upon all this with uneasiness.

As the papers were handed round, each guest took a careful peek, revealing nothing. Turning his attention back to Stephen Elliott, however, Marchland noted a distinct darkening of his features when he opened his own.

Miss Houghton glanced at Marchland, and he smiled at her in what he felt sure was an unconvincing manner.

"All this stumbling round in the dark," Elliott said, slipping the paper into a waistcoat pocket. "I'm not sure that it's safe."

"Nonsense," the jovial Lady Woodville corrected him, "nothing to

be worried about at all. There's a good boy, Elliott."

He made no reply but looked down at his shoes.

"Now then," she went on, "we all have our papers—Smee knows who he—or she—is, so let's have the lights out, shall we?" The butler and underbutler went about this and soon, but for the banked fire, they were in darkness. After a few moments there was the soft rustle of movement as someone made their way out of the gallery. Marchland thought that he heard the light tread of footsteps on the staircase runners a few moments later.

Amongst the guests, nervous, whispered chatter broke out as they awaited the command to seek their own starting spots. A hand gripped Marchland's own and he almost cried out until he realized that it was the hand of Lydia Houghton. His smile became genuine at that moment.

"I think we've given Smee quite long enough," Lady Woodville announced. "Off with you all and watch where you tread!" With that command, there was a great deal of giggling and shuffling of feet as the party rose and stumbled out of the gallery and branched off in different directions.

Marchland and Miss Houghton remained, as they were listening to the receding footsteps and whispering voices of their fellow guests. When, at last, all was quiet, Lydia whispered, "Shouldn't we go up, Dr. Marchland? I feel strange about Mr. Elliott sitting up there alone in the dark. He didn't look well."

"No, he didn't," Marchland agreed, "but I think we should wait and see if there are any developments. Besides, Owens is closer to him than he would know. You wouldn't believe how silently that huge man glides about. It's positively uncanny."

The striking of the gong made them both jump in their seats.

Lord Woodville, whom they'd forgotten, stood next to the large brass disc, hammer in hand. "That's me, then," he murmured, stumbling to the drinks cart, where he helped himself to the first bottle his hand fell upon.

With that, Marchland became aware of the return of movement within the great house, the long gallery acting as auditory conduit for shuffling and whispers. In the eerie hush, the word itself could be discerned from time to time as a faint hiss of enquiry from some distant and darkened hallway. Doors opened and shut softly as if the manor were haunted by a dozen questing wraiths.

"Perhaps, now . . ." Marchland began.

"No! No! . . . You mustn't touch me!" a man's voice cried out from deep within the house. "Let me go! Keep off me!"

Leaping to his feet, Marchland said, "That's Elliott!"

This was followed by the sound of footsteps pounding along one of the corridors and down a staircase. There were cries of fright and anger, and Marchland pictured the players being shoved aside in Elliott's headlong flight.

"Dr. Marchland!" Owens baritone voice rang out. "Mr. Elliott's bedroom!"

"Please stay here, Lydia!" Marchland said as he raced for the stairs. "Lights! Lights!" he shouted as he went.

"He's locked himself in," Owens informed him upon his reaching Elliott's suite.

"Did you see anything, Owens? Was there anyone?"

"He was Smee, I reckon," Owens replied. "Hid himself behind a curtain drawn over a window seat. When he burst out shouting, I saw and heard no one—just him bellowing like the damned."

"Let's break it down," Marchland replied, slamming his shoulder into the door and bouncing off with a cry. "We'll need a battering ram, Owens!"

"Stand clear, sir," the butler advised, giving the door a mighty kick that shattered the locking hardware and splintered the wooden frame near the knob. With a shove of his thick shoulder, they were in the room.

"They've touched me!" Elliott screamed at the two men, rising from behind his desk and brandishing an exotic-looking dagger. "They sat to either side of me in the dark and gripped my hands. It was like being seized by talons! I only just managed to break away from them and now my hands smell like rotted death!"

"And who are they, Stephen? Don't pretend that you don't know. Tell me their names at once!"

"Their names? No! . . . no. I'm afraid to say them aloud!"

"You must, Elliott! If you wish to be free of all this, you must!"

"The boy . . ." Elliott whispered now, licking his dry, chapped lips, his face contorted in anguish, ". . . the boy was . . . *Jervanny*—Giovanni Paoli, the girl . . . Phoebe—poor Phoebe Stanley."

"What happened to them?"

"*He* killed them."

"Your cousin? Mr. Abney? Why?"

"He wasn't my cousin. That's just what he put about in the village. He picked me up from somewhere—I don't remember where. I don't even know who my parents were. He said he would take care of me. That he would find me brothers and sisters and that we'd have a jolly family."

"But that wasn't true, was it?"

"I was his Judas goat. He used me to lure the others."

"To what end?"

"He was an occultist, Marchland. His ghastly books contained awful things—he showed me the illustrations—the woodcuts. In order for him to attain immortality and the black knowledge, as he deemed it—three sacrifices were required. It was up to me to provide them . . . or become one of them."

"You were unable to find the third in the time required—" Marchland filled in "—the vernal equinox, or some such ridiculous date—and you killed him in order to save yourself."

Turning his gaze on Marchland for the first time, Elliott appeared puzzled. "Me? I was terrified of the man and he was twice my size. Don't you understand, Marchland? *They* did it!"

"The children, you mean? But you know that they were dead by then. You'll have to testify at a coroner's hearing, Elliott. There's no other way."

"I'll do no such thing. I'm leaving here straightaway. They'll come back, you know—they want me in the garden alongside them!" Elliott came forward, the knife raised in his hand.

"As I told Dr. Marchland," Lydia Houghton interrupted the scene, having arrived to point a small revolver at Elliott's chest, "my uncle is the real marksman in the family, but I'm quite a good shot myself, Mr. Elliott. Please don't make me prove it."

Owens took the dagger from the now weeping Elliott as Marchland sent for the police.

"So you see, Mrs. Bunch," explained Marchland, "if there's no other explanation for Mr. Abney's death, then Mr. Elliott will certainly hang for it."

"He was just a boy," the tiny old woman replied, "just a dear, dear boy. I grew ever so fond of him. Comes from havin' no children to call my own, I reckon."

She slurped her tea as Marchland and Miss Houghton sat with her at the kitchen table, but made no offer of it to them.

"I n'ver had no good feelin' for Mr. Abney, but needed the work, didn't I? When I found out what he was about, though—when Master Stephen finally confided in me—I know'd what needed doin' and I done it straightaway before any harm could come to 'im."

"You dosed him with something from your garden, didn't you?" Marchland asked.

"Opium from his own plantings." She smiled toothlessly. "Whilst he lay there on the sofa in the li'bry, dreamin' his wicked dreams, his eyes wide open, I come to him as he had to those poor tykes. I took his black heart out same as he'd done . . . and him watchin' all the time. Once I'd buried it in the garden with the boy and the girl—so's they'd know, you see—I locked the door and dropped the key down a well, and that were that."

From the secret garden came the faint cry, "Here, sergeant! Over here!" whilst in the kitchen silence settled over the trio.

Mrs. Bunch set her cup down with a trembling hand, spilling some into the saucer. "There," she said in a voice gone hoarse and weak.

"It won't be but a moment now and I'll stand before me maker—the Good Lord—He'll understand." Then she slumped over onto the tabletop, sending the teapot crashing onto the floor.

"Good God!" cried Marchland, leaping up and seizing her wrist for a pulse. "She's killed herself, poor woman!"

Having risen as well, Lydia Houghton touch the old woman's cooling cheek with the back of her fingers. "She saved a child, did she not? Certainly God will forgive her escaping the gallows for it."

"Yes," Marchland agreed with a sigh, adding, "What a ghastly business this has been."

On the London train, Marchland contrived to chance upon Lydia Houghton in the dining car. After the usual pleasantries, he said, "It occurs to me, considering our disastrous first meeting, and now this rather sordid and unsettling affair, that you'll feel quite happy to be rid of me upon our return to the city." He managed to keep his expression neutral with some effort.

Studying him for several long moments, Lydia Houghton replied, "If the time we've spent together thus far in any way presages our possible future, Dr. Marchland, then I should be very disappointed indeed should you fail to call upon me often."

For the second time in their brief acquaintance, Marchland found himself grinning like an idiot. ●