

Lawrence Durrell

The  
Avignon  
Quintet

MONSIEUR + LIVIA + CONSTANCE

SEBASTIAN + QUINX





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MONSIEUR

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## “Outremer”

THE SOUTHBOUND TRAIN FROM PARIS WAS THE ONE WE had always taken from time immemorial – the same long slowcoach of a train, stringing out its bluish lights across the twilight landscapes like some super-glow-worm. It reached Provence at dawn, often by a brindled moonlight which striped the countryside like a tiger’s hide. How well I remembered, how well he remembered! The Bruce that was, and the Bruce I become as I jot down these words, a few every day. A train subject to unexpected halts, unexplained delays; it could fall asleep anywhere, even in open country, and remain there, lost in thought, for hours. Like the swirls and eddies of memory itself – thoughts eddying about the word “suicide”, for example, like frightened tadpoles. It has never been, will never be, on time, our train.

These were the reflections of the lone traveller in the lighted third-class compartment at the rear of the train. In the tarnished mirror this man is watching himself. It had ever been thus in early spring he told himself – even in the early student days of the old PLM. By the time the train had cleared echoing Dijon it became all but empty in this season. (He was trying to remember how long it was since he had last visited the city; but sitting there in his corner, half asleep and half awake, it seemed to him that in reality he had never been away. Or at least some part of him had always been present in its shadowed streets and quiet shabby squares.)

But this was a strangely different return to it; crawling out of a northern winter into a nascent spring at the summons of a blue telegram. And an awful season for such a journey! In the north a flurry of snowstorms had all but paralysed rail traffic; but down here the spring had almost decided to unfreeze the land. Once across the green mulberry-belt and into the olive-zone one becomes reassured, for even in the grey winterset of early dawn the gold tangerines hang in thriving loads as if in some Greek garden of Epicurus. His eyes rested unseeingly on the flying landscapes through which they passed.



The late traveller was myself, Bruce, and the journey was none of my choosing. The telegram which had summoned me southward from Prague was suitably laconic. It told me of the suicide of my oldest and best friend, Piers de Nogaret; more than friend indeed, for his sister Sylvie was my wife, though the telegram was signed not by her but by the family notary. It had reached me at the British Embassy to which I had been attached for the last few years as a medical adviser. “Bruce Drexel M.D. at your service” – but now how insubstantial it sounded, like an echo of far-off certainties which had taken no account of the revenges of time! The man in the mirror stared himself out of countenance. The train rushed and rumbled onwards.

He must be trying to objectify his thoughts and emotions by treating them as one would in a novel but it didn’t really work. As a matter of fact, in Rob Sutcliffe’s famous novel about us all, things began in exactly this way. I was strangely echoing his protagonist, summoned to the bedside of a dying friend (this was the difference) who had important things to reveal to him. Sylvie was there, too, in the centre of the picture as she always has been. Her madness was touchingly described. Of course in a way the characters were travesties of us; but the incidents were true enough and so was Verfeuille, the old chateau in which we had lived out this adventure between our voyages. Bruce was not identifying a little with the hero very much as Sutcliffe himself was, and about whom the writer once said: “Reality is too old-fashioned nowadays for the writer’s uses. We must count upon art to revive

and bring it up to date.”

Yes, but what about real people as opposed to paper figments? Dying, one becomes out of date; but it brings one's friends to their senses, or should. I so often wondered about this – how to splice the real and the imagined – when I read his book. Now he too was dead and Pia, my sister, had lodged all his papers in the muniments room of Verfeuille, where the whole searing unhappiness of their married life can be studied by the literary historian. It was not that she was a rotten wife, either, for they loved each other to distraction; it was simply the sad story of inversion – it had left him high and dry without inner resources. People like Rob become too attached, too vulnerable, and in consequence are easily broken on the block. My sister if she read these lines would put her hands over her ears and cry out “No!” But they are true.

In a few more months the three of us were to have met once again in the city of Piers' birth, to resume the thread of this bizarre friendship which had lasted half a lifetime and which had only been slightly disturbed by his last posting to Delhi. We were both due to retire this year and return to Verfeuille together, to live out the rest of our story with Sylvie behind the massive ramparts of the crumbling chateau. To wall ourselves up, in a way: to retire from the world completely: to develop and enrich this enduring friendship between the three of us which had withstood so many trials and still remained (at least for me) the central experience of my whole existence. Indeed there was nothing else in my life to which I could compare it in fruitfulness and intensity—a three-cornered love, it started only because one day Sylvie lost her reason and almost dragged her brother with her. Piers hesitated and faltered on the very brink. Had I not been there I think he would have slid down the long slopes of unreason, choosing it as a refuge from his thoughts of her insanity. Now everything had changed, abruptly, brutally. Piers was apparently dead, and the man I had become could see no way forward into the future. The disappearance of my friend had overturned reality; yet the feeling of being bereft created a singular kind of tearless detachment in me, a dazed and fearless irony. The mirror recorded a grimly smiling man. Meanwhile, far away, in the green rose-gardens of Montfave Sylvie walked in her Chinese shawl, her lips moving in silent conversations with her dead brother. Here Bruce stands up and paces the empty carriage in a fury of resentment and pain like an animal caught in a trap.



Fatigue surely played a good part in this novel feeling of unreality which had beset me. People talk of time to die and the dead Piers had only just begun to make his claims on the memory of his friends. It was his body, not his memory, which was cold. Each time I was jolted awake I had to re-experience the fact of his death, an angry sting. For a moment there would be nothing, just an empty space – and then memory slid open like a flick-knife and I realised that he had gone, entered into the weird convention of the state of death, about which we know nothing which might help us domesticate the idea, tame it.

I wondered if in dying he had remembered the initiation which we had shared in Egypt long ago—the hands of Akkad, distilled patiently from the doctrines of the desert gnostics? I know he had been deeply marked by them. In the matter of death, I mean, they were crucial and unequivocal. For after that initiation it was impossible to attach any profound importance to the notion of dying. All individual deaths had been resumed by the death of God! I remember how the idea terrified me at the time! When we said goodbye to tender smiling Akkad he told us: “Now don't give a thought to what you have learned. Simply become it as fast as you can – *for what one becomes one forgets.*”

Obviously this belonged to the other kind of death, the gnostic one which would henceforward always overshadow the death of mere time in man; the death which for Akkad and his sect was simply one form of the body's self-indulgence, a lack of fastidiousness. "Dying can be a mere caprice if one allows it to happen before discovering the big trick which enables one to die with profit," he said.

I repeated his words slowly to myself now as I stared into the flying night. I wondered where Akkad would be tonight. Perhaps he was dead? I felt separated from Piers by less than half a pulse-beat.



And yet we had been lucky, given the circumstances of our occupations and voyages, to have enjoyed an almost continuous association with each other; our initial friendship which later turned into love, had never withered on the stalk. As a youth I had come into contact with the brother and sister who lived so strange an abstract life of beauty and introspection in their lonely chateau: and from then on we had hardly quitted one another. Piers became a diplomat, I a Service M.D., yet despite all the vagaries of fate we were, at the very worst, posted simultaneously to adjacent countries. On several lucky occasions we even achieved the same posting, he to the Embassy of France, I to the British. Thus we knew Cairo together and Rome, we shared Peking and Berne, we divided Madrid. Sylvie was our lieutenant, and when we were apart she shared us, moving from one to the other. But always we spent our summer leaves in Verfeuille together. So that despite all the changes of place and person the whole pattern of our lives (and in consequence our love) had continuity and design.

Later I had deliberately married Sylvie because she wished it. It further cemented our fierce attachment to each other. Nor was I sleepwalking, for I knew full well the psychological implications of the act. I also knew that one day the centre might fall out of Sylvie's mind; that she might have to be sent away, sequestered in the green quietness of Montfavet, the great straggling asylum which hovers among the lush streamlets and sunny bowers of the Vaucluse, exhaling something like the kinetic calm of an Epidaurus. On this score I have never had anything to regret. This three-cornered passion has held me spellbound for a lifetime and will see me beyond the grave. I knew I had found my *onlie begetters*. I was reliving the plot and counterplot of Shakespeare's Sonnets in my own life. I had found the master-mistress of my passion. Who could ask for more?



I had been walking all winter long in a country of snowbound lakes, locked in the steel grip of ice where the wild geese hooted all night long as they straggled south. Thus walking in the grey winterscapes one comes, at every turn, upon little bundles of dispersed feathers – the snow like a crumpled dining table in the woods. The diner had left already. Sometimes the fox may have spared a bird's head, but mostly only a clutch of unswallowable feathers. A walk in the ancient world, I thought, must have been somewhat similar, with the remains of animal sacrifices at every crossroad in green groves, on the seashore. They offered up a sacrificial death to the Gods as later on men were to offer up the first fruits of their garden plots. I felt that perhaps the suicide of Piers (if such an improbable thing were true) somehow partook of this sort of offering. But I still didn't quite believe it. But then, if not by his own hand, then by whose? Nothing that had happened to us in the past offered an explanation for this astonishing development. And all the more so because of the gnostic ideas of Akkad which Piers claimed to have understood and to have believed in. But wait a minute!

A phrase of Akkad's comes to mind. It went something like this: "People of our persuasion gradually learn to refuse all rights to so-called God. They renounce the empty world, not like ascetics."

or martyrs, but like convalescents after suicide. But one must be ripe for this sort of thing.” Sudden an absurd idea has entered the sleeper’s mind. Piers’ self-inflicted death as being a part of a ritual murder ... What nonsense! I had a sudden picture of my friend, quixotic to the point of innocence repeating the words after Akkad. He had always been prepared to push things to extremes.

And Sylvie? What might she not have to tell me? The thought of her, up there in Montfavet, aches on and on in my mind, as it had done for the last two years.



And so at long last to reach home, to clatter softly and wearily into the empty station – that historical point of return and departure: but this time alone. It has always afflicted me with a profound love and dread, this shabby little station, because so often when I returned Sylvie was waiting for me on the platform, hand in hand with her nurse, distractedly gazing about her. I was always looking out for her, I suppose. The train sighs to a halt and the rasping announcements begin in the accents of the Midi. I stand paralysed among the lighted windows gazing about me.

It never changes; it looks so homely, so provisional, so grubby-provincial. You could never deduce from it the existence of the cruel and famous town to which it belongs.

Outside the mistral purred. In the slowly thawing gardens were the memorable flaccid palms set in their circles of moulting grass. There was still snow-rime in the flowerbeds. And of course a queue of rubber-tired *fiacres*, waiting for whatever custom the dawn train might bring in. They looked half-dead with boredom and disgust, the horses and the drivers. Soon they would be sauntered away into the sleeping town, for the next train arrived after eleven. I managed to wake a driver and strike a price. I was heading for the old Royal Hotel. But as we yawed about and made some disjointed lurch towards the battlements I was siezed by a sudden counter-influence which made me direct the driver towards the river. I felt a sudden desire to see it again, its existence seemed to confirm so many things, the old river-God of our youth. So we slobbered and slid along the ancient walls, outside the bastions. It was dark as pitch, one saw nothing. Trees arched overhead. Then suddenly one heard a voice coupled with the snarl of the wind. Like cats making love. I got out and walked beside the slow cab, feeling the wind clutch my shoulders.

In the greyness the water was inky, swollen and curdled with blocks of ice which thumped and tinkled along the banks.

A faint light touched the east but dawn was not yet breaking. You might have thought yourself in central Asia – the cloudy sky in close link like chain-mail and the fading stabs of moonlight. The driver grumbled but I paid no attention. I even walked out gingerly upon the famous broken bridge clutching the handrail as well as my hat, for here the wind whirled. A frail ghost-light lit the chapel but there were no worshippers at that hour. A broken and renowned relic of man’s belief, pointing its amputated fingers of masonry westward. I thought of Piers. In expounding Akkad once he had said something like: “What really dies is the collective image of the past – all the temporal selves which have been present in a serial form focused together now in an instant of perfect attention, of crystal clear apprehension which could last forever if one wished.” How hollow all these grave lucubrations seemed in this wind-tugged night. Nevertheless they were perhaps appropriate to the place. For a hundred years this shabby village had been Rome, had been all Christendom.

This was, after all, Avignon.



Confused messages waited for me at the hotel, but there was nothing to be done about them at the hour. ~~I dozed on my bed until sunrise and then set out resolutely to find a coffee, traversing the~~ city with affection and distress, hearing my own sharp footsteps on the pavements, disembodied as a ghost. Avignon! Its shabby lights and sneaking cats were the same as ever; overturned dustbins, the glitter of fish scales, olive oil, broken glass, a dead scorpion. All the time we had been away on our travels round the world it had stayed pegged here at the confluence of its two green rivers. The past embalmed it, the present could not alter it. So many years of going away and coming back, remembering and forgetting it. It had always waited for us, floating among its tenebrous monuments, the corpulence of its ragged bells, the putrescence of its squares.

And in a sense we had waited for it to reclaim us after every absence. It had seen the most decisive part of our lives – the fall of Rob Sutcliffe, Sylvie's collapse, and now the suicide of Piers. Here it lay summer after summer, baking away in the sun, until its closely knitted roofs of weathered tile gave the appearance of a piecrust fresh from the oven. It haunted one although it was rotten, fly-blown with expired dignities, almost deliquescent among its autumn river damp. There was not a corner of it that we did not love.

I had not given much thought to Rob Sutcliffe until now, sitting in this grubby café, waiting for the clocks to strike eight. After my sister Pia ... after her defection had become absolutely unequivocal and Rob knew that they would never live together again, his decline and fall began. It was slow and measured at first, the decline from clubman and adventurer and famous novelist into ... what exactly? From a dandy with a passion for clean linen to a mountebank in a picture hat. His books passed out of public demand, and he ceased to write any new ones. He took dingy lodgings in the lower town, two rooms in the house of an "angel maker" as the ironists of the town called those old crones who took in unwanted or illegitimate children for a small fee, and with an unwritten, unspoken guarantee to turn them into "angels" in a very few months by ill-treating them and literally starving them to death. The old crone was Rob's only company in the last years. They sat and drank themselves silly at night in the den he inhabited in that ghastly house full of hungry children. His physical appearance had changed very much since he had grown a straggling black beard, and taken to a cloak and the broad-brimmed hat which gave him a striking appearance. But he had long since ceased to wash, and he was as physically as dirty as an anchorite. He was fond of the cloak because it was impregnated with dirt and spots of urine. He had deliberately taken to wetting his bed at nights now, gloating over this deliberately infantile act, rubbing his own nose in it so to speak. In micturating he always allowed a few drops to fall upon the cloak. The stale odour of the garment afforded him great pleasure. For some time he continued to see Toby, but at last he refused him the right to visit him. All this ostentatious display of infantile regression was all the more mysterious for being conscious. After all, Sutcliffe had started life as a psychologist, and only turned to writing afterwards. It was his revenge on Pia, I suppose, but all the stranger for being so deliberate. Sometimes when very drunk (he also took drugs) he would beg a hack from the livery stables and ride slowly about the town, with his head bowed over his breast, asleep: the reins left on the horse's neck so that it took him wherever it wished. Even when it came to the act of defecation he chose to smear paper and fingers alike. The change in Rob was almost unbelievable. It was his friend Toby who told me all this in his low sad voice – the voice reserved for matters of gravity or distress. He had forced the old crone to disgorge all she knew after Rob's body had been recovered from the river into which horse and rider had plunged.

It was strange to sit here in the early sunlight thinking about him, and also about Piers who had also met his end not two streets away, in the Hotel des Princes. Why had he not returned to the chateau? why had he stayed on in the town? Was he waiting to greet me? Or was there some other factor?



involved – perhaps it was easier to see his sister? All these things remained to be discovered. It would soon be time to take up the telephone and sort myself out. Nobody as yet knew I had arrived. I wondered whether perhaps Toby was already here in response to my cable.

The reaction of the long journey had begun to tell on me; I started to doze in the café. But jumping up I went back to the hotel where I knew that a hot shower would give me the energy I needed to get through the day – the memorable day of this return to Avignon and to Sylvie.

It is much later in the year now, when I try to reassess the meaning and value of all these episodes on paper: in search of some fruitful perspective upon my own life here in the old chateau – the quiet solitary life which I have at last adopted. Scribbling all this gives me something to do, I am resetting the broken bones of the past. Perhaps I should have begun it long ago, but the thought of the monuments room with its books and memoranda and paintings, that depressed me. At every point there I am in touch with them all through their diaries and manuscripts and letters. Moreover I myself must hurry a bit also, for a personal shadow has fallen into step with me, a more prosaic medical one which I can hold at bay for a while with the needle. But I am playing my hand slowly so as not to risk deserting Sylvie if I can help it.



I knew that I would have to undertake a few of the official duties in connection with Piers' death and later that morning I rang up Jourdain at the asylum, the doctor who had been a family friend, and into whose charge Sylvie had always been placed. He was a cheerful man for a neurologist, and made even melancholia sound like something pleasant and enviable to have. "At last!" he said with evident relief. "We have been waiting for you. She has had excellent remissions, you know, and spent a great deal of time with Piers, until this extraordinary business came about. Yes, I am as puzzled as you must be ... Why? They talked of nothing but your arrival and the new life you were going to start together in Verfeuille. Naturally she collapsed, but it's not a total relapse. Some twilight, some confusion of states, but the picture isn't entirely hopeless. And now you are here you can help me. I am holding her under fairly heavy sedation at the moment. But why not come out to Montfavet this evening and dine? We can wake her together."

I said I would do so. Apparently Toby had given no sign of life either. I wondered if he had received my cable.

That afternoon, to fill in my time, I took a short cut across the part of the old town which lies inside the fortifications and climbed past the ugly palaces of the Popes; I climbed the green-fringed ramp which led up into the marvellous hanging gardens of the Rocher des Doms. From this vantage point one can look down on three sides to see the loops and curls of the Rhône carving out the embankments of its bed in the carious limestone, sculpting the soft flanks of the nether hills. A frail sun shone upon distant snowlines leading away towards the Alps. A little island lay below this cockpit, frozen, like a wild duck trapped in frost-glittering sedge. Mount Saint Victor stood up in the distance, erect as a martyr tied to its stake of ice. But the wind still blew steel, although the faint sunlight had coaxed out some fugitive perfumes, orange or thyme, upon the air.

Here we had so often wandered, Sylvie and I, moving from one panorama to the other. And repeating the journey now I seemed to recapture many fragments of our old conversations. Events had given them an entirely new resonance. They had become part of past history, that part of time we had shared with Piers. I saw us now as figures – rather as in Rob's novel – projected anew by the force of memory upon this vernal landscape. Sylvie's dark-lashed eyes, "borrowed from the thrush" as her brother used to say, and the black hair with its violet blackness shining like carbon paper. Yes, the pa-

now had attained a curious nervous density, a weight which was not composed (as one might suppose) of multiple nostalgias. It was full and rich, plump as an autumn fruit. It had been so fully lived that there was nothing about it one could dare to regret. The feeling of fatality, loneliness, and so on, were constituents of the present. Up here spring was scratching at the door like a pet.

I walked absently about the garden in the cold afternoon air, retracing in my mind the slopes and contours of these ancient conversations and wondering what the future held in store for me in this bereft world.

Sylvie was now the great question mark. Would she, I wondered, ever come to herself again enough to resume some sort of life with me? Funny how confident I had been that the presence of Piers would somehow make this possible, make her return to reason, to reality. There had been neither more nor less reason for optimism than there was now, yet I had felt it. Now I was not sure – I feared the imponderables of mental illness with its imperfectly demarcated boundaries, its sudden changes of temper and altitude. It was Sylvie herself who once said: “One should always distrust the insane. They are of bad faith somehow and they know it. But they don’t know how to alter it, and you doctors don’t know how to cure it.”

And what if the worst should happen? Why, she would elect to stay on at Montfavet in the room which had for so long been set aside for her, trusting only in Jourdain, her old friend and confidant. I sighed to think that she might never roam the world with me again, making one member of that strange trio, husband, wife, nurse: nor even that other trio of brother, sister, lover. How close we had been before all this unhappiness supervened! I kept thinking back to those days. Piers, Sylvie, myself, Toby, Rob, Pia and Sabine with her pack of fortune-telling cards – where was she now? Did she know of Piers’ death from the cards? – that would be like her. My slow footsteps crunched on the gravel. Below loomed the sinfully ugly palaces of the Popes in all their blockish magnificence, overshadowing the town which despite the resonance of its name was still hardly more than an overgrown village. The quasi-death of insanity with its small periodic remissions, its deviations into good sense, even into brilliant insight, was almost more cruel really than outright death. In my own case it seemed gradually to have worn me out emotionally – the word castration does not sound too exaggerated in the context. An affect dammed and frozen. And of course (doctors are always on the lookout) I could trace the spoor of some deep new inhibitions in my dreams, not to mention my phantasies in which I surprised myself by poisoning her. It is unbelievable when I think of it, yet true. Standing beside the bed in grim silence with my fingers on her pulse until the shallow breathing filtered away into the silence and her extraordinary marmoreal pallor announced the advent of the rigor. And then the sweet scent rose to my nostrils, the imaginary scent of death which I always smell. I suspect that it was the odour of morphine. Yet in this dream fantasy it was always Piers who came up and put his hand on my arm to restrain me, to exorcise me.



There was plenty of time that evening. The light was faltering away into moonlit dusk when I set out to walk across the town to the station and pick up a *fiacre*. I wanted to jog in leisurely fashion through the green fields and chestnut avenues, over the rushing bubbling streamlets, to join Sylvie. I had so often done this in the past. I was anxious to see again the little church which had always been our point of rendezvous. Did it still stand in its humble little square planted with tall shady plane trees? Did the old cracked bistro still have the yellow letterbox nailed to its wall? A small, a fragile point of reference in the incoherent and echoing world of her madness, of her life behind the walls of the great establishment.

I used to catch sight of her waiting for me so shyly among the trees, listening with bent head for the clip-clop of the horse's hooves. Her tremulous anxiety ignited the dark beauty of her face with luminous eyes and white-rose pallor. And somewhere near at hand always lurked the tall, military-looking nurse clad in her stiff field-grey uniform, her white hair tugged back on her scalp and pinned into a coif. She would remain watchfully in the shadow of the trees while Sylvie advanced on tiptoe to meet me, her arms outstretched, her lips moving. It was like meeting a small child. The queer little camel-backed church was always empty too, smelling of wax and cats and dust. We entered it always with our arms about each other, the ice broken at last by the first tremulous kiss of recognition. And always we gravitated, as if by instinct, to the little side-chapel marked with a Roman five, and stood down face to face with the large rather anodyne painting which we had come to love so much. Here she always insisted that we talk in whispers, not from respect of the place, but lest the eavesdropper in the painting should overhear – though why these so manifestly harmless images should menace the endearments of two lovers in the silent church I do not know.

Jogging slowly along now, down these long green avenues already touched by the first spring shoots, I felt the full ambivalence of my thoughts swinging from side to side as the little *fiacre* itself swung. Queer thoughts passed through my mind, the anarchic thoughts which sprang from those unresolved childish conflicts and fears: thoughts I could identify at least. Perhaps out of Piers' death might extract a horror and sweetness which brought me much closer to her? I, who had never been jealous of Piers while he was alive, or so I thought, managed to surprise myself with such a thought: would I have her to myself! And if she were to become sane again, then why not fecund? It was not too late ... But here my mind balked. Once before we had taken this path, and it was a distasteful and dishonourable one. Surprised by Sylvie's pregnancy one spring some years ago, and not knowing for certain whose the child would be, I tried to solve the problem by marrying her, only to have all that uncertainty end in a provoked miscarriage. It was cowardly to pretend that her state of mind dictated it; it was our state of mind which should have been called into question. Nobody likes being homosexual, just as nobody likes being a negro or a Jew. The marriage was only another mask for the hold I had on her brother through his affections. And yet love is a real thing – perhaps the only real thing in this bereft world. And yet how to achieve the only sort which is viable, enriching – one without no sanctions, no reservations, one without guilt?

It was no longer fashionable to ask too much of oneself; we three must have seemed a somewhat pathetic trio to the outside eye – I think of the mordant phrases of Rob about us. We were old-fashioned, we belonged to the age of piety, and perhaps Avignon was the perfect site for this kind of blind adventure which would leave no trace behind, except for a lot of mouldering papers in the old chateau which would interest nobody, and one day would be sold for scrap.

Outside, in the shade of the trees, the German nurse in field-grey waited for us, standing upright like a soldier, her arms folded, watching the door of the church from which we would eventually emerge. Once Sylvie had written on the walls of the gutted ballroom at Verfeuille the phrase: "*Quelqu'un de gris reste vainqueur.*" And I knew she had been thinking of this tall dour custodian of her reason.

Yes, the church was still there, thank goodness, and the little square had hardly changed. My eyes once sought the familiar corner under the trees, but now there were only a few aged men stooped over their *boules*. I halted the *fiacre* and went into the nave for a moment, bemused by the sleepy silence and thinking of nothing in particular. I sat for a while absently in our little side-chapel, staring at the familiar painting which had presided over so many of our conversations. Then I set myself to think hard of her, wondering if perhaps by telepathy I might project some of this sad calm towards her. I closed my eyes and counted the breaths for a while, recreating her form mentally the while in the

shape of a target, an ikon. I conjured her up – all the small-boned liveness which issued in such abrupt but sure gestures: she wore clothes of a slightly old-fashioned cut, and little jewelry. It was not hard to forge her image, her “eidolon”, in the grey gloom of the little church. I tried to project towards her that part of a man which is his knowing, thinking and caring part – beyond the ego and the tricks of the mind. Yes, I saw her and another phrase of Akkad came into my mind. I repeated it softly to myself.

“Even death has its own precise texture and the big philosophers have always entered into the image of the world it exemplifies while still alive, so to become one with it while their hearts were still beating. They colonised it.” But it was when Akkad said things like that, which had all the air of being quotations from some forgotten gnostic poet, that Sylvie, beside herself with admiration, would spread her hands towards him and say, “O convince me, dear Akkad, please convince me.”

Unlike her brother she shared my native incapacity for belief, a lack which prevented either of us from advancing very far into the tangled jungle of the gnostic world; whereas Piers took to it at once like a duck to water, and only just managed to prevent himself becoming a bore, a fervent.

Time was moving on, the sunlight was slanting across the planes in a last conflagration before dusk. I broke off my reverie and rejoined the little cab. “To *Monfavet-les-Roses*”, I said, and the driver looked at me curiously, wondering, I imagine, whether to feel sympathy or not; or perhaps he was just curious. The idea of the roses gave a singular tinge to the notion of madness. Indeed in the vulgar Avignon slang “*tomber dans les roses*” which had been waggishly adapted from “*tomber dans les pommes*” signified going mad enough to be incarcerated in the grey institution. We were moving through the cool evening light towards Sylvie. I wondered how I should find her.



You would say that they were simply two old dilapidated rooms with high ceilings and a predisposition to unreachable cobwebs, but they were rather glorious, belonging to an older age, part of the original foundation. But they had always been hers, set aside for her, and now it was as if they belonged to her completely. The authorities had allowed her to move in her own graceful furniture from the chateau, carpets and paintings, and even a large tapestry rescued from the old ballroom. So that it was always a pleasant shock of surprise to come upon this haven of calm and beauty after traversing the rather forbidding main buildings, and the succession of long white corridors with sterile-looking glass doors painted over with doctors’ names. Moreover her own high french window gave out directly on to the gardens so that she could virtually live in the open all summer. Hers was the life of a privileged prisoner, except when she happened to have a period of remission when she resumed her place in the ordinary world. But the rooms stayed hers, and while she was away they were kept scrupulously dusted.

She worked under the great tapestry with its glowing but subdued tones – huntsmen with lofty horns had been running down a female stag. After the rape, leaving the grooms to bring the trophies home, they galloped away into the soft brumous Italian skyline; a network of misty lakes and romantic islets receding into the distance along the diagonal; fathered by Poussin or Claude. The stag lay there panting and bleeding and in tears. None of this had changed and I found the fact reassuring. The beautiful old Portuguese writing desk with its ivory-handled drawers, the rare bust of Gongora, the autograph of Gide enlarged and framed above the piano. Jourdain stood by with a quiet sad smile holding his passkey in his hand, and giving me time to take it all in. My eye fell upon a bundle of manuscript, and a tangle of notebooks lying about in a muddle on the carpet – as if a packet had exploded in her hands. “The spoils from Piers’ room,” said Jourdain following my eye. “The police

allowed her to carry off some of the stuff in the hope that she might reveal something of interest. But so far nothing. She seems to have been the last to see Piers, you see? Come, we can talk later.”

Well, but she had gone away to lie down and sleep in her vast unmade bed with its heavy damascened baldachin holding back the light and neutralising it. Her eyes were closed but she was not asleep. I could tell by the movement of her inquisitive fingers – they were playing something like the slow movement of the A minor; but slowly and haltingly, as if sight-reading it for the first time. We made little enough noise, but I could tell from long experience that she knew we were there, sensing the fact like an animal. Nor was there anything mysterious in the fact that it was I, for she had been expecting me. It was the purest automatism for me to go down on one knee and place my finger on her white wrist. I whispered her name and she smiled and turned; without opening her eyes she kissed me warmly on the mouth, lingeringly. “Bruce, at last you, Bruce.” But she said it as if I were still part of a dream she was enacting in her mind. Then she went on in a different register and in a small precise voice. “So then everything smells of burnt rubber here. I must tell Jourdain.” My companion grunted softly. Then she went on at a headlong pace. “I think really that it was his way of eating that repelled me. Toby always ate in that way. Poor Toby.” I took her hand, forgetting, and said, “Has Toby arrived yet?” But she only put her finger to her lips and said, “Shh. They must not overhear. He will be coming soon. He promised me.” She sat up now in a masterful mood, clasping her hands, but still keeping her eyes fast shut. “Piers’ diaries, they are all over the place, and I can’t sort them properly. Thank goodness you have come, Bruce.” Her lips trembled. “But the smell of rubber and sulphur – can’t tell which is the worse. So now I am completely in your power, Bruce. There is nobody left now who can hurt me at all except you. Do you want to kill me Bruce, to drive me to it? I must know the truth.”

“Please.”

“I must know the truth.”

She opened her eyes at last and turned towards us smiling – a trifle tearfully to be sure but with a basic composure that was reassuring. It always amazed me that whenever I reappeared after a long absence she suddenly shed her sickness. It was like watching a diver slowly surfacing. After a moment she lay down again and turned her face to the wall saying, but this time in a confidently rational tone, “Part of the confusion is in myself, you know, but mostly in all three of us at once. It is horrible to be a battleground of three selves.” I knew only too well what she meant, though I said nothing, simply keeping my fingers on the precious timepiece of her pulse.

She lay sighing, and then after a while it came back, the sensation that by some enigmatic act of willpower I drew her slowly back towards reality once more. It was still a factor of control over her (which did not always work) that I would have liked to rationalise, to use like a real healer. I tried to explain it to myself by saying that with me she gradually began to forget that she was mad. Ascribing a rational value to everything she said, however confused, I provoked her into trying to provide one for herself. I pretended that it all had a meaning, and of course in another sense it did have one, if only one could have deciphered it. It was indeed literally drowned in meaning, like a flooded boat.

There is nothing stranger than to love somebody who is mad, or who is intermittently so. The weight, the strain, the anxiety is a heavy load to bear – if only because among these confusional states and hysterias loom dreadful probabilities like suicide or murder. It shakes one’s hold also on one’s own grasp of reality; one realises how precariously we manage to hold on to our reason. With the spectacle of madness before one’s eyes one feels the odds shorten. The eclipse of reason seems such an easy affair, the grasp on sanity so provisional and insecure. While I was feeling the weight of the



preoccupations she was saying: "Everything seems to have come to an end now, but has it? Three little nigger boys ... then there were two. I am afraid of you. Bruce what shall we do?" The question was asked on such a rational note that I took the plunge and asked: "You were with him? How did it happen? Did he do it himself?" She gave a small sigh, and closed her eyes once more; she was fading back into sedation again, that marvellous defence against the importunities of the world; I felt a fool for having adventured such important questions at such a time. Jourdain had the grace not to look quizzically at me. He shrugged. A tiny snore escaped her lips, and the doctor drew me softly out of that submarine bedroom into the study.

I waited there for a long while, suspended as if in a solution of silence, watching her and listening to her gradually deepening breathing as she edged her way towards the dismemberment of a drugged sleep. Jourdain was very patiently waiting too; he was an endearing man and the slight cast in one eye gave him always a sad juridical air, a tiny touch of melancholy which invaded his frequent smiles and inflected them with sadness. He sported dark suits even in summer, when they must have been stifling to wear, and white wing-collars with ties almost broad enough to be stocks. He whispered that he would come back for me at dinner-time and then quietly tiptoed away. I sat beside her for a while longer and then followed his lead. But in the outer room I started to gather up all the litter of papers and notebooks which were lying about on the carpet. It was typical of the sort of jumble of paper that Piers accumulated around him – everything unfinished, down to the last aphorism! One might have thought that a mad magpie had been at work among this heap of old concert programmes, maps of cities, rare pamphlets, notebooks and letters. I did what I could to sort and tidy, but it was not easy. Among the letters, some still in their envelopes, there were a number from me, and a number from Sylvie to me which I had sent on to him – so much did I feel that we were one person and obliged to share each other's lives, both inner and outer.

Then there were some from Piers to her, all written on the notepaper he affected which bore the legend *Outremer*. (I had noticed on her finger Piers' seal ring with the same rebus. He had always ironically referred to himself as "the last of the Templars", and the word expressed not only the family tie, for he was indeed a de Nogaret, but also the Templar pride in the overseas commitment of the order. For such a romantic going to the Middle Orient was a thrilling experience – of a quasi-historic kind. He felt he was returning to the roots of the great betrayal, the roots of all anti-Christian dissension. Piers was a worshipper of the Templar God. He believed in the usurper of the throne, the Prince of Darkness.)

I pondered all these contingencies as I sat in the green armchair, sifting the papers and dreaming. "In the face of such evil, creative despair is the only honourable posture," he said once and was annoyed when I smiled at his serious expression. I turned the pages of a diary in which he jotted down the visits he had received during the days preceding his death. Had he given his sister the seal ring which she now wore, the *Outremer* ring? I shook a copy of *A Rebours* and more letters fell out on the carpet. One was a note to me from Piers giving an account of one of his sister's relapses. "When these periods come on, Bruce, she hears my voice everywhere, in the woods, in the hot-water pipes, in the drone of a mosquito, crying out always 'Sylvie, where are you?' Followed by a sudden ominous wail 'I have killed my sister.' She is terrified at such times. What can I do?"

Such periods corresponded neither to the phases of the moon nor to her own physical rhythms. They seemed perfectly arbitrary and unpredictable. If we came to see her at such a time she would recognize only one of us, Piers. And here was a long rambling letter which she had written to me, but dedicated to her brother. "Dearest, you have been away so long. Soon it will be my birthday and I can scent the exactness of numbers, they mate with such reluctance. I know you cannot come as yet but I pretend

Today I waited all day for you, clothed from head to foot in a marvellous seamless euphoria. The throbbing of the almond-blossom has been almost unbearable, I cried myself asleep, back into reality again. Now the fruit is forming and I know I love you. Bruce dear, this is Man Friday's sole in the sand, I have it in the carpet now. Even Jourdain says he sees it, so I know that I am not romancing Piers was a Friday child remember? My dearest, they say that now you are back from India, and yet no word. Why? You will certainly have your reasons, and everything will be explained when you come. Forgive me if I am impatient.

"I am impatient to hear about India – O how was India; how calm was India? Starving and God-drunk and tattered with dry excrement? I feel I know. Every drawn breath an infanticide, every smile an enigmatic option on inner loneliness. When I was there long ago I felt the moon of my fragile no-being was at full. The smell of the magnolia remembers me supremely. A deep sadness seemed very worth while. But locked up in the first-class waiting-room of my mind I have come to repine. Yesterday they let me pretend and I went down to our Montfavet church to say hullo to the people on the wall. Nowadays at night I seem to hear Piers walking about in the other room, but he is never there when I run to see. This place, this mockery of a place, is full of a special sadness. Jourdain feels it too. He is still here, still talking of retiring, fastidious as a leper; I taste his smoke after he has gone. The taste of iodine too."

It tested each phrase on my inner ear, my inner mind, as I thought of her sitting in the fifth side-chapel of the Montfavet church under the three oil-painted witnesses, so gauche, so awkward. On the wall at her back there was a plaque commemorating the death of a forgotten priest. If I closed my eyes even now I could read it off.

ICI REPOSE  
PLACIDE BRUNO VALAYER  
Evêque de Verdun  
Mort en Avignon  
en 1850

I was so far plunged in reverie that I forgot the sleeper next door, and when at last Jourdain came tapping on the glass for me I wondered who it might be. I was half asleep I suppose, fagged out after the long journey. However I sprang up and followed the doctor to his own bachelor suite at the other corner of the main buildings. They echoed his lifelong passion for painting, and I noticed several new additions to his collection of oils.

In order to emphasise his civil capacity, so to speak, he had put on an old and cherished English blazer — to underline I suppose that his stay as a student in Edinburgh has been a most enjoyable period in his existence. The wines were thoughtful and tenderly chambered. The food was slight but of choice. And for a good while we said nothing, which is the prerogative of old friends, but sat sipping our cognac and smiling at each other. "I was about to ask you if there was any reasonable explanation," he said at last with an exasperated laugh, "and I see that you are just about to put the same question to me." He was right, I had been on the point of asking him what the devil had got into Piers. As he was fully informed of our plans of retirement and so on I could speak to him quite freely. I had always suspected him of being in love with Sylvie, but he was a man of great pudicity; when he was once a case of doing a mild psychotherapy on her he passed her over to someone else, in order, I thought, not to prejudice his doctor's control: or was it because he did not wish to feel the jealousy caused by his probings? "Let me tell you what is what for the present," he said at last as we sat down

to the meal. He drew a long breath. "Piers came here on retirement nearly a year ago, and set up shop in the hotel in order to be near Sylvie as he waited for you to arrive. Everything was in order for the execution of your plan, he spoke about it twice to me with enthusiasm. Sylvie herself celebrated the whole thing by several splendid remissions – you would never have thought she had been ill at all. Piers was beside himself with joy, and she spent nearly every day with him, either walking about the town or sitting in his rooms helping him sort papers or playing cards with him – you know his passion for cards. For the last week before this ... well, extraordinary act ... he had been in bed with a slight cold, nothing really to worry about. You will see when you look at his diary that quite a lot of people dropped in to see him, but it does seem that the very last was Sylvie. The nurse used to collect her in the evenings around seven and bring her back here to her rooms. Mind you, it was quite appropriate that the last person to see him alive was his sister. What is odd is that she was almost in a state of collapse when the nurse arrived, so the inference is that he had already done it or had told her that he was going to do it. But at any rate she knew. From then on such facts as she produced must be held in suspicion, for she went right round the bend. The nurse produced one interesting point – she said that Sylvie (Sylvie) was in a fearful state because she thought herself guilty of killing Piers, for she poured out her sleeping draught for him that night and thinks that she made a mistake. The empty bottle was beside the bed, where inevitably those flat-footed police found it, and insisted on an autopsy to settle the matter. Did he poison himself, or did she accidentally do so? That is the question." "An accident sounds more plausible. I'm reassured." "Exactly. He gave absolutely no indication of a desire to commit suicide. I was too late to prevent the police having him carved up, but I did get on to the *préfet* who assured me that unless there is very special evidence to the contrary the thing will be treated as an accident. Which solves the question of burial. I have also contacted that strange uncle of his, the Abbot of Foulques, who has agreed to lend a moral support should the police become tedious. You know he had permission to be buried in the family vault at Verfeuille? We should get all the formalities settled by tomorrow evening. Well, that is all I can tell you for the moment." He placed his fingers on the table and reflected deeply. "It may have been Sylvie," he said, "in which case we can absolve her of any ill intent; it could only have been an accident. Yes, it must be so."

I was strangely comforted by this exposé of the situation which had at first seemed to be so full of ambiguities. At least now the whole matter was plain, and when the police came back with the obvious result things could take their normal course, the funeral could take place. As Jourdain talked, however, I saw in my mind's eye the long casual autopsy slit which stretches from below the breast bone to the *mons pubis*.

"And Toby?" asked Jourdain with a sudden testy note in his voice, "where the devil is he?" It was a question I could not answer for the moment. "We have all cabled him in Oxford. But perhaps he hasn't yet gone up, or is away on a walking tour in Germany as he so often is ... I don't know." Jourdain nodded; and then with an exclamation he stood up, recalling something he had forgotten. "I completely forgot. I borrowed the police photos for you to see. They show the room exactly as it was when the police photographer was called in by the inspector and the *médecin-légiste*. Of course in part it is due to the fact that it took place at the Princes Hotel – what the devil induced Piers to stay there instead of somewhere like the Bristol? Funds? It's virtually a *maison de passe*. Perhaps he had special secret vices we don't know about? Anyway, whatever happens at the Princes is automatically suspicious for the police. Hence these awkward questions, photographs and so on. Of course he was an amateur *quart* – hashish – which delighted the cops. But there was precious little else of interest."

As he was speaking he was undoing a heavy black briefcase which had been lying against the sofa. From it he extracted an official envelope which held a number of photographic prints, as yet hard

dry. The glossy surface stuck to one's fingers as one peeled them. They were extremely beautiful. ~~these still-lives of Piers' disorderly room.~~ Jourdain spread them out on a green card-table and drew up two chairs, at the same time producing a large magnifying glass through which one could study the detail of the room with its strange inhabitant, who lay in bed, in the very posture in which he had been found. I felt a shortening of the breath as I contemplated them. Jourdain was talking on softly, anxious to give as complete an account as he could of this strange affair. "There were several sets of prints of the empty bottle here, on the bedside table. One of them Sylvie's, which is interesting. As you know he took quite large doses of Luminash, as a sort of sedative as well as a sleeping draught. Presumably this is what they'll find in the organs."

Piers lay on his side with his knees drawn up – in almost a sketch of the foetal position; he had thrown back the sheet and the covers and appeared to be about to get up from his bed. His head was turned round towards the camera, presumably in the direction of the door, and he was smiling as if in delighted and surprised recognition, at someone who had just entered the room. It was clearly a smile of welcome. The flashlight threw into relief his pleasant patrician face and the brilliance of his bright blue eyes, which had a sapphire-like luminosity. He wore one of his old white nightshirts with the little monogram on the breast. It was like a frozen shot in a film, and it was difficult to interpret what he might have been about to do; instead of rising perhaps he was just sinking back luxuriously, and smiling goodbye as somebody left the room?

Yet one outstretched hand with its firm fencer's wrist was stretched out towards the bedside table as if to switch off a light, take up a book or a cigarette. I passed the magnifying glass across the field to examine the detail with more precision. A novel lay beside the bed. His wrist-watch and his ebony cigarette holder lay in the silver ashtray on the bed-table. In a second and larger ashtray lay a mountain of cigarette and cigar ends. I recognised the stubs of the cheroots he smoked. For the rest the room was in a state of chaos; everywhere were tea-cups, jars of jam, flowers, packets of joss, picture magazines and mountains of books and papers. "The room looks as if it had never been cleaned," I said, and Jourdain shrugged his shoulders. "It's the Princes," he said as if that explained everything.

To tell the truth the appearance of his room was, for such an untidy man, relatively normal. Cupboards hung open revealing his wardrobe. Though he had always been a little bit of a dandy his choice of apparel was scanty, but choice, with a distinct leaning towards clothes made for him in London. A couple of medium-sized trunks were enough to house personal possessions of this kind; but the books were a different matter – Piers could not live without books, and plenty of them. This explained the sagging home-made bookshelves knocked together from pieces of crate. And there was the oil painting he liked so much, of the three of us. Sylvie in the dappled sunlight under the plane tree sitting in a yellow hammock, her lap full of flowers. On either side of her we stand, Piers holding his straw hat in his hand, as if he had just retrieved it from the grass. I stand leaning against the tree lighting a cigarette. The sky has the peculiar peeled look which is conferred by the mistral on a cloudless, hard as enamel. I went through the prints with a feeling of weakness, with a lump in my throat. Yes, there was nothing unexpected here. The only other decoration would be the famous death map which he had been compiling of late and which had a bearing on his intention of writing a memoir on the subject of his own approaching death. But more of this later. My hand is tired tonight. I must get some order into my thoughts. Something troubled me in all this. What was it?



Jourdain dropped me at my hotel that evening after dinner, and grunted as he saw through the glass doors of the patio the shapes of two men who sat waiting for me. They sat with such an air

involuntary boredom, smoking patiently, that I almost divined who they were before he spoke. “That old Bechet the notary, and Tholon the police inspector. They probably want to take you to see the room and ask you for any notions you might have.”

I turned and bade him goodnight. “Keep in touch,” he said as he let in the clutch, and I said I would. I opened the glass cage and stepped into the patio with its undusted potted palms and introduced myself to the two men – or at least to one of them; for Bechet I had already met some years before with Piers. We exchanged shocked commiseration at the news of his death, genuine enough in his case because he had dearly loved the family. He puffed and blew in his fussy way, and used his hands to say what his tongue could not.

It was unthinkable that it should have been anything but an accident, he told me, more than once. The little policeman, who looked so undistinguished in civilian clothes, did not intrude his speculations upon us. “We must see,” he said quietly. “Tomorrow we should have the results of the autopsy, and the body will be returned to the morgue, to the *chapelle ardente*, where his relatives may visit him if they wish.” My soul shrank back however at the thought, which was unworthy of a medical man like myself—I know it. Bechet plunged into the details of the funeral which he had memorised from the will. The details rendered him somewhat plaintive, for Piers was to be taken to the family *caveau* after dark, by the light of torches, there to be placed among his ancestors. But no service of any kind was to be read. “It’s awkward,” said Bechet, “I don’t know what the Abbé will have to say. He will think that Piers was an atheist.” Tholon sighed and I gathered from the volume that he harboured anticlerical sentiments. “It’s vexing,” said the old lawyer scattering ash over his rumpled suit, and on the end of his spotted bow tie. “In a way it was worse,” I said thoughtfully, “for he belonged to a sect of gnostics who live in Egypt – and they are certainly not Christians but dissenters. Hence the provision in his will, I suppose.” Tholon began to look impatient now and asked me if I would care to see the room in which my friend had died. It was being held under police seal for the moment, but perhaps the contents might give me an idea to help explain the affair. I was reluctant, but I felt I could hardly refuse. Despite Bechet’s obvious distaste (he was like all Mediterranean men superstitious about the death of friends) he allowed his courtesy to rule him and agreed to accompany us on the short walk across the square to the hotel. I had decided to get the thing over and done with.

It was deep night now with a rising moon. The gold lantern with its legend “Hotel des Princes” swung softly in the light breeze. It was an old hotel and smelt ruinously of dust and blocked drains. We climbed to the first floor and Tholon undid some tapes stuck with sealing wax on one of the doors. The room was a pleasant size but very musty. The inspector crossed it before even turning on the light and opened a door leading out on to a small balcony; then he returned and switched on the electric light within. The bird-spattered balcony gave out on to a corner of dilapidated garden whose withered and ancient trees had long since given up bearing fruit. No doubt Piers sat out here obstinately in the icy evenings of winter to watch the light softly fading over Avignon, watching the city softly tilting into the uncaring twilight like a sailing boat turning its cheek to the wind. From here, across the network of brown clay roofs, everything slid downwards into the massive green river, which itself propelled its currents downwards to Arles with its desolate necropolis, the Alyscamps. His mind, like mine now, would have crossed the river towards the sea and then veered northward once more ...

There was not a corner of this magnetic country that the three of us had not explored together, sometimes on foot, sometimes on horseback, or else in a dilapidated pony cart piled high with camping equipment. Often in summer as we sat down round a fire of olive-trimmings in some field near Remoulins or Aramon a moon like a blood-orange would wander into the sky and hang above the river, waiting for our return. Avignon, so small, stuffy and parochial, was in my blood. I shivered and



stepped back into the room where the two men stood in sympathetic silence, waiting for me to take into consideration and perhaps to offer some useful observations on it. But there seemed little enough to be said.

“The body has been removed, but nothing else has been touched except the glasses and the bottle of sedative from which we took our fingerprints.” On the nether wall was the so-called death-map compiled by my friend. I saw Bechet studying it in a somewhat nervous way and stepped to his side to explain it as best I could. “All the names were the names of friends who had died. He seemed to attach particular importance to the fact, and used to say that each separate death had taught him something new about death, and that he was going to resume this knowledge in a philosophic essay about dying. It was connected in an obscure way with the beliefs of this sect of gnostics to which he belonged.” It sounded pretty lame and stupid as an explanation but it had the merits of filling in an area of darkness. Bechet tutted with anxiety and readjusted his pince-nez. “Well. Well. Well,” he said disconsolately for death was a subject he could not stand – his whole life, constructed of a tissue of routine and boredom, had been designed to shelter him from the realisation that he was gradually approaching death. Tholon was made of different stuff, being much younger. He studied the big yellow chart with gravity. “I have noted all the names,” he said, and one could sense that a formidable dossier was on the way to being assembled.

“So they are all dead?” said Bechet with distaste.

“Yes.”

“OUTREMER”

“But why the singular shape of the map which looks like a sort of snake?”

“It is a snake – for this little sect death in an individual assumes the shape of a constellation, the Serpent. The snake symbolises process, even time itself.”

Bechet almost groaned at these obscurities. He looked quite alarmed, and I realised that it was time to spare him. So much of this must have sounded rubbish to him. “At any rate that is what I explained to me,” I said hastily while the lawyer rubbed his long *ultra*'s nose and sighed.

“Perhaps,” said Tholon, scenting my awkwardness, “you would care to spend a little while alone in the room? It is difficult to concentrate when one is with people. But alone and quiet you might notice something of interest. What do you say?” I hesitated. I knew that the good fellow wanted to leave me alone to say a prayer for the soul of my friend. I said I would like to stay if it did not upset anyone. To tell the truth I was anxious to see the back of them and eager to examine the bookshelf and the notebooks of my friend. There may have been a manuscript worth saving from the rapacious curiosity of the police. Tholon at once handed over the keys and the waxed tapes which I must affix. “Just look up,” he said, “and I will come round tomorrow and pick up the keys from your hotel.” I thanked him. Bechet seemed eager and relieved to quit the place. But he said: “Just one thing I'd like to have your opinion about. In the will he speaks of his horror at the chance of being buried alive, and asks to have a vein severed. Would you be prepared to do that?” I said that there would hardly be any need for that safeguard in view of the autopsy, and he agreed at once, relieved.

They both went. I heard their voices and footsteps descend in diminishing echoes down the stairs, then the uneasy blurred silence of the city fell upon this tomb-like room with its disinherited objects. From time to time the susurrus of traffic might be broken by a clattering stammering outburst of a church-bell, but that was all. So this is where Piers had spent the last hours of his life! I sat down on the foot of the bed and put my hand to the turned-back sheet. It was lukewarm. The room smelt vaguely of joss as well as of drains. I pulled back the bedclothes and was not surprised to find the scarlet bedsocks he always wore to match his vivid Egyptian *babouches*. A dozen pairs of socks he had

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