

Nirvana Manor

By

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The Wheel of Change

George Sanservel was awaiting instructions at the side of his dying mother's bed opposite his final servant, a loyal butler. He was fretting for he desperately needed these instructions and he was starting to worry about what would happen when his mother did die. The old lady – and a lady she was, not just an ordinary woman -- was lying in an old four poster bed, suffering from a vague upper class malady that lesser people would never get.

George felt comfortable in his mother's room. He was so used to it, he wasn't even aware of the fading curtains and floor coverings. A friend had once said that the room needed a good coat of paint, but to be brutally honest, before that it also needed a major application of nasty chemicals to kill the inhabiting insect life, a total rebuild of the infrastructure, the insertion of a lot of wood filler, the application of large quantities of plaster and then the invocation of a makeover television team looking for the ultimate challenge. After all this the coat of paint might be at last worth trying. George was blissfully ignorant of its dilapidated state simply because he was used to it and felt that this was how it should appear. He never even noticed the musty, ancient smell of slowly decaying timber.

George was the epitome of the Sanservel family: good looking, very nice and so stupid that without a butler he might not even be able to dress on his own.

The butler was also an epitome. Or at the very least a caricature. At that moment he was the epitome and caricature of a butler to the nobility. His clothing was clean and very well presented in the uniform of a modern butler: a morning suit. This was the height of modern fashion for this family, since it was only two centuries behind the rest of the world. The butler's expression never changed from a dignified sneer and he always spoke with perfect and clear enunciation.

George was dressed in hand me down clothes from his father, clothes which summed up the entire family. They were not so much lived in as lived in, died in and not washed too often to

make sure they lasted. The clothes makers of previous generations had so much more to be proud of than modern manufacturers. Modern clothes are sold in cheap, tatty shops where any old person of any class hands over common cash, or even more common credit cards for clothes that are identical to those that thousands of other people wear. No, the gentlemen's outfitters, dress makers and saddlers who made this family's clothes handed over the individually tailored goods without being so common as to ask for money, patiently waiting to be paid at the end of the life of the Gentleman, whereupon another piece of the family estate was sold to cover the astounding costs of making clothes that last for generations and are only paid for every 70 years or so. The Sanservels were particularly good patrons of such clothiers and so their estate had been reducing steadily over the generations to just a few remaining acres of woodland and this tumble down house.

'George,' the old woman said, 'you are now the Lord of this House, but I am afraid that it is all that is left to you by the Family. I know that the house is no longer as good as it once was but I am relying on you to build up the family name once again to something great.'

George replied with his usual enthusiasm, his worries put aside for his mother was instructing him once again. 'Of course Mother, I have a plan that will restore the House and then I'm going to find a nice, quiet, good looking girl of the right class to marry. I will contact our family friends in London.'

The Family had always survived by appearing on Committees and Boards, earning money without doing anything other than agreeing to the most outlandish political extremes, cheering on the firing of employees to save costs (and so maintain that essential shareholder value) or voting themselves a huge pay rise for being such good people. But in the Brave New Labour World, even this one hereditary career was denied to the family, for patronage was out of fashion, even with the patronisers.

George's mother continued her instructions. 'George, you must also find out what has happened to the family's wealth,' she continued. 'It was once great, with many fine features.'

We used to have so many ornaments in this house, but I can find no evidence of any of them now. You must find out what has happened to them and where they are now.'

George was eager to please. Two major jobs to do in one day! He rose to the challenge! 'I shall become a detective Mother. I shall use my intellect to find out what's happening and I shall solve this riddle.'

'Of course, George,' his mother replied with an exasperated air. 'And how will you start?'

'I shall start by thinking on what's happening. I shall consider the options. I shall look into it all. I shall be an excellent detective.'

The old woman sighed. 'You don't have a clue about what to do, do you George?'

George was not put out by the slightest bit at this personal knock. 'No, but how hard can it be? Perhaps I should look for clues as well. I wonder where they would be?'

'Perhaps you should call in the Police, George?' she replied despairingly.

George noticed that Forbes moved to speak but he spoke up first as befits the master of the house. 'No, Mother. I *shall* be a detective and find out *exactly* what has been going on here. We don't need the police with me here. I'll sort it all out.'

Forbes joined in belatedly. 'You do not need to fear, Ma'am, I shall assist George and we will surely solve the puzzle. I will be Doctor Watson to George's Sherlock Holmes. After all we must establish that there is a crime or the police will accuse us of wasting their time.'

'Jolly good idea,' exclaimed George. 'We can ask Mr Holmes and this doctor to show me how to look for clues. Perhaps they can also help with making The Family great again, too.'

'No, George, you must be the detective. You must lead this investigation with Forbes assisting you. Do you understand?' said the old lady.

‘Yes, Mother,’ he said and, to confirm his understanding, he added, ‘the only help I will get is from Forbes, as these other two chaps will not be involved. We will sort it all out, together.’

The woman reached out to Forbes. ‘You will look after George, won’t you Forbes? Make sure that he will be successful, will marry the right sort of woman, someone nice, good looking and of the right class? Promise me that Forbes,’ pleaded the old woman. ‘He should have enough money in the estate to last until he has an heir who can save the family home.’

‘Of course, Madam,’ replied Forbes.

The old woman started into a fit of coughing, then a rack of coughing, then a lung wrenching, deep, phlegm moving explosion of coughing. As the house was permanently damp and cold, the old woman often suffered from something like influenza, but never so common. George and Forbes observed these events, waiting expectantly for the next instruction. She went to speak and so they leant forward to be near her and hear clearly. She coughed and relaxed and they also leant back to their previous positions. She went to speak again and her would-be mourners leant forward again, ready once more for instructions, or, even better, revelations of past misdemeanours and deep dark family secrets. No such exciting news appeared and the old lady settled back to her pillow again, with a smirk. A third attempt to speak wisdom started another synchronised lean from the watchers but at the last minute she converted it into a look at the garden through the window.

Forbes and George relaxed, bored and somewhat irritated for it had become obvious that the old woman wasn’t going to reveal anything and probably wasn’t going to die either. George was now worried about the conversation they just had, so, he headed for the door indicating to Forbes that he should follow while the old woman started another particularly energetic coughing fit.

In the corridor, out of earshot, George whispered to Forbes, ‘what shall I do? I don’t really know how to be a detective. I think I should call the police.’

‘No, Sir. Lady Sansservel expressly stated that you were to do the investigating. The police may not be needed, after all. I’m sure that your breeding will manifest, Sir, and you will succeed. Why not see if your mother has further advice?’

George was going to argue, but his mother had become quiet, and he simply didn’t know what to say next.

‘Yes, breeding, yes,’ muttered George as he paused for a few minutes, slowly thinking it through. Finally, he returned to the room for more guidance. His mother was lying perfectly still in bed and had gone a strange blue colour. Something was clearly wrong. He called desperately to Forbes, who quickly appeared and checked the old woman. Forbes turned and looked him full in the face to say, ‘I believe your mother has passed away.’ The poignant moment had passed without George receiving a revelation or even noticing. George decided that surely his mother had gone on to another place where she could at last find out whether there were really separate heavens for the classes as she always secretly believed. She had also taken any death bed confessions with her.

Forbes continued to speak. ‘I’m afraid that’s it for me, George. I’m leaving and I won’t be back,’ he said, becoming an instant equal to George by the use of first names. This familiarity left George feeling unsettled but not as much as the words that had been spoken. Now that Mother had died who was left to tell him what to do? Desperately he tried to convince Forbes to stay. ‘But you have been such a good servant. Please stay and help me. The family must owe you something for all these years, I’m sure.’

‘Decades, Sir, but I have made my own arrangements in anticipation of this event.’

Thankfully for George, Forbes had slipped back into butler speak. ‘I’m afraid you’re going to have to find a source of income, Sir. Perhaps, you could sell the house and grounds to some rich developer who wants a posh place to rebuild or a hotel or a business centre? You’d be set for the rest of your life if you were careful and didn’t let the bills mount up. Otherwise, I doubt that you’ll be able to stay here for long before you get thrown out. Goodbye.’

‘But you can’t just leave me,’ George pleaded. ‘You heard what Mother said. She was relying on you. Please help me, Forbes. Who are these fellows Bill and why shouldn’t I let them ride horses?’

Forbes paused. ‘Okay, Sir, I will teach you some of what you need to know before I leave,’ he said, pity radiating from his face.

As had always happened, George sat at the kitchen table while the butler instructed him. Forbes had always been George’s teacher, enabling him to avoid contact with the lesser classes in schools where any old person’s money is accepted. This was especially useful as the Sanservels had no money anyway.

‘Now, Sir,’ started the teacher. ‘You’ll need to learn about paying bills.’

‘Excellent,’ answered the student, bright as a pin. ‘Who’s Bill?’

‘It’s a request for money, Sir.’

‘Excellent stuff. This isn’t so hard. Mother always told me that money had been touched by commoners, so I was to avoid it.’ George was full of enthusiasm. ‘So, where do I find the money?’

‘Ahhh, you must earn it first, Sir.’

‘Earn it? How do I do that? I thought I’d just be given it.’

‘No, Sir, you must earn it, because you don’t have any do you? Your mother sold the last of the rent cottages to pay your grandfather’s bills and the death duties, so nobody gives your family money anymore.’

‘Oh, I see,’ replied George who did not see at all. ‘Grandfather knew about this Bill too, then. He was a strong old fellow and I imagine he chased him down and sorted him out. But I was sure I would just be given money. That’s what always happens in our family. People give us

money all the time and we sit in on planks or boreds or something.’ He paused for thought and at last continued, ‘so how do I earn money?’

‘You get a job, Sir.’

‘Wow this is starting to get complicated. I’ve got to go and find a job and money and all for this Bill, fellow. What does a job look like?’

Forbes sighed. ‘A job is what you do. Someone will employ you, pay you money and then you can use the money to pay the person who has given you the bill.’

‘Ahhh, so I see a man about a job, get the money and give the money to someone else, named Bill. Why doesn’t Bill do the job, and then he’ll get the money directly? That would save me a lot of trouble.’

Forbes hesitated once more. ‘Sir, when you use the electricity, or the water or get your rubbish taken away or even get food delivered everyone will want paying. To show you that you owe them money they give you a piece of paper called a bill.’ George opened his mouth to speak but Forbes jumped in again before he could ask the obvious question. ‘And there is no person called Bill involved. The piece of paper is called a bill.’

‘Okay,’ said George, feeling that tentative understanding was arriving at last, ‘how about this? I find someone who is willing to work for me and they give me the money and I give it to Bill.’ George quickly corrected himself when he saw Forbes’ expression, ‘I mean to pay the bill, and if there’s money left over I get to keep it. If I could find lots of people to work, I would have lots of money left over.’

‘Well done, Sir, I knew your breeding would come through. You’ve immediately come up with the essence of capitalism. Yes, if you can find someone who will do a job for you and you can get more money than you give them, you will be able to keep the difference. This will do admirably. You would then be a businessman. A proper job that your mother would be proud of.’

George did not understand any of this after the pleasant words “Well done”.

‘Okay, so I find someone to work for me, doing a job for someone else. I keep some of the money and then I use it to pay the bills that come in the mail.’

‘Yes, sir, and the easiest way to convince others to work for you is to claim that you are taking all the risks.’

‘That doesn’t sound very good. I don’t like risks.’

‘No, Sir, you just claim you are taking risks. If you don’t have enough money, don’t pay them, they will take weeks to get up the courage to become really nasty. Then, if things get worse, your first act must be to make some of the people working for you redundant but to keep on with the business. Eventually, if things become really dire, you declare yourself bankrupt and no longer have to pay anyone, including your employees. So really you will take far less risk than they will, but you must never tell them that otherwise they might realise what is really going on and leave before things are really dire.’

‘Great, so now I’m a businessman,’ declared George, pleased with his new role in life.

‘While you’re building your empire, Sir, you need to look out for bills that are due, and find ways to delay these people until you have enough to pay them. Otherwise they will come and take all you have.’

‘Where do I find these bills?’ replied George, eager again.

‘I’m afraid they’ll find you, Sir. They come as letters and you must open them all, even if they aren’t addressed to you. Most of the bills will be in your mother’s name. You should start checking now.’

George wandered off to look for bills in some of the rooms, although he secretly kept looking for someone named Bill at the same time.

As he was looking around George glanced out through the huge picture window just as Forbes drove off with a sack which to anyone else would have been too quickly prepared, suspiciously bulging and probably should have had 'Swag' written on it if it was to be represented truthfully. One of the rats had finally left the house.

George was now thoroughly confused and very worried. Oh well, I think that this job stuff sounds a bit too complicated, he thought. I'll just use the money under the floorboards in Mother's room.

He went and looked at his mother's body, not knowing what to do. Finally he rang the local doctor who, thankfully, was able to come and help out, making all arrangements, including contacting the family solicitor to take charge of the legalities.

Several days later, feeling totally lost and desperate for guidance, George went to the local town to seek the help of a clairvoyant. Surely someone who could see clearly could help him? George may have been stupid, but, like 4 year old French children and most of the upper classes, he could speak French fluently. Unfortunately, he also had a tendency to interpret borrowed words rather literally.

Morgwyn's Challenge

Morgwyn was bored. She was waiting in her consultation room for a client, any client. She looked at her favourite poster. "You too can be psychic!!!" it declared. She had designed it herself with before and after pictures of a confused pre-psychic person's head surrounded by question marks and a newly psychic person's head with a wise expression. This was the way to get clients, she had decided.

Her appearance was designed to entice the gullible and the desperate into her web. Her hair was straight and bobbed, marked out in harsh stripes of dyed black and bleached white and she wore a long, black dress which was designed to hug a narrow waist and flare around feminine hips. And it would have done so if only she wasn't so fat. In fact her weight was so great, that it prompted questions as to whether she should be using guys ropes to anchor her dress to her body. On the other hand, not a lot of material was needed for her height as she was extremely short. Still, her weight did give her the advantage of a large cleavage promising motherly love to all. It also enabled her to distract the male clients away from her bulk by the use of a low cut neckline. Her face was painted to show deep, dark, mysterious eyes, rich, blood red lips and pale, effete skin. She fancied that she looked like Morticia from the Adams family, but, in fact she looked more like Danny de Vito in black drag.

Her consultation room was full of mystic devices, secret sigils and significant but complex symbols containing hidden meaning from every mystic art possible. There were Red Indian dream catchers, Hopi ear candles, Chinese Taoist paintings and acupuncture charts. Celtic crosses mingled with Egyptian Ankhs. And, of course, the very fashionable Tibetan Buddhist Vajra took pride of place in a Mandala so complex it absolutely reeked of hidden knowledge and the ineffable (whatever ineffable means, for it's a word which defies both description and understanding). There was even a scale model of the Pyramid of Cheops with all the dimensions adjusted so that they chimed with mystic constants and little stickers explaining these mysterious connections.

She was a mistress of ancient and lost wisdom demonstrated by the arcane spelling on every poster and flyer. Several substituted a 'y' for 'i' or used ancient fonts, but all of them were complex and obscure and so therefore they must all contain ancient, hidden knowledge. No one knew the meaning of many of the words, and so their knowledge was very well hidden indeed.

Vague and rambling new age music was playing gently in the background whilst scented candles cast a gentle light and incense glowed to fill the air with a smoky, pungent cloudiness.

A woman appeared at the door wearing the beads and scarves of a fortune teller and a wire pyramid on her head. Morgwyn immediately recognised a fellow spiritualist and a threat. She felt decidedly tense.

'My name's Elwyn,' said the woman, 'I've just arrived and I thought I'd consult a fellow spiritualist.'

Morgwyn guessed that Elwyn's name was no more real than her own. Vaguely Celtic names were the current New Age fashion.

'I'm Morgwyn. Welcome. Please sit down.' She said this with a gesture indicating the chair opposite which had been carefully placed to ensure that her authority and control were reinforced.

Elwyn gracefully settled into the chair demonstrating that her appearance and movement were the opposite of Morgwyn's heavy footed clumsiness. Morgwyn felt even more anxious and uncertain.

'It is so lovely to meet another follower of The Path,' Morgwyn said.

‘I’m sure there’s so much support we can give each other,’ replied Elwyn. The words were pleasant enough on both sides but, somehow, underneath them, there was an air of menace, as if honey was being offered on the blade of a hunting knife.

Morgwyn was impressed with Elwyn’s appearance for she projected the perfect image of an arcane spiritualist. The pyramid on her head was truly inspired. Morgwyn did not need to ask whether it really concentrated the cosmic energies into her brain, for she did not believe in such energies. The atmosphere between the two women was cool. Normally Morgwyn chanted to a client using contorted sentences to create a mystique of unknowable wisdom, but between professionals she used straightforward speaking.

‘I would welcome your support,’ lied Morgwyn, carefully, waiting for Elwyn to reveal her real agenda.

‘You have such a lovely consulting room,’ said Elwyn.

‘Thank you,’ replied Morgwyn, still waiting patiently to see when the threat would appear but now becoming very concerned at why such a delay was necessary. Perhaps it was a very big threat.

‘It would be so nice to work together,’ said Elwyn, ‘have you ever heard of co-consultation?’

Morgwyn had never heard of co-consultation before, but she had to appear all knowing or lose her credibility. She applied her intellect. This was a big guess, but she knew her stuff.

‘Yes, of course. I’ve always compared it to co-counselling. We can give each other readings right now if you’d like.’

Elwyn raised her eyebrows. She’s probably only just made up the name co-consultation this morning, thought Morgwyn, and so I’ve already impressed her.

‘Oh that would be so good,’ the newcomer said. ‘I think it will be so nice to live in this lovely little town and share spiritual understanding with another adept.’

So that was the threat. This woman was moving into Morgwyn's territory. Her livelihood and the comfortable living she was making were in danger. The town was in the centre of an area known for its ley lines, mystic mountains, lakes with mysterious inhabitants in dark depths and believers in alternative ways of living which usually involved not having to work. This town also had a large group of believers with plenty of money seeking a path to ancient wisdom to enable them to avoid Unhappiness, Suffering and Death. Morgwyn was making a very comfortable living by providing "spiritual guidance" for the richer seekers.

'Why don't we exchange readings now?' suggested Elwyn.

Morgwyn increased the odds since everything was at stake anyway. 'Yes, I usually do the two consultations in parallel. Would that be too confusing for you?'

Elwyn's eyes narrowed. 'That would be ideal, wouldn't it?' she said. 'We could compare our futures and see if there are any impending dangers. After all, if one of us were to face some major challenge, we should know about it beforehand so that the other can be there for support through a trying period.'

In spiritualist terms this was a "loser gets out of town by sundown or she suffers endless humiliation" challenge. Morgwyn was in big trouble so she quickly decided to set the agenda. 'I think we should do a range of divinations, don't you? I usually like to start with a tarot reading, then consult the runes and then the crystal ball.' She desperately hoped that Elwyn would not add numerology or astrology for they required an ability with maths that Morgwyn did not have. They could also be checked to ensure that the numbers did add up and that the angles were correct. Morgwyn did not want to be tied down to anything she had to record on paper or defend in any way.

Elwyn agreed to this agenda immediately. 'Okay, tarot, runes and a crystal ball it is then.'

She must be impatient, thought Morgwyn. Perhaps there was a chance that she would slip up.

They each produced their tarot cards, exchanged decks, shuffled and exchanged again, carefully avoiding touching each other during this process. Morgwyn's last tarot card pack had almost fallen apart so she had been forced to use a crisp, new and more modern Aquarius pack. She noted in a cool professional way that Elwyn's classical tarot pack felt worn and much shuffled. The first subtle challenge had already been made and Elwyn was already ahead.

The tension was rising. The incense clouded the air while the candles gently flickered as they hunched over their cards. They were almost motionless, only moving hand, eye and mouth. The feeling was of the closed, secret and intense atmosphere of a gambling den. There was all to play for and a livelihood to lose. The new age music somehow sounded like the theme from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*.

They drew cards simultaneously, staring coolly at each other, both looking for any sign of weakness.

'Ace of Swords,' said Morgwyn, 'You will have some adversity to overcome in a new situation.' This was a good card and so she had set her opening bet accordingly.

'Ace of Wands,' said Elwyn. 'I see a new beginning for you.' The bet was met and the stakes were raised.

'Ten of Wands,' countered Morgwyn, 'A challenge that you might not be able to meet.'

'Hmmm, perhaps not quite a failure, just a challenge,' replied Elwyn before she continued with, 'eight of cups for you, showing you leaving the rat race.' The bluff had been called and the response had raised the stakes. After just a few cards, neither contender was even pretending to use normal, accepted interpretations for these cards. They were interpreting freely but always with one aim in mind: to persuade the other that they were in big trouble if they stayed in town. They were concentrating fiercely, the sweat forming tiny beads on their brows.

‘The Wheel of Fortune,’ said Morgwyn, ‘beware change can lead to failure.’

‘Nine of Wands, leaving room for a successor.’

‘Eight of Swords, returning to resolve old relationships.’

‘That’s not....,’ started Elwyn, about to contradict. Morgwyn looked up alertly waiting for the contradiction for it would have been too blatant and would have broken the unwritten rules. Elwyn recognised her mistake for she deftly changed her ending words to, ‘...unusual in my situation.’

The tension in the dark, smoke filled room continued to be raised on every card. This was a steady exchange of explanation, bluff and counter bluff. No old time gamblers riding on a paddle wheel sailing down the Mississippi River could have withstood this stand off. There was no clear winner yet as the Battle of the Spiritualists continued.

They were down to their last card, they were evenly matched and this card would be the final decider. They both placed The Fool on the table at the same time, and without thinking Morgwyn shouted ‘Snap!’

The world stood still.

Morgwyn was mortified as she watched Elwyn assume a false attitude of concern. In the moment of excitement she had just thrown away the contest due to a silly childhood reflex. This interloper had won and life would soon become unbearable in this town.

‘The Fool,’ said Elwyn. Morgwyn felt that she was being named as Elwyn continued, ‘you are on the brink of a precipice. You need to retreat. You are in such danger. You must be in great fear.’

Morgwyn tried to counter with, ‘Yes, I see that both of us may be committed to a difficult path. We must both hold back from change.’

This interpretation was brushed aside contemptuously, ‘No I think this can be interpreted as us both entering a new phase of our lives. Starting again in innocence. In a new situation.’ The last words were hammered home.

Morgwyn felt she could have been easily contested this interpretation but she was panicking, stunned and appalled by her mistake. The remaining readings continued, but she was unable to retrieve her cool. As her failure was reinforced with every reading, even she started to believe that she should leave town.

Finally, Elwyn stood to leave with Morgwyn feeling thoroughly humiliated. ‘That was so useful. You obviously need so much support, Morgwyn. I must stay in town and help you. Perhaps I can guide you through this challenging time and support your practice.’ With these words the winner swept from the room to prepare her own practice and to destroy Morgwyn’s.

Underneath all the paraphernalia Morgwyn was a very bright, hard woman. She had been knocked about by life many times, starting from her childhood. The knocks were not initially due to her weight, but soon it was a major factor. Perhaps the first few verbal and physical knocks from her brutal father started the sequence which led to her putting on weight and getting more knocks from the world in general, but soon a spiralling exchange of difficult relationships and a growing waistline occurred. She was now dwelling on every one of these failures in her life.

She knew how much appearances mattered. She had been using appearances to manipulate the weaker, more credulous people around her. Now Elwyn would be manipulating those credulous people against her, crowing to all that she needed spiritual guidance. It would be said so nicely, so positively, as if to support her, but her clientele would recognise a loser and disappear. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but sometime soon she would be penniless. Could she stand the slow starvation caused by a thousand lost clients (well at least the twenty regulars) or should she just depart now?

What was she to do now? With her inner weaknesses exposed, knowing she would be mercilessly exploited, she sat and prayed for the distraction of another client.

The thief breaks in

Outside a mansion in the country a man dressed all in black and wearing a visor waited patiently for the opportunity to commit his crime. It was a modern, well protected house that had been looked after very carefully. A lot of money had been spent on this house, because the owner was important, rich, very powerful and very dangerous. The owner was not completely honest and would not have welcomed the presence of the police, so he was very careful about protecting his property, realising that there were villains in the world who were just as ruthless as he was.

The man waiting outside had spent the last week preparing for this night. He pressed a button on a very high tech gadget and, as a result, the alarm went off and the house lit up. The owner stumped noisily around the house looking for an intruder. The man outside smiled for this was the fifth night in a row that he had set the alarm off, disturbing the owner's sleep. He knew that the technicians who had installed the alarm would not have been able to find a fault for there was none.

Finally, a red light on the high tech gadget went out. It meant that the owner had made the biggest mistake of his life and had at last turned the alarm off in order to get a good night's sleep.

The burglar waited for exactly forty five minutes and went to the house. Using a very low tech crowbar, he forced a window open. The house was well protected, but, somehow this particular window was not as strong as the rest. The burglar knew this.

The house was a delight of valuable items. A few small, gaudy trinkets, were snatched greedily as the intruder headed directly to the bedroom as if he knew the way. After a few

second he loomed over the sleeping owner. His next act was surprising, though, for he tapped the sleeper on the shoulder, awakening him.

‘I have a message from Sir Ron,’ the intruder said and the message was delivered. It was sharp, very brutal and very final. As the owner rose from the bed in fear, to run or perhaps to fight, he was hit very hard on the head by a crow bar, and his life was taken from him.

The intruder searched the house, scattering items everywhere. The safe was found and exposed, but its contents were secure, for its defences were formidable, defeating even this intruder’s high tech equipment. Finally, the thief turned and ran for, now that this task was done, his life would be painfully forfeit if he was caught by the owner’s associates. He had a long way to run and he was in great fear, but he was prepared and he was not panicking.

Morgwyn vs Simon

Morgwyn was leading a group meeting with a number of her clients. She had several staggeringly gullible people present asking questions and receiving wisdom.

‘Dolphins appear from Sirius to tend to humanity, but despair abounds at the lack of awareness for what is offered,’ Morgwyn stated in her most matter of fact voice, using obscure grammar to convince all present that she knew more than they did.

‘Please, Morgwyn,’ said one of those yearning for wisdom, any wisdom at all, ‘what do the dolphins think about the way we treat them?’

‘Visitors grieve for the nature of the uncaring and unknowing.’

Another person spoke. He was a newcomer on the exact opposite side of the circle of acolytes and Morgwyn had been watching him warily for some time as he hadn’t said a single sycophantic word yet. In fact, he hadn’t said a word at all. ‘So how come we’ve never seen their spaceships?’ he asked.

Morgwyn was ready for such an obvious question. The question also confirmed that she had another opponent present. ‘The Sirius dwellers’ abilities are far, far, far in advance of petty humanity. An advanced spacecraft is almost undetectable by any mere scientific means. Only the intuitive can detect its presence.’ She said the word ‘scientific’ as if it had been coated in cynicism, dipped in a deep vat of disdain, and boiled in asperity for those who live by it. The coterie always appreciated a good knock at those arrogant scientists who pretended they had secret wisdom and then hid it from them, by making it so difficult to understand with all that maths and those long words.

‘Ah, then if they’re almost undetectable, we should have some evidence of them,’ responded the challenger. The spectators looked from one speaker to the other, their movements synchronised. They were looking at Morgwyn with interest to see how she would handle this upstart, for they were confident that she could sort him out effortlessly.

‘Governments hide the evidence in the hope of learning the deepest secrets of the star travellers. Evidence of spacecraft appears in pictures taken by satellites but all such evidence is suppressed.’ It was effortless to handle these questions for an expert like Morgwyn. Her answer was self obvious, fully covered every angle, contained a good dollop of paranoia, had a good application of blame on the authorities and finished with a reference to evidence that clearly exists but can never be found because it is so well hidden.

The surrounding spectators relaxed back with a sigh after such an excellent exchange of volleys. Morgwyn was not even ruffled and already the challenger had been outplayed. But the challenger was starting the next round.

‘If they’re so much ahead of us, how come they allow themselves to be hurt.’ Almost an ace right across the net, but like all good champions, Morgwyn had detected her challenger’s movements and predicted the direction of the challenge. Morgwyn demonstrated why she was so good as a clairvoyant with a quick backhander to a corner of the court that the challenger wasn’t defending. ‘To demonstrate power belittles and crushes the backward and

stupid. Humanity would be crushed on seeing its helplessness and naivety. The Advanced Ones desire Humanity's growth and development despite its government and so in their generosity they stay and subject themselves to our attentions even though it hurts them.'

The acolytes sighed collectively, almost clapping. What an answer! Such good repartee. Another point to their favourite who still wasn't seriously challenged. All heads turned back to look at the newcomer in case he still wanted to be beaten some more.

The challenger started a new volley with a hard hitting serve. 'Are there spirits all around us all the time?' he asked.

All faces turned to Morgwyn. The onlookers were really getting excited in the match. This was getting interesting, a new challenge that they never heard before. How would Morgwyn answer this one?

'Why yes, of course,' said Morgwyn. She was still flushed from her victory and almost complacent after so effortlessly winning the recent exchange. She gazed around the circle and accepted the plaudits. 'Everywhere,' she added.

All faces turned to the upstart.

'And you can see them and interpret them for us?' probed the contender.

All heads turned back to the champion watching for the next return.

'Yes, although the spirits are unable to speak directly and not all can perceive the true meaning of an astral communication,' Morgwyn replied with the automatic dexterity of an experienced winner.

Back to the challenger. 'I suppose that ghosts are the spirits that any of us can see.'

The questions were becoming very carefully worded, and Morgwyn could feel herself being manoeuvred into a difficult position. She was starting to worry as her previous challenge with Elwyn was coming to mind.

‘I suppose that’s why ghosts appear,’ added the newcomer.

A hushed expectation fell upon the watchers. This upstart was starting to pretend that he knew about the unknowable. Morgwyn was worried for she knew that Elwyn would already be acting against her. Perhaps this upstart had been sent to catch her out. All her acolytes had turned to watch her keenly.

‘Ghosts are seen by those able to see,’ said Morgwyn warily. She was definitely detecting a challenge but she hadn’t worked out yet how the next attack would affect her. If this was a set up by Elwyn, there were going to be many more difficult questions. All but one of her observers had turned to face the opponent. Morgwyn glared at the late head turner who quickly turned, red-faced. Morgwyn was worried that she was starting to radiate weakness, uncertainty and failure.

‘Can anyone get to see a ghost at some time?’ asked the newcomer.

The spectators looked back at Morgwyn. They all yearned to see a ghost if they only could learn enough to get their own direct access to the spirit world and so they were no longer onlookers. They were caught up inextricably in the match. Morgwyn realised that she had to be very careful. This was the first step in losing some of her paying adorers. She became a bit flustered as she realised that the match was moving dangerously close to the edge of the court where the spectators were. In her concern her language lost some of its obscurity.

‘Anyone can be in the right state at some time and so any can observe an intrusion from the other side. To receive a missive from the other side at will requires a sensitive mind.’

Again not all heads turned away from Morgwyn. Morgwyn could see that fears were starting to appear. Would she lose this battle? What was the contender preparing for? Was he sent by Elwyn?

‘But ghosts are seen in some places all the time. Aren’t there places where anyone can see a ghost? Often?’ he asked.

Morgwyn concentrated on what was happening. Her previous victory had been too easy. Her worries about Elwyn were clouding her judgement. She decided she had better start finding out more details about this upstart and very quickly as she might have quite a fight on her hands, especially if he had been primed by a spiritualist. ‘What is the name of the one appealing for wisdom?’ she asked. All faces were looking at her, searching for signs of weakness.

The challenger leaned forward for his next serve. ‘Simon. My name’s Simon and I want to see a ghost for myself. I don’t believe in the spirit world, but if I see a ghost for myself I will believe and you’ll have a convert. And I would even be prepared to write an article in my newspaper to support you and get your wisdom more widely heard. In fact, I’ll even give you £1000, if I get to see a ghost. You can give it to a Dolphin charity if you like. Are you able to do this or do I have to find a better spiritualist?’ declared Simon, his trap fully set and waiting for its clairvoyant victim. This was a serious challenge.

Morgwyn felt all eyes on her looking for weaknesses. She looked at the eager faces around her. They had to think that she was omnipotent in the spiritual world and so she couldn’t just avoid this challenge. She would have to do something to remove the danger. Outright denial and avoidance would get her nowhere, so she decided to move the contest to a more dangerous level but away from the onlookers. ‘A spiritual place is always available. Few of those present here are ready for a Visitation. Many are at risk of being Trapped by the Other Side. Who would dare face the Unknowable?’ She was back to her best medium’s singsong. Morgwyn was making sure that the onlookers were worried that they might see a ghost when they were not ready. Morgwyn had ensured that they all knew that knowledge was still hidden from them and they were not ready to see the Spirit World although they dearly wished they could.

Simon, however was radiating disbelief and lack of faith. ‘I have no fear of ghosts and if I’m Trapped by the Other Side I will take all responsibility for myself. I have studied the science

of Psychology and I know how to defend myself from psychic attacks. I know about secret experiments on mind reading and I've seen that fellow Derren Brown on the telly. If you're not up to it, I'm sure I can find another more knowledgeable medium who could do it.'

Morgwyn needed this money, not just to prove that she could win, but also to maintain her credibility and to protect her reputation before Elwyn could cause real damage to it. Her bank balance could always do with topping up also. She looked around at the circle of those wishing to learn from her and formed a quick judgement. She decided to call for a suspension of the battle to continue at a later date on a hidden court where she could manipulate the outcome afterwards. Her inner circle already believed and were all sufficiently scared, so they did not need to see a ghost. 'Only the one person can take the risk of seeing the other side and that one must accept his fate. The act can be done if one present does not care for his sanity. Those who care for their eternal selves should avoid this danger until their knowledge is complete.' Morgwyn hated this convoluted language but she kept it up for the show of it.

'Good. Tonight it is. We can go in my car. You guide me to a place and we'll see a ghost. You can win the £1000 and I will become a believer. Unless, of course, you turn out to be a charlatan.'

Cursing the convoluted speech which had opened such a trap, Morgwyn replied. 'And so it shall be.' Once she had Simon on his own, she would see what can be done. Perhaps she might win the £1000 somehow, but at the very least she could make sure that he didn't come to the next meeting and she could then deride him in his absence and ensure that all her believers would be certain that a ghost had been present.

Unfortunately, this wouldn't be good enough to defend herself against an expert like Elwyn who would be destroying her reputation behind her back. Perhaps the thousand pounds would be enough to start again somewhere new.

George meets Mariah in Morgwyn's waiting room

George was sitting in Morgwyn's waiting room. He looked around at the explanations on Chi, Kundalini and Chakras and saw an attractive young woman opposite him who seemed to be on the verge of tears. Part of being nice is to extend a hand to those around you in despair so George reached out to her instinctively.

'Hello, are you okay? I believe this lady is very good at helping people,' he said at his most caring.

'Oh yes, I hope so. I've been stuck in a difficult step forward for so long, I really need some help,' she declared in a wobbly and pathetic voice barely managing to keep the tears back.

'My name's George.'

'Mariah.' He observed her more closely now that they had introduced themselves. She was attractive, slim and well dressed in a hippy style, using nicely matching clothes from a multitude of cultures. She had fair hair, blue watery eyes and a round face. She was also wearing a large collection of jewellery.

'What do all those charms mean?' he asked.

'They all spell happiness,' she said. 'I've found the word for happiness in twenty different languages. These are the Chinese characters for Happiness, Luck and Friendship. I'm wearing red because it is a laughing colour. But I don't seem to be very happy still, even though I've tried in so many ways.'

Morgwyn opened her door, allowing the inner circle trooped out. As he left the room, Simon turned to Morgwyn, saying, 'This evening, then, you have to show me a real ghost or you get nothing.' Morgwyn waited for Simon to leave, then looked around and beckoned to Mariah who was one of her regulars.

Morgwyn planned Mariah's consultation as they entered the room. Morgwyn had long ago learned that people with vaguely good foretellings were more generous than people with specific bad foretellings, so all clients got the vaguely good unless they were one of the few who were asking for misery. The future for Mariah would be vaguely good, perhaps with signs and hints for A Man, A Good Future and Happiness all combined into one.

George consults Morgwyn

George spent the next half hour in a state of waiting without much thought or any expectations. Many gurus and disciples of meditation would have given their prayer wheel and half their incense to reach the state that George easily arrived at simply by being too stupid to think and fret.

As Mariah finally left she looked meaningfully at George without any tears. In a single rushed burst she asked, 'would you like to go for a coffee after you've had your session with Morgwyn? We, um, we could um like um share um our um you know readings, you know.'

George may have been dumb but he still had testosterone and it was capable of speaking on his behalf. 'Oh yes,' his testosterone answered, secretly hoping for a result that his mother would never have approved of, although, since the girl was one of the lower classes, it could be overlooked, perhaps, providing it was only a quiet fling to be put aside when the right vessel for an heir could be found.

'I'll wait for you here if you like, George,' Mariah said meaningfully.

'Okay.'

This exchange had been observed carefully by Morgwyn, in case there was some advantage she could gain. She instantly became bored with it, though, and decided to interrupt them before it dragged on all day.

‘The spirits announce a special visitor today. A time to consult has arrived,’ called Morgwyn.

George entered the office looking wistfully back at Mariah to ensure that she was staying put.

Morgwyn’s voice rang out to draw his attention. ‘An applicant has no need to ask. The advice is already apparent. Is someone called George present?’ she had already applied her intelligence and real intuition to George’s appearance and had divined much. This ability justified her role as an adviser and confidante much more than as a spiritualist and medium. ‘A man on hard times, once wealthy. A man seeking love and fortune. A man who is lost and seeks guidance.’

Morgwyn observed that George was astounded and impressed. He was so easy to read.

‘That’s amazing,’ he said. ‘I’ll bet you even know about my house in Little Nodding.’

Morgwyn intoned in her best spiritualist style, ‘a consultation of the spirits, the cards and a divination will take place.’ Adding more directly, ‘and that’ll be 20 pounds voluntary donation in advance, please.’

George mutely handed over the 20 pounds. Morgwyn retrieved her best crystal ball and looked into it. ‘A house appears. A big house. A nearby house, very close for the spirits or a familiar from the other side but too far to walk. And yet a long path is in store for someone nearby.’

‘Yes, that’s my house,’ said George. ‘Will anyone else live in the house with me? Will I get help and money to restore it? How did you know about Nirvana House? When will my business start up?’

This speech gave Morgwyn more information than she could hope for, but it also planted an idea. She was very fast at identifying any advantage and this victim was a gift from the spirits just for her. She investigated further to see what was available. ‘The spirits are talking to me.

A woman will come to share a life with someone present,' she intoned in her best spiritualist chant. This statement worked on George who immediately perked up, listening carefully. She became more canny as she tried to find out more about him and his background.

'A man nearby is lonely and seeking company,' she moaned. This was a sure fire start that usually got any client eager and telling her more.

George looked around the room. She went onto her next declaration. 'A man nearby has recently experienced great change and upset.'

George looked around again. He went to the door. 'Where are you going?' snapped Morgwyn, completely forgetting to be mysterious and abstract in her anger.

'To find these other fellows you're talking about. They might need your help too. Perhaps we could all consult you.' He looked puzzled.

Morgwyn was quick on the uptake once again and realised that he needed some direct speaking. 'The spirits provide a name for this person for they are all one man. Is there a George present?' She could see that George was going to be a very big challenge, although paradoxically, if she was careful he would also be an easy mark.

She considered what she really wanted from him. Somewhere deep inside her there was still a little girl and a woman holding hands and wishing for a lover, a husband and a child, preferably not all in one person, but she would accept whatever she could get. Unfortunately, her formidable bulk and her even more formidable presence made it impossible for any appropriate prey to even notice the honey trap and so be captured. Perhaps there was another way to capture a husband, and perhaps she could get even more at the same time, she thought, as she looked at George? Perhaps she could also get a place to live in? A base to fight Elwyn from?

But how could she be mysterious, vague and abstract, never committing to anything that could be checked, but at the same time making sure he did what she wanted? What she

wanted, of course, was to live and consult in a big country house with a handsome, lordly heir at her beck and call. She would decide in the future what she might beckon for and what she might on the other hand call for. All this was waiting for her if she could get this conversation right.

George sat down and said, ‘that sounds very interesting. Um, what was that again about my experiences.’

She took a long sigh and had a good look at him, just in case he was someone clever trying to set her up. He really did seem to be that dumb, so she re-assumed her character with fat arms upraised. Her voice was high and wobbling like some enormous soprano in an earthquake singing a song requiring the wearing of a huge, behorned helmet. ‘Great changes have occurred as one named George seeks a new path. Oh spirits above, provide him with the guidance he needs. What is his path in this time of crisis?’

After a short pause she continued with the most direct hint she could give. ‘The spirits speak. There is a call for a man named George.’

‘Is it Mother?’ asked George. ‘Does she know where Forbes is? Will he come back? Tell her I’m having trouble getting things done without Forbes and I’ve become a businessman, but nobody is working for me and I don’t know how to improve the house and the blue room needs redecorating, and should I be sleeping in the Chinese Room or the Blue Room?’ All this came in a cathartic rush with a single long breath. Clearly, George missed his mother terribly and needed her guidance. From the sound of it he even missed Forbes whoever he was.

This man is a gift to all charlatans, she thought to herself. This was going to be so easy. The answer to Elwyn and to her own womanly needs was in front of her. Out loud to get all the details she really needed she said, ‘the spirits are lost in the material world. A mother can’t find her way home. How should a spirit be guided to a home dimly remembered?’

Morgwyn's clients usually thought that spirits need spiritual guidance and so giving them directions in the mundane sense would have no value, so she was ready with a list of questions that would produce real physical guidance but George surprised her. 'Little Nodding,' he said. 'About half a mile out of the village on the road to Bigearian. The house is called Pleasaunce Hall. You can get to it at the end of the long and windy road west out of the village at Little Nodding towards Bigearian. There's a sign at the gate.' George spilt all this in one breath.

'You seem to know that very well,' said Morgwyn, speaking directly in her surprise.

'Mother made me memorise the address so that I could summon taxis and order food when Forbes and she were too busy,' said George.

Now he is using the directions to summon the spiritual world and me, she thought wryly.

With the address given to her in so much detail, she only needed to make sure that she would be welcome and so she added 'Guidance is available from the spirit world. The spirits offer direction and help for one named George. A mother seeks her son.' Just in case, she looked at George again and, sure enough, he was starting to look around the room for the mother seeking her son. 'A mother seeks her little Georgie.' A guess, but fairly safe.

'Oh that must be me. Only my Mother ever used that name. Mother will you keep helping me?' Morgwyn almost felt sorry for George as he could not see how he was being manipulated. She reminded herself of the spiritualist mantra, never give a sucker an even break.

'The spirits call out for interpretation. George's mother cannot call to her son directly. George will be guided by the spirits with a woman to mediate.' And with these words, Morgwyn set the scene for her own and George's future.

George and Mariah get Together

George finally escaped from Morgwyn's lair pleased to see that Mariah was waiting for him. They both stepped out of the waiting room onto the pavement. The conversation immediately stopped as neither knew what to do or say next. Mariah hesitated the first tentative statement. 'Well,' she said. Not a memorable start but the best she could summon in the circumstances.

'Yes, well,' said George grinning from ear to ear and not knowing what to do next. His testosterone had taken one look at Morgwyn and was hiding in fear, so George had lost what little power of intelligent speech he had earlier. 'Well,' he tried one more time, desperately trying to think of how to talk to women.

'Yes,' echoed a tongue tied Mariah.

'Coffee, then,' tried George.

'Yes, coffee,' echoed Mariah.

Thankfully, there was a cheap little greasy spoon café just a few doors away, otherwise who knows how long this would have lasted? Mariah, simply took George's arm and lead him into the café. This touch on George's arm was electric. He was bewildered as to what should happen next but he desperately wanted it to involve more touching. In all his life other people had looked after him. Thankfully Mariah asked him what he would like to drink.

Mariah bought them each a cup of coffee and a cake and they sat in hard plastic chairs next to the window onto the street.

Now it might be interesting to listen to the conversation that followed, but, unfortunately it was the conversation of two tongue tied people trying to get to know each other and so the words 'boring' and 'painful' apply instead of 'exciting' and 'interesting'. Still, they somehow managed to exchange stories and George told Mariah that he was a businessman and a detective and he informed her of Morgwyn's predictions for him. During this time George

also heard about all the different ways there are to obtain happiness, or to just barely miss out on it, as always seemed to happen in Mariah's case, despite trying everything for at least a week and sometimes even longer. George had never had to think about happiness before. Mother had always seen to George's happiness and he had always been happy to let life happen that way.

'This is so nice,' beamed Mariah. 'We must do this regularly. Perhaps tomorrow.'

'Oh yes,' George replied. He was eager. 'But I'll have to get home first, as I don't have any money left on me. I gave all my money to Morgwyn. The rest of my money's at home you see.'

'Why not catch the bus?' asked Mariah.

'I've never needed to before. Forbes always drove me around in the Bentley. I do miss them both so,' replied George.

'What Forbes and your mother?' asked Mariah.

'No, the house and the Bentley,' replied George.

'Look, catching a bus is so easy. I do it all the time. Where do you live?'

George was pleased to have Mariah's attentions. This must be the fastest prediction to come true, ever, he thought.

'Little Nodding,' he said automatically. 'About half a mile out of the village on the road to Bigearian. The house is called Pleasaunce Hall. You can get to it at the end of the long and windy road west out of the village at Little Nodding towards Bigearian. There's a sign at the gate.' George repeated this without the need for thought, which was just as well as he couldn't supply much anyway.

'What an amazing name for a house. It must be a place with so much happiness and so many good feelings in it.' Mariah smiled in a way that made George feel very warm indeed!

George sighed. ‘Yes, it is a lovely place, but a long way out. I get so lonely there in that big house.’ George had decided that Mariah was a very nice, attractive girl. She wasn’t as posh as the girls he usually met, but that was okay, especially as Mother wasn’t around to interfere with the meeting process. Mother also needed an intermediary these days, and Mariah seemed to be very spiritual so she was probably the one that Morgwyn had been talking about.

‘You can catch the lunchtime Bigearian bus to Little Noddling. It sounds like it’s not too far to walk after that. It’s a lovely day, too.’

‘Umm,’ prevaricated George.

‘What’s the problem?’

‘Welllllll, it’s just that I gave all my money to Morgwyn and I’ve never caught a bus and I promised Mother that I would be a detective and now that I’m a businessman I just don’t know what to do next.’ This all came out in a single, sighing breath.

‘George,’ Mariah said, wearing her best caring expression, with only the hint of a tear. ‘I can help you with all of those things. Let’s start with the money and the bus. I’ve got enough for us both to catch a bus and then you can show me the way to your place. You can tell me all about your business. It will be a lovely walk today with all the flowers just coming out.’

So they set off for a long bus ride with sideways smirks at each other and hopes for their joint happiness abounding.

Simon vs Morgwyn

Later that afternoon at Morgwyn’s office, Simon had arrived to take Morgwyn on their ghost hunt. She finally had time to look at him properly. He looked like a caricature of a mad scientist and a computer geek combined. He had long, straight, wild hair that stuck out in all directions. It looked like it might have been carefully arranged to look like this. He wore a

shirt containing so much plastic that it probably never got wet, even when being washed. He had a row of pens in his shirt pocket and he was constantly taking a pad of paper from his trouser pocket, scribbling some illegible words in it and putting it away again.

‘What words were being written by one nearby?’

‘Ideas I’ve just had,’ he said, ‘I’m a writer you see. And a scientist.’

She decided to see how much she could tease him. ‘Oh, the spirits declare that someone nearby doesn’t have a Ph.D. Is this true?’

‘Well, no, I don’t, not really,’ he answered.

‘Master of Science?’ she asked. He shook his head. ‘Bachelor of Science?’ He still shook his head. ‘A Level in science? A Level in another closely scientific subject? Any A Level at all? GCSE in Science?’ He was looking vaguely off in the distance, silent and regally detached as she listed qualifications.

‘Have you ever had any formal qualification in anything like a science?’ she tried one more time, slipping into normal speech.

He tried to defend himself. ‘I’ve always found that if you just present facts scientifically, people always show you respect. I don’t need bits of paper.’

She contemptuously indicated to him to lead on, as she carried her special bag, keeping its contents out of his sight. ‘The card of the fool shows the unknowing walking into danger. Does a fool realise he is a fool?’ She said this straight to him so that he would get the message loud and clear.

‘Hah, since ghosts don’t exist, my only task is to ensure that you don’t trick me. Did you know that the great founder of modern electronics, Marconi, uncovered many fake spiritualists? He found that all but one were using static electricity and mirrors.’ He seemed sure of his facts.

‘Don’t you mean Houdini?’ She felt she knew a lot more about the subject than he did, as it had more to do with illusion than science. He was making it up as he went along.

‘No, Marconi definitely discovered electronics. And you just spoke directly to me without any fancy language.’ He was crowing as if he had scored a point against her.

She decided to let it go. There was so much that he said that was wrong, but she couldn’t be bothered to comment. ‘Come on, let’s go,’ she said, secretly deciding that he would pay dearly for all the problems he caused by making him drive all over the countryside.

As they sat in the car Morgwyn noticed there was no glass in his glasses. She was just about to ask about this when he took them off and cleaned them. She was dumbfounded, a truly amazing feat on Simon’s part. ‘I see you need glasses to drive,’ she eventually said.

‘I’d be blind without them,’ he agreed.

Neither said any more as he drove off.

George Brings Mariah to his House

George and Mariah were walking up the path outside the house. Mariah saw Pleasaunce Hall standing proud at the top of the hill.

‘What a marvellous house,’ declared a hushed Mariah. ‘It must be so good to live here. So much space, with these wonderful lawns and the forest is so close, too.’

‘Ah yes a bit too close,’ said George, ‘there’s a tree with a branch growing in through a window at the back.’

Mariah stopped and stared for a second and then marched straight up to the entrance.

George’s legs were weary from unaccustomed walking so he lagged behind by some yards.

She had already disappeared inside by the time he arrived at the house.

When he finally entered she was coming down the grand staircase at the other side of the entrance lobby.

‘Look at this staircase,’ she said. ‘You could land a helicopter on this landing alone. Where do those doors on the landing, go? What about these stairs?’

‘The doors on the landing lead to Forbes’ rooms over the kitchen,’ he answered, ‘and the stairs at the sides lead to my rooms at the top of the house.’

‘This place has corridors and rooms everywhere,’ she called out. ‘Exactly which room did you say you use?’ she asked, smiling oddly.

George felt he missed the point of the question somehow, but still provided a useful answer.

‘I usually sleep in the front room at the very top now that Mother has passed on. It has the best view over the front of the house.’

‘Wow. Where does that go?’ she said pointing to a door on the ground floor just to the side of the grand staircase.

‘To the kitchens of course.’ He was bemused by all this, since the house was just the place where he had grown up and was nothing special to him.

She headed into the kitchens.

After a few seconds, she called back. ‘Are you living on this muck? This is no way to live. Look at it. How can you be happy here?’

George followed into the kitchen to see the embarrassing pile of plates and food scraps. He had been living on ham and cheese sandwiches with the occasional pre-cooked meal heated up in the microwave.

The great oven was sitting in the opposite corner, unused for many years. Mariah looked at it in awe. ‘This oven is huge. How do you heat it?’

‘I don’t know, with wood from outside I guess,’ he muttered. He had only ever been able to use the microwave and the sandwich board. His Mother did all the cooking when they lost the cook many years ago. For the first time, he realised that the cook must have walked out when they didn’t pay her any wages rather than just being misplaced as Mother implied. Mother had only ever used the big oven once or twice when entertaining.

Mariah looked at the neat pile of wood next to the oven and opened a few doors. ‘You don’t have central heating do you?’

‘No, we use timber from the woods outside to heat the library and the family rooms upstairs. There’s more than enough to light a couple of fires. The kitchen gets very cold sometimes I’m afraid.’

‘That is so good ecologically. And look, there’s a huge pantry here with all the lentils in the world. Lentils are brilliant food. With a few vegetables we could eat really well here. And if we lit that fire in the oven it would heat the kitchen, too. You must be so happy here to be in so much harmony with the world around you.’

There it was, the ‘h’ word again. George had never considered happiness much before. Life was as it was. There were good times, like summer in the garden or vague memories of Father and Mother playing with him, and there were bad times, when he was lonely or hungry or cold or someone was angry at him. There had been a lot more bad times lately, of course.

‘This is where I could be really happy,’ declared Mariah.

George accepted this, having already decided it would be wonderful to have Mariah about. After all, she might also help with the cleaning, which George was sure should be done, but he had no idea of where to start. In fact he now realised that Mariah could rescue him from his loneliness and help him recover the glory of the family. He realised how much he needed her to stay, preferably from tonight. She was his only hope for happiness.

‘Does this door lead to the forest at the back?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he was still bemused by all these questions about the obvious. ‘There’s a small garden just outside, too.’

Mariah opened the door.

She screamed in fear and panic.