

## 1. A PARTY OF FIVE

### I

THERE WAS A SLIGHT, a frigid, mist, but in the monstrous starlight, fading but still visible, something like a scene in a ballet was in progress. The light of the heavens struck, with a ghastly glare, into a defile, or was this what we should think of as an uncouth passage connecting one street with another? A deep trench, or a cutting, had been made, approximately twelve feet deep, having inclined walls of undressed earth, and this cavernous trench evidently served for people passing through a territory very little cultivated, with only a few rosebushes. But it was not daylight yet.)

There were five figures in this deep cutting, who were behaving very strangely. Three of them were suggestive of the Orient, and two Europeans, apparently intoxicated, withstood what seemed to be an attack. The five figures were exchanging hollow buffets, and it was with the actions of a dance that they delivered them, darting hither and thither in an unreal way.

Was this a stick-up by Asiatic thugs, in an Alexandrian suburb, or outside the modern Antioch? Were these three wild-eyed footpads, smelling of garlic and the sweat of many days spent in torrid landscapes, falling upon two British travellers, the worse for drink, perhaps the victims of knock-out drops?

But, should this represent a genuine misadventure, where were the flashes of knives, where the bitter *corps-à-corps*, in the passionate make-believe of these marionettes?

Marionettes! For was this indeed five of the male performers appearing in a *ballet-moderne*, practising at night one of their breath-taking routines?

Suddenly there comes a halt to surmise. All five figures desisted from aggression, in a manner suggesting that the British had become too enfeebled to proceed. They propped themselves up in a dispirited row, against the high wall of the cutting, on one side of the starlit path. The most diminutive of the quintette, a fat and nervous figure, with a frantic abrupt-

ness flung himself forward from the slope against which he lay all but erect, fell upon his hands, and then shot his feet up into the air. The clown of the party evidently; for he walked upon his hands backwards and forwards, and then was heard to crow. After that he stood on his head for some minutes. Then he crowed again, sprang to his feet, and stood, swinging from side to side a kind of bag or satchel. Turning, he started dancing up the lane, swinging his satchel aimlessly to and fro, the others, with much less *brío*, following him.

These five as yet unidentified persons emerged in a minute or two upon a hill, lined with buildings which were majestic white blocks. A car hooted higher up, just before the hill turned to the right, as if announcing that it saw them. The small man danced up the incline, stopping at the foot of a wide marble stair. The steps led to a front door standing between pillars and the house's face was a windowless arrangement of vertical slabs, the centre standing out like a bisected tower, two slits down its sides.

When the small man nimbly mounted the six steps, and pressed a bell, there was a sound like a gong inside. There was a long pause, when again he made the gong sound. There was a further pause, and then the door opened a very little; the small man vanished through the slit. The door was closed.

The small man was the Bailiff. He was almost in the dark, but he knew his way, and stepped out briskly in this carpeted well, in this lofty, black hall of his ancestral dwelling. Two domestics moved in the darkness, one of them adjusting his collar, the other accompanying the Bailiff towards the rear of the house. A sound of a lift was heard. When it stopped an old lady came out of it in a recess of the hall. Large spectacles were upon her square nose. An anonymity reminiscent of the windowless front of the house marked the falling black segments of her robe, but two hands shot out and she embraced her son. Speaking in a Semitic language, she said, "My darling little elephant! from what I heard, it seemed that your arrival was to be expected almost at once. And here you are, as full of your little self as ever. Are you well?"

"As well as a man can be who is ruined."

"Tut tut," the mother objected.

"I have two secretaries outside. There are also two young men I have brought from Third City. Please put them up for

a night or two . . . My bag, please," he called to the servant, who hastened silently across the hall with his bag. Whereupon the Bailiff led the way into a room facing the lift. The servant left this room a moment later, and made his way quickly into the great opacity, retraced his steps towards the front door, which he opened slightly, and beckoned to the four figures waiting at the foot of the steps outside. When these had arrived and made their way, one by one, through the slit, he closed the door again. Seemingly it was the idea not to allow too big a slice of daylight to dispel the gloom of this windowless tower which resembled another medium than air, which to the creatures within was as necessary to life as the earth's atmosphere is to men.

Pullman appeared to be adapting himself to this unknown medium, with great unsteadiness following the servant into the black hall, and occasionally stopping. He could, in fact, see nothing, but followed the silently moving figure ahead of him, who stopped when he stopped, and, without looking around, was able to adjust the rate of his advance to that of the following man. Satters was not quite so successful as the servant, for once or twice he stumbled into Pullman, and on one occasion nearly caused him to lose his balance.

This progress, kept on its course owing to the forward movement of a grey silhouette, terminated in Pullman's stumbling into the room where the sepulchral lady and her shadow, the ex-Bailiff, awaited him. In bowing before the figure of the lady, as silent as her servants, he nearly fell to the floor, but was prevented from doing this by the Bailiff, who moved forward to meet him. He supported him for a moment, and then Satters and Pullman rolled down, side by side, upon the same seat. They were brought something green and effervescent to drink. This rapidly dispelled their stupor. The Bailiff, meanwhile, could be seen disappearing in the direction of the lift. Then their hostess came to life. She spoke in broken English.

"You came good?" she said.

"Quite well, thank you," Pullman told her.

"Good," she said in French. "I hope you speak French? I know very little English."

Pullman nodded slowly, and they conversed henceforth in French.

"Were the stars troublesome?" she inquired.

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"Oh yes," the old lady corrected herself. "Of course the gravitation is at times difficult. You become a metaphysical being, but all the same there is some kind of gravitation."

Pullman stared at her. "Is there?" he asked.

"Gravitation? Oh yes. Canopus is a very great star, and you must remember that Third City is the other side of that."

"Good gracious me." Pullman stared stupidly ahead.

"Even with the speed of light, it is a long journey. We do longer ones, and speak of Third City as a 'Neighbour'; but it is a long way away."

The old lady had obviously just risen from her bed. Her toilet had been archaic, but she can never have departed very much from an archaistic shell in which her life now persisted. It was early in the morning and the household had been awakened by their arrival. Her face was of a far more formidable cast than that of her son; with its square beak more protrusive and bony, with her filmed eyes, like those of a bird, and the fierce teeth above the chin like a box, square and jutting, it was a vulpine mask. The metallic silver of the hair, as though of a false white, the awful pallor of the face, the deadly black of the tight mantilla, and the rest of her person suggestive not of a human body concealed by layers of black cerements but of some kind of form crouching there perhaps, a bejewelled claw at times bursting out, she was an evil apparition. This impression was not lessened by the use of the French tongue, for she hissed it, buzzed and rattled it, in such a way that, although she spoke excellent French, she made it seem a language intended to express nothing but terrifying thoughts.

As she spoke of the enormous size of the star Canopus, Pullman saw a vastness, from which his spirit shrank, where the thought of this old being, moving with the speed of light across the universe, elicited the picture of a flashing witch, clutching a metaphysical broomstick in an astral night.

She rose, and slid away through the open door, and there was the lisping of a distant interrogatory. The voice of Satters sounded soft and blunt to his ear.

"Pulley, what was that old Modom hissing about? She

looks as if she had just risen from her grave. I shouldn't like to meet her at night somewhere, would you, Pulley?"

"She is not the kind of person that I would wish to see by moonlight or by sunlight, alive or dead, anywhere in the world or out of the world."

"I have a faint buzz all the time in my head, like an insect flying," Satters said in an undertone, as if it had been not the kind of thing one would wish to publish.

"You have been a flying insect, my dear boy, for many hours at a great speed. At that of light."

"Me an insect, Pulley?"

"Yes, your plump English limbs shrunk to a metaphysical speck, to bring you down to a flying dimension, as it might be called. See?"

"Oh!" Satters did not understand, but he looked at him sideways uneasily.

Pullman continued to observe him. "I too," he said, "exist in a dim buzz. My skin is shivering, though I am warm."

"I've got that too. My teeth were chattering just now, and my nails—oh, it seemed as if someone was fitting them on, you know."

"Those sensations will soon pass," Pullman reassured him.

Satters was soothed a little, his master felt. Pullman shut himself off from his companion in order to take stock—in order to gather together his sensations since he had begun to resume his very problematical existence in these new surroundings—to scrutinize them and see what they added up to—these reactions to what was not only a new place but a new situation. First and foremost his new environment—its colour, its smell, its absence of sound, its aggressive suggestiveness of a nothingness which continually grew in intensity was of course not to his taste—he did not like the windowless hall, lit by two small hooded lamps. The eyes of the domestics were like those of animals existing in the darkness; and there was that faint trace of an odour which he recognized; its association was demonic, it had sickened the air of Fifth Piazza a the time of the meeting of the infernal Embassy and the Padishah's representative, and the Bailiff's parties would have been sweeter if there had not always been a taint of it there. But he was in the land of Hell, and that was the theme smell of that region, he supposed. Then he was not attracted by the Bailiff's parent.

These were all reactions of a displeasing kind, and there were no other reactions.

To have his body, however metaphysical it might be, reduced to an almost invisible existence, and then, like the magic of the mango tree, expanded precipitately to the size of the standard humanity, did not leave his reason unimpaired. He thought he ought to wait a little until these effects had worn off; but as far as *feeling* was concerned, he felt as would a man who was climbing a precipice, but suddenly knew that he would never reach the top. He was conscious, here, of the Abyss. There was not vertigo. But, as he had looked at the old woman who had just left the room, he knew that hers was one of the faces of death. He knew that he had made a mistake. But here he was: he folded his hands, and attempted momentarily to enter a blank, as it were, and to forget.

"Pulley!" Satters' voice was tremulous. "Where are we?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular." Pullman spoke testily; he did not feel equal, just then, to this responsibility. "I believe we are in the house of an old woman. We might be worse off. If this is the jumping-off ground for nothingness there are far worse things than nothingness."

He put his hand on Satters', and thus they sat for some time, perhaps half an hour.

## 2. A VERY SINISTER OLD LADY

### II

MUCH LATER THE SAME MORNING, at about ten o'clock, they had their breakfast in their apartment, near the top of the uncomfortably noiseless house. They had had three hours' rest—a break from which they had derived only a more oppressive headache. A large tray was brought into the room, and placed upon the table by an unsmiling man, who left behind him the impression that this menial act was disagreeable to him. He could speak no English, and shook his head with averted eyes when addressed in English, French, German, Italian, or any earthly tongue.

The atmosphere of a place where one has just arrived, one judges with most acuity from the people first encountered there. Pullman was obliged to confess that the old lady emanated something so subtly discouraging as to maintain him in a mood of uneasiness, and her servants depressed him even more than she did.

As he returned his coffee-cup to its saucer, in an undertone he declared, "It is a pity. It is possible that I made a bad mistake in coming to this place."

Satters stopped eating. His sag's face, obtuse but painfully attempting to understand, became knitted and knotted; his eyes fixed themselves upon the inscrutably lowered eyes of his masterful senior. He wished those lids would rise, so that he could see their expression.

"We should have stopped in Third City, you mean, Pulley, not come here with the old Bail . . . with the Bailiff?"

"It is only an impression, you know."

"Couldn't we go back, Pulley?" he asked. "The same way that we came?"

"I wish we could," Pullman muttered, but he said no more. Satters continued to await some further oracle, but not for very long. The sausages on his plate powerfully attracted him.

Pullman looked with disapproval at the long horizontal window, about five feet from the floor. These windows along