

The Stonegate Manor Collection

from: A Gathering of Ghosts

by David Haynes,

Published: 2014



For Sarah and George

A violent gust of wind smashed into the stagecoach and jarred Slee from his nap. How long had he been in this dreadful carriage?

“Steady, driver!” he called, although he knew the man could not hear him, especially not with the storm raging outside. He peered out. Not a single

welcoming lamp was visible in the darkness and the only signs of life were the drops of rain lashing against the window. He shivered and sank back.

He had set out from Paddington early that morning full of excited anticipation at the unexpected invitation. Yet that excitement had all but gone now, swallowed up by the never-ending bleakness of the vista beyond the confines of the carriage.

The carriage lurched again, almost sending him sprawling. It was barbaric to expect him to make the last leg of the journey in such a fashion. Furthermore, it was almost inconceivable that the gluttonous oafs in charge of the railway had, thus far, deprived the gentle folk of Yorkshire of a decent stretch of track. How could anyone expect to conduct serious business without the railway?

Nevertheless, there were some parts of this country which would never be within the reach of track and train. He looked out of the window again and watched the blurred sliver of moon do its best to cast light on the moors below. Some parts of the country were best left forgotten. He settled back in the seat and shivered.

A terrible grinding noise jarred him again; not from sleep but from a dismal reverie. It was quickly followed by the sound of an angry roar and the carriage shuddering to a violent halt. Slee paused before moving. It was probably stray cattle or sheep on the track and nothing more. He would stay where he was until they had passed and the carriage moved onward again.

Several moments lapsed with only his thoughts and the howl of a savage wind for company. London was tiresome and cramped, and sometimes he longed for the wide-open spaces and fresh spring air of some distant memory. Yet tonight he longed for the warmth of a fire and the convivial chatter of friends in The Albion and not the gloom of a solitary journey. He did not envy the driver tonight.

“Sir!” A series of urgent raps on the window startled him. “Sir, the axle’s gone. We can’t continue.”

Slee opened the carriage door and felt the power of the gale do battle with him. “Step inside for a moment, driver, and we can consider our options.”

The driver eyed the interior and raised his lamp. Rain ran in a steady torrent from the brim of his hat. “I’m afraid there aren’t any options. Not tonight at least.”

“What do you mean? Will there not be other coaches along presently?”

“Not here, sir. Your trip was commissioned special-like. It ain’t exactly on the main road, now is it?”

“Well I can’t spend the night here.” He paused and as if to reinforce his message he added, “I won’t.”

The driver turned and looked into the darkness. “By my reckoning, we ain’t too far away now.” He turned back. “Do you ride, sir?”

“Ride?” Slee asked incredulously. “We have reliable carriages and trains in London. I do not ride.”

“Shame,” replied the driver.

“Why?”

“Because now you’ll have to walk the rest of the way.”

* * * * *

Slee took the lantern from the driver, pressed two pennies into his cold hands and bid him good luck. He regretted his curt manner toward the other man for it was not his fault fate had treated him this way.

“I’ll send the rest of your luggage up in the morning, sir!”

Slee started walking along the track. The driver had given him the option of a march across the moors and for a moment Slee had considered it to save himself time. But he had quickly followed up his directions with the story of Barghest—a murderous and monstrous black dog, said to rip unsuspecting solitary travellers to shreds as they walked across the moors.

Slee knew it was nothing more than a myth, said by the driver to amuse himself and frighten his city gentleman passenger, no doubt. Yet in the unending blackness of the landscape it would not take much for his senses to desert him entirely, sending him wandering into a bog or over a precipice. It might take longer to walk the last leg along the track but if it meant arriving in one piece, he would sacrifice the lost time.

The lantern was barely bright enough to illuminate his path but he clung to it as a beacon of hope. He had not dressed for a night-time trek and the wind and rain rendered his smart city clothes as little more use than threadbare rags. His shoes had been polished to a high lustre, yet now they looked little better than squares of sackcloth tied to his feet. He knew his appearance would not effuse the greatest confidence in his abilities. He cursed at the weather. When word reached Mr Sutcliffe, his employer, about his appearance and tardiness, this first opportunity to impress would surely be his last.

After a short time his arms began to ache. In one hand he carried the redundant lantern and in the other, his attaché. He had purchased it himself using two months’ wages and it was inscribed with his initials in golden letters. He had seen the other dealers carrying such cases and had longed for one of his own. When Mr Sutcliffe had told him he would be travelling on his own to secure the collection, he had leapt into the air. Were it not for Mr Sutcliffe’s shocked expression, he might have kissed the man. Instead he walked directly into Ottoway and Co. and commissioned his own attaché. It was unfortunate that the money he spent on the case deprived him of the opportunity to purchase a new suit. Mr Sutcliffe agreed to cover the cost but unless he secured the entire collection, sadly the substantial sum would come straight from his wages.

There was very little inside the case; a magnifying glass, some brushes and cleaning agents, ink, a pen and his ledger. Yet the contents were not important. What was important was that he now felt as if he belonged and he had not felt that way for most of his life.

There was no option other than to keep his head lowered against the driving rain and wind. He stared only at his sodden shoes and had no idea how far he had gone, or indeed how long he had been walking, and so he paused for a moment and raised his head. Judging by the ache in his calves and the pounding of his heart, it had been some time.

He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the worst of the rain. The driver told him to keep walking along the track and not to deviate by even one step. Eventually he would arrive at his destination: Stonegate Manor.

Slee peered through the darkness looking for a light to guide him, yet he could see nothing save for the straining branches of the threadbare trees. He was cold, wet, hungry and exhausted, and he had had enough.

He hurled the lantern down the track and roared with all his might. The lantern disappeared from view and he was left in the dark once more. He sighed and walked quickly after it. With any luck it might have landed on the verge and was still usable. Almost immediately he was stopped in his tracks by a bright flash and a rising fountain of fire. The flames illuminated everything surrounding them before they were extinguished entirely. Slee ran toward the shattered lantern for he had seen a shape, a man-made shape in the glow, and he knew it could only mean his destination was close. He stumbled as he ran, such was his eagerness to see what the lamp had briefly shown him.

It was a gatepost, a tall stone gatepost and he meant to wrap his arms around it and kiss it. He lurched forward, one step after another until one of his sodden feet slipped in a pothole sending him hurtling head-first into the post. Slee smelled paraffin as his head collided with the object of his desire and rendered him senseless.

* * * * *

Through the haze of unconsciousness, Slee felt himself being lifted and then carried. His mind told him he was once again on his father's shoulders, being hurried away from something or someone who meant him harm. A shadowy shape took form in his mind. It bore no features yet somehow he knew it was a woman and it watched him from the darkness. Long black fingers reached for him; they beckoned him toward her. Those long, black fingers with their uncut and unclean nails reaching for him in the mire of his mind. His screams and the shrieks of terror pierced the darkness as the ghoulish fingers caressed his cheek.

"Please, no!" Slee sat bolt upright clutching his cheek. "It was just a dream," he whispered. "Just a dream."

He touched his cheek tenderly for his skin tingled. It is just the effect of the rain and wind on your skin, nothing more, he told himself. Where was he though? For he no longer felt the stinging bite of the storm on his face. He was in a bed, that much was obvious, but to whom the bed belonged was still a mystery. A dim glow came from the end of the bed where a fire glowed weakly.

"Do not fret, sir," a gentleman's voice came quietly from the corner. "You have reached your destination and you are safe."

Slee squinted into the gloom. "Sir, I cannot see your face. I would shake your hand for the generous assistance you have provided."

"The hour is late and you are in need of rest. We have ample time for introductions on the morrow. Now, I must rest, as must you."

"My attaché? In my haste I fear I dropped..."

"Look beside the bed, Mr Slee."

Slee peered over the side of the bed and saw the golden letters of his initials. "Thank you again." He looked back toward the man but the sight of the door closing slowly signalled his departure.

It was true, he felt exhausted but he was also curious about his situation. He recalled the stone gatepost and the smell of paraffin but nothing more about how

he had come to be in this strange, yet comfortable bed. He lifted the blankets. He knew even less about how he came to be wearing only a set of undergarments, and not his own at that.

He sank back into the pillows. They were deep and soft yet they smelled musty and of damp. It was evident they had not been used for some time. Nonetheless they were comfortable and he was so very tired. It had been a long day, a very long day indeed. He closed his eyes and felt the easy sleep that only an utterly weary body can bring wash over him.

* * * * *

The grey dawn staggered through the threadbare curtains and tickled Slee's eyelids. He had slept deeply and now the morning was upon him he struggled to be free from its embrace. A headache pinched at his skull but it was his empty stomach which finally forced his eyes open. It was no surprise he was hungry, he hadn't eaten since breakfast the previous day. He had not been able to eat the terrible bowl of stew served up to him in York and now he was famished.

He threw back the blankets and shivered. The fire had long since extinguished itself and the room was more than a little cold. He could not go in search of breakfast without suitable attire, no matter how severe his hunger. He lowered himself from the bed and felt the cold bite of bare boards beneath his feet.

The room was larger than the darkness had suggested but the size was undoubtedly its best feature. Paint peeled from the walls and in places blooms of mould crept slowly around the skirting. He padded toward the fire and found an ottoman at the foot of the bed. Upon it was a set of gentleman's clothes. They were not his own but he cared not for they were more able to repel the chill than the undergarments he wore.

He dressed quickly while listening to the wind gallop down the chimney and thunder into the room.

It had been many years since a caring hand had touched the décor, yet it was clear someone had cared for it once. A portrait hung above the fireplace but it had been abandoned to dust and grime and the faces of those it captured were obscured. Slee stood on his toes and peered closer. If anyone possessed the desire, it would not take much work to bring it back to life. He rubbed his thumb over the corner revealing the artists initials: I.T. This was not a name he was familiar with but by no means did he possess the encyclopaedic knowledge of Mr Sutcliffe. His belly grumbled a long utterance of discontent. He would examine the pictures systematically after he had eaten and not before. That was how he been taught.

He stepped outside the room and realised he had absolutely no concept of the dimensions or layout of the house. He was at the end of a gloomy and unlit corridor but at the end was daylight and it was that beacon he followed. All along the walls were more paintings of differing sizes. He scarcely looked at them though, for his mind was set on satisfying his stomach.

"Good morning!" he called. He reached for his pocket watch but quickly realised it remained in his waistcoat, wherever that may be.

"Hello?" he called again.

In answer a clock chimed the hour of ten. Have I really slept so late? he thought and followed the sound. Immediately at the end of the corridor was a galleried

landing overlooking the hallway below. He briefly noticed more paintings hanging on the walls and realised his task was more significant than first thought. Cataloguing the number he had seen so far would take more than a day and he fancied he had only seen but a small portion of the entire collection.

He followed the stairs down to the hallway and stopped. Corridors led off in every direction. "Hello?" he called yet again.

The hallway was grand by any standards, or at least it had been. For once there was not a single picture to be seen. Instead the walls were festooned with the heads of every single animal imaginable. Slee turned in a rapid circle. There were stags and bears and the big cats from Africa. There was bison beside fox and gazelle beside stoat. Much of the art he had seen portrayed men killing beasts and vice-versa but all were matched equally in mortal battle. This was different and he had no taste for such grotesque displays of slaughter.

"If you would care to step this way, sir?"

Slee jumped for he had not heard anyone approaching. A silver-haired man bowed before him and his hand indicated the route Slee should take.

"Of course," Slee replied. "And where is your master?"

"He shall be along directly, sir, but he wished you to take breakfast as soon as you woke."

Slee obeyed the direction and once again found he was walking along a gloomy art gallery. There must have been more than thirty works along this passage alone.

"If you please, sir."

The servant stopped and indicated the room he wished Slee to step into. The room, as with the others he had so far entered, was dark and dismal. Great claret drapes hung in lavish folds to the floor but their elegance had long since faded and now they simply covered the beauty which lay beyond.

"Can we not open the curtains? I am quite sure I shall not be able to see to eat." He walked toward the curtains.

"You must not, sir!" The servant's voice was in contrast to his manner and size. "My master will not allow it!"

Slee stopped in his tracks. The words of both the servant and Mr Sutcliffe rang in his ears. 'Succeed here, Slee and you shall be made partner.'

He turned away. "Very well but at least bring more lamps."

"As you wish. Please take a seat. I shall be along with your breakfast presently." His voice was calm again.

Slee sat down at the table and swirled his fingers through the thick layer of dust covering it. Only one place had been set but the table could easily accommodate twenty guests, perhaps more. In days gone by, this room would no doubt have been the scene of many a party but evidently those days were long gone.

Quite why the servant had been so eager to prevent him from opening the curtains was unclear but his voice had been extremely insistent. Nevertheless, Slee was ravenous and the little exchange had done little to change that fact.

He waited impatiently for a few moments before taking one of the two lamps and walking around the room. He had been in aristocrat's houses before, with Mr Sutcliffe, but never before had he seen quite so many paintings in one place. Apart from the barbaric display in the hallway, it seemed every other available space had

been filled with artwork. It would surely take days to catalogue it all properly. It was a terrible shame that all of them seemed to be covered in a lifetime's worth of dust and grime. It rendered them little more than wallpaper.

He completed a circuit of the room and paused beside one of the paintings. The frame was nothing exceptional, indeed it appeared most, if not all, of the hangings he had seen so far would need the expert touch of a framer to bring them back to life. He rubbed his thumb over the corner of the canvas and took a step back. The same faded initials had been etched into the paint, I.T.

"If you please, sir."

Slee turned around to see the servant place the breakfast on the table.

"Would there be anything else, sir?"

Slee immediately took his seat and looked down at the glorious array of food. A plate containing bacon, eggs, black pudding and two slices of fried bread had been set down. Beside the plate was a pot of steaming coffee and a silver rack of sliced toasted bread. A small pot of golden honey completed the picture. Slee could barely stand to contain his fervour to make a pig of himself but he poured himself a cup of coffee instead.

"No, that will be all, thank you." He raised the cup to his lips and waited for the servant to leave before setting about the food like a wild beast.

He had eaten his third mouthful when he realised something rather peculiar. The food had absolutely no taste whatsoever. It was completely bland to his palate. He took a sip of the coffee and that too held none of the sharp bitterness he was accustomed to. Perhaps he had sustained a chill from being out in the storm last night and a mild fever was disturbing his sense of taste. He consumed the remainder of his breakfast with a feeling of mild disappointment.

When at last he had finished, he sank back against the chair. His belly was satisfied but the part of his mind which craved the pleasure of eating salty, smoked bacon was not.

"It was to your liking, Mr Slee?"

Slee turned, expecting to see the servant standing beside him. Instead he was greeted by another. He moved his chair to stand but the other man held his hand out.

"No need to stand. I must apologise for my lateness but there were matters to which I was forced to attend. You slept well?"

Slee recognised the man as his host. "I did indeed, Lord Feltham. It is I who must apologise. My tardiness last evening was unforgivable. My only excuse is that of a broken carriage and a fall. May I ask, sir, who it was that delivered me to the safety of your home?"

Feltham smiled. "That was my man, Thomas, who I believe has made you feel welcome and delivered to you one of his wondrous Stonegate breakfasts?"

Slee looked down at his clean plate. "Then I am doubly thankful to him for it was a breakfast fit for a king."

Feltham walked around the table and took a seat. Although the room was as dark as a winter's night, Slee could see the other man's weary countenance quite easily. He appeared to be the victim of a malaise or of insomnia.

"Mr Slee, I am reliably informed Mr Sutcliffe is the most prestigious art dealer in all of England."

Slee nodded. "He is, sir."

Feltham smiled yet his voice was utterly joyless. "Then he shall find the Stonegate Collection to be a perfect match to his reputation."

"I am quite sure he shall. I will, of course, be required to catalogue the collection prior to any... arrangement." He left out the obvious financial implications for in situations such as this it was uncouth to raise such matters.

"I would expect nothing less."

"Then I shall begin immediately. There is one matter I must address though, if I may?"

Feltham nodded but his oiled hair remained static.

"The collection is considerably larger than either myself or Mr Sutcliffe imagined. Recording each and every canvas may take a number of days. I do not wish to presume but..."

Feltham raised a hand and stood. "Consider the house your own, Slee. My man will tend your every need and we shall meet again for supper. Shall we say seven?"

"Thank you, Lord Feltham." Slee rose and bowed his head.

A moment of silence passed between them before Feltham once again spoke. "There is one condition upon which I must insist."

"Of course."

"There are paintings which have lived under this roof for a great many years. They are without value yet I wish them gone. If you wish to acquire my collection you will take these paintings without question and without examination as part of the arrangement."

Slee did not understand what was being asked of him. Was he really being given a collection of art in return for nothing?

"I would have to confer with Mr Sutcliffe but I see no reason why I should not accept such a gracious offer. It is most generous." He paused for he needed to choose his words carefully. "And these paintings would not increase the... settlement?" Mr Sutcliffe had already provided an estimate for the collection and if Slee could return with more than was expected, he would surely make partner. If only one of the worthless paintings should happen to be worth something, anything, then his life would be changed forever. He may even keep one for himself.

"Not at all. I wish them gone, that is all." Feltham turned away. "You may start on the gallery beside your room. Good day, Mr Slee."

Slee was alone again with just the remnants of his tasteless breakfast for company. Where was this worthless collection he spoke of? If he could find it, he could see which one to take for his own. Mr Sutcliffe had no idea of its existence and so one missing portrait or one missing landscape would not be missed. Slee smiled. This was turning into a very worthwhile assignment after all.

* * * * *

He worked in contented silence throughout the afternoon. The paintings on the landing beside his room were of wonderful quality. The darkness of the house, although grim and depressing, kept the damaging rays of the sun at bay and with it, kept the oils fresh and vibrant. This was not to say they were perfect, they were not. The layer of grime and dust, which obscured the artists' careful brushwork,

had left its own scars for which Slee did not have the tools or expertise to repair. He had sufficient tools at his disposal to allow for their creators' names to be exposed once more though.

Someone within the Feltham family had at one time or another possessed a keen eye for works of rising value. He was prepared for the works of regional artists but not for those of national significance and he could only guess at their worth. Yet his mind was distracted for he thought only of what fortune his new station would bring him. He would be poor no longer and at last he would possess the means by which to support a wife, and in time a family. He could feel his heart beating faster at the thought. They would not take on too much debt for the business of art was not as secure as some, but they would...

A great commotion came from his room, jarring him painfully from his happy reverie. He turned and looked back along the dark corridor toward his bedroom door. It was closed and although he had been lost in his thoughts, he was sure none had passed this way. He stepped toward the bedroom and listened at the door.

He could hear nothing but he had not been mistaken in either the direction or volume of the disturbance. He pushed open the door.

"Hello?" he called.

Inside, the room was as he had left it this morning except for one difference. The painting which had been fixed to the wall above the fireplace now lay on the floor, face down. He walked over and knelt beside it. On the rear was written, 'The Feltham Family. Stonegate Manor 1878.'

Slee picked it up and hung it back in its place. The fall had not dislodged any of the grime and the artist's work, except for the signature, remained hidden. The storm had quietened since last night but the rain continued to drum a steady beat on the windows. Perhaps a gust of wind coursing down the chimney had dislodged the painting and sent it crashing to the floor. It mattered not for there was no obvious damage to the painting or frame.

Slee left the room, carefully closing the door behind him. He had no wish to spend any more time than necessary in that dismal space. Besides, his ledger would not fill itself.

Eventually when the poor quality lamps cast nothing but a weary halo upon the art, he was forced to stop. As late as he had risen, it had been a long and tiring day. He could not recall spending quite so much time staring at paintings in all his life. Nevertheless, it had been a satisfying endeavour and progress had been steady. He only hoped things would progress as smoothly tomorrow then he might be back on the coach to York by tomorrow evening.

He followed the corridor to the staircase and descended into the savage zoo once again. Stonegate Manor was an impressive house yet it felt unloved and without warmth. He longed to leave it behind and return to London where he was sure his fortune would be awaiting him.

"Can I help you, sir?"

The hallway was gloomy and only two candelabra had been filled with burning candles. The light was insufficient to give rise to anything but flickering shadows.

"I have not thanked you for bringing me into the warmth last night. You have my thanks."

The servant's stooped shadow crawled across the wall toward him. "It is unnecessary to thank me, sir. How may I be of assistance?"

"Has my luggage arrived yet? The driver informed me he would be sending it on once he repaired the coach. I have only the clothes you see before you and I do not wish for your master to think me oafish."

"I am afraid the road is impassable. The rain has not abated for the last three days and has rendered it a mire. I shall bring something suitable to your room. Would you care to bathe before dinner, sir?"

Slee shook his head. "Thank you but no." From behind him, the clock sounded six. "Just the clothes, please."

Slee dressed and left his room as quickly as he could. He had almost started to clean the painting in his room, but it would not do to soil the clothes the servant had delivered for they evidently belonged to Lord Feltham. There was something dreadfully depressing about a painting which had been left to rot unseen in a lifeless house; depressing and disturbing.

He glanced at the grandfather clock as he passed it in the hall. He was early for dinner but a few minutes would not matter. The clock stood sentry between a stag and a tiger as if keeping the two brutes apart and it chimed the half hour as he passed.

He knocked on the dining room door and entered. The passage of the day had not made it any less cheerless but at least the gloom was now punctured by a satisfactory number of lamps. As much as it depressed him, he could almost understand why paintings in invisible parts of the house were left uncared for, but not in a room such as this. This was a grand space in which to exhibit and show off Lord Feltham's great taste and wealth. How could he allow such a travesty to continue for so long?

He approached the painting he had briefly examined earlier. He stared at the name again and traced his fingers over the letters. He would make a point of asking Lord Feltham who I.T. was over dinner.

"Stop!" Feltham's voice boomed.

Slee dropped his hand and turned quickly. "I am sorry, sir. I did not mean..."

Feltham did not allow him to finish. His face resembled that of a snarling creature in his zoo. "This painting and the others you see in this room belong to the collection I spoke of this morning. You will remember my words or our arrangement is at an end."

Slee felt his face flush with embarrassment. "Of course. I did not know these were the paintings in question. I beg your forgiveness."

Almost immediately, Feltham's expression returned to the tired ambivalence he had displayed that very morning. "It is I who must apologise, my dear fellow. My manners have deserted me." He gestured toward the table. "Come, we shall drink a glass of claret and talk of other matters."

He poured two glasses and set them on the table. "Now, Slee, tell me of London. It is so very long since I have ventured beyond these dreary walls and we did all so enjoy visiting."

It was not lost on Slee that Feltham had used the word 'we' in his remark, but he had not seen sign of any other residents during his time there. He doubted he meant the servant.

Slee took his seat and regaled Lord Feltham with stories about London and the latest fashions, and of course the railway. The stories appeared to please him and it made Slee feel a little better for his indiscretion with the painting. The steady flow of fine claret did not harm matters either.

Finally the many courses of tasteless and grey food were finished and Slee was pleased. He doubted very much whether he could manage another morsel of anything that tasted of leather. Lord Feltham appeared not to notice for each time a plate was removed and a fresh one put down, he would congratulate his man for the fine culinary efforts.

“Are you a married man, Slee?” They remained at the dinner table but Feltham lit a cigar. Slee declined the offer. It was a habit he had not yet developed a taste for.

“I am not. I am hoping to make my means a little more presentable before I seek out a wife.”

“Most wise. An enterprising fellow such as yourself should have no problems on that score.”

“And yourself, Lord Feltham?” The words were out before he had thought any more of it. Yet he regretted them instantly for it sounded impolite.

Feltham allowed the smoke to drift slowly from his mouth; it snaked through his whiskers and his face became grave once more. “Lady Feltham and my children have gone.”

Slee waited for more. The reply seemed incomplete.

“They were taken by a cruel and wanton mistress. She has stalked the corridors of Stonegate Manor since my forbears built the house.”

Slee gasped. “They were murdered, sir?”

Feltham laughed but it was a desperate sound. “Murdered, Slee? No, nothing quite so exotic. The house was built on moorland bog and on some days, under the right conditions, a thin miasma walks through the house as if it were its own. For those unaccustomed, it can be quite a fright. But it carries with it something more serious than a scare. Within its poisonous shroud are a thousand years of death and decay and it was to that fume my family succumbed.”

“I am truly sorry. I did not know for if I had then I would surely not have raised the matter.”

Feltham poured another glass of wine which Slee did not want. His head was already spinning and he needed a clear head to finish his task by tomorrow.

“Think nothing of it, for I raised the topic, not you.”

In the hall the clock chimed eleven. “I do not wish to appear rude, Lord Feltham, but I am weary and if I hope to finish my work by tomorrow evening I must retire soon.”

“Of course. I have kept you talking too long but seldom do I entertain and I have enjoyed your stories so very much.”

Slee stood. “Well you must come to London and visit us. Mr Sutcliffe would be delighted to make your acquaintance, I am quite sure.”

Feltham’s head drooped. “I am quite sure I will never visit London again.”

* * * * *

A fire had been lit and his bed turned down when Slee finally got back to his room. Feltham was an odd fellow and no mistake. He was animated one minute and quite desolate and dejected the next. It made him a difficult man to fathom.

He undressed and climbed into bed. A lamp had been placed on the bedside table and he picked up his ledger to examine his work. He had catalogued nearly one hundred works and the value was already astounding.

Rain thumped on the window and wind whistled down the chimney. He might finish the work tomorrow but whether he would be able to leave was another matter entirely. He turned off the lamp and closed his eyes. The Stonegate Collection would bring him everything he had ever desired, and more.

Slee sat bolt upright and held his breath. A noise had jolted him abruptly from his sleep. The fire had gone out but as he peered into the gloom, he thought he saw something moving at the foot of his bed. He dared not move for whatever it was would surely come for him. The sound of his heartbeat echoed loudly in his ears.

Again the noise resounded through the darkness and this time Slee leapt from his bed. "I'll have you!" he shouted.

He bounded across the floor and flung his arms about the shadow, sending them both to the floor.

"Who is this scoundrel who seeks to murder me in the dead of night?" Slee raised his fist ready to strike the would-be assassin.

"It is I, sir. Fletcher."

Their faces were evidently close together for Slee could feel the warm breath of the other man on his face.

"Fletcher?"

"Lord Feltham's servant, sir. Please don't hit me!"

Slee stood and pulled the other man to his feet. "What do you mean by disturbing me like this?"

"I was only bringing your luggage, Mr Slee. The driver delivered it, you see, and you seemed anxious to have it."

"Fletcher, you gave me quite a fright. You're lucky I didn't bash your head in."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean any harm."

"I'm quite sure it could have waited until the morning but your dedication is admirable. Lord Feltham is lucky to have you."

"Thank you, sir. I'll leave you to your rest."

Slee crept back into bed and closed his eyes. His heart was racing and sleep was impossible to come by. Tossing and turning for what was left of the night was not something he relished. He re-lit the lamp and slipped out of bed. His luggage looked none the worse for whatever trials it had undergone and it was a promising sign that the driver had managed to get through.

The painting above the fireplace was nothing more than a dark shadow against the wall. He stared at it for a moment. Lord Feltham had not mentioned this particular painting at all, let alone forbidding any contact with it. A cursory check would do no harm.

He inched the painting from its position and gently lowered it onto the bed. The lamp flickered in the draft and made dark swirling patterns on the canvas. It was a mesmerising display and for a moment Slee was held in a thrall by the beauty.

What sat beneath the layers of dust and grime could scarcely have been any more alluring than what captivated him now.

The flame settled and with it the painting became dull and lifeless again. The only indication that there was anything of merit here was the artist's name.

"I.T.," Slee whispered to himself.

He placed his attaché beside the painting and opened it up. He was usually so meticulous with his work that it was a mystery why he had not started with this one in the first place.

He removed the agents and brush from the case and set to work. The painting was larger than any of the others he had worked on so far, although the art in the dining room appeared to be of similar size, if not greater. It was also far more difficult to clean. It was almost as if mud and dirt had been smeared over the brush strokes by hand. Was the painting so repellent that someone had sought to conceal it completely? If that was the case then why not just burn it instead? Slee shook his head. The house and its master were a mystery, why should it be any different for the objects within it?

Before long he had managed to reveal the first face on the portrait. It showed a young boy of perhaps four years, sitting unsmiling on a stool. The work was exquisite and the boy's face had been painted with the touch of a loving artist.

He moved on to the next face, that of an older sibling, and he too had been painted with delicate tenderness. His honey-coloured hair almost fluttered in the draft from the chimney. He had not revealed the entire painting by any means but already it was a conundrum why a father, albeit bereaved, should hide forever the faces of those he held most dear.

Before long he had uncovered the family, such as it was. Lady Feltham was as striking a woman as he had ever seen in London but she looked sad and almost desperate in her eyes.

Yet it was not the quality of the brush stroke, or the obvious love which characterised the work which was the most captivating aspect of the painting. It was the total, unending blackness of the background which held him in a trance. It was uncommon, if not rare, for an oil to be so dense as to allow no light at all to rebound from it. Without conscious effort he moved closer, closer still to the inky depths. Somewhere a delicate voice sang a dirge and it washed pleasantly across his ears. Tendrils of shadow drifted from the painting and caressed his neck with a lover's touch. Slee was in rapture, glorious rapture and he wished for it not to end.

He touched the canvas and it moved beneath his fingers.

"What is this devilment?" he whispered. Yet as he spoke, the blackness parted and the outline of something started to swim into view. The outline of a skull, nothing more, grew closer and closer as it travelled through the layers of paint.

Slowly, so slowly, it took shape before his eyes. Somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind, Slee screamed for this could not be real, and surely a scream would part him from his delirium.

As he watched, transfixed, wisps of hair gathered from the shadows then flew about the exposed skull and fastened themselves to it. Faster and faster, shadows spun around the skull, darting this way and that in a merry dance. Yet no features could be discerned, none at all, for the skull faced away from Slee and into the darkness. It was as awful as it was bewitching and he was under a spell.

“Please, release me.” He spoke to himself, for if he addressed the other then she may turn and respond to him and he did not wish for that. Her hair was long and as dark as the night, and it shifted in an unfelt breeze. But she must be beautiful for hair such as this could not belong to a harlot, it simply could not.

Slee licked his lips for they were barren of moisture. His heart beat out a terrible rhythm that threatened to rise out of his chest if he did not cease.

Slowly, so slowly, she began to turn as if she were displayed on a potter’s wheel. Slee felt the terrible pain in the base of his neck heighten one more turn.

Slowly, so slowly, she turned.

Slee whimpered. The sweet dirge, which had been so sweetly sung, stopped and gave way to a greedy cackle. Her face was finally exposed and Slee screamed for it was the face of a crone; a vile and base woman whose teeth were as black as the oils from which she had grown. Her cackle grew louder and louder and Slee felt his eardrums trying to push their way from his head.

“Stop!” he screamed and pushed his hands against his ears. Her mouth grew wider and wider and her stench filled the room like rancid meat. Slee retched and covered his eyes.

“Help me!” he wailed and felt the strength vanish from his legs. For once he was glad his body had failed him. He fell back against the fireplace and felt the mantle jab painfully into the base of his neck. Yet the pain was preferable to that of her malodorous breath and vile voice. As he drifted into the unconscious world, the sound of her terrible cackling and grotesque countenance filled his mind.

* * * * *

“Sir? Mr Slee? Wake up!”

Slee heard the words and felt the sting of an open palm on his cheek.

“Shall I send for a physician? Or Lord Feltham?”

Slee opened his eyes slowly and was pleased to see Fletcher’s weathered face before him. “Neither. I am quite well enough to stand, thank you.”

He rose slowly. Although it seemed the room would never be bathed in glorious sunshine, a weak daylight had at least replaced the terrible night.

“Sir, you were collapsed beside your bed.”

He noticed the painting was hanging on the wall once again and the portrait was obscured beneath a layer of filth.

“Have you...” Slee paused. It would not look good for his prospects if he were to reveal what he had been up to last night.

“I was exhausted, that and the knock I had the night previous must have caught up with me.” He looked at the painting again. “Was anything else out of place when you came in this morning?”

“Out of place?”

“Yes, were there any signs of...” Of what exactly? What exactly had happened last night? With the painting back where it belonged and still covered in dirt, had anything happened? “Were there any signs of disorder?”

Fletcher frowned. “Disorder? No, sir, just you on the floor. Are you quite sure you are not injured?”

Slee rubbed the back of his neck. “Yes, thank you, Fletcher. Tell me, what time is it?”

“A little after eight.”

Slee looked to the window. Spots of rain gathered and trickled down the glass in steady rivulets. “I should like to take some air before breakfast but I have come unprepared for such disagreeable weather. Would you have something suitable for me?”

Fletcher looked over his shoulder at the window. “Of course, sir. The gardens are not what they used to be, I am sorry to say. Not since Lady Feltham passed has anyone tended to it. I am sure it will be overgrown and impassable, especially in this weather. Are you quite sure I cannot bring you some tea instead?”

A vision of the crone flashed before his eyes sending an involuntary shiver of revulsion through his body. “No, I am sure I need the air, if only to gather my thoughts.”

“As you wish.”

It was on the tip of Slee’s tongue to ask Fletcher who I.T. was but he resisted the urge. Asking the question would reveal his actions and he still needed to take the Stonegate Collection back to London.

A short while later, Fletcher delivered a set of ancient-looking walking clothes. In the city, Slee would not have been seen in such old-fashioned garments but here on the moors, they seemed most appropriate. He dressed quickly and left the house.

He had not been outside since arriving and his entrance to the estate had been under a cloud of unconsciousness. He walked a few paces and turned back. So far all he had seen of the inside was his own narrow, dark corridor, the hallway and the dining room yet the exterior suggested something altogether more impressive, at least in size.

A row of enormous windows ran along one wall. Slee recognised it immediately as the dining room for all the drapes remained drawn. Who was Lord Feltham preventing from looking in exactly? Or was it to stop someone looking out?

He turned away and walked toward the side of the house. Fletcher had directed him to the most accessible part of the estate, at least the part he recalled as being accessible for it had been that long since he had ventured beyond the walls of the manor.

Already the rain had soaked the tweed cap he had been given and water crawled down his neck and gathered at his collar. It was not the morning for a walk but it was the morning for attempting to make sense of what he had seen last night... what he had been shown.

He followed a thin gravel path away from the house. The path dropped down onto a flat expanse of grass and ended abruptly. In former times it would undoubtedly have been a magnificent croquet lawn, but now the weeds were almost as numerous as the blades of grass. The wind gusted and blew the rain into his eyes but he was undaunted by the weather for he could not stand to spend another moment in his room.

He knew what he had seen in the painting, yet how could it be? The painting had been replaced on its hook and his attempts at rudimentary restoration had been undone. So what exactly had happened?

He looked up at the leaden sky. It had to be a dream; a nightmare perhaps, for the alternative was simply too loathsome to contemplate. He inhaled deeply and

felt the stinging breath of the season flow through his body. A dream, a vile and disgusting dream, that was all it had been, and a spot of exercise would drive its terrible remnants from his mind.

Up ahead he could see a small copse and although the rain was not too heavy, it was incessant and he was already starting to feel cold. The copse would provide a modicum of shelter from the elements, even if it was only for a few minutes. He walked with renewed purpose and within a matter of seconds he was once more in shadow; the shadow of oak and birch, of sycamore and ash.

He paused and looked back at the manor once more. From this vantage it appeared even more impressive. Window after window filled the spaces not occupied by great sandstone blocks. The light was weak but had it been a summer's morning, the sunlight could not have made the place look any less dreary and cold. Slee removed his cap and slapped it against the side of his leg. This trip would secure his reputation with Mr Sutcliffe but it had already taken its toll on him.

He turned away and peered through the tree trunks. If there had ever been a path it had long been overrun by bramble and weed. It was not a particularly enticing view but then again neither was what lay behind him.

He stepped into the copse and felt his spirits lift. It was a gloomy day and his passage was in shadow, but above him the occasional bird sang a sweet song and the smell of the saturated earth was delightful. He had not walked on anything other than cobble and asphalt for so long he had forgotten the joy of scrambling over fallen tree trunks and tripping on hidden brambles. He felt like a child again.

He paused and stretched his back against a particularly wide trunk. He had neglected to bring his pocket watch with him and how much time had passed was a mystery. He tried to peer back along his route but the manor was no longer in view. He would have to turn back soon; he did not want to appear rude by being away so long.

The thought filled him with dread, yet it was a chore he could not neglect. Not unless he wished to put his position under threat. He sighed and turned to walk back when something caught his eye, something quite out of place in the copse. He crouched and peered between the overlapping gnarly trunks. There it was, a wooden cross.

He stepped quickly into the thicker undergrowth, kicking away the brambles which tried to pull him back. The cross was a mere dozen strides from the path but it had become so covered in weeds and vines that it was almost obscured entirely. Indeed, had he not paused in that very spot it was likely he would have missed it completely. As he drew closer, he realised with dismay what he was looking at.

He took hold of the vines and pulled them away. A single name had been crudely scratched into the wood. Slee traced his finger over the letters and read the name aloud: "Isabel Thorne." He stepped back for he knew this was a grave and he wished not to stand on it any longer.

"I.T," he whispered.

* * * * *

"You enjoyed your walk, Mr Slee?" Lord Feltham asked.

Slee took a sip of his tasteless coffee and smiled. It felt false but he hoped it did not show. "Very much, although the rain remains persistent."

Feltham looked to the covered window but returned his gaze quickly to Slee. "Yes, I fear your return to London may be delayed somewhat. I trust this causes you no problem?"

Slee's stomach turned violently at the thought of another night in that room. "Of course not. I am grateful of your hospitality."

"And I am grateful of your expertise."

A moment of silence passed between them before Slee spoke. "Do not think me impertinent, sir, but who is Isabel Thorne?"

Feltham's face took on a thunderous look. "Isabel Thorne? From whom have you heard that name?"

Slee became flustered. "From no-one, Lord Feltham. I was walking in the copse and I saw her name on a cross. I did not mean..."

Feltham slammed down his cup, slicing a shard of china from the base. It span across the space between them and struck Slee on the cheek. He felt the sting as it bit into his flesh.

"You must not speak that name again, or you shall return to London without a single painting to show Sutcliffe." He rose quickly and stormed from the room.

Slee was in a state of shock. Feltham had proved to be an unpredictable man but he had not expected quite so hostile a reaction. He set down his cup and stood. If Isabel Thorne's name was quite so disagreeable to him, then why did he have two of her paintings hanging in his house?

Slee left the dining room and returned briefly to his room. If Sutcliffe did not grant him a full partnership after this then he would leave and work for someone who appreciated him. This had become an exasperating and disturbing assignment.

Although there did not seem to be any hope of returning to London today, Slee worked diligently on the remaining paintings. He wanted to be in a position to leave as soon as the road was clear. If a coach was unavailable then he would sooner walk across the moors and risk the teeth of the Barghest than spend another night with Feltham. Nevertheless, his spirits were cheered by each addition to the ledger because with each inclusion came the chance for wealth in his own pocket.

"Is there a chance a coach could get through tonight, Fletcher?"

The solitary servant shook his head. Fletcher was busy lighting a fire in Slee's bedroom. "I am afraid not, sir. The morning may hold more chance but there is no hope for this evening."

"Tell me, Fletcher, how long have you been in the employ of Lord Feltham?"

Fletcher stopped his work. "I couldn't exactly say, sir."

"No? Whyever not?"

"Because it's been so long I stopped counting. I was born in this house, as was my father and his before him. All the Fletchers have served in this house in one capacity or another."

Slee looked up at the painting. "And are you the last?"

Fletcher stood and turned to face him. "I am, sir. The last of the Fletchers."

"No, you misunderstood. Are you the last of those in service?"

“Yes there has been only me since...” Slee saw Fletcher’s eyes dart up at the painting briefly. “Since her ladyship and the little ones passed.” He lowered his eyes and made for the door but Slee caught his arm.

“Who was she?” he asked gently.

Fletcher did not turn to face him but made no effort to get away.

“You know to whom I refer, Fletcher, for this painting was restored last night and now it is once again smeared with dirt. Isabel Thorne is the artist and her grave lies in the copse. So why would you cover the work with soil from the garden?”

Fletcher turned quickly. “You must not speak her name, sir.” His voice was nothing more than a trembling whisper. “She was evil and a witch. His lordship dare not say but I will, Isabel Thorne was responsible for the deaths of his family. There was no other cause.”

“How so? What of this miasma Lord Feltham mentioned?”

“I do not know her means but she was besotted with his lordship. The miasma of which he speaks is real but it causes no ill-health.”

Slee pointed at the portrait. “Why not make a pyre of the painting and be done with her once and for all then?”

“Because his lordship believes his wife and children will burn in hell if he allows it to be so. He believes them cursed.”

“Cursed? We are not in the dark ages!”

“You may mock me sir, but Isabel Thorne was not of this age. Of that I am convinced. She died giving birth to Lord Feltham’s bastard son and on that very night she wailed for him, she screamed for him to come to her and finally she cursed them all. I bear him no malice for such things are common, but for ten days the miasma was thick and foul in the house until it claimed his family. She raised the miasma in death and it claimed his family in revenge.”

Both men looked up at the painting.

Had Slee not experienced the terrible hallucinations during the previous night he might have laughed at such a notion. “She was a servant?”

“She was the nanny and an artist.” Fletcher turned and walked slowly out of the room.

Slee knew there were two paintings bearing the signature I.T. One was in his room and the other was in the dining room. If he was to take them away, he intended to see the subject of the other.

He dressed quickly and went down to dinner. He did not cherish the idea of spending an uncomfortable evening with Lord Feltham but hope remained that this assignment could be salvaged yet. Feltham was waiting for him by the door. He bowed as Slee met him.

“I humbly offer my apologies, Mr Slee. My behaviour has been inexcusable and most out of character. I have been under some considerable pressure over the last few months and I am afraid it is taking its toll. I tender this not as an excuse but as a reason to allow me to entertain you for one last evening.”

Slee smiled and took Feltham’s hand in his own; it was cold and clammy. Perhaps Feltham needed him still.

“There is no need. It was my impertinence that soured the mood and I offer my apologies to you.”

Feltham slapped him on the back and laughed. "Then we shall both agree to be sorry. Now let us say nothing more on the subject. Fletcher has outdone himself tonight." Slee allowed himself to be led into the dining room and sat in his now customary place.

Fletcher truly had outdone himself. The food was utterly bland again but on this occasion, it even looked unappealing. Yet Lord Feltham did not notice and the wine flowed with ease.

"Have you arrived at a figure for the collection? It is crass to talk of such matters, I agree, but we are at the end of our acquaintance and I doubt very much whether we shall cross paths again."

"I shall have to take advice from Mr Sutcliffe. There is work here which may be of national importance. I am afraid I was unprepared for such an exquisite collection."

Slee saw the look of disappointment on Feltham's face. He sought to rid that dismal visage immediately. "I understand the collection was valued three years ago?"

"It was. My wife was the expert on such matters."

"Well I can say that the estimate was woefully short. My estimate is more than double." Slee knew his offer would secure profits ten times greater for Mr Sutcliffe.

Feltham drank his glass of claret in one gulp. "And the other collection? You will take that unseen?"

"I shall be happy to."

"And it will remain in storage for one hundred years?"

Slee was taken aback. "Storage?"

Feltham poured another glass of wine. "Yes, storage. It will never be opened and none of the collection will ever be viewed. I merely want it retaining."

Slee looked around the room. There were fifty or more paintings hanging upon the walls. He had hoped to make at least a little money for himself but if any viewings were forbidden, how could he hope to induce anyone to buy them?

"But, Lord Feltham, am I to understand that all of these works of art are to be consigned to a lifetime of darkness? I do not wish to appear rude but art is designed to be enjoyed, not hidden away like a sinful secret."

"You do not wish to appear rude? Yet you have twice done so without thought. It is either carelessness or malice. I would prefer to assume the former and I would urge you to change this unfortunate characteristic of your disposition."

Slee looked across the table at the shadowy face of the man who held his fortune in the palm of his hand. He wanted to bellow at the man, to tell him that he no longer cared whether he left Stonegate Manor with one or one hundred paintings. He just wanted to leave.

"Again, I am sorry, but I am at a loss to find a reason for your insistence on this matter. They may be of some value but without examination I am quite unable to say."

"They were painted for me and for my pleasure alone. If I do not wish them viewed then the matter is closed. If you wish to secure the rest of my collection you shall agree without further comment."

Slee nodded and sipped his wine.

"You think me odd, do you not, Slee?"

Slee said nothing.

“Yet you and I have more in common than you might suppose. I too have been careless and I too have made unwise decisions which have cost me dear. I know you find me tiring and quarrelsome but do not allow that to cloud your judgement. Take my collection, take both collections and allow Sutcliffe to make you partner. The fortune you gain from that will outweigh the trifle my small request would cost you or Mr Sutcliffe.”

Feltham stood and walked toward the door. “I shall have Fletcher drive you to York in the morning. Goodnight, Mr Slee.”

Without further comment, he left leaving Slee alone in the room. He would have liked to tell Feltham what he really thought but the man was right. Why risk losing everything over a collection of paintings which were probably worthless anyway? He left the remainder of his wine and walked back through the dreary corridors to his room.

He placed his attaché and packed case by the door then climbed into bed. He wished he had bought a book for he intended not to sleep but to pay another visit to the dining room, to examine Isabel Thorne’s other painting.

* * * * *

Slee opened the door slowly and peered into the corridor. He could see very little but it was the sound of humanity he was listening for. He waited for a moment and stepped across the threshold. Immediately a violent shiver gripped him, sending the light from his lamp trembling across the wall. The attaché in his other hand rattled like a child’s toy. The boards were cold beneath his bare feet and the air chill and damp. He took one last look into his bedroom and walked on. Each step was greeted with a groan or a whine from beneath his feet and each noise seemed to echo throughout the house. He had already decided that if he were caught he would simply claim thirst had awoken him.

He descended the stairs quickly and his breath made a fog in the lamplight. With each step, and the closer to the foot of the stairs he got, the thicker the fog appeared. A stench rose to greet him like London’s foetid air on a summer’s day. Yet it was not summer, it was winter, and the stench was not of the bursting graveyards but of the miasma which had entered the house uninvited.

Slee stepped from the staircase and into the fetor. He yearned to cough but he held it back for he was close to his goal. He slid silently through it until he reached the dining room, where he put his head to the wood and listened for any sounds of movement from within. He brushed away an imaginary fly at his nose for the vapours were snaking up toward him. They tickled his nose and brushed his thigh like fingers. They caressed his neck like... like the crone in the painting.

He threw open the door, caring not if Lord Feltham was on the other side, and leapt across the threshold. He pushed the door behind him and leaned against it. His breath came in short gasps and a fierce desire to vomit almost overcame him. It was merely a mist, a trick of nature and that was all. No witches were hiding within its smoky tendrils. He berated himself for being foolish.

He held the lamp out before him. It barely threw enough light for his room, let alone a room of this size. He recalled there had been a number of candles and

lamps placed around the table when he had eaten and now he searched them out. One by one he lit them until the room was as bright as it ever would be.

He may have imagined the crone's touch in the hallway but he had not dreamed up the miasma, of that he was convinced. Yet here and now, in the room of tasteless fare, there was no festering fog at all. It was a strange yet welcome phenomenon.

The dark paintings covered the walls like blackened mirrors and they reflected only the bleak spirit of the house. Slee stepped directly over to the painting he had touched once before. He held the lamp to it and tentatively touched it again. He had no desire to hear the warning shout from Feltham again but the need to expose the contents surpassed even that.

The faint outline of her initials could still be seen but he had not exposed them entirely with his first visit. He gently lifted the frame and placed it on the table beside the attaché. He had uncovered many fine paintings during the last two days yet his heart thumped with fresh and unexpected excitement at the thought of revealing this one. He looked around the room at the others. Perhaps he might have a look at some of the others while he was here. He opened the attaché and shook some of the cleaning agent onto the cloth. The Stonegate Manor Collection would be revealed in its entirety tonight.

He worked quickly but less precisely than he had done with the others. His hands shook with every pass of his cloth but very quickly his excitement turned to dismay; dismay and a very strong feeling of unease. He should stop, he knew he should. He should replace the painting and return to his room, yet he could not. His hands worked without instruction as if they were guided by the devil himself.

"Stop," he whispered to himself, but even as he spoke the word he knew it was a forlorn request.

One face, then two, then a third and finally the face of a young boy were revealed. It was the perfect facsimile of the painting in his room. It was identical down to each strand of honey-coloured hair waving in the unseen breeze. Even though he was cold, he felt beads of perspiration gather on his back.

Then the darkness started closing in again. The delicious and terrifying inky pools of paint within the portrait started to swirl and merge before his eyes. He turned away quickly and picked up the frame. He would not fall once again for whatever devious optical illusion was being played out before him. He reached up and hung the painting back in its spot. Only this time it faced the wall.

He had heard of collectors paying for expensive reproductions to be produced so the originals would not run the risk of damage in a display. Yet this was not a priceless masterpiece painted by a master, it was merely a family portrait with little value except to members of that family. It did not make any sense.

Slee walked to the other side of the room and picked a frame at random. It too bore the same signs of neglect as the others. He placed it on the table and set, once more, to work.

"It cannot be!" He rubbed his eyes for this painting too was a replica of the portrait in his room. He fought against the almost irresistible urge to submerge himself within it; to be at one with the crone and her laughter. He pushed it away and dragged another frame down. It did not take long before a collection of

partially restored portraits were strewn across the floor and Slee was slumped in the middle of them all.

He groaned weakly and ran his hands through his hair. What was this madness? Why were there forty or more identical paintings in this room? He knew there were only two people who could answer that question, Lord Feltham and Isabel Thorne. He dragged himself upright and fell against the table. His legs were weary and his mind disturbed. He could not bring himself to hang the paintings back in their rightful place and knew this would mean an end to his career.

He walked to the doorway and stepped through it into the miasma once more. His eyes were dry and stung with tiredness but he would not sleep, not now, for his future was in tatters. He walked slowly back to his room, caring not for the teasing caresses of the mist or the vile stench of its breath. He wished simply to be away from the lunacy of Stonegate Manor.

His room was cold and dreary and the fire had long since gone out. He felt utterly without hope and he fell onto his bed as if a shot had penetrated his heart. He wept quietly into the blankets and felt the seductive touch of sleep slip in beside him.

He dreamed of the children within the paintings; their faces contorted and riddled with pain. They beseeched him and clung to his body in despair, yet he could not help them and he could not deliver them to safety. He flinched and shook as he dreamed and his mind tried vainly to send him hurtling back into the light, but he too was trapped. He too was trapped in this awful place. And what was that terrible sound? There was a screeching, a screaming, a wailing. And a cackle.

He felt his mind fight against it. It was not real, it was a dream and there are no real sounds in a dream, only the ones your mind create. But the cackle grew louder and her face grew closer until he could smell the poisonous fume of her breath and see the vile, deformed sneer on her lips.

Slee jerked violently as she reached out for him and it sent his mind racing toward the surface. He felt the last strands of slumber slip from his skin like sweat. He lay still, listening to the steady, yet quickened, beat of his heart and kept his eyes closed.

But the cackle still filled his ears and the stench filled his nostrils. How can this be? I am no longer asleep, he thought.

He opened his eyes and screamed.

She loomed over him and her mouth was ajar in a hideous grimace. Her breath stung his nostrils and made his stomach turn. Black hair flew about her face like a cloud of flies and her laughter was the most corrupt sound known to man.

He was quite unable to move.

She laughed again in the most monstrous way.

“Leave me alone, I have done nothing!” he wailed.

A loud crash came from the foot of the bed and it caused her to spin around.

“Begone, you vile witch. Leave this house and never return.”

Slee recognised Fletcher’s voice and now the crone’s attention was elsewhere he was able to move. Fletcher held a candle in his hand and he touched the flame to the painting. It was instantly engulfed in golden flames. The crone screeched and screamed but was drawn back into the picture at once.

Fletcher dropped the painting and turned to Slee. "You must leave at once. I will see no more slaughtered innocents in this house."

"But the paintings," Slee mumbled.

"I will see them destroyed, as they should have been five years ago." He took Slee by the arm and pushed him toward the door. "The carriage is ready, I shall bring your cases. Now go."

Slee looked at the burning portrait. It was already entirely ablaze and black smoke crept about the room as it sought to escape.

"He will kill you. I have seen the anger on his face and he will kill you, Fletcher."

"Then I shall be glad for this is no existence. The house is dead and Lord Feltham is only a breath away from that fate too. These paintings cannot leave the house any more than he can. He is trapped forever."

Slee took one last look at the fire and ran from the room. A fog still remained but it was not the damp mellifluous cloud of the night. It was the smell of a fire and it was not only one painting which had been used as fuel.

He had no concept of time as the house was still shrouded in darkness, yet as he reached the foot of the stairs a bright glow came from the dining room. It was as if the most glorious sunrise had finally been allowed to enter Stonegate Manor.

Yet it was not sunrise Slee knew, it was a pyre and the fuel was Lord Feltham's family portraits.

"What have you done!" Feltham stepped through the smoke and repeated his question. "What have you done, you filthy scoundrel. I shall see you on the gallows for this!"

Slee stepped back. "It was a terrible mistake, I cannot..."

Feltham raised his fist and struck Slee across the temple. The blow was not that of a man comfortable with violence but it was strong enough to knock Slee back into the door.

"You have killed my wife!" Feltham grabbed the collars on his nightshirt and twisted them in his fists.

The material tightened at his throat and Slee was unable to talk. He gasped for breath.

"It was not Mr Slee, Lord Feltham. It was I who set fire to the paintings."

Feltham loosened his grip and turned to face Fletcher. Slee slammed against the door. and reached behind his back to find the door handle.

"You?" pleaded Feltham. "Why would you do this? My wife and children loved you, as I do."

"I will not see you destroy another life. Mr Slee is innocent yet you would embroil him in your tragedy. It is not fair and it is not right, Lord Feltham. You would trade this man's sanity for the memory of your wife?"

"In an instant!" Feltham boomed back and walked toward his servant.

"My sanity?" Slee whispered. "What do you mean, Fletcher? What devilment am I the victim of?"

Fletcher took a step backward onto the second stair. "He knew you would not resist his offer and he knew you could not resist the temptation of a concealed collection. What collector could? Yet I am afraid it is you who are cursed now, Mr Slee. It is you who have looked into the witch's eyes and felt her gaze. He has deceived you and I aided him to do it. If the paintings are destroyed then his

family may be consigned to hell but the crone will no longer hold sway in this house.” He looked down at his master. “And now I wish to atone.”

Slee looked along the corridor toward the fire. Within the crackle and pop of burning canvas came the sound of a distant cackle, faint yet terrible.

“I will leave this place and never return. Now her paintings are destroyed she cannot follow.”

Slee cared not for Feltham, he cared not for Stonegate Manor or the exquisite art. He cared only for his own sanity. He tightened his grip on the handle and flung open the door. Dawn was still a while away and outside there was nothing but darkness. He paused and looked back. Fletcher and Feltham were locked in battle on the stairs, their faces bathed in the glorious amber glow of burning art. He turned and ran into the darkness.

It had been a trap; a deception by a wicked man to rid himself of a curse while keeping the memory and the souls of his family alive. The cold morning air stung his lungs but he ran on and did not look back. The paintings were all destroyed and with it the crone and her curse. He hoped Fletcher and Feltham would soon follow.

His nightshirt soon became drenched and the hem was covered in mud. He was utterly miserable and the best he could wish for was a speedy end on the fangs of the Barghest. The track stretched out before him and all around was nothing but the barren moors. He cursed himself for how sedate his life had become in London. He was ill-equipped to make the journey to York on foot. Barely had the gloomy façade of Stonegate Manor disappeared from view than his lungs and legs were defeated.

He stopped and bent over, resting his hands on his knees. His breath came fast and created plumes of vapour in the air. If he ever got back to London, he vowed to walk everywhere.

Wind whipped around him and howled about his ears. Then came a clattering, a braying and the sound of a whip cracking. He looked along the track in both directions but could see nothing in the gloom. The sounds came closer and closer until in the distance he spotted a carriage, hurtling along the track from Stonegate Manor.

Could it be Lord Feltham? He looked about but there was not even a solitary tree to hide behind. Besides, his energy was spent and if Feltham chose to run him down, it was a better fate than being a meal for a wild beast.

Soon enough the carriage was upon him but the horses stopped before they stamped on him.

“Get in!”

“Fletcher?” Slee recognised the servant’s voice.

“Get in, Mr Slee. He may follow me yet.”

Slee jumped into the carriage and fell onto his luggage as it lurched away. Somehow Fletcher had managed to survive the conflict with Feltham and put his attaché and case into the carriage.

He pulled off the sodden nightshirt and opened the case. Inside were neatly packed clothes, some his own and some Lord Feltham’s. He rummaged through the clothes, discarding those that did not belong to him.

A cackle.

Slee paused. It was a trick of the wind, that was all. It was unsurprising; his nerves were shot to pieces. He pushed the clothes aside until he reached the bottom of the case. Something had been placed inside, something he did not recognise.

A vile stench and terrible laughter.

His throat grew dry and his heart pounded in his chest.

He pulled the object from the case and turned it over. It had been wrapped in brown paper and upon the front were written the words, 'To my friend, Slee. A gift for all eternity. Feltham.'

A whisper, a cackle and the stench of death.

He ripped it open and felt the carriage floor disappear into the abyss. It was the Feltham family portrait and deep in the background, almost hidden within the darkness, his very own terrified countenance peered out. He dropped the painting and looked to the window.

A scream; his own scream.

For it was not the moors and the leaden skies that looked back at him but the terrible sneer of the crone, and her cackle filled the carriage and tore at his soul.
