

Chapter One

Let us imagine that he is a King.
Quite probably he is a servant or a gardener . . . but let us imagine that he is a King.

What does a King do?

Stands at the end of a long colonnade, evidently, where it breaks off between two arms of a great building — looking at the rain.

What is he King of?

Erythruria.

And where is that?

An inward place, for each of us his own: some island, perhaps, of the Bohemian Plage.

How old is he?

Oh . . . fifty-five; perhaps sixty. Hardly more.

What is his name?

Licinius, let's say.

The rain draws a thin veil over the great bare garden, forming slow droplets under the twigs of trees and darkening the granite of the house. There comes the smell of Autumn — and a sound . . . orchestrated, slow, symphonic, long . . . as it falls upon clothing; earth; stones; grasses; leaves. . . .

After he has stood there for some time, a shaft of sunlight pierces the Western clouds. It touches the tops of the far walls opposite, tingeing them rose; gilding small windows, high beneath the roof, smoky, opaque, like cataracted eyes.

From one of these a girl looks out on him.

A girl?

I think . . .

Who is she?

What — ?

His daughter.

You are sure?

Quite sure.

Yes . . .

She is his *only* daughter . . .

—He has three sons.

Jennifer blinks with the new found splendour of sunlight. She turns up her face towards the pearl-grey sky where brilliancy glimmers through millions of falling drops, dusting the grime-filmed glass with a sheen of gold. It makes it on a sudden visible: casting, unfocussed, into dim planes of remote perspective everything beyond.

What is she doing?

Watching the rain, I suppose . . .

She is watching the rain.

Just that. — As her father does.

But no, I am wrong: not as her father does. For her it is different, she is enclosed from it. For her there is neither symphony nor smell. Only the muslin veil across the garden, making it like a faded pencil sketch.

Licinius does not see her at the window. He sighs, and walks back along the colonnade into the shelter of the growing dusk.

They are beginning to light lamps.

Behind another window, facing East, high up, submersed in shadow, other eyes look out. Set in a thin, long, head, they peer with a blind expression at the sky. Leo, this is, the King's youngest son.

He stands very still.

There is a stench of mildew, slight but definite; a smell of dust, bare boards, decaying wallpaper peeling in strips from the plaster —
He is alone in the middle of an empty room.

Leo's face is unreadable, blank — it's blankness being somehow undisturbed by the little trapezium of creases above his nose where the flesh becomes drawn together in a frown. He is holding in his right hand a knife with a long broad blade. This he begins to flick over against his palm, fixing his gaze on it concentratedly as it jerks and twists, making a dull glint ripple down its edge.

Then suddenly, as though something has attracted his attention — the movement of an insect, perhaps, or perhaps some noise — he gives a start and briskly looks about him, glancing in turn towards the four top corners of the room. He takes a pace forward, closer to the light.

Somewhere a drop falls, from a leaking gutter onto stone, with an irregular, unrhythmic, drip, that is monotonous in its changing pitch. Leo steps forward again, out of the shadow — and gazes, through blanketting layers of grime on the uncleaned window, into the fading, grey, still world outside.

The sun does not show here. The mizzle falls slowly in an unceasing sheet — descending with an endless, even, constancy of motion, that yet, bewilderingly connotes no change. Below him, in the great gardens, touched by faint light, the leaves of the roses glisten, let fall their burdens into the spongy earth; and far off in the gloom, the chirp of a damp bird comes uncertainly.

Eastward and North, the grey-lagged town lies huddled, its pavements spattered by dribblets from broken gutters, from runnels, from spouts, from gargoyles of flaking stone. Except for the sounds and movements of the rain, the long streets, with their passageways and yards and narrow alleys, wind for the most part deserted: silent and unused. Only at wide intervals — the scarce nodal points where a few shops are gathered, or a pub or two, and the lights become rather brighter for a space — is their forlornness broken: by the movements of some couple in a doorway, or a solitary figure, perhaps, hunched in a greatcoat, hurrying through the gloom.

Along beside the river, tall warehouses mass solid, blackly bleak against the drifting sky; the water flows beneath it grey and flat, starred faintly by brief hair-follicles of light.

*“I find it difficult **not** to enjoy sex, actually. Sometimes I don’t — but there’s no-one I **have** to go with. If I don’t take to a man, I can always just say ‘no’”*

“How long have you been doing it?”

She sits up on the bed, brushing her fingers through the hairs of his chest.

“About two years, this time. — I did it before for a while, when I was eighteen or nineteen. A couple of years then, as well. But there was a gap.”

“Why did you stop?”

“Something happened. — A personal thing.” She looks away from him, towards the floor.

“What did you do after that?”

“Oh — this and that. — I did other things for a while.”

“And why did you start again?”

“I needed money.” She grins: “ — It pays well enough!”

“So, then — ” Half shutting his eyes for a moment, he slightly frowns. “You won’t be doing it now for very long?”

“I haven’t thought about it. I’ll have to stop sometime, I suppose. — I like doing it, though!”

“Really?!”

“Yes.” She pulls a face of comic pathos. “ — Couldn’t you tell!”

He smiles, shaking his head. “I’d have thought it was a dangerous sort of thing.”

“Oh — Well, you get a bad one sometimes, of course. You can’t spot all of them. I’ve been beaten up once and raped. Robbed twice. Had a narrow escape or two. — But the risks are just part of the job, you can’t worry about them. You’ve got to use your judgement who you go with. And I’m usually all right. I’m pretty good!”

“What made you take it up?”

*“What — the first time, you mean? — I had a friend who did it. I went out with her one night to watch — really just to see how it was done. Only one of the men wanted **me** — and I thought” — she shrugs — “‘Why not?!’” — A pause. “The money was good enough, and I was lucky: the first man that I had was very nice.” She looks reflective for a moment, tilting her head to one side. “I thought it would be sordid. Then I realised I could make it anything I wanted. — That it depended upon me.” She stops and looks at him, adding, with a little twitch of the shoulders: “I’m not cut out for anything particular. — It’s sociable. It pays well. — And you **do get variety!**” There is a covert giggle in her voice. After a moment she adds again: “ — I enjoy it!”*

“Have you ever met anyone you’ve really liked?”

“What, when I’m working? . . . ” Her face clouds. “Yes. . . . One time I did.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story.” She sighs. “ — And I’ve got my living to make. I want to get in at least two more tonight. — It must be quite late now, I don’t usually stop this long with anyone. — I don’t know, really, why I have with you. Normally, I just do it — and go.” Rising from the bed, she begins putting on her clothes.

“What on earth is that!”

“What? -Oh, my leg, you mean? I had an accident. Got burned. Years ago. — It used to embarrass me when I got undressed, but you forget about it after a bit. Hardly anyone even notices. Never, when I go outside. — I’m always surprised when anybody does.” She gives a shrug. “Well — Nobody minds a black mark on your shin!”

Reaching out, he takes hold of her ankle gently, and makes to raise her leg. “Let me look at it. — It’s a strange mark. Huge. — And there’s another one the other side!”

“Yes. I’ve got three. There’s one on the other ankle. I was lucky, really, that it wasn’t worse.” She draws away from him and goes on dressing.

“How did it happen?”

*“A bit of bad luck, that’s all.” She pulls a face. “Come on! **You get your clothes on too.** — If you want me again, you can usually find me where I was tonight. If you don’t see me, then ask one of the girls:- Anita. Any of them’ll tell you. And they’ll know if I’m off with someone how long I might be. Usually it’s quick — just in a doorway, perhaps, or up an alley. But I might have gone back with somebody, like you. Or else I mightn’t be about. — Some nights I pack up early. I’m generally there, though: Tuesdays to Thursdays, midnight to three o’clock. — I do other nights as well, but always those.” She kisses him lightly. “All right, then? — See me to the door?”*

On the front steps she pauses, looks back at him for a moment, and then says:

“I killed him, I think. . . .” She glances at the ground, and bites her lip. “I didn’t give enough!”

Flashing an odd, inchoate, little smile, she nods and walks away along the street. The man stands staring blankly after her.

Licinius reaches the house and turns into a narrow entranceway. He descends three steps, and comes to a small oak door which he unlocks. There is a lantern swinging from a hook beside the jamb, but it is barely alight, and the passage that lies within is very dark. For a few moments he fumbles with the winding mechanism of the lamp, adjusting the wick till it sheds a steady glow. Black shadows scuttle about him as he moves. He re-locks the door.

A series of small grey rooms, each furnished with a table and two chairs, gives off from the passageway on either side, and at the end it joins with a wider one in which lamps have been lit. Once more tiny rooms lead off to right and left. Before he can enter the second passage, however, he has to pass through a second low oak door, which again he stops to unfasten with a key. Then he re-locks it behind him, but with a somewhat abstracted air: as though rather by force of habit than design.

One only of the rooms that he now comes to is in use. The others are empty, and their doors stand wide: set open with an almost military precision at right angles to the heavy frames. When he reaches the door that is closed, Licinius halts. He draws the slide back gently on the grille, and peers inside.

There are three men in the room, two seated, the third standing by the further

wall. The two sitting down are facing each other across a rough-hewn table made from some dark wood. One of these is a very small, pousy, frog-like man, with a bald head, and enormous protruding eyes that swim in the depths of pebble-lens spectacles. The other is Watergrain, the Chief of Police.

And the third?

He is a constable on guard.

On guard? — On guard of what . . . ? — Is he a prisoner, then, the little man?

He is.

What has he done?

He has . . .

I am not quite certain — Let me think . . .

He . . . Wait —

Yes — Yes, that's right —

He has murdered his wife.

What interest has the King in this?

I cannot tell.

The man was a palace official of some sort. Perhaps it is that. At any rate, he goes inside.

He just walks in? — The door has been left unlocked?

It wasn't, no. The policeman on duty outside has opened it.

Policeman? Policeman? There is a policeman outside? — You haven't mentioned him. — You just thought, I suppose, that I might know?

Licinius has pale blue eyes and a thin grey goatee beard. The policeman's uniform is blue and has gilt buttons. He is six feet three inches tall, and has a wart on the left side of his nose, towards the tip. The cell is lighted by an oil lamp.

—I thought it scarcely an important fact.

How can I envisage the scene if you don't describe it? — The King goes inside?

He does. Almost at once. Watergrain rises to greet him. The constable stiffens, appears, perhaps, more alert. As though he has noticed nobody come in, the little man remains slumped in his chair.

Glancing from Watergrain to the prisoner, then back, Licinius raises an

eyebrow. “Well?” he says.

“Nothing at all, sir.” Watergrain shakes his head. The prisoner’s batrachian eye-globes swim round like twin moons in their glass bowls, flicking a quick glance up at the King’s face. Then they return to scrutinising the table. He gibbers something quietly to himself.

What is his name?

They call him *Wale*, I think.

An odd name.

Yes.

“We can get nothing out of him at all,” says Watergrain. “Or nothing that’s coherent, anyway.”

Licinius frowns: “You’d perhaps better let it rest then for tonight.”

“Yes sir, perhaps we had.” There is a pause. After a second or two, he adds: “We’ll give him until the morning to think it over — and if he has still not changed his mind about it by then — ” He sketches a shrug, and turns to glare at *Wale*, bending forward as he does so very slightly from the hips, and speaking with distinct emphasis: “ — we’ll try out some more forcible persuasion.”

“In another place,” the King adds quietly.

For a few seconds *Wale* appears not to have heard; but the fish-bowl eyes become fixed all at once, the frog-like body trembles uncontrollably from head to foot. After a while it slowly subsides again, with a quivering-jelly movement, to rigidity.

Licinius looks at him with a puzzled expression.

“If . . . you make a clean breast to us of everything, there could be a free pardon for the murder,” he says at last.

The prisoner gives no sign that he has heard.

“You’d be able to get out of here, go free. You have my word of that. . . . We’d even find you, perhaps, another job.”

Wale continues to stare fixedly at the table-top whilst the King speaks; but then he half-rises, clenching his soft, small hands. He begins trembling, and sinks down once more. His mouth works silently, but he is not trying to speak. Licinius stares at him till he is calm again, then pulls a face, and shrugs, and turns away. A noise from the prisoner, though, makes him look back. *Wale* is staring up at him with a strange expression — eager, self enclosed: a fatuous blind smile.

“It’s very big,” he says. “It’s *very* big. The abdomen all covered with grey hair. And eye spots, blue, bright blue. *Enormous*—Yes!”

Chapter Two

There is a sense here of suspended time. The shadows, clotted by the dull grey light, have ceased to move: now they but thicken imperceptibly. Outside, beyond the glass, the slow clouds shuffle Northwards, dropping their casual burdens of fine rain in a thin veil that darkens, blurs, and masks.

Within the room the last light of the day creeps through an oval window to one side. A listening silence quavers like held breath. Cupboards, tables, and other discarded things, are cast together in huge random piles, their edges muted with the grime of years: great spiders' webs, and trailing cloaks of dust.

Cobwebs are everywhere. The air is still. They loop from the tops of wardrobes like torn bunting, heavy with dirt and fluff, or the occasional shell of a dehydrated fly. They shroud the abandoned cradle, cling to the rusty sword. They cover the floorboards, crumpled like black rags. Half fancied and half real, vague shapes impend, bulking like petrified monsters in the gloom — dread denizens of unimagined worlds.

What is this place?

An attic.

There is a creak on the stair. Then silence. Then a sound inside the room: a scuffling noise in the shadows.

Now it has stopped.

The door swings slowly back. A man comes in.

—No, not a man. A youth — Leo, I think.

He stands by the doorway a moment, screwing his eyes up and glancing from side to side, then calls out his sister's name, uncertainly.

There is no answer.

Stepping forward a pace or two, he stops quite motionless, his head very slightly cocked, his mouth half-open. His eyes make a broad slow sweep. He listens hard.

There is almost a perfect silence in the room. Soft rain falls on the window like fine sand, blown by a sudden gust of wind. Leo walks over to the casement and looks out, then turns and again calls doubtfully: "Jennifer?"

Still no reply.

"I know you're there!?"

There comes a rustling and a scraping noise: a loud metallic clash, quite close at hand. It startles him. He jumps.

A few yards to his right the lid of a small saucepan has appeared in the middle of a patch of clear bare floor. It gently rocks to and fro.

"Jenny?!" He holds his breath. "There aren't any rats up here!"

A stifled giggle from somewhere to his left. He turns towards it. Towering shapes of furniture, dumb shadow. Nothing else. He pauses, seems to think.

“So that’s the game, is it?”

“Yes, that’s the game! — You find me! — If you can!”

He turns a little more, as though locating — with precision now — from where the voice has come; but his view is cut off in that direction by a wardrobe and twin bastions of piled chairs. Between them runs a narrow twisting aisle. He threads his way through this, he peers about. On every side, receding into the gloom, crazy pagodas and minarets of furniture and heaped-up odds and ends aspire into the black void of the roof. There is the large dolls’ house with the broken chimney; the ragged sofa, and the stuffed emu; a dresser; a box of lead soldiers; some half-empty paint tins; an old copper pot; a candlestick or two; a knobless door; clothes, china, drawers, tables, desks, locked cases, and old trunks, stacked higgledy-piggledy on top of one another, underneath fifty years or so of grime. Further away, and splendid by itself, with its curtains drawn closely about it to keep out the dust, for all the world as if it were ever going to be used again, there looms his great-grandfather’s huge four-poster bed, complete with its bolsters and pillows and blankets and sheets, and the thick eiderdowns with the Royal Arms.

“Are you annoyed with me, Jenny? — What have I done?”

There is no answer.

His eyes come to rest at last upon the bed, caressing its contours with a thoughtful slowness, examining the folds and fall of its draperies, inch by inch. At length he smiles.

“I’ve found you!” he exclaims.

There is no response.

“You’re in the four-poster!” he cries. He stands and waits.

The silence slowly spreads itself again, like ripples dancing outwards in a pool from some dropped stone.

For almost a minute he stays motionless. Then he begins to pick his way to the bed, stepping with a careful delicacy over and amongst the piles of junk. Reaching his goal, he snatches back the curtain at one side, exciting from the canopy above a choking pale fine corona of dust. Stiff and straight in the near-darkness, the girl lies staring up at him, po-faced.

“Where were you?” she demands.

“In the Library.”

“I looked there.”

“I was downstairs part of the time in one of the rooms — Watching the wall-paper peel, and regarding my navel.”

“I’ve been looking for you half the afternoon!”

“Well, I’m here now.” He sits on the edge of the mattress.

“But I don’t want you now. — I was bored earlier!”

“Then I shall go again.”

“I should.”

“I shall!”

He rises, to suit the action to his words.

“You were avoiding me, weren’t you?” She looks up at him.

“No, little sister; no.” He shakes his head.

“Don’t call me that!”

He smiles. “Do you know what the time is?”

“Yes.”

“Well then . . .” He pulls a face. “Are you coming to dinner?”

She stares for a few moments into the dark well of the curtained bed without replying to him. Her mouth is drawn tight. Her eyes are moist. “Yes, I suppose so,” she says, ungraciously. “There’s a candle beside the door. Some matches too.”

“Good.” He looks down at her. “I’ll fetch them, then.”

“I was so bored, Leo, this afternoon!” She calls this after him in a sudden flurry: almost by way, perhaps, of apology.

From somewhere down below there comes a sudden, high, wild, mirthless, female laugh. After ten seconds that drag like an age, it stops. The boy rises from where he has been sitting on the floor beside the old red sofa, walks over to the window, and leans forward with his hands upon the recurved surface of the sill. The gardens glow livid under the pale cold moon. He seems not to see them, though, as he stares into the pane, his breath coming shallowly, his body tense, his head held stiff. He seems to be waiting for some further sound. His hands clench themselves on the wood with a spasmodic grip, the bones and tendons standing whitely out. After some moments the laughter rings out again, then cuts off abruptly. The boy takes a deep breath, and turns. There comes a thud. Silence. He waits. From the staircase below him there comes another thud. Slowly, he begins moving towards the door, the candleflames flickering gently in his draught.

Over the roofs the rain is easing off. The grey light shades to brown. Within the room, the mounds of furniture appear to grow taller as the seconds pass, their apices swallowed wholly by the dark. Leo feels his path gingerly among them. His sister follows.

“What did you do?” he says.

“After I’d looked for you? I came up here and stood watching the rain for a while as it fell on the garden. — Father was watching it too, from the colonnade.”

Leo bends down by the door and gropes with his fingers in the narrow space between two piles of books. From this he extracts a candle and a box containing several matches. “What then?” he asks.

“I went and curled up in the bed and drew the curtains around me — tightly, to shut out the rain.”

The last of the daylight now has almost gone. He strikes a match and tilts the candle to it. “There’s a holder down there, too,” she suddenly prompts.

“And lay there cursing me?” He finds the sconce and fits the candle in, puts back the matches, draws open the door.

“No, not at all. I’d forgotten about you then till I heard you coming. I heard the stair creak — That one! — Just like that!” She presses on it hard a second time.

“I didn’t know you’d hide from me!” he says. “And three or four of them do,

in any case.”

“You sounded funny calling out to me!”

He smiles. “I wasn’t sure that you were there.”

They go down the long corridor together, their voices throwing back starkly from the bare plaster, rising and booming loudly in sudden thunder as they pass the entrance to some disused room, its door swung open or tumbled from the butts. Ahead of them, at the far end of the passage, a solitary small window, facing East, admits but little light. The flame of the candle prances in the draughts, making strange flickerings on walls and floor.

“I just lay there, thinking, in the musty darkness — telling stories to myself.”

“Stories?”

Jennifer nods. “It was very dark and warm, and very quiet. And I felt quite safe, as though nobody could touch me there. — All the great world was gone, there was only me. And I thought: ‘I am this, this darkness. There is nothing else.’ And so I just lay there living in the silence, floating without a body through warm space. ‘And it will always be like this’, I thought. ‘There won’t *be* any people any more.’ — You don’t need people when they don’t exist.” Her face goes hard.

Leo does not reply. They walk on without speaking for some time. At length Jennifer half turns to look at him. Her eyes flick towards the floor, then back again. She says: “What’s wrong?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing.” He tries to smile. “What could be wrong?”

“I don’t know, Leo, but there’s *something* wrong. I’ve hardly seen you for months. We *used* to be friends.”

There is a silence. After a bit he says quietly: “Well — are we not?”

“So tell me then.”

“I can’t. — There’s nothing wrong.” After a moment or so he amplifies: “ — I’ve got a problem; I need to think it out. But I can’t talk about it, it wouldn’t mean anything to you.”

They go on without speaking once again. Very gradually, tears start to form in her eyes. “Why don’t you like me any more?” she says.

“Like you! — Of course I do!”

“Why won’t you talk to me?”

“I do.” He grins. “Look here — I’m talking now!”

“You’re not.” She pouts.

“I’ll tell you about it when I’ve worked it out. I can’t tell you yet, you’d just think it was silly.”

She shakes her head.

“You would.” Again there is a silence. After some moments she begins gradually to walk more slowly, and then stops. Placing her left foot forward a little, she stares at the toe. Leo has stopped as well, a few feet ahead. He turns and regards her with slightly parted lips: an expression of amused expectancy.

She takes a breath, and frowns. Then, in a small, clear, voice that oddly seems to echo, she exclaims:

“Are you . . . *in love*?”

He looks at her and laughs. “In *WHAT*?” he says.

“In *LOVE!*” She laughs as well; then lightly runs forward the few feet that

separate them, touching a hand to his shoulder, and looking briefly up into his face.

He shakes his head. "It's nothing like that, no."

They walk on again, together.

"You'll never guess it, so there's no point trying. — The great world turns, clocks tick, and people eat roast pork."

"I know they do."

"Don't pout, little sister, you'll get stuck like it. As Maria'd say."

"I'm worried about you — I'm *not* pouting, Leo. . . . You've been getting strange for months!"

"I suppose, then, that I must have been thinking for months." He grins. " — It has an adverse effect!"

They turn the corner into a short blind passage, closed at the end by a panelled mahogany door. Taking the brass knob of this with a stiff left hand, Leo pauses to glance back at her. After a moment he sighs, and stands quite still. "How can I try to explain it?" he says at length. "I *want* to tell you. — Only I don't know how!" He draws back the edges of his mouth, compressing his lips. Then he says "Well, it's like . . ." He stops. "Oh, I don't know!" He takes a breath.

Puzzled, she stares at him as he seeks for words. With the fingertips of his right hand, he rubs at his temples.

"Imagine something happening inside your head," he says at last. "Something so interesting that everything else — people, fun, work, the whole of the outside world — exists simply as a nuisance, a distraction from it. . . . It's as though — It's — Arrhhh! . . ." He stops with an impatient gesture of his hands.

"What?"

"I just can't explain it at all! — But it grips you so that it seems there's nothing else. You have to chase it, to worry at it, to try, to try, to try, to work it out!"

"Try to work what out?" She stares at him with a frown.

There is a silence. Then he shakes his head. He twists at the knob of the door with a violent motion; and with a sudden briskness flings it back, stepping aside for her with a sweeping bow, half angry, half ironic, as he does so.

Inside, a fire blazes in the hearth. Leo's face takes on a quizzical expression for an instant as he sees who stands before it, a foot raised to the fender, with his back to them, his head bent, staring at the coals. Turning to his sister in feigned astonishment, he cries:

"Well! — Look who's here!" He puts on a heavy air of mock gravity.

"Ah — Jennifer!" He loudly clears his throat. "Ah . . . well . . . I'd like you to meet somebody. Now this is your eldest brother: Julian. — I don't suppose you will ever have seen him before?"

She glances at Leo, and cannot suppress a laugh. "Oh . . . Yes . . . Yes, once or twice!" And catching at the spirit of the thing: " — But what's he doing here?"

Leo shakes his head with a bewildered look. "I really couldn't say. — Maybe he's lost!" He leans forward as though to inspect Julian minutely, as he does so slightly inclining his head.

Their brother turns, and regards them for some seconds without speaking. "Thank you!" he growls at length. "That's quite enough!"

"Sorry, dear brother." Leo looks comically contrite. Then to his sister he

once more averts his face, sketching with forehead, eyes, and gaping mouth a caricature of innocent surprise.

Julian looks annoyed. "I do eat with you all occasionally, you know!"

"Occasionally, yes," says Leo. His manner changes, suddenly becoming brusque. "—And what is the matter with you?"

"There's nothing the matter!" Julian turns his back. After a moment he says in a surly tone: "I've got a headache, that's all. — Quite enough!"

"There's no need, though, to take it out on me."

"I wasn't taking it out on you. I didn't mean to. What — Good evening, Mark."

The door has opened very quietly. The remaining brother pauses on the threshold to glance round and proffer a bright smile. "Well! An event!" he cries. "We must call for Champagne!"

"What do you mean?" Julian's lips contract.

Mark looks at him carefully, and gives a shrug. "We don't often see you nowadays, that is all."

Julian seems to swallow something large. Then he says quietly: "I've had enough! Can I do nothing without its being remarked? — I'll stand . . . I'll stand no more!" His voice rises querulously on the final words. Breathing rapidly, he turns and slaps his thigh.

Mark glances as though in surprise towards the others.

Leo says blandly: "He is offended with us. — We erred, it appears, by noticing his presence."

Jennifer looks at him sharply, but holds her peace. There is a silence.

Mark for a moment frowns. Then, quickly, in a low voice, tonelessly, he says: "Oh no, indeed. I didn't intend that." It is not clear, however, to which of them he speaks. He turns more fully to Julian with a smile. "But you must admit, it isn't often that we see you here these days, is it?"

"I get here when I can."

"Of course you do. I'm sorry." He spreads his hands, palms half towards the floor, then drops them again. "— I had forgotten how onerous the duties of a Crown Prince are."

Julian explodes. "Must I be persecuted?! — I am here now, this evening. Be content!" He is breathing hard. His fists clench at his sides, and then relax. There is a silence. "Father's late!" he says. He turns away from them all, lifting his head.

"Perhaps we had best send a footman to summon him!" Changing from dry, Mark's tone has become ascerbic. This time, however, he provokes no response.

Julian turns towards them once again. "I'm sorry," he says. "I really don't feel very well. That's all it is."

The rain has stopped, the cloud has broken up. Great floating islands drift across the sky, red and dark purple on a pale blue ground. Beneath the clouds, the light has almost gone. It lingers but as a dark translucency.

In the vast stillness of this twilight world a muted movement comes upon the

garden. The soft loam seems to pullulate with crawling things. Slugs leave their silvery tracks across the paths; beetles, and moths, and little flies take wing. From gutters and turrets and gable-ends of the house splash drips unrhythmic into puddles of the sodden earth. Faint movement, and a small new sound of life.

Close by the damp dark stonework of a wall, a robin fastens its beak upon a worm. Straining itself hard backwards onto its tail, it draws it up slowly out of the wet mould.

“What was it that delayed you so, then, father? — There seemed to be some excitement in the house.”

“Eh, pardon, Julian? — Yes. Oh, yes, — there was.” An uneasy silence once more prevails at the table. The King appears wholly occupied with his meal.

“Well, after all,” says Mark with a slight drawl, “it isn’t every day that one of our chief officials gets arrested.” He gazes down at the signet ring he wears.

Jennifer glances at him with sudden curiosity.

“Really?” says Julian, lightly. “Who was that?”

“Wale,” Mark replies. “If that means anything to you.”

“Ah, no. — No, it doesn’t. I don’t think I know him at all.”

Licinius breaks out of his seeming trance. “Well then, you ought to, Julian!” he snaps. “He had an important post. -You must learn to take your duties more seriously. You are, after all, Crown Prince. — And one day, not long hence, you will be King!”

“Ah — What does he look like?” Julian addresses Mark.

“Short, fat, bald, and with thick glasses.”

The portrait causes Jennifer to giggle.

Julian snaps his fingers with a smile. “Oh yes. Yes, I do know him, after all, of course. I just didn’t realise that his name was Wale. What has he done?”

“Murdered his wife, I believe. — Or that, at any rate, is the official story.”

“It really does seem he at least did that,” Licinius muses, half to himself again. “But there’s more to it, perhaps. I think there has to be!” He shakes his head.

“How did he do it?” enquires Julian.

Licinius glances at Jennifer, then back. “He strangled her. With a scarf.”

Julian stares. “I shouldn’t have thought he’d have had the strength!” he says.

“He probably did it whilst she was asleep.”

“Probably?” echoes Mark. There is a long silence.

Julian visibly ponders. He goes to speak, but stops. Finally, he says: “What makes you suppose, then, that he did it at all?”

Licinius looks at him. “He was caught with the body, Julian, last night, dragging it down the steps towards the river along one of the wharves — trussed in a meal-sack. He nearly fell in himself, tripping over a crate, and it was the noise of that which drew attention to him. She was quite a big woman, apparently, very well made; he was finding it extremely difficult. They caught him on the river steps with the
body.”

“I see.” Julian frowns.

“But he hasn’t confessed, though?” says Mark.

“No — ” Licinius pauses, and stares for a moment into space, whilst an expression flits across his features as if of puzzlement or perhaps surprise. “He hasn’t so far said anything at all. Nothing that makes any sense at any rate.” He stops, and shakes his head. “But it only, of course, will be a matter of time.”

Mark frowns. “Yet you think that . . . that it was more than — well, — than just a family tiff? Why were you bothered about it? — I don’t understand.”

Licinius shakes his head. “It’s a curious thing. This morning a letter from the dead woman was delivered to Watergrain at Police H.Q., asking to meet him privately just before noon. She was offering information of some kind that she said ‘would be of interest to the King’. By then, of course, she was already dead.”

“What sort of information? Did she say?”

“Nothing at all Mark, no. — But there isn’t any point in making guesses. I think we’ll find out soon enough!”

Mark nods. He glances at Julian, his brows very slightly raised, as though in speculation. “Yes father — Yes,” he murmurs, “I suppose we shall.”