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## *At Cant's Hotel*

Donald realized that he had to get a grip. He was not doing himself any good by giving way to panic like this. At the first opportunity – for the road itself was too narrow to turn in – he wheeled the car round and proceeded in the direction he had been travelling, but in forward gear. There was no sign of the pursuing vehicle. The forest was bearing down upon him oppressively on every side, but after a few miles it began to thin out, and then he was looking down on a village lying deep in a glen through which ran a substantial, fast-moving burn. He had certainly never been here before and was quite puzzled as to where he could be.

As he drove down into the settlement he saw no name sign; it struck him that the feel of the place was not very Scottish, rather it had something of a Middle-European character; the surrounding hills, too, looked almost Alpine. But the names on the rather old-fashioned-looking

shops were certainly Scottish: he noticed Chisholm, Macpherson, Catanach. There were few people about. The road dropped down to a hump-backed bridge then, doubling sharply back, opened into a little square. On the left stood a low, rambling building with the name 'Cant's Hotel' in gold letters over the entrance. What was it that made him instinctively dislike that name? No matter. Donald parked the car and went in.

It seemed not much different from many small Scottish country hotels. There was a brass bell on the reception desk: the kind that one banged to summon attention. So Donald banged it and waited. No-one came. He peered into the sitting-room and the bar, which opened off opposite sides of the entrance hall, but both were deserted, so he went up the steep spiral staircase with its worn maroon carpet and long-unpolished brass handrail. Upstairs there was a long corridor with an uneven, creaking floor. All the bedrooms he looked into were devoid of furniture but the floors were covered uniformly with thick dark-brown carpets and the walls were freshly painted. There were signs that new plumbing had been installed, and possibly some new bathrooms. Donald concluded that the hotel was probably closed for renovation and that he had only been able to get in because the owners were about somewhere, or possibly workmen.

He went into one of the rooms and was suddenly overcome by intense weariness: if only there had been a bed! He shut the door behind him. This room had a tiny bathroom in which the WC sat on a raised platform. With a feeling of pleasurable secretiveness and mild guilt he lay down on the luxuriously new carpet with his head on this platform as a pillow, and after arranging his sweater

under him to cushion his hip, fell almost at once into a profound sleep.

When he woke it was already dusk. He was stiff and a bit cold, but what made him shiver was a dream he had had. In fact it was less a dream than a vivid memory which had come back to him in sleep, scarcely modified except by that visionary, other-worldly atmosphere peculiar to dreams. It dated back to a time when he was about ten and attending a school in which a clique of bullies maintained power through a permanent reign of terror. This gang was led by a quite small and insignificant boy who, however, was able to dominate others, including many much larger and tougher than himself, through the powerful sway of his depraved and probably psychotic personality. In the dream memory this person was whipping with bramble stalks a small boy stripped to the waist and hung by his ankles from the branch of an ash tree, while the rest of the gang stood around and cheered him on.

The leader's name was Cant.

Alone and friendless in a strange, empty hotel in the autumn gloaming, in an unknown place far from home, tricked and cozened and pursued by sinister ruffians who he feared had kidnapped or harmed or even done away with his dear wife . . . it is not to be wondered at that Donald felt depressed and anxious. He needed to find and speak to a sympathetic human being. He moved cautiously to the door and made his way down the corridor to the stair, guided by a dim light from downstairs. There was still no-one about, so he went through a green baize door which opened off a niche beside the reception desk. The room he entered was in darkness, but at the farther

end a sliver of light showed beneath another door. He groped his way towards it, bumping into furniture. On the other side there was a good deal of noise, thumping and scraping of chairs, but no sound of human voices. He opened the door an inch and peeked through apprehensively.

Before his eyes was a large, barn-like function room with rows of long tables covered with white tablecloths. Around these tables were seated fifty or sixty people conversing volubly in sign language. There was a general air of excitement and expectation among these assembled deaf-mutes, and every now and again one of them would point or gesticulate towards the curtained stage at the far end of the hall. Evidently some kind of performance was shortly due to begin.

Meanwhile two or three girls were serving the audience plates of sandwiches and jugs of Irn-Bru. Donald was by this time ravenously hungry, having eaten nothing since breakfast-time, and the sight of the food was enough to overcome his nervousness and persuade him to slip into the function room. Trying to look as unobtrusive and mute as possible, he made his way to a smaller table at the side where some of the ashets of sandwiches had been left, and, grabbing hold of a plate, loaded it with food and began stuffing himself unceremoniously.

No-one paid him the slightest attention.

Donald retreated with his plate to the near end of the table closest to the door by which he had entered, where nobody was sitting, and sat surreptitiously devouring his sandwiches and refreshing himself with Irn-Bru while he waited to see what was about to happen. It was approaching seven-thirty. The sense of expectation among

the audience became more marked, and what might by analogy be described as a hush began to overtake the silent conversations which were being carried on. Then the lights dimmed, plates were pushed aside and all turned towards the stage in pleasurable anticipation.

The curtains parted – old-fashioned maroon plush curtains which reminded Donald of the pantomimes of his childhood – and a kind of firework display ensued, no doubt simulated, which ultimately resolved itself into the words THE SINISTER CABARET in bright, gaudy colours, red and green and blue and orange and mauve. When this had dissolved, the Master of Ceremonies entered with a crude swagger: a strutting, posturing circus ringmaster with a top hat, boots and spurs, and carrying a whip which he cracked from time to time just for the sake of it. Beneath the fancy dress and the make-up of this vulgarian Donald had little difficulty in recognizing the person of the odious Motion! Oh, dear God!

The compère now wordlessly introduced his co-players: his wife, scantily attired in a figure-hugging black costume with suspenders and fishnet stockings, and an older man in a tramp's outfit whom, with a profound sinking of the heart, Donald at once pinpointed as the sadistic torturer Cant whose appearance – though forty-odd years had naturally altered it – his recent dream had vividly restored to his memory. And there was someone else he recognized: Cant's brutal lieutenant from those far-off days, a great hulking oaf known by the nickname Scrote. In the course of the act which followed he came to realize something else: this Scrote was the very same individual whom he had successfully prosecuted for embezzlement some years before, not long after he had taken silk, without

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ever identifying him as his childhood tormentor.

The audience was already ecstatic, although almost nothing had so far happened, and what had was sadly commonplace stuff: the excitement was really quite silly and childish and unjustified. The performance took the form of a series of sketches played in mime but introduced by one or other of the actors with a short verse which supposedly rehearsed its subject-matter but often seemed only marginally related to what actually happened. These verses were spoken out loud but mouthed with exaggerated and ponderous articulation so that they could be lip-read by the deaf-mutes, who of course found them hysterically funny. Actually they were uniformly banal and often in execrable taste. This, for instance:

*The budgie old sat in the cold  
And whistled a rotten tune.  
A butcher's lad said, 'Christ, that's bad!'  
And squashed him with a spoon.*

This was played as a pantomime skit with Mrs Motion playing the poor budgie and the sadist Scrote the reprehensible butcher's boy. Sometimes there was a feeble attempt at profundity and *double-entendre*:

*There once was a burrowless bunny  
Who caught a chill and died.  
'Oh, boo-hoo-hoo!' said Auntie,  
'But better than dying inside!'*

The audience roared with laughter at this, although it was very doubtful whether they had understood it. They were one of those exasperating audiences who laugh simply because they are on a day out and have to be seen to be enjoying themselves, and also out of a desire to be seen to be knowing. Donald had had quite enough of this show and was just thinking of sneaking out again by the way he had come when a truly dreadful development occurred. The detestable Motion declaimed a new verse:

*A kiss or two, a ray of love:  
You said you must be on your way.  
Although we'll never meet again,  
A face to recognize some day.*

—and then a new actress appeared on the stage, a woman with a lithe figure and long, rich-brown hair, a woman whom Donald knew only too well. It was Madeleine – or her double. The same, in fact, in every feature, every tiniest detail, yet Donald knew in his heart of hearts that it was not his wife.

And now – horror of horrors! – he saw played out before his eyes his parting from his wife a couple of days before (though it seemed now to belong to another lifetime), with his own part taken by the indecent Cant. Everything was the same, including – and this was played with peculiar emphasis – the moment when Madeleine had related her dream and indicated the place where the guillotine had made a mess of her neck. Cold sweat broke out on him. When the sketch was over Motion sauntered back on stage and remarked:

‘Nice one, eh?’ as if addressing Donald personally.

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After that the Madeleine substitute kept appearing in sketches that were obscene, sordid, suggestive or depraved, usually as some character whose innocence was hideously debauched by a villain played by Cant. Donald now found himself unable to leave, though he longed to do so, held in a hypnotic, humiliating, trance-like state by the silly, catchy jingles:

*The Leith Police dismisseth us  
As oftentimes before,  
And thoroughly off that pisseth us  
As they show us to the door.*

\* \* \* \*

*Home, home on the scheme  
Where the pit-bull and Rottweiler scream,  
Where seldom is heard an encouraging word  
But the drugs make it seem like a dream.*

It was all odious and reprehensible, and Donald, terrified in truth to the roots of his being, experienced a violent desire to take it out on the deaf-mutes for their complicity, to rage among them, overturning their tables and throwing their food around for endorsing all this evil play-acting and imposture. But at last it seemed that the show was coming to an end. The players assembled all together on the stage for what appeared to be a finale, and sang in turns and finally in unison the lines of a farewell ditty:

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*Nothing is quite the way it seems:  
The Sinister Cabaret corrupts your dreams.  
What you were and you would have been,  
What you would rather remained unseen:  
Nasty longings and hidden gall—  
The Sinister Cabaret reveals them all.  
You want to escape and disappear  
But the Sinister Cabaret is always here:  
In your attic and in your bed—  
The Sinister Cabaret is inside your head.*

The curtain dropped to tumultuous applause and then rose again and the players strutted and bowed and linked hands and grinned away with infamous self-satisfaction while the mutes rose from their seats and raised their clapping hands above their heads and made uncouth noises of appreciation. Fury had now quite driven out Donald's fear, and the enraged advocate pushed forward between the tables jostling the audience out of his way and leapt up onto the stage.

'Where is my wife? What have you done to her?' he shouted at Motion, striding right up to him with clenched fists.

Motion smiled patronizingly. 'What have we done to her? What have *you* done to her, that's the question!'

'Can't you see that she's one of us now?' asked the Motion woman, mockingly.

The Madeleine-substitute gave Donald a pitying look and held her hands out wide as if to indicate her helplessness.

'Don't give me that! Are you saying I don't know my own wife? I know an impostor when I see one. What

have you done to her?’

He grabbed Motion by the collar and twisted. ‘And what did you mean by placing that wretched mammet in my bed?’

Cant now walked up to Donald menacingly.

‘I think you ought to go now,’ he said.

‘You filthy little shit!’ said Donald. ‘I think I’ll kill you quite soon. Yes, I think I’ll do that.’

Cant made as if he was going to hit Donald, but Donald grabbed hold of a belaying-pin which was lying nearby and he quickly retreated a step or two. God knows why there should be a belaying-pin lying nearby, it flashed through Donald’s mind, but there is usually one around when it is needed, either that or a marline-spike: he supposed it must have been used in one of the sketches. But what more could Donald do? A wave of mingled despair and contempt swept over him and he turned on his heel and left the stage. Then he was once more convulsed by rage and he turned back towards the troupe and shouted:

‘Frauds! Impostors! Actors!’

But they just laughed. The deaf-mutes, the wind now completely out of their sails, parted silently (of course) to let him past, and he left the hall by the way he had come. He re-entered the entrance hall of the hotel, went upstairs and groped his way to the bedroom he had occupied earlier. Feeling suddenly as overcome by weariness as if he had been drugged, he staggered into the bathroom, lay down in a foetal position and was instantly asleep.

In spite of a deeply disturbed night, haunted by vile and confused images which he could no longer remember

clearly, Donald awoke the next morning in a determined, almost a defiant mood, and sat on the floor with his hands around his knees trying to think of a way forward.

‘A plan – I must think of a plan!’

He supposed that the sensible thing would be to go to the police, but the police were an unimaginative bunch on the whole, and he had, he realized, nothing very concrete to tell them; indeed, no evidence at all of criminal or even illegal activity. The story he had to tell was odd in the extreme and he was well aware that he risked not being taken seriously. There was his professional status, of course, but up here he was unknown; and besides he felt somehow in a different world, in which none of his quotidian assumptions held good. Still, he couldn't think of any course of action that seemed to offer better prospects of success.

Donald looked at his watch: it was just after eight and there was no sound of life at all in the hotel. He went over to the window and looked out cautiously. There were few people about. The atmosphere here is strange, he thought; but he couldn't put his finger on the nature of the strangeness. There were shops in the village, anyway, and by this time at least one of them ought to be open.

He bought some food in the general store and leaned against the wall of the bridge over the burn while he had a couple of rolls and a carton of milk for his breakfast. It was nearly October but the weather was holding; there was a freshness in the air, a kind of suspended quality in the atmosphere, as if the earth were waiting for something to happen. What? There was a strangeness, certainly, in which he couldn't quite find his way, but he

couldn't say in what it consisted. It was a bit like the way one saw the world in early childhood.

He felt drawn to Chisholm's shop, on the opposite side of the square from the general store and sauntered across. It seemed if anything to be a hardware store, but not in the normal sense. As well as the usual things such a place might have, it was crammed with all kinds of obsolete goods and equipment such as would have been necessary in a traditional rural society of seventy-five or a hundred years ago: harnesses, gear for carriages, agricultural implements and materials for all kinds of traditional arts and crafts. In a way it was like a museum, but there was a sense that these things were still needed and used. All was orderly, adequate, satisfying. Behind the counter was an elderly man who fitted his shop in every respect.

'Good morning,' said Donald. 'Could you tell me where the nearest police station is, please? None here, I suppose?'

'Oh, goodness, no. The nearest would be . . . maybe Ullapool. Yes, probably Ullapool. What would you be wanting with the polis?'

Donald was a bit taken aback by the directness of this, but the question was asked in a friendly manner, and this was the first person he'd come across since he left home who he felt was sympathetic enough for him to confide in. He leaned forward confidentially.

'The truth is . . . Do you know that cabaret act that was on in Cant's Hotel last night?'

'Oh, ay?' said the old man in a discreet, non-committal tone.

'Well, I've been having a bit of trouble with them over the past day or two. I'd rather not go into the details,

but . . . well, to tell you the truth, I've reason to suppose that they're up to no good. Don't repeat that, mind you . . . '

'No, no. I'll keep quiet, right enough.'

'I can't say for sure that it's a police matter, but I think they ought to know.'

'You'd be better with the detective,' said the old man decisively.

'There's a detective? Where?' Donald immediately felt that he would be much more comfortable dealing with the detective.

The shopkeeper said a name in Gaelic which Donald couldn't take in.

'It's a fifty-mile drive,' he said with a shake of the head and a slight chuckle, 'but as the crow flies it's no more than a quarter of that.'

An idea suddenly occurred to Donald. He would be better off without the car: he couldn't then be pursued by that black Range Rover. He would feel more secure out there on his own, reliant on his own wits.

'Is it walkable?'

'Oh ay. If you're fit, sir, you could walk it no bother.'

'Could you show it to me on a map – do you have a map of the area for sale?'

The old man shook his head again, as if enjoying some private joke. He was one of those old Highland people who seem perpetually, though not unkindly, amused by the naiveté and childishness of the city-bred.

'No, no. No maps, sir. But I could draw you one myself, right enough.'

'That would be very kind.'

The old man disappeared to the back of the shop and

shortly re-emerged with a large sheet of brown wrapping-paper and a thick-nibbed fountain pen. He set to work with great concentration, his tongue protruding a little between his teeth, and every now and again giving a little grunt. His draughtsmanship was firm and workmanlike.

‘Tell me about this detective,’ said Donald as the old man put the finishing touches to the map. ‘I’m surprised that there is enough work to support him in these parts.’

‘Oh, he doesn’t do it for the money, sir. He does it for the love of the thing. He’s just a man, you see, who loves detecting.’

‘And he’s good at it, is he?’

‘None better.’ The old man bent down and rummaged under the counter, coming up after a minute with a worn and grubby card bearing the legend:

PETER MacNUCATOR  
Private Detective  
Cul an Duirn 212

‘Thank you,’ said Donald. ‘I’m most grateful. I’d better buy some stuff for my journey, I suppose.’

The old man extended his hand with quiet pride towards his plentiful stock.

‘It’s all here, sir. This is all you need.’

Donald bought a small backpack and a number of other items which he reckoned he might need. He asked the old man if he would be kind enough to keep an eye on his car while he was gone, and was advised to park it in front of the hardware store. He thanked the old man for his trouble.

‘My prayers go with you,’ said the strange old fellow.

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Donald went back to the other shop to buy provisions for his journey, then went to the car to transfer what he needed from his bag to the backpack. The hotel still looked deserted and there was no sign at all of the Sinister Cabaret.

It was around nine o' clock when he set off.