6

In the evening, when I grew calmer, I found that Rosalind was trying to talk to me. Some of the others were anxiously asking what was the matter, too. I told them about Sophie. It wasn't a secret any more now. I could feel that they were shocked. I tried to explain that a person with a deviation – a small deviation, at any rate – wasn't the monstrosity we had been told. It did not really make any difference – not to Sophie, at any rate.

They received that very doubtfully indeed. The things we had all been taught were against their acceptance – though they knew well enough that what I was telling them must be true to me. You can't lie when you talk with your thoughts. They wrestled with the novel idea that a Deviation might not be disgusting and evil – not very successfully. In the circumstances they could not give me much consolation, and I was not sorry when one by one they dropped out and I knew that they had fallen asleep.

I was tired out myself, but sleep was a long time coming. I lay there, picturing Sophie and her parents plodding their way southward towards the dubious safety of the Fringes, and hoping desperately that they would be far enough off now for my betrayal not to hurt them.

And then, when sleep did come, it was full of dreams. Faces and people moved restlessly through it, scenes, too. Once more there was the one where we all stood round in the yard while my father disposed of an Offence which was Sophie, and I woke up from that hearing my own voice shouting to him to stop. I was frightened to go to sleep again, but I did, and that time it was quite different. I dreamed again of the great city by the sea, with its houses and streets, and the things that flew in the sky. It was years since I had dreamed about that, but it still looked just the same, and in some quite obscure way it soothed me.

My mother looked in in the morning, but she was detached

and disapproving. Mary was the one who took charge, and she decreed that there was to be no getting up that day. I was to lie on my front, and not wriggle about, so that my back would heal more quickly. I took the instruction meekly, for it was certainly more comfortable to do as she said. So I lay there and considered what preparations I should have to make for running away, once I was about again and the stiffness had worn off. It would, I decided, be much better to have a horse, and I spent most of the morning concocting a plan for stealing one and riding away to the Fringes.

The inspector looked in in the afternoon, bringing with him a bag of buttery sweets. For a moment I thought of trying to get something out of him – casually, of course – about the real nature of the Fringes: after all, as an expert on Deviation he might be expected to know more about them than anyone else. On second thoughts, however, I decided it might be unwise.

He was sympathetic and kindly enough, but he was on a mission. He put his questions in a friendly way. Munching one of the sweets himself, he asked me:

'How long have you known that Wender child – what is her name, by the way?'

I told him, there was no harm in that now.

'How long have you known that Sophie deviates?'

I didn't see that telling the truth could make things much worse.

'Quite a long time,' I admitted.

'And how long would that be?'

'About six months, I think,' I told him.

He raised his eyebrows, and then looked serious.

'That's bad, you know,' he said, 'It's what we call abetting a concealment. You must have known that was wrong, didn't you?'

I dropped my gaze. I wriggled uncomfortably under his straight look, and then stopped because it made my back twinge.

'It sort of didn't seem like the things they say in church,' I tried to explain. 'Besides, they were awfully little toes.'

The inspector took another sweet and pushed the bag back to me.

'"... and each foot shall have five toes,"' he quoted. 'You remember that?'

'Yes,' I admitted, unhappily.

'Well, every part of the definition is as important as any other; and if a child doesn't come within it, then it isn't human, and that means it doesn't have a soul. It is not in the image of God, it is an imitation, and in the imitations there is always some mistake. Only God produces perfection, so although deviations may look like us in many ways, they cannot be really human. They are something quite different.'

I thought that over.

'But Sophie *isn't* really different – not in any other way,' I told him.

'You'll find it easier to understand when you are older, but you do know the definition, and you must have realized Sophie deviated. Why didn't you tell your father, or me, about her?'

I explained about my dream of my father treating Sophie as he did one of the farm Offences. The inspector looked at me thoughtfully for some seconds, then he nodded:

'I see,' he said. 'But Blasphemies are not treated the same way as Offences.'

'What happens to them?' I asked.

He evaded that. He went on:

'You know, it's really my duty to include your name in my report. However, as your father has already taken action, I may be able to leave it out. All the same, it is a very serious matter. The Devil sends Deviations among us to weaken us and tempt us away from Purity. Sometimes he is clever enough to make a nearly-perfect imitation, so we have always to be on the look-out for the mistake he has made, however small, and when we see one it must be reported at once. You'll remember that in future, won't you?'

I avoided his eye. The inspector was the inspector, and an important person; all the same I could not believe that the Devil sent Sophie. I found it hard to see how the very small toe on each foot could make much difference either.

'Sophie's my friend,' I said. 'My best friend.'

The inspector kept on looking at me, then he shook his head and sighed.

'Loyalty is a great virtue, but there is such a thing as misplaced loyalty. One day you will understand the importance of a greater loyalty. The Purity of the Race –' He broke off as the door opened. My father came in.

'They got them – all three of them,' he said to the inspector, and gave a look of disgust at me.

The inspector got up promptly, and they went out together. I stared at the closed door. The misery of self-reproach struck me so that I shook all over. I could hear myself whimpering as the tears rolled down my cheeks. I tried to stop it, but I couldn't. My hurt back was forgotten. The anguish my father's news had caused me was far more painful than that. My chest was so tight with it that it was choking me.

Presently the door opened again. I kept my face to the wall. Steps crossed the room. A hand rested on my shoulder. The inspector's voice said:

'It wasn't that, old man. You had nothing to do with it. A patrol picked them up, quite by chance, twenty miles away.'

A couple of days later I said to Uncle Axel:

'I'm going to run away.'

He paused in his work, and gazed thoughtfully at his saw.

'I'd not do that,' he advised. 'It doesn't usually work very well. Besides,' he added after a pause, 'where would you run to?'

'That's what I wanted to ask you,' I explained.

He shook his head. 'Whatever district you're in they want to see your Normalcy Certificate,' he told me. 'Then they know who you are and where you're from.'

'Not in the Fringes,' I suggested.

He stared at me. 'Man alive, you'd not want to go to the Fringes. Why, they've got nothing there – not even enough food. Most of them are half starving, that's why they make the raids. No, you'd spend all the time there just trying to keep alive, and lucky if you did.'

'But there must be some other places,' I said.

'Only if you can find a ship that'll take you – and even then –' He shook his head again. 'In my experience,' he told me, 'if you run away from a thing just because you don't like it, you don't like what you find either. Now, running *to* a thing, that's a different matter, but what would you want to run to? Take it from me, it's a lot better here than it is most places. No, I'm against it, Davie. In a few years' time when you're a man and can look after yourself it may be different. I reckon it'd be better to stick it out till then, anyway; much better than have them just catch you and bring you back.'

There was something in that. I was beginning to learn the meaning of the word 'humiliation', and did not want any more of it at present. But from what he said the question of where to go would not be easily solved even then. It looked as if it would be advisable to learn what one could of the world outside Labrador, in preparation. I asked him what it was like.

'Godless,' he told me. 'Very godless indeed.'

It was the sort of uninformative answer my father would have given. I was disappointed to have it from Uncle Axel, and told him so. He grinned.

'All right, Davie boy, that's fair enough. So long as you'll not chatter, I'll tell you something about it.'

'You mean it's secret?' I asked, puzzled.

'Not quite that,' he said. 'But when people are used to believing a thing is such-and-such a way, *and* the preachers want them to believe that that's the way it is; it's trouble you get, not thanks, for upsetting their ideas. Sailors soon found that out in Rigo, so mostly they only talk about it now to other sailors. If the rest of the people want to think it's nearly all Badlands outside, they let them; it doesn't alter the way it really is, but it does make for peace and quiet.'

'My book says it's all Badlands, or bad Fringes country,' I told him.

'There are other books that don't, but you'll not see them about much – not even in Rigo, let alone in the backwoods here,' he said. 'And, mind you, it doesn't do to believe everything every sailor says either – and you're often not sure

whether any couple of them are talking about the same place or not, even when they think they are. But when you've seen some of it, you begin to understand that the world's a much queerer place than it looks from Waknuk. So you'll keep it to yourself?'

I assured him I would.

'All right. Well, it's this way –' he began.

To reach the rest of the world (my Uncle Axel explained) you start by sailing down river from Rigo until you get to the sea. They say that it's no good sailing on straight ahead, to the east, that is, because either the sea goes on for ever, or else it comes to an end suddenly, and you sail over the edge. Nobody knows for sure.

If you make north and keep along the coast, and still keep along when it turns west and then south, you reach the other side of Labrador. Or, if you keep straight on northwards, you come to colder parts where there are a great many islands with not much living on them except birds and sea-creatures.

To the north-east they say there is a great land where the plants aren't very deviational, and the animals and people don't *look* deviational, but the women are very tall and strong. They rule the country entirely, and do all the work. They keep their men in cages until they are about twenty-four years old, and then eat them. They also eat shipwrecked sailors. But as no one ever seems to have met anyone who has actually been there and escaped, it's difficult to see how that can be known. Still, there it is – no one has ever come back denying it either.

The only way I know is south – I've been south three times. To get there you keep the coast to starboard as you leave the river. After a couple of hundred miles or so you come to the Straits of Newf. As the Straits widen out you keep the coast of Newf to port and call in at Lark for fresh water – and provisions, too, if the Newf people will let you have any. After that you bear south-east awhile and then south, and pick up the mainland coast again to starboard. When you reach it you find it is Badlands – or at least very bad Fringes. There's plenty growing there, but sailing close inshore you can see that nearly all of it is deviational. There are animals, too, and most of

them look as if it'd be difficult to classify them as Offences against any known kinds.

A day or two's sail farther on there's plenty of Badlands coastline, with no doubt about it. Soon you're following round a big bay, and you get to where there are no gaps: it's all Badlands.

When sailors first saw those parts they were pretty scared. They felt they were leaving all Purity behind, and sailing farther and farther away from God, where He'd not be able to help them. Everybody knows that if you walk on Badlands you die, and they'd none of them expected ever to see them so close with their own eyes. But what worried them most – and worried the people they talked to when they got back – was to see how the things which are against God's laws of nature flourish there, just as if they had a right to.

And a shocking sight it must have been at first, too. You can see giant, distorted heads of corn growing higher than small trees; big saprophytes growing on rocks, with their roots trailing out on the wind like bunches of hair, fathoms long; in some places there are fungus colonies that you'd take at first sight for big white boulders; you can see succulents like barrels, but as big as small houses, and with spines ten feet long. There are plants which grow on the cliff-tops and send thick, green cables down a hundred feet and more into the sea; and you wonder whether it's a land plant that's got to the salt water, or a sea plant that's somehow climbed ashore. There are hundreds of kinds of queer things, and scarcely a normal one among them – it's a kind of jungle of Deviations, going on for miles and miles. There don't seem to be many animals, but occasionally you catch sight of one, though you'd never be able to name it. There are a fair number of birds, though, sea-birds mostly; and once or twice people have seen big things flying in the distance, too far away to make out anything except that the motion didn't look right for birds. It's a weird, evil land; and many a man who sees it suddenly understands what might happen here if it weren't for the Purity Laws and the inspectors.

It's bad – but it isn't the worst.

Farther south still, you begin to find patches where only

coarse plants grow, and poorly at that, and soon you come to stretches of coast, and land behind it, twenty, thirty, forty miles long, maybe, where nothing grows – nothing at all.

The whole seaboard is empty – black and harsh and empty. The land behind looks like a huge desert of charcoal. Where there are cliffs they are sharp-edged, with nothing to soften them. There are no fish in the sea there, no weed either, not even slime, and when a ship has sailed there the barnacles and the fouling on her bottom drop off, and leave her hull clean. You don't see any birds. Nothing moves at all, except the waves breaking on the black beaches.

It is a frightful place. Masters order their ships well out for fear of it; and very relieved the sailors are to keep clear.

And yet it can't always have been like that because there was one ship whose captain was foolhardy enough to sail close inshore. Her crew were able to make out great stone ruins. They were all agreed that they were far too regular to be natural, and they thought they might be the remains of one of the Old People's cities. But nobody knows any more about them. Most of the men in that ship wasted away and died, and the rest were never the same afterwards, so no other ship has risked keeping close in.

For hundreds of miles the coast goes on being Badlands with stretches of the dead, black lands; so far, in fact, that the first ships down there gave up and turned about because they thought they would never reach any place where they could water and provision. They came back saying that they thought it must go on like that to the ends of the earth.

The preachers and the church people were pleased to hear it, for that was very much what they had been teaching, and for a time it made people lose interest in exploring.

But later on curiosity revived, and better-found ships sailed south again. An observer on one of these, a man called Marther, wrote in a journal which he published, something like this:

> The Black Coasts would appear to be an extreme form of Badlands. Since any close approach to them is likely to be fatal nothing can be said of them with certainty but that they are entirely barren, and in some regions are known to glow dimly on a dark night.
>
> Such study as has been possible at a distance, however, does not confirm the view of the Right Wing Church Party that they are the result of unchecked deviation. There is no evidence whatever that they are a form of sore on the earth's surface destined to spread to all impure regions. Indeed, the contrary appears more likely. This is to say that just as Wild Country becomes tractable, and Badlands country slowly gives way to habitable Fringes country, so, it would seem, are the Blacklands contracting within the Badlands. Observations at the necessary distance cannot be detailed, but such as have been made indicate consistently that living forms are in the process, although in the most profane shapes, of encroaching upon this fearsome desolation.

That was one of the parts of the journal that got Marther into a lot of trouble with orthodox people, for it implied that deviations, so far from being a curse, were performing, however slowly, a work of reclamation. Along with half a dozen more heresies it landed Marther in court, and started agitation for a ban on further exploration.

In the middle of all the fuss, however, a ship called the *Venture* which had long been given up for lost, came sailing home to Rigo. She was battered and undermanned, her canvas was patched, her mizzen jury-rigged, and her condition foul, but she triumphantly claimed the honour of being the first to reach the lands beyond the Black Coasts. She brought back a number of objects including gold and silver and copper ornaments, and a cargo of spices to prove it. The evidence had to be accepted, but there was a lot of trouble over the spices, for there was no means of telling whether they were deviational, or the product of a pure strain. Strict churchgoers refused to touch them for fear they might be tainted; other people preferred to believe that they were the kind of spices referred to in the Bible. Whatever they were, they are profitable enough now for ships to sail south in search of them.

The lands down there aren't civilized. Mostly they don't have any sense of sin so they don't stop Deviations; and where they do have a sense of sin, they've got it mixed up. A lot of them aren't ashamed of Mutants; it doesn't seem to worry them when children turn out wrong, provided they're right enough to live and to learn to look after themselves. Other places, though, you'll find Deviations who think they are normal. There's one tribe where both the men and women are hairless, and they think that hair is the devil's mark; and there's another where they all have white hair and pink eyes. In one place they don't think you're properly human unless you have webbed fingers and toes; in another, they don't allow any woman who is not multi-breasted to have children.

You'll find islands where the people are all thickset, and others where they're thin; there are even said to be some islands where both the men and women would be passed as true images if it weren't that some strange deviation has turned them all completely black – though even that's easier to believe than the one about a race of Deviations that has dwindled to two feet high, grown fur and a tail, and taken to living in trees.

All the same, it's queerer there than you'd ever credit; pretty nearly anything seems possible once you've seen it.

It's pretty dangerous in those parts, too. The fish and the other things in the sea are bigger and fiercer than they are here. And when you do go ashore you never know how the local Deviations are going to take you. Some places they are friendly; in others they shoot poisoned arrows at you. On one island they throw bombs made of pepper wrapped in leaves, and when it gets in your eyes they charge with spears. You just never know.

Sometimes when the people are friendly you can't understand a thing they're trying to say and they can't understand you, but more often if you listen a bit you'll find out that a lot of their words are like our own but pronounced differently. And you find out some strange, disturbing things. They all have pretty much the same legends of the Old People as we have – how they could fly, how they used to build cities that floated on the sea, how any one of them could speak to any

other, even hundreds of miles away, and so on. But what's more worrying is that most of them – whether they have seven fingers, or four arms, or hair all over, or six breasts, or whatever it is that's wrong with them – think that their type is the true pattern of the Old People, and anything different is a Deviation.

That seems silly at first, but when you find more and more kinds just as convinced of it as we are ourselves – well, you begin to wonder a bit. You start asking yourself: well, what real evidence have we got about the true image? You find that the Bible doesn't say anything to contradict the people of that time being like us, but on the other hand it doesn't give any definition of Man, either. No, the definition comes from Nicholson's *Repentances* – and he admits that he was writing some generations after Tribulation came, so you find yourself wondering whether he *knew* he was in the true image, or whether he only thought he was. . . .

Uncle Axel had a lot more to say about Southern parts than I can remember, and it was all very interesting in its way, but it didn't tell me what I wanted to know. At last I asked him point-blank.

'Uncle Axel, are there any cities there?'

'Cities?' he repeated. 'Well, here and there you'll find a town, of a kind. As big as Kentak, maybe, but built differently.'

'No,' I told him. 'I mean big places.' I described the city in my dream, but without telling him it was a dream.

He looked at me oddly. 'No, I never heard of any place like that,' he told me.

'Farther on, perhaps. Farther than you went?' I suggested.

He shook his head. 'You can't go farther on. The sea gets full of weed. Masses of weed with stems like cables. A ship can't make her way through it, and it's trouble enough to get clear of it once you get in it at all.'

'Oh,' I said. 'You're quite sure there's no city?'

'Sure,' he said. 'We'd have heard of it by this time if there was.'

I was disappointed. It sounded as if running away to the South, even if I could find a ship to take me, would be little

better than running away to the Fringes. For a time I had hoped, but now I had to go back to the idea that the city I dreamt of must be one of the Old People's cities after all.

Uncle Axel went on talking about the doubts of the true image that his voyage had given him. He laboured it rather a lot, and after a while he broke off to ask me directly:

'You understand, don't you, Davie, why I've been telling you all this?'

I was not sure that I did. Moreover, I was reluctant to admit the flaw in the tidy, familiar orthodoxy I had been taught. I recalled a phrase which I had heard a number of times.

'You lost your faith?' I inquired.

Uncle Axel snorted, and pulled a face.

'Preacher-words!' he said, and thought for a moment. 'I'm telling you,' he went on, 'that a lot of people saying that a thing is so, doesn't *prove* it is so. I'm telling you that nobody, *nobody* really *knows* what is the true image. They all *think* they know – just as we think we know, but, for all we can prove, the Old People themselves may not have been the true image.' He turned, and looked long and steadily at me again.

'So,' he said, 'how am I, and how is anyone to be sure that this "difference" that you and Rosalind have does not make you something nearer to the true image than other people are? Perhaps the Old People were the image: very well then, one of the things they say about them is that they could talk to one another over long distances. Now *we* can't do that – but you and Rosalind can. Just think that over, Davie. You two *may* be nearer to the image than we are.'

I hesitated for perhaps a minute, and then took a decision.

'It isn't just Rosalind and me, Uncle Axel,' I told him. 'There are others, too.'

He was startled. He stared at me.

'Others?' he repeated. 'Who are they? How many?'

I shook my head.

'I don't know who they are – not names, I mean. Names don't have any thinking-shapes, so we've never bothered. You just know who's thinking, like you know who's talking. I only found out who Rosalind was by accident.'

He went on looking at me seriously, uneasily.

'How many of you?' he repeated.

'Eight,' I told him. 'There were nine, but one of them stopped about a month ago. That's what I wanted to ask you, Uncle Axel, do you think somebody found out –? He just stopped suddenly. We've been wondering if anybody knows. . . . You see, if they found out about him –' I let him draw the inference himself.

Presently he shook his head.

'I don't think so. We should be pretty sure to have heard of it. Perhaps he's gone away, did he live near here?'

'I think so – I don't know really,' I said, 'but I'm sure he'd have told us if he was going away.'

'He'd have told you if he thought anybody had found out, too, wouldn't he?' he suggested. 'It looks to me more as if it'd be an accident of some kind, being quite sudden like that. You'd like me to try to find out?'

'Yes, please. It's made some of us afraid,' I explained.

'Very well.' He nodded. 'I'll see if I can. It was a boy, you say. Not very far from here, probably. About a month ago. Any more?'

I told him what I could, which was very little. It was a relief to know that he would try to find out what had happened. Now that a month had gone by without a similar thing happening to any of the rest of us we were less anxious than we had been, but still far from easy.

Before we parted he returned to his earlier advice to remember that no one could be certain of the true image.

Later, I understood why he gave it. I realized, too, that he did not greatly care what was the true image. Whether he was wise or not in trying to forestall both the alarm and the sense of inferiority that he saw lying in wait for us when we should become better aware of ourselves and our difference, I cannot say. It might have been better to have left it awhile – on the other hand, perhaps it did something to lessen the distress of the awakening. . . .

At any rate, I decided, for the moment, not to run away from home. The practical difficulties looked formidable.

7

THE arrival of my sister, Petra, came as a genuine surprise to me, and a conventional surprise to everyone else.

There had been a slight, not quite attributable, sense of expectation about the house for the previous week or two, but it remained unmentioned and unacknowledged. For me, the feeling that I was being kept unaware of something afoot was unresolved until there came a night when a baby howled. It was penetrating, unmistakable, and certainly within the house, where there had been no baby the day before. But in the morning nobody referred to the sound in the night. No one, indeed, would dream of mentioning the matter openly until the inspector should have called to issue his certificate that it was a human baby in the true image. Should it unhappily turn out to violate the image and thus be ineligible for a certificate, everyone would continue to be unaware of it, and the whole regrettable incident would be deemed not to have occurred.

As soon as it was light my father sent a stable-hand off on a horse to summon the inspector, and, pending his arrival, the whole household tried to disguise its anxiety by pretending we were just starting another ordinary day.

The pretence grew thinner as time went on, for the stable-hand, instead of bringing back the inspector forthwith, as was to be expected when a man of my father's position and influence was concerned, returned with a polite message that the inspector would certainly do his best to find time to pay a call in the course of the day.

It is very unwise for even a righteous man to quarrel with his local inspector and call him names in public. The inspector has too many ways of hitting back.

My father became very angry, the more so since the conventions did not allow him to admit what he was angry about. Furthermore, he was well aware that the inspector intended him to be angry. He spent the morning hanging around the house and yard, exploding with bad temper now and then over

trivial matters, so that everyone crept about on tiptoe and worked very hard indeed, in order not to attract his attention.

One did not dare to announce a birth until the child had been officially examined and approved; and the longer the formal announcement was delayed, the more time the malicious had to invent reasons for the delay. A man of standing looked to having the certificate granted at the earliest possible moment. With the word 'baby' unmentionable and unhintable, we all had to go on pretending that my mother was in bed for some slight cold, or other indisposition.

My sister Mary disappeared now and then towards my mother's room, and for the rest of the time tried to hide her anxiety by loudly bossing the household girls. I felt compelled to hang about in order not to miss the announcement when it should come. My father kept on prowling.

The suspense was aggravated by everyone's knowledge that on the last two similar occasions there had been no certificate forthcoming. My father must have been well aware – and no doubt the inspector was aware of it, too – that there was plenty of silent speculation whether my father would, as the law allowed, send my mother away if this occasion should turn out to be similarly unfortunate. Meanwhile, since it would have been both impolite and undignified to go running after the inspector, there was nothing to be done but bear the suspense as best we could.

It was not until mid-afternoon that the inspector ambled up on his pony. My father pulled himself together, and went out to receive him; the effort to be even formally polite nearly strangled him. Even then the inspector was not brisk. He dismounted in a leisurely fashion, and strolled into the house, chatting about the weather. Father, red in the face, handed him over to Mary who took him along to mother's room. Then followed the worst wait of all.

Mary said afterwards that he hummed and ha'd for an unconscionable time while he examined the baby in minutest detail. At last, however, he emerged, with an expressionless face. In the little-used sitting-room he sat down at the table and fussed for a while about getting a good point on his quill. At

last he took a form from his pouch, and in a slow, deliberate hand wrote that he officially found the child to be a true female human being, free from any detectable form of deviation. He regarded that thoughtfully for some moments, as though not perfectly satisfied. He let his hand hesitate before he actually dated and signed it, then he sanded it carefully, and handed it to my enraged father, still with a faint air of uncertainty. He had, of course, no real doubt in his mind, or he would have called for another opinion; my father was perfectly well aware of that, too.

At last Petra's existence could be admitted. I was formally told that I had a new sister, and presently I was taken to see her where she lay in a crib beside my mother's bed.

She looked so pink and wrinkled to me that I did not see how the inspector could have been quite sure about her. However, there was nothing obviously wrong with her, so she had got her certificate. Nobody could blame the inspector for that; she did appear to be as normal as a new-born baby ever looks. . . .

While we were taking turns to look at her somebody started to ring the stable bell in the customary way. Everyone on the farm stopped work, and very soon we were all assembled in the kitchen for prayers of thanksgiving.

Two, or it may have been three, days after Petra was born I happened upon a piece of my family's history that I would prefer not to have known.

I was sitting quietly in the room next to my parents' bedroom where my mother still lay in bed. It was a matter of chance, and strategy, too. It was the latest place that I had found to stay hidden awhile after the midday meal until the coast was clear and I could slip away without being given an afternoon job; so far, nobody had thought of looking there for me. It was simply a matter of putting in half an hour or so. Normally the room was very convenient, though just at present its use required caution because the wattle wall between the rooms was cracked and I had to move very cautiously on tiptoe lest my mother should hear me.

On that particular day I was just thinking that I had allowed nearly enough time for people to be busy again when a two-wheeled trap drove up. As it passed the window I had a glimpse of my Aunt Harriet holding the reins.

I had only seen her some eight or nine times, for she lived fifteen miles away in the Kentak direction, but what I knew of her I liked. She was some three years younger than my mother. Superficially they were not dissimilar, and yet, in Aunt Harriet each feature had been a little softened, so that the effect of them all together was different. I used to feel when I looked at her that I was seeing my mother as she might have been – as, I thought, I would have liked her to be. She was easier to talk to, too; she did not have a somewhat damping manner of listening only to correct.

I edged over carefully on stockinged feet to the window, watched her tether the horse, pick a white bundle out of the trap, and carry it into the house. She cannot have met anyone, for a few seconds later her steps passed the door, and the latch of the next room clicked.

'Why, Harriet!' my mother's voice exclaimed in surprise, and not altogether in approval. 'So soon! You don't mean to say you've brought a tiny baby all that way!'

'I know,' said Aunt Harriet's voice, accepting the reproof in my mother's tone, 'but I had to, Emily. I had to. I heard your baby had come early, so I – oh, there she is! Oh, she's lovely, Emily. She's a lovely baby.' There was a pause. Presently she added: 'Mine's lovely, too, isn't she? Isn't she a lovely darling?'

There was a certain amount of mutual congratulation which did not interest me a lot. I didn't suppose the babies looked much different from other babies, really. My mother said:

'I *am* glad, my dear. Henry must be delighted.'

'Of course he is,' said Aunt Harriet, but there was something wrong about the way she said it. Even I knew that. She hurried on: 'She was born a week ago. I didn't know what to do. Then when I heard your baby had come early and was a girl, too, it was like God answering a prayer.' She paused, and

then added with a casualness which somehow failed to be casual: 'You've got the certificate for her?'

'Of course.' My mother's tone was sharp, ready for offence. I knew the expression which went with the tone. When she spoke again there was a disturbing quality in her voice.

'Harriet!' she demanded sharply. 'Are you going to tell me that you have *not* got a certificate?'

My aunt made no reply, but I thought I caught the sound of a suppressed sob. My mother said coldly, forcibly:

'Harriet, let me see that child – properly.'

For some seconds I could hear nothing but another sob or two from my aunt. Then she said, unsteadily:

'It's such a little thing, you see. It's nothing much.'

'*Nothing much!*' snapped my mother. 'You have the effrontery to bring your monster into my house, and tell me it's *nothing much*!'

'*Monster!*' Aunt Harriet's voice sounded as though she had been slapped. 'Oh! Oh! Oh! . . .' She broke into little moanings.

After a time my mother said:

'No wonder you didn't dare to call the inspector.'

Aunt Harriet went on crying. My mother let the sobs almost die away before she said:

'I'd like to know why you have come here, Harriet? Why did you bring it here?'

Aunt Harriet blew her nose. When she spoke it was in a dull, flat voice:

'When she came – when I saw her, I wanted to kill myself. I knew they would never approve her, although it's such a little thing. But I didn't, because I thought perhaps I could save her somehow. I love her. She's a lovely baby – except for that. She is, isn't she?'

My mother said nothing. Aunt Harriet went on:

'I didn't know how, but I hoped. I knew I could keep her for a little while before they'd take her away – just the month they give you before you *have* to notify. I decided I must have her for that long at least.'

'And Henry? What does he say?'

'He – he said we ought to notify at once. But I wouldn't let him – I couldn't, Emily. I *couldn't*. Dear God, not a third time! I kept her, and prayed, and prayed, and hoped. And then when I heard your baby had come early I thought perhaps God had answered my prayers.'

'Indeed, Harriet,' said my mother coldly, 'I doubt whether that had anything to do with it. Nor,' she added pointedly, 'do I see what you mean.'

'I thought,' Aunt Harriet went on, spiritlessly now, but forcing herself to the words, 'I thought that if I could leave my baby with you, and borrow yours –'

My mother gave an incredulous gasp. Apparently words eluded her.

'It would only be for a day or two; just while I could get the certificate,' Aunt Harriet went doggedly on. 'You are my sister, Emily – my sister, and the only person in the world who can help me to keep my baby.'

She began to cry again. There was another longish pause, then my mother's voice:

'In all my life I have never heard anything so outrageous. To come here suggesting that I should enter into an immoral, a criminal conspiracy to . . . I think you must be mad, Harriet. To think that I should lend –' She broke off at the sound of my father's heavy step in the passage.

'Joseph,' she told him as he entered. 'Send her away. Tell her to leave the house – and take *that* with her.'

'But,' said my father in a bewildered tone, 'but it's Harriet, my dear.'

My mother explained the situation, fully. There wasn't a sound from Aunt Harriet. At the end he demanded incredulously:

'Is this true? Is this why you've come here?'

Slowly, wearily, Aunt Harriet said:

'This is the third time. They'll take my baby away again like they took the others. I can't stand that – not again. Henry will turn me out, I think. He'll find another wife, who can give him proper children. There'll be nothing – nothing in the world for me – nothing. I came here hoping against hope for sympathy

and help. Emily is the only person who can help me. I – I can see now how foolish I was to hope at all . . .'

Nobody said anything to that.

'Very well – I understand. I'll go now,' she told them in a dead voice.

My father was not a man to leave his attitude in doubt.

'I do not understand how you dared to come here, to a God-fearing house, with such a suggestion,' he said. 'Worse still, you don't show an atom of shame or remorse.'

Aunt Harriet's voice was steadier as she answered:

'Why should I? I've done nothing to be ashamed of. I am *not* ashamed – I am only beaten.'

'Not ashamed!' repeated my father. 'Not ashamed of producing a mockery of your Maker – not ashamed of trying to tempt your own sister into criminal conspiracy!' He drew a breath and launched off in pulpit style. 'The enemies of God besiege us. They seek to strike at Him through us. Unendingly they work to distort the true image; through our weaker vessels they attempt to defile the race. You have sinned, woman, search your heart, and you will know that you have sinned. Your sin has weakened our defences, and the enemy has struck through you. You wear the cross on your dress to protect you, but you have not worn it always in your heart. You have not kept constant vigilance for impurity. So there has been a Deviation; and deviation, *any* deviation from the true image is blasphemy – no less. You have produced a defilement.'

'One poor little baby!'

'A baby which, if you were to have your way, would grow up to breed, and, breeding, spread pollution until all around us there would be mutants and abominations. That is what has happened in places where the will and faith were weak: here it shall *never* happen. Our ancestors were of the true stock: they have handed on a trust. Are you to be permitted to betray us all? To cause our ancestors to have lived in vain? Shame on you, woman! Now go! Go home in humility, not defiance. Notify your child, according to law. Then do your penances that you may be cleansed. And pray. You have much to pray for. Not only have you blasphemed by producing a

false image, but in your arrogance you have set yourself against the law, and sinned in intent. I am a merciful man; I shall make no charge of that. It will be for you to clean it from your conscience; to go down on your knees and pray – pray that your sin of intention, as well as your other sins, may be forgiven you.'

There were two light footsteps. The baby gave a little whimper as Aunt Harriet picked it up. She came towards the door and lifted the latch, then she paused.

'I shall pray,' she said. 'Yes, I shall pray.' She paused, then she went on, her voice steady and harder: 'I shall pray God to send charity into this hideous world, and sympathy for the weak, and love for the unhappy and unfortunate. I shall ask Him if it is indeed His will that a child should suffer and its soul be damned for a little blemish of the body. . . . And I shall pray Him, too, that the hearts of the self-righteous may be broken. . . .'

Then the door closed and I heard her pass slowly along the passage.

I moved cautiously back to the window, and watched her come out and lay the white bundle gently in the trap. She stood looking down on it for a few seconds, then she unhitched the horse, climbed up on the seat, and took the bundle on to her lap, with one arm guarding it in her cloak.

She turned, and left a picture that is fixed in my mind. The baby cradled in her arm, her cloak half open, showing the upper part of the brown, braid-edged cross on her fawn dress; eyes that seemed to see nothing as they looked towards the house from a face set hard as granite. . . .

Then she shook the reins, and drove off.

Behind me, in the next room, my father was saying:

'Heresy, too! The attempt at substitution could be overlooked; women sometimes get strange ideas at such times. I was prepared to overlook it, provided the child is notified. But heresy is a different matter. She is a dangerous as well as a shameless woman; I could never have believed such wickedness in a sister of yours. And for her to think that you might abet her, when she knows that you yourself have had to make

your own penances twice! To speak heresy in my house, too. That cannot be allowed to pass.'

'Perhaps, she did not realize what she was saying,' my mother's voice said, uncertainly.

'Then it is time she did. It is our duty to see that she does.'

My mother started to answer, but her voice cracked. She began to cry: I had never heard her cry before. My father's voice went on explaining about the need for Purity in thought as well as in heart and conduct, and its very particular importance to women. He was still talking when I tiptoed away

I could not help feeling a great curiosity to know what was the 'little thing' that had been wrong with the baby – wondering if, perhaps, it were just an extra toe, like Sophie's. But I never found out what it was.

When they broke the news to me next day that my Aunt Harriet's body had been found in the river, no one mentioned a baby. . . .

8

My father included Aunt Harriet's name in our prayers on the evening of the day the news came, but after that she was never referred to again. It was as though she had been wiped out of every memory but mine. There, however, she remained very clearly, given form at a time when I had only heard her, as an upright figure with a face drained of hope, and a voice saying clearly: 'I am *not* ashamed – I am only beaten.' And, too, as I had last seen her, looking up at the house.

Nobody told me how she came to die, but somehow I knew that it had not been by accident. There was a great deal that I did not understand in what I had overheard, and yet, in spite of that, it was quite the most disturbing occurrence I had known yet – it alarmed me with a sense of insecurity far greater, for some unperceived reason, than I had suffered over Sophie. For several nights I dreamed of Aunt Harriet lying in the river, still clasping the white bundle to her while the water swirled her hair round her pale face, and her wide-open eyes saw nothing. And I was frightened. . . .

This had happened simply because the baby was just a bit different in some way from other babies. It had something, or lacked something, so that it did not exactly accord with the Definition. There was the 'little thing' that made it not quite right, not quite like other people. . . .

A mutant, my father had called it. . . . A mutant! . . . I thought of some of the poker-work texts. I recalled the address of a visiting preacher; the detestation there had been in his voice when he thundered from the pulpit: '*Accursed is the Mutant!*'

Accursed is the mutant. . . . The mutant, the enemy, not only of the human race, but of all the species God had decreed; the seed of the Devil within, trying unflaggingly, eternally to come to fruition in order that it might destroy the divine order and turn our land, the stronghold of God's will upon Earth,

into a lewd chaos like the Fringes; trying to make it a place without the law, like the lands in the South that Uncle Axel had spoken of, where the plants and the animals and the almost-human beings, too, brought forth travesties; where true stock had given place to unnameable creatures, abominable growths flourished, and the spirits of evil mocked the Lord with obscene fantasies.

Just a small difference, the 'little thing,' was the first step. . . .

I prayed very earnestly those nights.

'Oh, God,' I said, 'please, please, God, let me be like other people. I don't want to be different. Won't you make it so that when I wake up in the morning I'll be just like everyone else, please, God, please!'

But in the morning, when I tested myself I'd soon pick up Rosalind or one of the others, and know that the prayer hadn't altered anything. I had to get up still just the same person who had gone to bed the night before, and I had to go into the big kitchen and eat my breakfast facing the panel which had somehow stopped being just part of the furniture and seemed to stare back at me with the words: ACCURSED IS THE MUTANT IN THE SIGHT OF GOD AND MAN!

And I went on being very frightened.

After about the fifth night that praying hadn't done any good, Uncle Axel caught me leaving the breakfast-table and said I'd better come along and help him mend a plough. After we'd worked on that for a couple of hours he declared a rest, so we went out of the forge to sit in the sun, with our backs against a wall. He gave me a chunk of oatcake, and we munched for a minute or two. Then he said:

'Well, now, Davie, let's have it.'

'Have what?' I said, stupidly.

'Whatever it is that's been making you look as if you were sickening for something the last day or two,' he told me. 'What's your trouble? Has somebody found out?'

'No,' I said. He looked greatly relieved.

'Well, what *is* it, then?'

So I told him about Aunt Harriet and the baby. Before I had

finished I was talking through tears – it was such a relief to be able to share it with someone.

'It was her face as she drove away.' I explained. 'I've never seen anyone look like that before. I keep on seeing it in the water.'

I looked up at him as I finished. His face was as grim as I'd ever seen it, with the corners of his mouth pulled down.

'So that was it –' he said, nodding once or twice.

'It was all because the baby was different,' I repeated. 'And there was Sophie, too . . . I didn't understand properly before . . . I – I'm frightened, Uncle Axel. What'll they do when they find out I'm different . . . ?'

He put his hand on my shoulder.

'No one else is ever going to know about it,' he told me again. 'No one but me – and I'm safe.'

It did not seem as reassuring now as it had been when he said it before.

'There was that one who stopped,' I reminded him, 'perhaps they found out about him . . . ?'

He shook his head. 'I reckon you can rest easy on that, Davie. I found out there was a boy killed just about the time you said. Walter Brent his name was, about nine years old. He was fooling around when they were felling timber, and a tree got him, poor lad.'

'Where?' I asked.

'About nine or ten miles away, on a farm over by Chipping,' he said.

I thought back. The Chipping direction certainly fitted, and it was just the kind of accident that would account for a sudden unexplained stop. . . . Without any ill-will to the unknown Walter I hoped and thought that was the explanation.

Uncle Axel backtracked a bit.

'There's no reason at all why anyone should find out. There's nothing to show – they can only know if you let them. Learn to watch yourself, Davie, and they'll never find out.'

'What *did* they do to Sophie?' I asked once more. But again he refused to be drawn on that. He went on:

'Remember what I told you. They *think* they are the true image – but they can't know for sure. And even if the Old People were the same kind as I am and they are, what of it? Oh, I know people tell tales about how wonderful they were and how wonderful their world was, and how one day we'll get back again all the things they had. There's a lot of nonsense mixed up in what they say about them, but even if there's a lot of truth, too, what's the good of trying so hard to keep in their tracks? Where are they and their wonderful world now?'

'"God sent Tribulation upon them,"' I quoted.

'Sure, sure. You certainly have taken in the preacher-words, haven't you? It's easy enough to say – but not so easy to understand, specially when you've seen a bit of the world, and what it has meant. Tribulation wasn't just tempests, hurricanes, floods and fires like the things they had in the Bible. It was like all of them together – and something a lot worse, too. It made the Black Coasts, and the ruins that glow there at night, and the Badlands. Maybe there's a precedent for that in Sodom and Gomorrah, only this'd be kind of bigger – but what I don't understand is the queer things it did to what was left.'

'Except in Labrador,' I suggested.

'*Not* except in Labrador – but *less* in Labrador and Newf than any other place,' he corrected me. 'What can it have been – this terrible thing that must have happened? And why? I can almost understand that God, made angry, might destroy all living things, or the world itself; but I don't understand this instability, this mess of deviations – it makes no sense.'

I did not see his real difficulty. After all, God, being omnipotent, could cause anything He liked. I tried to explain this to Uncle Axel, but he shook his head.

'We've got to believe that God is sane, Davie boy. We'd be lost indeed if we didn't do that. But whatever happened out there' – he waved his hand round the horizon at large – 'what happened there was *not* sane – not sane at all. It was something vast, yet something beneath the wisdom of God. So what was it? What can it have been?'

'But Tribulation –' I began.

Uncle Axel moved impatiently. 'A word,' he said, 'a rusted mirror, reflecting nothing. It'd do the preachers good to see it for themselves. They'd not understand, but they might begin to think. They might begin to ask themselves: "What are we doing? What are we preaching? What were the Old People really like? What was it they did to bring this frightful disaster down upon themselves and all the world?" And after a bit they might begin to say: "Are we right? Tribulation has made the world a different place; can we, therefore, ever hope to build in it the kind of world the Old People lost? Should we try to? What would be gained if we were to build it up again so exactly that it culminated in another Tribulation?" For it is clear, boy, that however wonderful the Old People were, they were not too wonderful to make mistakes – and nobody knows, or is ever likely to know, where they were wise and where they were mistaken.'

Much of what he was saying went right over my head, but I thought I caught its gist. I said:

'But, Uncle, if we don't try to be like the Old People and rebuild the things that have been lost, what *can* we do?'

'Well, we might try being ourselves, and build for the world that is, instead of for one that's gone,' he suggested.

'I don't think I understand,' I told him. 'You mean not bother about the True Line or the True Image? Not mind about Deviations?'

'Not quite that,' he said, and then looked sidelong at me. 'You heard some heresy from your aunt; well, here's a bit more, from your uncle. What do you think it is that makes a man a man?'

I started on the Definition. He cut me off after five words.

'It is *not*!' he said. 'A wax figure could have all that, and he'd still be a wax figure, wouldn't he?'

'I suppose he would.'

'Well, then, what makes a man a man is something *inside* him.'

'A soul?' I suggested.

'No,' he said, 'souls are just counters for churches to collect, all the same value, like nails. No, what makes man man is

mind; it's not a thing, it's a quality, and minds aren't all the same value; they're better or worse, and the better they are, the more they mean. See where we're going?'

'No,' I admitted.

'It's this way, Davie. I reckon the church people are more or less right about most deviations – only not for the reasons they say. They're right because most deviations aren't any good. Say they did allow a deviation to live like us, what'd be the good of it? Would a dozen arms and legs, or a couple of heads, or eyes like telescopes give him any more of the quality that makes him a man? They would not. Man got his physical shape – the true image, they call it – before he even knew he was man at all. It's what happened inside, after that, that made him human. He discovered he had what nothing else had, mind. That put him on a different level. Like a lot of the animals he was physically pretty nearly as good as he needed to be; but he had this new quality, mind, which was only in its early stages, and he developed that. That was the only thing he could usefully develop; it's the only way open to him – to develop new qualities of mind.' Uncle Axel paused reflectively. 'There was a doctor on my second ship who talked that way, and the more I got to thinking it over, the more I reckoned it was the way that made sense. Now, as I see it, some way or another you and Rosalind and the others have got a new quality of mind. To pray God to take it away is wrong; it's like asking Him to strike you blind, or make you deaf. I know what you're up against, Davie, but funking it isn't the way out. There isn't an easy way out. You have to come to terms with it. You'll have to face it and decide that, since that's the way things *are* with you, what is the best use you can make of it and still keep yourselves safe?'

I did not, of course, follow him clearly through that the first time. Some of it stayed in my mind, the rest of it I reconstructed in half-memory from later talks. I began to understand better later on, particularly after Michael had gone to school.

That evening I told the others about Walter. We were sorry about his accident – nevertheless, it was a relief to all of them

to know that it had been simply an accident. One odd thing I discovered was that he was probably some kind of distant relation; my grandmother's name had been Brent.

After that, it seemed wiser for us to find out one another's names in order to prevent such an uncertainty occurring again.

There were now eight of us in all – well, when I say that, I mean that there were eight who could talk in thought-shapes; there were some others who sometimes sent traces, but so weak and so limited that they did not count. They were like someone who is not quite blind, but is scarcely able to see more than to know whether it is day or night. The occasional thought-shapes we caught from them were involuntary and too fuzzy and damped to make sense.

The other six were Michael who lived about three miles to the north, Sally and Katherine whose homes were on neighbouring farms two miles farther on, and therefore across the border of the adjoining district, Mark, almost nine miles to the north-west, and Anne and Rachel, a pair of sisters living on a big farm only a mile and a half to the west. Anne, then something over thirteen, was the eldest; Walter Brent had been the youngest by six months.

Knowing who we were was our second stage in gaining confidence. It somehow increased a comforting feeling of mutual support. Gradually I found that the texts and warnings against mutants on the walls stood out at me less vividly. They toned down and merged once more into the general background. It was not that memories of Aunt Harriet and of Sophie were dulled; it was rather that they did not jump so frighteningly and so often into my mind.

Also, I was soon helped by having a great many new things to think about.

Our schooling, as I have said, was sketchy; mostly writing, reading from a few simple books and the Bible and *Repentances*, which were not at all simple or easy to understand, and a little elementary figuring. It was not much equipment. Certainly it was far too little to satisfy Michael's parents, so they sent him to a school over in Kentak. There, he began to learn a lot of things our old ladies had never thought of. It was natural

for him to want the rest of us to know about them, too. At first he was not very clear and the distance being so much more than we were used to gave us all trouble. But presently, after a few weeks' practice, it became much sharper and better, and he was able to hand on to the rest of us pretty nearly everything he was being taught – even some of the things he did not understand properly himself became clearer when we all thought about them, so that we were able to help him a little, too. And it pleased us to know that he was almost always at the top of his class.

It was a great satisfaction to learn and know more, it helped to ease one over a lot of puzzling matters, and I began to understand many of the things Uncle Axel talked about much better, nevertheless, it brought, too, the first taste of complications from which we would never again be free. Quite quickly it became difficult always to remember how much one was supposed to know. It called for a lot of restraint to remain silent in the face of simple errors, to listen patiently to silly arguments based on misconceptions, to do a job in the customary way when one knew there was a better way. . . .

There were bad moments, of course; the careless remark that raised some eyebrows, the note of impatience towards those one should respect, the incautious suggestion; but the missteps were few, for the sense of danger now lay closer to the surface in all of us. Somehow, through caution, luck, and quick recoveries we managed to escape direct suspicion and live our two diverging lives for the next six years without the sense of peril becoming sharp.

Until, in fact, the day when we discovered that the eight of us had suddenly become nine.

9

It was a funny thing about my little sister, Petra. She seemed so normal. We never suspected – not one of us. She was a happy child, and pretty from a baby, with her close golden curls. I can still see her as a brightly-dressed little thing constantly dashing hither and thither at a staggering run, clasping an atrociously cross-eyed doll which she loved with uncritical passion. A toy-like creature herself, prone as any other child to bumps, tears, chuckles, solemn moments, and a very sweet trust. I loved her – everybody, even my father, conspired to spoil her, with an endearing lack of success. Not even a wandering thought of difference crossed my mind concerning her until it abruptly happened. . . .

We were harvesting. Up in the twelve-acre there were six men mowing in echelon. I had just given up my scythe to another man, and was helping with the stooking by way of a breather when, without any warning, I was struck. . . . I had never known anything like it. One moment I was contentedly, unhurriedly binding and propping up sheaves; the next, it was as if something had hit me physically, inside my head. Very likely I actually staggered under it. Then there was pain, a demand pulling like a fish-hook embedded in my mind. There was, in the surprise of the first few moments at any rate, no question whether or not I should go; I was obeying it, in a daze. I dropped the sheaf I was holding, and pelted off across the field, past a blur of amazed faces. I kept on running, I did not know why, except that it was urgent; across half the twelve-acre, into the lane, over the fence, down the slope of the East Pasture towards the river. . . .

Pounding across the slope on a slant I could see the field that ran down to the far side of the river, one of Angus Morton's fields, crossed by a path that led to the footbridge, and on the path was Rosalind, running like the wind.

I kept on, down to the bank, along past the footbridge, downstream towards the deeper pools. I had no uncertainty,

I kept right on to the brink of the second pool, and went into a dive without a check. I came up quite close to Petra. She was in the deep water against the steep bank, holding on to a little bush. It was bent over and down, and the roots were on the point of pulling free. A couple of strokes took me near enough to catch her under the arms.

The compulsion ebbed suddenly and faded away. I towed her to an easier landing-place. When I found bottom and could stand up I saw Rosalind's startled face peering anxiously at me over the bushes.

'Who is it?' she asked, in real words, and a shaky voice. She put her hand on her forehead. 'Who was able to do that?'

I told her.

'*Petra?*' she repeated, staring incredulously.

I carried my little sister ashore, and laid her on the grass. She was exhausted, and only semi-conscious, but there did not seem to be anything seriously wrong with her.

Rosalind came and knelt on the grass on the other side of her. We looked down at the sopping dress and the darkened, matted curls. Then we gazed across her, at one another.

'I didn't know,' I told her. 'I'd no idea she was one of us.'

Rosalind put her hands to her face, finger-tips on her temples. She shook her head slightly and looked at me from disturbed eyes.

'She isn't,' she said. 'Something like us, but not one of us. None of us could *command* like that. She's something much more than we are.'

Other people came running up then; some who had followed me from the twelve-acre, some from the other side, wondering what had made Rosalind go tearing out of the house as if it were on fire. I picked Petra up to carry her home. One of the men from the field looked at me in a puzzled way:

'But how did you know?' he asked. 'I didn't hear a thing.'

Rosalind turned an incredulous expression of surprise towards him.

'What! With the way she was yelling! I'd've thought anybody who wasn't deaf would have heard her half-way to Kentak.'

The man shook his head doubtfully, but the fact that we had both apparently heard it seemed confirmation enough to make them all uncertain.

I said nothing. I was busy trying to fend off agitated questions from the others, telling them to wait until either I or Rosalind was alone and could attend to them without rousing suspicions.

That night, for the first time for years, I had a once-familiar dream, only this time when the knife gleamed high in my father's right hand, the deviation that struggled in his left was not a calf, it was not Sophie, either; it was Petra. I woke up sweating with fright....

The next day I tried to send thought-shapes to Petra. It seemed to me important for her to know as soon as possible that she must not give herself away. I tried hard, but I could make no contact with her. The rest tried, too, in turn, but there was no response. I wondered whether I should try to warn her in ordinary words, but Rosalind was against that.

'It must have been panic that brought it out,' she said. 'If she isn't aware of it now, she probably doesn't even know it happened, so it might easily be an unnecessary danger to tell her about it at all. She's only a little over six, remember. I don't think it is fair, or safe, to burden her until it's necessary.'

There was general agreement with Rosalind's view. All of us knew that it is not easy to keep on watching each word all the time, even when you've had to practise it for years. We decided to postpone telling Petra until either some occasion made it necessary, or until she was old enough to understand more clearly what we were warning her about; in the meantime we would test occasionally to see whether we could make contact with her, otherwise the matter should rest as it stood at present.

We saw no reason then why it should not continue to stand as it did, for all of us; no alternative, indeed. If we did not remain hidden, we should be finished.

In the last few years we had learnt more of the people round us, and the way they felt. What had seemed, five or six years ago, a kind of rather disquieting game had grown grimmer as

we understood more about it. Essentially, it had not changed. Still our whole consideration if we were to survive must be to keep our true selves hidden; to walk, talk, and live indistinguishably from other people. We had a gift, a sense which, Michael complained bitterly, should have been a blessing, but was little better than a curse. The stupidest norm was happier; he could feel that he belonged. We did not, and because we did not, we had no positive – we were condemned to negatives, to not revealing ourselves, to not speaking when we would, to not using what we knew, to not being found out – to a life of perpetual deception, concealment, and lying. The prospect of continued negativeness stretching out ahead chafed him more than it did the rest of us. His imagination took him further, giving him a clearer vision of what such frustrations were going to mean, but it was no better at suggesting an alternative than ours were. As far as I was concerned a firm grasp of the negative in the cause of survival had been quite enough to occupy me; I was only just beginning to perceive the vacancy left by the absent positive. It was chiefly my appreciation of danger that had sharpened as I grew up. That had become hardened one afternoon of the summer in the year before we discovered Petra.

It was a bad season, that. We had lost three fields, so had Angus Morton. Altogether there had been thirty-five field-burnings in the district. There had been a higher deviation rate among the spring-births of the stock – not only our own stock, but everyone's, and particularly among the cattle – than had been known for twenty years. There seemed to be more wildcats of various sizes prowling out of the woods by night than ever before. Every week someone was before the court charged with attempted concealment of deviational crops, or the slaughter and consumption of undeclared Offences among stock, and to cap it all there had been no less than three district alerts on account of raids in force from the Fringes. It was just after the stand-down following the last of these that I happened across old Jacob grumbling to himself as he forked muck in the yard.

'What is it?' I asked him, pausing beside him.

He jabbed the fork into the muck and leant one hand on the shaft. He had been an old man forking muck ever since I could remember, I couldn't imagine that he had ever been, or would be, anything else. He turned to me a lined face mostly hidden in white hair and whiskers which always made me think of Elijah.

'Beans,' he said. 'Now my bloody beans are wrong. First my potatoes, *then* my tomatoes, *then* my lettuces, *now* my god-dam beans. Never knew a year like it. The others I've had before, but who ever heard of beans getting tribulated?'

'Are you sure?' I said.

'Sure. 'Course I am. Think I don't know the way a bean *ought* to look, at my age?'

He glared at me out of the white fuzz.

'It's certainly a bad year,' I agreed.

'Bad,' he said, 'it's ruination. Weeks of work gone up in smoke, pigs, sheep and cows gobbling up good food just to produce 'bominations. Men making off and standing-to so's a fellow can't get on with his own work for looking after theirs. Even my own bit of garden as tribulated as hell itself. Bad! You're right. And worse to come, I reckon.' He shook his head. 'Aye, worse to come,' he repeated, with gloomy satisfaction.

'Why?' I inquired.

'It's a judgement,' he told me. '*And* they deserve it. No morals, no principles. Look at young Ted Norbet – gets a bit of a fine for hiding a litter of ten and eating all but two before he was found out. Enough to bring his father up out of his grave. Why, if *he'd* done a thing like that – not that he ever would, mind you – but *if* he had, d'you know what he'd have got?' I shook my head. 'It'd have been a public shaming on a Sunday, a week of penances, *and* a tenth of all he had,' he told me, forcibly. 'So you'd not find people doing that kind of thing much then – but now –! What do they care about a bit of fine?' He spat disgustedly into the muck-pile. 'It's the same all round. Slackness, laxness, nobody caring beyond a bit of lip-service. You can see it everywhere nowadays. But God is not mocked. Bringing Tribulation down on us again, they are: a season like this is the start. I'm glad I'm an old man and

not likely to see the fall of it. But it's coming, you mark my words.

'Government regulations made by a lot of snivelling, weak-hearted, weak-witted babblers in the East. That's what the trouble is. A lot of namby-pamby politicians, and churchmen who ought to know better, too; men who've never lived in unstable country, don't know anything about it, very likely never seen a mutant in their lives, and they sit there whittling away year after year at the laws of God, reckoning they know better. No wonder we get seasons like this sent as a warning, but do they read the warning and heed it, do they –?' He spat again.

'How do they think the south-west was made safe and civilized for God's people? How do they think the mutants were kept under, and the Purity standards set up? It wasn't by fiddling little fines that a man could pay once a week and not notice. It was by honouring the law, and punishing anybody who transgressed it so that they knew they were punished.

'When my father was a young man a woman who bore a child that wasn't in the image was whipped for it. If she bore three out of the image she was uncertified, outlawed, and sold. It made them careful about their purity and their prayers. My father reckoned there was a lot less trouble with mutants on account of it, and when there were any, they were burnt, like other deviations.'

'Burnt!' I exclaimed.

He looked at me. 'Isn't that the way to cleanse deviations?' he demanded fiercely.

'Yes,' I admitted, 'with crops and stock, but –'

'The other kind is the worst,' he snapped, 'it is the Devil mocking the true image. Of course they should be burnt like they used to be. But what happened? The sentimentalists in Rigo who never have to deal with them themselves said: "Even though they aren't human, they *look* nearly human, therefore extermination *looks* like murder, or execution, and that troubles some people's minds." So, because a few wishy-washy minds did not have enough resolution and faith, there were new laws about near-human deviations. They mustn't be

cleansed, they must be allowed to live, or die naturally. They must be outlawed and driven into the Fringes, or, if they are infants, simply exposed there to take their chance – and *that* is supposed to be more merciful. At least the Government has the sense to understand that they mustn't be allowed to breed, and sees to it that they shan't – though I'd be willing to bet there's a party against that, too. And what happens? You get more Fringes dwellers, and that means you get more and bigger raids and lose time and money holding them back – all lost because of a namby-pamby dodging of the main issue. What sort of thinking is it to say "Accursed is the Mutant," and then treat him like a half-brother?'

'But a mutant isn't responsible for –' I began.

'"Isn't responsible,"' sneered the old man. 'Is a tiger-cat responsible for being a tiger-cat? But you kill it. You can't afford to have it around loose. *Repentances* says to keep pure the stock of the Lord by fire, but that's not good enough for the bloody Government now.

'Give me the old days when a man was allowed to do his duty and keep the place clean. Heading right for another dose of Tribulation we are now.' He went on muttering, looking like an ancient and wrathful prophet of doom.

'All these concealments – *and* they'll try again for want of a proper lesson; women who've given birth to a Blasphemy just going to church and saying how sorry they are and they'll try not to do it again; Angus Morton's great-horses still around, an "officially approved" mockery of the Purity Laws; a damned inspector who just wants to hold his job and not offend them in Rigo – and then people wonder why we get tribulated seasons . . .' He went on grumbling and spitting with disgust, a venomously puritanical old man. . . .

I asked Uncle Axel whether there were a lot of people who really felt the way old Jacob talked. He scratched his cheek, thoughtfully.

'Quite a few of the old ones. They still feel it's a personal responsibility – like it used to be before there were inspectors. Some of the middle-aged are that way, too, but most of them are willing enough to leave it as it is. They're not so set on the

forms as their fathers were. They don't reckon it matters much what way it's done so long as the mutants don't breed and things go along all right – but give them a run of years with instability as high as it is this year, and I'd not say for certain they'd take it quietly.'

'Why should the deviation-rate suddenly get high some years?' I asked him.

He shook his head. 'I don't know. Something to do with the weather, they say. Get a bad winter with gales from the south-west, and up goes the deviation-rate – not the next season, but the one after that. Something comes over from the Badlands, they say. Nobody knows what, but it looks as though they're right. The old men see it as a warning, just a reminder of Tribulation sent to keep us on the right path, and they make the most of it. Next year's going to be a bad one, too. People will listen to them more then. They'll have a sharp eye for scapegoats.' He concluded by giving me a long, thoughtful look.

I had taken the hint and passed it on to the others. Sure enough the season had been almost as tribulated as the one before, and there *was* a tendency to look for scapegoats. Public feeling towards concealments was noticeably less tolerant than it had been the previous summer, and it increased the anxiety we should in any case have felt over our discovery of Petra.

For a week after the river incident we listened with extra care for any hint of suspicion about it. We found none, however. Evidently it had been accepted that both Rosalind and I, in different directions, had happened to hear cries for help which must, in any case, have been faint at the distance. We were able to relax again – but not for long. Only about a month went by before we had a new source of misgiving.

Anne announced that she was going to marry. . . .

10

THERE was a shade of defiance in Anne, even when she told us.

At first we did not take it very seriously. We found it difficult to believe, and we did not want to believe, that she was serious. For one thing, the man was Alan Ervin, the same Alan I had fought on the bank of the stream, and who had informed on Sophie. Anne's parents ran a good farm, not a great deal smaller than Waknuk itself; Alan was the blacksmith's son, his prospects were those of becoming the blacksmith himself in his turn. He had the physique for it, he was tall and healthy, but that was about as far as he went. Quite certainly Anne's parents would be more ambitious for her than that; so we scarcely expected anything to come of it.

We were wrong. Somehow she brought her parents round to the idea, and the engagement was formally recognized. At that point we became alarmed. Abruptly, we were forced to consider some of the implications, and, young as we were, we could see enough of them to make us anxious. It was Michael who put it to Anne first.

'You can't, Anne. For your own sake you mustn't,' he told her. 'It'd be like tying yourself for life to a cripple. Do think, Anne, do really think what it is going to mean.'

She came back at him angrily.

'I'm not a fool. Of course I've thought. I've thought more than you have. I'm a woman – I've a right to marry and have children. There are three of you and five of us. Are you saying that two of us must never marry? Never have any lives or homes of our own? If not, then two of us have got to marry norms. I'm in love with Alan, and I intend to marry him. You ought to be grateful. It'll help to simplify things for the rest of you.'

'That doesn't follow,' Michael argued. 'We can't be the only ones. There must be others like us – beyond our range, somewhere. If we wait a little –'

'Why should I wait? It might be for years, or for always.

I've got Alan – and you want me to waste years waiting for someone who may never come – or whom I may hate if he does. You want me to give up Alan, and risk being cheated of everything. Well, I don't intend to. I didn't ask to be the way we are; but I've as much right to get what I can out of life as anyone else. It isn't going to be easy: but do you think I'd find it easier going on like this year after year? It can't be easy for any of us, but it isn't going to make it any better if two of us have to give up all hope of love and affection. Three of us can marry three of you. What is going to happen to the other two then – the two who'll be on the outside? They won't be in any group. Do you mean they ought to be cheated out of everything?

'It's you who haven't thought, Michael – or any of you. I *know* what I intend to do: the rest of you don't know what you intend to do because you're none of you in love – except David and Rosalind – and so you've none of you faced it.'

That was partially true as far as it went – but, if we had not faced all the problems before they arose, we were well aware of those that were constantly with us, and of those the main one was the need of dissembling, of leading all the time a suffocating half-life with our families. One of the things we looked forward to most was relief some day from that burden, and though we'd few positive ideas how it could be achieved, we could all realize that marriage to a norm would become intolerable in a very short while. Our position in our present homes was bad enough; to have to go on living intimately with some one who had no thought-shapes would be impossible. For one thing, any of us would still have more in common with the rest and be closer to them than to the norm that he or she had married. It could not be anything but a sham of a marriage when the two were separated by something wider than a different language, which had always been hidden by the one from the other. It would be misery, perpetual lack of confidence, and insecurity; there'd be the prospect of a lifetime's guarding against slips – and we knew well enough already that occasional slips were inevitable.

Other people seem so dim, so half-perceived, compared with

those whom one knows through their thought-shapes; and I don't suppose 'normals', who can never share their thoughts, can understand how we are so much more a part of one another. What comprehension can they have of 'thinking-together' so that two minds are able to do what one could not? And we don't have to flounder among the shortcomings of words; it is difficult for us to falsify or pretend a thought even if we want to; on the other hand, it is almost impossible for us to misunderstand one another. What, then, could there be for any of us tied closely to a half-dumb 'normal' who can never at best make more than a clever guess at anyone else's feelings or thoughts? Nothing but prolonged unhappiness and frustration – with, sooner or later, a fatal slip; or else an accumulation of small slips gradually fostering suspicion. . . .

Anne had seen this just as well as the rest of us, but now she pretended to ignore it. She began to defy her difference by refusing to respond to us, though whether she shut her mind off altogether, or continued to listen without taking part we could not tell. We suspected the former as being more in character, but, being unsure, we were not even able to discuss among ourselves what course, if any, we ought to take. Possibly there was no active course. I myself could think of none. Rosalind; too, was at a loss.

Rosalind had grown into a tall, slim young woman, now. She was handsome, with a face you could not help watching; she was attractive, too, in the way she moved and carried herself. Several of the younger men had felt the attraction, and gravitated towards her. She was civil to them, but no more. She was competent, decisive, self-reliant; perhaps she intimidated them, for before long they drifted their attentions elsewhere. She would not be entangled with any of them. Very likely it was for that reason that she was more shocked than any of us by what Anne proposed to do.

We used to meet, discreetly and not dangerously often. No one but the others, I think, ever suspected anything between us. We had to make love in a snatched, unhappy way when we did meet, wondering miserably whether there would ever be a time when we should not have to hide ourselves. And

somehow the business of Anne made us more wretched still. Marriage to a norm, even the kindest and best of them, was unthinkable for both of us.

The only other person I could turn to for advice was Uncle Axel. He knew, as did everyone else, about the forthcoming marriage, but it was news to him that Anne was one of us, and he received it lugubriously. After he had turned it over in his mind, he shook his head.

'No. It won't do, Davie. You're right there. I've been seeing these last five or six years how it wouldn't do – but I've just been hoping that maybe it'd never come to it. I reckon you're all up against a wall, or you'd not be telling me now?'

I nodded. 'She wouldn't listen to us,' I told him. 'Now she's gone further. She won't respond at all. She says that's over. She never wanted to be different from normals, now she wants to be as like them as she can. It was the first real row we've ever had. She ended up by telling us she hated all of us, and the very idea of us – at least, that's what she tried to tell us, but it's not actually that. It's really that she wants Alan so badly that she's determined not to let anything stop her from having him. I – I never knew before that anybody could want anybody else quite like that. She's so fierce and blind about it that she simply doesn't care what may happen later. I don't see what we can do.'

'You don't think that perhaps she *can* make herself live like a norm – cut out the other altogether? It'd be too difficult?' Uncle Axel asked.

'We've thought about that, of course,' I told him. 'She can refuse to respond. She's doing that now, like somebody refusing to talk – but to go on with it. . . . It'd be like taking a vow of silence for the rest of her life. I mean, she can't just make herself forget, and *become* a norm. We can't believe that's possible. Michael told her it'd be like pretending to have only one arm because the person one wants to marry has only one arm. It wouldn't be any good – and you couldn't keep it up, either.'

Uncle Axel pondered for a bit.

'You're convinced she's crazy about this Alan – quite beyond reason, I mean?' he asked.

'She's not like herself at all. She doesn't think properly any more,' I told him. 'Before she stopped responding her thought-shapes were all queer with it.'

Uncle Axel shook his head disapprovingly again. 'Women like to think they're in love when they want to marry; they feel it's a justification which helps their self-respect,' he observed. 'No harm in that; most of them are going to need all the illusions they can keep up, anyway. But a woman who *is* in love is a different proposition. She lives in a world where all the old perspectives have altered. She is blinkered, single-purposed, undependable in other matters. She will sacrifice anything, including herself, to one loyalty. For her, that is quite logical; for everyone else it looks not quite sane; socially it is dangerous. And when there is also a feeling of guilt to be overcome, and, maybe, expiated, it is quite certainly dangerous for someone –' He broke off and reflected in silence awhile. Then he added, 'It is *too* dangerous, Davie. Remorse . . . abnegation . . . self-sacrifice . . . the desire for purification – all pressing upon her. The sense of burden, the need for help, for someone to share the burden. . . . Sooner or later, I'm afraid, Davie. Sooner or later . . .'

I thought so, too.

'But what can we do?' I repeated, miserably.

He turned steady, serious eyes on me.

'How much are you justified in doing? One of you is set on a course which is going to endanger the lives of all eight. Not altogether knowingly, perhaps, but none the less seriously, for all that. Even if she does intend to be loyal to you, she is deliberately risking you all for her own ends – just a few words in her sleep would be enough. Does she have a moral right to create a constant threat hanging over seven heads just because she wants to live with this man?'

I hesitated. 'Well, if you put it like that –' I began.

'I *do* put it like that. *Has* she that right?'

'We've done our best to dissuade her,' I evaded, inadequately.

'And failed. So now what? Are you just going to sit down under it, not knowing what day she may crack, and give you all away?'

'I don't know,' was all I could tell him.

'Listen,' said Uncle Axel. 'I knew a man once who was one of a party who were adrift in a boat after their ship had burnt. They'd not much food and very little water. One of them drank sea water and went mad. He tried to wreck the boat so that they'd all drown together. He was a menace to all of them. In the end they had to throw him overboard – with the result that the other three had just enough food and water to last until they reached land. If they hadn't done it he'd have died, anyway – and the rest of them, too, most likely.'

I shook my head. 'No,' I said decisively, 'we couldn't do that.'

He went on looking at me steadily.

'This isn't a nice cosy world for anyone – especially not for anyone that's different,' he said. 'Maybe you're not the kind to survive it, after all.'

'It isn't just that,' I told him. 'If it were Alan you were talking about, if it would help to throw him overboard, we'd do it. But it's Anne you're meaning, and we can't do it – not because she's a girl, it'd be the same with any of us; we just couldn't do it. We're all too close together. I'm much closer to her and the others than I am to my own sisters. It's difficult to explain –' I broke off, trying to think of a way of showing him what we meant to one another. There didn't seem to be any clear way of putting it into words. I could only tell him, not very effectively.

'It wouldn't be just murder, Uncle Axel. It'd be something worse, as well; like violating part of ourselves for ever. . . . We couldn't do it. . . .'

'The alternative is the sword over your heads,' he said.

'I know,' I agreed unhappily. 'But that isn't the way. A sword inside us would be worse.'

I could not even discuss that solution with the others for fear that Anne might catch our thoughts; but I knew with certainty

what their verdict on it would be. I knew that Uncle Axel had proposed the only practical solution; and I knew, too, its impossibility meant recognizing that nothing could be done.

Anne now transmitted nothing whatever, we caught no trace of her, but whether she had the strength of will not to receive we were still uncertain. From Rachel, her sister, we learnt that she would listen only to words, and was doing her best to pretend to herself that she was a norm in every way, but that could not give us enough confidence for us to exchange our thoughts with freedom.

And in the following weeks Anne kept it up, so that one could almost believe that she had succeeded in renouncing her difference and becoming a norm. Her wedding-day arrived with nothing amiss, and she and Alan moved into the house which her father gave them on the edge of his own land. Here and there one encountered hints that she might have been unwise to marry beneath her, but otherwise there was little comment.

During the next few months we heard scarcely anything of her. She discouraged visits from her sister as though she were anxious to cut even that last link with us. We could only hope that she was being more successful and happier than we had feared.

One of the consequences, as far as Rosalind and I were concerned, was a more searching consideration of our own troubles. Quite when it was that we had known we were going to marry one another, neither of us has been able to remember. It was one of those things that seem ordained, in such proper accord with the law of nature and our own desires, that we felt we had always known it. The prospect coloured our thoughts even before we acknowledged it to ourselves. To me, it had never been thinkable that anything else should happen, for when two people have grown up thinking together as closely as we had, and when they are drawn even closer together by the knowledge of hostility all round them they can feel the need of one another even before they know they are in love.

But when they do know they are in love they suddenly know,

too, that there are ways in which they differ not at all from norms. . . . Also, they face the same obstacles that norms would. . . .

The feud between our families which had first come into the open over the matter of the great-horses had now been established for years. My father and half-uncle Angus, Rosalind's father, had settled down to a regular guerrilla. In their efforts to score points, each kept a hawk-like watch upon the other's land for the least Deviation or Offence, and both had been known for some time now to reward the informer who would bring news of irregularities in the other's territory.

My father, in his determination to maintain a higher level of rectitude than Angus, had made considerable personal sacrifices. He had, for instance, in spite of his great liking for tomatoes, given up growing the unstable *solonaceae* family at all; we bought our tomatoes now, and our potatoes. Certain other species, too, were blacklisted as unreliable at some inconvenience and expense, and though it was a state of affairs which promoted high normality rates on both farms, it did nothing whatever to make for good neighbourliness.

It was perfectly clear that neither side would be anything but dead-set against a union of the families.

For both of us the situation was bound to grow more difficult. Already Rosalind's mother had attempted some matchmaking; and I had seen my mother measuring one or two girls with a calculating, though so far unsatisfied, eye.

We were sure that, at present, neither side had an idea of anything between us. There was no more than acrid communication between the Stroms and the Mortons, and the only place where they could be found beneath the same roof was church. Rosalind and I met infrequently and very discreetly.

For the present there was an impasse, and it looked like an impasse of indefinite duration unless we should do something to force the situation. There was a possible way, and could we have been sure that Angus' wrath would have taken the form of forcing a shotgun wedding we would have taken it; but we were by no means certain about that. Such was his opposition

to all Strorms that there was, we considered, a strong likelihood that he might be prompted to use the gun another way. Moreover, we were sure that even if honour were forcibly preserved we should both of us be disowned by our families thereafter.

We discussed and explored lengthily for some pacific way out of the dilemma, but even when half a year had passed since Anne's marriage we were no nearer reaching it.

As for the rest of our group, we found that in that six months the first alarm had lost its edge. That is not to say that we were easy in our minds: we had never been that since we discovered ourselves, but we had had to get used to living with a degree of threat, and once the crisis over Anne had passed we got used to living with a slightly-increased degree of threat.

Then, one Sunday at dusk, Alan was found dead in the field-path that led to his home, with an arrow through his neck.

We had the news first from Rachel, and we listened anxiously as she tried to make contact with her sister. She used all the concentration she could manage, but it was useless. Anne's mind remained as firmly closed against us as it had been for the last eight months. Even in distress she transmitted nothing.

'I'm going over to see her,' Rachel told us. 'She must have someone by her.'

We waited expectantly for an hour or more. Then Rachel came through again, very perturbed.

'She won't see me. She won't let me into the house. She's let a neighbour in, but not me. She screamed at me to go away.'

'She must think one of us did it,' came Michael's response. 'Did any of you do it – or know anything about it?'

Our denials came in emphatically, one after another.

'We've got to stop her thinking that,' Michael decided. 'She mustn't go on believing it. Try to get through to her.'

We all tried. There was no response whatever.

'No good,' Michael admitted. 'You must get a note to her somehow, Rachel,' he added. 'Word it carefully so that she'll

understand we had nothing to do with it, but so that it won't mean anything to anyone else.'

'Very well. I'll try,' Rachel agreed doubtfully.

Another hour passed, before we heard from her once more.

'It's no good. I gave the note to the woman who's there, and waited. When the woman came back she said Anne just tore it up without opening it. My mother's in there now, trying to persuade her to come home.'

Michael was slow in replying to that. Then he advised:

'We'd best be prepared. All of you make ready to run for it if necessary – but don't rouse any suspicions. Rachel, keep on trying to find out what you can, and let us know at once if anything happens.'

I did not know what to do for the best. Petra was already in bed, and I could not rouse her without it being noticed. Besides, I was not sure that it was necessary. She certainly could not be suspected even by Anne of having had any part in the killing of Alan. It was only potentially that she could be considered one of us at all, so I made no move beyond sketching a rough plan in my mind, and trusted that I should have enough warning to get us both clear.

The house had retired for the night before Rachel came through again.

'We're going home, mother and me,' she told us. 'Anne's turned everyone out, and she's alone there now. Mother wanted to stay, but Anne is beside herself and hysterical. She *made* them go. They were afraid she'd be worse if they insisted on staying. She's told Mother she knows who's responsible for Alan's death, but she wouldn't name anybody.'

'You do think she means us? After all, it *is* possible that Alan may have had some bitter quarrel of his own that we know nothing about,' Michael suggested.

Rachel was more than dubious. 'If it were only that, she'd surely have let me in. She wouldn't have screamed at me to go away,' she pointed out. 'I'll go over early in the morning, and see if she's changed her mind.'

With that we had to be content for the moment. We could relax a little for a few hours at least.

Rachel told us later what happened the following morning. She had got up an hour after dawn and made her way across the fields to Anne's house. When she reached it she had hesitated a little, reluctant to face the possibility of the same sort of screaming repulse that she had suffered the previous day. However, it was useless simply to stand there looking at the house; she plucked up courage and raised the knocker. The sound of it echoed inside and she waited. There was no result.

She tried the knocker again, more decisively. Still no one answered.

Rachel became alarmed. She hammered the knocker vigorously and stood listening. Then slowly and apprehensively she lowered her hand from the knocker, and went over to the house of the neighbour who had been with Anne the previous day.

With one of the logs from the woodpile they pushed in a window, and then climbed inside. They found Anne upstairs in her bedroom, hanging from a beam.

They took her down, between them, and laid her on the bed. They were too late by some hours to help her. The neighbour covered her with a sheet.

To Rachel it was all unreal. She was dazed. The neighbour took her by the arm to lead her out. As they were leaving she noticed a folded sheet of paper lying on the table. She picked it up.

'This'll be for you, or maybe your parents,' she said, putting it into Rachel's hand.

Rachel looked at it dully, reading the inscription on the outside.

'But it's not –' she began automatically.

Then she checked herself, and pretended to look at it more closely, as it occurred to her that the woman could not read.

'Oh, I see – yes, I'll give it to them,' she said, and slipped into the front of her dress the message that was addressed neither to herself, nor to her parents, but to the inspector.

The neighbour's husband drove her home. She broke the news to her parents. Then, alone in her room, the one that Anne had shared with her before she had married, she read the letter.

It denounced all of us, including Rachel herself, and even Petra. It accused us collectively of planning Alan's murder, and one of us, unspecified, of carrying it out.

Rachel read it through twice, and then carefully burnt it.

The tension eased for the rest of us after a day or two. Anne's suicide was a tragedy, but no one saw any mystery about it. A young wife, pregnant with her first child, thrown off her mental balance by the shock of losing her husband in such circumstances; it was a lamentable result, but understandable.

It was Alan's death that remained unattributable to anyone, and as much of a mystery to us as to the rest. Inquiries had revealed several persons who had a grudge against him, but none with a strong enough motive for murder, nor any likely suspect who could not convincingly account for himself at the time when Alan must have been killed.

Old William Tay acknowledged the arrow to be one of his making, but then, most of the arrows in the district were of his making. It was not a competition shaft, or identifiable in any way; just a plain everyday hunting arrow such as might be found by the dozen in any house. People gossiped, of course, and speculated. From somewhere came a rumour that Anne was less devoted than had been supposed, that for the last few weeks she had seemed to be afraid of him. To the great distress of her parents it grew into a rumour that she had let fly the arrow herself, and then committed suicide out of either remorse or the fear of being found out. But that, too, died away when, again, no sufficiently strong motive could be discovered. In a few weeks speculation found other topics. The mystery was written off as unsolvable – it might even have been an accident which the culprit dared not acknowledge. . . .

We had kept our ears wide open for any hint of guesswork or supposition that might lead attention towards us, but there was none at all, and as the interest declined we were able to relax.

But although we felt less anxiety than we had at any time for nearly a year, an underlying effect remained, a sense of warning, with a sharpened awareness that we were set apart, with the safety of all of us lying in the hands of each.

We were grieved for Anne, but the grief was made less sharp by the feeling that we had really lost her some time before, and it was only Michael who did not seem to share in the lightening of anxiety. He said:

'One of us has been found not strong enough . . .'