



I heard that the girl had left home suddenly. No one knew where she was. The husband thought she might have gone abroad. It was only a guess. He had no information. I was agitated and asked endless questions, but no concrete facts emerged. 'I know no more than you. She simply vanished, I suppose she's entitled to go if she wants to — she's free, white and twenty-one.' He adopted a facetious tone, I could not tell if he was speaking the truth. The police did not suspect foul play. There was no reason to think harm had come to her, or that she had not gone away voluntarily. She was old enough to know her own mind. People were constantly disappearing; hundreds left home and were not seen again, many of them women unhappily married. Her marriage was known to have been breaking up. Almost certainly she was better off now, and only wanted to be left in peace. Further investigation would be resented and would lead to more trouble.

This was a convenient view for them, it excused them from taking action. But I did not accept it. She had been conditioned into obedience since early childhood, her independence destroyed by systematic suppression. I did not believe her capable of such a drastic step on her own initiative: I suspected pressure from outside. I wished I could talk to someone who knew her well, but she seemed to have no close friends.

The husband came to town on some mysterious business, and I asked him for lunch at my club. We talked for two hours, but in the end I was none the wiser. He persistently treated the whole affair lightly, said he was glad she had gone. 'Her neurotic behaviour nearly drove *me* demented. I'd had all I could take. She refused to see a psychiatrist. Finally she walked out on me without a word. No explanation. No warning.' He spoke as if he was the injured party, 'She went her own way without considering me, so I'm not worrying about her. She won't come back, that's one thing certain.' While he was away from home, I took the opportunity of driving down to the house and going through the things in her room, but found nothing in the way of a clue. There was just the usual collection of pathetic rubbish: a china bird; a broken string of fake pearls; snapshots in an old chocolate box. One of these, in which a lake reflected perfectly her face and her shining hair, I put into my wallet.



Somehow or other I had to find her; the fact remained. I felt the the same compulsive urge that had driven me straight to the country when I first arrived. There was no rational explanation, I could not account for it. It was a sort of craving that had to be satisfied.

I abandoned all my own affairs. From now on my business was to search for her. Nothing else mattered. Certain sources of possible information were still available. Hairdressers. Clerks who kept records of transport bookings. Those fringe characters. I went to the places such people frequented, stood about playing the fruit machines until I saw a chance of speaking. Money helped. So did intuition. No clue was too slender to follow up. The approaching emergency made it all the more urgent to find her quickly. I could not get her out of my head. I had not seen all the things I remembered about her. During my first visit I was in the living-room, talking about the Indris, my favourite subject. The man listened. She went to and fro arranging flowers. On an impulse I said the pair of them resembled the lemurs, both so friendly and charming, and living together so happily here in the tress. He laughed. She looked horrified and ran through the French window, silver hair floating behind her, her bare legs flashing pale. The secret, shady garden, hidden away in seclusion and silence, was a pleasant cool retreat from the heat of summer. Then suddenly it was unnaturally, fearfully cold. The masses of dense foliage all around became prison walls, impassable circular green ice-walls, surging towards her; just before they closed in, I caught the terrified glint of her eyes.

On a winter day she was in the studio, posing for him in the nude, her arms raised in a graceful position. To hold it for any length of time must have been a strain, I wondered how she managed to keep so still; until I saw the cords attached to her wrists and ankles. The room was cold. There was a thick frost on the window panes and snow piled up on the sill outside. He wore the long uniform coat. She was shivering. When she asked, 'May I have a rest?' Her voice had a pathetic tremor. He frowned, looked at his watch before he put down his palette. 'All right. That'll do for now. You can dress.' He untied her. The cords had left deep red angry rings on the white flesh. Her movements were slow and clumsy from cold, she fumbled awkwardly with buttons, suspenders. This seemed to annoy him. He turned away from her sharply, his face irritable. She kept glancing nervously at him, her mouth was unsteady, her hands would not stop shaking. [...] A silence followed, while she stood like a lost child, tears wet on her cheeks. Next she started wandering aimlessly round the room, stopped by the window, pulled the curtain aside, then cried out in amazement.

Instead of darkness, she faced a stupendous sky conflagration, an incredible glacial dream-scene. Cold coruscations of rainbow fire pulsed overhead, shot through by shafts of pure incandescence thrown out by mountains of solid ice towering all

around. Closer, the trees round the house, sheathed in ice, dripped and sparkled with weird prismatic jewels, reflecting the vivid changing, cascades above. Instead of the familiar night sky, the aurora borealis formed a blazing, vibrating roof of intense cold and colour, beneath which the earth was trapped with all its inhabitants, walled in by those impassable glittering ice-cliffs. The world had become an arctic prison from which no escape was possible, all its creatures trapped as securely as were the trees, already lifeless inside their deadly resplendent armour.

Despairingly she looked all round. She was completely encircled by the tremendous ice-walls, which were made fluid by explosions of blinding light, so that they moved and changed with continuous liquid motion, advancing in torrents of ice, avalanches as big as oceans, flooding everywhere over the doomed world. Wherever she looked, she saw the same fearful encirclement, soaring battlements of ice, an overhanging ring of frigid, fiery, colossal waves about to collapse on her. Frozen by the deathly cold emanating from the ice, she felt herself becoming part of the polar vision, her structure becoming one with the structure of ice and snow. As her fate, she accepted the world of ice, shining, shimmering, dead; she resigned herself to the triumph of glaciers and the death of her world.

It was essential for me to find her without delay. The situation was alarming, the atmosphere tense, the emergency imminent. There was talk of a secret act of aggression by some foreign power, but now one knew what had actually happened. The government would not disclose the facts. I was informed privately that a steep rise in radioactive pollution, pointing to the exposure of a nuclear device, but of an unknown type, the consequences of which could not be accurately predicted. It was possible that polar modifications had resulted, and would lead to significant climate change due to the refraction of solar heat. If the melting Antarctic ice cap flowed over the South Pacific and Atlantic oceans, a vast ice-mass would be created, reflecting the sun's rays and throwing them back into outer space, thus depriving the earth of warmth. In town, everything was chaotic and contradictory. Confusion was increased by a spate of new and conflicting regulations, and by the arbitrary way controls were imposed or lifted. The one thing that would have clarified the position was an over-all picture of world events; but this was prohibited by the determination of the politicians to ban all foreign news. My impression was that they had lost their heads, did not know how to deal with the approaching danger, and hoped to keep the public in ignorance of its exact nature until a plan had been evolved.