

The Age of Desire

The burning man propelled himself down the steps of the Hume Laboratories as the police car—summoned, he presumed, by the alarm either Welles or Dance had set off upstairs—appeared at the gate and swung up the driveway. As he ran from the door the car screeched up to the steps and discharged its human cargo. He waited in the shadows, too exhausted by terror to run any farther, certain they would see him. But they disappeared through the swing doors without so much as a glance toward his torment. Am I on fire at all? he wondered. Was this horrifying spectacle—his flesh baptized with a polished flame that seared but failed to consume—simply a hallucination, for his eyes and his eyes only? If so, perhaps all that he had suffered up in the laboratory had also been delirium. Perhaps he had not truly committed the crimes he had fled from, the heat in his flesh licking him into ecstasies.

He looked down his body. His exposed skin still crawled with livid dots of fire, but one by one they were being extinguished. He was going out, he realized, like a neglected bonfire. The sensations that had suffused him—so intense and so demanding that they had been as like pain as pleasure—were finally deserting his nerve endings, leaving a numbness for which he was grateful. His body, now appearing from beneath the veil of fire, was in a sorry condition. His skin was a panic-map of scratches, his clothes torn to shreds, his hands sticky with coagulating blood; blood, he knew, that was not his own. There was no avoiding the bitter truth. He *had* done all he had imagined doing. Even now the officers would be staring down at his atrocious handiwork.

He crept away from his niche beside the door and down the driveway, keeping a lookout for the return of the two policemen. Neither reappeared. The street beyond the gate was deserted. He started to run. He had managed only a few paces when the alarm was abruptly cut off. For several seconds his ears rang in sympathy with the silenced bell. Then, eerily, he began to hear the sound of heat—the surreptitious murmuring of embers—distant enough that he didn't panic, yet close as his heartbeat.

He limped on to put as much distance as he could between him and his felonies before they were discovered. But however fast he ran, the heat went with him, safe in some backwater of his gut, threatening with every desperate step he took to ignite him afresh.

It took Dooley several seconds to identify the cacophony he was hearing from the upper floor now that McBride had hushed the alarm bell. It was the high-pitched chattering of monkeys, and it came from one of the many rooms down the corridor to his right.

"Virgil," he called down the stairwell. "Get up here."

Not waiting for his partner to join him, Dooley headed off toward the source of the din. Halfway along the corridor the smell of static and new carpeting gave way to a more pungent combination: urine, disinfectant and rotting fruit. Dooley slowed his advance. He didn't like the smell any more than he liked the hysteria in the babble of monkey voices. But McBride was slow in answering his call, and after a short hesitation, Dooley's curiosity got the better of his disquiet. Hand on truncheon, he approached the open door and stepped in. His appearance sparked off another wave of frenzy from the animals, a dozen or so rhesus monkeys. They threw themselves around in their cages, somersaulting, screeching and berating the wire mesh. Their excitement was infectious. Dooley could feel the sweat begin to squeeze from his pores.

"Is there anybody here?" he called out.

The only reply came from the prisoners: more hysteria, more cage rattling. He stared across the room at them. They stared back, their teeth bared in fear or welcome; Dooley didn't know which, nor did he wish to test their intentions. He kept well clear of the bench on which the cages were lined up as he began a perfunctory search of the laboratory.

"I wondered what the hell the smell was," McBride said, appearing at the door.

"Just animals," Dooley replied.

"Don't they ever wash? Filthy buggers."

"Anything downstairs?"

"Nope," McBride said, crossing to the cages. The monkeys met his advance with more gymnastics. "Just the alarm."

"Nothing up here either," Dooley said. He was about to add, "*Don't do that*," to prevent his partner putting his finger to the mesh, but before the words were out one of the animals seized the proffered digit and bit it. McBride wrested his finger free and threw a blow back against the mesh in retaliation. Squealing its anger, the occupant flung its scrawny body about in a lunatic fandango that threatened to pitch cage and monkey alike onto the floor.

"You'll need a tetanus shot for that," Dooley commented.

"Shit!" said McBride, "what's wrong with the little bastard anyhow?"

"Maybe they don't like strangers."

"They're out of their tiny minds." McBride sucked ruminatively on his finger, then spat. "I mean, look at them."

Dooley didn't answer.

"I said, *look*..." McBride repeated.

Very quietly, Dooley said: "Over here."

"What is it?"

"Just come over here."

McBride drew his gaze from the row of cages and across the cluttered work surfaces to where Dooley was staring at the ground, the look on his face one of fascinated revulsion. McBride neglected his finger sucking and threaded his way among the benches and stools to where his partner stood.

"Under there," Dooley muttered.

On the scuffed floor at Dooley's feet was a woman's beige shoe; beneath the bench was the shoe's owner. To judge by her cramped position she had either been secreted there by the miscreant or dragged herself out of sight and died in hiding.

"Is she dead?" McBride asked.

"Look at her, for Christ's sake," Dooley replied, "she's been torn open."

"We've got to check for vital signs," McBride reminded him. Dooley made no more to comply, so McBride squatted down in front of the victim and checked for a pulse at her ravaged neck. There was none. Her skin was still warm beneath his fingers however. A gloss of saliva on her cheek had not yet dried.

Dooley, calling in his report, looked down at the deceased. The worst of her wounds, on the upper torso, were masked by McBride's crouching body. All he could see was a fall of auburn hair and her legs, one foot shoeless, protruding from her hiding place. They were beautiful legs. He might have whistled after such legs once upon a time.

"She's a doctor or technician," McBride said. "She's wearing a lab coat." Or she had been. In fact the coat had been ripped open, as had the layers of clothing beneath, and then, as if to complete the exhibition, the skin and muscle beneath that. McBride peered into her chest.

The sternum had been snapped and the heart teased from its seat, as if her killer had wanted to take it as a keepsake and been interrupted in the act. He perused her without squeamishness; he had always prided himself on his strong stomach.

"Are you satisfied she's dead?"

"Never saw deader."

"Carnegie's coming down," Dooley said, crossing to one of the sinks. Careless of fingerprints, he turned on the tap and splashed a handful of cold water onto his face. When he looked up from his ablutions McBride had left off his tête-à-tête with the corpse and was walking down the laboratory toward a bank of machinery.

"What do they do here, for Christ's sake?" he remarked. "Look at all this stuff."

"Some kind of research facility," Dooley said.

"What do they research?"

"How the hell do I know?" Dooley snapped. The ceaseless chatterings of the monkeys and the proximity of the dead woman made him want to desert the place. "Let's leave it be, huh?"

McBride ignored Dooley's request; equipment fascinated him. He stared entranced at the encephalograph and electrocardiograph; at the printout units still disgorging yards of blank paper onto the floor; at the video display monitors and the consoles. The scene brought the *Marie Celeste* to his mind. This was like some deserted ship of science—still humming some tuneless song to itself as it sailed on, though there was neither captain nor crew left behind to attend upon it.

Beyond the wall of equipment was a window, no more than a yard square. McBride had assumed it let on to the exterior of the building, but now that he looked more closely he realized it did not. A test chamber lay beyond the banked units.

"Dooley...?" he said, glancing around. The man had gone, however, down to meet Carnegie presumably. Content to be left to his exploration, McBride returned his attention to the window. There was no light on inside. Curious, he walked around the back of the banked equipment until he found the chamber door. It was ajar. Without hesitation, he stepped through.

Most of the light through the window was blocked by the instruments on the other side; the interior was dark. It took McBride's eyes a few seconds to get a true impression of the chaos the chamber contained: the overturned table; the chair of which somebody had made matchwood; the tangle of cables and demolished equipment—cameras, perhaps, to monitor proceedings in the chamber?—clusters of lights which had been similarly smashed. No professional vandal could have made a more thorough job of breaking up the chamber than had been made.

There was a smell in the air which McBride recognized but, irritatingly, couldn't place. He stood still, tantalized by the scent. The sound of sirens rose from down the corridor outside; Carnegie would be here in moments. Suddenly, the smell's association came to him. It was the same scent that twitched in his nostrils when, after making love to Jessica and—as was his ritual—washing himself, he returned from the bathroom to bedroom. It was the smell of sex. He smiled.

His face was still registering pleasure when a heavy object sliced through the air and met his nose. He felt the cartilage give and a rush of blood came. He took two or three giddy steps backward, thereby avoiding the subsequent slice, but lost his footing in the disarray. He fell awkwardly in a litter of glass shards and looked up to see his assailant, wielding a metal bar, moving toward him. The man's face resembled one of the monkey's; the same yellowed teeth, the same rabid eyes. "*No!*" the man shouted, as he brought his makeshift club down on

McBride, who managed to ward off the blow with his arm, snatching at the weapon in so doing. The attack had taken him unawares but now, with the pain in his smashed nose to add fury to his response, he was more than equal of the aggressor. He plucked the club from the man, sweets from a babe, and leaped, roaring, to his feet. Any precepts he might once have been taught about arrest techniques had fled from his mind. He lay a hail of blows on the man's head and shoulders, forcing him backward across the chamber. The man cowered beneath the assault and eventually slumped, whimpering, against the wall. Only now, with his antagonist abused to the verge of unconsciousness, did McBride's furor falter. He stood in the middle of the chamber, gasping for breath, and watched the beaten man slip down the wall. He had made a profound error. The assailant, he now realized, was dressed in a white laboratory coat. He was, as Dooley was irritatingly fond of saying, on the side of the angels.

"Damn," said McBride, "shit, hell and damn."

The man's eyes flickered open, and he gazed up at McBride. His grasp on consciousness was evidently tenuous, but a look of recognition crossed his wide-browed, somber face. Or rather, recognition's absence.

"You're not him," he murmured.

"Who?" said McBride, realizing he might yet salvage his reputation from this fiasco if he could squeeze a clue from the witness. "Who did you think I was?"

The man opened his mouth, but no words emerged. Eager to hear the testimony, McBride crouched beside him and said: "Who did you think you were attacking?"

Again the mouth opened; again no audible words emerged. McBride pressed his suit. "It's important," he said, "just tell me who was here."

The man strove to voice his reply. McBride pressed his ear to the trembling mouth.

"In a pig's eye," the man said, then passed out, leaving McBride to curse his father, who'd bequeath him a temper he was afraid he would probably live to regret. But then, what was living for?

Inspector Carnegie was used to boredom. For every rare moment of genuine discovery his professional life had furnished him with, he had endured hour upon hour of waiting for bodies to be photographed and examined, for lawyers to be bargained with and suspects intimidated. He had long ago given up attempting to fight this tide of ennui and, after his fashion, had learned the art of going with the flow. The processes of investigation could not be hurried. The wise man, he had come to appreciate, let the pathologists, the lawyers and all their tribes have their tardy way. All that mattered, in the fullness of time, was that the finger be pointed and that the guilty quake.

Now, with the clock on the laboratory wall reading twelve fifty-three a.m., and even the monkeys hushed in their cages, he sat at one of the benches and waited for Hendrix to finish his calculations. The surgeon consulted his thermometer, then stripped off his gloves like a second skin and threw them down onto the sheet on which the deceased lay. "It's always difficult," the doctor said, "fixing time of death. She's lost less than three degrees. I'd say she's been dead under two hours."

"The officers arrived at a quarter to twelve," Carnegie said, "so she died maybe half an hour before that?"

"Something of that order."

"Was she put in there?" he asked, indicating the place beneath the bench.

"Oh certainly. There's no way she hid herself away. Not with those injuries. They're quite something, aren't they?"

Carnegie stared at Hendrix. The man had presumably seen hundreds of corpses, in every conceivable condition, but the enthusiasm in his pinched features was unqualified. Carnegie found that mystery more fascinating in its own way than that of the dead woman and her slaughterer. How could anyone possibly enjoy taking the rectal temperature of a corpse? It confounded him. But the pleasure was there, gleaming in the man's eyes.

"Motive?" Carnegie asked.

"Pretty explicit, isn't it? Rape. There's been very thorough molestation; contusions around the vagina; copious semen deposits. Plenty to work with."

"And the wounds on her torso?"

"Ragged. Tears more than cuts."

"Weapon?"

"Don't know." Hendrix made an inverted U of his mouth. "I mean, the flesh has been *mauled*. If it weren't for the rape evidence I'd be tempted to suggest an animal."

"Dog, you mean."

"I was thinking more of a tiger," Hendrix said.

Carnegie frowned. "Tiger?"

"Joke," Hendrix replied, "I was making a joke, Carnegie. My Christ, do you have *any* sense of irony?"

"This isn't funny," Carnegie said.

"I'm not laughing," Hendrix replied with a sour look.

"The man McBride found in the test chamber?"

"What about him?"

"Suspect?"

"Not in a thousand years. We're looking for a *maniac*, Carnegie. Big, strong. Wild."

"And the wounding? Before or after?"

Hendrix scowled. "I don't know. Postmortem will give us more. But for what it's worth, I think our man was in a frenzy. I'd say the wounding and the rape were probably simultaneous."

Carnegie's normally phlegmatic features registered something close to shock. "Simultaneous?"

Hendrix shrugged. "Lust's a funny thing," he said.

"Hilarious," came the appalled reply.

As was his wont, Carnegie had his driver deposit him half a mile from his doorstep to allow him a head-clearing walk before home, hot chocolate and slumber. The ritual was observed religiously, even when the Inspector was dog-tired. He used the stroll to wind down before stepping over the threshold. Long experience had taught him that taking his professional concerns into the house assisted neither the investigation nor his domestic life. He had learned the lesson too late to keep his wife from leaving him and his children from estrangement, but he applied the principle still.

Tonight, he walked slowly to allow the distressing scenes the evening had brought to recede somewhat. The route took him past a small cinema which, he had read in the local press, was soon to be demolished. He was not surprised. Though he was no cineaste the fare the flea pit provided had degenerated in recent years. The week's offering was a case in point: a double

bill of horror movies. Lurid and derivative stuff to judge by the poster, with their crude graphics and their unashamed hyperbole. "*You May Never Sleep Again!*" one of the hook lines read; and beneath it a woman—very much awake—cowered in the shadow of a two-headed man. What trivial images the populists conjured to stir some fear in their audiences. The walking dead; nature grown vast and rampant in a miniature world; blood drinkers, omens, fire walkers, thunderstorms and all the other foolishness the public cowered before. It was all so laughably trite. Among that catalogue of penny dreadfuls there wasn't one that equaled the banality of human appetite, which horror (or the consequences of same) he saw every week of his working life. Thinking of it, his mind thumbed through a dozen snapshots: the dead by torchlight, face down and thrashed to oblivion; and the living too, meeting his mind's eye with hunger in theirs—for sex, for narcotics, for others' pain. Why didn't they put *that* on the posters?

As he reached his home a child squealed in the shadows beside his garage; the cry stopped him in his tracks. It came again, and this time he recognized it for what it was. No child at all but a cat, or cats, exchanging love calls in the darkened passageway. He went to the place to shoo them off. Their venereal secretions made the passage stink. He didn't need to yell; his footfall was sufficient to scare them away. They darted in all directions, not two, but half a dozen of them. A veritable orgy had been underway apparently. He had arrived on the spot too late however. The stench of their seductions was overpowering.

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Carnegie looked blankly at the elaborate setup of monitors and video recorders that dominated his office.

"What is Christ's name is this about?" he wanted to know.

"The video tapes," said Boyle, his number two, "from the laboratory. I think you ought to have a look at them, sir."

Though they worked in tandem for seven months, Boyle was not one of Carnegie's favorite officers; you could practically smell the ambition off his smooth hide. In someone half his age again such greed would be objectionable. In a man of thirty it verged on the objectionable. This present display—the mustering of equipment ready to confront Carnegie when he walked in at eight in the morning—was just Boyle's style: flashy and redundant.

"Why so many screens?" Carnegie asked acidly. "Do I get it in stereo, too?"

"They had three cameras running simultaneously, sir. Covering the experiment from several angles."

"*What* experiment?"

Boyle gestured for his superior to sit down. Obsequious to a fault, aren't you? thought Carnegie; much good it'll do you.

"Right," Boyle instructed the technician at the recorders, "roll the tapes."

Carnegie sipped at the cup of hot chocolate he had brought in with him. The beverage was a weakness of his, verging on addiction. On the days when the machine supplying it broke down he was an unhappy man indeed. He looked at the three screens. Suddenly, a title.

"*Project Blind Boy*," the words read. "*Restricted*."

"*Blind Boy*?" said Carnegie. "What, or *who*, is that?"

"It's obviously a code word of some kind," Boyle said.

"*Blind Boy, Blind Boy*." Carnegie repeated the phrase as if to beat it into submission, but before he could solve the problem the images on the three monitors diverged. They picture the

same subject—a bespectacled male in his late twenties sitting in a chair—but each showed the scene from a different angle. One took in the subject full length and in profile; the second was a three-quarter medium-shot, angled from above; the third was a straightforward close-up of the subject's head and shoulders, shot through the glass of the test chamber and from the front. The three images were in black and white, and none were completely centered or focused. Indeed, as the tapes began to run somebody was still adjusting such technicalities. A backwash of informal chatter ran between the subject and the woman—recognizable even in brief glimpses as the deceased—who was applying electrodes to his forehead. Much of the talk between them was difficult to catch; the acoustics in the chamber frustrated microphone and listener alike.

“The woman's Doctor Dance,” Boyle offered. “The victim.”

“Yes,” said Carnegie, watching the screens intently, “I recognize her. How long does this preparation go on for?”

“Quite a while. Most of it's unedifying.”

“Well, get to the edifying stuff, then.”

“Fast forward,” Boyle said. The technician obliged, and the actors on the three screens became squeaking comedians. “Wait!” said Boyle. “Back up a short way.” Again, the technician did as instructed. “There!” said Boyle. “Stop there. Now run on at normal speed.” The action settled back to its natural pace. “This is where it really begins, sir.”

Carnegie had come to the end of his hot chocolate. He put his finger into the soft sludge at the bottom of the cup, delivering the sickly-sweet dregs to his tongue. On the screens Doctor Dance had approached the subject with a syringe, was now swabbing the crook of his elbow, and injecting him. Not for the first time since his visit to the Hume Laboratories did Carnegie wonder precisely what they did at the establishment. Was this kind of procedure *de rigueur* in pharmaceutical research? The implicit secrecy of the experiment—late at night in an otherwise deserted building—suggested not. And there was that imperative on the title card—“*Restricted.*” What they were watching had clearly never been intended for public viewing.

“Are you comfortable?” a man off camera now inquired. The subject nodded. His glasses had been removed and he looked slightly bemused without them. An unremarkable face, thought Carnegie; the subject—as yet unnamed—was neither Adonis nor Quasimodo. He was receding slightly, and his wispy, dirty-blond hair touched his shoulders.

“I'm fine, Doctor Welles,” he replied to the off-camera questioner.

“You don't feel hot at all? Sweaty?”

“Not really,” the guinea pig replied, slightly apologetically. “I feel ordinary.”

That you are, Carnegie thought; then to Boyle: “Have you been through the tapes to the end?”

“No, sir,” Boyle replied. “I thought you'd want to see them first. I only ran them as far as the injection.”

“Any word from the hospital on Doctor Welles?”

“At the last call he was still comatose.”

Carnegie grunted and returned his attention to the screens. Following the burst of action with the injection the tapes now settled into non-activity: the three cameras fixed on their short-sighted subject with beady stares, the torpor occasionally interrupted by an inquire from Welles as to the subject's condition. It remained the same. After three or four minutes of this eventless study even his occasional blinks began to assume major dramatic significance.

“Don't think much of the plot,” the technician commented. Carnegie laughed; Boyle looked discomforted. Two or three more minutes passed in a similar manner.

“This doesn’t look too hopeful,” Carnegie said. “Run through it at speed, will you?”

The technician was about to obey when Boyle said: “*Wait.*”

Carnegie glanced across at the man, irritated by his intervention, and then back at the screens. Something *was* happening. A subtle transformation had overtaken the insipid features of the subject. He had begun to smile to himself and was sinking down in his chair as if submerging his gangling body in a warm bath. His eyes, which had so far expressed little but affable indifference, now began to flicker closed, and then, once closed, opened again. When they did so there was a quality in them not previously visible, a hunger that seemed to reach out from the screen and into the calm of the inspector’s office.

Carnegie put down his chocolate cup and approached the screens. As he did so the subject also got up out of his chair and walked toward the glass of the chamber, leaving two of the camera’s ranges. The third still recorded him, however, as he pressed his face against the window, and for a moment the two men faced each other through layers of glass and time, seemingly meeting each other’s gaze.

The look on the man’s face was critical now, the hunger was rapidly outgrowing sane control. Eyes burning, he laid his lips against the chamber window and kissed it, his tongue working against the glass.

“What in Christ’s name is going on?” Carnegie said.

A prattle of voices had begun on the soundtrack. Doctor Welles was vainly asking the testee to articulate his feelings while Dance called off figures from the various monitoring instruments. It was difficult to hear much clearly—the din was further supplemented by an eruption of chatter from the caged monkeys—but it was evident that the readings coming through from the man’s body were escalating. His face was flushed, his skin gleamed with a sudden sweat. He resembled a martyr with the tinder at his feet freshly lit, wild with a fatal ecstasy. He stopped French-kissing the window, tearing off the electrodes at his temples and the sensors from his arms and chest. Dance, her voice now registering alarm, called out for him to stop. Then she moved across the camera’s view and out again crossing, Carnegie presumed, to the chamber door.

“Better not,” he said, as if this drama were played out at his behest, and at a whim he could prevent the tragedy. But the woman took no notice. A moment later she appeared in long shot as she stepped into the chamber. The man moved to greet her, throwing over equipment as he did so. She called out to him—his name, perhaps. If so, it was inaudible over the monkey’s hullabaloo. “Shit,” said Carnegie, as the testee’s flailing arms caught first the profile camera, and then the three-quarter medium-shot. Two of the three monitors went dead. Only the head-on shot, the camera safe outside the chamber, still recorded events, but the tightness of the shot precluded more than an occasional glimpse of a moving body. Instead, the camera’s sober eye gazed on, almost ironically, at the salvia smeared glass of the chamber window, blind to the atrocities being committed a few feet out of range.

“What in Christ’s name did they give him?” Carnegie said, as somewhere off camera the woman’s screams rose over the screeching of the apes.

Jerome woke in the early afternoon feeling hungry and sore. When he threw the sheet off his body he was appalled at his state. His torso was scored with scratches, and his groin region was red-raw. Wincing, he moved to the edge of the bed and sat there for a while, trying to piece the previous evening back together again. He remembered going to the laboratories, but very little after that. He had been a paid guinea pig for several months, giving of his blood, comfort

and patience to supplement his meager earnings as a translator. The arrangement had begun courtesy of a friend who did similar work, but whereas Figley had been part of the laboratories' mainstream program, Jerome had been approached after one week at the place by Doctors Welles and Dance, who had invited him—subject to a series psychological tests—to work exclusively for them. It had been made clear from the outset that their project (he had never even been told its purpose) was of a secret nature, and that they would demand his total dedication and discretion. He had needed the funds, and the recompense they offered was marginally better than that paid by the laboratories, so he had agreed, although the hours they had demanded of him were unsociable. For several weeks now he had been required to attend the research facility late at night and often working into the small hours of the morning as he endured Welles's interminable questions about his private life and Dance's glassy stare.

Thinking of her cold look, he felt a tremor in him. Was it because once he had fooled himself that she had looked upon him more fondly than a doctor need? Such self-deception, he chided himself, was pitiful. He was not the stuff of which women dreamed, and each day he walked the streets reinforced that conviction. He could not remember one occasion in his adult life when a woman had looked his way, and kept looking; a time when an appreciative glance of his had been returned. Why this should bother him he wasn't certain. His loveless condition was, he knew, commonplace. And nature had been kind. Knowing, it seemed, that the gift of allurements had passed him by, it had seen fit to minimize his libido. Weeks passed without his conscious thoughts mourning his enforced chastity.

Once in a while, when he heard the pipes roar, he might wonder what Mrs. Morrissey, his landlady, looked like in her bath; might imagine the firmness of her soapy breasts, or the dark divide of her rump as she stooped to put talcum powder between her toes. But such torments were, blissfully, infrequent. And when his cup brimmed he would pocket the money he had saved from his sessions at the laboratories and buy an hour's companionship from a woman named Angela (he'd never learned her second name) on Greek Street.

It would be several weeks before he did so again, he thought. Whatever he had done last night, or, more correctly, had done on him, the bruises alone had nearly crippled him. The only plausible explanation—though he couldn't recall any details—was that he'd been beaten up on the way back from the laboratories. Either that, or he'd stepped into a bar and somebody had picked a fight with him. It had happened before, on occasion. He had one of those faces that woke the bully in drunkards.

He stood up and hobbled to the small bathroom adjoining his room. His glasses were missing from their normal spot beside the shaving mirror and his reflection was woefully blurred, but it was apparent that his face was as badly scratched as the rest of his anatomy. And more: a clump of hair had been pulled out from above his left ear; clotted blood ran down to his neck. Painfully, he bent to the task of cleaning his wounds, then bathing them in a stinging solution of antiseptic. That done, he returned to his room to seek out his spectacles. But search as he might he could not locate them. Cursing his idiocy, he rooted among his belongings for his old pair and found them. Their prescription was out of date—his eyes had worsened considerably since he'd worn them—but they at least brought his surroundings into a dreamy kind of focus.

An indisputable melancholy had crept up on him, compounded of his pain and those unwelcome thoughts of Mrs. Morrissey. To keep its intimacy at bay he turned on the radio. A sleek voice emerged, purveying the usual palliatives. Jerome had always had contempt for popular music and its apologists, but now, as he mooched around the small room, unwilling to clothe himself with chafing weaves when his scratches still pained him, the songs began to stir

something other than scorn in him. It was as though he were hearing the words and music for the first time, as though all his life he had been deaf to their sentiments. Enthralled, he forgot his pain and listened. The songs told one seamless and obsessive story: of love lost and found, only to be lost again. The lyricists filled the airwaves with metaphor—much of it ludicrous, but no less potent for that. Of paradise, of hearts on fire; of birds, bells, journeys, sunsets; of passion as lunacy, as flight, as unimaginable treasure. The songs did not calm him with their fatuous sentiments. They flayed him, evoking, despite feeble rhyme and trite melody, a world bewitched by desire. He began to tremble. His eyes, strained (or so he reasoned) by the unfamiliar spectacles, began to delude him. It seemed as though he could see traces of light in his skin, sparks flying from the ends of his fingers.

He stared at his hands and arms. The illusion, far from retreating in the face of this scrutiny, increased. Beads of brightness, like the traces of fire in ash, began to climb through his veins, multiplying even as he watched. Curiously, he felt no distress. This burgeoning fire merely reflected the passion in the story the songs were telling him. Love, they said, was in the air, around every corner, waiting to be found. He thought again of the widow Morrissey in the flat below him, going about her business, sighing, no doubt, as he had done; awaiting her hero. The more he thought of her the more inflamed he became. She would not reject him, of that the songs convinced him. Or if she did he must press his case until (again, as the songs promised) she surrendered to him. Suddenly, at the thought of her surrender, the fire engulfed him. Laughing, he left the radio singing behind him and made his way downstairs.

It had taken the best part of the morning to assemble a list of testees employed at the laboratories. Carnegie had sensed a reluctance on the part of the establishment to open their files to the investigation despite the horror that had been committed on its premises. Finally, just after noon, they had presented him with a hastily assembled who's who of subjects, four and a half dozen *in toto* and their addresses. None, the offices claimed, matched the description of Welles's testee. The doctors, it was explained, had been clearly using laboratory facilities to work on private projects. Though this was not encouraged, both had been senior researchers, and allowed leeway on the matter. It was likely, therefore, that the man Carnegie was seeking had never even been on the laboratories' payroll. Undaunted, Carnegie ordered a selection of photographs taken off the video recording and had them distributed—with the list of names and address—to his officers. From then on it was down to footwork and patience.

Leo Boyle ran his finger down the list of names he had been given. "Another fourteen," he said. His driver grunted, and Boyle glanced across at him. "You were McBride's partner, weren't you?" he said.

"That's right," Dooley replied. "He's been suspended."

"Why?"

Dooley scowled. "Lacks finesse, that Virgil. Can't get the hang of arrest technique."

Dooley drew the car to a halt.

"Is this is?" Boyle asked.

"You said number eighty. This is eighty. On the door. Eight. Oh."

"I've got eyes."

Boyle got out of the car and made his way up the pathway. The house was sizable, and had been divided into flats. There were several bells. He pressed for J. Tredgold—the name on

his list—and waited. Of the five houses they had so far visited, two had been unoccupied and the residents of the other three had born no resemblance to the malefactor.

Boyle waited on the step a few seconds and then pressed the bell again; a longer ring this time.

“Nobody in,” Dooley said from the pavement.

“Looks like it.” Even as he spoke Boyle caught sight of a figure flitting across the hallway, its outline distorted by the cobblestone glass in the door. “Wait a minute,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Somebody’s in there and not answering.” He pressed the first bell again, and then the others. Dooley approached up the pathway, flicking away an overattentive wasp.

“You sure?” he said.

“I saw somebody in there.”

“Press the other bells,” Dooley suggested.

“I already did. There’s somebody in there and they don’t want to come to the door.” He rapped on the glass. “Open up,” he announced. “Police.”

Clever, thought Dooley; why not a loudspeaker, so heaven knows too? When the door, predictably, remained unanswered, Boyle turned to Dooley. “Is there a side gate?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then get around the back, pronto, before he’s away.”

“Shouldn’t we call—?”

“Do it! I’ll keep watch here. If you can get in the back come through and open the front door.”

Dooley moved, leaving Boyle alone at the front door. He rang the series of bells again and, cupping his hand to his brow, put his face to the glass. There was no sign of movement in the hallway. Was it possible that the bird had already flown? He backed down the path and stared up at the windows; they stared back vacuously. Ample time had now passed for Dooley to get around the back of the house, but so far he had neither reappeared nor called. Stymied where he stood, and nervous that his tactics had lost them their quarry, Boyle decided to follow his nose around the back of the house.

The side gate had been left open by Dooley. Boyle advanced up the side passage, glancing through a window into an empty living room before heading around to the back door. It was open. Dooley, however, was not in sight. Boyle pocketed the photograph and the list and stepped inside, loath to call Dooley’s name for fear it alert any felon to his presence, yet nervous of the silence. Cautious as a cat on broken glass he crept through the flat, but each room was deserted. At the apartment door, which let on to the hallway in which he had first seen the figure, he paused. Where had Dooley gone? The man had apparently disappeared from sight.

Then, a groan from beyond the door.

“Dooley?” Boyle ventured. Another groan. He stepped into the hallway. Three more doors presented themselves, all were closed; other flats, presumably. On the coconut mat at the front door lay Dooley’s truncheon, dropped there as if its owner had been in the process of making his escape. Boyle swallowed his fear and walked into the body of the hall. The complaint came again, close by. He looked around and up the stairs. There, on the half-landing, lay Dooley. He was barely conscious. A rough attempt had been made to rip his clothes. Large portions of his flabby lower anatomy were exposed.

“What’s going on, Dooley?” Boyle asked, moving up to the bottom of the stairs. The officer heard his voice and rolled himself over. His bleary eyes, settling on Boyle, opened in horror.

“It’s all right,” Boyle reassured him. “It’s only me.”

Too late, Boyle registered that Dooley’s gaze wasn’t fixed on *him* at all, but on some sight over his shoulder. As he pivoted on his heel to snatch a glance at Dooley’s bugaboo a charging figure slammed into him. Winded and cursing, Boyle was thrown off his feet. He scrabbled about on the floor for several seconds before his attacker seized hold of him by jacket and hair and hauled him to his feet. He recognized at once the wild face that was thrust into his—the receding hairline, the weak mouth, the *hunger*—but there was much too he had not anticipated. For one, the man was naked as a babe, though scarcely so modesty endowed. For another, he was clearly aroused to fever pitch. If the beady eye at his groin, shining up at Boyle, were not evidence enough, the hands now tearing at his clothes made the assailant’s intention perfectly apparent.

“Dooley!” Boyle shrieked as he was thrown across the hallway. “In Christ’s name! Dooley!”

His pleas were silenced as he hit the opposite wall. The wild man was at his back in half a heartbeat, smearing Boyle’s face against the wallpaper. Birds and flowers, intertwined, filled his eyes. In desperation Boyle fought back, but the man’s passion lent him ungovernable strength. With one insolent hand holding the policeman’s head, he tore at Boyle’s trousers and underwear, leaving his buttocks exposed.

“God...” Boyle begged into the pattern of the wallpaper. “Please God, somebody help me...” But the prayers were no more fruitful than his struggles. He was pinned against the wall like a butterfly spread on cork, about to be pierced through. He closed his eyes, tears of frustration running down his cheeks. The assailant left off his hold on Boyle’s head and pressed his violation home. Boyle refused to cry out. The pain he felt was not the equal of his shame. Better perhaps that Dooley remained comatose; that this humiliation be done and finished unwitnessed.

“Stop,” he murmured into the wall, not to his attacker but to his body, urging it not to find pleasure in this outrage. But his nerve endings were treacherous; they caught fire from the assault. Beneath the stabbing agony some unforgivable part of him rose to the occasion.

On the stairs, Dooley hauled himself to his feet. His lumbar region, which had been weak since the car accident the previous Christmas, had given out almost as soon as the wild man had sprung him in the hall. Now, as he descended the stairs, the least motion caused excruciating agonies. Crippled with pain he stumbled to the bottom of the stairs and looked, amazed, across the hallway. Could this be Boyle—he the supercilious, he the rising man, being pummeled like a street kid in need of dope money? The sight transfixed Dooley for several seconds before he unhinged his eyes and swung them down to the truncheon on the mat. He moved cautiously, but the wild man was too occupied with the deflowering to notice him.

Jerome was listening to Boyle’s heart. It was a loud, seductive beat, and with every thrust into the man it seemed to get louder. He wanted it: the heat of it, the life of it. His hand moved around to Boyle’s chest and dug at his flesh.

“Give me your heart,” he said. It was like a line from one of the songs.

Boyle screamed into the wall as his attacker mauled his chest. He’d seen photographs of the woman at the laboratories; the open wound of her torso was lightning-clear in his mind’s eye. Now the maniac intended the same atrocity. *Give me your heart*. Panicked to the edge of his

sanity he found new stamina and began to fight afresh, reaching around and clawing at the man's torso. Nothing—not even the bloody loss of hair from his scalp—broke the rhythm of his thrusts, however. In extremis, Boyle attempted to insinuate one of his hands between his body and the wall and reach between his legs to unman the bastard. As he did so, Dooley attacked, delivering a hail of truncheon blows upon the man's head. The diversion gave Boyle precious leeway. He pressed hard against the wall. The man, his grip on Boyle's chest slick with blood, lost his hold. Again, Boyle pushed. This time he managed to shrug the man off entirely. The bodies disengaged. Boyle turned, bleeding but in no danger, and watched Dooley follow the man across the hallway, beating at his greasy blond head. He made little attempt to protect himself, however. His burning eyes (Boyle had never understood the physical accuracy of that image until now) were still on the object of his affections.

"Kill him!" Boyle said quietly as the man grinned—grinned!—through the blows. "Break every bone in his body!"

Even if Dooley, hobbled as he was, had been in any fit state to obey the imperative, he had no chance to do so. His berating was interrupted by a voice from down the hallway. A woman had emerged from the flat Boyle had come through. She too had been a victim of this marauder, to judge by her state. But Dooley's entry into the house had clearly distracted her molester before he could do serious damage.

"Arrest him!" she said, pointing at the leering man. "He tried to rape me!"

Dooley closed in to take possession of the prisoner, but Jerome had other intentions. He put his hand in Dooley's face and pushed him back against the front door. The coconut mat slid from under him; he all but fell. By the time he'd regained his balance Jerome was up and away. Boyle made a wretched attempt to stop him, but the tatters of his trousers were wrapped about his lower legs and Jerome, fleet-footed, was soon half-way up the stairs.

"Call for help," Boyle ordered Dooley. "And make it quick."

Dooley nodded and opened the front door.

"Is there any way out from upstairs?" Boyle demanded of Mrs. Morrissey. She shook her head. "Then we've got the bastard trapped, haven't we?" he said. "Go on, Dooley!" Dooley hobbled away down the path. "And you," he said to the woman, "fetch something in the way of weaponry. Anything solid." The woman nodded and returned the way she'd come, leaving Boyle slumped beside the open door. A soft breeze cooled the sweat on his face. At the car outside Dooley was calling up reinforcements.

All too soon, Boyle thought, the cars would be here, and the man upstairs would be hauled away to give his testimony. There would be no opportunity for revenge once he was in custody. The law would take its placid course, and he, the victim, would only be a bystander. If he was ever to salvage the ruins of his manhood, *now* was the time. If he didn't—if he languished here, his bowels on fire—he would never shrug off the horror he felt at his body's betrayal. He must act now—must beat the grin off his ravisher's face once and for all—or else live in self-disgust until memory failed him.

The choice was no choice at all. Without further debate, he got up from his squatting position and began up the stairs. As he reached the half-landing he realized he hadn't brought a weapon with him. He knew, however, that if he descended again he'd lose all momentum. Prepared, in that moment, to die if necessary, he headed on up.

There was only one door on the top landing. Through it came the sound of a radio. Downstairs, in the safety of the hall, he heard Dooley come in to tell him that the call had been

made, only to break off in mid-announcement. Ignoring the distraction, Boyle stepped into the flat.

There was nobody there. It took Boyle a few moments only to check the kitchen, the tiny bathroom and the living room. All were deserted. He returned to the bathroom, the window of which was open, and put his head out. The drop to the grass of the garden below was quite manageable. There was an imprint in the ground of the man's body. He had leaped. And gone.

Boyle cursed his tardiness and hung his head. A trickle of heat ran down the inside of his leg. In the next room, the love songs played on.

For Jerome, there was no forgetfulness, not this time. The encounter with Mrs. Morrissey, which had been interrupted by Dooley, and the episode with Boyle that had followed, had all merely served to fan the fire in him. Now, by the light of those flames, he saw clearly what crimes he had committed. He remembered with horrible clarity the laboratory, the injection, the monkeys, the blood. The acts he recalled, however (and there were many), woke no sense of sinfulness in him. All moral consequence, all shame or remorse, was burned out by the fire that was even now licking his flesh to new enthusiasms.

He took refuge in a quiet cul-de-sac to make himself presentable. The clothes he had managed to snatch before making his escape were motley but would serve to keep him from attracting unwelcome attention. As he buttoned himself up—his body seeming to strain from its covering as if resentful of being concealed—he tried to control the holocaust that raged between his ears. But the flames wouldn't be dampened. His every fiber seemed alive to the flux and flow of the world around him. The marshaled trees along the road, the wall at his back, the very paving stones beneath his bare feet were catching a spark from him and burning now with their own fire. He grinned to see the conflagration spread. The world, in its every eager particular, grinned back.

Aroused beyond control, he turned to the wall he had been leaning against. The sun had fallen full upon it, and it was warm; the bricks smelled ambrosial. He laid kisses on their gritty faces, his hands exploring every nook and cranny. Murmuring sweet nothings, he unzipped himself, found an accommodating niche, and filled it. His mind was running with liquid pictures: mingled anatomies, female and male in one undistinguishable congress. Above him, even the clouds had caught fire. Enthralled by their burning heads he felt the moment rise in his gristle. Breath was short now. But the ecstasy? Surely that would go on forever.

Without warning a spasm of pain traveled down his spine from cortex to testicles and back again, convulsing him. His hands lost grip of the brick and he finished his agonizing climax on the air as he fell across the pavement. For several seconds he lay where he had collapsed, while the echoes of the initial spasm bounced back and forth along his spine, diminishing with each return. He could taste blood at the back of his throat. He wasn't certain if he'd bitten his lip or tongue, but he thought not. Above his head the birds circled on, rising lazily on a spiral of warm air. He watched the fire in the clouds gutter out.

He got to his feet and looked down at the coinage of semen he'd spent on the pavement. For a fragile instant he caught again a whiff of the vision he'd just had; imagined a marriage of his seed with the paving stone. What sublime children the world might boast, he thought, if he could only mate with brick or tree. He would gladly suffer the agonies of conception if such miracles were possible. But the paving stone was unmoved by his seed's entreaties. The vision, like the fire above him, cooled and hid its glories.

He put his bloodied member away and leaned against the wall, turning the strange events of his recent life over and over. Something fundamental was changing in him, of that he had no doubt. The rapture that had possessed him (and would, no doubt, possess him again) was like nothing he had hitherto experienced. And whatever they had injected into his system, it showed no signs of being discharged naturally; far from it. He could feel the heat in him still, as he had leaving the laboratories, but this time the roar of its presence was louder than ever.

It was a new kind of life he was living, and the thought, through frightening, exulted him. Not once did it occur to his spinning, eroticized brain that this new kind of life should, in time, demand a new kind of death.

Carnegie had been warned by his superiors that results were expected. He was now passing the verbal beating he'd received to those under him. It was a line of humiliation in which the greater was encouraged to kick the lesser man, and that man, in turn, his lesser. Carnegie had sometimes wondered what the man at the end of the line took his ire out on; his dog presumably.

"This miscreant is still loose, gentlemen, despite his photograph in many of this morning's newspapers and an operating method which is, to say the least, insolent. We *will* catch him, of course, but let's get the bastard before we have another murder on our hands—"

The phone rang. Boyle's replacement, Migeon, picked it up, while Carnegie concluded his pep talk to the assembled officers.

"I want him in the next twenty-four hours, gentlemen. That's the time scale I've been given, and that's what we've got. Twenty-four hours."

Migeon interrupted. "Sir? It's Johannson. He says he's got something for you. It's urgent."

"Right." Carnegie claimed the receiver. "Carnegie."

The voice at the other end was soft to the point of inaudibility. "Carnegie," Johannson said, "we've been right through the laboratory, dug up every piece of information we could find on Dance and Welles's tests—"

"And?"

"We've also analyzed traces of the agent from the hypo they used on the suspect. I think we've found the *boy*, Carnegie."

"What boy?" Carnegie wanted to know. He found Johannson's obfuscation irritating.

"*The Blind Boy*, Carnegie."

"And?"

For some inexplicable reason Carnegie was certain the man *smiled* down the phone line before replying: "I think perhaps you'd better come down and see for yourself. Sometime around noon suit you?"

Johannson could have been one of history's greatest poisoners. He had all the requisite qualifications. A tidy mind (poisoners were, in Carnegie's experience, domestic paragons), a patient nature (poison could take time) and, most importantly, an encyclopedic knowledge of toxicology. Watching him at work, which Carnegie had done on two previous cases, was to see a subtle man at his subtle craft, and the spectacle made Carnegie's blood run cold.

Johannson had installed himself in the laboratory on the top floor, where Doctor Dance had been murdered, rather than use police facilities for the investigation, because, as he explained to Carnegie, much of the equipment the Hume organization boasted was simply not

available elsewhere. His dominion over the place, accompanied by his two assistants, had, however, transformed the laboratory from the clutter left by the experimenters to a dream of order. Only the monkeys remained a constant. Try as he might Johansson could not control their behavior.

"We didn't have difficulty finding the drug used on your man," Johansson said, "we simply cross-checked traces remaining in the hypodermic with materials found in the room. In fact, they seem to have been manufacturing this stuff, or variations on the theme, for some time. The people here claim they know nothing about it, of course. I'm inclined to believe them. What the good doctors were doing here was, I'm sure, in the nature of a personal experiment."

"What sort of experiment?"

Johansson took off his spectacles and set about cleaning them with the tongue of his red tie. "At first, we thought they were developing some kind of hallucinogen," he said. "In some regards the agent used on your man resembles a narcotic. In fact—methods apart—I think they made some very exciting discoveries. Developments which take us into entirely new territory."

"It's not a drug then?"

"Oh, yes, of course it's a drug," Johansson said, replacing the spectacles, "but one created for a very specific purpose. See for yourself."

Johansson led the way across the laboratory to the row of monkeys' cages. Instead of being confined separately, the toxicologist had seen fit to open the interconnecting doors between one cage and the next, allowing the animals free access to gather in groups. The consequence was absolutely plain—the animals were engaged in an elaborate series of sexual acts. Why, Carnegie wondered, did monkeys perpetually perform obscenities? It was the same torrid display whenever he'd taken his offspring, as children, to Regent's Park Zoo; the ape enclosure elicited one embarrassing question upon another. He stopped taking the children after a while. He simply found it too mortifying.

"Believe me," Johansson smirked, "this is mild by comparison with much of the behavior we've seen from them since we gave them a shot of the agent. From that point on they neglected all normal behavior patterns. They bypassed the arousal signals, the courtship rituals. They no longer show any interest in food. They don't sleep. They have become sexual obsessives. All other stimuli are forgotten. Unless the agent is naturally discharged, I suspect they are going to screw themselves to death."

Carnegie looked along the rest of the cages. The same pornographic scenes were being played out in each one. Mass rape, homosexual liaisons, fervent and ecstatic masturbation.

"It's no wonder the doctors made a secret project of their discovery," Johansson went on. "They were on to something that could have made them a fortune. As aphrodisiac that actually works."

"An aphrodisiac?"

"Most are useless, of course. Rhinoceros horn, live eels in cream sauce: symbolic stuff. They're designed to arouse by association."

Carnegie remembered the hunger in Jerome's eyes. It was echoed here in the monkeys'. Hunger, and the desperation that hunger brings.

"And the ointments too, all useless. *Cantharis vesticatora*—"

"What's that?"

"You know the stuff as Spanish fly, perhaps? It's a paste made from a beetle. Again, useless. At best these things are irritants. But this..." He picked up a vial of colorless fluid.

"This is damn near genius."

“They don’t look too happy with it to me.”

“Oh, it’s still crude,” Johansson said. “I think the researchers were greedy and moved into tests on living subjects a good two to three years before it was wise to do so. The stuff is almost lethal as it stands, no doubt of that. But it *could* be made to work, given time. You see, they’ve sidestepped the mechanical problems. This stuff operates directly on the sexual imagination, on the libido. If you arouse the *mind*, the body follows. That’s the trick of it.”

A rattling of the wire mesh close by drew Carnegie’s attention from Johansson’s pale features. One of the female monkeys, apparently not satisfied with the attentions of several males, was spread-eagled against her cage, her nimble fingers reaching for Carnegie. Her spouses, not to be left loveless, had taken to sodomy. “*Blind Boy?*” said Carnegie. “Is that Jerome?”

“It’s Cupid, isn’t it?” Johansson said:

*“Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind,
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.”*

It’s Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“The bard was never my strongest suit,” said Carnegie. He went back to staring at the female monkey. “And Jerome?” he said.

“He has the agent in his system. A sizable dose.”

“So he’s like this lot!”

“I would presume—his intellectual capacities being greater—that the agent may not be able to work in quite such an *unfettered* fashion. But, having said that, sex can make monkeys out of the best of us, can’t it?” Johansson allowed himself a half-smile at the notion. “All our so-called higher concerns become secondary to the pursuit. For a short time sex makes us obsessive. We can perform, or at least *think* we can perform, what with hindsight may seem extraordinary feats.”

“I don’t think there’s anything so extraordinary about rape,” Carnegie commented, attempting to stem Johansson’s rhapsody. But the other man would not be subdued.

“Sex without end, without compromise or apology,” he said. “Imagine it. The dream of Casanova.”

* * *

The world had seen so many Ages: the Age of Enlightenment; of Reformation; of Reason. Now, at last, the Age of Desire. And after this, an end to Ages; an end, perhaps, to everything. For the fires that were being stoked now were fiercer than the innocent world suspected. They were terrible fires, fires without end, which would illuminate the world in one last, fierce light.

So Welles thought as he lay in his bed. He had been conscious for several hours, but had chosen not to signify such. Whenever a nurse came into his room he would clamp his eyes closed and slow the rhythm of his breath. He knew he could not keep the illusion up for long, but the hours gave him a while to think through his itinerary from here. His first move had to be back at the laboratories. There were papers there he had to shred, tapes to wipe clean. From now on he was determined that every scrap of information about *Project Blind Boy* exist solely

in his head. That way he would have complete control over his masterwork, and nobody could claim it from him.

He had never had much interest in making money from the discovery, although he was well aware of how lucrative a workable aphrodisiac would be; he had never given a fig for material wealth. His initial motivation for the development of the drug—which they had chanced upon quite by accident while testing an agent to aid schizophrenics—had been investigative. But his motives had matured through their months of secret work. He had come to think of himself as the bringer of the millennium. He would not have anyone attempt to snatch that sacred role from him.

So he thought, lying in his bed, waiting for a moment to slip away.

As he walked the streets Jerome would have happily affirmed Welles's vision. Perhaps he, of all men, was most eager to welcome the Age of Desire. He saw its portents everywhere: on advertising billboards and cinema marquees, in shop windows, on television screens—everywhere, the body as merchandise. Where flesh was not being used to market artifacts of steel and stone, those artifacts were taking on its properties. Automobiles passed him by with every voluptuous attribute but breath—their sinuous bodywork gleamed, their interiors invited plushly. The buildings beleaguered him with sexual puns: spires, passageways, shadowed plazas with white-water fountains. Beneath the raptures of the shallow—the thousand trivial distractions he encountered in street and square—he sensed the ripe life of the body informing every particular.

The spectacle kept the fire in him well stoked. It was all that will power could do to keep him from pressing his attentions on every creature that he met eyes with. A few seemed to sense the heat in him and gave him wide berth. Dogs sensed it too. Several followed him, aroused by *his* arousal. Flies orbited his head in squadrons. But his growing ease with his condition gave him some rudimentary control over it. He knew that to make a public display of his ardor would bring the law down upon him, and that in turn would hinder his adventures. Soon enough, the fire that he had begun would spread. *Then* he would emerge from hiding and bathe in it freely. Until then, discretion was best.

He had on occasion bought the company of a young woman in Soho; he went to find her now. The afternoon was stifling hot, but he felt no weariness. He had not eaten since the previous evening, but he felt no hunger. Indeed, as he climbed the narrow stairway up to the room on the first floor which Angela had once occupied, he felt as primed as an athlete, glowing with health. The immaculately dressed and wall-eyed pimp who usually occupied a place at the top of the stairs was absent. Jerome simply went to the girl's room and knocked. There was no reply. He rapped again, more urgently. The noise brought an early middle-aged woman to the door at the end of the landing.

"What do you want?"

"The woman," he said simply.

"Angela's gone. And you'd better get out of here too in that state. This isn't a flop-house."

"When will she be back?" he asked, keeping as tight a leash as he could on his appetite.

The woman, who was as tall as Jerome and half as heavy again as his wasted frame, advanced toward him. "The girl won't *be* back," she said, "so you get the hell out of here, before I call Isaiah."

Jerome looked at the woman. She shared Angela's profession, no doubt, if not her youth or prettiness. He smiled at her. "I can hear your heart," he said.

"I told you—"

Before she could finish the words Jerome moved down the landing toward her. She wasn't intimidated by his approach, merely repulsed.

"If I call Isaiah, you'll be sorry," she informed him. The pace of her heartbeat had risen, he could hear it.

"I'm burning," he said.

She frowned. She was clearly losing this battle of wits. "Stay away from me," she said. "I'm warning you."

The heartbeat was getting more rapid still. The rhythm, buried in her substance, drew him on. From that source: all life, all heat.

"Give me your heart," he said.

"Isaiah!"

Nobody came running at her shout, however. Jerome gave her no opportunity to cry out a second time. He reached to embrace her, clamping a hand over her mouth. She let fly a volley of blows against him, but the pain only fanned the flames. He was brighter by the moment. His every orifice let onto the furnace in his belly and loins and head. Her superior bulk was of no advantage against such fervor. He pushed her against the wall—the beat of her heart loud in his ears—and began to apply kisses to her neck, tearing her dress open to free her breasts.

"Don't shout," he said, trying to sound persuasive. "There's no harm meant."

She shook her head and said, "I won't," against his palm. He took his hand away from her mouth and she dragged in several desperate breaths. Where was Isaiah? she thought. Not far, surely. Fearing for her life if she tried to resist this interloper—how his eyes shone!—she gave up any pretense to resistance and let him have his way. Men's supply of passion, she knew from long experience, was easily depleted. Though they might threaten to move earth and heaven too, half an hour later their boasts would be damp sheets and resentment. If worst came to worst, she could tolerate his inane talk of burning; she'd heard far obscener bedroom chat. As to the prong he was even now attempting to press into her, it and its comical like held no surprises for her.

Jerome wanted to touch the heart in her, wanted to see it splash up into his face, to bathe in it. He put his hand to her breast and felt the beat of her under his palm.

"You like that, do you?" she said as he pressed against her bosom. "You're not the first."

He clawed her skin.

"Gently, sweetheart," she chided him, looking over his shoulder to see if there was any sign of Isaiah. "Be gentle. This is the only body I've got."

He ignored her. His nails drew blood.

"Don't do that," she said.

"Wants to be out," he replied digging deeply, and it suddenly dawned on her that this was no love-game he was playing.

"Stop it," she said, as he began to tear at her. This time she screamed.

Downstairs, and a short way along the street, Isaiah dropped the slice of *tarte française* he'd just bought and ran to the door. It wasn't the first time his sweet tooth had tempted him from his post, but—unless he was quick to undo the damage—it might very well be his last. There were terrible noises from the landing. He raced up the stairs. The scene that met his eyes was in every way worse than that his imagination had conjured. Simone was trapped against the wall

beside her door with a man batted upon her. Blood was coming from somewhere between them, he couldn't see where.

Isaiah yelled. Jerome, hands bloody, looked around from his labors as a giant in a Savile Row suit reached for him. It took Jerome vital seconds to uproot himself from the furrow, by which time the man was upon him. Isaiah took hold of him, and dragged him off the woman. She took shelter, sobbing, in her room.

"Sick bastard," Isaiah said, launching a fusillade of punches. Jerome reeled. But he was on fire, and unafraid. In a moment's respite he leaped at his man like an angered baboon. Isaiah, taken unawares, lost balance, and fell back against one of the doors, which opened inward against his weight. He collapsed into a squalid lavatory, his head striking the lip of the toilet bowl as he went down. The impact disoriented him, and he lay on the stained linoleum groaning, legs akimbo. Jerome could hear his blood, eager in his veins; could smell sugar on his breath. It tempted him to stay. But his instinct for self-preservation counseled otherwise; Isaiah was already making an attempt to stand up again. Before he could get to his feet Jerome turned about and made a getaway down the stairs.

The dog day met him at the doorstep, and he smiled. The street wanted him more than the woman on the landing, and he was eager to oblige. He started out onto the pavement, his erection still pressing from his trousers. Behind him he heard the giant pounding down the stairs. He took to his heels, laughing. The fire was still uncurbed in him, and it lent speed to his feet. He ran down the street not caring if Sugar Breath was following or not. Pedestrians, unwilling in this dispassionate age to register more than causal interest in the blood-splattered satyr, parted to let him pass. A few pointed, assuming he was an actor perhaps. Most took no notice at all. He made his way through a maze of back streets, aware without needing to look that Isaiah was still on his heels.

Perhaps it was accident that brought him to the street market; perhaps, and more probably, it was that the swelter carried the mingled scent of meat and fruit to his nostrils and he wanted to bathe in it. The narrow thoroughfare was thronged with purchasers, sightseers and stalls heaped with merchandise. He dove into the crowd happily, brushing against buttock and thigh, meeting the plaguing gaze of fellow flesh on every side. Such a day! He and his prick could scarcely believe their luck.

Behind him he heard Isaiah shout. He picked up his pace, heading for the most densely populated area of the market, where he could lose himself in the hot press of people. Each contact was a painful ecstasy. Each climax—and they came one upon the other as he pressed through the crowd—was a dry spasm in his system. His back ached, his balls ached. But what was his body now? Just a plinth for that singular monument, his prick. Head was *nothing*; mind was *nothing*. His arms were simply made to bring love close, his legs to carry the demanding rod any place where it might find satisfaction. He pictured himself as a walking erection, the world gaping on every side. Flesh, brick, steel, he didn't care—he would ravish it all.

Suddenly, without his seeking it, the crowd parted, and he found himself off the main thoroughfares and in a narrow street. Sunlight poured between the buildings, its zeal magnified. He was about to turn back to join the crowd again when he caught a scent and sight that drew him on. A short way down the heat-drenched street three shirtless young men were standing amid piles of fruit crates, each containing dozens of baskets of strawberries. There had been a glut of the fruit that year, and in the relentless heat much of it had begun to soften and rot. The trio of workers was going through the baskets, sorting bad fruit from good, and throwing the spoiled strawberries into the gutter. The smell in the narrow space was overpowering, a

sweetness of such strength it would have sickened any interloper other than Jerome, whose senses had lost all capacity for revulsion or rejection. The world was the world; he would take it, as in marriage, for better or worse. He stood watching the spectacle entranced: the sweating fruit sorters bright in the fall of sun, hands, arms and torsos splattered with scarlet juice; the air mazed with every nectar-seeking insect; the discarded fruit heaped in the gutter in seeping mounds. Engaged in their sticky labors, the sorters didn't even see him at first. Then one of the three looked up and took in the extraordinary creature watching them. The grin on his face died as he met Jerome's eyes.

"What the hell?"

Now the other two looked up from their work.

"Sweet," said Jerome. He could hear their hearts tremble.

"Look at him," said the youngest of the three, pointing at Jerome's groin. "Fucking exposing himself."

They stood still in the sunlight, he and they, while the wasps whirled around the fruit and, in the narrow slice of blue summer sky between the roofs, birds passed over. Jerome wanted the moment to go on forever; his too-naked head tasted Eden here.

And then, the dream broke. He felt a shadow on his back. One of the sorters dropped his basket he was sorting through; the decayed fruit broke open on the gravel. Jerome frowned and half-turned. Isaiah had found the street. His weapon was steel and shone. It crossed the space between him and Jerome in one short second. Jerome felt an ache in his side as the knife slid into him.

"*Christ*," the young man said and began to run. His two brothers, unwilling to be witnesses at the scene of a wounding, hesitated only moments longer before following.

The pain made Jerome cry out, but nobody in the noisy market heard him. Isaiah withdrew the blade; heat came with it. He made to stab again but Jerome was too fast for the spoiler. He moved out of range and staggered across the street. The would-be assassin, fearful that Jerome's cries would draw too much attention, moved quickly in pursuit to finish the job. But the tarmac was slick with rotted fruit, and his fine suede shoes had less grip than Jerome's bare feet. The gap between them widened by a pace.

"No you don't," Isaiah said, determined not to let his humiliator escape. He pushed over a tower of fruit crates—baskets toppled and strewed their contents across Jerome's path. Jerome hesitated, to take in the bouquet of bruised fruit. The indulgence almost killed him. Isaiah closed in, ready to take the man. Jerome, his system taxed to near eruption by the stimulus of pain, watched the blade come close to opening up his belly. His mind conjured the wound: the abdomen slit—the heat spilling out to join the blood of the strawberries in the gutter. The thought was so tempting. He almost wanted it.

Isaiah had killed before. He knew the wordless vocabulary of the act, and he could see the invitation in his victim's eyes. Happy to oblige, he came to meet it, knife at the ready. As the last possible moment Jerome recanted, and instead of presenting himself for slitting, threw a blow at the giant. Isaiah ducked to avoid it and his feet slid in the mush. The knife fled from his hand and fell among the debris of baskets and fruit. Jerome turned away as the hunter—the advantage lost—stooped to locate the knife. But his prey was gone before his ham-fisted grip had found it; lost again in the crowd-filled streets. He had no opportunity to pocket the knife before the uniform stepped out of the crowd and joined him in the hot passageway.

"What's the story?" the policeman demanded, looking down at the knife. Isaiah followed his gaze. The bloodied blade was black with flies.

In his office Inspector Carnegie sipped at his hot chocolate, his third in the past hour, and watched the processes of dusk. He had always wanted to be a detective, right from his earliest rememberings. And, in those rememberings, this had always been a charged and magical hour. Night descending on the city; myriad evils putting on their glad rags and coming out to play. A time for vigilance, for a new moral stringency.

But as a child he had failed to imagine the fatigue that twilight invariably brought. He was tired to his bones, and if he snatched any sleep in the next few hours he knew it would be here, in his chair, with his feet up on the desk amid a clutter of plastic cups.

The phone rang. It was Johannson.

"Still at work?" he said, impressed by Johannson's dedication to the job. It was well after nine. Perhaps Johannson didn't have a home worth calling such to go back to either.

"I heard our man had a busy day," Johannson said.

"That's right. A prostitute in Soho, then got himself stabbed."

"He got through the cordon, I gather?"

"These things happen," Carnegie replied, too tired to be testy. "What can I do for you?"

"I just thought you'd want to know: the monkeys have started to die."

The words stirred Carnegie from his fatigue-stupor. "How many?" he asked.

"Three from fourteen so far. But the rest will be dead by dawn, I'd guess."

"What's killing them? Exhaustion?" Carnegie recalled the desperate saturnalia he'd seen in the cages. What animal-human or otherwise-could keep up such revelry without cracking up?

"It's not physical," Johannson said. "Or at least not in the way you're implying. We'll have to wait for the dissection results before we get any detailed explanations--"

"Your best guess?"

"For what it's worth..." Johannson said, "...which is quite a lot: I think they're going bang."

"What?"

"Cerebral overload of some kind. Their brains are simply giving out. The agent doesn't disperse you see. *It feeds on itself*. The more fevered they get, the more of the drug is produced; the more of the drug there is, the more fevered they get. It's a vicious circle. Hotter and hotter, wilder and wilder. Eventually the system can't take it, and suddenly I'm up to my armpits in dead monkeys." The smile came back into the voice again, cold and wry. "Not that the others let that spoil their fun. Necrophilia's quite the fashion down here."

Carnegie peered at his cooling hot chocolate. It had acquired a thin skin which puckered as he touched the cup. "So it's just a matter of time?" he said.

"Before our man goes for bust? Yes, I'd think so."

"All right. Thank you for the update. Keep me posted."

"You want to come down here and view the remains?"

"Monkey corpses I can do without, thank you."

Johannson laughed. Carnegie put down the receiver. When he turned back to the window, night had well and truly fallen.

In the laboratory Johannson crossed to the light switch by the door. In the time he'd been calling Carnegie the last of the daylight had fled. He saw the blow that felled him coming a mere heartbeat before it landed; it caught him across the side of his neck. One of his vertebrae

snapped and his legs buckled. He collapsed without reaching the light switch. But by the time he hit the ground the distinction between day and night was academic.

Welles didn't bother to check whether his blow had been lethal or not; time was at a premium. He stepped over the body and headed across to the bench where Johansson had been working. There, lying in a circle of lamplight as if for the final act of a simian tragedy, lay a dead monkey. It had clearly perished in a frenzy. Its face was knitted up; mouth wide and spittle-stained; eyes fixed in a final look of alarm. Its fur had been pulled out in tufts in the throes of its copulation. It took Welles half a minute of study to recognize the implications of the corpse, and of the other two he now saw lying on a nearby bench.

"Love kills," he murmured to himself philosophically and began his systematic destruction of *Blind Boy*.

I'm drying, Jerome thought. I'm dying of *terminal joy*. The thought amused him. It was the only thought in his head which made sense. Since his encounter with Isaiah and the escape from the police that had followed, he could remember little with any coherence. The hours of hiding and nursing his wounds—of feeling the heat grow again, and of discharging it—had long since merged into one midsummer dream, from which, he knew with pleasurable certainty, only death would wake him. The blaze was devouring him utterly, from the entrails out. If he were to eviscerated now, what would the witnesses find? Only embers and ashes.

Yet still his one-eyed friend demanded *more*. Still, as he wove his way back to the laboratories—where else for a man to go when the stitches slipped but back to the first heat?—still the grids gaped at him seductively, and every brick wall offered up a hundred gritty invitations.

The night was balmy: a night for love songs and romance. In the questionable privacy of a parking lot a few blocks from his destination he saw two people having sex in the back of a car, the doors open to accommodate limbs and draft. Jerome paused to watch the ritual, enthralled as ever by the tangle of bodies and the sound—so loud it was like thunder itself—of twin hearts beating to one escalating rhythm. Watching, his rod grew eager.

The female saw him first and alerted her partner to the wreck of a human being who was watching them with such childish delight. The male looked around from his gropings to stare. Do I burn, Jerome wondered? Does my hair flame? At the last, does the illusion gain substance? To judge by the look on their faces, the answer was surely no. They were not in awe of him, merely angered and revolted.

"I'm on fire," he told them.

The male got to his feet and spat at Jerome. He almost expected the spittle to turn to steam as it approached him but instead it landed on his face and upper chest as a cooling shower.

"Go to hell," the woman said. "Leave us alone."

Jerome shook his head. The male warned him that another step would oblige him to break Jerome's head. It disturbed our man not a jig; no words, no blows, could silence the imperative of the rod.

Their hearts, he realized, as he moved toward them, no longer beat in tandem.

Carnegie consulted the map, five years out of date now, on his office wall to pinpoint the location of the attack that had just been reported. Neither of the victims had come to serious harm, apparently. The arrival of a carload of revelers had dissuaded Jerome (it was unquestioningly Jerome) from lingering. Now the area was being flooded with officers, half a dozen of them armed. In a matter of minutes every street in the vicinity of the attack would be

cordoned off. Unlike Soho, which had been crowded, the area would furnish the fugitive with few hiding places.

Carnegie pinpointed the location of the attack and realized that it was within a few blocks of the laboratories. No accident, surely. The man was heading back to the scene of his crime. Wounded, and undoubtedly on the verge of collapse—the lovers had described a man who looked more dead than alive—Jerome would probably be picked up before he reached home. But there was always the risk of his slipping through the net and getting to the laboratories. Johansson was working there, alone. The guard on the building was, in these straitened times, necessarily small.

Carnegie picked up the phone and dialed through to Johansson. The phone rang at the other end but nobody picked it up. The man's gone home, Carnegie thought, happy to be relieved of his concern. It's ten-fifty at night and he's earned his rest. Just as he was about to put the receiver down, however, it was picked up at the other end.

"Johansson?"

Nobody replied.

"Johansson? This is Carnegie." And still, no reply. "Answer me, damn it. Who is this?"

In the laboratories the receiver was forsaken. It was not replaced on the cradle but left to lie on the bench. Down the buzzing line, Carnegie could clearly hear the monkeys, their voices shrill.

"Johansson?" Carnegie demanded. "Are you there? Johansson?"

But the apes screamed on.

Welles had built two bonfires of the *Blind Boy* material in the sinks and then set them alight. They flared up enthusiastically. Smoke, heat and ashes filled the large room, thickening the air. When the fires were fairly raging he threw all the tapes he could lay hands upon into the conflagration, and added all of Johansson's notes for good measure. Several of the tapes had already gone from the files, he noted. But all they could show any thief was some teasing scenes of transformation. The heart of the secret remained his. With the procedures and formulae now destroyed, it only remained to wash the small amounts of remaining agent down the drain and kill and incinerate the animals.

He prepared a series of lethal hypodermics, going about the business with uncharacteristic orderliness. This systematic destruction gratified him. He felt no regret at the way things had turned out. From that first moment of panic, when he'd helplessly watched the *Blind Boy* serum work its awesome effects upon Jerome, to this final elimination of all that had gone before had been, he now saw, one steady process of wiping clean. With these fires he brought an end to the pretense of scientific inquiry. After this he was indisputably the Apostle of Desire, its John in the Wilderness. The thought blinded him to any other. Careless of the monkeys' scratchings he hauled them one by one from their cages to deliver the killing dose. He had dispatched three, and was opening the cage of the fourth, when a figure appeared in the doorway of the laboratory. Through the smoky air it was impossible to see who. The surviving monkeys seemed to recognize him, however. They left off their couplings and set up a din of welcome.

Welles stood still and waited for the newcomer to make his move.

"I'm dying," said Jerome.

Welles had not expected this. Of all the people he had anticipated here, Jerome was the last.

"Did you hear me?" the man wanted to know.

Welles nodded. "We're *all* dying, Jerome. Life is a slow disease, no more nor less. But such a *light*, eh? in the going."

"You *knew* this would happen," Jerome said. "You knew the fire would eat me away."

"No," came the sober reply. "No, I didn't. Really."

Jerome walked out of the door frame and into the murky light. He was a wasted shambles, a patchwork man, blood on his body, fire in his eyes. But Welles knew better than to trust the apparent vulnerability of this scarecrow. The agent in his system had made him capable of superhuman acts. He had seen Dance torn open with a few nonchalant strokes. Tact was required. Though clearly close to death, Jerome was still formidable.

"I didn't intend this, Jerome," Welles said, attempting to tame the tremor in his voice. "I wish, in a way, I could claim that I had. But I wasn't that farsighted. It's taken me time and pain to see the future plainly."

The burning man watched him, gaze intent.

"Such fires, Jerome, waiting to be lit."

"I know..." Jerome replied. "Believe me...I know."

"You and I, we are the end of the world."

The wretched monster pondered this for a while, and then nodded slowly. Welles softly exhaled a sigh of relief. The deathbed diplomacy was working. But he had little time to waste with talk. If Jerome was here, could the authorities be far behind?

"I have urgent work to do, my friend," he said calmly. "Would you think me uncivil if I continued with it?"

Without waiting for a reply he unlatched another cage and hauled the condemned monkey out, expertly turning its body around to facilitate the injection. The animal convulsed in his arms for a few moments, then died. Welles disengaged its wizened fingers from his shirt and tossed the corpse and the discharged hypodermic on to the bench, turning with an executioner's economy to claim his next victim.

"Why?" Jerome asked, staring at the animal's open eyes.

"Act of mercy," Welles replied, picking up another primed hypodermic. "You can see how they're suffering." He reached to unlatch the next cage.

"Don't," Jerome said.

"No time for sentiment," Welles replied. "I beg you, an end to that."

Sentiment, Jerome thought, muddily remembering the songs on the radio that had first reawoken the fire in him. Didn't Welles understand that the processes of heart and head and groin were indivisible? That sentiment, however trite, might lead to undiscovered regions? He wanted to tell the doctor that, to explain all that he had seen and all that he had loved in these desperate hours. But somewhere between mind and tongue the explanations absconded. All he could say, to state the empathy he felt for all the suffering world, was: "*Don't*," as Welles unlocked the next cage. The doctor ignored him and reached into the wire-mesh cell. It contained three animals. He took hold of the nearest and drew it, protesting, from its companions' embraces. Without doubt it knew what fate awaited it; a flurry of screeches signaled its terror.

Jerome couldn't stomach this casual disposal. He moved, the wound in his side a torment, to prevent the killing. Welles, distracted by Jerome's advance, lost hold of the wriggling charge. The monkey scampered away across the bench-tops. As he went to recapture it the prisoners in the cage behind him took their chance and slipped out.

“Damn you,” Welles yelled at Jerome, “don’t you see we’ve no *time*? Don’t you understand?”

Jerome understood everything, and yet nothing. The fever he and the animals shared he understood; its purpose, to transform the world, he understood too. But why should it end like this—that joy, that vision—why should it all come down to a sordid room filled with smoke and pain, to frailty, to despair? *That* he did not comprehend. Nor, he now realized, did Welles, who had been the architect of these contradictions.

As the doctor made a snatch for one of the escaping monkeys, Jerome crossed swiftly to the remaining cages and unhatched them all. The animals leaped to their freedom. Welles had succeeded with his recapture, however, and had the protesting monkey in his grip, about to deliver the panacea. Jerome made toward him.

“Let it be,” he yelled.

Welles pressed the hypodermic into the monkey’s body, but before he could depress the plunger Jerome had pulled at his wrist. The hypodermic spat its poison into the air and then fell to the ground. The monkey, wresting itself free, followed.

Jerome pulled Welles close. “I told you to *let it be*,” he said.

Welles’s response was to drive his fist into Jerome’s wounded flank. Tears of pain spurted from his eyes, but he didn’t release the doctor. The stimulus, unpleasant as it was, could not dissuade him from holding that beating heart close. He wished, embracing Welles like a prodigal, that he could ignite himself, that the dream of burning flesh he had endured would now become a reality, consuming maker and made in one cleansing flame. But his flesh was only flesh; his bone, bone. What miracles he had seen had been a private revelation, and now there was no time to communicate their glories or their horrors. What he had seen would die with him, to be rediscovered (perhaps) by some future self, only to be forgotten and discovered again. Like the story of love the radio had told; the same joy lost and found, found and lost. He stared at Welles with new comprehension dawning, hearing still the terrified beat of the man’s heart. The doctor was *wrong*. If he left the man to live, he would come to know his error. They were not presagers of the millennium. They had both been dreaming.

“Don’t kill me,” Welles pleaded. “I don’t want to die.”

More fool you, Jerome thought, and let the man go.

Welles’s bafflement was plain. He couldn’t believe that his appeal for life had been answered. Anticipating a blow with every step he took he backed away from Jerome, who simply turned his back on the doctor and walked away.

From downstairs there came a shout, and then many shouts. Police, Welles guessed. They had presumably found the body of the officer who’d been on guard at the door. In moments only they would be coming up the stairs. There was no time now for finishing the tasks he’d come here to perform. He had to be away before they arrived.

On the floor below Carnegie watched the armed officers disappear up the stairs. There was a faint smell of burning in the air. He feared the worst.

I am the man who comes in after the act, he thought to himself. I am perpetually upon the scene when the best of the action is over. Used as he was to waiting, patient as a loyal dog, this time he could not hold his anxieties in check while the others went ahead. Disregarding the voices advising him to wait, he began up the stairs.

The laboratory on the top floor was empty but for the monkeys and Johansson’s corpse. The toxicologist lay on his face where he had fallen, neck broken. The emergency exit, which let on to the fire escape, was open; smoky air was being sucked out through it. As Carnegie stepped

away from Johansson's body officers were already on the fire escape calling to their colleagues below to seek out the fugitive.

"Sir?"

Carnegie looked across at the mustachioed individual who had approached him.

"What is it?"

The officer pointed to the other end of the laboratory, to the test chamber. There was somebody at the window. Carnegie recognized the features, even though they were much changed. It was Jerome. At first he thought the man was watching him, but a short perusal scotched that idea. Jerome was staring, tears on his face, at his own reflection in the smeared glass. Even as Carnegie watched, the face retreated with the gloom of the chamber.

Other officers had noticed the man too. They were moving down the length of the laboratory, taking up positions behind the benches where they had a good line on the door, weapons at the ready. Carnegie had been present in such situations before; they had their own, terrible momentum,. Unless he intervened, there would be blood.

"No," he said, "hold your fire."

He pressed the protesting officer aside and began to walk down the laboratory, making no attempt to conceal his advance. He walked past sinks in which the remains of *Blind Boy* guttered, past the bench under which, a short while ago, they'd found the dead Dance. A monkey, its head bowed, dragged itself across his path, apparently deaf to his proximity. He let it find a hole to die in, then moved on to the chamber door. It was ajar. He reached for the handle. Behind him the laboratory had fallen completely silent; all eyes were on him. He pulled the door open. Fingers tightened on triggers. There was no attack however. Carnegie stepped inside.

Jerome was standing against the opposite wall. If he saw Carnegie enter, or heard him, he made no sign of it. A dead monkey lay at his feet, one hand still grasping the hem of his trousers. Another whimpered in the corner, holding its head in its hands.

"Jerome?"

Was it Carnegie's imagination, or could he smell strawberries?

Jerome blinked.

"You're under arrest," Carnegie said. Hendrix would appreciate the irony of that, he thought. The man moved his bloody hand from the stab wound in his side to the front of his trousers and began to stroke himself.

"Too late," Jerome said. He could feel the last fire rising in him. Even if this intruder chose to cross the chamber and arrest him now, the intervening seconds would deny him his capture. *Death was here*. And what was it, now that he saw it clearly? Just another seduction, another sweet darkness to be filled up, and pleased and made fertile.

A spasm began in his perineum, and lightning traveled in two directions from the spot, up his rod and up his spine. A laugh began in his throat.

In the corner of the chamber the monkey, hearing Jerome's humor, began to whimper again. The sound momentarily claimed Carnegie's attention, and when his eyes flitted back to Jerome the short-sighted eyes had closed, the hand had dropped, and he was dead, standing against the wall. For a short time the body defied gravity. Then, gracefully the legs buckled and Jerome fell forward. He was, Carnegie saw, a sack of bones, no more. It was a wonder the man had lived so long.

Cautiously, he crossed to the body and put his finger to the man's neck. There was no pulse. The remnants of Jerome's last laugh remained on his face, however, refusing to decay.

“Tell me...” Carnegie whispered to the man, sensing that despite his preemption he had missed the moment; that once again he was, and perhaps would always be, merely a witness of consequences. “Tell me, *What was the joke?*”

But the blind boy, as is the wont of his clan, wasn’t telling.