

THE KARSWELL INHERITANCE

Simon Delvaux was a young man of easy accomplishments. He had sailed through Eton and Kings College, Cambridge, taking a degree in Classics, relying on his considerable native intelligence, a very good memory and an instinctive understanding of the unwritten rules of the academic game. Accordingly he had come down from Cambridge scarcely having done any work with a respectable, though not dazzling, degree. While at Kings Simon had, in fact, devoted more energy to studying aesthetics and the history of art than to the ostensible object of his study. The history of art had not yet grown into an academic discipline in England, which is always somewhat behind its continental cousins in academic fashions, and was still the happy province of a few enquiring minds with a passion for art and the time to pursue it. Time, however, in Simon's case was rapidly running out since a lack of funds was compelling him to cast around for some occupation that would provide a supplement to his income without absorbing too much of his time.

It is indicative of Simon's inherent good fortune that in mid August 190-, shortly after hearing news of the sudden death of his uncle, Julian Karswell, he received word that he was the sole beneficiary of his uncle's will and accordingly inherited the whole of his estate, including Lufford Abbey. The only condition being that he should, within three months of Karswell's death, take up permanent residence at Lufford Abbey. Since Simon's present accommodation was Spartan, to say the least, and his affairs of the simplicity that poverty ensures, this condition proved no obstacle to the assumption of his unexpected inheritance.

Simon had only seen his uncle Karswell on rare occasions, most of which he remembered with a distinct lack of affection. Frankly, Simon had always been rather frightened of his imposing and very self-assured uncle, who could menace him with the merest look. It was, therefore, all the more surprising that he should find himself the sole beneficiary at his demise. Simon's mother and her brother had never got on well so contact with his wealthy uncle had been sparse and intermittent. And the sparser the better so far as the young Simon had been concerned.

Simon pondered his new found position on his journey up to Warwickshire. As he gazed out of the train window he let his mind wander at will over the possibilities. Fantasies of becoming Lord of the Manor flitted across his mind's eye in a rather pleasing fashion.

After changing trains Simon took the little branch line to Lufford and alighted at the deserted station. After some little time spent in locating the station master, who was tending his garden, Simon managed to procure a trap to transport him the three miles to Lufford Abbey.

The trap jolted along the country lanes and swung off through the imposing wrought iron gates of the long drive to the house. The drive was bordered by trees: to one side lay some rolling parkland, to the other a densely wooded area. Presently the Abbey appeared in the distance, its dappled exterior glowing in the sun. Lufford Abbey had been acquired by an enterprising courtier during the dissolution of the monasteries together with extensive land holdings in the surrounding area. He had built a Tudor mansion for himself from the ruins of the Abbey but only small parts of the original house remained. Most of the building dated from the eighteenth century and was in the *Gothick* style. Parts of the old Abbey lay dotted about in the grounds around the house giving a pleasing picturesque appearance to the whole.

The trap pulled up on the gravel drive in front of the house and Simon got out. At the top of the steps before the entrance hall stood, erect, her hands neatly clasped before her at waist height, a middle aged woman, soberly dressed, who regarded Simon with a steady unwavering look. Simon fumbled with his wallet as he paid the driver, rendered self-conscious by his awareness of the woman's gaze at the top of the steps. Unaccountably he felt like a new boy arriving late at his boarding school.

He paused at the top of the steps and the woman unexpectedly smiled as he held out his hand in greeting. 'Welcome to Lufford Abbey, Mr. Delvaux,' she said. 'I am Mrs. Holding, your late uncle's housekeeper at Lufford Abbey.'

'How do you do,' said Simon.

Mrs. Harding gestured to another servant standing deferentially behind her. 'Bentley, take Mr. Delvaux's luggage and show him to the master bedroom.'

Simon followed Bentley and briefly established himself in his bedroom as Bentley unpacked his clothes and a few books. Towards the end of this process a maid announced that Mrs. Harding thought he might like some tea after his journey and conducted him to the drawing-room where Mrs. Harding presided over the tea pot.

The Housekeeper made as if to go but Simon bid her stay and take tea with him. There was so much he needed to know about the place and she must act as his guide.

'This big place must take a great deal of administration,' remarked Simon.

'Oh, yes, indeed it does,' said Mrs. Harding 'Mr. Karswell always found my methods to his satisfaction,' she asserted.

'Oh, yes, I'm sure he did.'

'Such a loss.'

'Yes, yes, of course, very surprising. How did my uncle die?'

'Did you not know?'

'No.'

'It was all a tragic accident. He was travelling on the continent, Mr. Karswell often travelled, he was a highly cultured man; at the time he was engaged in writing a book on *The Symbolical Significance of Architecture and its Practical Application*. Anyway, he was examining some decorative details on the facade of St. Wulfram's church at Abbeville when a block of masonry fell from some scaffolding above him and he was killed instantly. Naturally there was an investigation, but nothing was discovered that could help explain the occurrence. These foreigners are so lax, almost anything can happen on the continent. They do not have the same standards as us. He was interested in many things, a very great man. But like so many great men, not recognised as such by his contemporaries.'

'Quite,' said Simon.

'He was much misunderstood. You must not pay any attention to what the local people may have to say about him. They are ignorant folk, little more than animals.'

'You must have been very devoted to him.'

'We all were. Here at Lufford Abbey. The staff are all devoted people. Hand picked by myself and Mr. Karswell. I hope that we will be able to serve you just as successfully as we served your uncle.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure you will. How many servants are there?'

'We have only a small staff. There is myself, the cook, the footman, two maids, a kitchen maid, a groom, a gardener and two under-gardeners. Mr. Karswell did not have a butler, he did not often entertain and disliked formality. Mr. Karswell was a man of reclusive and studious habits, apart from his extensive trips on the continent that is, but he had to engage in those, they were part of his researches.'

'On the *Symbolical Significance of Architecture*?'

'Partly. Mr. Karswell had many interests beyond those of architectural history. His researches took him to some of the remotest parts of Europe and beyond.'

'Some kind of anthropological research?'

'Yes, something like that. Mr. Karswell was an expert on the rituals and sacred practises of many peoples. He had written a number of works on these matters and was the unacknowledged expert in the field.'

'I had no idea my uncle was such a scholar.'

'Yes, indeed. He was a man of far reaching ideas, of great accomplishment. But not of a kind appreciated by the *hoi polloi*. Very few people had the insight to appreciate his work. Your uncle amassed a great library in the pursuit of his researches. It is one of the finest in the world in his chosen areas of expertise.'

'I shall have to have a jolly good look through it, once I've settled in,' said Simon. 'I must confess that I still haven't quite taken it all in. It was so unexpected you see. I never thought for a moment that I would inherit Lufford Abbey. You must have known him as well as anyone. Do you know why he should leave the estate to me? Did he often talk of me in affectionate terms or something of the sort?'

'I really couldn't say. But I know that your uncle thought you had a great deal of potential, if channelled correctly. I think he liked to think that you were similar in some respects to himself. When you used to visit as a boy he remarked on how sensitive you were

to unseen things. Still, it is not for us to question your uncle's motives. Doubtless he had sound reasons for leaving you the estate, he always had a sound reason for everything he did.'

After tea Mrs. Harding absented herself, explaining that she needed to prepare the household accounts for Simon's inspection. Simon paced the room running his hands lightly over the comfortable furniture and pondering his unexpected good fortune. He stood looking out of the windows at the park. Sheep grazed in the distance and the sun glowed gently on the lush green hills. Simon was struck by the silence of the house. The very air seemed muted as if hushed at an imperious command. He remembered how cowed he had felt as a child visiting the house, overawed by the stern splendour of the architecture and the commanding presence of his uncle. He had always felt as if he had to move through the house on tiptoe since the slightest sound seemed to be amplified and would bring forth rebuke. It was silent now. Simon rocked momentarily back and forth on his heels, feeling beneath him the springiness of the deep piled carpet.

He turned and walked out into the large entrance hall with its cold expanse of black and white marbled tiles. His footsteps resounded loudly in the airy space of the hall. Simon crossed the hall and stood before a large and imposing portrait of his uncle. Three quarter length and executed in the smooth and refined style associated with the old masters the figure of Karswell stood to one side in the front plane of the picture staring out at the viewer with piercing blue eyes. Simon recognised the background of the painting, with its black and white tiled floor and white walls with smoothly arched niches for statues, as the hall in which he stood. Karswell had had himself depicted standing almost at this very spot. He stood wearing a dark pinstripe suit, his arms folded confidently before him, his neck protruding from a stiff white collar below which hung a neatly fastened black tie. The artist had painted the image in such a way as to give the maximum presence to the sitter. Through some clever illusion the figure seemed to occupy a plane slightly before that of the actual picture surface, so that the figure projected outwards into the viewer's space. The intense expression on the sitter's face, which loomed out palely above the dark suit, the features set, stern, hard, the widely opened luminous blue eyes staring out so intensely as to transfix, hypnotically, the

viewer made a very powerful impression. It was with difficulty that Simon disengaged his gaze from the piercing stare of his uncle's portrait. He had to avoid his uncle's eyes in order to concentrate on the rest of the painting. Some way back into the picture, on the marble floor, sat a dog, at least Simon took it to be a dog, for he found it rather difficult to identify which breed of dog it might be. The dog too stared out, this time past rather than at the viewer. The direction of the dog's gaze induced in the viewer an uncertainty as to what might be lurking behind his shoulder to the point where Simon felt compelled briefly to stop examining the painting and look around him. But, of course, the hall was empty. Returning to the painting Simon observed that beyond the dog was an arcade like opening; and at this point artistic licence had evidently taken over from realism, for none such existed in the hall, in which the rest of the painting was accurately located. Through the arcade was a view of the surrounding parkland and impressively placed in the park, outlined against a Mediterranean blue sky, was an imposing edifice of white marble consisting of a high plinth surmounted by an elegant Ionic peristyle above which rose a stepped pyramidal roof crowned by a large statue of a mythical beast in a state of watchful repose. Inevitably Simon's gaze was dragged back to the face of his uncle. Karswell's pale round face, with its long nose, fleshy cheeks and high domed head sparsely furnished with flanking patches of hair had the air of a man supremely confident in his own abilities. It emanated something of the great intelligence to which Mrs. Harding had referred but it also, principally through the intense hypnotic eyes and the harshly set lips, projected a cold and unforgiving singularity of purpose that Simon found distinctly unsettling. It seemed impossible to be aware of the intelligence without also becoming conscious of the menace so clearly apparent on the features of the sitter who, as Simon gazed at the portrait, seemed about to tilt outwards from the picture towards him. Simon gained this impression so forcefully that involuntarily he stepped backwards a pace as one who seeks to avoid collision with another. As he recoiled Simon received the distinct impression that his leg encountered a soft furry object. Simon turned and looked around him but there was no animal in sight. Perhaps the household is possessed of an extremely nimble cat he thought.

Simon had retired to the drawing room and was reading a book while relishing a scotch and soda when Mrs. Harding entered the room. 'I'm sorry to trouble you, sir, but Mr. Karswell always permitted use of the hall for small religious gatherings and one is due to take place tonight. It will not cause any disturbance and I wondered if we might be permitted to continue the meetings here? It has become something of a tradition.'

'Yes, by all means,' said Simon, thankful that he had not been asked to participate and wishing to be accommodating to Mrs. Harding. 'If uncle Julian thought it correct I'm sure there can be no objection.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mrs. Harding and left the room.

Simon thought nothing more of the strange request but later that night, as he was sitting reading in bed, his attention was waylaid by the faint sound of chanting. He put down his book and sat quietly, listening attentively. Yes, he had not been mistaken. Drifting on the still night air was the steady rhythmical beat of a chant. Too indistinct for any words to be audible but, without doubt, the sound of several voices raised in unison. As he sat listening Simon thought that the chant was speeding up, becoming more and more urgent, less musical and more desperate; but just at that point it ceased. A chill breeze crept in at the window and Simon shivered in his bed. He turned over and, dismissing any impulse to wander around the grounds investigating the strange noise, he bid sleep come and wipe it all away.

The following morning Simon was awakened by the tinkling of the china on his breakfast tray as Lucy the maid brought it into his room. He luxuriated in the crisp sheets of the enormous bed as the maid drew back the curtains and the early morning sunshine spilled into the room and glinted from the surface of the highly polished furniture.

'I say, Lucy, did you hear any strange noises last night?'

'No, sir,' replied the maid with a look of surprise at being asked such a question.

'I could have sworn I heard some jolly queer sounds last night.'

'Well, it's bound to be different, isn't it, sir. You being used to town living. I dare say you'll hear lots of things out in the country at night that would be unfamiliar to town ears.'

'Yes, perhaps you're right. But I didn't think it was an animal noise. I thought it was people's voices I heard, a kind of singing.'

'You must have dreamed it, or perhaps it was the wind whipping around the house. Why there aren't any folk for miles around, who'd be singing round here?'

'Yes, I suppose you're right. Perhaps my nerves are a trifle jangly after all the recent surprises. I think I'll take a walk to calm my nerves.'

After breakfast Simon put on some old trousers and an old linen jacket and strode out into the grounds. The sun, though bright, had not yet heated the air so it was very pleasant walking. Simon ambled along the gravel paths of the formal garden pausing to exchange greetings with the gardeners and then set out across the parkland. He walked along by the side of the wood and was struck by the intense silence of the estate; no bird sang or woodland creature stirred. The whole scene was a picture of the utmost tranquillity and Simon felt very fortunate indeed.

At length he reached the impressive wrought iron gates and sturdy gate posts, surmounted by heraldic beasts, that marked the limits of the demesne. Simon passed through the gateway and walked along the road in the direction of the village. On one side of the road was the high brick wall that marked the boundary of the park, on the other side hedgerows divided fields thick with grain. Simon admired the numerous wildflowers among the hedgerows and he became conscious of how much noisier it had become since he had left the precincts of Lufford Abbey. Several varieties of bird-song flitted across the air and unseen animals rustled among the undergrowth.

As the day progressed the sun became hotter and by the time Simon reached the village he was beginning to feel distinctly thirsty; accordingly he wasted no time in searching out the village pub and ordering a pint of beer. The interior of the pub was dark and cool and he seated himself at a table near the bar.

It was not long before Simon was drawn into the conversation of a group of the local villagers who assumed he was on a walking tour. Somewhat disingenuously Simon asked who lived at the big house.

'T'aint no one lives there presently,' said one old man.

'No one at all?' enquired Simon.

'Just the household servants. Owner up and died a few weeks past.'

'And no loss that be neither,' put in one of his companions.

'Oh, why is that?'

'Round here he were known as the Abbot o' Lufford. Queer fella he were to be sure. Very haloof, you might say. They say he had a lot a book learnin' but o' manners he had none. Run yer over soon as look at yer.'

'Ay, he were that churlish.'

'Ay, he were a queer 'un.'

'Why was he known as the Abbot of Lufford?'

A mirthless laugh issued from the old man's mouth. 'Twarn't for his Christian charity I can tell thee that.'

'He thought he were a very grand man and since he lived at Lufford Abbey t'were natural, in jest like, to call him Abbot. But he weren't no God-fearing man weren't the Abbot. Why when he died they couldn't get no local parson to do the honours but that they had to get some foreign chap nobodied seen afore.'

'So this "Abbot of Lufford" was considered a rather conceited chap,' said Simon.

'Karswell was his name, that were his real name. He had mighty high ideas of himself, did Karswell. He built this huge big monument to himself in the grounds of Lufford Abbey. He didn't use no local builders neither for it. Had a bunch a foreigners in special to do it he did. Must a corst a fortune!'

'They do say he is not buried proper like in that huge tomb but is sitting up in a big room inside it, just like he was still alive, sitting up at a table with a bottle o' wine and some old book. Not sleepin' just waitin' they says,' interjected one of the regulars.

There followed an animated discussion among the villagers between those who believed Karswell was interred in the mausoleum in traditional fashion and those who maintained that he inhabited it as one might a house.

'I thought I might take a walk up to the house later, I shall have to look out for the mausoleum,' said Simon.

'You can't miss it, it's that big. But I wouldn't recommend going up to the hall. 'Tis not a welcoming place. Karswell, he didn't like no one straying onto his land and neither trespasser nor poacher ever ventures onto his grounds. Folk round abouts say that those who do don't go back again.'

By the time Simon left the pub he was in no doubt that his uncle had done nothing to endear himself to the local inhabitants. He pondered the strange stories he had heard about his uncle on the way back to Lufford Abbey. On returning to the park, instead of following the same path back to the house Simon struck off across country and as he reached the crest of a hill saw what must be the mausoleum gleaming white in the sunlight like a large piece of garden architecture. As he approached Simon realised it was much larger than he had originally thought. It was indeed a grandiloquent resting place for his uncle's remains and Simon could not help thinking there was a touch of megalomania about the enterprise. The building was, in design, based on those Hellenistic tombs and mausolea that the absolute rulers of Asia Minor built for themselves. As he stood looking at the building Simon recalled that he had seen something similar before and after puzzling over this recollection he remembered the building in the background of his uncle's portrait. Just as in the painting the monument consisted of a high plain stuccoed base surmounted by a grand peristyle of slender Ionic columns and all surmounted by a stepped pyramid. On the top sat, resplendently, a mythical beast, part lion, part goat and winged. Simon walked around the building and was struck by what a curious conceit it was. It seemed somehow to accord with the other impressions he was gaining of his late uncle all of which seemed to be accumulating into a rather disturbing portrait of the man.

Simon noted the complete absence of windows or any Christian imagery in his uncle's mausoleum. In form the building seemed to belong to another, pre-Christian era; to be a resurgence into the present of ancient, long forgotten beliefs. Set into one of the short sides of the base was a large metal door decorated with large bosses and surrounded by an elaborate stone moulding. There was no handle or knob on the doors. 'Are you sitting in there uncle Julian,' said Simon to himself, 'sitting at your table waiting. Waiting for what?' Simon pressed his hand against the door, it was icily cold to the touch, surprisingly so, almost

as if it was refrigerated. It had all the coldness and certainty of death about it. Simon pulled himself away from the structure sensing that its proximity immersed him in morbid thoughts. He walked quickly away attempting to cast its unpleasant associations from his mind. Simon regained the rise and looked down on the structure. The weather was becoming rather oppressive, heavy with the promise of a summer storm. It was with some sense of relief that Simon reached the more convivial architecture of Lufford Abbey.

On his return to the hall Simon had to engage in the more mundane exercise of going through the household accounts, more to assuage the sense of propriety of Mrs. Harding than from any burning desire on Simon's part to assure himself of the correct maintenance of affairs at Lufford Abbey. Towards the close of this engrossing task Mrs. Harding asked him how he was settling in at the hall. Simon had to confess that he was finding the whole experience a trifle strange. Mrs. Harding reassured him that it was just a matter of getting to grips with the routine of life at Lufford and hinted that all he need do was relax and enjoy the experience.

'I saw uncle Julian's mausoleum this afternoon, a very impressive piece of architecture,' said Simon, conscious of a desire not to venture any unflattering opinions about anything his uncle had done to Mrs. Harding.

'Yes, it is wonderful isn't it? A fitting resting place. Mr. Karswell designed it himself, you know.'

'No. I didn't realise.'

'Yes, it was part of one of his last projects.'

'It shows a rather alarming propensity to plan for the future,' said Simon, half humorously. Mrs. Harding's features showed no signs of companionable amusement.

'The Master found it necessary to plan very carefully for the future,' she asserted rather coldly.

'Yes, I'm sure it was a most sensible idea. Just one that not many people, nowadays at least, tend to think about,' put in Simon anxiously. 'And it gave him an opportunity of executing some of his architectural ideas, I suppose.'

'Indeed it did.'

'What were uncle's architectural ideas?'

'I really couldn't say Mr. Delvaux, I was merely Mr. Karswell's housekeeper, his general factotum, I do not pretend to understand the profundity of his ideas. But the beauty of the mausoleum speaks for itself, does it not?'

'Yes, it is most impressive. What did uncle do with himself, apart from his scholarly pursuits?'

'Mr. Karswell took a minute interest in the running of the estate and the welfare of the local people. As you will discover, there are many responsibilities that such a position entails. But the Master's researches absorbed a great deal of his time. Mr. Karswell was, above all else, a scholar. Will there be anything else?'

'No, I think that covers everything.'

That night Simon's sleep was disturbed by feverish dreams, no doubt inspired by the malicious gossip of the locals. He dreamed that he was wandering in the park in just his night-shirt, that he was trying to find something, something that was of vital importance to his own well being. He scurried around the pastures in the moonlight but in vain he sought for, he knew not what. Like an ill remembered name it hovered just short of his conscious mind. A storm was approaching and the wind gradually grew in strength tugging at his night-gown with an irritating persistence. At length after much futile striving Simon found himself brought up against the imposing edifice of his uncle's mausoleum. The wind swept around him in great cold gusts and Simon staggered into the lee of the building for shelter. He rested by the building feeling immensely weary after his vain searching and he lent against the tall metal door of the mausoleum and listened to the wind howl around it. To his surprise Simon felt the door shift beneath his weight and slowly swing inwards.

With a lack of caution that Simon found he only experienced in dreams he allowed himself to be propelled by the swinging door into the mausoleum. Simon took a few steps towards a faintly outlined figure seated within. The storm outside increased in its intensity and a great flash of lightning illuminated the interior. In the split second that the interior was lit up Simon could see that the walls of the mausoleum were brightly painted with strange

hieroglyphics and in the centre of the room he recognised the figure of Karswell, dressed immaculately in suit and tie as in life, but his features set in that rigid timeless repose of the dead; his features, the line of his nose and mouth, fixed and accentuated by their immobility, his eyelids closed like a sightless marble statue. Simon thought foolishly how he could now settle the dispute among the locals in the village pub when the lightning flashed a second time illuminating the interior even more brightly, and now Karswell's bright blue eyes shone out at him and his lips turned up in a satisfied smile of welcome and on the instant, as Simon stood paralysed at the sight of his uncle's predatory gaze, the mausoleum door slammed violently shut and he was plunged into utter darkness. Simon jolted awake, his body quivering with the shock of the sudden transition from sleep to consciousness. He gulped and wiped a hand through his sweat soaked hair and reached for the bedside lamp. Once more the lightning flashed outside and Simon realised how the night storm had been incorporated into his nightmare, conjured up by his overactive imagination from the vain talk of some gossiping old men. But not wishing to pay a return call to those idle night thoughts Simon picked up a book and read until the dawn lit up the curtains.

The following morning Simon still felt shaken by his horrible dream. He was becoming increasingly nervous under the accumulation of disconcerting experiences. He was plagued by a palpable sense of unease that was mounting to a kind of fear of the whole place. He became convinced that all was not right at Lufford Abbey and determined that he could not remain another night alone at Lufford but must have the reassuring companionship of a friend; someone with whom he could discuss the strange atmosphere of the place. To that end he sent a wire to his best friend from college days, Alastair Lawrence, who lived not far away in Kenilworth, urging him to join him at once and hinting that he felt himself to be in danger.

Alastair Lawrence was so struck by the feverish tone of his friend's wire when it reached him that he was compelled to rapidly rearrange his plans and set off for Lufford Abbey without delay. Alastair had recently acquired a motor car and he took this opportunity to try it out on its first long run.

Simon could not settle all that day but paced around the long corridors puzzling over why he felt so worried. As he moved about the Abbey Simon repeatedly caught glimpses, out of the corner of his eye, of a cat or small dog following him around. But when he looked round to take a closer look it could never be seen and when he inquired about the presence of household pets at Lufford the servants denied any knowledge of any domesticated cats or dogs. Finally Simon arrived at the panelled door of Karswell's library and thinking that perhaps the secret of Lufford Abbey lay within he entered the room. It was a lofty room with three large windows looking out over the park. In the distance could be seen the pyramidal roof of Karswell's mausoleum. The other walls were lined with oak bookcases. At intervals the cases jutted out into the room like groynes into the sea and formed darker spaces between them. In the centre of the room, placed at regular intervals, was a portable set of library steps on casters, elaborately decorated terrestrial and celestial globes and, in the centre of the room a large writing desk. Simon crossed the room and sat at the comfortable desk. This was, no doubt, where his uncle studied and wrote his books. The library had a harmonious and tranquil quality that surprised Simon. It had a true feeling of comfort and Simon could feel his tense body begin to relax in the room. He surveyed the serried ranks of books, ordered by size and topic, their leather and gilt spines creating a warm feeling. He got up and walked around the room casting his eye along the books, gliding across the titles and authors. A number of luxuriously bound, privately printed books were by Karswell himself on such subjects as *A History of Witchcraft*; there was a volume of wood engravings by Thomas Bewick, Caxton's famous edition of *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine and several volumes of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. His uncle's principal interests were plain to see by the preponderance of books on comparative religion, eastern and ancient philosophies, theology and, above all, a very large section on demonology containing editions of such important and rare books as Olaus Magnus's *Historia de gentibus septentrionalis* printed at Rome in 1555 and Ivo Salzinger's *Revelatio Secretum Artis* published in 1721. There seemed to be few esoteric works with which Julian Karswell would not have been familiar.

Simon's circumnavigation of the bookcases eventually brought him back to the centre of the room and to a low free-standing case that Simon quickly realised must contain some of the most valuable volumes in Karswell's library since a number of them proved to be richly decorated illuminated manuscripts. There was an early fourteenth century psalter in the 'East Anglian' style that Simon thought probably originated from Bury St. Edmunds and a couple of lavishly illuminated fifteenth century Books of Hours of Flemish origin together with a *Legenda Aurea* that looked to be illuminated by the workshop of Jean Pucelle. Eagerly Simon examined these treasures with mounting satisfaction. He carefully replaced one of the Hours and picked out another manuscript which he took, on initial inspection, to be another fourteenth century French manuscript, probably a Breviary. The part of the Breviary that Simon held contained the calendar. As well as some amusing and occasionally obscene drolleries interspersed among the ivy clad borders of the calendar in the *bas-de-page* beneath the calendar entries for each month were depicted a sequence of fascinating, if obscure, scenes that appeared, to Simon's eyes, to form a continuous sequence through the months of the year. In the first scene various labouring figures were shown working with implements laying the foundations of a building. On the following page the building was almost complete and was being admired by a stout master builder and another richly attired figure whom Simon assumed to represent the patron. The building, though rather crudely rendered, bore a striking resemblance to the mausoleum in the grounds of Lufford Abbey. On the next page the building is no longer the principal subject and is relegated to one side of the pictorial field in order to provide the necessary room for a long train of figures, evidently mourners, who move in a solemn procession towards the mausoleum, their faces covered by the heavy cowls of their cloaks. The next page showed the mourners gathered round the bier surrounded by many candles. The next scene was similar in presenting a number of figures gathered outside the building but this time conducting some kind of ritual around the supine body of a figure whose face could not be seen. In the immediately following and final illustration was depicted a hideous parody of the raising of Lazarus wherein the figure of the devil, wearing a travelling cap and short cloak, but readily identifiable by his taloned feet and horned head, took the place traditionally allotted to Christ and using the same commanding

gesture, with which Christ is frequently depicted, brings forth a figure from the mausoleum who emerges, like Lazarus, partially wrapped in a winding sheet. Simon shuddered at the illustration and puzzled over the peculiar iconography, racking his mind for some precedent for such bizarre and frankly sacrilegious imagery. When he turned to the text of the calendar Simon's puzzlement deepened for he found it impossible to decipher the script that dotted the page. Instead of the indications of saints feast days and holy days in Latin that Simon expected to see the words were written in a language that Simon could not identify. It seemed to be neither, Latin nor a medieval vernacular and though the characters were neatly and clearly formed the sense was lacking.

Simon was so engrossed in puzzling over the manuscript that he did not hear Mrs. Harding enter the library.

'I see you have discovered Mr. Karswell's manuscript collection,' she said, standing close behind Simon, who jumped at the unexpected sound.

'Oh, you did startle me, Mrs. Harding,' said Simon, turning around in his seat. 'I had no idea my uncle had such a fine collection.'

'Oh yes, Mr. Karswell was very proud of his library.'

'Uncle seems to have had a penchant for matters arcane.'

'Your uncle was well versed in these matters. He pursued knowledge wherever it might lead him, regardless of whether it brought him ridicule or fame.'

'This manuscript is very puzzling. Do you know how uncle obtained it?'

Mrs. Harding laughed in a rather dry manner. 'My dear Mr. Delvaux, the Master did not find that manuscript, he made it.'

Simon was astonished at this piece of information.

'You amaze me. It certainly had me fooled, I thought it was an original manuscript. And the others, are they also pastiches?'

'Oh no, they are all quite genuine. As is this manuscript. Things are just not always what they seem.'

'What language is the text? I'm having difficulty in making any sense of it.'

'It is a very ancient language that very few people can read. The Master made a life long study of it. It is not a language of mundane application.'

'It is certainly very curious,' remarked Simon.

'I shouldn't trouble yourself to try to understand it; I'm afraid you will find it quite impenetrable,' said Mrs. Harding firmly, the while picking up the volume and replacing it on the case. 'If you are to explore your uncle's library you will need to understand how it is organised. Allow me to show you the catalogue and how it is arranged.'

Mrs. Harding proceeded to show Simon the intricacies of the catalogue with an irritating and distracting thoroughness. Eventually she made to go and Simon remembered to mention that a room needed to be prepared for a friend of his who would be coming to stay for a few days.

'Will Mr. Lawrence be arriving in time for dinner, sir?' enquired Mrs. Harding.

'Oh, yes, I should think so,' replied Simon.

Alastair Lawrence was making good time in his de Dion Bouton and was quite enjoying the prospect of a few days at a country house with his old college friend, though he would have preferred to receive more notice, when his vehicle bounced rather alarmingly over a more than usually bad pothole; at once the steering began to feel odd and Alastair stopped the motor car at the edge of the road. He climbed down and to his chagrin saw that he had a puncture. Alastair kicked the tyre but deducing that some more subtly nuanced form of mechanical intervention was called for took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and set about repairs.

At Lufford Abbey Simon sat, somewhat disconsolately, at the large dining room table, his eyes moving from empty place setting to clock and back again.

'Shall I serve the first course now, sir?' enquired the footman.

Simon did not at once reply. He was watching the pendulum swinging in the long case clock. 'Yes, go ahead, Bentley,' said Simon. 'I can't imagine what has kept Mr. Lawrence. I do hope he is coming.'

Simon allowed extensive pauses between courses but by the time he had reached the cheese still his friend had not arrive. Simon poured himself another glass of port. 'Uncommonly good,' he said to himself as he took a drink and felt the smooth, warming liquid trickle down his throat. Mrs. Harding had brought out this particular bottle in anticipation of his guest's arrival. As well as being uncommonly good the port wine was having a pronounced effect on Simon. The sweet, pungent wine was unusually heavy and by the third glass Simon was having difficulty in keeping his eyes open, and when open in focusing them for any length of time. He stood, holding onto the table for stability and said to himself 'can't understand it, port's never had this effect on me before.' Simon stood swaying by the table trying to prevent the room from rocking to one side when the dining room door opened and Mrs. Harding stood there with a group of people behind her.

'It is time, Mr. Delvaux,' said Mrs. Harding and advanced into the room with her companions.

'Time for what?' said Simon, staggering towards the doorway which was swaying in the most alarming manner.

'The appointed time. It is time to meet the Master.'

Before they could reach him Simon had collapsed to the floor, the preparation that Mrs. Harding had so carefully mixed with the port wine having taken effect.

It was shortly after this that a procession of people carrying in their midst a supine figure could be seen walking with solemn steps from the precincts of Lufford Abbey in the direction of the mausoleum.

It was at about this time that Alastair Lawrence, his smart appearance somewhat ruffled and his enthusiasm for motoring in abeyance succeeded in repairing the puncture and resumed his journey to Lufford.

When the little procession reached the mausoleum they lit several torches and laid out Simon's unconscious body before the doors. The celebrants gathered in a semi-circle around the body and began to chant. At intervals Mrs. Harding raised her hands skyward and intoned a prayer in a language alien to the slumbering hills of Warwickshire. Finally the chanting died away and Mrs. Harding produced from her robes Mr. Karswell's manuscript

which Simon had mistaken for a fourteenth century breviary. Mrs. Harding held aloft the book and the celebrants knelt to the ground, commencing a low chant. Mrs. Harding read from the book in a high piercing voice.

If it were not for the full moon Alastair maintains that he doubts if he would have spotted the entrance to Lufford Abbey. But as it was he caught sight of the impressive gateway and turned off the road into the drive.

Mrs. Harding turned finally to the page wherein is depicted the figure of the Prince of Darkness performing a little service. The chanting took on a greater urgency and a tense expectation could be felt in the voices as Mrs. Harding intoned the words written in the calendar that constituted the spell which Karswell had so carefully taught her to execute.

It was as he approached the house, which to Alastair's surprise appeared dark and deserted, that he saw a large number of lights some way off. Accordingly he stopped the motor car and headed on foot towards the lights. As he approached Alastair heard the eerie chanting and the ringing tones of Mrs. Harding's voice and felt a chill run down his spine. He began to run and as he got closer he saw his friend, Simon, lying prostrate on the ground and realised with horror that his friend's plea for help had not been unfounded. At his approach the group of people began to scatter and, still gabbling a few words, Mrs. Harding fled with them.

Alastair knelt by Simon's side and seeing that he was only unconscious he dragged him away from the mausoleum and poured a little brandy from a hip flask into his friend's mouth. This brought Simon around sufficiently for him to get to his feet and the two staggered arm in arm to the car. Alastair bundled his friend in as quickly as he could and, with much grinding of gears, turned the car around and headed back towards the gates at top speed.

There was no one about at the gates of Lufford Abbey and with a sense of relief Alastair passed through them and continued along the open road heading back the way he had come. Anxiously he looked across at his friend sitting beside him and saw that he had once again lost consciousness.

Alastair drove through the night and the dawn was just coming up when he noticed that his friend was stirring. 'Nearly at Kenilworth now. You'll be safe here, old chap. I dread to think what might have happened if I hadn't arrived when I did.' said Alastair.

His friend did not reply and Alastair turned to see if he was all right. Simon stared straight ahead out of the windscreen. As Alastair turned to him Simon turned to look at his friend. His eyes had an unnaturally fixed stare, which Alastair attributed to the terrifying ordeal his friend had experienced. They seemed to Alastair to be a more intense and luminous blue than he had ever noticed before. The rest of his friend's features were rather drawn, his recent experience seemed to have aged him, the lines around his nose and mouth seemed more pronounced than Alastair remembered them. His lips were set in a stern line. 'How are you feeling now, Simon,' asked Alastair. Simon did not reply, he just stared at Alastair with those piercing blue eyes and his lips curled up into a pronounced, but it has to be said, mirthless smile.

Back at Lufford Abbey all was still and peaceful. The only faint sound that could be heard was a muffled sobbing coming from behind the tightly sealed doors of Karswell's mausoleum.