

Mr Ash's Studio

by

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It was the return of the road-breaking battalion with their accursed compressed-air drills which made Mr Horrocks's greying hairs bristle with determination. He could oathfully endure the foul orchestra of horns and gears, the cacophony of canned dance music; even the piano pounding of the infernal brat in the flat below. But at the first renewal of that quivering, booming patter from East Street he knew something must be done if he was to finish his novel. 'Why not take a studio while you're looking for another flat?' said a friend in the club. He picked up a copy of the *Connoisseur*. 'Here you are. "Within ten minutes' walk of Knights-bridge Tube Station, roomy, out-door studio. Very quiet. Easy

terms." Why not have a look at that? There are heaps of others vacant if it doesn't suit you.'

Very occasionally, about twice a year, Mr Horrocks acted with extreme decision. Within ten minutes he was on his way to the agents. He was a small, sturdy, thrusting little person of forty-six. He had a long head, rather flat along the top, the hair at the sides brushed forward which gave him a slightly old-fashioned appearance. His eyes were very quick and dark, mouth small and mobile, chin pointed but emphatic. He made a rather contradictory impression on the discerning beholder, alert but contemplative, irascible but benign. He regarded censors, kill-joys, puritans and that sort with an unbridled loathing in theory—but if he came in actual contact with one of them he was—in practice—courteous, understanding, reasonable, inquisitive; the true novelist's mind being inevitably timeserving.

'Anyone in Rooper's Court will direct you,' said the agent, handing him a key. 'Ask for Mr Ash's studio.'

'Thank you,' replied Mr Horrocks and trotted off. Keeping a wary eye open, he eventually discovered Rooper's Court, which began in a narrow arched passage-way off the Brompton Road and developed into what had been known in his youth as a 'Mews'. Now it was a series of lock-up garages and an occasional small private house—re-built coachmen's quarters. There were many chauffeurs sluicing and attending to their charges. Mr Horrocks, looking round for a guide, caught sight of a tall young man standing at the door of a charming little yellow house with gay blue window boxes. Mr Horrocks went up to him and put his question.

'Certainly,' he replied in a pleasant, genial way. 'Come with me.' He conducted Mr Horrocks to an opening on the right-hand side round a corner where was a small square railed-in grass space. At the far end was a rather high hut with a corrugated iron roof, over which leaned a plane tree with many drooping branches.

'That's the studio,' said the tall young man, 'the door is up the other end.'

'Thanks very much,' said Mr Horrocks. 'It looks nice and quiet.'

The young man seemed to be considering something. 'Are you a painter?' he asked presently.

'No,' replied Mr Horrocks. 'I try to write, my name is Samuel Horrocks; but I don't suppose you've ever heard of it.'

'Of course I have. And may I say I greatly admire your stories

of the supernatural. May I ask how you were put on to this studio?’

‘Oh, I just happened to see it advertised.’

The young man remained thoughtful for a moment. Then he appeared to make up his mind. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I hope you’ll find it all right for your purposes. My name is Landen and I live in that little yellow house. If I can be of any service to you, let me know.’ Mr Horrocks thanked him and they said good-bye.

‘Very courteous young fellow,’ thought Mr Horrocks as he stepped forward; ‘looks highly intelligent, too, but I wonder what service he thought he could render me?’ Ah, there was the door. He pushed the key in the lock. He had to use some force to open the door as it was jammed from damp, he supposed, at the bottom and sides. He found himself in a room surprisingly more spacious than its exterior suggested. There appeared to be two rooms, as a matter of fact, for there was another door at the far end. The place was lit by three high windows. It smelled rather fusty and there were patches of damp on the distempered walls. Ah, there was an easel with a picture on it and a couple of rather dilapidated chairs. He’d see what was behind the other door. It *was* another room, quite a small one, full of odds and ends, packing cases, an oil stove, a kettle and so on. What a peculiar smell! What was that red stain on the small packing case? He bent down. Good heavens it was alive, a cluster of moths. How very curious! Beautiful colour. They must be feeding on something. He put out his hand to disturb them when suddenly they all sprang up at his face. Little brutes! He lashed out at them and beat a hasty retreat, shutting the door behind him. Venomous little beasts! Well, what about this studio? He wasn’t greatly taken with it, but it was most certainly quiet. Mr Horrocks was a shop-assistant’s glad-dream, for he almost invariably took the first thing offered him and hurried out of the shop. The last thing he wanted was to go hunting about, fussing with agents and keys, and asking his way and that sort of thing. He wanted a place to work in and he wanted it at once. This would surely do. Not in the winter, perhaps, but with the summer coming on—Why not in the winter? Mr Horrocks vaguely considered this proviso. Too damp, perhaps, and also—well there was something rather—rather sombre about it. It was the contrast, no doubt, between its aloofness, quietness and isolation and the raging stress and promiscuous din only a hundred yards away. Something like that.

Oh yes, it would do. He'd get a desk in and a stove for the damp, and just exploit that aloofness and quiet. That was settled. He strolled over to the easel. Portrait of a woman. Good-looking girl—in a way very beautiful, and yet there was something about her expression—something enigmatic. Wonder who this fellow Ash was. Ah, there were his palette and brushes on the floor behind the easel. Curious smudged, rainbow thing, a palette. It was rather humiliating, but he hadn't really the smallest knowledge of the way a painter went to work. However, he'd never pretended otherwise. How loud his footsteps sounded on the wood floor! Showed how quiet it was. Before leaving he peeped through the door into the small room. Yes, there they were back again, forming a sort of pattern—wonderful patch of colour, dark ruby. Little brutes seemed to be staring at him. He laughed out loud. What an echo! He must get some lunch. He'd take the studio that afternoon for a month. That was settled and a great relief. As he caught hold of the door on getting outside, it seemed to swing hard at him of its own momentum and it slammed harshly, thrusting him back. He was a little ruffled. Not exactly a hospitable atmosphere about that place, he thought.

The tall young man was still standing outside the yellow house as he repassed up the court. 'Well?' he asked.

'I've decided to take it,' said Mr Horrocks. 'It's not, perhaps, a very cheerful spot, but its quietness decided me.'

The young man nodded. 'Are you taking it for long?'

'No, just by the month.'

'I see. Well, good luck with the book—I hope you'll give us some more ghost stories soon.'

'It's rather difficult to get plots for them,' replied Mr Horrocks, 'but I'll do my best. Good-morning.'

Three days later he revisited the studio, which now housed a desk, a couple of comfortable chairs and his portable typewriter. It was a brilliantly fine May morning and the place seemed a bit more genial, but not really very much, he considered. However, now for work. He was about a third of the way through his novel and irritatingly uncertain exactly how to develop it. Also he had promised his agent to have a ghost story ready fairly soon for the Christmas number of a magazine which paid very well. But at the moment he hadn't an idea in his head. For the time being he would concentrate on the novel. He sat down at his desk and began to cogitate. His weakness, he knew it well, was a tendency

to flippancy. The more he saw and read of the world and its denizens the harder he found it to take them with the proper seriousness. As far as the tale of humanity was concerned he was inclined to laugh at the wrong places, a serious flaw in a novelist! His characters would adopt an unbecoming impishness at critical moments and mock their creator's efforts to control them. It was probably due to the fact that their creator had never succeeded in measuring humanity flatteringly in accordance with the Cosmic Scale. He was, therefore, delighted to find that the atmosphere of Mr Ash's studio was an excellent corrective to this levity. He wrote a whole chapter by lunch time, a very critical chapter, and he knew that it was good. The motley streak was rigidly eliminated from it. With an aching arm but satisfied soul he got up at half past one, yawned, stretched himself and found himself regarding the picture on the easel. Seen by this stronger light it appeared a very vivid piece of work. It almost seemed as if it had been more worked on than when he'd seen it before. Certainly her face was a puzzle. He went up to it and covered first her eyes, then her mouth and chin with his hand in an attempt to discover where the secret of that oddness lay. As a result he decided it was immanent and not to be traced. He'd have a look and see what those little red devils were doing. There they were bunched on the packing case making that same pattern, motionless and intent. Funny pattern, almost like a human face. Vague memories of 'bug-hunting' at school came back to him. He was very certain that nothing resembling them had ever found its way into his killing bottle. Singular markings on their heads. He bent down, and at once the swarm rose together and flew savagely into his face. He struck out at them. How extraordinary, it seemed impossible to touch one! Artful little dodgers. What a filthy smell they made, nauseating and corrupt. He'd leave them alone in future.

He spent the afternoon at Kew Gardens, in his opinion the most delectable place in the world on a fine spring day. As he strolled about the lawns and threw crumbs to the birds, he sought some inspiration for that infernal ghost story. A reviewer had once credited him with the possession of a 'malignant imagination' for such fiction. At the moment he had a malignant lack of it. All the same the atmosphere of that studio ought to be kinetic. Presently he felt like a rest and sat down on a seat by the rhododendrons. Drowsily he began to daydream. A succession of images elusively patrolled his brain. A girl's head on an easel—a

dark stain on a packing case. He found himself examining the studio almost inch by inch, for his visualising power was very highly developed. He scrutinised the girl's face closely and then was jerked back into full consciousness, for it had seemed to him that a brush had fallen on the face and slightly emphasised the line from her left nostril to upper lip. Amusing illusion! Might be an idea for a story there; whole thing taking place in narrator's subconscious. Damned difficult. Well he must be getting home, those — road-breakers would have knocked off by the time he reached there.

From then on he went to the studio four days a week, always in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. He invariably approached it with oddly mixed emotions. Never had he known any place more stimulating to his imagination, yet he never felt at home there. The moment he unlocked the door he felt a sense of obscure excitement, which, in fact, began to come over him as soon as he passed into Rooper's Court, and intensified itself until he was actually inside and face to face with the girl on the easel. And as he wrote he often paused and looked up at her. Each time he came to the studio she seemed subtly and indefinitely to have changed, developed, become at once more 'realised' yet harder to 'nail down' and analyse. He imagined that was what was meant by learning to 'see' a painting; that like a poem or a piece of music it only revealed its inner, profounder meaning to those who lavished as much care on deciphering it as the artist had in inscribing it. She was very useful, too, for she seemed to have become identified in a way with the chief female character in his novel—'heroine' would have been a somewhat satirical term for that dark-hearted vampire. And how excellently and reassuringly the book was going! For once his publisher's plaintive and oft-repeated blurbed insistence that 'Samuel Horrocks's latest work is also his greatest', showed every evidence of being justified. Certainly it revealed an almost ruthless lack of flippancy. As it moved to its inevitable climax, the shadows darkened and gathered round it. That meant drastically revising the first third of it, a laborious necessity but unescapable.

He left the little room and the moths alone. Their business was none of his; he felt, and somehow they were peculiar to the place. He gathered that Mr Ash, whoever he might be, had felt a keen interest in them, for he discovered a little sketch-book, presumably his, on one of the window ledges. This contained

dozens of preliminary studies for the girl's head, each one decoratively framed in moth-clusters. One of them gave him rather a dubious reaction, for the girl's head was flung hard back from her shoulders, and there was poured over her face a stream of dark red; delicately though unmistakably articulated into the couched shape of moths. What the artist was thinking about when he put his pencil to work on so morbid a conception Mr Horrocks was at a loss to understand; yet it fascinated him, and he several times examined it in a hurried, shamefaced way. All the same, if it hadn't been someone else's property he was almost certain he would have torn it into very small pieces.

He spent, perhaps, twenty hours a week in the studio, yet in a sense he was there for much longer. That was due to his recently developed tendency to day-dream, reinforced by his abnormal power of visualisation. This tendency was by no means welcome, in fact it was decidedly exasperating, for his subconscious, the breeding-ground, he supposed, of these day-dreams, appeared to be quite determined that he should be compelled to take an urgent interest in what occurred at the studio when its tenant wasn't there. Of course *nothing* went on, and yet the fact remained that he might be taking a walk or trying to read when all of a sudden he would find himself, as it were, just inside the studio and regarding its interior. His view of it was hazy and it appeared much diminished but it was quite recognisable. He couldn't see his desk or chairs, but there was the girl's head on the easel, and there the windows and the door into the little room. And he was forced to admit there was frequently something else, *someone*, to be more precise, and that he—yes, it was a man—was moving about. A tall man with an odd walk, as if he limped. But however hard he concentrated he could never quite get this person into focus. The effort to do so often made him sweat and his heart race, but he simply couldn't get a proper look at this person's face. Surely he was tall and dark. Who could he be? While he was still in this fussed state and before he pulled himself together and called himself a fool, he often felt a violent, crazy impulse to dash off to Rooper's Court to make quite certain whether there was or was not someone prowling about the studio. More than once he could only just rally enough strength of mind to resist this insensate craving. He reassured himself that this eccentric pre-occupation with a dingy hut was a symptom of over-work, not exactly that, perhaps, but excessive absorption in his novel. But

how blessed that all those wavering uncertain currents had coalesced so perfectly into a steady stream. He had to thank the dingy hut for that, and he could see the end in sight.

He met Landen when he was leaving the studio late one afternoon and accepted his invitation to come in for a glass of sherry. The little yellow house was as charming inside as out, fitted and furnished with a nice careless discretion.

'So you really find the place a congenial workshop?' his host enquired on hearing of the progress the book was making.

'Well, it depends on what you mean by that,' replied Mr Horrocks. 'I've certainly written forty thousand words there and, as golfers say, I "don't want them back," but congenial—well, I mustn't be ungrateful—but it's not an adjective I feel appropriate to the place.'

Landen was silent for a moment. 'No,' he said presently, 'I think I understand what you mean.'

'You've been inside it?'

'Oh, yes,' said Landen.

'It's got an atmosphere of its own. Almost, one might say, a personality. There are places like that, I think.'

'Are you clairvoyant in that way? I mean have you had actual experiences of a psychic sort?'

'As a matter of fact, I have,' replied Mr Horrocks, 'quite a number. But as I've found that these experiences were not shared by others, I've kept quiet about them.'

'That is my case also,' said Landen, 'And I've learnt to keep my mouth shut, when to open it results in being regarded as a self-assertive liar. It must be a great relief to you to get them out of your system in the form of fiction. Are you writing a story now?'

Mr Horrocks shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm not sure,' he said, 'but I'm inclined to think there *is* one forming itself in my harassed old pate. But I mustn't hurry it or keep pulling it up to have a look, like an impatient fisherman. If it's hooking something I shall feel that unmistakable "bite" when the time comes.'

'That's rather a revealing metaphor,' said Landen. 'I can't write fiction—"think of stories"—myself, I'm an architect, but I understand just what you mean. By the way, I always remember that story of yours, *At the Going Down of The Sun*; I believe the Ray theory of psychic phenomena you hinted at there is the most probable.'

'It was the undoubted evidence for phantoms of the living which gave me the idea,' replied Mr Horrocks, somewhat gratified.

'Yes, quite,' said Landen. 'By the way, you don't work at night in the studio, do you?'

'I haven't so far.'

'Well, I shouldn't. There are some tough characters about this neighbourhood at night. If they saw a light they might pay you a somewhat unceremonious visit.'

'I should, of course, lock the door,' said Mr Horrocks.

'Yes, naturally, but all the same, I shouldn't run any risk.'

At length the day came when Mr Horrocks typed the word FINIS and the date below it, May 29th, and knew that the preceding ninety thousand words represented the best work he'd done in his life; so good and yet so alien to his customary manner both in atmosphere and style that he hardly recognised it as his. Almost, he modestly said to himself, as if he'd been a tiny bit inspired. Tomorrow he'd hand it to his publisher and go straight off to Cornwall for a long rest. And then he'd start hunting for a tolerably quiet flat. So it was good-bye to the studio. Would he be sorry to bid it farewell? Once again he failed to give a decided answer to that question. It had been a most excellent tonic and stimulant to his imagination, yet he *was* a little afraid of it. Yes, better to say the word, there was something about it which ruffled his nerves and no doubt caused that ridiculous yet oppressive day-dreaming. He'd have a last leisurely stroll round it; and a last look at the girl. It really was a most baffling illusion for he could have sworn that the expression on her face had drastically changed. She was still exquisitely beautiful and she'd always looked like one to be wary of, but now she wore an air of mocking, heartless frigidity, a most lovely, perilous vampire, a devil. He had a sudden desire to crash his fist into her face. And then he laughed at himself and said out loud, 'Well, my most adorable but evil one, I shan't see you again. Give my love to Mr Ash and —' He stopped abruptly. He had spoken in a light, bantering tone, but the echo of his words came back to him in a most mournful yet somehow mocking way. He felt a sudden gust of uneasiness and depression and impulsively turned the canvas round. On the back of it he casually noticed some carefully drawn but undecipherable hieroglyphics. And now for a last look at the little red beasts. Yes, there they were, glowing, motionless and obscene, like a stain of

blood with a hundred eyes. Supposing he picked up that piece of planking and crashed it down on them. The little devils seemed to read his thoughts, for they sprang up at him and drove him from the room. How they stank! Well, that was that. As he opened the door to leave he took a last look back and then the door swung hard at him—'Runk!'—and slammed to. As he strolled towards his club for lunch his mind turned to the subject of that infernal ghost story he'd got to write. It was beginning to get urgent. Obscurely he felt that the studio was the only possible place in which to conceive of it and write it. Perhaps he'd given it up too soon. What a curse it was! Just as he'd finished a most delicate and exhausting piece of work, he'd got to tackle another. Well he would have *one* day off, he told himself irritably, If his imagination wouldn't let him rest, he'd drown it. The bank rate had been lowered that morning and his business friends at the club, who'd been feeling the over-draft severely, were in the mood for some alcoholic enthusiasm and celebration. Mr Horrocks was reasonably abstemious, but for once he found their spiritual state catching and comforting. Consequently, after a large and cheerful lunch, sherry, hock and a double port, he was more than prepared for a restorative snooze in his favourite chair in the chess-room. It was sweet and dreamless, so he was all the more annoyed, when on awaking he found himself staring, not at the trees in St James's Park, but straight down the length of the studio. And there was that—no he *wouldn't* look. He got up brusquely and went to the bar. He completely mistrusted the *fata Morgana* amenities of alcohol, but his nerves were jangled and something must be done. He did it with discretion. The result was quite unexpected and bizarre, for he began to experience an exalted resolve to visit the studio again that night, and then and there conceive of that accursed short story. He was sure of it. He'd have a good dinner, just enough to keep his optimism untarnished but leave his head fairly clear, and *he'd get that story*. It sounded ludicrous, but he'd had such irrational surges of certainty before and they'd always been justified. He *would* go.

Successfully maintaining his resolution and good hope, he hailed a taxi at ten-thirty and twenty minutes later was at Rooper's Court, feeling rather excited and venturesome. Yet the enterprise began to reveal itself rather more starkly in the court than it had in the club smoking-room. It was a boisterous night, the wind veering to the west and stiffening sharply. The weather was

breaking, and with much low cloud it was very dark. Rooper's Court appeared desolate and uninviting. Lander seemed to be in, as there was a light in his sitting-room. This reminded Mr Horrocks of his advice about not visiting the studio after dark. Oh well, he could take care of himself. As he turned the corner he took an electric torch from his pocket. That tree made it damned dark. What a wind! Curious sound the branches made on the roof; like stealthy footsteps. Ah, there was the keyhole. Door had stuck as usual. He put his shoulder to it, whereupon it yielded so suddenly that he staggered forward and dropped the torch. Then the door swung back and crashed. Now where was that cursed torch? His hands swept the floor. Ah, there it was. Click, Click. Blast the thing, it wouldn't work now! Yes, just a faint glow. He'd wait a moment till his eyes got used to it. Rather a fool to have come. What was he really doing in this rather dreadful place? How those branches lashed the roof. Yes really rather a dreadful place. What would those moths be doing? Probably just making that pattern and listening to him, their foul little eyes staring and intent. He moved forward cautiously. He could just see his way now. What a daunting suggestion of menace seemed hovering in the place. Well, that was an absurd exaggeration. After all, that was the atmosphere he'd come to absorb. Hullo! what was that? It almost seemed as if the room had become smaller, as if the walls had come crouching in towards him. Ah there was the easel! But he'd turned the girl's face round! Who could have—Good God, the moths were on it! He stood motionless and rigid, his heart beating wildly, for wasn't her head flung back from the shoulders and weren't they crawling, crawling—! And weren't those walls closing in on him, and who was that standing and watching him from the small door? For a moment he felt he could never move again; then he wrenched himself free and began to run for the door. He dropped the torch and with trembling hands groped his way along a wall. Where was the door! Was that it? No! Yes! Yes! As he flung it open it seemed as though a myriad little wings came beating round his eyes. He tore down the path, the door crashing to behind him. As he reached the corner someone approached him. He flinched back. Then a voice said, 'It's all right. This is Landen. You're perfectly safe. Come with me—'

'But how did you know?' cried Mr Horrocks hysterically.

'I heard you shouting,' he replied quietly, 'and guessed the rest.'

Mr Horrocks walked panting by his side to his house and into the sitting-room. There was a tantalus and glasses on the table. 'Sit down,' said Landen, 'and make yourself comfortable while I mix you a drink.'

'It's very good of you,' said Mr Horrocks. 'I'm afraid I quite lost my head but I had rather a shock. I see now I should have taken your advice, but I didn't realise—'

'Perhaps I should have been more explicit,' replied Landen, handing him a glass, 'but as you found the place congenial for your writing I didn't want to prejudice you against it, but it is, of course, well, shall we say highly *impregnated*. You've gone into such matters far more than I, but as you have stated, they remain without convincing explanation.'

'Absolutely so,' replied Mr Horrocks, raising his glass with a still unsteady hand. 'Any tentative suggestions I have made were simply guesswork. There is no theory ever advanced which begins to cover the ground. It was horrible, horrible!'

'I'll give you such facts as I know about that studio,' said Landen, sitting down and lighting a cigarette. 'It was built by a person named Raphael Ash four years ago. His father was a Highland Scot in business at Teheran. There he married a Persian woman of high degree. Their son was brought up in Persia and eventually sent to Oxford. A friend of mine was up at New College with him. He was a very enigmatic character. Outwardly imperturbable and bland, yet keeping himself aloof from college life and somehow forbidding. He was extremely unpopular for some reason, I believe, not unconnected with a certain doubt as to how he spent his plentiful leisure time. The occupants of the other rooms in his corridor thought at times they saw and heard somewhat dubious things. So four enterprising and intoxicated sportsmen broke into his rooms one night. They got rather badly frightened, but would say nothing of their experiences. By a coincidence they all died within a year or so. Ash came under the notice of the college authorities and was sent down by them after a couple of terms; for reasons best known to themselves. Whereupon he built this studio and began to paint. He also fell in love. I may say he inherited a great deal of money. The lady concerned seemed for a time to reciprocate his feelings and she certainly made his money fly. However, someone else desired her and he was just as rich and socially far more eligible. I knew this lady and you have seen a brilliantly clever likeness of her, but no portrait

could do her justice. She was exquisitely lovely, an accomplished actress and an utterly amoral, soul-less rogue. Well, she married the other man and went to live with him at his place in Surrey. A few weeks later she met her death. She was seen one afternoon by a gamekeeper running through a wood near the house. He stated at the inquest that she was beating out at something with her hands. He imagined she was being attacked by a swarm of bees and ran after her; but before he could reach her she had fallen over the edge of a quarry. She was dying when he got to her, but still beating out with her hands as if to keep something from her face. Shortly after Ash was shot dead in the small room in the studio—'

'Good God!' exclaimed Mr Horrocks. 'Was it suicide?'

'That was the verdict,' replied Landen slowly. 'The evidence was slightly conflicting. One witness stated that he had heard voices coming from the studio that afternoon, and the medical evidence was slightly indefinite. However, the coroner was satisfied. Well, that's all I know about Mr Ash and his studio—or almost. When I came to live here I discovered it had a certain reputation amongst the frequenters of the court. I wondered why, got the key and went there late one winter evening. And then I no longer wondered. It has had one temporary tenant beside you since Ash died. He gave it up after a few days. I believe it is to be pulled down soon. And now you must have another little drink and I'll join you.'

'Well, just a very small one. There is one other thing; those moths—'

'You will not find their like in the Natural History Museum,' replied Landen. 'Perhaps you might search the world over and never do so; for I once described them to a distinguished Orientalist and he told me that he had never met anyone who had encountered such an insect, but that he'd received obscure hints concerning such creatures, though there was a very general reluctance to refer to them. Once or twice he had succeeded in overcoming this reluctance. He gathered that they were known as "The Servants of Eblis"—in a rough translation. Personally he didn't believe in their existence and was greatly puzzled as to how I'd heard of them. I will tell you something; you and one other are the only persons I've known who could see them.'

'Who could see them?' echoed Mr Horrocks, astonished.

'Yes, I have made some experiments. You and I, in that respect at least are privileged people.'

'And that other?' asked Mr Horrocks, after a pause.

'She is dead,' replied Landen quietly. Mr Horrocks was silent for a while. Presently he said, 'Was Ash very dark and did he limp slightly?'

'Yes,' replied Landen.