

# DAWNROSE



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**DAWNROSE**

**A fairytale for adults**

La Princesse se percera la main d'un fuseau; mais au lieu d'en mourir, elle tombera seulement dans un profond sommeil qui durera cent ans, au bout desquels le fils d'un Roi viendra la réveiller.

Charles Perrault

Da ging es allerorten herum, besah Stuben and Kammern, wie es Lust hatte, und kam endlich auch an einen alten Turm. Es stieg die enge Wendeltreppe hinauf und gelangte zu einer kleinen Thür. In dem Schloss steckte ein verrosteter Schlüssel, und als es umdrehte, sprang die Thür auf, und sass da in einem kleinen Stübchen eine alte Frau mit einer Spindel und spann emsig ihren Flachs.

The Brothers Grimm

## I

Round the castle was a hedge so high that even the turrets were hidden. The hedge was of thorny, flesh-tearing briars which had once been hung with the remnants of those who had tried to pierce it. They had been many in the early days, but gradually numbers had dwindled, partly out of hopelessness and partly because of time. The generation of the moment gave way to the new, and so the story of the moment became the stuff of legend. When a hundred years had passed, there were no witnesses even ten times removed, and the remnants had disappeared with wind and weather, animal and bird. Nothing remained but the tale, with its patina of age, and the hedged-in castle whose whereabouts no-one knew. Even so does truth turn into literature.

When the hunting party reached the hedge, all but one of them saw it as a natural obstacle to be ridden round. But Prince Alonso dismounted. He did not know why he dismounted, or why on dismounting he felt drawn to penetrate the hedge, but the impulse could not be resisted. He drew his sword, and with just three strokes he carved himself an entrance. Then he turned to his hunting companions, who had gathered round, and for a reason which he did not know he warned them not to follow him. The men responsible for his safety demurred, but he said that he would return within an hour, and if he did not they could come for him.

The hundred years of weathering had done their damage. Pillars had crumbled and roofs fallen in. Briars and weeds and ivy had advanced across the floors and up the walls, and yet it was a shock for Alonso when he came upon the first skeleton. A guard in a doorway, still in uniform – what remained of it – slumped on the ground. The Prince stepped over him and through the open wooden door which rotted on its rusted hinges. There were more skeletons inside. They sat in chairs round a great wooden table, and spiders spun in their sockets. There were dishes on the table, and dusty pictures on the walls, which were also hung with faded tapestries and thready silk curtains. Here the pillars and roofs had defied the elements, and the painted ceiling – figures and animals in a sky scene – still had colour. For a moment the Prince felt that he was in the presence of living beings, so naturally did the skeletons sit, and he shuddered at the tableau of life caught in death. There was nothing in this hall that was not real and unreal.

It was difficult to leave the hall. The skeletons made it difficult, because they seemed to want to address him. Indeed there was even a place at the table for him, and beside it sat a woman whose long, ornate dress still clung to her bones as if to preserve the modesty of what had long since melted away. "Sit next to me," she seemed to say. "We expected you."

These living dead, preserved like pictures in a frame of crumbling stone, promised something of magic. Here you could believe in things impossible outside. Why? As the universe expands, do we move further and further away from its centre and its truth? As man builds, does he cover up his own origins? Why, pondered Alonso, should he feel closer to miracles in the midst of this stillness than in the live bustle of the real world? Was the real world so unreal?

He shook his head to clear it. The real world was real. There were no miracles. And these ruins presaged nothing, for they consisted only of dead people in a dead building, for which there must be a natural explanation. Poison? Gas? A plague? He would bring in the scientists. They would clear up the mystery in terms of real life.

He left the hall through a low door which led to a bright corridor. The corridor was bright because at the end of it was the kitchen, whose outer wall had collapsed, letting in the daylight. The skeletons of the cooks lay on the floor, and on the three walls still standing were huge pots and pans. A mighty stove stood at the angle between the inner wall and that on the right hand, and in its open mouth were piles of ashes.

And so it was everywhere. People had fallen, or perhaps lain down at their place of work or rest, and had died and decayed where they lay. The buildings had decomposed around them. At some awful moment in the past, a castleful of busy, unsuspecting people had been overtaken by a calamity as sudden and as total as the eruption that had buried Pompeii, and yet it had left no sign of its physical presence. There were no blackened walls, no shattered bones, no bodies huddled together in terror or stretched in attitudes of escape. On the contrary, the bodies were all at ease, and the walls – broken and unbroken – were white, or green with plant-life, indicating no other force than that of slow, all-embracing Nature. These people and this castle had died without fear.

At the foot of a small round tower the Prince came upon a spiral stone staircase. It seemed to lead nowhere, for the tower was too narrow to contain

anything but the staircase. But then he noticed that it did not stand alone; it was linked to a wall that reached about halfway up its height. When he walked round to the other side, he found a similar wall there, too. What lay between the two walls? He went to the end, but found that a third wall at right-angles to the other two completed the enclosure. Perhaps by climbing the spiral staircase, he would be able to look down on the enclosure and see what it enclosed.

In fact he had scarcely climbed half a dozen of the spiral whorls when he came to a landing. The staircase continued upwards, but off the narrow landing was a wooden door which, for all its age, looked solid and freshly grained. No sign here of decay. Nor was there a sign of a handle – the door was simply of dark wood with no opening or protuberance of any kind. The Prince placed his right palm against it, and at that precise moment he heard the first sound that had come to his ears since he had entered the castle. For that reason it was a shock – he had not realized until then how absolute had been the silence. The sound itself was brief and gentle, a sudden swift, low rustle, like the passing of wings. He started back, heart pounding, but then stood still as the silence spread again to completeness. Nothing had passed him.

He placed his hand against the door again, and pushed. The door yielded to his pressure, and noiselessly swung back on its hinges, opening into a long dark room. The Prince stepped inside, and waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom. The light from the doorway should have illuminated it, but soon he realized that the darkness did not come alone from the absence of light; the walls and ceiling of this room were made entirely of the same dark wood as the door, and the floor was covered with a thick dark carpet. From within the depths of this strange night came a perfume that stirred his senses like wine on the tongue. He had never smelt a perfume like this. It made him ache.

He stepped into the room, and his feet sank into the carpet, which deadened all sound of his footsteps. At the far end was a shape, and as he drew near, he was able to make it out as the pillared frame of a four-poster bed. Whether it was the perfume that made his head swim, or the pulsation of his own imagination, he did not know, but his throat had gone dry and his heart was driving into his chest as he drew aside the curtain.

## II

The girl was of astonishing beauty. This he did not see until he had brought her out of the round tower into the sunlight. But then, as she blinked away the long night from her eyes, he marvelled at the mane of golden hair, the sapphire-bright eyes, and the gentle bow of the lips.

“What has happened?” murmured the girl.

He did not hear the words. He heard only the soft wing-brushing tone of her voice.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She did not answer, but gazed round the wilderness of the castle.

“What has happened?” she asked again.

He did not know what to say.

“You’ve been asleep,” he said, trying to colour his voice with calming reassurance.

“My father and mother!” she cried suddenly, and if he had not held her by the arm, she would have rushed away from him.

“Wait,” he said gently, firmly.

“Oh, what has happened?” she asked again, but this time with eyes turned full into his, filled with alarm.

“I don’t know,” said the Prince. “I just found you here asleep. That’s all I know.”

“Thou didst awaken me with a kiss,” said the girl.

“Yes,” he said.

“Thou shouldst have let me sleep.”

She must not see the hall. Nor the bodies. He must spirit her away from this place and back into the real world. If she saw what he had seen, what effect might it have on her?

“My father? My mother?”

“I don’t know. There’s nobody here,” he said. “I found you asleep.....”

She was not listening. She was gazing at the ruins as if listening to tales told by the stones. In a moment she would try to break away from him again. He stooped, and swept her up into his arms. She was as light as a bird. Her white robe draped

over his arms like a broken wing, and although she did not resist, but lay still and almost yielding, she gave no sign of awareness of what he had done. And her eyes continued to seek out the story of the stones.

He began to carry her away.

“No!” she cried.

“We can’t stay here,” said the Prince. “There’s nothing except these ruins.”

“There!” she cried, pointing towards the great hall. “I must go to them!”

“There’s nothing but ruins,” he said, calming and reassuring as he walked on. “I’ve been there. You’ll find nothing.”

He picked his way through blocks of fallen masonry, keeping her head turned away from the skeleton guard in the doorway.

“Didst thou save them too?” she asked.

“There’s no-one else here,” he said. “Only you.”

“Then they are there.”

“No. What’s your name?”

“Dawnrose.”

She did not look at him.

“That’s a beautiful name. I’m Alonso.”

“Yes.”

Still she did not look at him, and so he could not see that she was crying. Yet she allowed him to carry her away.

The Prince walked through the gateway that he had cut in the thorny hedge. Beyond it waited the hunting party, and there were gasps of astonishment as he emerged carrying the figure in white.

“Clifford, bring my horse,” he commanded.

She was afraid. He felt her trembling.

“There’s no need to be afraid, Dawnrose,” he said. “They’re friends. I’m going to take you to the palace, and then we’ll find out what’s happened here. Don’t be afraid.”

“Oh please, let me stay here,” she said.

Clifford brought the Prince’s horse, a fine brown stallion.

“Dawnrose, listen. I’m a prince.”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to take you to the palace. You’ll be looked after.”

“Nay, let me die in peace,” she said.

“You can’t stay here, and you mustn’t talk of death. I promise no harm will come to you. Please trust me.”

The hunting party watched in silence as she allowed him to swing her up into the saddle. She did not look at them.

“Please go on without me,” said the Prince to his companions. “I shall take the lady back to the palace. Clifford, you’ll come with us. But no-one is to go through the hedge. Is that clear?”

The order was acknowledged, and then the Prince mounted his horse behind the girl, holding the reins on either side of her.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said again.

She turned to look at him with blue bewilderment and reproach:

“Thou shouldst have let me sleep,” she said.

They rode through the forest for a good hour, with Clifford following on his own brown horse. During this time not a word was spoken. Alonso was entranced by her nearness and her perfume, but he did not dare to penetrate her wall of silence. Why did she want to die?

On the outskirts of the vast forest were the royal stables, and here the Prince dismounted, for he and the girl would ride to the palace in a coach. Clifford was to go on ahead so that rooms could be prepared for the visitor.

The Prince helped the girl down from the horse, but when the coach was driven up beside them, he again saw that she was trembling.

“You mustn’t be afraid, Dawnrose,” he said. “I won’t harm you.”

“It is not thee that I fear,” she replied.

“What then?”

“I do not know.”

Nevertheless, she climbed into the coach, and allowed him to sit beside her, almost as if she accepted that that was his place. But still she was lost in her thoughts, and only brought her gaze back into the world when they entered the cobbled streets of the town. Then at once she was staring out of the window, but as her face was turned away from him, he could not tell whether she was pleased or frightened by what she saw. She did not make a movement or speak a word.

When they rattled into the palace grounds, and the coach finally stopped, the coachman opened the door and the Prince helped her down. There was not the tiniest

light in her face to illumine her thoughts, but when he held her arm to guide her into the palace, she stopped and looked straight into his eyes. Then he shuddered, for within the blueness of her gaze he saw what he was sure was an expression of hope. And the question that it accompanied was:

“Am I dead?”

“No,” he said. “Oh no, you’re very much alive.”

The King and Queen were away on a state visit, but the Lord Chamberlain, the old and fierce, grey-bearded Lord Corambis, was present to greet – or rather scrutinize – the new arrival. Clifford had had to inform him of what had happened, since she was to be given rooms in the palace – and nothing could make an official entrance into the palace without first passing the scrutiny of Lord Corambis.

“Welcome, madam,” he said, in a tone of the utmost dubiousity. “We have placed the young lady in the blue apartment, Your Royal Highness. May I inquire how long the young lady will be staying?”

“We’re not sure yet, Corambis. But it’ll certainly be for some time.”

Lord Corambis tightened his lips at both corners, as if this statement constituted gross impropriety.

“May I ask if their majesties are informed of this visitation?”

“No, their majesties are not informed of this visitation, since their majesties are away and this visitation was only planned a couple of hours ago.”

“I see,” said the Lord Chamberlain.

“What dost thou see?” asked the girl, and the Lord Chamberlain’s head jerked in astonishment at the directness of the question. He looked at the girl, then at the Prince, and then at the girl again, clearly uncertain how to respond.

“Seest thou thy master’s guest or thy servant’s servant?” she asked.

The Lord Chamberlain opened and shut his mouth, and raised and lowered his hands, but could say nothing. The Prince, too, was astonished, not only to hear her words, but also to see that there were tears in her eyes.

“In my father’s house,” she said, “we did bear a welcome to strangers.”

She did not speak in anger, but in sorrow.

It was not without a certain relief that Lord Corambis scurried off to order food for the young couple. The Prince would accompany the girl to the blue apartment himself. He had also insisted that Dawnrose should be attended by the Lady Sarah, wife of the Prince’s own steward, Clifford. The Lord Chamberlain had

muttered that this was “somewhat irregular”, but with a sidelong glance at the girl had given his consent.

Alonso had known Clifford and Sarah since he was a child. They had no children of their own, and while never stepping beyond the bounds of their position, they were his closest friends in the royal household. When he entertained young ladies in his apartment – as he had done on more than one occasion – he could rely on Clifford’s total discretion, and when he required assistance in understanding the female mind, he would always turn to Sarah.

But even Sarah would have had difficulty in understanding Dawnrose’s mind. She had lapsed into total silence again, and as they walked through the corridors of the palace, she would stop to touch things.

“They’re quite real,” said Alonso, but there was no smile in her eyes as she looked at him. The expression was clouded. When they reached the blue apartment, she confronted him, reached up and touched his face. Was she blind?

“What is it?” he asked her. “What’s the matter?”

“If I be not dead,” she said, “and thou art real, and all these things be real, then what nightmare is this? My father, my mother, my home....”

“We’ll find out.”

“Thou dost not understand. I know.”

“What do you know?”

“Tell me what year it is.”

He told her, and watched the colour fade from her cheeks.

“What’s the matter?” he asked again.

“If thou speakest true,” she said, “then I have slept for an hundred years.”

### III

Despite the horror of her apparent discovery, the girl ate her meal ravenously. It was the first sign she had given of being mortal flesh and blood, but she would give the Prince no further information about her mortality. She said only that he must take her back to the castle so that she could find her parents, and he promised that they would be found, and so she should not worry. Then he left her, and secretly put a guard on her apartment, as he was afraid that she might run away. But she made no attempt to run away, for where could she run to?

Alonso himself slept badly, tossing the mystery from one side of his brain to the other until his head ached. But eventually he drifted into a troubled sleep, only to be awoken by Clifford announcing that Lord Corambis was demanding to see him urgently. It transpired that one of the hunting party had talked, and now all the journals and reviews had sent their representatives to the palace to find out about the girl. Clearly they would have to be told something, and they had intimated that they were prepared to wait indefinitely until they could meet her.

“Who is she anyway?” asked the Lord Chamberlain.

“That we don’t know yet,” replied the Prince.

“Then if I may say so, Your Highness, I doubt if their majesties will approve of her presence here in the palace. Or of this public brouhaha. Now I can fob them off for a day or so...”

“There’s no need, Corambis. I’m prepared to meet them, and to introduce Dawnrose to them...”

“Ha! And fuel the fires of the gossip-mongers!”

There then ensued a long discussion as to what the writers should and should not be told, and when Alonso mentioned the hundred-year sleep, the Lord Chamberlain threw his hands in the air and cried out in fury that the Prince was making a complete fool of himself and of the royal family.

“It’s a mockery!” he shouted. “The girl is a trickster!”

Lord Corambis had been Lord Chamberlain as long as Alonso could remember. Indeed the Prince had always been rather afraid of the old man, who wielded great influence over the King and Queen and was also possessed of a vile temper. Everyone tended to give way to Lord Corambis for the sake of peace and quiet. But this denigration of Dawnrose kindled a flame in Alonso that he himself

had never suspected to be there. He told the Lord Chamberlain to control his tongue, and to his immense surprise received an immediate apology. The discussion now proceeded in a far milder, more conciliatory tone, and Lord Corambis agreed that the Prince and the girl should meet the writers, while Alonso agreed that the Lord Chamberlain should be present, and there should be no mention of the one-hundred-year sleep.

When he had breakfasted, Alonso went to the blue apartment. The guard had nothing to report, and the news from Lady Sarah, who opened the door to the Prince, was that Dawnrose appeared not to have slept all night, for her bed had been untouched. Might she have made it herself? It probably meant nothing. A girl who believes she has slept for a hundred years will scarcely miss the sleep of one night.

Dawnrose was standing at the window, looking down into the palace garden. The sunlight bathed her in gold, and Alonso found himself staring open-mouthed at the shining purity of her beauty. It was an effort for him to speak, but he managed to tell her that the writers from journals and reviews had come, and would want to know something about her.

“Thou shouldst tell them nothing,” she said.

“I have to answer them,” said the Prince.

“Why? Have they power over thee?”

“No.”

“Dost thou fear them?”

“No.”

“Art thou in their debt?”

“No.”

“Then wherefore must thou answer them?”

“Because the people read what they write. The people like to know about their royal family, and so we keep them informed through the journals.”

“If thou doest good to thy people, then shall thy people love thee. And all will be happy.”

This was the longest conversation they had had, and the Prince was fascinated by the directness with which she spoke. No-one had spoken to him in this manner before.

“If thou art a prince,” she said, “then thou must lead, not follow.”

He had expected her to be withdrawn again, yet she spoke to him almost as if he were a child. He was surprised, pleased, but disconcerted. And she had not yet finished.

“Thou didst promise to find my father and my mother. Hast thou news of them?”

“Not yet, Dawnrose. You must give me time.”

But time for what? Her mother and father were sitting at a table in the ruined castle, with spiders in their eyes. How could she be told? When could she be told?

“We’ll have news of them soon, I promise you. But I have to go now, to meet the writers. What am I to tell them?”

“Tell them what thou knowest.”

“I don’t know anything!”

“Then tell them the nothing that thou knowest.”

Was she laughing at him?

To his surprise she then offered to accompany him and to answer the writers’ questions herself. This had indeed been his original intention, but he had hesitated to ask her. Why had he hesitated?

Now he hesitated to accept her offer, for what would she say? Perhaps Lord Corambis had been right, and he was being tricked.

“We mustn’t mention your hundred-year sleep,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

“They won’t believe it. They’ll think it’s trickery.”

“It is the truth. Do they not want the truth?”

“We think it better to keep silent about it until we can find out exactly what happened to you.”

“We?”

“Lord Corambis and I.”

He was a child. He needed guidance. It was a relief to think that Lord Corambis would be at the meeting, for the responsibility would be out of his own hands.

“We must go,” he said. “They’re waiting for us.”

And so they went together to the meeting. But he knew that he was following, not leading.

## IV

The meeting with the writers was the quietest and most respectful the Prince had ever known. It was as if everyone present had sensed an other-worldliness in the room with them, and suffered the same dislocation of reality as the Prince had done. Only Lord Corambis, who presided over the meeting and insisted that all questions be directed at him, seemed impervious to the aura and remained unalterably himself. For this Alonso was grateful.

He himself briefly narrated the story of how he had been hunting, had made his way into the ruined castle, and had found Dawnrose asleep in one of the rooms.

Dawnrose confirmed that this was so, and said she had been born and raised in the castle, which belonged to her parents. She was a princess .... At this point Lord Corambis forestalled further questions about her background, pointing out that there was a certain mystery here, and it would have to be investigated before definitive statements could be issued. The writers would, of course, be informed as soon as the details were available. Dawnrose appeared puzzled by the interruption, but the line of questioning then shifted to whether there was a romance, what was the attitude of the King and Queen, and (a strangely penetrating question) whether the Prince was happy.

Lord Corambis replied that the King and Queen had been informed, were on their way home, but had no attitude at all at this stage. Prince Alonso was allowed to answer that it was too early to speak of a romance, but that he was happy.

“His Royal Highness,” said Lord Corambis, “is noted for his happy disposition.”

Out of these fragments some journals created a story to fill their leading page, emphasising the astonishing beauty of the young princess and the fascinating mystery of her origin. The more staid publications emphasised the girl’s youthfulness and the lack of information concerning her background. Their reports were confined to single columns on out-of-the-way pages.

Dawnrose’s revelation that she was a princess had come as no surprise to Alonso, for he had assumed this from the very start. But when the meeting with the writers was over, he hurried to the royal library, where he spent several hours studying the history of the previous century. Everything connected with the royal family was clearly documented, and there was no question of an unknown branch or

even an unknown residence, and yet the name Dawnrose occurred nowhere. If she was royal, she was certainly not from his own lineage, or any known to the historians.

Unable to stay away from her, he once more sought her out and found her eventually together with the Lady Sarah in the palace kitchen, where she was examining the machinery. The servants were answering her questions with genuine eagerness, seeming not to be puzzled in the least by her ignorance. It was almost as if by her very presence she had turned them into her own servants.

The moment she saw the Prince, she almost ran to him. His pleasure at this welcome was soon hollowed by her greeting:

“Hast thou found them?”

“Who?”

“My father and mother.”

He told her that his men were still making inquiries. The eagerness died on her face. He asked her to walk with him in the garden, and so she gently thanked the kitchen servants for their explanations, and walked side by side with the Prince out into the sunshine.

“You said you were a princess. Was your father a king?”

“Then thou hast found him.”

“No.”

“Then why didst thou ask if he was a king?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

He had sent the clouds across the sun, and now hesitated to speak again and break into her private thoughts. But it was she who broke the silence.

“My father is King Anselm.”

“Anselm?”

“And my mother is Queen Dorothea.”

“But there’s no King Anselm! I’ve been through all the history books, Dawnrose, and there’s no king of that name. Or are they from another country? Where were you born, Dawnrose?”

“In the house where thou didst find me. Take me there, Alonso. If they are dead, then I must know.”

“My men are searching for them.”

“They know not where to search.”

“I promise, we shall find them, and you will know. Please be patient, Dawnrose.”

The Prince could scarcely wait to return to the library. He now had a name to follow up, and he might also be able to trace the castle through the name. But first he went to see Lord Corambis, to ask his advice about the skeletons in the castle.

“Your Highness,” said the Lord Chamberlain, “in the circumstances I deemed it wise for the castle to be investigated. We may find there clues as to the identity of this ... girl.”

“What do you mean ‘investigated’?”

“I have dispatched a team of scholars and scientists to search the ruins. If there are skeletons there, then they will find them.”

“I gave orders that no-one was to enter the castle!”

“Did you, Your Highness? I was not informed. Forgive me.”

“No-one knows the whereabouts of the castle.”

“No-one, Your Highness? Two of my own servants were in your hunting party. Again forgive me, Your Highness, but their majesties will be here soon. They will require information about this girl, and we must take every step to obtain it. And as for the young lady herself, you cannot tell her of the skeletons until they have been properly examined, and we have established who they were and how they died. It would be most inconsiderate to suggest that her parents are dead when we do not know who they are, or who she is.”

“She says she’s the daughter of King Anselm and Queen Dorothea.”

“Pooh! I know the history of our country, Your Highness, and there’s never been a King Anselm.”

“I’m going to do some research on that in the library.”

“Good!” said the Lord Chamberlain, with surprising enthusiasm. “If Your Highness is willing to research the archives, then that will give us another possible avenue to the truth. All lines of inquiry must be pursued.”

And so Prince Alonso went to the library to pursue his line of inquiry. But the archives yielded no more mention of a King Anselm or a Queen Dorothea than they had of a Princess Dawnrose. The only Anselm he could find was the bishop and theologian who had been born in Italy c. 1033 and had died in England in 1109. A great scholar, he had been one of the founders of Scholasticism, but despite the depth and breadth of his intellect, he had been a kindly man. He had once written: “I want

to understand something of the truth which my heart believes and loves. I do not seek thus to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order that I may understand.”

The Prince read these words several times, sensing a message in them which he could not quite grasp.

The history of the castle proved to be equally elusive. There were plenty of documents relating to the forest, which was called Feen Wood, but there was no trace of any castle in the records. These stretched back 500 years.

The thought occurred to the Prince that Dawnrose might therefore be even older. Supposing she had slept for a thousand years? Lord Corambis had been right to send scholars and scientists to the castle. They could establish the age of the stones and the skeletons.

When King Charles and Queen Isabel returned to the palace, they at once began to question Prince Alonso about his strange discovery. The conversation, however, had scarcely begun, when Lord Corambis was announced into the royal presence. It was clear that his view of the “young lady” differed substantially from Alonso’s, and so King Charles sent for Dawnrose herself.

“We’ll soon get to the bottom of this,” he said.

But the moment she entered the room, there was a perceptible softening of the royal authority. It was not just her beauty that widened the King’s eyes, but also something in her bearing that both charmed and intrigued him. Was it dignity, was it certainty, was it purity? He found himself asking her questions, but listening not to the words so much as to the music of her answers.

The Queen, however, was less enchanted. She sensed the unearthliness, but could not decide whether it was from heaven or hell. The beauty was unmistakable, but did it carry comfort or danger? She felt herself threatened even as she marvelled at the spell.

The interview yielded no further information, but the King had no qualms about the girl staying in the palace – on the contrary, he would be delighted for her to stay indefinitely. This he made plain both in Dawnrose’s presence and also when she had returned to her apartment. But in the discussion that followed her departure, he acknowledged the wisdom of caution. Lord Corambis’s investigations were for the good of everyone. If Alonso’s intentions were serious, then no effort must be spared in seeking to unravel the mystery. Doctor Camps, the court physician, should examine her, both physically and psychologically. Indeed she should be thoroughly questioned by a team of experts who would know what questions to put.

At this last suggestion, Prince Alonso objected that they would be inflicting a kind of inquisition on her, and that if she had to be questioned, it should be informally and by no more than three people. She was not a criminal.

The justice of this remark was also acknowledged. But she did have to be questioned by experts – men who, in the words of the Queen, would not be “diverted from the truth by a pair of blue eyes”. This in her view, though not in the King’s, disqualified the King. The Prince was too involved personally to sit upon such a panel, and the Queen did not consider herself to be an expert. Lord Corambis, on the

other hand, appeared to have all the necessary qualities – his vast experience of political life and of human nature generally would enable him to ask pertinent questions and to extract truthful answers. Doctor Camps, the court physician, was another who seemed eminently qualified for the task, since as well as being a physician he was considered (especially by himself) to be something of an expert in the field of psychology. After much discussion, it was decided that the third interrogator should be Professor Mann, the scientist whom Lord Corambis had appointed to lead the investigation of the ruined castle. The interview would take place as soon as the results of this investigation were known, and the experts would report their findings to the King, Queen and Prince immediately afterwards.

Alonso, with permission from the King and Queen, informed Dawnrose of what was planned. To his surprise she showed no flicker of emotion when told that she was to be examined by the court physician and also interrogated by the three specialists. Her only concern seemed to be what had happened to her parents.

Lord Corambis, without permission from the King and Queen, informed the Lady Sarah of what was planned. She was to keep a close watch on the behaviour of the young lady, and report regularly to him.

The Lady Sarah informed her husband Clifford of this edict from the Lord Chamberlain, and Clifford in turn informed Prince Alonso. The Prince was furious, but was persuaded by Clifford to take no action, since Lady Sarah had no wish to incur the wrath of the Lord Chamberlain, who would undoubtedly have her removed from the palace if he found out that she had revealed his scheme. Besides, if Dawnrose was everything she seemed, Sarah would have nothing untoward to report, and in any case Clifford would ensure that she reported to him (and through him, to Alonso himself) before passing information to Lord Corambis.

Three days passed. Dawnrose continued to explore the palace and to question the servants about machines and procedures. She was always accompanied by Sarah, and indeed directed many of her questions to her. It was also Sarah, together with Clifford, who went with her on her first excursion into the town. The Prince would have liked to go, too, but he was so well known that his presence would have made it impossible for the party to move freely. Clifford told him afterwards that Dawnrose had been overflowing with curiosity about everything she saw: the buildings, the people, and particularly the shops. She had been as excited as a child when confronted with the huge range of merchandise, and when trying on dresses (for the

principal object of the excursion was to supply her with clothes of her own, since she had come with only the one dress), she had behaved “just like any other girl of her age, sir”.

The excitement and curiosity, however, alternated with a deep, though increasingly private, melancholy. Frequently, when she was alone in her room, Sarah – vigilant beyond the door – would hear her sobbing. Two or three times Sarah had asked her why she was so sad, but there had been occasions when Dawnrose had merely been gazing out of the window or – as she sometimes did – singing strange melodies. Dawnrose had simply shaken her head and smiled. Only on one occasion did she respond directly, saying:

“I have lost my childhood.”

She never slept. Of this there was now no doubt. Not only was the bed never used, but Sarah had heard her at all hours, and had seen the lights flickering from beneath the door. (Sarah was now lodged in the servants’ quarters adjacent to the blue apartment – a temporary arrangement so long as Dawnrose remained in the palace.) She would pass the night mainly reading, for every day Sarah had to bring her the reviews and journals, and she herself would select books from the royal library. She was particularly interested in history books and tales about strange happenings, whether fact or fiction.

The time required by the scientists and scholars to examine the ruined castle and the skeletons meant that the Prince could still give Dawnrose no information about her parents. This placed a strain on their relationship, for she was convinced that he was hiding something from her. She informed Sarah that she intended to make her own way back to the ruined castle, but when she attempted to leave the palace, she found her passage blocked by the guards at the gate. Lord Corambis, who happened to be in the vicinity at that precise moment, explained to her that for her own safety it would not be possible for her to leave. There was, he said, some sort of “trouble” in the town.

Dawnrose returned to her apartment, where Alonso found her crying.

“Am I a prisoner?” she asked.

He did not know what to say.

“You did take me from my home, and now you do keep me here, and yet I have done no wrong. Let me know what has happened to my father and mother!”

“Please be patient,” said Alonso.

“What didst thou find in the castle?”

“Only you,” said the Prince.

“That is not possible!” she said.

Her eyes saw straight through his own and into his thoughts, and he knew that she knew he was lying. But he had to be sure before he told her of the skeletons, and so he had to wait for the scientists’ findings.

After three days, the investigation of castle and skeletons was complete. Professor Mann, who had headed the inquiry, and Doctor Camps, the court physician who had also played an important role in the proceedings, arrived at the palace to interrogate Dawnrose and then to present their report to the royal family. At the Prince’s insistence, the interview was to be as informal as possible, and Dawnrose had agreed to answer their questions in her own apartment. First, though, she was to be physically examined by Doctor Camps, and while this examination was taking place, Professor Mann quickly informed Lord Corambis of the main findings relating to castle and skeletons.

Professor Mann was in his mid forties, short, bearded and bustling, and one of the leading intellects in the country. His book ‘The Material Universe’ was a standard work in universities both at home and abroad. Doctor Camps was rather older, a tall stooping man, bespectacled and diligent. Together with the elderly Lord Corambis they seemed out of place in the blue apartment, with its delicate scents and flowers, and when they sat in a four-chair circle with Dawnrose, it was they who seemed ill at ease.

Lord Corambis began the interview by summing up what was already known: namely, that Dawnrose was the daughter of a King Anselm and a Queen Dorothea, who according to the records had never existed, she had been born and bred in the castle, and claimed to have slept for a hundred years. Would she care to add anything to this meagre catalogue? Dawnrose cared to add only that she thought her age to be one hundred and sixteen.

Lord Corambis then asked her about her attitude towards the Prince, the state, and her fellow human beings, and particularly wished to know what system of government she believed in. She answered that she loved the Prince and also her fellow human beings, had no special attitude towards the state, and knew of only one system of government, which was the rule of kings.

“Do you wish to be Queen?” asked Lord Corambis.

“If my father and mother are dead,” she answered, “then I am Queen.”

Lord Corambis seemed a little vexed by this answer.

“I mean do you wish to be Queen of this country?”

She replied that she had not thought of such matters, for she was not sure what country she was in.

Lord Corambis muttered something about evasiveness, but passed the questioning to Doctor Camps. He informed the others that the lady was a virgin, and proceeded to question her about her sexual fantasies, and her relationship with her father. She answered that she expected to be married and to have children and that she loved her father and mother.

Doctor Camps questioned her about her inability to sleep, but she could give him no reason.

Professor Mann took over the questioning:

“Where were you,” he asked abruptly, “the day before the Prince found you?”

“I must have been asleep in that room,” she replied.

“How did you get into that room?”

“I do not know.”

“When did you first see the Prince?”

“When he awoke me with a kiss.”

“You never saw him when you were a child?”

“I do not believe he was alive then.”

Professor Mann frowned, and pursed his lips. It was an expression he sometimes adopted when cogitating a particularly complicated move at chess.

“When did you first enter the castle?”

“I was born in the castle.”

“What is your father’s name?”

“Anselm.”

“Do you prefer life in the town or the country?”

“I only know of life in the castle.”

Professor Mann continued to frown and purse his lips.

“I do not believe that you slept for a hundred years,” he said directly.

She returned his gaze without flinching, and it was he who looked down.

“Thy beliefs,” she said, “will never change the truth.”

“We shall find out the truth,” he replied. “Of that you need have no doubt.”

Doctor Camps now wanted to know what she recalled from before her hundred years of sleep. She began to speak of her parents, of music, dancing, a governess called Lydia who taught her to read and write – but the doctor interrupted her. He was particularly interested in her very last memories – perhaps the last seconds before she fell into her sleep.

Until this moment she had answered all their questions immediately, without hesitation and with the utmost patience and tolerance. Now, however, she sat silently for a while, clearly searching for an image. They did not interrupt her search.

“The last thing I remember,” she said at last, “is a wheel.”

“What sort of wheel?” asked Doctor Camps.

“I do not know,” she replied.

“A wheel!” exclaimed Professor Mann. “You saw a wheel and fell asleep?”

“Perhaps hypnosis,” suggested Doctor Camps.

“Wheels are sometimes used,” said Lord Corambis, “as instruments of torture.”

“I do not believe I was tortured,” said Dawnrose. “I know I was not afraid of the wheel. I was in a room with an old lady .... I was not afraid.”

“Who was the old lady?”

“I do not know.”

The three wise men nodded to one another that there was no more to be said, and rose to take their leave.

“I too have a question,” said Dawnrose.

The three men listened attentively.

“What did you find at the castle?”

The Prince, however, had insisted that he and he alone must inform Dawnrose of the findings, and Lord Corambis had been happy to accede to this condition. He told Dawnrose that the Prince would be coming shortly. Then the three men departed. Doctor Camps half bowed to her, and thanked her courteously. Lord Corambis and Professor Mann merely nodded.

From the blue apartment they went straight to the Council Chamber, where the King, Queen and Prince Alonso were waiting with varying degrees of impatience. The Prince, indeed, was quite pale with agitation.

First, the King asked each of them in turn to summarise the conclusions they had drawn about the girl. Doctor Camps began by saying that he had given her a

thorough physical examination before the interview, and found her to be bodily perfect in every way. She was totally healthy, beautifully formed, and apart from a few tiny birthmarks was quite flawless. As far as her personality was concerned, he had been most impressed by her evident sincerity and willingness to co-operate, and he had no doubt that she genuinely believed her own story of having slept for one hundred years. Nor did he doubt that she was a princess, or believed that she was one. The only doubt must concern her mental condition, and he must reserve judgement as to the cause of her strange tale.

Professor Mann thought her an excellent actress, but was quite certain that she was a fake. It was scientifically impossible for her to have slept for a hundred years, and the most rational explanation of the whole affair was that she had deliberately set out to trap the Prince.

Lord Corambis was also convinced that she was a fake, and warned the Prince severely against the dangers of allowing her free access to the “corridors of power”.

Professor Mann now gave his report on the scientific tests carried out in the castle. He began by explaining the nature of the tests themselves, but the King interrupted him and asked simply for the conclusions.

“The evidence shows,” said Professor Mann, “that parts of the castle date back some two thousand years.”

A ripple of astonishment ran round the Council Chamber, and Prince Alonso felt a strange tightening of bands round his throat.

“There are,” continued the professor, “sections that are considerably younger, though none less than one hundred years old.”

“Did you analyse the room where I found the princess?” asked Alonso.

“The room with the dark wood panelling was one of the more recent additions.”

“A hundred years old?” asked Alonso.

“Approximately,” confirmed the professor.

“So the girl could be telling the truth,” said the King.

“The age of the room,” said the professor, “proves nothing about the age of the girl.”

He then called upon Doctor Camps to report on his study of the skeletons. The court physician explained that these had fallen apart when moved, and so he and his team had had to reassemble and re-attach the bones.

“We examined five of the skeletons,” Doctor Camps went on, “but in not one case was it possible to establish the cause of death. We were, however, able to estimate the ages of the people concerned, and also the approximate time of their death. The details are all in the written report which Professor Mann will give you.”

“When did they die?” asked Alonso, the tension clearly perceivable on his face and in his voice.

“Approximately one hundred years ago.”

The Prince sat back in his chair.

“Is there no indication at all of the cause of death?” asked Lord Corambis.

“None,” replied the doctor. “Yet whatever it was struck them all simultaneously.”

“Why didn’t it strike Dawnrose as well?” asked Alonso.

“That I can’t say,” replied the doctor.

“The inference of that is clear,” interposed Professor Mann. “It’s because she wasn’t there. None of the evidence that we have uncovered can be taken as proof of her story.”

“Then explain it!” cried Alonso.

The Queen laid her hand on Alonso’s arm to calm him, but he would not be restrained.

“Give me one explanation of how she got into that room, and of why she acts as she does, knows nothing about our century, weeps for her parents....”

“Yes, yes, Your Highness,” said the professor, “the acting is most convincing, but you’ll see as good in any of our theatres.”

“What is the purpose of this play?” asked the King.

“Would Your Majesties allow your son to marry a woodcutter’s daughter?”

“Ah!” said the King.

“But how can a woodcutter’s daughter suddenly become a princess? Why, by being found in the castle, by creating a mystery, by playing upon the credulity of those with kind hearts and vivid imaginations.”

“I don’t believe that she’s been acting” said Alonso.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but ‘I don’t believe’ is not scientific evidence.”

“Well you don’t believe her, so how scientific is your non-belief?”

“Your Highness, there is a whole world of difference between our scepticisms. You ask me to believe in the supernatural, whereas I ask you to trust in science.”

“Science has provided nothing more than an imaginative story!”

“So far. But give us time, Your Highness.”

“I must challenge these assumptions,” said Doctor Camps. “I too am a man of science, but I do not believe that Dawnrose is deliberately deceiving us.”

“You do not believe!” exclaimed Professor Mann.

“... and there is ,” continued the doctor, “no scientific evidence to support such accusations.”

“You think she slept for a hundred years?” asked Professor Mann incredulously. “And you a man of science?”

“She believes that she did. And the key to this mystery lies in the convolutions of the human mind, not in some fanciful plot of deceit.”

“Ah,” said Professor Mann, “that is a possibility. Delusion would be a rational explanation. So long as we are agreed to discount the irrational, we need not quarrel.”

“Then what is your rational explanation,” asked the Prince, “for a castle that’s two thousand years old and is not mentioned in any of the archives?”

“That, Your Highness,” said the professor, “is a question for the archivists. But the forest is vast. And no doubt in olden times was even vaster. A small castle could be undetected in a vast forest. And records were not kept so scrupulously then as they are now.”

“Feen Wood is mentioned in all the archives.”

“But not the castle. Ergo the archivists did not know about it.”

“I have heard,” said Lord Corambis, “of whole buildings being transplanted stone by stone to new locations. A ruined castle would present fewer difficulties than most edifices.”

“An interesting idea,” said Professor Mann, “bearing in mind the hotchpotch of styles and ages.”

The generation and discussion of theories might well have lasted through the night had it not suddenly been interrupted at this moment by the entrance of Dawnrose herself, followed by an agitated Lady Sarah.

## VI

The Council Chamber was a small but impressive room. Its high circular walls held the portraits of famous Councillors (Lord Corambis had already sat for his), and enclosed the circular table at which the nation's affairs were discussed and decided. The leather-seated chairs were all alike except for the King's and Queen's, which were larger and statelier, and although the Queen did occasionally attend meetings – when they concerned children, or charities, or social problems that interested her – both the room and the furniture exuded an essential masculinity. It had been designed by men for men, and it was old and sombre.

The entrance of Dawnrose into this enclosure of oak and leather was like the entrance of a being from another world, and Alonso was not alone in sensing the presence of something beyond royalty. The King himself rose to his feet.

“I'm sorry, Your Majesty,” exclaimed the Lady Sarah, “but I could not....”

“It's all right, Sarah,” said the King. “You may go.”

He crossed the chamber as if to reassure the princess, but she spoke even before he could reach her:

“What was found at the castle? It was promised me that I should be told, but Alonso, thou didst not come, and so I have come to thee.”

Her words created a silence of embarrassment. Eyes turned downwards or towards other eyes.

“Were my father and mother in the castle, Alonso?”

Alonso ended the stillness by walking to her and placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Come and sit down, Dawnrose,” he said, and guided her to a chair.

“Thou hast found them.”

“Yes.”

Quietly, gently, briefly, he told her what had been found. Her pain was his torture. She sat with cheeks pale and eyes wide until he had finished, and then she covered the wide eyes with her hands, through which the tears began to seep. Her shoulders shook, but she emitted no sound. Everyone – even Professor Mann and Lord Corambis – looked on with helpless fascination as the tears flooded and the body trembled. The Queen rose from her chair and came to kneel beside Dawnrose, putting one arm round the heaving shoulders, and wiping the tears with a

handkerchief. The King motioned that everyone should leave, which they did at once, and then the Queen gestured that the King should also leave, which he did with somewhat less alacrity. Only the Prince and the Queen remained now to comfort Dawnrose.

“My poor child,” murmured the Queen. “We’ve been so thoughtless.... Can you forgive us?”

Slowly the silent weeping ceased, and the Queen gently lifted Dawnrose’s hands away from her face and wiped the salt moisture away. But the sadness of the blue wells made the Queen shudder, and again she asked for forgiveness.

“Thou hast done no wrong,” whispered Dawnrose.

But when she looked at Alonso, the sadness passed from her eyes through his and into his most inward depths, and he felt something indefinable slipping away.

“Thou shouldst have let me sleep,” whispered Dawnrose.

Now Alonso knelt beside her, desperate to recapture what was so swiftly escaping.

“Dawnrose, life must be lived,” he said urgently. “Your parents would not want you to die with them.”

“Thou dost not understand,” she said. “There is something....”

“What? What is there, Dawnrose?”

“I do not know. A power. My father and mother knew this was to happen. When I was a child, they said I might sleep and be woken by the son of a king. And they would be dead. But they hoped....”

“What?”

“That it would not come to pass. And so I was to think no more of it.”

“But it has come to pass,” said the Queen. “And now you must think no more of it. Alonso is right, they would not have wanted you to die with them.”

“My childhood was happy,” said Dawnrose, “and filled with laughter and dance and music. I never doubted.”

“What do you mean?” asked Alonso. “You never doubted what?”

“Now I do not know,” she said, “whether I am blessed or cursed.”

“Dawnrose, you’re blessed, you’re blessed!”

“Then why did this happen?”

They could not answer her. The Queen talked of fate and acceptance, and Alonso urged her to live the life her parents would have wanted her to live, but the

words seemed to pass her by, for suddenly she asked where her parents were. When told that their bodies were in the mortuary, she said that she must go to see them.

“No,” said Alonso, “it’s a terrible sight, Dawnrose. They have no flesh, no faces. We can’t even be sure which are your parents.”

“I shall be sure.”

They could say nothing to dissuade her from this intention, and she insisted that they must go to the mortuary at once, since the delay had already been too long.

Meanwhile, released from the dark circles of the Council Chamber, the King, Lord Corambis, Professor Mann and Doctor Camps had slid back into their positions, but all were agreed that the princess’s room must be searched for some indication as to her true identity. They did not know what sort of indication they were looking for. They were also at one with the King that the fewer people who knew of these events the better, and under no circumstances should Alonso be allowed to consider marrying the girl until all the mysteries had been solved and all the diseases cured.

A short discussion took place as to whether Archbishop Sumner should be appraised of the situation. On hearing of the mysterious stranger in the palace, he had already intimated to Lord Corambis that he expected to be kept fully informed. The truth was, however, that no-one liked the Archbishop, whose fierce primacy was a challenge to all other authority, and indeed inhibited the free exercise of power. Lord Corambis was particularly keen that he should be kept out of discussions as long as possible. Professor Mann thought that the Archbishop’s presence would be irrelevant, and might indeed be positively harmful to their co-operation, but Doctor Camps on the other hand wondered if the girl was not in need of some sort of spiritual guidance. The King gave due consideration to the counsel of his counsellors, and ordained that the Archbishop should be brought into the discussion “in due course” – which was not now.

In view of the need for secrecy, the four men agreed that they should conduct the search themselves. The King insisted that he, too, would get down on his majestical hands and knees. But they felt it would be better for Prince Alonso not to be involved, and for Dawnrose herself to know nothing of the search. It was therefore with a kind of conspiratorial satisfaction that they learnt of the princess’s plan to visit the mortuary, accompanied by the Queen and Prince Alonso. Lord Corambis suggested that perhaps, in the circumstances, Clifford and the Lady Sarah ought to accompany the party, and although Alonso felt this was unnecessary, the

King supported the Lord Chamberlain's view that, on such a harrowing occasion, good reliable servants were "far above rubies".

In the coach, as it rattled through the cobbled streets on its way to the mortuary, Dawnrose was surprisingly calm. She sat next to Lady Sarah and opposite the Queen and Prince Alonso (Clifford rode with the driver), and on two or three occasions asked Alonso to identify buildings or monuments. He had expected her to be downcast and apprehensive, and so her equanimity puzzled both him and the Queen. Perhaps she had not visualised the starkness of what awaited her.

The people in the mortuary had been warned in advance that the royal party was on its way, and with hushed deference they were taken at once to the section they wished to see. Here lay the skeletons of those who had sat at the table a hundred years ago. To Alonso they all looked alike, for they were no longer distinguished by their clothing, and he felt a curious sense of unreality as he approached the laid-out bones. But he was more concerned with Dawnrose's reaction than with the grim exhibition before him, for he was sure that she would turn pale and weep. It had not occurred to him that the scene might have any effect on his mother, and yet it was she who gasped and turned her head away.

"Be not afraid," said Dawnrose.

When he heard this, Alonso marvelled. Dawnrose went straight to one of the skeletons, and stood looking down at it.

"This is my mother," she told the Queen.

She had linked her arm to the Queen's, perhaps to give her support, but now the Queen disengaged her arm and asked Alonso to take her outside. (Clifford and Lady Sarah had not been allowed into the room.) Alonso obeyed at once, though he was most reluctant to leave Dawnrose alone. Thus he did not see the princess cross to another of the skeletons, and he did not hear her instruct the mortuary attendant to set the second skeleton beside the first. Nor did he know that she had then placed the fingers of her father's right hand over the fingers of her mother's left. Had he seen this action, he would undoubtedly have misinterpreted it.

The princess stood for several minutes looking down on the two she had joined. There were no tears in her eyes, and indeed it would have been impossible for anyone to read her mind through the emotionless expression on her face. When eventually she had seen enough, she thanked the attendant, and walked calmly out of the room to join the others in the entrance hall.

The Queen had recovered her composure, and was as anxious as her son to know what frame of mind Dawnrose was now in. They were both surprised that she spoke to them even before they could address her:

“There is nothing to fear in death,” she said gently to the Queen. “Only life is fearful.”

On the way back to the palace, scarcely a word was spoken. Alonso would have liked to question her about her parents, and about the source of her composure, but he felt that to speak to her would be to intrude upon her.

Meanwhile, the search of Dawnrose’s apartment had yielded nothing to help solve the various mysteries. The girl had brought no possessions with her from the castle, apart from the dress she had been wearing, and there were no pictures or jottings to offer insight into her mental condition. Dutifully each searcher listed the items he found, and scrupulously each searcher scanned the others’ lists, but finally each one shook his hand and conceded that there was nothing.

Lord Corambis suggested that the room in the castle where the Prince had found Dawnrose might provide a greater yield. Professor Mann, however, had already searched the room thoroughly, and it had contained nothing of note – nothing, indeed, except its dark wood, its thick carpet, and its four-poster bed. He did not deem it worthwhile even to mention the richly embroidered coverlet that lay over the bed.

## VII

It was impossible to prevent speculation about the mystery girl. Everyone was waiting now for further details concerning her identity, and indeed for an announcement of the royal engagement. The longer the palace kept silent, the more fanciful become the rumours. One or two of the less scrupulous palace servants were paid substantial sums by the less scrupulous journals to reveal inside information, and so it was variously suggested that the Princess Dawnrose was ill, dying, or even dead, that there was a rift between the King and Queen, or between Prince Alonso and one or both of his parents, and that the young lovers themselves had quarrelled.

Lord Corambis, normally in total control of all matters pertaining to the royal household, was becoming increasingly agitated by his failure to uncover information. He could find no evidence of any plot to infiltrate the Royal Family, whether from inland or abroad, searches of Feen Wood had failed to bring forth a family of woodcutters or any other family that might have set Dawnrose on her royal career, and even Lady Sarah's reports yielded nothing. Apart from the fact that the princess never slept, she had no abnormal habits or interests, read avidly, but had no communication whatsoever from the outside world. She was a kind and considerate mistress, who treated Sarah herself more as a companion than a servant. At no time, however, had she given the slightest hint that she knew what had happened to her.

Doctor Camps was convinced that her unconscious mind had shut out some trauma of the past, and unless this secret could be unlocked, sooner or later the princess would suffer a complete mental breakdown. But he saw her only sporadically, and Sarah, who waited on her day and even night, saw no sign of any breakdown. In fact, the fits of melancholy had become less frequent, and even when they did take place, the princess merely asked to be left alone, and then – as Sarah discreetly noted – she sat quietly until they had passed.

Doctor Camps took this lack of emotion to be a sign in itself, indicating profound disturbance, but Professor Mann – who still maintained that she was a fake – attributed it to a growing indifference to the success or failure of her scheme or, even more subtly, to a feigned indifference. He suggested that the girl should be tested by being told to go home, but the Royal Family would not hear of this, and in any case it was obvious that, whether genuine or not, she would return to the castle.

From the very beginning the King had been intrigued by her, and now that the Queen had overcome her initial prejudices, she also found herself growing fond of this strange girl. Nevertheless, they both had misgivings about their son marrying her. There were too many unknown factors to ensure the successful continuation of the monarchy. Physically she appeared to be in perfect condition, but without knowing the family background, how could one be sure there were no hereditary diseases, mental or physical? On the other hand, Alonso was possessed by her, and who could tell what the effect would be if he were to lose her? Would he then marry at all? If he did not, the line would be at an end, and that would be even more disastrous than an incalculable marriage. On this point even Lord Corambis was agreed.

But the speculations in the journals, the Lord Chamberlain's quest for information, the theories of the doctor and the professor, and the mixed feelings of King Charles and Queen Isabel were, in the final analysis, of little significance beside the wishes of the protagonists in this strange love story. Alonso had no doubt at all that he wanted to marry Dawnrose and live happily ever after with her, but his courtship of her had not yet even begun. Their conversations had never once resulted in a meeting of minds, and he had only kissed her in her sleep. If he married her, he would be marrying a stranger, and indeed he did not even know if she would marry him, for they had never once either talked of or shown their feelings.

This uncertainty he confided to his parents when they broached the subject to him.

“How can I even ask her in all this haze of mystery and death? Let alone make a public statement about it!”

The Prince, it must be stressed, was not a shy man. He knew that he was blessed with the gifts of looks, wealth and power, and in the past he had never hesitated to use them. The trusted Clifford (and possibly his wife Sarah) alone knew how many young ladies had been entertained in the Prince's private apartment, with the entertainment sometimes stretching through the night. Nor was he by nature cautious. Indeed his hunting and sporting companions often feared for his safety, so recklessly would he ride and play. In the presence of Dawnrose, however, he became disorientated. It was as if he were wandering through the streets of an unfamiliar town, where no-one spoke his own language.

It may be added in passing that the King had had his share of hot-blooded passion both in youth and middle age, and even now in his early fifties made occasional discreet business trips of a very private nature. Thus in requesting his wife to leave the two men together for a few minutes, he intended to call on a fund of experience to which he did not particularly wish to allude in Her Majesty's presence.

"Look here, Alonso," he said, as soon as they were alone together, "a man and a woman can't get to know each other without knocking down the barriers. You know what I mean, eh? What stage have you got to?"

"To be quite honest, father, I haven't even got to stage one."

"In my position, boy, I don't have time for the preliminaries. What do you count as stage one?"

"We don't even hold hands,"

"So you haven't kissed her?"

"Only when she was asleep."

"That's fine! You only kiss her when she's not there. What about exploring?"

"I told you, father, I've got nowhere."

"Why not? Dammit, you've had girls, haven't you?"

"I can't explain it. In her presence, I'm not sure..."

"Do you want her?"

"Of course I want her."

"Then what stops you? If she says no, she says no. And then you know you're in love with a block of ice. Dammit, boy, if you don't do anything, you'll never get anywhere."

The father leaned very close to the son now, and lowered his voice to a tone of the utmost intimacy:

"Do you think she's frigid?"

"I don't know."

"Even frigid ones have parts that can be stimulated. Ask your mother. No, don't."

"Father, I know what to do with women. It's just that Dawnrose isn't like any woman that you or I have ever known."

"Son, if you're going to marry her, there are some respects in which she has to be like any woman we've ever known. And if she's not, then there's no point in marrying her. I'm not saying you have to get to the final stage before the wedding – a

virgin bride can be a very fine thing – but if you don't reach the penultimate stage, then you're running down the street with your eyes shut. Now, you go to her, son, and you treat her like any other woman. And if she responds like any other woman, you can marry her, and we'll put the country out of its misery.”

And thus the King brought matters to a head. Alonso would begin his courtship in earnest, and either the course of true love would run smooth, or the affair would have to end. The Queen was informed of the general plan but was spared the details, and expressed her approval. Lord Corambis was informed of the general plan and some of the details, and expressed his disapproval. And the journals and reviews were asked to be patient and to stop writing fiction – two requests that were as alien to Nature as the seduction of Dawnrose.

## VIII

When Alonso presented himself at the blue apartment, he was admitted as usual by the Lady Sarah, and greeted by the princess with an announcement that was scarcely calculated to encourage the fine art of wooing:

“It is time for my father and mother to be buried.”

The romantic overtures that Alonso had so carefully prepared now had to give way to the workaday tune of practicality.

“Yes, that’s something we’d wanted to discuss with you, Dawnrose,” he said.

“What are your wishes?”

“They must be buried at the castle.”

“Is there a burial-ground there?”

“Of course.”

“Dawnrose, would it be wise for you to go back to the castle? In the circumstances ....”

“I have to go back.”

Her tone was of almost infinite ambiguity. Was this a rejection of him? Did it mean that her return would be permanent? Did she have to go back from an inner compulsion or an outer? Did she want to go back?

Alonso forced himself to stand firm as the grounds of meaning shifted:

“You mean you have to go back because of the burial?”

“And ...”

“And what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

It did matter. Everything mattered.

“Tell me.”

“We must talk of the funeral. And then of other things,”

“What other things?”

“Nay, Alonso, the funeral. We shall need many hearses, for all my people must be buried at the castle.”

“The servants, too?”

“They all have their place.”

“That’s a big undertaking, Dawnrose, to bury all these people. We shall have to send in any arm of gravediggers .....

“No. We need only the bearers.”

“But the bodies – do you mean they’re to be cremated?”

“Oh no.”

“Then graves have to be dug.”

“All is prepared.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You shall see. For the servants we shall need coffins of pine.”

“And for your parents.”

“No coffins.”

For a moment Alonso had the impression that someone else was speaking through Dawnrose. How else could such a young girl know what was and was not to be done? And the list of instructions was not yet finished. He must find a priest, but not an ordinary priest. It must be one whom he knew and loved.

There was such a priest. Father Ignatius had taught Alonso Latin and Greek, and had guided him through boyhood to manhood with unfailing gentleness and understanding. Father Ignatius would bury the dead with love as well as with words.

Dawnrose had one further instruction. There were to be no guests. No-one would attend the ceremony except the priest, the bearers, herself and Alonso. The thought flashed through the Prince’s mind that perhaps Dawnrose and he were to die as well.

“Why just me?” he asked boldly.

“It is not a time for strangers.”

“But I’m a stranger,” he said.

“Nay, thou art my future husband.”

She spoke the words as a pure statement of fact, not even looking for his reaction. He transformed his spontaneous gasp into a gentle clearing of the throat.

“Of course,” he murmured.

Of course. Of course he must go to the burial, of course no-one else should go, of course he was her future husband.

He reached across the round glass table at which they sat, and grasped her hand.

“Your hands are cold!” he exclaimed.

“My hands are always cold,” she said.

He did not know what to do. With another girl, he would have easily crossed the glass barrier, taken her in his arms and kissed her, but even with the cold fingers returning his clasp, he could not move, he could not gain further possession. He released her hand. And just as she had accepted his tiny invasion, so too did she accept his tiny retreat. Through his head ran a haunting lament: “The funeral bak’d meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.”

“Now we may talk of other things,” she said. “Thy priest, whom thou knowest and lovest, shall marry us.”

“I wish he could,” said Alonso. “But the Archbishop would never allow that.”

“The Archbishop?”

“When it’s matter of a royal wedding, Dawnrose, the Archbishop officiates. It has to be the Head of the Church.”

“Then let the Archbishop bury my father and mother.”

“I thought it had to be a priest I loved.”

“Thou dost not love the Archbishop?”

“I think even God will have difficulty loving the Archbishop.”

“Then must Father Ignatius marry us. There must only be love when we enter the castle.”

“The castle?”

Slowly the realisation shaped itself in Alonso’s mind that Dawnrose was not speaking of two separate occasions.

“You mean we’re to be married on the same day?” he asked.

“The same hour,” she replied. “Thus will the future be knit to the past.”

It was as if a light suddenly shone into Alonso’s head, clearing mists and allowing him to be himself again.

“That’s impossible!” he exclaimed. “A royal wedding is a public event. It has to be performed at one of our great churches, the Archbishop conducts the ceremony, the people crowd the streets, and it’s a national day of rejoicing. The nation would never allow its prince to be secretly married. That’s not the way things are done.”

He had never spoken to her with such authority before. For the first time he was certain of the ground, knowing what was right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable. And now he saw her as she was – a young girl, unschooled in the ways of the world and society. It was true that her beauty was unearthly, and that within

her dwelt some magic that disorientated those who met her, but this was the earth, and he was of it, and so he must train her, enlighten her, govern her.

She did not respond. He realized that when he had made his speech, he had not been looking at her. Now, as he waited for her to answer, he found that she was not looking at him either. Instead she was staring at the glass table, or rather at something on the table. He followed the direction of her stare, and it seemed to be concentrated on a vase of red roses at the centre.

“Dawnrose,” he said, “did you hear?”

“Yes,” she said. “I heard.”

But her eyes remained on the roses.

“What is it?” he asked.

“They have thorns,” she said.

“The roses? Yes, of course they have thorns. What about them?”

“I think they have something to do with the wheel,” said the princess.

“The wheel?”

“But I cannot be sure,” she said.

“What wheel?”

“It has gone. Now I do not know any more.”

What was wrong with her? Alonso was wrestling for authority again...

“Dawnrose, I was talking about our wedding.”

“Yes, I heard.”

“It can’t be after the funeral, and it can’t be at the castle.”

“You do not understand,” she said.

“Then help me to understand.”

There was another silence, and once again her eyes turned to the roses on the table. He could not even tell whether she was going to speak, but he did not dare to interrupt her thoughts. At last she raised her eyes and looked straight at him.

“They cannot go elsewhere,” she said.

“Who can’t? Who can’t go elsewhere?”

“My people.”

Was the ambiguity deliberate? Was she playing with him? Was he missing something? He knew he must not let go of this mermaid, or she would disappear for ever beneath ungraspable waves.

“What people? Who do you mean?”

“My father and mother, the people of the castle, the people of my country.”

“You have no country, Dawnrose. And your father and mother and the people of the castle are all dead. You must ...”

“No,” she said.

It was not a cry. It was a simple statement of fact. It meant, from its tone, that they were not dead.

“They are,” insisted Alonso. “That’s why we have to bury them.”

“You do not understand,” she said again.

“Then help me,” he said again.

But this time she raised her hands in a gesture that may have meant that she could not help him, or that he would never understand, or that he must not ask for more.

Alonso should have been infuriated, but he was not. He was fascinated. No matter how many webs he untangled, he found himself trapped in a dozen new threads for each one unravelled.

But on the wedding he could not, he must not give way.

“Dawnrose, one day I shall be king of this country. A royal wedding is a massive, public event which affects everyone. We’re not just private individuals – we’re royalty. The people have to see their rulers, and their future rulers. They have to see their future king marrying their future queen.”

“My father and mother are dead,” said Dawnrose.

“Yes, I know.”

“My father was King Anselm.”

“What has this got to do...”

“When they died, no matter how, no matter when, the succession passed to me. I am Queen.”

The logic was impeccable, the announcement authoritative and unopposable. But Queen of where, of what, of whom? A queen without a country, without a people...

Alonso closed his eyes in order to focus his mind as sharply as possible on his own logic:

“Yes, you’re Queen. But you have no realm, Dawnrose. Your country has disappeared, your people are dead, and even your castle is in ruins. This is the here

and now, and you have to conform to the customs of the here and now. The rules have changed.”

“No,” she said.

Once again, the statement of fact.

Was she blind to the truth, or did she know something that he did not know?

He waited, but she said nothing more.

“What do you mean, no?” he asked, ashamed of the lameness of the question even as he formulated it.

“There are different sets of rules,” she said. “There are mine, and there are yours.”

Impasse.

But she broke the deadlock as swiftly as she had created it.

“We shall have two weddings,” she said. “One at the castle, and one in thy great church.”

“Of course!” cried Alonso.

Of course. Between poles there is always a halfway point. Father Ignatius would bury the dead and marry the living within the walls of the old world, and Archbishop Sumner would marry the married in one of the churches of the new. But the first wedding must be secret. For if the Archbishop knew of it, he would call down the wrath of heaven from above, while Lord Corambis would exercise the wrath of earth against a ceremony planned in his ignorance. The King and Queen, too, should believe that the second wedding was the first.

One further subterfuge would be necessary: the wedding must be witnessed. And the witnesses must be known and loved. Clifford and the Lady Sarah were the obvious choice, but they were for ever under the surveillance of Lord Corambis. It would be unfair to burden them with a secret out of accordance with their duties. But the funeral was not to be a secret, and so they would be invited to accompany the cortege, and would know of no sequel until they were within the castle walls.

And so Prince Alonso’s first attempt to court the Princess Dawnrose ended in plans for a funeral and two weddings. He had also held hands with her for the first time.

## IX

Lord Corambis was vehemently opposed to the marriage. He could see nothing but danger in it – danger to the Royal Family, danger to the State, and danger to himself. He had the backing of Doctor Camps, who was worried about the heredity factor, and of Professor Mann, whose scepticism never wavered. King Charles and Queen Isabel, however, were prepared to bless this union for reasons already outlined, and since the wedding was to go ahead, Lord Corambis found himself in charge of the overall organisation. Inevitably, therefore, he now had to work together not only with the young couple themselves, but also with the principal figure of authority in all matters pertaining to birth, marriage and death – Archbishop Sumner.

Archbishop Sumner was in his late fifties – a short man who was rarely seen other than in his flowing robes and heightening mitre. Steel grey eyes pierced from behind steel grey spectacles, and the crispness of his voice was aligned far more to the fear than to the love of God. He cultivated awe both of the Church and of himself, but enjoyed proximity to royalty, as if it were a foretaste of the glory to come. Like Lord Corambis he would have welcomed a royal wedding as an occasion on which to show off the trappings of his authority, but when the Lord Chamberlain confided the facts (and interpreted facts) to him, his brow beetled.

Both he and the Lord Chamberlain were to beetle their brows more than once in the course of the wedding preparations. The young princess showed little interest in the pomp and pageantry of State and Church, and indeed on one occasion the Archbishop was forced to rebuke her. They were rehearsing the ceremony in the Abbey, and with great thoroughness he was explaining the symbolism of the ring, when suddenly he noticed that she was not even listening to him. Her eyes were fixed upon a stained glass window to the left of the chancel. It depicted scenes from the life of Saint Teresa of Avila.

“You must listen to me!” exclaimed the Archbishop. “These are important matters!”

“I do not think,” said Dawnrose, “that a ring is of more importance than a spear.”

Neither the Archbishop nor the Prince understood her remark, but it strengthened the primate’s belief that Lord Corambis – with whom he rarely saw eye

to eye – had judged correctly in the matter of this marriage. A young bride who showed so little respect for the great ones of the kingdom, let alone for the word of God as conveyed by God’s highest representative on earth, seemed singularly ill equipped to be the future queen of the realm.

The Prince himself was not a little disconcerted by Dawnrose’s evident lack of interest in the official wedding. It was as if she regarded that as a task to be fulfilled, in contrast to the funeral and the secret wedding, which were of real significance. When she talked with him about these events, her eyes would shine bright blue, and he felt the excitement rising within her, as befitted a young girl counting the days to her new life. But the procession to the Abbey, the ceremony with massed choirs and dignitaries, the banquet to follow, and the celebrations of the nation – these were facts without feelings, the “other” wedding, the world of Corambian duty and Sumnerian pomp.

Only with Father Ignatius did she seem to be in harmony. Father Ignatius was a tall and gentle man, forty years old but with an ageless face and manner. He sought goodness and found goodness. He had agreed at once to conduct the funeral – the Archbishop, incidentally, having no objections to his taking it, since those to be buried were not of the archdiocese or, for all he knew, of the faith. The secret wedding, however, had raised doubts in his mind, for it smacked of deceit. Yet Dawnrose was able to conquer his scruples with the argument that in her country she was Queen, and it would be mortally offensive to the spirits of her people if she were not to be married in their presence.

“I suppose it can do no harm,” Father Ignatius had said, and had melted to her smile of joy and certainty.

The funeral and secret wedding were to take place on the day preceding the official wedding. On the eve of the black and white day, Dawnrose and Alonso were sitting in the blue apartment with Father Ignatius, making their final arrangements. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Dawnrose asked Father Ignatius if he knew the story of Katherine of Alexandria. He said that he did.

“Why,” she asked, “did the wheel splinter?”

“Because, I suppose, God would not allow her to be broken.”

“Then why,” she asked, “did God allow her to be beheaded?”

“Because, I suppose, he was ready to receive her.”

“Then,” she said, “the readiness is all.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

Both Alonso and Father Ignatius were puzzled by this conversation, but assumed that in some way it was connected with the death of her parents.

The following day at sunrise, a strange wedding cortege drove swiftly through the deserted streets of the town and out into the vast forest that might once have been Danwrose’s country. It consisted of a line of black coaches. One contained Dawnrose and Sarah, Alonso and Father Ignatius, with Clifford riding alongside the coachman. All were dressed in black. The remaining coaches contained the bodies of Dawnrose’s parents, shrouded in purple, followed by those of the servants, all in pine coffins. As the procession drew nearer to the ruined castle, Alonso noticed that Dawnrose was trembling. He reached across to place his hand on her. It was cold.

“You’re not afraid, are you?” he said.

“No,” she said. “I tremble because I am going home.”

He had misunderstood her. The light in her eyes was of joy. And when at last the coach stopped before the mighty hedge of thorns, she had opened the door and leapt to the ground before the Prince could stop her, and before even Clifford could descend to perform his duty.

“Dawnrose!” cried the Prince.

“Come!” she said, looking up at him and smiling. “You must come with me.”

“No, wait,” he said. “The bearers have to bring the bodies.”

“No,” she said. “You must come with me, and I shall show you where the bodies are to be taken. Then you will return here. And Father Ignatius must wait also, and while we are gone tell Sarah and Clifford the true purpose of their coming. For they cannot attend the burial of my father and mother.”

“What’s this all about, Dawnrose?”

“Come. You shall see.”

She could not wait. For the first time in their acquaintance she seized his hand, and he was swept away through the carved opening in the hedge and into the briar and ivy covered courtyard, past crumbling pillars and fallen roofs, through a rotting wooden door, and into the great hall where he had found the banqueting skeletons. Now the table and chairs were empty. But Dawnrose swirled away from her Prince and on to the vast floor beyond the table, and there she danced at dizzying speed, her face lit up by a smile as bright as the rays of the sun ribboning through the windows. For a moment, but only for a moment, Alonso heard an orchestra, and the

chairs round the table were filled with people in evening gowns or tails ... but they were not there – only Dawnrose was there, floating across the floor in a white ball gown .... in a black dress. She was dancing in mourning.

She stopped dancing.

“Come!” she said, and held out her hand.

He might have been on the end of a lead, so dutifully and so irresistibly was he drawn. And then he was holding her, and they were dancing together, and there was an orchestra, and there were blurred faces and figures all around, indistinguishable because of the speed with which Dawnrose danced him past them .... round and round, faster and faster, and the music was a waltz whose harmonies were rich and as giddy as the movement of their bodies round the floor, and his head pounded, he was on the verge of falling....

But they were gliding so slowly. Dawnrose was quietly humming a rhythm to which she drew him on. The hall was empty. There was no other sound. There were no other people.

Alonso stopped in mid-step.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “But I thought I might be dreaming.”

“No,” she said. “This is real.”

Did she say: “This is real”?

In the floor he noticed thick glass tiles, and wondered what they were for. The floor was perfectly preserved. Apart from its glass tiles, it was made of stone.

“Poor Alonso!” said Dawnrose, in a tone that was almost bantering.

“Why am I poor?” he asked.

“Because you do not know why you are poor!” she said, and laughed. “But I will make you happy, and you will never be poor again.”

Once more she took his hand, and led him to the end wall, where for the first time he noticed, at head height, a frieze of plaster animals that ran from one side to the other. They had yellowed to the same old-age colour as the wall itself, which was why he had not seen them earlier.

“When I was a child,” she said, “I thought these animals were real, because once I saw them move. But that was not their secret. Watch.”

She fondled the antlered head of a mighty stag, and suddenly the wall itself and the floor on which they were standing began to move. Alonso started, but she held his arm.

“Be still,” she murmured. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

The movement stopped. The wall with the frieze was false, and consisted of two massive panels which had now slid apart revealing the true stone wall beyond. The section of floor they were standing on was also one of two panels, and in the gap that had now appeared, reaching from in front of the stone wall down into impenetrable darkness, was a broad marble staircase.

“Come,” said Dawnrose.

And down the marble staircase they went, hand in hand, into a strangely scented gloom. The scent was perhaps of incense, or burnt wood mingled with must. The stillness was eerie, but Dawnrose would not let him be afraid.

“You will be able to see in a moment,” she whispered.

They stood at the bottom of the staircase, and sure enough his eyes gradually became accustomed to the darkness, and shapes began to emerge. Tiny glimmers of light filtered through from the ceiling – no doubt from the glass tiles he had noticed in the floor of the hall – and before long he could see that they were standing at the end of a vast chamber, on all sides of which were human figures, rectangular blocks, crosses, canopies ...

“This is our burial vault,” whispered Dawnrose. “Come.”

The air was as cold as the hand that was holding his, but again Alonso was powerless to resist as she drew him along beside her, past the still shapes that contained who knew how many centuries of relinquished history?

They stopped at a massive stone catafalque with two stone coffins on top.

“The parents of my father,” whispered Dawnrose. “King Alphonse and Queen Delia. I never knew them. They died before I was born.”

She led him to another stone base on which lay two statues, the right hand of the man clasping the left hand of the woman.

“My father and mother,” she whispered.

Alonso was startled.

“That’s not possible!” he exclaimed. “They’re outside!”

His voice echoed back from the walls and tombs, as if in rebuke.

“This is where they are to lie,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“Read the plaque.”

He bent over to peer through the dusk at the writing on the side of the tomb:  
‘King Anselm and Queen Dorothea’.

“When was this built?” he asked.

“Long ago.”

“When, Dawnrose?”

“When I was a child.”

“They built their own tomb?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“I think it is the custom.”

She told him to press a stone scroll that was curled up at one corner of the tomb. He did so, and the linked statues swung back. Then she asked him to look inside. She made him set one foot on the base of the tomb and raise himself up to peer over the rim of the stone basin. The interior was a bed with pillows and rich drapes.

“That is where they shall lie,” she said, “until the awakening.”

He descended.

“Did they show this to you as well?”

“Of course,” she said.

Of course. Of course people built their own tombs. Of course they showed them to their children. What other custom was there?

“But you were just a child!”

“Death maketh no distinction between youth and age.”

Alonso shuddered in the chill.

“Alonso, art thou afeared to die?”

“Of course I’m afraid to die. Aren’t you?”

Her face clouded for a moment.

“If thou art afeared . . . .”

But then she shook her head.

“No, thou must see it. Thou must know as I did, for the future. It is no secret that there are tombs beneath halls and bones beneath dancing feet. Thou must know all the rooms of my castle.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come.”

“I don’t want to see any more.”

“Thou must. The readiness is all.”

“Dawnrose, stop talking in riddles!”

The answer to the riddle lay a few paces further along the chamber. He saw it even before he reached it – a statue of two figures. One lay on a bed, and other leaned over her, about to kiss her.

“Read the plaque,” she said.

But he did not need to read the plaque. He knew who they were.

“Why have you done this?” he asked, voice hoarse and dry.

“So that thou wilt know,” she said.

“I don’t want to know!” he cried, and his voice echoed, and she flinched.

“I don’t want to know,” he repeated more gently. “Who wants to see his own tomb?”

“Who wants to dwell for a thousand years in a house he has never seen?”

“But who built this?”

“My father and mother.”

“How did they know? Dawnrose, how did they know?”

“They knew – somehow – of my possible sleep, my awakening in thy presence, and their death. All know of their death.”

“How did they know of your sleep? How did they know about me?”

“They never told me. They said only that it might come to pass.”

“I do not understand this!”

“It was never explained to me, Alonso.”

He stood before the tomb and wrestled with realities that could only slip away from his grasp. What time was this? What world? Had he lost his senses?

She was not a dream. She was beside him even now, and whispering to him that the bodies must be brought. The funeral before the wedding. First the bearers must bring her father and mother, and the rest must wait outside, for they were to be buried elsewhere. She would wait here while he fetched Father Ignatius and gave the bearers their instructions.

He obeyed. He could not do otherwise. He climbed the marble staircase, crossed the stone and glass floor, and stepped out into the unmusted, sunlit air of the

open courtyard. It was a different world, and yet still not his. There were so many realities.

Was Dawnrose dead?

No, she had danced and laughed. They were to be married. She would make him happy and he would never be poor again. She was a child who knew things unknown even to old men, to professors, to Archbishops, to Chamberlains, to Kings and Queens. She was not just alive. She was life.

And yet she was so at ease with death.

Was she blessed or was she cursed?

He must marry her, and he must find the answers, for answers there must be. If only she stayed.

Stabbed by apprehension, Prince Alonso hastened through the hedge to the waiting cortege.

## X

From the depths of the earth, so it seemed, there came a singing that was siren-clear and mesmeric. It was not, however, an allurement. Nor was it sad, nor happy, nor suffused with any identifiable emotion. It was totally pure.

The line of bearers stopped in their tracks to listen, and Father Ignatius crossed himself. Alonso found himself trembling.

When the song ended, they resumed their slow march across the courtyard until they reached the great hall. There Alonso ordered that the dead king and queen should be brought after him, but all the rest must wait, for he still did not know where the servants were to be buried.

Before they entered the hall, Father Ignatius held out a small gold cross to the Prince.

“There is something unholy in this place,” he said. “Wear the cross for protection.”

Alonso placed the cross round his neck, and led the way into the hall. Everything was as he had left it, with the parted wall and the marble stairs leading down into the crypt, but now the stillness was unearthly, and the chill seemed filled with menace. Where was Dawnrose? He had expected her to come towards him, but as they descended the steps and his eyes began to penetrate the gloom, he could discern no movement, nor even a living presence. The thought flitted through his mind that she could be childishly hiding behind one of the tombs.

“Dawnrose!” he called.

His voice echoed, and the walls’ response was far from reassuring. He called again, more urgently, but still there was no movement. And now another thought came to his mind, and it was as cold as her fingers.

“Wait here,” he commanded.

Father Ignatius and the bearers stood at the entrance to the crypt, and strained their eyes to follow him as he strode away. They could not know the awful terror driving him towards his own tomb.

The statues were still in place. He searched for a scroll or a rosette or a wreath to press, but the base was smooth.

She was dead. She was inside the tomb. Why else would she have brought him here alone, and then made him leave her?

In desperation he ran his hand over the smooth base, hoping to activate some hidden mechanism. If he had to, he would smash these statues down and break into the tomb from above.

“Dawnrose!” he cried.

“I am here.”

And she was coming towards him through the gloom.

“Oh God!” he said. “I thought you were dead.”

“I was at the burial ground,” she said. “All is ready.”

“I thought you were dead. I was going to smash the tomb.”

“No,” she said. “Be gentle.”

Then she reached up and clasped the foot of the prince’s statue, and at once the top of the tomb swivelled away from the base.

“Here we shall rest,” she said, “for our thousand years. Will you look inside?”

He shook his head.

“We must bury your parents,” he said.

She closed the tomb, and together they walked back to join Father Ignatius and the bearers. Then she led them to the tomb of the two hand-linked statues, and pressed the scroll that opened it.

The bearers themselves stood like statues, holding on their shoulders the purple-shrouded, hand-linked skeletons, and Alonso wondered how they would lower the dead into the resting-place.

Father Ignatius began the ceremony, and the kindness of his voice and the shining of his faith gave distinction to every word. Alonso found himself drawn into a strange search, for the familiar words of the burial service seemed to take on new shades of meaning that he could not quite grasp. He was not sure whether things were being explained to him or mystified.

“The eternal God is thy dwelling-place, and underneath are the everlasting arms....”

“The righteous live for ever,

And in the Lord is their reward.

And the care for them with the Most High

Therefore shall they receive the crown of royal dignity

And the diadem of beauty from the Lord’s hand ...”

“But someone will say, How are the dead raised? and with what manner of body do they come? Thou foolish one, that which thou thyself sowest is not quickened, except it die: and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be, but a bare grain....”

“.... And we have joy at this time in all who have faithfully lived, and in all who have peacefully died. We thank Thee for all fair memories and all lively hopes; for the sacred ties that bind us to the unseen world; for the dear and holy dead who compass us as a cloud of witnesses, and make the distant heaven a home to our hearts.”

Throughout the service Dawnrose stood still and attentive, only moving to guide the bearers to the steps at the back of the tomb. Thus they were able to mount the base and lower the bodies to rest.

The second burial was to follow immediately, and Dawnrose led the procession through the ruins to a curved stone wall that seemed to have no entrance. It was at the very end of the castle’s terrain, for towering not far beyond it was the mighty hedge of briars. Had the wall not curved outwards instead of inwards, it might have been part of the ramparts, but in fact it turned out to be circular.

Dawnrose whispered to Alonso: “In our castle all entrances are maidenly.”

She walked up to the blank stone wall and raised her hand to touch one of the stones. Inevitably a gap appeared and the cortege slowly made its way into the enclosure. It was a graveyard. They passed between ancient stones and crosses until they came to a line of open graves. They were overgrown, as indeed was the whole cemetery, but the holes were clearly discernible, and so too were the crosses that stood at their heads, and the names carved in their stone.

“Who dug these graves?” Alonso asked Dawnrose.

“They themselves,” she replied.

The service was different, but the effect on Alonso was the same. He heard words that were not unfamiliar, but he could not wrestle them to the point of pinning their meaning:

“Make us glad according to the days wherein Thou hast afflicted us.  
And the years wherein we have seen evil.  
Let Thy work appear unto thy servants,  
And Thy glory upon their children.  
And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us;  
And establish Thou the work of our hands upon us;  
Yes, the work of our hands establish Thou it.”

“And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, These which are arrayed in the white robes, who are they, and whence came they? And I say unto him, My Lord, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of god; and they serve Him day and night in His temple....”

“I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, From henceforth, blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so, said the Spirit; for they rest from their labours.”

These last words were spoken as the bodies were laid in the graves which Dawnrose had designated, for she had known every one of the servants by name, and had identified their remains. Like so much else about her, this had amazed Alonso, but she explained that she had been trained to know them all. Her father and mother had impressed it upon her as a duty.

It was now mid morning, and the sun shone brightly down on the ruined castle and its occupants. No-one moved from the walled-in graveyard, for only one person present knew what was next to be done. But she was in no hurry. She gazed round her, and Alonso had the impression that she was trying to remember something.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I do not know,” she said. “There is something I do not understand.”

“What is it?”

“The old woman .... Why is she not here?”

“Which old woman?”

“In the room – with the wheel.”

Alonso could only answer that all the bodies which had been found had also been brought. Besides, if Dawnrose had been trained to recognize the servants, then the old woman could not have lived in the castle, since Dawnrose had not known her.

The princess frowned for a moment.

“Then who was she? And where is she?”

No-one could answer these questions.

The wedding was to be held in the great hall beneath which lay the tombs of Dawnrose’s ancestors. The bearers were to leave, though one should guide Clifford

and the Lady Sarah to the hall, and there Alonso and Father Ignatius should wait for the bride.

“Where are you going?” asked the Prince.

“Wilt thou have thy bride to wed in black?” she asked.

Then with light steps she went away towards the tower where he had first found her. Would he see her again?

Father Ignatius had read his mind:

“She’ll come back,” he said.

The Prince smiled, but still sensed the ache of apprehension.

“Father,” he asked, “is this place unholy?”

“It is unearthly,” said the priest, “but whether it is good or bad I cannot tell.”

“What good thing would strike all those people dead? Supposing it strikes Dawnrose now!”

“If it allowed her to live for a hundred years, it won’t kill her now. Be patient..”

“Why did she ask you about Saint Katherine?”

“I don’t know.”

“She said the readiness is all.”

They had entered the hall. The floor and walls had closed to cover the marble staircase that led to the burial vault. Alonso thought they had still been open when he had left the building, but he was not sure.

They were joined now by Clifford and the Lady Sarah, who gazed around them with fascination, unaware of the mysteries beneath their feet.

“Father,” said the Prince, “do you feel secure in the presence of God?”

“God is my rock and my salvation....”

“But do you feel secure in his presence?”

This burning question the priest did not have the chance to answer – even if he had been able to – for from outside the hall came the same ethereal voice they had heard before the burial. Once more there were no words to the song, but this time instead of glacial purity, it spoke of joy. Behind the voice, the listeners could hear the dancing of the soul, and it drove away the thoughts that were troubling Alonso as if they were mere shadows of shadows. All was light again, and there were no meanings to be grasped, since the light was sufficient unto itself.

The song ended, and into the hall came a creature of such astonishing beauty that even Father Ignatius's mouth fell open in wonderment. This was Dawnrose transfigured. The sun's rays seemed to follow her and light up her smile until it dazzled. The silk of her white dress flashed like the silk of her hair, and the jewels round her neck vied with the jewels of her eyes. Nothing on earth or in heaven could have matched Dawnrose's beauty, and if anyone had ever doubted that she was the embodiment of goodness, the sight of this vision was surely enough to place her among the angels.

When Dawnrose stood beside Alonso, enveloping him in light and perfume, he began to tremble violently, and only when she laid her hand on his arm did this involuntary movement cease. Instead he was filled with calm, even to the extent that he became aware again of death beneath his feet.

"Let the service begin," whispered Dawnrose.

The words of the service were the conventional words, the responses the conventional responses. Alonso's mind oscillated between feelings of intense reality and unreality, caught between two worlds neither of which he could fully grasp. She was to be his, to share his home, his bed, his kingdom, his life ... but he would lose her every minute of every day. She was inside him and outside him, part of him and yet separate from him, occupying him, but deserting him. He loved her above all things, and so she could destroy him. And he partly wanted her to destroy him. For that would bring him peace.

The priest's words suddenly held his attention. They seemed to grasp meaning instead of rendering it elusive. They seemed to echo the singing voice. They seemed to place something eternal into the space of the temporal:

"Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself. It not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth. Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

There were no claps of thunder, no heavenly choruses, no rejoicing of the organ, cheering of the crowd, or showering of flowers. The wedding ended in silence, and the silence filled the hall and the vault below, but it was the silence of total enchantment. The Prince and Dawnrose were man and wife, and one of them could not believe it.

## XI

The official wedding was to take place the following day in the Abbey, but Dawnrose had made it plain that her wedding was the one in the castle. And since she and Alonso were now married, their first night as man and wife must be spent together. She would make her way to his apartment during the night.

The long-drawn-out remainder of this funeral/wedding day was spent on preparations for the great spectacle. Lord Corambis demanded a complete rehearsal of the procession and entrance into the Abbey. Archbishop Sumner insisted on going through the service arrangements, there were last minute adjustments to the bridal gown, lengthy discussions on the seating plan for the wedding feast, and interviews with writers from different journals. Throughout the afternoon and evening, Dawnrose was gentle, co-operative and helpful to all who needed her presence. The explosive impatience of Lord Corambis, the Almightyness of the Archbishop, the rushing of the servants, the fussing of the Queen and the growing irritability of the King all flowed past her, unable to pierce her serenity.

Alonso himself had the greatest difficulty in applying his mind to the matters of the morrow, since it was entirely taken up with the prospects of the coming night. The hours of practising pomp were sweetened only by the occasional glance that passed between secret husband and secret wife. Each of these honeyed moments reassured him that he would soon have full possession of this new reality and make it his own. He wondered if he would ever become so familiar with the new world that it would lose its fascination.

The day ended at last. Night fell, and the palace settled to stillness and silence. Alonso paced his rooms, studied the mirror, adjusted the lights, and strained to hear footsteps in the corridor. Perhaps she would never come. Perhaps Sarah would burst in with the news that she was dead.

But suddenly she was there in the room with him, close to him, laughing, encouraging, accepting. He was her husband. He could take her.

He kissed her, and felt her merge with him. His heart was already pounding, yet still he could not believe that he would be allowed to have her. There would be an explosion, a thunderbolt, a devil in a fiery chariot...

He began to undress her. She did not resist. Her flesh was marble smooth and white, but warm. She was smiling.

“Come,” he said.

He took her hand, and led her to the bedroom.

In his excitement, he fumbled with her buttons, and she helped him, still smiling. But when he fumbled with his own clothes, she did not help him. She merely stood by, waiting patiently.

Then, in a fever, he clasped her to him, but the movement was clumsy.

“Wait,” she whispered, disengaged herself from his embrace, and smiled up at him. “We should lie down.”

The softness of the sheets and the softness of her body were kindling to his passion and he wanted to devour her, consume her, annihilate her. His hands grasped and pressed, and his legs forced and encircled the smooth curves of her body, and when he finally pushed his way through and into her, she let out a little cry of pain. But she was tight and moist and yielding, and he plunged deeper and deeper, faster and faster, until he thought his heart would burst from his body and his head would explode. And then he released his passion far, far into her, and the violence abated, the pounding slowed, and he lay still.

She made no sound, no movement, but held him against her. Her hands burnt. Then the fire began to flame again, and once more he was inside her, probing and sliding into her depths, consumed from head to toe with the rage of possession. She was his, totally and for ever. Not even death could take this night away, and the great shudder that marked the next release was the thrill of life in ecstasy at its most intense.

Again and again through the night he made love to her, and each time the pleasure was fresh and limitless. No matter what shape he formed, she was there to complete it, and every pattern was perfectly rounded and reached its roundness at precisely the moment of concurrence. Her body was the life-giver and the life-taker, and no sooner had she drained the waters from him than she was flooding him again with gushing waves of desire. She was the sea, and he was the shore; she was the sun, and he the earth; she was the music, and he the instrument. If the Archangel had chosen this night to blow his trumpet, heaven would have merged with hell and there would have been no judgment.

He could not exhaust the treasures of her body, but his own was finite. Eventually Nature’s storm had to give way to Nature’s calm, and so Alonso slept the sleep of fulfilment, dreamless and motionless as the vault beneath the banqueting

hall. His final thoughts before his mind drifted away into the arms of the night were that this was life's beginning, the past had lost all truth, and the future would bring pleasure beyond dreams.

When Alonso awoke, it was to the sound of rain against the windows. He was lying on his side, with his back turned to Dawnrose, but a few seconds elapsed before his mind caught up with his body and entered the present. Then at one he turned to face his bride, and drink again the elixir of her beauty. Propped upon one elbow, and gazing down at him from faded, hooded, blue eyes, was a naked, wrinkled and wizened old woman.

## XII

Alonso uttered a cry of fear, anguish, horror... He leapt naked from the bed, swiftly draped a blanket round himself, and stood trembling, staring at the grey-haired, shrivelled hag that had lain beside him. And she in turn stared up at him, uncomprehending and bemused.

“Who are you? Get out! Where’s Dawnrose?” he cried. “Oh God, what’s happening?”

“What is it, Alonso?” She asked,. “What ails thee?”

Her voice creaked with age.

“Who are you?” he shouted.

“I am Dawnrose. I am thy wife.”

“No! Where is she? What have you done with her?”

Still she did not understand.

“I am Dawnrose,” she said again. “Why dost thou not know me?”

Was this a punishment? A test? A joke? Would Dawnrose come dancing into the room? Would the hag throw off her disguise? Would Alonso wake up?

Alonso was awake. There was no disguise. Dawnrose did not dance into the room.

“I do not understand,” croaked the hag. She was now half in and and half out of the bedclothes, one cork-dry arm resting on the white sheet, her shrivelled dugs hanging pendulously, and her cracked, lined face still turned towards Alonso, the half hidden, faded blue eyes seeking answers from him. “Tell me what is wrong.”

“Please don’t do this to me!” cried Alonso. “I beg you, let me see Dawnrose!”

“Alonso, art thou ill?”

“Please, please!”

In his agony he went down on his knees to her.

“Alonso, what hath befallen thee? Why dost thou not know me?”

It was no deception. She too was weeping. He stood up.

“You don’t know?” he asked.

“Nay, tell me,” she said.

He stared at her. The tears were real. Could tears still flow from eyes so desiccated?

Without a word, he went to the dressing-table, fetched a hand-mirror, and brought it back to her. She took it from him, still looking at him, and then slowly turned her eyes to look into the glass.

Her silence and the stillness of her reaction were so complete and so protracted that she seemed more like a sculpture than a being. There was no sign on her face, no flicker of her body to betray the least emotion, even that of surprise. Nothing. And caught in the nightmare irreality of the moment, Alonso too had turned to stone.

At last she lowered the mirror and nodded her grey, parchment-skinned head.

“Then I am accursed,” she said. “Who has done this to me? And why?”

“You’re Dawnrose?” he asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes,” she said.

But there was still no emotion in her voice, no horror, fear or sadness. She had stated the fact only as a fact.

“What are we going to do?” asked Alonso. “If this is true...our marriage...”

She said nothing.

“Oh my God, what are we going to do?”

Now she looked directly at him again, and for one instant he saw a familiar blueness, but then it was gone.

“Get dressed,” he told her, and swiftly pulled on his own clothes. “I have to see my parents. You must stay here till I return. Right? Under no circumstances should you leave here.”

He hurried first to Clifford’s rooms, and warned him and his wife not to enter the apartment. Then he ran through corridors lined with statues and paintings, up a broad, red-carpeted staircase, and along another corridor.

The King and Queen slept in separate bedrooms in the same wing. It was to the King’s room that Alonso ran, and found his father at breakfast.

“What’s this, my boy? Last minute nerves?”

But the cheerful greeting turned to ever more sombre reflection as Alonso told his story, from the clandestine wedding through to the appalling transformation of his bride.

“It’s not possible,” said the King. “Someone’s playing a joke. I’d better see her.”

Alonso found himself praying that Dawnrose, *his* Dawnrose, would be waiting in the apartment.

But it was the old woman that was waiting. She was grotesquely dressed in the robe Dawnrose had worn the night before. It was too big for her, and the wide folds revealed the skin pouches of her neck and her shrivelled breasts.

“Who are you?” demanded the King.

“I am Dawnrose.”

“No you’re not. Tell us the truth now, or I’ll have you arrested. Where’s Dawnrose?”

But no amount of royal or paternal authority could shake the old woman’s tale, and mysteriously, the more she spoke, and the more he watched her, the closer Alonso felt to the presence of Dawnrose.

“Father,” he said, “there’s a way of testing. To make sure once and for all. Dawnrose was a virgin. There’ll be blood on her.”

The old woman looked at him with a startled expression on her face.

“No!” she said, and for all her age and fragility, her authority almost matched the King’s.

“If you *are* Dawnrose,” said Alonso, “this is the only way you can prove it.”

“Thou knowest that I am Dawnrose,” she said. “How canst thou deny me?”

“My father doesn’t believe it,” said Alonso.

The old woman looked at the King, and saw the anger and disbelief on his face.

“Is the body so different from the soul?” she asked. “And must I be so humbled?”

But she allowed Alonso to pull up her dress, and he made her part her thin and yellowed thighs. Between them, unmistakably, were flecks of dried blood.

He let the dress fall, turned to his father, and nodded.

“My God!” said the King.

“What are we going to do?” asked Alonso.

“For a start, we cancel the wedding,” said the King. “We’ll announce that she’s ill. Corambis’ll have to see to it straight away. And we’ll brief Doctor Camps. I don’t know what your mother’s going to say.”

“And then what?”

“She’ll have to be hidden away – and later we’ll say she died. What else can we do? First things first. I’ll tell Corambis what’s happened. And you must work out where to put her.”

“I am here!” cried the old woman. They both looked at her.

“We know you’re here,” said the King.

“Then why do you speak of me as if I were *not* here?”

The King and the Prince exchanged glances of incomprehension.

“There’s no time to lose,” said the King. “I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

He hurried out of the room.

“Oh Alonso,” said the old woman, “I know that I am monstrous in thy sight, but do not humiliate me.”

“No-one wants to humiliate you,” said the Prince. “We’re just trying to be practical. We have to cancel the wedding, and we have to decide what to do with you.”

“What dost thou mean?”

“The fewer people that know about this the better. We’ll have to hide you somewhere until...”

“Until what?”

“Is it possible that you could be restored?”

“My youth?”

“Your youth! What else?”

“One hundred and sixteen years are gone. How can they be restored?”

“Besides, would I ever sleep again?” said the Prince. “Knowing now...”

The horror of his loss pressed down upon him with unbearable weight. His mind reheld the soft smooth flesh of the young girl, and his eyes compared her with the rough folded sacking that stood before him, its ugliness accentuated by the white robe of youth that cloaked it. Tears started from his eyes, and he had to sit down and rest his head in his hands.

The old woman’s face clouded with concern, and she hobbled to the Prince’s chair, gently laying a bony hand on his arm.

Her touch made him shudder, and helped him to regain control. He stood up again.

“What are we going to do with you?” he asked.

“Let me stay here,” she said, “until I die.”

“No!” he cried. “I can’t bear to have you here! Don’t you understand?”

“I understand that thou art young, and I am old, and we cannot live as man and wife. This I understand. But thy hatred of me I do not understand, for I am still Dawnrose, and what thou didst love in me doth still lie within me. Hast thou no pity?”

Yet again reality and unreality were becoming confused for Alonso. He closed his eyes. She would be gone. Or Dawnrose would be there again.

He opened his eyes. The old woman was there.

“It was Dawnrose that I loved!” he said.

“I *am* Dawnrose,” she said.

Now he was angry. “You are not the Dawnrose that I loved!”

She gazed at him, and the blue eyes were unflinchingly direct and momentarily familiar.

“Was it my skin that thou didst love?”

His irritation increased.

“I fell in love with a young girl, not an old woman!”

“Thou didst love Dawnrose,” she said, “and I am Dawnrose.”

“Do you expect me to hold you, kiss you, make love to you?”

“No, my dearest Alonso, I know that my body hath lost thine, and this is the curse. I ask nothing of thee but to let me stay and die here. What didst thou love if thou canst so hate me now?”

“I loved your beauty.”

“Then was it thine eyes alone that did love me?”

“No.”

“When wouldst thou have ceased to love me? When the first fair hair turned grey, or when the first line did cross my forehead?”

“We would have grown old together.”

“Would that have altered what thou didst see?”

“It would have altered the way I saw it.”

“Do old eyes not see youth? Oh Alonso, I see thy beauty. Would thine old eyes not have seen the beauty of the young Dawnrose?”

He did not answer.

“When, Alonso, wouldst thou have ceased to love me?”

“I can’t answer these questions!” he cried. “They’re irrelevant! I only know that I can’t love you as you are!”

“Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth. But thou didst not love Dawnrose, Alonso. Thou didst love a painting.”

His horror now turned to apprehension. She had not accepted, or even understood. He could no longer bear her presence.

“I have to see my father,” he said.

“Thy father said he would return here.”

“I have to go.”

“I will not detain thee. I ask only that thou shouldst be kind to me.”

Without another word he hastened out of the room, this time locking the apartment door from the outside. Thus he did not see the tears falling from the old woman’s eyes, or hear her murmur to an unseen listener: “Thou shouldst have let me sleep.”

### XIII

When Alonso entered the King's apartment, he found his father and the Queen in conference with Lord Corambis.

"I warned Your Majesties," Lord Corambis was saying, "right from the very start. It was madness to take this woman into the palace."

"You were right, Corambis," said the King, "and we were wrong. The question is what's to be done. Come in, Alonso."

"If Your Highness had listened to me in the first place," said Lord Corambis to the Prince, "this would never have happened."

"I apologize, Lord Corambis," said the Prince.

"Young eyes see no further than their noses," grumbled the Lord Chamberlain. "And now Corambis has to pick up the pieces."

The old man was enjoying himself.

"Well, the wedding has to be cancelled," he said, "but what do we tell the people?"

"As little as possible," said the King.

"That is the general rule anyway, Your Majesty," said the Lord Chamberlain. "But they have to be told something."

"As I said before, we announce that she's been taken ill, and later we say she's died. It's not so difficult. But speed is of the essence, Corambis. The crowds are lining the streets already."

"The Archbishop will have to be told. And what's he going to say when he hears of this secret wedding already carried out? Lunacy! Sheer lunacy!"

Alonso sat with his eyes cast down, and the Queen put her hand on his arm.

"There was always something strange about her," she said, "but you mustn't blame yourself, Alonso. She was a lovely girl."

"Lovely girl fiddlesticks!" said Lord Corambis. "There's more to a woman than a pair of blue eyes."

"Watch your tongue, Corambis," said the King. "You're speaking to the Queen."

"I apologize, Your Majesty. I am overwrought."

There followed a discussion as to who else should be told. Clearly Doctor Camps would have to be informed immediately, so that he could deal with the medical side of the public announcement. And in any case, he should examine the old woman, to see if he could find some rational explanation. The Archbishop would no doubt bring

down the wrath of heaven on them all (if this was not already the wrath of Heaven, said Lord Corambis), but he must know the whole truth, for they would need his guidance. Clifford and the Lady Sarah would be told and sworn to secrecy, and perhaps Professor Mann should also be brought in, for a scientific approach to the problem.

“I want Father Ignatius to know,” said Alonso.

“That priest has caused enough trouble already!” snapped Lord Corambis.

“He knows more than anyone,” said the Prince, “and I want him told.”

“Yes, let him be told,” said the Queen. “He’s a good man.”

“Besides,” said the King, “we’re going to have to see about the legality of this marriage. We shall need him.”

Lord Corambis left to announce the cancellation of the wedding, but he insisted that no decisions should be taken in his absence. Enough damage had already been done behind his back, he said.

When he had gone, the Queen said that she would go and talk to the old woman, to prepare her for what was coming.

“If she really is Dawnrose,” said the Queen, “she will be suffering. Perhaps I can comfort her.”

“She isn’t the only one who needs comforting,” said the King, looking towards Alonso. And indeed the Prince sat slumped in his chair, with hollowed eyes and cheeks.

The Queen had been told precisely what was awaiting her, but nevertheless she was shocked at the sight of the hag in the young girl’s dress. As for the old woman herself, she had hobbled towards the door on hearing the key turn, and was visibly surprised to see the Queen. She even looked past her into the corridor, but the Queen was alone.

“Where is Alonso?” she asked.

“Alonso is with the King,” replied the Queen.

“Why did he lock the door?”

The Queen could not answer. She could only stare.

“I have had no food,” said the hag. “I am treated as a prisoner, and as a monster. What harm have I done?”

“I’ll have food sent to you,” said the Queen.

The questions and words of sympathy that she had prepared would no longer come to her lips. She felt herself in the presence of something appalling and tragic, and she wanted to leave it. And yet at the same time she was held, unable to take her eyes off the fallen, shrunken face, and despite her revulsion searching for some sign of Dawnrose amid the wreckage.

“Why hast thou come?” asked the old woman. “Is it only to stare at me?”

The Queen felt ashamed, and swiftly left the room, locking the door behind her. In her distress, she forgot to order the food.

The old woman was still waiting for her Prince and her breakfast when Doctor Camps entered the apartment. He had examined Dawnrose once before, soon after her arrival at the palace, and had said then that she was “bodily perfect”. Thanks to his long years of practice, he skilfully concealed his inner abhorrence of what he saw before him now, and adopting a tone of business-like formality asked the old lady to strip naked.

“I have no sickness,” she told him. “I am only old.”

“I have to ascertain who you are,” said the doctor patiently.

“Thou knowest who I am,” she replied.

“His Majesty the King has commanded me to examine you, madam. I therefore have to examine you.”

“I too am a majesty. Wilt thou obey me also?”

“Please, madam, I’m sorry, but it must be done.”

She relented, and allowed him to examine her from head to toe. He made notes as he proceeded, and then compared them with his previous findings, shaking his head and growing visibly more perplexed with each discovery. At last he motioned to her to get dressed again.

“Dost thou know me?” she asked.

“Your Highness,” said the doctor sadly, “what has happened to you?”

“I have grown old,” she replied.

“This is beyond my comprehension. I’m so sorry.”

He hurried out of the room, and locked the door behind him. Then he stood still and took a very deep breath. He was trembling.

Meanwhile, Lord Corambis had been busy making announcements and sending messengers in all directions. The crowds dispersed, tongues wagged, writers wrote,

and the rain continued to fall, bringing an unholy exclamation from the Archbishop as he stepped from his coach into a puddle in the palace courtyard.

Lord Corambis was on hand to greet him, brief him, and accompany him personally to the King's apartment, where the King, Queen and Prince were waiting.

"There is an evil force at work here," said the Archbishop. "I sensed it at once. The woman is Antichrist."

"What we need to know," said the King, "is whether the marriage of yesterday was legal."

"Who conducted the wedding?"

"Father Ignatius," said the Prince.

"I see," said the Archbishop. "More deceit. I was told it was to be a funeral."

"So it was," said the Prince. "The wedding followed the funeral."

"Dammit, was it legal?" exploded the King.

The Archbishop looked reprovably at the King, but saw that the latter was in no mood for the niceties.

"Well, Your Majesty, if Father Ignatius held the service, I must assume that he did so in accordance with the law."

"But the woman in the apartment is not the woman I married," said Alonso.

"If that could be proved..." said the Archbishop.

"Well?" asked the King.

"If it could be proved that the woman is not Dawnrose, then clearly she would not be your wife."

"The woman *is* Dawnrose," said the Prince, "but she's not the Dawnrose I married."

"Unfortunately," said the Archbishop, shaking his head, "you are not the first husband to make such a complaint. A marriage cannot be annulled on the grounds that one of the parties has changed,"

"This is not a matter of change," said the King. "She's totally unrecognizable."

"If she is Dawnrose, Your Majesty, then she is His Highness's wife, whether she is sixteen or one hundred and sixteen."

"Then our only hope," said the King, "is that she is not Dawnrose."

The arrival of the court physician just a few minutes later seemed to destroy that hope. He had no doubt, he said, that the old woman he had examined was indeed Dawnrose. There were birthmarks that were unmistakable.

“Perhaps a lawyer could help us,” suggested the Queen.

“Your Majesty,” said the Archbishop, in a tone more arch than bishop, “in matters of Church Law, I am the supreme authority.”

“There is, Your Majesty,” said Lord Corambis, “another hope.”

“What hope, Corambis?”

“We need an explanation for this transformation. Might it not be that we can find an explanation that will enable the marriage to be annulled?”

The Lord Chamberlain held his audience captive.

“Supposing it could be proved,” he said slowly, “that this woman had inveigled His Highness into marriage by means of deception, dishonesty, concealment of known facts, or diabolism... would this, Your Grace, not be sufficient grounds for annulment?”

His words produced a silence of intense concentration, as all eyes turned to the Archbishop.

“If this could be proved,” said the Archbishop, “then there would indeed be grounds for annulment.”

Spontaneously those present began to run through the evidence.

“But I must warn you,” said the Archbishop, breaking off the premature trial, “that these would be serious accusations. The inquiry must be thorough and impartial. Evidence must be heard, and judgement given, by an official tribunal of the Church, in which even Your Majesty can have no say except that of a witness.”

“Who would preside over such a tribunal?” asked the King.

“Why, the Head of the Church,” said the Archbishop, “who is, of course, myself.”

#### XIV

The tribunal was to be held in secret. No good could come of the Royal Family being associated with deception, or diabolism, even if the Prince had been an innocent victim. The proceedings would be headed by the Archbishop himself and two elders of the Church. There would be no formal prosecution or defence, as in a court of law, and anyone present could ask questions, at the discretion of the Archbishop. Even the accused would be allowed to speak, with His Grace's permission.

"I wish to make it clear," said His Grace forcefully. "that the accused will be given every chance to defend herself. We are at all times in the presence of God, and God will not permit injustice. But for Your Highness..." (here he gave the tiniest of smiles in the direction of the Prince)... "that will, I think, be a source of comfort."

Also present would be the King, the Queen, Prince Alonso, Lord Corambis, Doctor Camps. Professor Mann, and – at the Prince's insistence – Father Ignatius.

Meanwhile, Dawnrose was taken back to the blue apartment by Clifford and the Lady Sarah, both of whom were sworn to secrecy. At no time before the tribunal did Prince Alonso go to see her, but Father Ignatius did.

Despite his foreknowledge, he was taken aback to find that the ethereal beauty he had seen at the castle had been transformed into the crumbling skin and bone that now confronted him. He automatically recalled his premonitions at the castle, when he had sensed the presence of something unholy, and his first words to the old woman were tinged with a tone of detachment, almost of severity:

"Do you know of any reason why this should have been inflicted on you?"

"No, father," she said. "I am accursed, and must endure my loss."

"Did you know it would happen?"

"One day. But not now. Though when I learned that I had slept for one hundred years, I did know my age."

"Dawnrose, do you know *how* this happened?"

It was the first time since her transformation that anyone had addressed her by name. In the half-hidden, faded blue eyes there was a flicker of gratitude.

"I know only that there is some power. My father and mother told me of events that might come to pass, though of such a change they never spoke. Yet I believe there is a link between my sleep and their death and my sudden age. But I cannot find it."

“There’s to be a tribunal,” said Father Ignatius. “Attempts will be made to prove that you are guilty of deception, or dishonesty, or perhaps even diabolism.”

Now the light in the blue eyes became one of anguish and horror.

“I have done none of these things. Who is accusing me?”

“It’s the wish of the court.”

“Why, father? I have done no wrong.”

“They have to invalidate the marriage.”

The ravaged face sank even further into itself, and the old woman sat in silence, contemplating this new assault on her soul. At length she nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “He must be free of me. But father, I cannot lie to free him, nor can I take my own life. Must they then disgrace me? Must they take all that is left to me? Can he not wait for my death, for it will surely come soon?”

“No, Dawnrose, they will not wait.”

“Oh father, who am I that I should be so cast down?”

“There are mysteries, Dawnrose, that are beyond our comprehension.”

“I love Alonso, and he did love me. That too is a mystery, for now he hates me.”

“No, Dawrose, that is not a mystery. Could you have loved a man who from one moment to the next had changed from life to death?”

“Oh father, hast thou not thyself embraced eternal love? Wouldst thou have turned away from the crucified Jesus?”

He absorbed her rebuke, nodding at its justice. And his heart sank at the thought of what they would do to her at the tribunal.

The known facts were as follows: the Prince had found Dawnrose in a ruined castle. She claimed to have slept for one hundred years. In those same ruins were found the skeletons of people who had been dead for one hundred years – cause of death unknown. The Prince had taken Dawnrose back to the palace. She remembered – or said she remembered – a wheel and an old woman whom she did not know. The skeletons had been buried at the castle in existing tombs and graves, and then Father Ignatius had married Alonso and Dawnrose. The couple had spent their first night together in the Prince's apartment, where they had made love. In the morning, Dawnrose had apparently turned into an old woman.

These were the fixed points, and together they formed a framework within which there were myriad possible variations. The task of the tribunal would be to link the points in a consistent pattern. If this could be done to the exclusion of other patterns, and with the inclusion of all points, it might be claimed that the truth had been established. If there were two or more patterns that incorporated all the fixed points, there would be ambiguity, and judgement would therefore be impossible. If no pattern emerged that incorporated all the fixed points, judgement would again be impossible, since any point that did not conform to a pattern might develop into an anti-pattern and so invalidate that which had excluded it.

Thus, after the Archbishop's opening prayer for guidance, did Father Hieronymus, the Church's legal expert, give guidance to those assembled in the Council Chamber. The King and Queen sat in their usual places, flanked by Prince Alonso and Lord Corambis. In the quarter circle to their right, the Archbishop sat between Fathers Hieronymus and Severinus – the second church elder – while the section of the table opposite the Royal Family was occupied by Doctor Camps, Professor Mann and Father Ignatius. Directly opposite the Archbishop and in complete isolation, sat Dawnrose.

When Father Hieronymus had finished, the Archbishop himself outlined the method and purpose of the inquiry, which was intended above all to establish the legality or otherwise of the Prince's marriage. This question hinged on the section of the service where both persons swore that they knew of no lawful impediment why they should not be joined in matrimony. If it could be proved that the defendant had

concealed information, indulged in deception, or secretly practised the black arts, the marriage would be annulled. All should speak the truth, without prejudice or favour.

Doctor Camps, the court physician, was the first to give evidence. He explained how he had examined the old woman and, by comparing certain marks on her body (Father Severinus began writing at this moment) and features such as the shape of the ears, had established beyond all doubt that she was Dawnrose. He knew of no natural explanation either for her hundred-year sleep or for her transformation.

The Archbishop drew the inference that therefore the explanation must lie beyond the natural world, and asked the old woman – as Father Ignatius had done – whether she knew why she had been punished with this transformation.

“Doth Your Grace,” she replied, “regard his own transformation from youth to age as a punishment?”

The boldness of the answer shocked the Archbishop.

“May I remind the defendant that it is she who is on trial!” he snapped, his face only slightly less red than his robe.

In response to further questioning from the Archbishop, Doctor Camps expressed the view that Dawnrose’s sleep and transformation had been caused by auto-suggestion. Professor Mann objected that there were no precedents. The doctor pointed out that prior to Cain’s murder of Abel there had been no murders, but a lack of precedent did not mean a lack of reality. He had come across many cases of autosuggestion, was at present writing a thesis on the subject, and could therefore claim to be an authority.

“Writing a thesis does not make one into an authority,” snapped Professor Mann. “It makes one into a thesis-writer.”

He himself had no doubt that the hundred-year-sleep had never taken place, and that Dawnrose had played an elaborate hoax in order to win her position in the Royal Family. As for the transformation, since it could not be explained scientifically, it could not have taken place either, and therefore the old woman could not be Dawnrose. When asked why an old woman should have been substituted for the princess, he responded that the function of science was to find out how and not why. Lord Corambis then offered a political explanation for the substitution: Dawnrose had been a foreign agent, had obtained the information she required, and had feared discovery. The substitution had been a diversion to enable her to escape.

The Archbishop thanked Professor Mann and Lord Corambis, and pointed out that their rational explanations entailed gross deception on the part of Dawnrose, which would without doubt invalidate the marriage. Father Hieronymus confirmed this judgement.

The old woman now raised her hand. The Archbishop hesitated, but nodded permission for her to speak.

“If, Your Grace, Professor Mann’s dismissal of all things irrational be accepted, then must the truths of the Holy Bible and the Holy Church be denied.”

The Archbishop made a gesture of dismissal:

“A rational explanation has been offered. I have merely pointed out its implications. We shall come to the irrational in due course.”

He now had the Lady Sarah brought into the chamber, and questioned her about Dawnrose’s behaviour. Of particular interest was her sleeplessness, for which again there seemed no natural explanation. Dawnrose herself attributed it to the fact that she had slept for one hundred years, and now her body and soul needed no more. Lord Corambis attributed it to training.

It was at this moment that Father Severinus spoke for the first time. He was a gaunt, pinched man, sixty years of age, with sharp eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles like those of the Archbishop.

“Your Grace,” he said, “I should like to ask one or two questions of the Lady Sarah.”

The Archbishop nodded.

“What did the defendant do during the night while others slept?”

“I think she read, sir.”

“What did she read?”

“Books, sir, and journals.”

“Did you ever see in her room a book called the Grimoire?”

“I don’t remember a book of that name, sir.”

“Did you ever hear her read aloud – especially at midnight?”

“No, sir.”

“Or talk to someone, or something?”

“In the early days she would often weep at night. And she may have spoken out loud, but there was never anyone with her.”

Father Severinus made some notes (as he had done assiduously all through the hearing), and nodded to the Archbishop, who dismissed the Lady Sarah.

The Prince now rose to tell his story. He described the perfect preservation of the room where he had found the sleeping princess, the rustling sound like the passing of wings (here Father Severinus became intensely interested, and wrote copiously), the helplessness he felt in Dawnrose's presence (he even used the word 'bewitching'), her preoccupation with death, the strange singing he had heard in the ruined castle, the ghostly vault and ready dug graves, the impression that he sometimes had of someone as it were speaking *through* Dawnrose, and the shock of the transformation. He also mentioned the blood on the thighs of the old woman.

He was heard amid tomblike silence, and his account clearly evoked much sympathy. Dawnrose herself never took her eyes from his face, whereas he did not look even once in her direction. He preferred to gaze at the floor, the ceiling, or the far wall of the council chamber.

"Your Highness," said the Archbishop, in a tone of the utmost respect and compassion, "may we ask for your own theory as regards the true nature of Dawnrose?"

The Prince's discomfort was clear for all to see. So, too, was the rapt attention of the old woman.

"I have no theory, Your Grace," said the Prince. "I merely ask that my marriage should be annulled."

The Archbishop now invited the King to speak, but the King declined on the grounds that he could add nothing to what his son had said. The Queen likewise declined and Lord Corambis had intimated beforehand that he had no desire to give further evidence. Of those present in the Council Chamber, this left only Father Ignatius and the old woman herself to make a statement, and so with the greatest reluctance the Archbishop called upon Father Ignatius to speak.

He began by describing the events at the ruined castle, mentioning his initial fear that he was in the presence of something unholy, but swiftly assuring the assembly that in the course of his dealings with the princess he had altered his view. Of paramount importance were the impressions he had gained during his final interview with her, and this had left him with no doubt that Dawnrose – whether young or old – was a woman of rare virtue and goodness, and the attempts to blacken her character were both shameful and unfounded.

“Father Ignatius,” interposed the Archbishop, “you are embarking upon matters of judgment that are not your concern. You have been called upon to give evidence, not to pass judgement. If you have no further testimony to deliver, I will ask you to step down.”

Father Ignatius’s eyes flashed his disapproval, and for a moment it seemed that he would defy the Archbishop, but after glancing towards the old woman, he gave way.

“It might be suggested,” said the Archbishop, “that Father Ignatius’s initial impression of some unholy presence at the castle may have been the correct one, and that his later conversion to the defence of the defendant was influenced by that same “bewitching” quality spoken of by His Royal Highness. We must keep an open mind on such matters – and to prove the open-mindedness of this inquiry, we shall now allow the defendant herself to address us.”

The old woman rose to her feet. For all the unsteadiness of her movements, and the trembling of her hands, she held her listeners at once with the unflinching directness of her gaze and her speech.

“I was a princess. I lived with my father and mother at the castle, and my childhood was joyful and happy and carefree. I sang, I danced, and I loved all those around me. And they loved me. They taught me to be ready for death, and they warned me that one day I might fall asleep and wake up to find them dead. But I should be woken by the son of a king, whom I should marry. When I was sixteen I entered a room where there was an old woman whom I did not know.

Something happened to me. I do not know what happened to me. My last memory is of a wheel. Then I was awakened by Prince Alonso, and found that my castle was in ruins, my father and mother were dead, I was now alive in an age that was unrecognisable to me, and I had lost the world I knew. I learned that I had slept for one hundred years. The Prince brought me to this palace, and he was kind to me. Others were kind to me, too.

My unhappiness abated. I knew that I was to marry the Prince, and I believed that we would live happily ever after, as it is written. I tried to become familiar with the new world I found myself in. I was unable to sleep, but did not regard this as surprising since I had slept for one hundred years. My father and mother had to be buried at home, in the burial vault of the Royal Family. This they had shown me in my childhood, as part of my future. After the burial, Father Ignatius wedded the

Prince and myself, and I was happy. We had been married in the presence of my father and mother, and in the home where I had spent my childhood. I would have liked to stay there for ever, but my place was with my husband. I lay with my husband on our wedding night, and I was happy. I did not sleep, but was unaware of any changes taking place. When he awoke, he no longer loved me. This I could not understand, until he showed me the reflection of myself. Then I saw that I had become an old woman. I do not know how this came about, or why. I have done nothing wrong, have deceived no-one, have never spoken to the Devil, love God, and love my Prince. I cannot understand the charges that have been brought against me, or why this tribunal is being held. I know that Prince Alonso must be free of me, but let that not be a reason for humbling me with lies.”

Some of those present wept either outwardly or inwardly, but the Archbishop was moved only to the expression of a reprimand:

“No-one here has told lies, and the accusation is a false and calumnious one. All those who have spoken have sought only to establish the truth, and if their views meet with your disapproval, that is no reason for you to slander their character.”

“Your Grace,” said the old woman, “I advance the same argument against those who accuse me of evil deeds.”

“You have not been slandered!” exclaimed the Archbishop. “We seek only to establish the truth, and by God’s help we shall do so.”

He now called upon Father Hieronymus – a fat, double-chinned man with a bald head that shone like a lamp – to explain the legal aspects of the case. At great length he expounded the nature of possible impediments to the legality of a marriage, but stressed that annulment could only occur if it could be proven that the impediments existed.

When he had finished, the Archbishop repeated that proof was necessary, and no theory – however rational it might appear – could provide a basis for judgment unless it was supported by the evidence.

The time had now come for Father Severinus to give his conclusions. And as the gaunt, sharp-eyed man rose to his feet, everyone in the Council Chamber knew that the tribunal was drawing towards its climax.

“There are mysteries in this case,” he began, “to which we are seeking an explanation. We have heard different theories providing partial answers, but leaving vital areas uncovered. Doctor Camps’ autosuggestion requires that we believe in

unprecedented achievements, with no conceivable motivation. Professor Mann and Lord Corambis offer us a plot of astonishing complexity, ending just when it was most likely to bear fruit. Wherein lay the danger of discovery if Lord Corambis himself knew nothing? His Royal Highness Prince Alonso advances no theory. He believes the young Dawnrose and the old Dawnrose are the same person. So too does Doctor Camps. And so do I. He believes that Dawnrose slept for one hundred years. And so do I. He talks of his helplessness in her presence, of the passing of wings, of her preoccupation with death, of someone appearing to speak through Dawnrose. I accept his testimony. But he has no theory. He cannot fit all these pieces together in a pattern. Now I will describe a pattern to you. It is a theory, but it has one priceless advantage over all the other theories. It can be tested. Let us begin with the beauty of Dawnrose. Was there ever such beauty? Where did this beauty come from? I will tell you. From the Devil. For Dawnrose had a pact with the Devil. Place yourselves within the mind of a young girl – bored, living in her castle, dreaming as young girls do of beauty, romance, adventure. The defendant remembers going into a room, and meeting an old woman whom she did not know. She talks to the old woman, confides her young girl's dreams to her – of being beautiful, of marrying a handsome prince. My child, says the old woman, these things can be yours. How? asks the princess. Why, says the old woman, my master can give them to you. And she draws the magic circle – remembered by the defendant as a wheel – takes out her book of spells, and intones the magic incantations: O Emperor Lucifer, Master of all rebellious spirits, brightest and most beautiful of all the angels, Lord of my soul... Suddenly there is a blinding light, and before them stands the bright angel himself. Master, cries the crone, thy servants kneel before thee. And the Devil smiles upon them, and asks them their desires. And the young girl is dazzled by the light, and enamoured of the power. I want to be the most beautiful creature on earth, she cries, and to marry a handsome prince. Thy wish shall be granted, speaks the Devil, but what canst thou grant to me in return? What wilt thou take? asks the young girl. I'll take thy soul, says the Devil. Then have it, cries the girl, and make me beautiful. But if I change thee now, says the Devil, who will know thee? Thy family will be fearful, for their daughter will be gone and thou wilt be a stranger unto them. Then let me sleep for a hundred years, says the girl, and then awake and be beautiful. Thou shalt sleep for one hundred years, says the Devil, and thy handsome prince shall awaken thee with a kiss. But from that moment onwards, thy soul shall be mine.

And so the young girl, dazzled by her dreams, makes her pact with the Devil. She falls, and all around her fall. And one hundred years later, the handsome prince awakens her. He hears the rustling of wings as the guardian demon leaves her to her prince. He takes her to the palace, and she falls in love with him. She remembers her pact with the Devil, and weeps. Alone at night, and unable to sleep, she searches feverishly through books and papers, prays nightly to the Devil to appear to her, but in vain. And the prince? He is bewitched, for not only is this the most beautiful creature on earth; she is also inspired by the magic powers of Satan.

There was strange singing in the ruins of the castle – the voice of the princess herself, or of her demon sent to enchant all hearers? Father Ignatius sensed the presence of something unholy in the ruined castle. They found named tombs and graves already awaiting those who had died one hundred years ago. The work of those who were to die, or the work of demons sent to prepare the way? Now we come to the wedding. Why did this wedding have to take place in the ruined castle, and in the presence of the dead? Why was it kept secret from the Leader of the Church, the Archbishop himself? Father Ignatius is a kindly man, a trusting man, a man with little experience of the ways of Satan. For the Devil would never permit his victim to be married in a church, by the head of that church, in the presence of the Holy Spirit. No, this wedding had to be performed in a profane place, in the presence of the dead and of demons. For the princess could not escape her marriage and the loss of her soul, since the Devil does not allow his pacts to be broken.

The transformation – the Devil taking his pleasure. She knew he would have her soul upon her marriage. For whether this was a *professio tacita* or a *professio expressa*, the outcome must be the same – that the victim must return to the Devil all those properties he has given to her. And so he took back her beauty. And when he chooses, he will collect her soul. I ask you now, is there one event in all this history that does not conform precisely to the pattern of diabolism? We do not need miracles of autosuggestion, or fantastic tales of plots and espionage. One simple fact explains everything. But I do not ask you even to accept this explanation for itself. For in contrast to the other tales you have heard, this one can be proved. At the very beginning of this tribunal, Doctor Camps, the court physician, spoke of marks on the body of the princess – marks repeated on the body of the defendant. Now it is the Devil's practice to place his mark on the body of her with whom he makes his pact. There is a very simple test to ascertain whether marks on the body have been placed

there by the Devil. With your permission, Your Grace, I should like to administer the test now.”

“What is to be done, Father Severinus?” asked the Archbishop.

“We pass a needle through the mark. The defendant’s reaction to that will determine whether she is or is not in league with the Devil.”

Father Ignatius raised his hand.

“Your Grace, in deference to the dignity of the defendant, this test should be held privately....”

“The defendant’s dignity is the least of our concerns,” replied the Archbishop. “Doctor Camps, whereabouts on the body of the defendant did you find these marks?”

Father Severinus spoke before the doctor could answer: “The Devil’s marks are often cleverly concealed. I should like to see the inside of her thigh.”

“Very well,” said the Archbishop. “The defendant will stand here, and will expose her thighs.”

The old woman made her way slowly to the point indicated by the Archbishop.

Father Severinus knelt at the old woman’s feet and pushed her legs apart.

“Aha!” he cried. “I thought so! You should all come and examine this mark.”

One by one, the people present filed past the old woman and peered at the mark on the inside of her left thigh. It was a tiny cross. When they had all seen it, Father Severinus asked where it had come from.

“I have had it since birth,” replied the old woman.

“We shall see,” said Father Severinus. He now produced from the folds of his black robe a little box, and out of this he drew a long needle. At the sight of it, the old woman flinched.

“I am going to pass this needle through the mark,” said Father Severinus, “and you must all pay careful attention to the defendant’s reaction. This is of paramount importance.”

So saying, he pushed the needle into the old woman’s thigh. Her reaction was as great a shock to those present as her transformation had been to the Prince. She let out a single, agonized cry, and then fell forward. Father Severinus half caught her, and half dropped her, and she collapsed motionless on to the floor. Everyone involuntarily stood up, and Doctor Camps hurried to the side of the prostrate figure.

Father Severinus stood looking down, as the doctor examined her. There was a tense silence.

“I’m afraid,” said the doctor, “she’s dead.”

His announcement only added to the silence. Father Severinus fell to his knees.

The Archbishop gazed at the body, but then looked up and scanned the faces in the room.

“Truly,” he said, “the justice of God is awe-inspiring. The insertion of a simple needle has furnished us with the proof that we needed, and has taken judgment out of our hands. The guilt of the defendant is plain for all to see, and her death, though it fills us with terror, should not fill us with pity. For these are the fruits of traffic with the Devil.”

“Your Grace,” said Father Severinus, still on his knees and still looking down pale-faced and wide-eyed at the body, “speak no more. Let us rather pray for forgiveness. For those who have been marked by the Devil, the piercing of the skin by the needle will have no effect. The Devil’s victims feel nothing, for their skin is thick as sin. The defendant cried out in agony, and we have taken her life without cause. She was innocent.”

## XVI

Dawnrose was buried in her tomb beneath the great hall in the castle. The funeral was conducted by Father Ignatius, and attended by Prince Alonso, Clifford and the Lady Sarah. It was a desolate ceremony. If the words of the service had previously seemed to contain mysteries and coded messages, now they conveyed unequivocally the reality and finality of death. At one moment Prince Alonso would have fallen to his knees had not Clifford grasped his arm and supported him. Father Ignatius was reading:

“For even if in the sight of men they be punished,  
Their hope is full of immortality;  
And having borne a little chastening, they shall receive great good;  
Because God made trial of them, and found them worthy of Himself.”

When the service was over, the Prince himself closed the tomb and sent Clifford and the Lady Sarah away, together with the bearers, to wait beyond the castle walls. Then, still in the presence of Father Ignatius, he sat upon the steps of Dawnrose’s house for a thousand years, and there he wept.

“I betrayed her!” he cried. “She was innocent, and I betrayed her!”

“We all betrayed her,” said Father Ignatius. “But there are mysteries we cannot grasp.”

“A little chastening ...” wept Alonso. “Why did God have to make trial of her? Did he not know, in his omniscience, that she was innocent?”

“Sh, my son,” said Father Ignatius, shaking his head, “we may question ourselves, but we cannot question God.”

“I question God,” said Alonso. “I question His infinite mercy that can inflict such pain on the innocent.”

“No, no,” urged Father Ignatius, “God did not inflict this pain!”

“Then who did?”

“We do not know. There are powers that we do not understand.”

“I must know! I must understand. If I have to give my life for it, I must find out the truth. Help me, Father, help me!”

But Father Ignatius knew no more than Prince Alonso how to uncover the truth of Dawnrose’s life and death. If man had killed her, who had transformed her?

If man had awoken her, who had made her sleep? And if she, who had come from the past, had found no explanation, how could they hope to gain deeper access to a reality no longer in existence?

Nevertheless, he pledged himself to give Alonso what help he could, and together they left the vault and stepped out into the grey morning. As they did so, Alonso heard a voice whisper:

“Wilt thou have thy bride to wed in black?”

He turned his head, and seemed to see a figure stepping lightly away towards the tower where he had first found Dawnrose. Something leapt within his breast, but when he looked again the figure was gone and the courtyard was empty.

“I’m deceiving myself,” he said aloud.

Father Ignatius asked him what he meant, but already Alonso’s mind had moved forward:

“We must go there!”

Father Ignatius cast an anxious look at his young companion, but the Prince was following his own thoughts and not Father Ignatius’s.

“The tower, Father,” he said. “That’s what she means.”

They walked past the crumbled pillars and across the ivy-covered courtyards to the small round tower where he had awoken her. Should he have let her sleep? Should he now let her rest? But she had known of his coming before, and she had summoned him now.

They climbed the spiral stone staircase as far as the narrow landing and then they stood before the solid, freshly grained wooden door. Father Ignatius fingered the cross at his neck. The Prince placed his right palm against the dark wood, and waited for a sound, but there was none. The door merely yielded to his pressure, and noiselessly swung back on its hinges, opening into the room.

But it was not the same room. Instead of darkness, there was light. The daylight flooded in from a glass roof that ran the whole length of the chamber. The dark wood of the walls was relieved by the bright colours of silken dresses hanging from golden rails. The thick carpet now revealed its patterns of bright-eyed birds and furry animals. And the bed on which the princess had lain for one hundred years had pillars of gold and porphyry and a richly embroidered coverlet.

Of course, she had come here again before the wedding, to exchange her black for white. And she had pressed the hidden mechanisms, laid open the maidenly entrances, and ended her bedroom's one-hundred-year night.

"Is this where you found her?" asked Father Ignatius.

Prince Alonso nodded, remembering the darkness, the stillness, and the perfume. Even now he could sense that perfume. Was she here? What else was here?

He was drawn to the bed. Here she had lain, and if she was here now, here she would lie. But the bed was empty and smooth, the coverlet stretched across it undisturbed. What strange designs had been embroidered into it: not pictures, nor patterns, but shapes like letters, tightly packed in red and black on the gold cloth. Alonso stooped to look at them more closely, but if they were letters, there were none that he could read. He called to Father Ignatius, who gazed down at the coverlet with equal puzzlement.

"They seem like words," he said, "but not in any language that I know."

"Why would words be embroidered into a coverlet? And so many? Could this have been left here for us? Or for Dawnrose?"

"She would have understood as little as we do, Your Highness. But there is a man who may be able to decipher this."

"Who?"

"He is our leading expert in ancient lore and languages, just as he is our leading expert in diabolism. Father Severinus."

"No! He killed her!"

"Your Highness, we all killed her. Let me speak to him. Perhaps he will help us. And I know of no-one else who can."

The Prince finally agreed, and together he and Father Ignatius carefully folded the coverlet and carried it away from the ruined castle where Dawnrose lay in her sleep of death.

## XVII

The majority of those who witnessed the death of Dawnrose felt that it was an experience best forgotten as swiftly as possible. The main concern of the King and Queen was that Alonso should put it behind him, find a suitable wife, and ensure the continuation of the royal line. Archbishop Sumner was more concerned with the reputation of the Church and its leading representative, and swiftly pointed out that God's will was always done, and innocence of diabolism did not prove innocence of other crimes. Professor Mann was delighted by the outcome, since it proved the utter irrelevance of the Church's irrational approach while in no way invalidating his own. Dr Camps regarded the whole episode as sad and unfortunate, but continued resolutely with his work on autosuggestion. Lord Corambis hurled himself into the task of convincing the world that nothing untoward had happened apart from the sudden and exceedingly tragic death of the young princess. The cause, he said, was an obscure though non-contagious disease, and the effect was considerable public sympathy for the Royal Family and especially the Prince – who was, according to Lord Corambis, too heartbroken to be interviewed.

Father Hieronymus, the legal expert, was summoned by the King – in the presence of the Archbishop – to pronounce upon the legality of the Prince's marriage to Dawnrose. Regretfully he had to admit that in the light of the evidence offered – and particularly in view of her innocence of the charge of diabolism – he could not as yet see any reason to declare the marriage invalid. He was urged to go away and think again.

Alone among all these witnesses – apart, of course, from Prince Alonso and Father Ignatius – Father Severinus was unable to devote himself to tasks that would divert him from the vivid recollection of Dawnrose's cry of agony. He it had been who had inserted the needle into her thigh, and he it had been who in his heart had already pronounced judgement on her, thereby exposing her to the fatal test. He wrestled now with God, for if it had indeed been God's will that Dawnrose be executed for a crime she had not committed, why had God chosen him to be the executioner? In the past, he had never doubted the justice of his calling, but it was one thing to pronounce judgement in accordance with the Law of the Church, and quite another to inflict the supreme punishment on someone proven innocent. For the

first time he was regretting the wealth of learning that had raised him to such pre-eminence.

It was therefore with considerable relief that he devoted himself to the task of deciphering the coverlet. This, it seemed, was God's way of telling him that his vast store of knowledge was essential to the divine plan, and that he need only serve without questioning the nature of his service.

The work took him only two days, although for Prince Alonso, trapped within walls of loss and guilt, the days seemed more like barren months. Only Father Ignatius, who was now his constant companion, could sow moments of patience into the churning furrows.

"Dawnrose," he would say, "waited one hundred years for you. Surely you can wait a day or two for her coverlet."

The Prince would reply that he could wait if he could sleep, but the very act of replying gave him respite.

As he worked on the transcription and the translation, Father Severinus' excitement grew by the minute. It was not only the words and meanings that fascinated him, but also – and above all – the vast areas of implication that opened up between those words and meanings. While he wrote, his memory set the true story of Dawnrose beside the story he was writing, and through the gaps between the two stories there began to filter astonishing shapes quite different from any he had encountered. And yet – herein lay the breathtaking beauty of it all – these astonishing shapes made up a perfectly coherent picture. Only when he reached the very end did his brow crease in puzzled disappointment, for only then did he realize that the story could not erase the doubts set up by the reality. What he had written provided the material for explanation, but the explanation did not provide the comfort he had sought.

Gaunt and sharp-eyed, Father Severinus sat with Alonso and Father Ignatius in the Prince's apartment.

"The language," he said, "is Mataquin, and the words tell a story. I will read you the story:

"Once upon a time there were a King and Queen who were very unhappy because they had no children. They tried all the waters in the world, pilgrimages, prayers and promises, but all in vain. At last, however, the Queen became pregnant and eventually gave birth to a daughter. A fine christening

was arranged to which they invited not only their friends and relatives, but also all the fairies who were in the kingdom at that time. Seven were found, and they were to be the little Princess's godmothers, so that each would make her a gift – as was the fairy custom in those days – and thus the Princess would have every perfection imaginable. After the christening they all returned to the palace, where a great feast was to be held, but as they were sitting down at table, there entered an old fairy who had not been invited because for more than fifty years she had not left her tower, and everyone had thought she was dead or under a spell. The King had a place laid for her, but he could not offer her the same rich porcelain and cutlery as the other fairies had, because only seven such place settings had been made. The old fairy was deeply offended, and began to mutter threats under her breath. The seventh fairy overheard her and, guessing at the evil to come, went and hid behind a tapestry. When the feast was over, the fairies made their gifts of virtue, beauty, wealth and so on, until it came to the old fairy's turn. Trembling with rage, she announced that the Princess would one day pierce her hand with a spindle and die. Everyone shuddered and wept bitterly, but then the seventh fairy stepped forth, and said: Rest assured, King and Queen, your daughter shall not die in this way. It is true that I do not have sufficient power to undo completely what my elder has done. The Princess will pierce her hand with a spindle, but instead of dying, she will only fall into a deep sleep which will last for one hundred years, at the end of which the son of a King will come to wake her.”

At this point Father Severinus broke off and looked up at Prince Alonso, who sat white-faced and wide-eyed opposite him.

“Oh, Your Highness,” he said, “she made such a tragic mistake, the heart breaks at it.”

“What do you mean?” asked the Prince.

“I shall explain it all when the story is finished. Not only the tragic error, but also the omission which accounts for the deaths of those you found in the castle.”

The Prince turned to Father Ignatius.

“Father, she was blessed and she was cursed.”

Father Ignatius nodded, and then Father Severinus resumed the story:

“Hoping to protect his beloved child from this disaster, the King ordered that every spindle in the kingdom was to be burnt. Sixteen years later, the Princess was wandering round the castle exploring the many chambers, when she came to an old tower. She climbed the spiral staircase and reached a little door with a rusted key in its lock. She turned it, and the door opened, revealing a tiny attic in which sat an old woman spinning thread.

‘What are you doing, mother?’ asked the Princess.

‘I’m spinning, my child,’ replied the old woman.

‘That’s look so nice, said the Princess. ‘How do you do it? May I try?’

But no sooner did she touch the spindle than it pierced her hand and she fell unconscious to the floor. And at the very moment when she fell, the sleep spread through the whole castle: the King and Queen and all their counsellors

fell asleep, and so did the servants in the kitchen, the horses in the stable, the dogs in the courtyard, the doves on the roof, the flies on the wall....”

“But they didn’t!” cried Prince Alonso. “They died – they all died!”

“It can all be explained, Your Highness,” said Father Severinus. “The author of this tale has sewn in the gaps for us to fill – if we have the knowledge and the imagination to do it. But there is one gap I shall not be able to fill. There we must wrestle together with the material she has given us.”

“Finish the story, Father Severinus,” said Father Ignatius. “So that we can come to the explanation.”

“The story continues as you know it. A hedge of thorns springs up, a hundred years pass, and the son of a King is hunting in the forest when he comes upon the hedge. He enters the castle, finds the sleeping Princess, awakens her with a kiss ....”

“And then?” asked Prince Alonso.

“And then everyone in the castle awoke – the King and Queen and all their counsellors, the servants in the kitchen....”

“It didn’t happen!”

“No.”

“How does it end?”

“The Prince and Princess are married, and they live happily ever after.”

“I don’t understand,” said the Prince. “Who wrote this? And why?”

“It was written, Your Highness, if my interpretation is correct, by the seventh fairy. At the time of the accident, so the story tells us, she was in Mataquin, and when she came back to the castle it was too late to undo the terrible consequences of her earlier mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“First, Your Highness, I must explain the omission in the early part of the account. The seventh fairy, you’ll recall, said she did not have the power to undo completely what her elder had done. No fairy could undo the spell of another. Changes could only be made in two ways: either by exploiting gaps left in the original formulation of the spell, or by negotiation between the fairies. The old fairy said explicitly that the Princess would die. That could not have been changed without negotiation. And so the modification from death to sleep could only have been obtained at a price.”

“What price?”

“The King and Queen were very unhappy because they had no children. Could they have lived happily ever after if their child had died?”

The Prince and Father Ignatius shook their heads.

“So they were the price,” said Father Severinus. “They, and everyone else in the castle.”

“They knew, then,” said the Prince, “that if ever Dawnrose found a spindle, they would die themselves.”

“That’s why they prepared her!” exclaimed Father Ignatius.

“The tombs and the graves,” said the prince. “Oh, it all makes sense now. They taught her to be ready. Always ready for death.”

“But they would not have told her the cause,” said Father Ignatius.

“No,” said Father Severinus. “And that is why at the tribunal she truthfully told us that she did not know what happened to her, or why. Presiding over all her life were the forces of good and evil, and she never knew what they were doing to her.”

“Why did she become old?” asked the Prince.

“The seventh fairy’s mistake. The spell said only that the Princess would sleep for one hundred years and be woken by the son of a King. It said nothing about the condition in which she would awake. The old fairy was free to do what she liked to Dawnrose once she had been awoken.”

“She was young when I woke her,” said Alonso.

“Oh yes,” said Father Severinus. “That was part of the great revenge. Let her taste perfect happiness, and then .... Her spell would have been to make the Princess assume her real age on her wedding night.”

“Why?” cried Alonso.

“She had been insulted,” said Father Severinus. “Read the history books, Your Highness, and you’ll find that far worse revenges have been taken for far slighter injuries.”

“But surely,” interposed Father Ignatius, “the seventh fairy could have taken some steps to protect Dawnrose.”

“The seventh fairy knew nothing of this spell,” said Father Severinus. “She had returned to her native land.”

“Then when was the spell imposed?”

“At the moment when the Princess was pierced by the spindle. The King had ordered that all spindles should be burnt. Who, in the castle itself, would have dared to spin? The old woman behind the rusted lock in the tiny attic in the old tower....”

He paused. They both knew who the old woman had been.

“The Princess pierced her hand, and then the old fairy pronounced her new curse.”

“Oh, Dawnrose!” cried Alonso, and Father Ignatius reached across to put a comforting hand on the Prince’s shoulder.

The three of them sat in silence for a while, each recalling past events and fitting them to the pattern unfolded by Father Severinus. But the latter knew there were many more questions to come, and he waited almost with dread for what he knew would be the final question.

Father Ignatius resumed the search for understanding:

“If Dawnrose fell to the floor of the attic, how did she get into the long room? Surely the old fairy wouldn’t have carried her there?”

“No, the seventh fairy heard what had happened, returned to the castle, and laid the Princess to rest in the room that had been specially built for her sleep.”

“Would she also have heard about the new spell?”

“I think so. Yes, I think that is why she sewed her coverlet. In her grief and despair at her mistake, she told the story as it should have happened. We do sometimes console ourselves with stories when reality is too harsh to bear.”

“And Dawnrose’s sleeplessness?”

“The subtlest of tortures. Welcome to those with full and happy lives, but a torment to one who has lost everything. Had she lived, she would have had no respite.”

“Then her death was not part of the spell?”

It was the Prince who asked this question, his voice almost breaking with emotion, and Father Severinus himself began to tremble slightly.

“I don’t know,” he said, “we are entering the area that is not covered by the story. But I don’t think it was. Death for Dawnrose may have been more a blessing than a curse.”

“You were the instrument, Father Severinus,” said Father Ignatius with a tinge of severity. “Are you at peace with yourself over her death?”

“No,” said Father Severinus. “I have not been at peace since that moment.”

“Then for all our sakes,” said Father Ignatius, in a far kinder and gentler tone, “we must try to understand what may have happened. If her death was not part of the spell, was it an act of mercy performed by the seventh fairy? Or death from purely natural causes – the shock of the needle?”

“I have asked those same questions, Father Ignatius, but do not know the answers.”

It was at this moment that Prince Alonso raised the question that Father Severinus had most dreaded:

“Is Dawnrose’s death the ending? Does this mean that the evil fairy triumphs? What’s God doing all this time? You’re men of the Church – how do you account for the victory of evil over good?”

His grief now was edged with bitterness, and the gaunt face of Father Severinus sank even further in upon itself. But Father Ignatius did not waver:

“We see through a glass darkly. God does not allow evil to triumph, and what seems may not be what is.”

“She’s dead!” cried Prince Alonso. “Is that the triumph of good?”

“Is she dead?” asked Father Ignatius.

His question silenced Alonso at once, for such a thought had not occurred to the Prince. Father Severinus, however, had already taken this possibility into account:

“Father Ignatius,” he said. “We must not raise false hopes. The old fairy would have learnt from the mistake of the young. She would not have left a way for her spell to be reversed.”

“But her spell related to age – not to death. We do not believe that Dawnrose’s death was the work of the old fairy. And if it was the work of the seventh fairy, she may have had something else in mind.”

“Are the fairies still here?” asked Alonso. “Are they still with us?”

“The forces of good and evil never die,” said Father Severinus. “We may assume they are still here. Father Ignatius, I too have been tortured by the implications of this ending. I know that in His infinite goodness, God will have taken the princess to His heart, if she is dead. But if she is not dead, then what is to happen? What is meant to happen?”

“If I were to kiss her,” asked Prince Alonso, “would she wake up and be herself again?”

“She was herself,” said Father Ignatius, sadly.

“I mean young,” said Alonso. “And beautiful as she was.”

Father Severinus shook his head.

“How do you know?” insisted the Prince.

But Father Severinus had wrestled with the Devil many times, and knew what a cunning adversary he was. A second awakening of Dawnrose could only recreate the situation that had existed before the tribunal, and if the Prince was not willing to spend the rest of his days with a woman of one hundred and sixteen, then he should leave her in her sleep. Alonso remained unconvinced, and Father Ignatius wondered whether Father Severinus’s faith in the efficiency of evil ought not at least to be matched by a similar respect for the talents of good.

“The spell cannot be undone!” repeated Father Severinus. “Of that I am certain. And so what is to be gained from awakening Dawnrose – if indeed she is asleep and not dead? You seek to rediscover a dream, but you may uncover a nightmare.”

“The seventh fairy would not allow that!” exclaimed the Prince. “She would only allow goodness!”

And come what may, Prince Alonso was now resolved to return to the castle, open the tomb, and once more kiss Dawnrose. Even if Father Severinus was right, and the spell was irreversible, the seventh fairy would somehow find a way to make the ending happy.

“I shall pray for you,” said Father Severinus.

“And I shall accompany you,” said Father Ignatius.

## XVIII

It was dawn when Prince Alonso left the palace in a coach driven by the faithful Clifford. He was accompanied by both fathers, for Father Severinus had insisted that he too must attend this final ceremony.

During the night, Alonso had written a short letter to his parents, which he had instructed Clifford to deliver in the event of his not coming back from the castle. The letter read:

My dear father and mother.

I am returning to the castle to see if I can awaken Dawnrose. I do not know what will happen, but I believe that I shall somehow find happiness there. If this is so, please do not grieve, but rejoice that your son has found what he sought. And forgive me for leaving you. Father Ignatius will tell you all there is to tell.

Your loving son,

Alonso.

He had also begun letters to Lord Corambis and to the Archbishop, but in each case had found nothing but words of reproach. He therefore decided that if he was to leave them, he would leave them in silence. The reproach must come from elsewhere.

Scarcely a word was spoken during the journey, since all three men were preoccupied with their different thoughts and prayers. Alonso was impatient to make this final test, and prayed that his betrayal of Dawnrose would be erased through restoration. He was afraid that he would betray her again, but clung with all his might to Father Ignatius's interpretation of the death.

Father Ignatius himself remained convinced that the seventh fairy was watching over them this dawn, but he was impressed by Father Severinus's certainty regarding the spell. He strained to find some way of integrating the spell and the hope, and prayed for the happy ending he had held out to the Prince.

Father Severinus was the most agitated of the three. He had spent much of his life studying the powers of evil, and now he was afraid that he was to be instrumental in providing them with one more victim. He still heard Dawnrose's cry of agony ringing in his head, and to it now his imagination added new horrors: the crone

arising from her tomb and wreaking the Devil's vengeance on the world. And he feared God's punishment for delving into forbidden mysteries. He prayed that Dawnrose was dead, and that God had guided the needle.

When the coach reached the hedge of thorns, Alonso unexpectedly informed the two fathers that he would enter the castle alone. He himself did not know why, but when the fathers demurred, he said he would return within an hour, and if he did not they could come for him.

Father Ignatius insisted on blessing him, and when he had finished, the two men embraced. Father Severinus also blessed him, and then shook hands with him. The last farewell was to Clifford. The servant had tears in his eyes as the Prince embraced him, thanked him, and asked him also to thank the Lady Sarah.

"Let me come with you, Your Highness!" begged Clifford.

But the Prince was adamant that he must go alone.

They watched him disappear through the gap he had carved in the hedge, and then they settled anxiously for their hour's wait.

Once more the Prince made his way to the great hall, and he recalled skeletons, a dance to a ghostly orchestra, and a vision in white. All gone. There was nothing in the hall but furniture and dust.

He stepped across to the plaster animals, and stroked the head of the mighty stag. Then he descended the marble staircase, accustomed his eyes to the gloom, and walked – heart drumming – towards the statues of stooping prince and sleeping princess.

"Don't betray me!" he whispered. "Don't let me betray her!"

The stillness weighed upon him, and he could scarcely breathe. As he raised his hand to grasp the foot of the stone prince, he began to tremble, and his hand hovered for an instant as if held back by an invisible string. Then flesh touched stone, and he was startled by a sound – brief and gentle, a swift low rustle, like the passing of wings. After that the silence spread again to completeness. Nothing had passed him.

Without a sound, the top of the tomb swung back, and from its depths came the same achingly sweet perfume that had filled the dark room in which Dawnrose had slept.

Alonso barely had the strength to climb the steps and look down into the purple and gold bed where she lay. There had been no change. The grey hair framed

the peaceful parchment face, and the withered arms lay by her sides. But the sound of the wings ... the ache of the perfume .... These were the messages of the seventh fairy. Dawnrose was not dead.

Alonso climbed down into the tomb, and stooped over the crumpled whiteness of the one-hundred-and-sixteen-year-old woman. Gently he pressed his lips against the dried leaves of her mouth, and then he stood again. For a moment nothing happened, and he thought he had imagined everything, but suddenly there was a flicker. And as he watched, held by a spell, her eyes opened, and a ray of sun came down through the glass to light up the grey hair and the blueness of the eyes. Magically, the wrinkled face unfolded into a smile of recognition. She was one hundred and sixteen years old. She was beautiful. She was Dawnrose.

“Art thou come?” she whispered.

He nodded, unable to speak.

“And dost thou love me?”

Again he nodded.

“Then do not weep.”

But he could not stop weeping. The tears ran from his faded, hooded eyes down along the deep wrinkles of his face and into his grey beard. They were tears of joy at the triumph of good. They were tears of gratitude that there would be no more betrayal. They were tears of wonderment at the beauty of Dawnrose. They were tears of release at the discovery of love.

He lay down beside her, and she put her arms round his body and stroked his grizzled head until the end came. Then she reached up to a cross above the bed, and the statues of Alonso and Dawnrose swung back and sealed the tomb.

## XIX

When the hour had passed, the two priests entered the castle. Clifford had wanted to accompany them, but they feared for his soul.

Calling for the Prince, they made their way to the great hall and the burial vault. They both knew that he would not and could not answer them, for the universal stillness told of no life. Inside the vault, they knelt beside the tomb of Alonso and Dawnrose and silently thanked God for answering their prayers. And yet they were both weeping, as though God's mercy were as much a source of sadness as of joy.

When they left the vault and the hall, Father Severinus suddenly stood still and grasped Father Ignatius's arm.

"There is something I have to know," he said.

But he did not need to express his wish in words, for Father Ignatius had had the same thought at the same moment.

Together they walked through the ruins to the tower where Prince Alonso had first found Dawnrose. They climbed the stairs to the landing, but they did not enter Dawnrose's room. Instead they wound their way upwards to the very top of the spiral staircase, and here they came to an open door that leaned on broken hinges. In its lock was a rusted key. And beyond the open door was a tiny attic. They did not even need to enter the little room to know what was there, for they could see from the doorway that it contained nothing but an old, cobweb-covered spinning-wheel.

