

I

Jack Sadler woke up in what had once been the Colonel's room. Now, like the rest of the big house, it was his. They'd had a wing each, the Colonel and his wife Madge; they liked to meet at mealtimes in the dining room, listen to the news together, or play a game of Gin Rummy, but several doors divided them while they slept.

Colonel Bassett had been a tidy man. Came from his army training, so he said. Never so much as a hair out of place on him except, as he got older, in his ears where they sprouted untended. It was always a mystery to Sadler why so meticulous a man had allowed this one part of himself to become so very overgrown.

Sadler looked round the room. The Colonel had been very fond of cupboards. He had put them in all over the house, so that whenever he saw something lying around, he could be sure to be near one and just pop it away out of sight. At least once a year he'd turned out all the cupboards and made inventories of what they held.

It was cold in the room, so cold that Sadler lay there without moving, wrapped in his blankets and his two eiderdowns, lay trapped by the morning cold, cursing himself for not leaving the fire on all night. He thought to himself, never minded an East Anglian winter when I was a lad. Quite enjoyed an excuse to wear my green balaclava. But now. He was seventy-six, give or take a day or two (he knew his birthday was coming round soon, one day this week or next – he'd have to look at the calendar) and the cold seemed to wake up all the little aches and

pains that dozed in his joints, even set the bile in his stomach trickling backwards into his throat.

Don't get up, he thought. Don't move. Lie here all day in the warm bed. Just clamber out for a second or two, long enough to turn on the fire, then back into the warm. Lie there, arms straight down, waiting for the fire to come red. Wait till the room's nice and warm, then prop yourself up with another pillow, put your dressing gown on and your glasses and have a little read . . .

He lay rigid. Cowardly old sod, he thought. Get the bleedin' fire on or you'll be trapped like this all day. So silly when it wouldn't take more than a few seconds, just the time it takes to walk four and a half paces.

Then he remembered the dog. He looked at his clock, saw half past seven and knew that by now the dog would be scratching at the kitchen door, desperate for a pee but so well trained poor old thing he only did it on the floor if he had to. Sadler never had known what kind of dog he was: brown wiry body, black eyes and no tail to speak of, just a small woolly tuft to wag. From behind he looked like a little brown sheep. One hundred and five he was by human computing and except at moments like this Sadler was glad of his company. He often wondered what it would be like to be totally alone with not so much as a yap to break the silence and no one to read the paper to. He sincerely hoped he would die before the dog, recognizing at the same time that this thought was a bit Colonelish. Because the Colonel always used to say, 'You know, Sadler, the only thing that's bearable about death is that I'll die first, before Madge.' And then in the end Madge and the Colonel had died on the same day, Coronation Day.

Sadler sat up in bed and fumbled about for his dressing gown. At the window, heavy chintz curtains held out the sunlight. March morning, cold as January, but clear as a jewel in the grounds of the great house. Sadler switched on

the fire, resisted the impulse that drove him back to bed, went to the window instead, big south window where the merest twitching of the curtains sent sunlight jumping over the sill.

Everything he could see from this window belonged to him: a wide lawn, cut in two by the drive and sweeping leftwards past the house, right round to the north side. Beyond the lawn, an old yew hedge like a line of sentinel shoulders hunched at the gate of a wood of evergreens. To the right of the lawn, the apple orchard, walled on one side but straggling over rising ground to a meadow. At the bottom of the meadow, a stream tunnelling a windy course among dense rushes, never flowing fast enough to stay clear but in late spring its banks gaudy with kingcups. This morning everything was white with frost. Much prettier than snow, Sadler always thought, much more delicate. But spring was such a fickle whore. Daffs couldn't push up innocent shiny buds without she sent a frost to snap them off.

The dog was whining now, would be crossing his little legs if he could. Sadler heard the whining as he came barefoot down the wide stairs and thought, time I took him to the vet again to see about his worm. He seems happy with his worm, though. Fond of being hungry all the time, makes him feel young again I wouldn't wonder. Funny things, worms. Worm lies trapped in his belly, eating for him, eating and growing fat and the dog's as thin as a fox.

It was too late when Sadler opened the kitchen door. The dog sat silent, reproachful, looking at the puddle he'd made. Sadler never scolded the dog, couldn't bear to do it any more. He patted the dog's little head, opened the door to the garden and sent him trotting out into the cold. Five minutes and he'd be whining again, asking to be let in.

Sadler sat down at the kitchen table, wondering how many countless mornings had there been, just like this

one, sitting there thinking to himself, twenty years ago I'd be up and dressed by now, smart enough in my morning uniform – black trousers, striped cotton jacket, clean white shirt and one of the Colonel's old ties – chivvying Vera who moved so ponderously about the kitchen, watching the clock to be sure to sound the gong on the dot of eight. Then waiting there, standing almost to attention, for the Colonel to come down at one minute past.

'Good morning, Sadler.'

'Good morning, Sir.'

Handing him *The Times* as he went into the dining room, following him in, serving his eggs or his kidneys or his sausages, pouring his strong coffee and then retiring with a nod and a 'thank you, Sadler'. Back to the kitchen then, watching Vera's thin hands decorating the butter balls with a sprig of parsley, putting the finishing touches to Madam's tray. What a neat little breakfast she took every day: lightly boiled egg, lightly toasted bread, a little pot of china tea and a slice of lemon.

'Ready, Vera?'

'Yes, Mr Sadler.'

Lifting the tray up with pride, it looked so nice with its clean linen traycloth (Madam always bought her traycloths from the Ladies Work Stall at the Hentswell fête, they were so finely embroidered), carrying it up the wide staircase to her room. And there she was, sitting up in bed in her bed-jacket, her rouge on already, smiling at him.

'Good morning, Sadler.'

'Good morning, Madam.'

Still smiling. 'Is the Colonel down?'

'I've just served his breakfast, Madam.'

No one to carry a tray to any more. Dead and gone now, the smiling face. And he'd never known it when it was young and pretty. Lined and rouged already when he had taken up service under its kindly eye. Older than the Colonel, his Madge. Twenty-six she'd been as the century

turned and she'd gone on her father's arm to St Margaret's Westminster. And her groom only twenty, not long out of school, a young lieutenant with hardly the need to shave more than twice a week. What a wedding! A thousand lilies at the altar alone. Friends of royalty in the congregation, quite a crowd in Parliament Square to see the bride and groom come out. Madge remembered her wedding day all her life, just as if it had been yesterday. She told Sadler that her mother had spent *forty-three shillings a yard* on ivory satin for her dress and when she'd put it on and her maid had handed her the bouquet she'd felt as good as a queen.

The dog was scratching at the door.

'Come on then,' Sadler called, 'never seen a door before?'

He chuckled, got up slowly and shuffled over the stone floor to let the dog in. It went at once to its warm mat by the old Aga, lay down and look up at Sadler who remembered the puddle and cursed.

'Incontinent little rat!'

The dog wagged its clump of a tail, might have smiled if it could have.

'Come on then, sod you,' Sadler said, 'better mop it up.'

He found an old cloth under the sink, ran a cold tap on to it and wrung it out. His back hurt as he bent down to wipe the floor. What a dose of humiliation old age could give you. What a creaking, stinking, barnacled old wreck life made of the boat in which your soul was forced to sail. Might live another twenty years in this ghastly old body, Sadler thought as he pushed the cloth to and fro. 'But all I can say, God, if you're there,' he said aloud, 'is I hope not.' He straightened up painfully, went back to the sink and rinsed out the cloth. Then he crossed to the Aga and the dog looked up.

'If you think you're going to get a meal, you're wrong, friend,' he said. He would have patted the dog, to give it