

THE CRADLE

by Chloé Barraud

At a bend in the road, half lost in the fir trees and thick bushes, the imposing old frame building was standing before the eyes of the unlikely visitor who had been brought by chance or necessity to venture into the deep woods. What a strange place for building a hotel. But what an excellent place for keeping something secret.

A narrow track was leading to the entrance of the house. The waste of the yard. The silence of the place in the incipient darkness. One would have thought the house to be abandoned for decades. Surrounded by brambles and nibbled by withered ivy, the stone front wall was pierced by four windows. The wooden shutters had already been closed but a dim light was barely visible between the clapboards. It was the only proof of life in this cold and oppressive environment.

There still was the original wrought iron sign above the massive door, but it wasn't easy to make it out in the dark. *The Cradle*. If it hadn't been for the necessity of my investigation, I think I would never have pushed the door open. The history of the building was quite well-known in the region. The Cradle used to be a boarding house for young children and teenagers. Most of them were orphans. The others had been brought there because their parents couldn't take care of them. They were fed and educated. But they had very little contact with the local population. The location of the house, built in the middle of the forest, guaranteed almost total isolation. Officially, as in the other institutions subsidized by the government, the children's needs were provided for, and when they came of age and left the Cradle, they were all accepted to the most prestigious schools and universities in the country. But it is actually difficult to understand how a child can grow up healthily in such a remote place.

The door quietly closed behind me. The entrance hall was only lit by the chimney fire, which created a heavy and unpleasant warmth in the room, and by a little reading lamp on the reception desk. The carpet was dirty. The brown wallpaper, peeled off in some parts. Two huge old armchairs had been put near the fire place so as to give the whole room the illusion of comfort. Slouched in one of them, I caught sight of a corpulent silhouette who didn't cast a single look at me.

After reporting my name to the old landlady at the reception, she led me to my room in the east wing of the building. The Cradle didn't welcome any children anymore. The boarding house had closed down about ten years before, and had been converted into a hotel. The closure had happened rather abruptly. According to the local population, the mother of a young girl, a former drug-addict who had been judged incapable of looking after her child, had one day tried to retrieve her and brought her back home. She was legally allowed to do so, but in fact she failed in her attempt. The directors of the Cradle found an imaginary technicality and, faced with the aggressiveness of the woman, they called the police. She came back a few weeks later and that time she managed to retrieve her daughter. But unfortunately, the young girl soon after died in unclear circumstances. The forensic experts concluded that it was the result of intense mental and physical exhaustion and the mother accused the directors of the Cradle of ill-treating their residents. To silence the recriminations and the growing questioning of the media, the Cradle was closed. And nobody took an interest in this place anymore. At least, until I came and decided to spend a few days there as a guest.

The bedroom was really small and damp. There was no convenience at all. The iron cot and the metal bedside table were remains of the dormitory. The wallpaper had covered the original white wall. By pulling a little piece off to unstick it completely, I caught a look of what was hidden beneath. There were marks. Kinds of engravings. Perhaps they weren't, but at that moment, I was sure that they were child-made drawings. How could children possibly have lived there? There was no light from the ceiling. Just a desk lamp on the metal table. And the moonlight through the window. On that side of the house, the garden was much larger and better kept. One could manage to perceive the shape of a hedge. While looking at the shadows of the

small shrubs swaying in the wind, I imagined the scene of young children playing, despite the austerity of the place, under the eyes of their monitors.

After the Cradle had closed, the building remained uninhabited for months. Until one day, a couple who was living in a village nearby decided to buy the land and the boarding house. They converted it into a hotel. The idea surprised the local population because the place was isolated and too few travellers were likely to stop there. But the hotel remained open and still is. And when I went to the place, I had been informed that the couple was in fact former employees of the boarding house. I had to find out why they had decided to settle there and what actually was going on in the Cradle before its closure.

I left my belongings on the little bed and decided to go downstairs, to the dining hall, to start questioning the landlady. I sensed that she wouldn't be necessarily cooperative if straight away I put to her all the questions I had in mind. I didn't want to disclose my intentions and my profession too rapidly as it was likely to compromise my assignment. *That's what you must often do, Mister Matthews, isn't it ? Hiding your intentions and deceiving people in order to get what you want.*

'This is not exactly how I would have put it,' the journalist replied, 'but basically, you're right.'

'Of course I am', the man said, smiling at his guest with a slightly menacing arrogance, 'I have worked with people like you many times.'

Tall and rather thin, the face marked by persistent fatigue and troubles, the man stared at his interlocutor and then began to move in circles into the room. They were in a large and very bright living room, with abstract paintings on the walls and some tropical plants in the corners. The place was quiet, but the silence was occasionally broken by the sound of quick footsteps coming from the corridor nearby.

'Don't worry,' the man said, 'they won't disturb us for the moment.' Then, he added: 'Would you like something to drink before we go on? Tea? Coffee?'

'A cup of tea, please.'

Matthews didn't take his eyes off his host. The man was about fifty. Looked about sixty. His hair was almost totally grey. The assurance he was speaking with surprisingly contrasted with the awkwardness and hesitation of his gestures. His face looked horribly tense when he tried to pour the boiling water into the cup with his trembling hand. Once a competent and rather impressive detective, the man had become a mere shadow of his former self.

'The tea is tasteless, I'm sorry.'

Matthews shook his head. 'It doesn't matter.'

The man sat down and remained silent a few seconds. 'When they told me you would come to talk about the past,' he went on at last, 'they didn't tell me why you wanted to talk about the past. Why are you asking questions about the Cradle? Are you doing an investigation as I did almost eight years ago? Do you want to know exactly what kind of atrocities were going on there? If you want to do so, I can help you and tell you all the information I've found out. But if you just want to write a sensational article about the wild imaginings of an old detective... please leave at once. I have no time to spare entertaining journalists.'

'Mister Stevens,' Matthews replied, smiling at him with an expression of the most sympathetic understanding, 'I sincerely want to know the truth about the death of Clara Wellington's daughter.'

'So did I.' He rubbed his eyes. His voice became plaintive. 'And finally, I know the truth now.'

The detective was gazing into space. Whispering incomprehensible words. Matthews listened those murmurs with a certain sense of discomfort. In his entire career as a journalist, this was the first time he had met such an afflicted and disconcerting character.

Daniel Matthews was well-built, broad-shouldered, quick and agile in his movements, shrewd and subtle in his reflections. His talent as a writer, an interviewer and an investigator, had enabled him to access to a kind of notoriety. His professional advancement had been very fast. At the age of thirty-six, he had become one of the most promising candidates for the succession of the Daily Telegraph editor. And the writing of a sensational article solving the mystery about the unexplainable death of a young girl that occurred in the South of England almost twenty years before was likely to further his ambition.

Resolute to find out the secret of the Cradle, he put his cup down on the living room tea table and tore out a new sheet of paper off his notebook. 'So,' he said loudly, 'you were talking about questioning the hostess...'

Stevens seemed to wake up. He smiled and cast a scornful and haughty look at his interlocutor. He swallowed the rest of his tea and then said: 'Of course I was! I know exactly what I was talking about!'

'I didn't mean that you did not remember where you stopped your account...' Matthews said, a bit embarrassed to have annoyed his host.

'Oh, never mind Mister Matthews, I was just teasing you.' He smiled again and resumed his story. 'As I said before, I made my way downstairs and headed for the large dining hall. The landlady was already in, preparing the supper.'

The room was about fifty feet long. It was a huge and cold hall situated in the middle of the house and without any window. The wan and tiring neon lighting. The walls covered by painted paneling and a yellowish wallpaper. The beige tiles on the floor. The three long metal tables and their sixty or so chairs, only collecting dust. Exactly as I imagined the refectory of an old boarding house to be. Here and there, old black and white photographs had been stuck in order to give the room a picturesque aspect. A church. A market place. They had probably been taken in a village nearby. A wooden round table, much smaller than the original ones, had been put up for the occasional hotel guests. On one side, the dining hall was opening onto a very dark and cluttered kitchen from which a disagreeable smell and a thick steam were rising. I decided to sit down and patiently watch the landlady cooking the dinner.

The old woman was bustling around the kitchen. There was something displeasing with her appearance, something amiss, although I couldn't exactly specify what. She was moving about slightly bent with age, but her movements were fast and steady. Her face was profoundly wrinkled and pale. The long hair had been put up into a bun but some was hanging down in grey wisps round her face. She was wearing a long brown flowered dress and a grey house-coat. As she brought me the apparently unappetizing shepherd's pie she had prepared, I started to think of how to innocently engage in conversation.

'Am I your only guest tonight, Madam?' I asked.

The woman stared at me and curtly answered: 'Yes, you are.' She was about to go back into the kitchen, but I managed to keep her back.

'Do you always have so few patrons at this time of the year?'

'You must have noticed,' she replied in an apathetic and almost scornful tone, 'the hotel is a bit isolated. We are not used to having many patrons at all. Only a few tourists a year on their way to Blastbury Abbey.' She pointed her finger at one of the photographs on the wall, and then added: 'But I suppose this is also the reason you came...' She was truly unpleasant. And at that moment, with the inquisitive rather than simply interrogative tone she had used, she also seemed suspicious. The kind of suspicion one can often encounter among the elderly living in a little village. But I had to find out if this suspicion was not based on something else. Above all, I had to make her talk about the Cradle.

'That's right. I've come to visit the abbey and rest a few days in the country. I was surprised when somebody in Blastbury told me about a hotel lost in the woods. Pleasantly surprised, in fact. I wouldn't have thought I'd found a hotel in such an isolated place, as you said.' I swallowed a mouthful of the tasteless pie before venturing to add: 'Not so surprising actually: one told me this house hadn't always been a hotel. It is a quiet and peaceful place, far from the hustle and bustle of the city. An appropriate place for a boarding house, isn't it?'

'Indeed.' She quietly replied. 'I've heard the house used to welcome and educate children. When my husband and I bought the land and the building, it was completely abandoned.' Even if I may have made her feel ill-at-ease when I evoked the boarding house, she didn't show it. On the contrary, she began to describe the poor condition in which the building was when they settled in. She told me the alterations they had to make so as to convert it into a hotel. As she was talking about the fittings carried out in the east wing, where the dormitories were formerly situated, my attention was suddenly drawn to the dark corridor at the far end of the refectory. It was difficult to make out anything there. Only light gradually fading into the gloom.

'And what about the west wing?' I finally asked.

‘The class rooms. Not redone yet,’ she said, ‘this part of the house is still abandoned. Locked up. Falls down in some parts. It’s a really dangerous place. Anyone who may venture there would probably run into trouble.’ The look in her eyes was then frankly malignant. Was it some advice or some threat? The fact remains that she went to the kitchen, brought back a carrot cake and didn’t utter a single word anymore. Her silence was a perfect defense against my curiosity and I guessed I would probably have to face it during my entire investigation. But by formulating this kind of subliminal menace, she had committed her first mistake. *You see, Mister Matthews, I know from experience that people who feel in position of strength often overestimate their ability to stay in this position and tend to compromise themselves very easily.*’

‘Maybe she just wanted to say that it was dangerous to go into the west wing because of its bad condition, without having anything at the back of her mind,’ the journalist replied, incredulous at the detective’s suspicion. Stevens looked offended.

‘Maybe,’ he said irritably, ‘but you should have noticed that she lied to me, forgetting to mention she used to work in the boarding house as a monitor. Anyhow, you will soon understand, as you listen to me, that the landlady who was making so few efforts to repay my stay pleasant or at least bearable was far from being an innocent person. Her role in the loathsome activities at the Cradle will appear to you clearly and I hope you will then apologize for questioning my first intuition.’ After this scathing remark, he resumed his story.

‘After dinner, I wished the woman good night and went back to my bedroom. I locked the door behind me, took off my shoes and slipped between the rough sheets. I felt the presence of the landlady just behind the door. After her footsteps had died down the corridor, I remained shrouded by silence only broken by the whisper of the wind. My sleep was tortured and I felt very cold. I couldn’t help thinking of the little girl who had been imprisoned and probably ill-treated for six years or so. Thinking of her mother who had been nonsuited many times when she had tried to sue the directors of the institution. Thinking I was finally her last hope of discovering and disclosing the truth about her daughter’s death.

The next morning came unkindly. I had woken up at five and tried to keep my eyes closed a couple of hours more. A thin mist had invaded the garden tinted blue with the early light. The shape of the hedge had almost disappeared. I took a quick shower in the bathroom on the first floor and headed for the dining hall. I swallowed the breakfast the taciturn landlady had prepared and left the house. I knew I wouldn’t get further information from her, even less from her husband, busy gardening. Therefore, this was supposed to be the first day of my investigation in the village of Blastbury.

On my way down the narrow path to my car parked at the roadside, I turned and looked at the front of the house unsurprisingly as gloomy as the first time I had seen it by night. The husband watched me drive away through the woods. As I came closer to the edge of the forest and escaped from its stifling atmosphere, the mist gradually vanished and the golden colors of the countryside passed by in front of my eyes. Rural farms and dormant fields slowly turned into houses, giving way to the township of Blastbury. Slightly more than a hundred little cottages, a pub and several shops. The kind of little village where everybody knows everything about everyone, which is very convenient and helpful for a detective on duty. I decided to park my car far from the main square of the village, near the monumental abbey. This imposing stone building, dating from the twelfth century, had been partly destroyed during the Reformation but the cloister, the west wall and the chapter house with its cinquefoil arched doorway were still standing. On either side of the monument, stone benches had been conveniently scattered through the gardens. God knows I definitely like old buildings, but I didn’t have time to spare contemplating.

My first idea was to head for the pub, the best place ever to get any kind of information from the local population. It was Sunday and almost all the shops in the village were closed. The paved streets were quiet, white flowers had been laid on the windowsills and the few inhabitants who were out and used to seeing tourists didn’t pay attention to me. On the contrary, when I entered *the Drunken Swan*, Blastbury’s crowded pub in which a cosy warmth and a beer smell were prevailing, every patron stopped their conversation for a while and turned curiously towards me. This silence lasted a few seconds before the buzz of voices and clatters of glasses invaded the place again. I threaded my way through the tables, sat at the bar desk and waited for the manager

to come and take my order. He was a good-looking man, aged about forty, athletic and broad-chested, cheerful and warm.

'Welcome to the Drunken Swan, Sir,' he said, 'What can I give you?'

'Could I have a glass of... cranberry juice, please?'

'Certainly, Sir.' The man caught the bottle of red liquid and poured it into a glass. Then he smiled at me and replied teasingly: 'You must be some policeman on duty for not taking a pint of what is probably the best beer in the region.'

I returned his smile and answered, 'You don't know how right you are...' I picked up my detective card from the pocket of my suit. 'My name's Nigel Stevens, private detective. I come from London.' At first, the manager looked a bit surprised, but this revelation didn't alter his kindness at all.

'I'm Roy Porter, and this is my wife, Mary.' The woman at the other extremity of the bar nodded to me. Roy added: 'Please forgive my surprise, but we haven't seen a detective in Blastbury for many years. Probably since the conflict between Jaye St. John and his mother about the legacy. In any case, if I may help you somehow, just ask me.' He bent towards me and proceeded in a confidential tone. 'And let me warn you: people here do not really like foreigners nosing around their affairs.'

'Thank you, Mister Porter. But don't worry, I won't disturb your patrons for the moment, at least if you can spare me a few minutes and answer some questions of mine.' The man hesitated.

'Well, I've been living in Blastbury since my childhood and people confide in me sometimes. Nevertheless I don't think I'm entitled to disclose any detail about their privacy.'

'Theoretically, You won't have to do so. I'm actually investigating the death of Amber Wellington, Clara Wellington's daughter, that tragically occurred almost ten years ago.' I took an old sheet from a local newspaper I had found, with quite an evasive short news item about the event, and held it out to the manager. 'Mean anything to you?' Porter took the article, examined it for a long time and sighed.

'So you're investigating the Cradle, is that right?' He answered solemnly.

I nodded.

'In that case, I'm really sorry you have come quite a long way for nothing, Mister Stevens. I'm afraid you'll never get the answers to your questions.' He looked very apologetic and I remained staggered by this sentence.

'I beg your pardon? Why do you say that?' I finally asked.

'Because you're not the first one who has tried to discover the truth about this case. Those who tried in the past came up against an impassable judicial wall and they finally gave up their investigation and went back home. I don't know what exactly happened in the Cradle. I don't know whether the children were ill-treated or not. And actually I don't really care now.' He sighed again. 'When Mrs Wellington left the village, I thought we wouldn't hear about it anymore. You know, Blastbury is a peaceful little village. No crime. No violence. Thus people don't like brooding over the idea that something terrible may have happened here. But the mother contacted you, so they will probably have to brood at least once more.'

'Did you know Mrs Wellington personally?'

The manager began to wipe glasses energetically. 'Not really. I must have seen her once or twice during local fairs but she never came to the pub. Her addiction was not exactly to liquids, if you take my meaning.'

'But you seem to know what happened to her,' I said.

'How could I ignore it?' he exclaimed. 'As I said, Blastbury is a little village, and at that time the case caused quite a stir.' He stopped and put the glass he had dried onto the counter. Then, he added: 'I don't want you to think it doesn't hurt me. I'm not insensitive to the death of this child. Poor dear, God bless her. I just know that, considering the Cradle was an institution subsidized by the government itself, whatever happened there, nobody will ever manage to penetrate the mystery. Moreover, there is no evidence that something really happened, nor witnesses.'

'But the building is still standing in the middle of the woods,' I replied, 'and, above all, two former monitors of the boarding house are still living there. These are helpful details for the beginning of an investigation.'

‘You mean the hag and her surly husband? I beg you’ll never get any information from them. They are said to be unfriendly and contemptuous. They don’t strive hard to make their so-called hotel comfortable. Of course, as a result, they don’t have many guests, but I bet they benefit from another form of income. A very advantageous retirement pension for their work in the service of the government, I mean.’

‘They used to live in Blastbury at the time when the Cradle was still open, is that right?’ I asked.

‘They had a house in the North of the village. But in fact they were almost always at the Cradle and they never have any real contact with the population.’

As Porter was explaining to me that nobody in Blastbury would be likely to help me find information about the Cradle, I began to feel slightly anxious and the fear invaded me of becoming the next detective investigating on that unexplainable death to give up his assignment. But when faced with my apparent despair, and convinced by my firm will to do justice to the poor little girl, Porter finally confided in me. He first made a sign to his wife to tell her to look after the new patrons heading for the bar, and when he was sure nobody was listening to us, he whispered:

‘I know a man who could help you. A man who comes at the Swan every evening. Ravaged by remorse, drowning his sorrows. His name is Burnett. Come back here some time around nine, and then you’ll see if he’s willing to talk to you. But please do not rush him: he used to be a good friend of mine.’ And then he added: ‘Oh yes, and take my advice: avoid venturing alone anywhere in the Cradle. No one knows what the hag would be able to do if she sensed any suspicion from you.’

So saying, Porter poured two pints and brought them to his patrons, and I had no time to tell him I stayed at the Cradle precisely. In fact, it didn’t really matter how many warnings or even threats I received. My curiosity had been aroused with the prospect of meeting someone likely to make decisive revelations and, while waiting for this crucial moment in my investigation, my thoughts revolved on the old couple. Although the local population, the journalists and above all several detectives, had voiced suspicion that they were potentially accomplices or at least witnesses to the ill-treatment of children, they were irrationally still living on the crime scene. *There is no evidence that something really happened, nor witnesses.* Porter’s words came back to my mind. What if evidence did exist? And what if the evidence could be uncovered inside the Cradle? Then, someone would have to stay in post there in order to keep it secret. And what part of the building seemed more secret and sealed than the obscure west wing?

I had to go back to the Cradle urgently. I had to check whether my intuition was correct. I swallowed the rest of my drink and quickly made my way to the pub’s door. All the attention once more turned to me and the manager leaning against the bar counter waved goodbye, then quickly looked away. Outside, the morning was darkening and mist gradually invaded the narrow streets of Blastbury. I rushed to my car parked near the abbey and sped off. The land covered by the fog. The wind continually charging and routing these thick vapours. The growing shadow of the forest in the distance. I took me fifteen minutes to reach the Cradle.

The husband wasn’t in the garden anymore. He had left his tools under the porch screen, and the massive shears were lying on the concrete terrace. Apart from that, nothing seemed to have changed in the front yard, as chaotic as ever. In the entrance hall, once more dimly lit, chiefly from the blazing log fire, I had the hideous vision of the landlady, leaning at the reception desk, who stared at me in silence as I headed for the stairs. I was about to climb the first step, when suddenly a shrill voice made me jump and stop.

‘Did you enjoy yourself?’ the woman asked.

‘I beg your pardon?’ The wrinkled creature had come close to me and was breathing rapidly. She repeated the question:

‘Did you enjoy visiting Blastbury?’

‘Immensely,’ I answered, so as to put an abrupt end to the conversation. But she asked again:

‘What about the abbey? Did you see the sculpted pillars inside the chapter house?’ By dint of trying to get rid of her too rapidly, I nearly compromised myself. But fortunately, I did not:

‘The chapter house is closed to visitors on Sunday. Now, will you please excuse me, I’m going upstairs to rest before lunch.’

'I'm going upstairs too. I have things to tidy.' She made the ghost of a sardonic smile and followed me up the stairs. Once in my room, I spent countless minutes sometimes sitting on the little bed, sometimes leaning at the window and watching the husband who had taken advantage of a sunny spell to clip the hedge. Countless minutes waiting for the landlady to leave the corridor. In vain. As she had guessed my intention to venture into the forbidden area, she was barring my way, walking tirelessly in front of my door. I could hear her steps and her heavy breathing. I could almost feel her inquisitive eye.

But I had not given up. I waited for lunchtime and then opened the door. The old woman had brought a chair near the stairs. She was doing embroidery and she didn't pay attention to me. I finally broke the heavy silence:

'Excuse me', she cast me a side glance, 'I would like to return to Blastbury as soon as possible. I have to leave the region in a few days and I want to make the most of the peaceful atmosphere of this charming village. Therefore, I would like to have lunch as soon as possible, if it's not too much of a bother for you.'

'Of course not.' But her expression betrayed her as she stood up unwillingly.

When I entered the refectory, my attention was drawn onto the dark corridor at the other side of the room. I felt my heartbeat accelerate and a huge excitement overwhelmed me. The kind of excitement and adrenalin I always tend to pursue during my investigations. I pretended to examine the old photographs on the wall and waited for the landlady, visibly procrastinating, to disappear in the kitchen. Once done, and after a few minutes of uncertainty, I furtively sneaked into the gloom.

I stayed awhile at the doorway and listened to the clatter of dishes telling me that the landlady was really bustling around the kitchen. My eyes accustomed slowly to the dark. I finally made out that the corridor bent sharply to the left, and then straight ahead, leaving a bare brick wall in front of me. Walking with a muffled tread and feeling my way along the cold walls, I reached a T-shaped intersection. In addition to the dim light provided by my mobile, until then completely useless because of the lack of signal in the forest, the gleam of the sun was piercing through clapboards nailed from the inside to a large window. A thin beam, reflecting the dust I had raised, enabled me to examine the place. Left and right, two metallic doors. Surprisingly, both of them were padlocked.

I was taken about by this discovery. In the middle of what was supposed to be a heap of ruins, according to the landlady, and that actually looked like a building in good condition, someone had thought fit to set up this security to impede intrusions. Moreover, magnetic badge readers, henceforth deactivated, were fixed on each door. What could be kept in classrooms that was so precious that it required such a precaution?

I noticed the door on the left had a window. A little dusty pane of glass I wiped with the back of my hand. I came closer to the door hesitatingly, as if I had felt a malicious presence likely to appear suddenly from behind me, or to rush against the pane from the inside. Using my mobile as a flashlight, I managed to make out partly what was hidden in the inner room. Much to my surprise, I perceived a row of five or six dusty screens fixed to the wall above a metallic desk. Cables running on it. Huge folder racks against the opposite wall. And rusty chairs piled up in the corner of the room. Following with my eyes the cables that were fixed on the ceiling, I realized some of them led to the outside of the room and hung just above my head, whereas the others, continuing their way to the right, disappeared into the second sealed room.

I had no time to understand what it was. All of a sudden, a terrible crash coming from the kitchen resounded in the whole corridor. Fear immediately took hold of me. Absorbed in my mysterious finding, I had completely forgotten the risk I had taken venturing into the forbidden wing. Above all, I had forgotten the landlady was so near. Unconcerned by the noise I could make, I ran along the corridor as fast as possible and finally reached the refectory, out of breath. And there, I saw...'

Stevens stopped his account abruptly. He looked at the journalist, visibly tensed up by the scene, and laughed.

'I can see just by the look on your face, Mister Matthews, that my story seems to fascinate you.' He added with a smirk.

'It does indeed,' Matthews confessed. He was slightly annoyed by his interlocutor's self-importance and wanted to hear the punch line rapidly.

'And what do you think I saw in the refectory?' Stevens asked with smugness.

'I don't know. I suppose you saw the landlady.'

'Do you really think I would be here, talking to you about the mysteries of the Cradle, if she had caught me snooping around in the west wing? Obviously not.' The detective rubbed his hands. 'No, she was still in the kitchen, and in fact she came out exactly when I got in the refectory. Hopefully, she didn't suspect anything. I sat at the wooden round table, watched her pick up the fragments of the plate she had broken, and thought about what I had discovered.'

'You mean the sealed room... what was it exactly?' Matthews asked.

'I finally understood that it was a disused monitoring room, and that the cables used to be connected to video cameras. I see no other possible explanation.'

Matthews remained unconvinced. 'I've personally lived in a boarding house when I was young. I don't remember much of that time. I think the loss of my parents caused a traumatism leading to a kind of amnesia. But I'm quite sure there wasn't any video camera in it. Anyhow, I don't see why a boarding house would require such a surveillance system.'

'Precisely!' Stevens replied triumphantly. 'There is no reason.' He was about to specify what he had in mind, when suddenly someone knocked at the living-room door. 'Damn! Not yet!' the detective shouted. But the door slowly and inexorably opened.

A woman in a regulation white uniform, poked her head round the door and anxiously peered at the journalist.

'Is everything alright, Mister Matthews?' She asked with a tigh-lipped smile.

'Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be?' Matthews stammered, looking horribly uncomfortable. He watched his host, his hands tightened on the arm-rest of his chair, seething with anger at the sight of the nurse who had dared to interrupt the conversation.

The woman's voice trembled a little as she noticed Stevens looking daggers at her, but she insisted. 'Are you sure you don't want to stop the interview?'

Matthews had no time to answer. In the sharp, rather arrogant and even offensive tone of someone who relishes his superiority, Stevens reprimanded:

'I said no interruption!'

But the nurse didn't pay attention to him. 'If there is anything you require, Mister Matthews,' she replied benevolently, 'do not hesitate to press this button on the wall and I will come back here right away. And when the interview is finished, please come at the reception. There is someone who wants to talk to you.' So saying, she left the living-room.

It took a few minutes for Stevens to calm down and come round. In the scarcely breathing silence, he stood up and began to walk around the white room with downcast eyes. Anger seemed to have suddenly given way to a kind of despair. The assurance he had displayed since the beginning of the interview had completely faded. Whispering to himself incomprehensible and barely audible criticisms, he cast nervous glances around and finally looked at his guest. Paranoia blazed in his eyes.

'I'm really sorry, Mister Matthews,' he moaned, 'this isn't what I wanted to be.'

Matthew tried to ease the situation. 'Don't worry. It doesn't matter. Please, carry on your story.'

'They've made you doubt. I'm sure they've made you doubt my sincerity.'

'No. Not at all.'

'They've told you I'm a liar. They've told you my story was pure fabrication.' Stevens's face wore an expression of pain.

'Nobody told me anything.' Matthews replied thoughtfully. 'I can assure you I believe you. Please, carry on. I want to know the truth about the Cradle.'

Stevens stopped walking. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After some hesitations, he sat down again in front of the journalist. 'You're right. I'm going to tell you everything I know. Yes, everyting I know. And you will repeat it. You will write an article. And everyone will finally discover the truth.' Heartened by this prospect, he slowly resumed his story.

'After my venture into the west wing, and after lunch, I stayed a while in my bedroom thinking about how to explore the forbidden area again, and how to enter the mysterious sealed

rooms. I knew the husband had left some tools under the porch that could be useful for picking the padlocks, but it was impossible to grab and bring them to the refectory without being seen. I had to wait for the night. Until then, I decided to spend the afternoon far from the grim atmosphere of the Cradle.

I drove to Blastbury and parked again close to the abbey. Drizzle swept into my car as I opened the door, but it was short-lived and I had the entire afternoon to walk around. I watched the darkness progressively invading the sky, and the village falling into sleep. I went in a local fish and chips for dinner, and finally headed for the Drunken Swan just before nine, thrilled at the idea of at last meeting the man known by the name of Burnett.

When I entered the pub, Roy Porter immediately waved at me. I walked to the bar counter where a couple of locals were chatting, and glanced around in order to spot the informer, probably hidden somewhere among the crowd. Porter's voice suddenly rang clear above the hum of the conversations.

'Good evening, Sir. Nice to see you again. Fancy another cranberry juice? Or maybe something a little bit stronger?' He asked teasingly.

'Well, why not? What's your wine selection?'

Porter seemed suddenly embarrassed. 'Oh, we've got red, and, er, white...'

I returned his smile. 'Ok! I'll get a pint of beer then.' Porter got some colors back on his cheeks and looked overjoyed.

The manager actually knew why I had come back to the pub and he didn't take long to point out a table in the far corner, barely lit by an old oil lamp fixed on the wall. A wizened silhouette was sitting there, motionless, fading out in the shadows and warm steam that filled the room.

'I didn't tell him who you were,' Porter specified, 'I just said you were someone trustworthy who wanted to chat a bit and share a few drinks quietly. I didn't think he would accept, but he did. So, please, don't give the lie to me. This chap has endured a lot of pain and sorrow. Treat him with respect and consideration.'

'Don't worry, Sir. That's what I always do.' I replied. In fact, that's what I always do when I want to get major information from a touchy or quick-tempered suspect. But that time, I really didn't want to overburden this poor soul.

I took my pint with me and sidled up to the dark silhouette. The small thin body, cramped in a large coat, his hand tightly gripped on a Johnnie Walker top, was peering from beneath his cap with tiny and weary eyes. A four-to-five day stubble and a slovenly appearance suggested that he didn't expect much from life anymore. Burnett was depressed. And a part of my mission was to discover why.

'Good evening,' I began to say, 'may I sit down at your table?'

Burnett poured Scotch into his glass and didn't look at me. 'If it gives you any pleasure.' He answered wryly.

I sat down at the little table and began to sip my beer, thinking about how I could engage in conversation about the Cradle. But Burnett anticipated:

'I know who you are.' He curtly said. 'I know what you want from me.'

'Really?'

The man slowly swirled the brown liquid in his glass and met my eyes as he drank. 'People don't usually come all the way from London just to sit at my table and share a drink with me innocently. Don't get sneaky with me. Ask your questions, and go away. As you can see, I'm a very busy man.'

Burnett was annoyed at my presence. He was trying to hide his despair and ill-being behind a curt and aggressive tone. I hesitated awhile and finally understood that I had better be frank and direct with my questions.

'Alright. Let's go to the point. In this case, I want to know what your connection with the Cradle is.'

Burnett drained his glass and set it on the table. He sighed and looked at me with misty eyes. 'Tommy.' He whispered.

'Who?'

'My son.' He snickered and dried his eyes with his cuff. 'Yes. Tommy was my son.'

Confronted with my interlocutor's distress, I found it difficult to demand that he explained what happened to his son: 'And how did he die? Did he die when he was inside the Cradle?'

'No. He died because of me.' He sounded worn out and defeated. He was like a man pursued, but pursued by invisible enemies: remorse that made him feel more guilty and even more helplessly alone than ever.

'Can you please explain to me what exactly occurred?' I asked gently.

'I'm gonna try. But I'm not sure it will do any good. If you're investigating the Cradle, nobody will believe you if you repeat what I'm gonna tell you.' He sighed again profoundly and poured himself another whisky. And then, he began to tell his story:

'Tommy was almost seven when his mother and I were forced to send him to the institution for a reason that is none of your business. He only stayed there for six months. Only six months... One day, the director of the Cradle phoned me. He told me Tommy had been taken to hospital after a serious epileptic fit that occurred while he was watching TV with the other children. I did not understand the point immediately because he had never been epileptic before. After this accident, the director considered it too risky to keep Tommy at the Cradle. He sent him back home, or at least, he send his body back home. For the little boy who came back to Blastbury looked physically like Tommy. But he had been drained of his mind and personality. No speaking. No listening. As if the brain activity had suddenly ceased. You see, my son could but scream and mumble incomprehensible gibberish. Above all, he was incapable of understanding when we spoke to him. At first I thought his state was a consequence of the epileptic fit. However doctors told me it was impossible. But with perseverance, I finally managed to find out what evil had destroyed my son's mind.'

Burnett swallowed the rest of his glass and looked at me in helpless despair. As if he had forgotten the bustle of the pub and the locals' insatiable and unhealthy curiosity, he began to moan: 'My son! My poor son! I just wanted to help you. I just wanted you to get better. To recover your mind... Tommy!' He exclaimed with a trembling voice, 'I wish I'd never brought you there. Wish none of this had happened.'

'What do you mean? Where did you bring him?' I asked.

'Psychiatrists couldn't do anything. No explanation for his state. And no cure. But one of them told me about another kind of treatment, able to cure amnesia and several deep psychological traumas: Hypnotherapy,' he said solemnly. 'I didn't know anything about this practice, and I firmly believed it would be our last hope to cure Tommy. But unfortunately, the therapy failed.' Moonlight coming from the pub's small tinted window caught the trace of tears on his face. 'Everything went off so fast and so violently! The therapist began to pronounce key sentences and, as if Tommy could understand again the meaning of these injunctions, he fell into a semi-conscious state. But when the doctor tried to make him speak, questioning him about his name, his memories, the situation soon got out of hand. His limbs tensed up. His eyelids fluttered nervously. And suddenly, all his body started to convulse. Clinging to him so as to contain his movements, in vain, I was watching my son's decline helplessly. The waking-up sentences had failed. The therapist was completely distraught. With his eyes closed, and mouth contorted, Tommy was howling and crying. But in his delirium, he had surprisingly regained the power of speech. Clipped words. Unbelievable words. "*Trust*"... "*Keep informed*"... "*Achieve*"... "*Forget*"... "*Obey*". I didn't know what to do. I didn't understand anything. I burst into tears. And after a few minutes, the cries stopped. The convulsions disappeared. Tommy slowly calmed down. And remained silent. When the rescuers arrived in the surgery, it was already too late.'

Burnett's story was poignant, as well as terrifying and mysterious. I couldn't remain insensitive to the tragedy that had deeply affected this poor soul. But the revelations he had made encouraged me to compare and link the two deaths related to the Cradle. Amber Wellington and Tommy Burnett had both stayed at the boarding house and had both been sent back home before their educational program was over. The little girl died of exhaustion. The little boy, of a cerebral stroke after a delirium and a convulsive fit. There was no mark of physical ill-treatment on them. Probably because they hadn't been physically ill-treated. But the boy's attitude and the words he had pronounced before he died suggested that an even more abominable practice had been tried out on the children. And Burnett didn't take long to mention it.

‘After Tommy’s death, I lost everything. My wife, my job...’ Once more, the man drained his glass. ‘His last words haunted my mind, night and day, and they still do. I’ve questioned and harassed the hypnotherapist about these words. And his answer was totally insane. He told me the only similar cases were related to experiments carried out on American and German soldiers during World War II. Mental conditioning thanks to hypnosis and sleep-teaching, a method to control people’s thoughts and behavior by repeating the same sentences or images over and over again until these sentences or images enter people’s thoughts. It was supposed to relax soldiers and ensure their entire obedience to orders.’

‘And you think that’s what they did to your son?’ I asked incredulously.

‘Astonishing, isn’t it? But that’s the damn truth. During the war, the process failed, but the experiments never stopped. And what can be safer and more unobtrusive than tormenting the minds of abandoned children and teenagers? No one cares about them, and no one suspects anything because the children seem well-educated and are accepted to prestigious schools.’

‘Did you inform the police?’

‘What’s the use?’ Burnett exclaimed. ‘Nobody has ever believed me. People say it is pure fiction, made up by a depressed alcoholic. They trust in the authorities. And the authorities have always denied that something unusual happened at the Cradle.’

‘I certainly believe you,’ I confessed. ‘I’ve been hired by Mrs Clara Wellington to investigate her daughter’s death. Thanks to all the elements I have discovered since I arrived here, I’m firmly convinced something unusual did happen in this boarding house. And thanks to your story, I’m beginning to see clearly what it is. The only thing amiss is proof.’

Burnett bent towards me and added with melancholy: ‘You’ll never find proof, Sir. The keepers won’t tell you anything. And if there were some equipment in the building, they must have taken it with them when they left the place when faced with the curiosity of the media.’

I looked at him in the eyes and smiled benevolently. ‘I think you’re wrong, Mister Burnett.’ I whispered. ‘I’m quite sure they haven’t taken all the equipment with them.’

Burnett looked astonished and released his hold on the bottle. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘I mean there is something in the hotel’s west wing that someone is trying very hard to keep secret. Padlocked rooms. Deactivated surveillance system... The keepers must be sleeping now. Give me one hour or two, and I’ll get the proof we need.’

At this moment, and for the first time since I had met him, I saw a glimmer of hope illuminating Burnett’s eyes. The suffering and impotence he had endured for almost ten years suddenly vanished, giving way to the heartening prospect of at last exposing his son’s murderers. Under the influence of alcohol, and moved by his will of revenge, he stood up violently and nearly staggered.

‘If what you say is true,’ he exclaimed, ‘then, I’m coming with you!’

‘No way!’ I curtly replied. ‘The landlady is alert for the slightest noise or suspicious activity. I’ll be more discreet if I’m alone. But I promise you’ll be the first one to know what I have found out.’

Curiously, he did not insist. He vigorously shook hands with me, wished me good luck, and watched me leave the bar with barely concealed apprehension. Outside the pub, I stood awhile in the rain looking at the black clouds spreading out across the sky. Gloomy nights are always more exciting than long sunny days. But that night was bound to be the most exciting and perilous in my career.

When I arrived in the woods, I parked my car far from the Cradle and walked on to the hotel. The howling wind was bending the shrubs in the yard. The night was full of the grating of the iron sign chain swaying. I sneaked to main door and cast a furtive look between the wooden clapboards. Probably waiting for my return, the husband was in the entrance hall, slouched in his armchair, visibly asleep. As expected, I had to find another way to enter the Cradle without being seen. The windows of the ground floor were all sealed up, but hopefully the door under the porch, leading to the living-room, was ramshackle and easy to force. Above all, the husband had made a fatal but welcome mistake: his tool case was still on the concrete terrace. Thanks to light provided by my mobile, I grabbed a claw head and forced the wooden door as silently as I could. Then, I stayed a moment in the doorway, panting and sweating, as if the fear of being noticed and

defeated had surpassed the excitement of this late-night venture. But I thought about the promise I had made to Burnett and Mrs Wellington, and finally made my way inside the house.

The glow coming from the chimney fire was barely visible in the living-room, but the husband's snore resounded clearly. I took off my wet shoes and slowly tiptoed to the reception desk. There was no light in the stairs and, surprisingly, no trace of the usually ubiquitous landlady. It was a heaven-sent opportunity to seize. Holding my breath, I brushed past the huge armchair and quickly slipped into the gloomy refectory. Faint at first, but growing louder as I was going through, the repetitive drip of the kitchen leaking tap echoed in the cold room. I ran to the west corridor and rapidly reached the T-intersection with its two padlocked rooms, henceforth completely plunged in obscurity. The place seemed quiet and vacant. Rain was streaming down the sealed windows. I dropped my guard for a few seconds and recovered my composure.

With a trembling hand, I took the screwdriver and the small metallic shank I had stolen out of my pocket and get closer to the door of the monitoring room. I was about to pick the padlock, like I had already done many times during other assignments, when all of a sudden a massive dark shape coming from the corridor bumped into me and rushed to the metallic door. Violently thrown against the wall, I fell on the floor and suddenly noticed my assailant was pointing a long pair of pincers at me. Completely paralyzed, I suppressed a scream. But to my great surprise the intruder turned his tool towards the door and broke the padlock with a groan.

'Much easier like that, don't you think?' the man shouted, unaware of the din he was making. He extended his arms and helped me up. I was progressively recovering my senses.

'Mister Burnett? Is it you?' I whispered incredulously. 'What the hell are you doing here? I told you not to come with me!'

'And you really thought I would listen to you? I'll find no rest until I see exactly what Tommy has endured.'

'How did you get in?' I asked.

'You have broken the veranda's door...' He said with an imperceptible smile.

'And what about the old man?'

'Still sleeping like a baby.' Burnett's tone was irritatingly casual.

'Well,' I replied angrily, 'I wouldn't be surprised if you had woken him up with all the racket you've made.'

'Don't worry. I'm sure he's still sleeping.' He sighed and hesitatingly added: 'Anyway, the police won't be long. Then, he won't be able to do anything against us anymore.'

I remained stunned. 'You have called the police?' I finally exclaimed. It took me but a few seconds to realize that Burnett's impatience may have compromised the assignment by revealing to the police I was investigating on the Cradle. I had broken into the hotel without the certainty of finding evidence, and I was likely to be charged if I didn't find anything. No doubt the keepers would then become suspicious and would probably destroy all the evidence. Therefore, we had to act quickly.

Piqued, more than really angry, I asked Burnett to remain as inconspicuous and silent as he could. He put his pincers on the floor and gave me the pocket torch he had brought with him. Then, he followed me into the monitoring room. The door was hard to open, as if it had been definitely sealed by wearing effect of time, or perhaps simply dampness. The room itself was smaller than what I had thought, and we rummaged in it rapidly. A thick smoke in the air. Cables hanging everywhere. Dust on every piece of furniture. But unfortunately there wasn't much more to see. The huge folder racks against the wall were hopelessly empty. Not so surprising actually. The authorities wouldn't have left there obvious evidence such as documents on the experiments carried out in the boarding house. Burnett was visibly disappointed, but he didn't take long to pull himself together.

He ran to the other sealed door and, once more, loudly broke the padlock with his pincers. Dimly lit by the pocket torch, Burnett's face appeared flushed. His eyes, bright with ardour and indignation, stared at the huge dark corridor in front of us and at the dozen open doors located on both sides. The classrooms. At least, that's what they were supposed to be. We slowly went into the corridor. Our steps echoed on the white tiles. After a few seconds, Burnett started and let out a murmur of satisfaction. He got closer to the switchgear cubicle screwed on the wall and opened it.

'I don't think there's still power in here,' I muttered pessimistically.

I was wrong. One by one, the neons on the ceiling switched on, and their wan and frozen light soon invaded the corridor and the classrooms. Fighting back our apprehension, we entered the first room on our right. And then, we remained motionless for a moment. Silent. Pretrified at the spectacle of this unbelievable discovery. For there was no black board, desks, nor platform in this supposed classroom. But a row of metallic chairs securely bolted to the floor, with leather straps on their arm-rest, and all turned towards a large white screen on the opposite wall. Fixed on the ceiling, a projector was still diffusing a thin beam of light towards it.

'So, this is true.' I gravely said. 'This is not a classroom. This is a screening room.' I passed my fingers on the rough straps and sighed. Burnett hadn't pronounced a single word since we had entered. He was staring with wide open eyes at the medicine cabinet in the corner. Staring with amazement and horror at the collection of anticonvulsants and Valium bottles. I came closer to Burnett and placed my hand on his shoulder.

'Here is the evidence we needed, isn't it?' He stammered sadly.

'Well,' I replied, 'this is a good beginning. Enough to alert the local police and the media.' Burnett's eyes were moist with tears. 'Don't worry,' I benovolently said, 'everybody will soon be informed about the atrocities committed here.'

It was at that moment, when we were both absorbed in a form of reverence, that a strident but so familiar voice rang out from the entrance of the room and made us jump.

'I don't think so!'

More hideous and frightening than ever, the old landlady was standing in the doorway, with bulging eyes, and a hunting gun in her hand. Looking at me with a certain sense of satisfaction, she passed her tongue on her lips and exulted: 'Congratulations, Mister Stevens! You are actually very talented... Oh, but I'm sorry: I should have said *Detective* Stevens, right?'

I remained stunned. 'How do you know?' I asked.

'I know a lot of things. For instance, this time, you overestimated yourself, thinking you'd be able to discover and reveal the secret my husband and I have been keeping for almost ten years.'

'So, you do know what happened here. And you know how the two children died.' I replied.

'It's not what you think.' She curtly replied. 'These were just accidents.'

'Accidents!' Burnett shouted. Rage was making him fluent. The insults and accusations came in a rush. He began to move to the doorway, shaking his fist, but the woman pointed her gun at him.

'Back up!' she threatened, 'I won't hesitate to shoot.' Furious but frightened, Burnett stopped.

I tried to calm things down. 'What do you mean by accidents?' I asked the landlady.

'Their therapy was abruptly interrupted. Due to an external interference for the girl, and to an unpredictable epileptic reaction to visual stimulation for the boy. And the therapy *mustn't* be stopped before it's complete,' she specified.

I chuckled. 'Therapy? You probably mean mental conditioning and subservience of innocent young children?'

The old woman sighed. 'Mister Stevens, you don't know how far you are from the truth! Do you really know who we are, my husband and I, and all the people who used to work at the Cradle? We are educationalists. Not torturers. We've been hired and supervised by a special division of the intelligence services in order to develop and experiment a revolutionary learning method for children. A method aimed to facilitate intellectual education, but also to inculcate all the elementary precepts that would influence their social behavior and psychology. The will to achieve the best position possible in the social scale. Self satisfaction about their actual social position and way of life. The respect for human life and civil rights. The entire obedience to the law and to the injunctions the authorities could emit to ensure social peace or the stability of the country in case of a major crisis. In one word, a moral education.'

'And the chosen method was hypnosis.' I inferred.

'Exactly,' the landlady replied, 'hypnosis and sleep-teaching provided very satisfactory results. Orphans and abandoned children who had been for the most part deeply affected by the lack of affective links or the loss of their parents have succeeded in entering the most competitive schools in the country. Moreover, some of them are nowadays at the head of the top companies in England and even Europe. The method really bore fruit, you see?'

‘Oh yes, I see.’ I answered. ‘I clearly see that you managed to mould the minds of poor children to create a kind of elite. And I see that it is henceforth really easy for the authorities to control the big companies you mentioned. What a shame you've been forced to close the boarding house...’

‘Theoretically, no child should have died! These accidents drew the attention of the media to us, and we had no other choice but to evacuate the place. We had nothing to fear from the former boarders because we had taught them to forget the name and the location of the Cradle, and to forget everything about the therapy. But all the equipment couldn't be taken away inconspicuously. That's why my husband and I had to remain in office here.’

As the landlady was speaking, a slight hum coming from outside suddenly resounded in the whole corridor. I saw Burnett's eyes lighting up as he probably guessed the origin of the sound.

‘Now, it's over for you!’ He furiously shouted. ‘The police will soon discover the equipment and what you did on the children!’

The woman laughed loudly and waved the gun at us. ‘I don't think so! Because, unfortunately, you won't be able to tell the police anything.’

All at once, the sound of police cars invading the yard with their sirens wailing made the landlady start. As she was turning her head towards the sealed windows, Burnett suddenly rushed at her with a redoubled fury and clutched the cannon of the gun. Violently struggling with the woman, the hands clung to the weapon, he screamed at me:

‘Run! Run and bring the cops here! Quick!’

I ran to the exit of the room and hurried along the corridor as fast as I could. I was about to reach the T-shaped intersection, when a loud bang rang out behind me and made me stop. There was no struggle sound coming from the classroom anymore. For a few seconds, anxiety, mixed with a certain curiosity, urged me to make some steps back, but the danger of the situation quickly made myself see reason. Without a second thought, I raced through the refectory and in no time reached the entrance hall, out of breath. To my great surprise, the main door was wide open. The husband had disappeared.

I rushed outside and stopped on the doorstep, completely dazzled by the headlamps of the police cars. I waved my arms and shouted: ‘Help! Help!’ but the din of the sirens drowned out my words. Hesitatingly, I came closer to the vehicles in front of me and gradually began to distinguish some silhouettes standing out against the bright light on either side of the narrow track. But I had no time to talk to them. A deep voice, coming from the left, suddenly drew me in its direction:

‘Mister Stevens! This way, please!’ Leaning against a black car parked near the police vehicles, a rather tall man, wearing a dark suit, was beckoning to me. I couldn't make out his face in the obscurity.

‘There's a man inside the house who's in trouble!’ I cried. ‘You must go there and help him immediately!’

‘Don't worry,’ the man replied, ‘we'll mind it. Please, get in the car. You'll be secure.’

I did as I was told. A couple of men in civilian clothes, already in the vehicle, silently stared at me as I sat down on the back seat. Progressively recovering my senses, I looked through the car window at the dark-suited man, visibly absorbed in a vehement discussion with two police officers, and with another man I couldn't recognize. At that moment, a deep murmur spread among the policemen and all the attention focused on the Cradle main entrance. I remained petrified by the abominable vision standing in front of my eyes: foaming with anger, defying the crowd with her gun, the landlady had appeared in the doorway. Her dress was stained with blood.

‘Burnett... Oh God, no!’ I whispered, astounded.

Why weren't the policemen doing anything against her? The two officers, followed by the man I hadn't recognized and who turned out to be her husband, had gone to her and were calmly talking to her. I didn't understand anything. The dark-suited man came back to the car and I poured out my questioning on him.

‘What's the hell going on here?’ I shouted indignantly. ‘She has shot a man! She should be arrested!’

The man looked at me in the rear-view mirror with vivacious and malicious blue eyes. 'Mister Stevens,' he replied, 'please, take it easy. Everything will be alright if you stay quiet.'

'I'm perfectly quiet! And anyway, who the fuck are you?'

He smiled scornfully. 'Can't you guess?'

Outside, the policemen were gradually leaving the crime scene, and I saw the old couple going back into the Cradle as free as birds.

'Let me out! I must talk to the police.' I said. But the car door was locked and I finally understood I had fallen into a trap. 'Let me out!'

'I'm really sorry, Mister Stevens,' the operative replied, 'but due to all the classified information you have discovered, we can't let you go and tell the media everything. As a consequence, I'm afraid you'll have to stay with us for a long, long time...'

I tried to struggle, to break the window with all my strength, in vain. The car moved off at full speed and disappeared into the woods. *And you must already know the sequel of my story, Mister Matthews.* I've been committed in this hospital for about eight years, and the intelligence services henceforth take a malicious pleasure in passing me off someone insane. In fact, they've almost succeeded in making me become really insane. But I know what I have seen and heard. I know I'm the victim of a conspiracy aimed to keep secret the atrocities committed in the Cradle. And thanks to your article, everybody will soon know about this.'

As if he was overcome by emotion, Stevens burst into tears. He was forgetting the unpleasant reality of the situation and all his thoughts were focused on the prospect of the imminent revelation he had been expecting for years.

'You will write the article, won't you?' He insisted obstinately.

Matthews stood up, came closer to him and benevolently placed his hand on his shoulder. He tried to reassure his host. 'I know the truth now,' he said. 'Of course, I will write the article, and I'm going to do it right now.' Stevens's anxiety and apprehension progressively vanished, and he was once more giving way to tears when there was a loud knock at the living-room door, breaking a long silence. The nurse appeared in the doorway.

'I'm sorry to disturb you again, Mister Matthews... but the man at the reception really wants to talk to you urgently,' she said.

Matthews was forced to cut short the interview. He kindly said goodbye to Stevens and encouraged him to remain hopeful and to patiently wait for the release of the article. Then, he headed for the hospital reception where an austere-looking man in a dark suit was waiting for him.

'Mister Matthews, I suppose...'

'Himself.' They vigorously shook hands.

'Agent Smith, MI5, we talked on the telephone. I'm sorry I had to make you shorten your interview but I've a appointment at five and I couldn't wait much longer.'

'It doesn't matter. We had just finished the most interesting part of the account.'

'So much the better!' Smith replied ironically. 'So, get down the brass tacks. I wanted to ensure you again the Agency's entire transparency about this imaginary case. We have nothing to hide from the media and nothing to blame ourselves for, especially about an old boarding house likely to have covered up reprehensible activities. Detective Stevens's wild imagining has already caused too much harm to the image of the intelligence services and I hope this interview has helped you realize the absurdity and irrationality of his accusations against us. We've been trying for years to understand why such a brilliant detective has abandoned reason for madness, and how he has come to the idea of a conspiracy against him.'

Matthews was silently listening to his interlocutor's formatted speech. He had guessed the obvious intention of the MI5 operative was to impede the release of a compromising article, even if this article was based on an imaginary story, but he was surprised Smith had chosen persuasion rather than intimidation.

'You're free to do what you want, Mister Matthews,' the operative added, 'but just think about that: a competent journalist doesn't base himself on a fictional story to write an article that would be likely to threaten the confidence the nation must have in the authorities.'

'Mister Smith,' Matthews replied, slightly annoyed, 'I know my job perfectly and I don't need lessons from anyone. I will make my decision about the writing of the article in due course, when I have enough elements or the certainty the story's totally fake.'

'Suit yourself. Anyway, do not hesitate to call me if you want to get further reliable information.' So saying, Smith took his leave and rapidly got out of the hospital.

Matthews spent the rest of the afternoon in his office at the Daily Telegraph headquarters, brooding over Smith's warning and recollecting every passage of Stevens's story so as to tell fact from fiction. Despite his firm will to believe the old detective, doubts remained about his mental health, and as a journalist he couldn't publish an article about the case without any evidence. The only solution to the dilemma was to investigate and find evidence that what Stevens had said was true. And the first step consisted in visiting the Cradle in his turn.

It was almost nightfall when Matthews took his car and drove South from London to Salisbury region, and almost midnight when he finally arrived in the vicinity of Blastbury, and penetrated the deep woods. There, at a bend in the road, half lost in the fir trees and bushes, the journalist at last saw the imposing old building that haunted Stevens's thoughts. Surprisingly, the place seemed vaguely familiar to him.

'Every boarding house must look like all the others.' He thought.

He slowly came closer to the front wall. *The Cradle*. The wrought iron sign and its grating chain were still above the doorstep, but Matthews remained completely stunned, for all the rest had disappeared. The massive door, the windows. All the furniture inside. Even the wallpaper. The building was completely empty.

'How can it be?' Matthews wondered.

At that precise moment, when Matthews was absorbed in his reflections in the middle of what used to be the refectory, heavy footsteps resounded on the beige tiles.

'I knew you'd come here!' The loud voice made Matthews start.

'Agent Smith?' The journalist asked incredulously.

'I've tried to dissuade you from investigating on this case, but unfortunately you haven't listened to me. Too bad for you.' The operative sadistically smiled.

'Why are you saying that? What are you going to do?'

'Do you remember this place, Mister Matthews? You should remember. You've been here before. You've been here as a child, and you don't remember it.'

'That's not possible!' Matthews shouted, completely confused.

'Yes it is. You were one of those children. You succeeded in entering a prestigious school and your professional advancement in the Daily Telegraph has been very fast. Fortunately you've been conditioned to forget everything about the Cradle. But now, I'm afraid we are forced to make you forget everything once more...' Smith's blue eyes lighted up as he delivered this ruthless sentence.

Matthews's heart missed a beat and, faced with the imminent danger, he ran to the outside as fast as he could. But Smith suddenly pronounced words, senseless words, repetitive words that resounded in Matthews's head and paralysed him. Resounded again and again. Louder and louder. He stood for a few seconds wobbling unsteadily in the middle of the entrance hall, and tumbled down in a heap. And he remained there, motionless, stretched out on the cold floor, his mind drained of its substance.