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CLASSICS

Mervyn Peake  
Complete Works



Series Sixteen

*The Complete Works of*  
**MERVYN PEAKE**

(1911-1968)



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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mervyn Peake". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'M' and 'P'.

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Version 1

*The Complete Works of*

**MERVYN PEAKE**

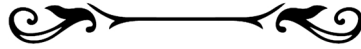
*With introductory material by Gill Rossini, MA*



*By Delphi Classics, 2026*

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*Complete Works of Mervyn Peake*



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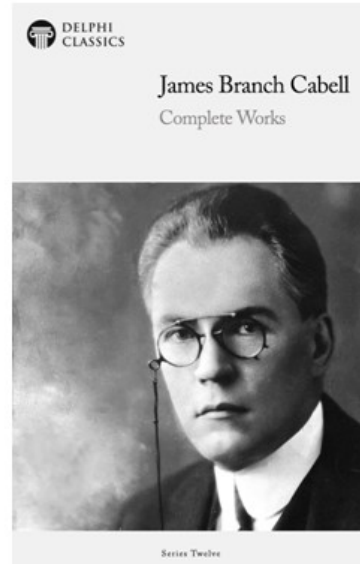
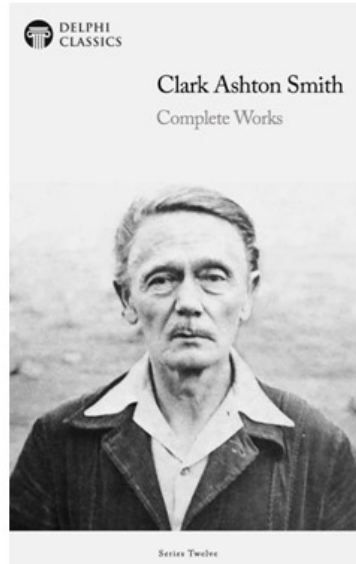
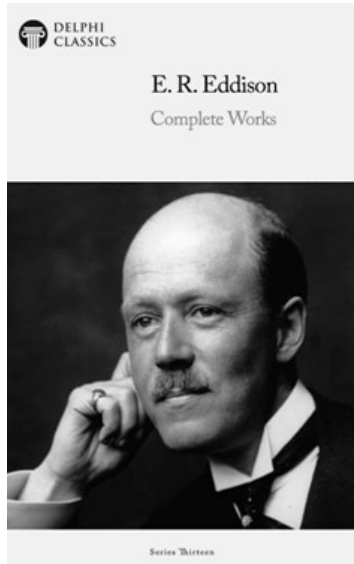
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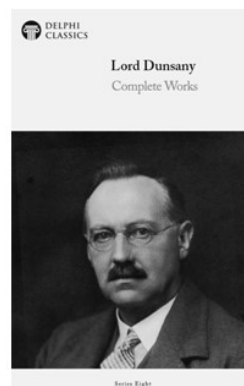
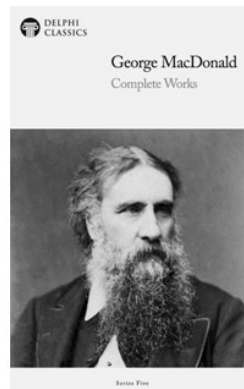
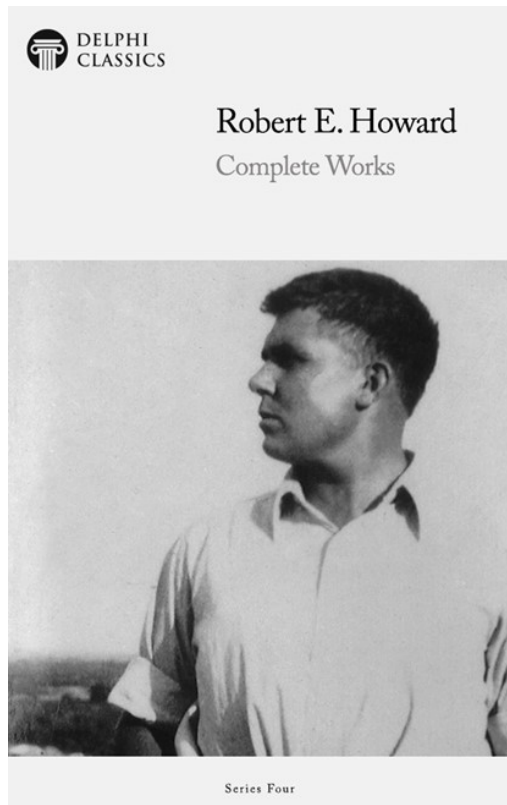
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# FANTASY AT DELPHI



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## The Gormenghast Series



*Guling, Mount Lu in Jiujiang, Jiangxi, east China — Mervyn Peake's birthplace*



*Peake as a young man*

## Titus Groan (1946)



This novel and its companion works, which, if they can be categorised at all, are sometimes classified as fantasy, horror and Gothic genres. *Titus Groan* is the first book in the *Gormenghast* series, which takes the story of the protagonist, Titus, from infancy until eighteen in the final novel. The other books in the series are *Gormenghast* (1950) and *Titus Alone* (1959) and the novella *Boy in Darkness* (1956). Had Peake not been so ill and died so young, it is likely the series would have continued, as notes by him with ideas for more volumes have been found.

It is known from Peake's surviving correspondence that he was already writing the novel in 1940, the same year he was called up for military war service with the Royal Artillery and subsequently the Royal Engineers. His application to spend his war service as an official war artist had been turned down by the Ministry of Information, despite his success in the 1930's as a professional portrait artist of some repute.

As his service was largely away from the front line he was able to continue with his almost compulsive habit of sketching and drawing (as a talented artist he was rarely far away from his sketchbook and pencils) and crucially, his notebooks in which he was crafting this novel. It would seem that he wrote the first 30,000 words in only two months (as detailed by G. Peter Winnington in his biography of Peake). There seems to be some difference of opinion as to whether Peake was writing the novel simply as a personal project, or whether he always intended to seek publication. His wife, Maeve, claimed it was not intended for a public audience. However, it was published by Eyre and Spottiswoode on 22 March 1946 (retail price fifteen shillings), who in their advance publicity for the launch stated the book had taken seven years to write, had 200,000 words and was the product of a 'fantastic, macabre, yet amusing imagination' (*Bookseller*, 28 February 1946). The publisher also said that much of the book had been written during Peake's army service, 'on gunsites and in camps and billets,' — an odd thing to boast about as it made he appear as if he was shirking his duties!

In some of the 'serious' literary and broadsheet press, reviews were complimentary. The provincial press, however, could always be relied upon for forthright and unvarnished book reviews and the *Western Mail* lived up to that reputation. After pointing out that Peake, a successful illustrator, was seeking success now as a novelist, the reviewer continues:

'Readers who are sufficiently well balanced temperamentally will be able to resist the melancholy influence and will probably say that he has been able to achieve [success]. It is a long, weird satirical story...most of the characters are as abnormal in some way or other as their names are uncommon and the general picture of the life they lead and their surroundings is as cheerless as a mortuary. The portraiture is splendid and the narrative power and imagery are... indisputable. (March 26th 1946)

The reviewer of the *Western Morning News* noted wearily that reading *Titus Groan*

'has taken me longer...than any other book for many years. This might reflect upon obscurities in the writing or my own obtuseness. In fact, the story is so fantastic, the canvas so heavily painted and the language so searchingly complicated that lengthy attention to every detail becomes essential... It may fail to appeal to a majority, but its supporters will more than compensate such "short-sightedness" by their enthusiasm'. (May 9th 1946)

Thus, this reviewer successfully predicted the loyal and passionate fan base that the books have built up over the decades, especially since their revival in the more culturally open and questioning decade of the 1960's (there is a useful and erudite introduction by novelist Anthony Burgess to *Titus Groan* in Eyre and Spottiswoode's 1968 edition of the novel).

It is likely that Peake based the personality of Titus Groan as an infant on his own infant son Sebastian, as both babies were fractious and tearful. Several commentators have seen parallels in Titus' life with the Boy Emperor in China, who abdicated at the age of six in 1912, was effectively a 'house prisoner' in the royal palace until the age of eighteen and then at the age of 24 was able to go and live as a private citizen. Peake had, of course, been born in China in 1911 and spent the early part of life there as his father was a medical missionary; this coincided with the civil war in China and that immersion in such an atmosphere (plus two world wars and his witnessing of the liberation of the concentration camp at Belsen) potentially led to Peake's adult preoccupation with the darker side of human nature.

There have been many adaptations of the novel. In 1984, BBC Radio 4 broadcast two 90-minute plays based on *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, adapted by Brian Sibley and starring Sting as Steerpike and Freddie Jones as the Artist (narrator). In 2011, Brian Sibley adapted the story again, this time as six one-hour episodes broadcast on BBC Radio 4 as the Classic Serial. Entitled *The History of Titus Groan*, it adapted the *Gormenghast* novels and the concluding volume, *Titus Awakes*, written by his widow Maeve Gilmore. It starred Luke Treadaway as Titus and Carl Prekopp as Steerpike.

In 2000, the BBC and the PBS station WGBH of Boston produced a miniseries for television, entitled *Gormenghast*, based on the first two books of the trilogy. There have also been stage adaptations of *Titus Groan*, including one by the theatre company Blackshaw, which debuted at the Actors' Church in London in April 2012.

The vast castle of Gormenghast is very much a 'character' in its own right, with the characters strongly influenced by it — indeed, almost feeling themselves to be a part of it. G Peter Winnington, Peake's recent biographer, even suggests that Peake imagined the castle first and then the characters followed:

'...a plot summary of the Titus Groan books misses the whole point, for it is obliged to omit the purely descriptive passages and neglects the interpenetration of person and place.'

Nevertheless, a plot summary of the first part of *Titus Groan* will be attempted here with the proviso that the reader has a treat in the form of the descriptive words of Peake to come! However, it will focus initially on characters rather than attempt a laborious trawl through a list of plot points.

The book is set in the huge labyrinthine, decaying castle of Gormenghast, the family seat of the Groan family. Although many people live and work in the complex, there are still vast spaces within the 'miles of rambling stone and mortar' that lie unused, quietly deteriorating with great swathes of paper peeling from the walls, revealing the cracks in the wall behind.

The Groan dynasty and a host of servants reside there, overseen by a Master of Ritual, Sourdust, who ensures the ancient traditions of the castle and the aristocratic family are adhered to. One such tradition, so old that no-one knows why or how it started, is the annual wood carving competition. The outer folk (literally living beyond the castle walls) spend all year creating their wood carvings, but only three would be chosen by the Earl of Groan to go on display in the castle's Hall of Bright Carvings, whilst the rest will be ignominiously burnt; it is a bitter and rabid rivalry

between the outer folk. They live in 'clay dwellings' constructed against the castle walls; the huts 'swarmed like an epidemic' around it and are allowed to do so according to ancient law.

Rottcodd, the curator of the Hall of Bright Carvings, lives a solitary and spartan life, with only his gallery of wood art for company, sleeping in a hammock and with little in the way of everyday comfort. He keeps his exhibits scrupulously clean and dust free, but has little personal interest in most of them. He is so alone, that when Flay, Lord Groan's footman, brings him the news of the birth of Titus — 'the New One' — he has no-one to tell and is therefore a useless medium for gossip.

The 76<sup>th</sup> Earl of Groan, the Lord Sepulchrave and therefore the lord of the castle, is a bookish, melancholy, 'tragic looking' man who is quietly resentful of his position as head of the Groan dynasty. Every day the Lord of the Library tells the Earl which tasks he must perform that day — '...the exact times; the garments to be worn for each occasion and the symbolic gestures to be used' — these are meticulously recorded in a series of books. Sourdust is the only person who understands the complexities of the many rituals, but the Earl also has the help of his 'bony, straggly' footman, Flay, who is also a stickler for protocol.

The Earl's wife, the Countess Gertrude, has her own interests, largely the numerous birds she keeps in her apartments and her adored white cats she lavishes her affection on; when she is not in her own rooms she takes regular and very specific walks within the castle compound. Large and imposing, with dark red hair, she pays no attention to her family or to the rest of Gormenghast and does not even have any interest in her new baby; her precious pet magpie and white rook mean more to her. Her few gestures to the baby are to command that he wear her gold ring round his neck, that a wet nurse should be found for him and that he should wear green dresses made from the velvet curtains.

Gertrude and the Earl have two children. Fuchsia, who at the start of the novel is fifteen and an impulsive and emotional girl, has 'long, rather wild black hair...her sullen mouth was full and rich...her eyes smouldered.' We are told she could be beautiful with just a small twist of her looks. She has little dress sense and is gauche in her movements. Her quarters are in the west wing of the castle, her bedchamber an untidy mess of old toys and clothes, the sense of clutter made more pronounced by her habit of drawing on the chamber's walls in charcoal, 'impetuous' works...filled with an extraordinary energy'. A door in her bedchamber leads to a series of attic rooms that only she has access to and which she regards as her own domain:

'It was here that she would see the people of her imagination...her attic of make-believe, where she would watch her mind's companions advancing or retreating across the dusty floor.'

Fuchsia's brother, Titus, is a newborn baby and as the only male heir, will inherit the Lordship and the estate when his father is deceased, a fact that Fuchsia bitterly resents; the very fact of his gender means she cannot bring herself to acknowledge him. Everywhere else in the castle and beyond, the heir's birth causes an almighty stir, disrupting routines as the news permeates the castle hierarchy and drunken celebrations begin. However, this baby, although in every way physically sound, has one unusual feature — he has violet eyes, which the Groan family's physician, Prunesquallor, describes as 'unnatural'; the physician also feels that the child's head is a rather unusual shape.

Titus is entrusted to the care of Nannie Slagg, the somewhat decrepit and now forgetful family nanny who has taken care of many Groan children; as instructed by her mistress, Lady Groan, she chooses a woman from the Outer Dwellers, Keda, to be

wetnurse for Titus. Keda is the wife of one of the most respected of the Bright Carvers and therefore highly suitable as the little heir apparent's nurse and furthermore, is ready to pour all her love into her role, having just lost her own baby. In the joint care of Keda and Nannie Slagg, Titus thrives and despite his thin desperate cries when he is upset, he is generally an easy infant to be fond of and much loved.

Living in the south wing are Sepulchrave's identical twin sisters Cora and Clarice Groan, notable for always being dressed in purple and for certain disabilities, both physical and cognitive. Despite this, they long for power and influence and hate their sister-in-law Gertrude, whom they believe robbed them of the chance of wielding power in the Groan dynasty — 'We ought to have what she has', says Clarice and Cora reinforces: 'Then we could make people do things'.

In such a huge castle it is no surprise that the servants — particularly those in the 'ghastly heat' of the vast Great Kitchen — are detached from any understanding of, or affection for, the Lord and his family; the kitchens are essentially a universe of their own, ruled over by the chef, Abiatha Swelter, a 'drunken, arrogant and pedantic' man. The kitchen is kept clean by a team of 'Grey Scrubbers' — their task is to scrub the stone walls and floors of the kitchen to keep it spotlessly clean. Theirs is no chosen vocation; it is a role passed down from father to son. Of the other kitchen servants, no kitchen hand hates Swelter more than the seventeen-year-old Steerpike (no-one except perhaps Flay, Swelter's sworn enemy). Steerpike is a resentful, ambitious youth with a murky past:

'Limb by limb, it appeared that he was sound enough, but the sum of these several members accrued to an unexpectedly twisted total. His face was pale like clay and save for his eyes, mask-like. These eyes were set very close together and were small, dark red and of startling concentration'.

He manages to escape from the kitchen during the commotion caused by the birth of the new Groan heir and because Flay has left the door to the rest of the castle open — Swelter is now in a drunken stupor on the kitchen floor, Flay has gone, indeed so have all the revelling kitchen staff, yet Steerpike is completely sober; so when he sees an opportunity to escape from the drudgery of the kitchen he seizes it. Hoping he will soon be outside the castle to make his escape, instead he gets hopelessly lost in a labyrinth of corridors known as the Stone Lanes and falls under the influence of Flay, who is furious that Steerpike has, firstly, left the confines of the kitchen and, secondly, is spying on the Groan family. He locks Steerpike in a small room, but the kitchen lad is determined to escape, even though it is high up in the castle with a 'precipitous drop' to the ground. Gathering all of his courage and trying not to think of the 'sickening' height of the room, he climbs out of the window and uses the masonry and ancient creepers to make his escape.

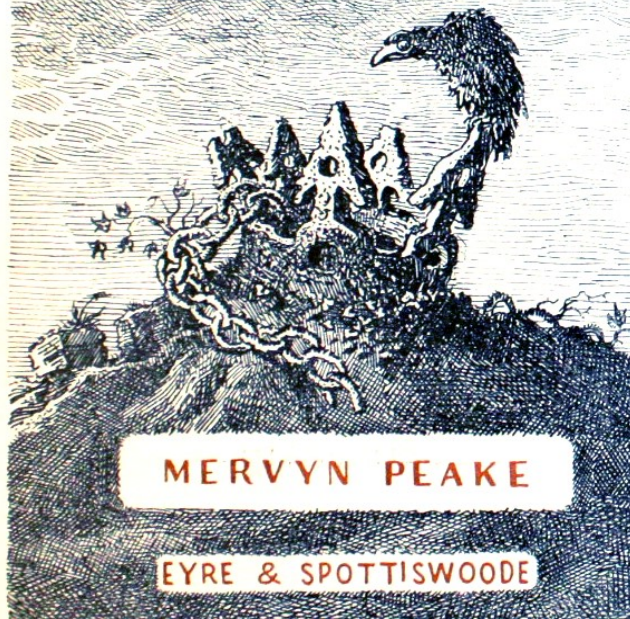
After a gruelling climb lasting a day and night that make his limbs shake with the effort, he finally climbs on to a huge flat area of roof, covered with stone flags, an 'enormous quadrangle'. After a rest, he tentatively begins to explore and when all he sees is the vast roofscape of the castle and no way of escaping, he loses heart. Eventually, he sees a small window — if he climbs through that into the castle, can he try again to make his escape? He struggles to squeeze himself inside, '...and a whirl of blackness fell with a crash upon the boarded floor of Fuchsia's secret attic'. It takes him some time to orientate himself and explore the attic (helping himself to Fuchsia's wine at the same time) and then the inevitable happens — she appears and finds an

interloper in her private domain. This is Steerpike's first face-to-face encounter with a member of the Groan family. What will come from it?

This is a difficult book to summarise in a short paragraph. Peopled with vivid, if not always likeable characters, peppered with lovely descriptive writing so detailed it is almost a homage to Charles Dickens and with a plot that is just about wide enough in scope to carry the huge word count, *Titus Groan* can in turn unsettle, amuse, fascinate and, in some strange way, repel. The world it is set in is weird and not entirely welcoming, with the decaying castle dominating everything. The illustrations are heavy-handed, dark and sketchy, as if one is looking at them within the shadows and gloom of the castle itself. Yet, the whole novel is also compelling and by far the best of the Gormenghast series. It could only have come from the imagination of Peake himself and to date, has never been adequately imitated.

TITUS

GROAN



MERVYN PEAKE

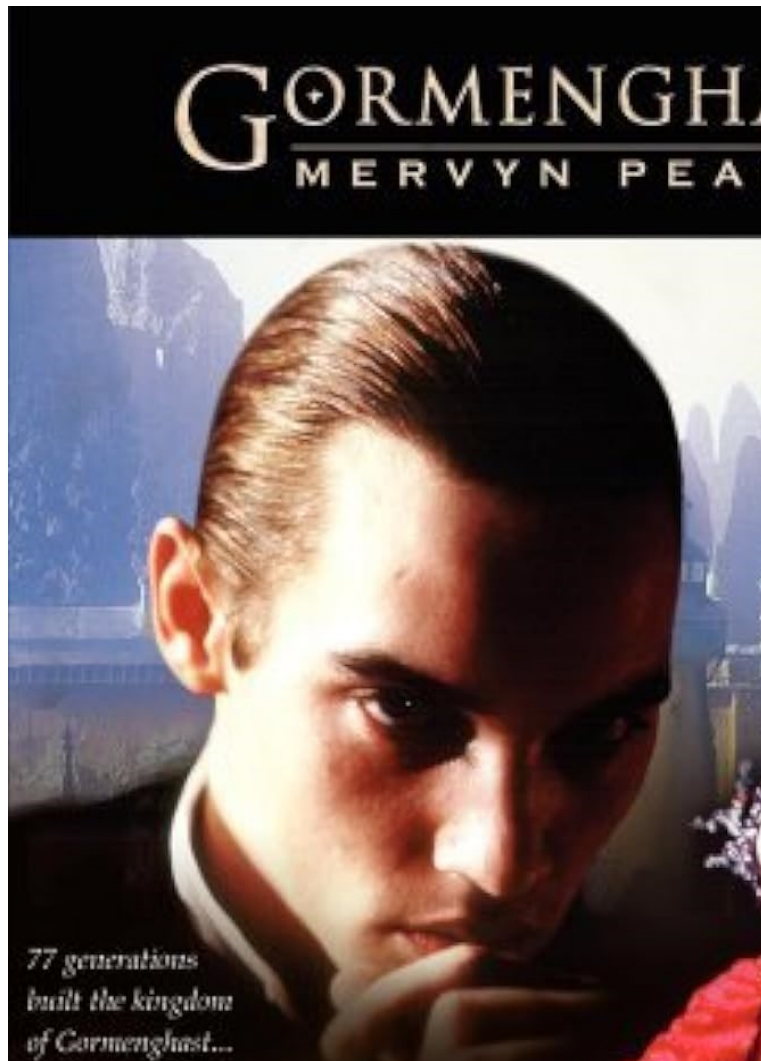
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

*The first edition*

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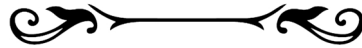
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*The 2000 television adaptation*

## THE HALL OF THE BRIGHT CARVINGS



GORMENGHAST, THAT IS, the main massing of the original stone, taken by itself would have displayed a certain ponderous architectural quality were it possible to have ignored the circumfusion of those mean dwellings that swarmed like an epidemic around its outer walls. They sprawled over the sloping earth, each one half way over its neighbour until, held back by the castle ramparts, the innermost of these hovels laid hold on the great walls, clamping themselves thereto like limpets to a rock. These dwellings, by ancient law, were granted this chill intimacy with the stronghold that loomed above them. Over their irregular roofs would fall throughout the seasons, the shadows of time-eaten buttresses, of broken and lofty turrets, and, most enormous of all, the shadow of the Tower of Flints. This tower, patched unevenly with black ivy, arose like a mutilated finger from among the fists of knuckled masonry and pointed blasphemously at heaven. At night the owls made of it an echoing throat; by day it stood voiceless and cast its long shadow.

Very little communication passed between the denizens of these outer quarters and those who lived *within* the walls, save when, on the first June morning of each year, the entire population of the clay dwellings had sanction to enter the Grounds in order to display the wooden carvings on which they had been working during the year. These carvings, blazoned in strange colour, were generally of animals or figures and were treated in a highly stylized manner peculiar to themselves. The competition among them to display the finest object of the year was bitter and rabid. Their sole passion was directed, once their days of love had guttered, on the production of this wooden sculpture, and among the muddle of huts at the foot of the outer wall, existed a score of creative craftsmen whose position as leading carvers gave them pride of place among the shadows.

At one point *within* the Outer Wall, a few feet from the earth, the great stones of which the wall itself was constructed, jutted forward in the form of a massive shelf stretching from east to west for about two hundred to three hundred feet. These protruding stones were painted white, and it was upon this shelf that on the first morning of June the carvings were ranged every year for judgement by the Earl of Groan. Those works judged to be the most consummate, and there were never more than three chosen, were subsequently relegated to the Hall of the Bright Carvings.

Standing immobile throughout the day, these vivid objects, with their fantastic shadows on the wall behind them shifting and elongating hour by hour with the sun's rotation, exuded a kind of darkness for all their colour. The air between them was turgid with contempt and jealousy. The craftsmen stood about like beggars, their families clustered in silent groups. They were uncouth and prematurely aged. All radiance gone.

The carvings that were left unselected were burned the same evening in the courtyard below Lord Groan's western balcony, and it was customary for him to stand there at the time of the burning and to bow his head silently as if in pain, and then as a gong beat thrice from within, the three carvings to escape the flames would be brought forth in the moonlight. They were stood upon the balustrade of the balcony in full view of the crowd below, and the Earl of Groan would call for their authors to come forward. When they had stationed themselves immediately beneath where he was standing, the Earl would throw down to them the traditional scrolls of vellum,

which, as the writings upon them verified, permitted these men to walk the battlements above their cantonment at the full moon of each alternate month. On these particular nights, from a window in the southern wall of Gormenghast, an observer might watch the minute moonlit figures whose skill had won for them this honour which they so coveted, moving to and fro along the battlements.

Saving this exception of the day of carvings, and the latitude permitted to the most peerless, there was no other opportunity for those who lived within the walls to know of these 'outer' folk, nor in fact were they of interest to the 'inner' world, being submerged within the shadows of the great walls.

They were all-but forgotten people: the breed that was remembered with a start, or with the unreality of a recrudescing dream. The day of carvings alone brought them into the sunlight and reawakened the memory of former times. For as far back as even Nettel, the octogenarian who lived in the tower above the rusting armoury, could remember, the ceremony had been held. Innumerable carvings had smouldered to ashes in obedience to the law, but the choicest were still housed in the Hall of the Bright Carvings.

This hall which ran along the top storey of the north wing was presided over by the curator, Rottcodd, who, as no one ever visited the room, slept during most of his life in the hammock he had erected at the far end. For all his dozing, he had never been known to relinquish the feather duster from his grasp; the duster with which he would perform one of the only two regular tasks which appeared to be necessary in that long and silent hall, namely to flick the dust from the Bright Carvings.

As objects of beauty, these works held little interest to him and yet in spite of himself he had become attached in a propinquital way to a few of the carvings. He would be more than thorough when dusting the Emerald Horse. The black-and-olive Head which faced it across the boards and the Piebald Shark were also his especial care. Not that there were any on which the dust was allowed to settle.

Entering at seven o'clock, winter and summer, year in and year out, Rottcodd would disengage himself of his jacket and draw over his head a long grey overall which descended shapelessly to his ankles. With his feather duster tucked beneath his arm, it was his habit to peer sagaciously over his glasses down the length of the hall. His skull was dark and small like a corroded musket bullet and his eyes behind the gleaming of his glasses were the twin miniatures of his head. All three were constantly on the move, as though to make up for the time they spent asleep, the head wobbling in a mechanical way from side to side when Mr Rottcodd walked, and the eyes, as though taking their cue from the parent sphere to which they were attached, peering here, there, and everywhere at nothing in particular. Having peered quickly over his glasses on entering and having repeated the performance along the length of the north wing after enveloping himself in his overall, it was the custom of Rottcodd to relieve his left armpit of the feather duster, and with that weapon raised, to advance towards the first of the carvings on his right hand side, without more ado. Being on the top floor of the north wing, this hall was not in any real sense a hall at all, but was more in the nature of a loft. The only window was at its far end, and opposite the door through which Rottcodd would enter from the upper body of the building. It gave little light. The shutters were invariably lowered. The Hall of the Bright Carvings was illumined night and day by seven great candelabra suspended from the ceiling at intervals of nine feet. The candles were never allowed to fail or even to gutter, Rottcodd himself seeing to their replenishment before retiring at nine o'clock in the evening. There was a stock of white candles in the small dark ante-room beyond the door of the hall, where also were kept ready for use Rottcodd's overall, a huge

visitors' book, white with dust, and a step-ladder. There were no chairs or tables, nor indeed any furniture save the hammock at the window end where Mr Rottcodd slept. The boarded floor was white with dust which, so assiduously kept from the carvings, had no alternative resting place and had collected deep and ash-like, accumulating especially in the four corners of the hall.



Having flicked at the first carving on his right, Rottcodd would move mechanically down the long phalanx of colour standing a moment before each carving, his eyes running up and down it and all over it, and his head wobbling knowingly on his neck before he introduced his feather duster. Rottcodd was unmarried. An aloofness and even a nervousness was apparent on first acquaintance and the ladies held a peculiar horror for him. His, then, was an ideal existence, living alone day and night in a long loft. Yet occasionally, for one reason or another, a servant or a member of the household would make an unexpected appearance and startle him with some question appertaining to ritual, and then the dust would settle once more in the hall and on the soul of Mr Rottcodd.

What were his reveries as he lay in his hammock with his dark bullet head tucked in the crook of his arm? What would he be dreaming of, hour after hour, year after year? It is not easy to feel that any great thoughts haunted his mind nor — in spite of the sculpture whose bright files surged over the dust in narrowing perspective like the highway for an emperor — that Rottcodd made any attempt to avail himself of his isolation, but rather that he was enjoying the solitude for its Own Sake, with, at the back of his mind, the dread of an intruder.

One humid afternoon a visitor *did* arrive to disturb Rottcodd as he lay deeply hammocked, for his siesta was broken sharply by a rattling of the door handle which was apparently performed in lieu of the more popular practice of knocking at the

panels. The sound echoed down the long room and then settled into the fine dust on the boarded door. The sunlight squeezed itself between the thin cracks of the window blind. Even on a hot, stifling, unhealthy afternoon such as this, the blinds were down and the candlelight filled the room with an incongruous radiance. At the sound of the door handle being rattled Rottcodd sat up suddenly. The thin bands of moted light edging their way through the shutters barred his dark head with the brilliance of the outer world. As he lowered himself over the hammock, it wobbled on his shoulders, and his eyes darted up and down the door returning again and again after their rapid and precipitous journeys to the agitations of the door handle. Gripping his feather duster in his right hand, Rottcodd began to advance down the bright avenue, his feet giving rise at each step to little clouds of dust. When he had at last reached the door the handle had ceased to vibrate. Lowering himself suddenly to his knees he placed his right eye at the keyhole, and controlling the oscillation of his head and the vagaries of his left eye (which was for ever trying to dash up and down the vertical surface of the door), he was able by dint of concentration to observe, within three inches of his keyholed eye, an eye which was not his, being not only of a different colour to his own iron marble but being, which is more convincing, on the other side of the door. This third eye which was going through the same performance as the one belonging to Rottcodd, belonged to Flay, the taciturn servant of Sepulchrave, Earl of Gormenghast. For Flay to be four rooms horizontally or one floor vertically away from his lordship was a rare enough thing in the castle. For him to be absent at all from his master's side was abnormal, yet here apparently on this stifling summer afternoon was the eye of Mr Flay at the outer keyhole of the Hall of the Bright Carvings, and presumably the rest of Mr Flay was joined on behind it. On mutual recognition the eyes withdrew simultaneously and the brass doorknob rattled again in the grip of the visitor's hand. Rottcodd turned the key in the lock and the door opened slowly.

Mr Flay appeared to clutter up the doorway as he stood revealed, his arms folded, surveying the smaller man before him in an expressionless way. It did not look as though such a bony face as his could give normal utterance, but rather that instead of sounds, something more brittle, more ancient, something dryer would emerge, something perhaps more in the nature of a splinter or a fragment of stone. Nevertheless, the harsh lips parted. 'It's me,' he said, and took a step forward into the room, his knee joints cracking as he did so. His passage across a room — in fact his passage through life — was accompanied by these cracking sounds, one per step, which might be likened to the breaking of dry twigs.

Rottcodd, seeing that it was indeed he, motioned him to advance by an irritable gesture of the hand and closed the door behind him.

Conversation was never one of Mr Flay's accomplishments and for some time he gazed mirthlessly ahead of him, and then, after what seemed an eternity to Rottcodd he raised a bony hand and scratched himself behind the ear. Then he made his second remark. 'Still here, eh?' he said, his voice forcing its way out of his face.

Rottcodd, feeling presumably that there was little need to answer such a question, shrugged his shoulders and gave his eyes the run of the ceiling.

Mr Flay pulled himself together and continued: 'I said still here, eh, Rottcodd?' He stared bitterly at the carving of the Emerald Horse. 'You're still here, eh?'

'I'm invariably here,' said Rottcodd, lowering his gleaming glasses and running his eyes all over Mr Flay's visage. 'Day in, day out, invariably. Very hot weather. Extremely stifling. Did you want anything?'

‘Nothing,’ said Flay and he turned towards Rottcodd with something menacing in his attitude. ‘I want *nothing*.’ He wiped the palms of his hands on his hips where the dark cloth shone like silk.

Rottcodd flicked ash from his shoes with the feather duster and tilted his bullet head. ‘Ah,’ he said in a non-committal way.

‘You say “ah”,’ said Flay, turning his back on Rottcodd and beginning to walk down the coloured avenue, ‘but I tell you, it is more than “ah”.’

‘Of course,’ said Rottcodd. ‘Much more, I dare say. But I fail to understand. I am a Curator.’ At this he drew his body up to full height and stood on the tips of his toes in the dust.

‘A what?’ said Flay, straggling above him for he had returned. ‘A curator?’

‘That is so,’ said Rottcodd, shaking his head.

Flay made a hard noise in his throat. To Rottcodd it signified a complete lack of understanding and it annoyed him that the man should invade his province.

‘Curator,’ said Flay, after a ghastly silence, ‘I will tell you something. I know something. Eh?’

‘Well?’ said Rottcodd.

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Flay. ‘But first, what day is it? What month, and what year is it? Answer me.’

Rottcodd was puzzled at this question, but he was becoming a little intrigued. It was so obvious that the bony man had something on his mind, and he replied, ‘It is the eighth day of the eighth month, I am uncertain about the year. But why?’

In a voice almost inaudible Flay repeated ‘The eighth day of the eighth month’. His eyes were almost transparent as though in a country of ugly hills one were to find among the harsh rocks two sky-reflecting lakes. ‘Come here,’ he said, ‘come closer, Rottcodd, I will tell you. You don’t understand Gormenghast, what happens in Gormenghast — the things that happen — no, no. Below you, that’s where it all is, under this north wing. What are these things up here? These wooden things? No use now. Keep them, but no use now. Everything is moving. The castle is moving. Today, first time for years he’s alone, his Lordship. Not in my sight.’ Flay bit at his knuckle. ‘Bedchamber of Ladyship, that’s where he is. Lordship is beside himself: won’t have me, won’t let me in to see the New One. The New One. He’s come. He’s downstairs. I haven’t seen him.’ Flay bit at the corresponding knuckle on the other hand as though to balance the sensation. ‘No one’s been in. Of course not. I’ll be next. The birds are lined along the bed-rail. Ravens, starlings, all the perishers, and the white rook. There’s a kestrel; claws through the pillow. My lady feeds them with crusts. Grain and crusts. Hardly seen her new-born. Heir to Gormenghast. Doesn’t look at him. But my lord keeps staring. Seen him through the grating. Needs me. Won’t let me in. Are you listening?’

Mr Rottcodd certainly was listening. In the first place he had never heard Mr Flay talk so much in his life before, and in the second place the news that a son had been born at long last to the ancient and historic house of Groan was, after all, an interesting tit-bit for a curator living alone on the upper storey of the desolate north wing. Here was something with which he could occupy his mind for some time to come. It was true, as Mr Flay pointed out, that he, Rottcodd, could not possibly feel the pulse of the castle as he lay in his hammock, for in point of fact Rottcodd had not even suspected that an heir was on its way. His meals came up in a miniature lift through darkness from the servants’ quarters many floors below and he slept in the ante-room at night and consequently he was completely cut off from the world and all its happenings. Flay had brought him real news. All the same he disliked being

disturbed even when information of this magnitude was brought. What was passing through the bullet-shaped head was a question concerning Mr Flay's entry. Why had Flay, who never in the normal course of events would have raised an eyebrow to acknowledge his presence — why had he now gone to the trouble of climbing to a part of the castle so foreign to him? And to force a conversation on a personality as unexpansive as his own. He ran his eyes over Mr Flay in his own peculiarly rapid way and surprised himself by saying suddenly, 'To what may I attribute your presence, Mr Flay?'

'What?' said Flay, 'what's that?' He looked down on Rottcodd and his eyes became glassy.

In truth Mr Flay had surprised himself. Why, indeed, he thought to himself, had he troubled to tell Rottcodd the news which meant so much to him? Why Rottcodd, of all people? He continued staring at the curator for some while, and the more he stood and pondered the clearer it became to him that the question he had been asked was, to say the very least, uncomfortably pertinent.

The little man in front of him had asked a simple and forthright question. It had been rather a poser. He took a couple of shambling steps towards Mr Rottcodd and then, forcing his hands into his trouser pockets, turned round very slowly on one heel.

'Ah,' he said at last, 'I see what you mean, Rottcodd — I see what you mean.'

Rottcodd was longing to get back to his hammock and enjoy the luxury of being quite alone again, but his eye travelled even more speedily towards the visitor's face when he heard the remark. Mr Flay had said that he saw what Rottcodd had meant. Had he really? Very interesting. What, by the way, *had* he meant? What precisely was it that Mr Flay had seen? He flicked an imaginary speck of dust from the gilded head of a dryad.

'You are interested in the birth below?' he inquired.

Flay stood for a while as though he had heard nothing, but after a few minutes it became obvious he was thunderstruck. 'Interested!' he cried in a deep, husky voice, 'Interested! The child is a Groan. An authentic male Groan. Challenge to Change! No *Change*, Rottcodd. No *Change*!'

'Ah,' said Rottcodd. 'I see your point, Mr Flay. But his lordship was not dying?'

'No,' said Mr Flay, 'he was not dying, but *teeth lengthen!*' and he strode to the wooden shutters with long, slow heron-like paces, and the dust rose behind him. When it had settled Rottcodd could see his angular parchment-coloured head leaning itself against the lintel of the window.

Mr Flay could not feel entirely satisfied with his answer to Rottcodd's question covering the reason for his appearance in the Hall of the Bright Carvings. As he stood there by the window the question repeated itself to him again and again. Why Rottcodd? Why on earth Rottcodd? And yet he knew that directly he heard of the birth of the heir, when his dour nature had been stirred so violently that he had found himself itching to communicate his enthusiasm to another being — from that moment Rottcodd had leapt to his mind. Never of a communicative or enthusiastic nature he had found it difficult even under the emotional stress of the advent to inform Rottcodd of the facts. And, as has been remarked, he had surprised even himself not only for having unburdened himself at all, but for having done so in so short a time.

He turned, and saw that the Curator was standing wearily by the Piebald Shark, his small cropped round head moving to and fro like a bird's, and his hands clasped before him with the feather duster between his fingers. He could see that Rottcodd was politely waiting for him to go. Altogether Mr Flay was in a peculiar state of mind. He was surprised at Mr Rottcodd for being so unimpressed at the news, and he was

surprised at himself for having brought it. He took from his pocket a vast watch of silver and held it horizontally on the flat of his palm. 'Must go,' he said awkwardly. 'Do you hear me, Rottcodd, I must go?'

'Good of you to call,' said Rottcodd. 'Will you sign your name in the visitors' book as you go out?'

'No! Not a visitor.' Flay brought his shoulders up to his ears. 'Been with lordship thirty-seven years. Sign a book,' he added contemptuously, and he spat into a far corner of the room.

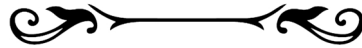
'As you wish,' said Mr Rottcodd. 'It was to the section of the visitors' book devoted to the staff that I was referring.'

'No!' said Flay.

As he passed the curator on his way to the door he looked carefully at him as he came abreast, and the question rankled. Why? The castle was filled with the excitement of the nativity. All was alive with conjecture. There was no control. Rumour swept through the stronghold. Everywhere, in passage, archway, cloister, refectory, kitchen, dormitory, and hall it was the same. Why had he chosen the unenthusiastic Rottcodd? And then, in a flash he realized. He must have subconsciously known that the news would be new to no one else; that Rottcodd was virgin soil for his message, Rottcodd the curator who lived alone among the Bright Carvings was the only one on whom he could vent the tidings without jeopardizing his sullen dignity, and to whom although the knowledge would give rise to but little enthusiasm it would at least be new.

Having solved the problem in his mind and having realized in a dullish way that the conclusion was particularly mundane and uninspired, and that there was no question of his soul calling along the corridors and up the stairs to the soul of Rottcodd, Mr Flay in a thin straddling manner moved along the passages of the north wing and down the curve of stone steps that led to the stone quadrangle, feeling the while a curious disillusion, a sense of having suffered a loss of dignity, and a feeling of being thankful that his visit to Rottcodd had been unobserved and that Rottcodd himself was well hidden from the world in the Hall of the Bright Carvings.

## THE GREAT KITCHEN



AS FLAY PASSED through the servants' archway and descended the twelve steps that led into the main corridor of the kitchen quarters, he became aware of an acute transformation of mood. The solitude of Mr Rottcodd's sanctum, which had been lingering in his mind, was violated. Here among the stone passages were all the symptoms of ribald excitement. Mr Flay hunched his bony shoulders and with his hands in his jacket pockets dragged them to the front so that only the black cloth divided his clenched fists. The material was stretched as though it would split at the small of his back. He stared mirthlessly to right and left and then advanced, his long spidery legs cracking as he shouldered his way through a heaving group of menials. They were guffawing to each other coarsely and one of them, evidently the wit, was contorting his face, as pliable as putty, into shapes that appeared to be independent of the skull, if indeed he had a skull beneath that elastic flesh. Mr Flay pushed past.

The corridor was alive. Clusters of aproned figures mixed and disengaged. Some were singing. Some were arguing and some were draped against the wall, quite silent from exhaustion, their hands dangling from their wrists or flapping stupidly to the beat of some kitchen catch-song. The clamour was pitiless. Technically this was more the spirit which Flay liked to see, or at all events thought to be more appropriate to the occasion. Rottcodd's lack of enthusiasm had shocked him and here, at any rate, the traditional observance of felicity at the birth of an heir to Gormenghast was being observed. But it would have been impossible for him to show any signs of enthusiasm himself when surrounded by it in others. As he moved along the crowded corridor and passed in turn the dark passages that led to the slaughter-house with its stench of fresh blood, the bakeries with their sweet loaves and the stairs that led down to the wine vaults and the underground network of the castle cellars, he felt a certain satisfaction at seeing how many of the roysterers staggered aside to let him pass, for his station as retainer-in-chief to his Lordship was commanding and his sour mouth and the frown that had made a permanent nest upon his jutting forehead were a warning.

It was not often that Flay approved of happiness in others. He saw in happiness the seeds of independence, and in independence the seeds of revolt. But on an occasion such as this it was different, for the spirit of convention was being rigorously adhered to, and in between his ribs Mr Flay experienced twinges of pleasure.

He had come to where, on his left, and halfway along the servants' corridor, the heavy wooden doors of the Great Kitchen stood ajar. Ahead of him, narrowing in dark perspective, for there were no windows, the rest of the corridor stretched silently away. It had no doors on either side and at the far end it was terminated by a wall of flints. This useless passage was, as might be supposed, usually deserted, but Mr Flay noticed that several figures were lying stretched in the shadows. At the same time he was momentarily deafened by a great bellowing and clattering and stamping.

As Mr Flay entered the Great Kitchen the steaming, airless concentration of a ghastly heat struck him. He felt that his body had received a blow. Not only was the normal sickening atmosphere of the kitchen augmented by the sun's rays streaming into the room at various points through the high windows, but, in the riot of the festivities, the fires had been banked dangerously. But Mr Flay realized that it was *right* that this should be as insufferable as it was. He even realized that the four grillers who were forcing joint after joint between the metal doors with their clumsy

boots, until the oven began to give under the immoderate strain, were in key with the legitimate temper of the occasion. The fact that they had no idea what they were doing nor why they were doing it was irrelevant. The Countess had given birth; was this a moment for rational behaviour?

The walls of the vast room which were streaming with calid moisture, were built with grey slabs of stone and were the personal concern of a company of eighteen men known as the 'Grey Scrubbers'. It had been their privilege on reaching adolescence to discover that, being the sons of their fathers, their careers had been arranged for them and that stretching ahead of them lay their identical lives consisting of an unimaginative if praiseworthy duty. This was to restore, each morning, to the great grey floor and the lofty walls of the kitchen a stainless complexion. On every day of the year from three hours before daybreak until about eleven o'clock, when the scaffolding and ladders became a hindrance to the cooks, the Grey Scrubbers fulfilled their hereditary calling. Through the character of their trade, their arms had become unusually powerful, and when they let their huge hands hang loosely at their sides, there was more than an echo of the simian. Coarse as these men appeared, they were an integral part of the Great Kitchen. Without the Grey Scrubbers something very earthy, very heavy, very real would be missing to any sociologist searching in that steaming room, for the completion of a circle of temperaments, a gamut of the lower human values.

Through daily proximity to the great slabs of stone, the faces of the Grey Scrubbers had become like slabs themselves. There was no expression whatever upon the eighteen faces, unless the lack of expression is in itself an expression. They were simply slabs that the Grey Scrubbers spoke from occasionally, stared from incessantly, heard with, hardly ever. They were traditionally deaf. The eyes were there, small and flat as coins, and the colour of the walls themselves, as though during the long hours of professional staring the grey stone had at last reflected itself indelibly once and for all. Yes, the eyes were there, thirty-six of them and the eighteen noses were there, and the lines of the mouths that resembled the harsh cracks that divided the stone slabs, they were there too. Although nothing physical was missing from any one of their eighteen faces yet it would be impossible to perceive the faintest sign of animation and, even if a basinful of their features had been shaken together and if each feature had been picked out at random and stuck upon some dummy-head of wax at any capricious spot or angle, it would have made no difference, for even the most fantastic, the most ingenious of arrangements could not have tempted into life a design whose component parts were dead. In all, counting the ears, which on occasion may be monstrously expressive, the one hundred and eight features were unable, at the best of times, to muster between them, individually or taken *en masse*, the faintest shadow of anything that might hint at the workings of what lay beneath.

Having watched the excitement developing around them in the Great Kitchen, and being unable to comprehend what it was all about for lack of hearing, they had up to the last hour or two been unable to enter into that festive spirit which had attacked the very heart and bowels of the kitchen staff.

But here and now, on this day of days, cognisant at last of the arrival of the new Lord, the eighteen Grey Scrubbers were lying side by side upon the flagstones beneath a great table, dead drunk to a man. They had done honour to the occasion and were out of the picture, having been rolled under the table one by one like so many barrels of ale, as indeed they were.

Through the clamour of the voices in the Great Kitchen that rose and fell, that changed tempo, and lingered, until a strident rush or a wheezy slide of sound came to

a new pause, only to be shattered by a hideous croak of laughter or a thrilled whisper, or a clearing of some coarse throat — through all this thick and interwoven skein of bedlam, the ponderous snoring of the Grey Scrubbers had continued as a recognizable theme of dolorous persistence.

In favour of the Grey Scrubbers it must be said that it was not until the walls and floor of the kitchen were shining from their exertions that they attacked the bungs as though unweaned. But it was not only they who had succumbed. The same unquestionable proof of loyalty could be observed in no less than forty members of the kitchen, who, like the Grey Scrubbers, recognizing the bottle as the true medium through which to externalize their affection for the family of Groan, were seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

Mr Flay, wiping away with the back of his claw-like hand the perspiration that had already gathered on his brow, allowed his eyes to remain a moment on the inert and foreshortened bodies of the inebriate Grey Scrubbers. Their heads were towards him, and were cropped to a gun-grey stubble. Beneath the table a shadow had roosted, and the rest of their bodies, receding in parallel lines, were soon devoured in the darkness. At first glance he had been reminded of nothing so much as a row of curled-up hedgehogs, and it was some time before he realized that he was regarding a line of prickly skulls. When he had satisfied himself on this point his eyes travelled sourly around the Great Kitchen. Everything was confusion, but behind the flux of the shifting figures and the temporary chaos of overturned mixing tables, of the floor littered with stock-pots, basting pans, broken bowls and dishes, and oddments of food, Mr Flay could see the main fixtures in the room and keep them in his mind as a means of reference, for the kitchen swam before his eyes in a clammy mist. Divided by the heavy stone wall in which was situated a hatch of strong timber, was the *garde-manger* with its stacks of cold meat and hanging carcasses and on the inside of the wall the spit. On a fixed table running along a length of the wall were huge bowls capable of holding fifty portions. The stock-pots were perpetually simmering, having boiled over, and the floor about them was a mess of sepia fluid and egg-shells that had been floating in the pots for the purpose of clearing the soup. The sawdust that was spread neatly over the floor each morning was by now kicked into heaps and soaked in the splashings of wine. And where scattered about the floor little blobs of fat had been rolled or trodden in, the sawdust stuck to them giving them the appearance of rissoles. Hanging along the dripping walls were rows of sticking knives and steels, boning knives, skinning knives and two-handed cleavers, and beneath them a twelve-foot by nine-foot chopping block, cross-hatched and hollowed by decades of long wounds.

On the other side of the room, to Mr Flay's left, a capacious enormous copper, a row of ovens and a narrow doorway acted as his landmarks. The doors of the ovens were flying wide and acid flames were leaping dangerously, as the fat that had been thrown into the fires bubbled and stank.

Mr Flay was in two minds. He hated what he saw, for of all the rooms in the castle, it was the kitchen he detested most, and for a very real reason; and yet a thrill in his scarecrow body made him aware of how right it all was. He could not, of course, analyse his feelings nor would the idea have occurred to him, but he was so much a part and parcel of Gormenghast that he could instinctively tell when the essence of its tradition was running in a true channel, powerfully and with no deviation.

But the fact that Mr Flay appreciated, as from the profoundest of motives, the vulgarity of the Great Kitchen in no way mitigated his contempt for the figures he saw before him as individuals. As he looked from one to another the satisfaction which he

had at first experienced in seeing them collectively gave way to a detestation as he observed them piecemeal.

A prodigious twisted beam, warped into a spiral, floated, or so it seemed in the haze, across the breadth of the Great Kitchen. Here and there along its undersurface, iron hooks were screwed into its grain. Slung over it like sacks half filled with sawdust, so absolutely lifeless they appeared, were two pastry-cooks, an ancient *poissonnier*, a *rôtier* with legs so bandy as to describe a rugged circle, a red-headed *légumier*, and five *sauciers* with their green scarves around their necks. One of them near the far end from where Flay stood twitched a little, but apart from this all was stillness. They were very happy.

Mr Flay took a few paces and the atmosphere closed around him. He had stood by the door unobserved, but now as he came forward a roysterer leaping suddenly into the air caught hold of one of the hooks in the dark beam above them. He was suspended by one arm, a cretinous little man with a face of concentrated impudence. He must have possessed a strength out of all proportions to his size, for with the weight of his body hanging on the end of one arm he yet drew himself up so that his head reached the level of the iron hook. As Mr Flay passed beneath, the dwarf, twisting himself upside down with incredible speed, coiled his legs around the twisted beam and dropping the rest of himself vertically with his face a few inches from that of Mr Flay, grinned at him grotesquely with his head upside down, before Flay could do anything save come to an abrupt halt. The dwarf had then swung himself on to the beam again and was running along it on all fours with an agility more likely to be found in jungles than in kitchens.

A prodigious bellow outvoicing all cacophony caused him to turn his head away from the dwarf. Away to his left in the shade of a supporting pillar he could make out the vague unmistakable shape of what had really been at the back of his brain like a tumour, ever since he had entered the great kitchen.

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*End of Sample*