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The Tower

Written by P. M. Hubbard

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P. M. Hubbard (1910–1980)

Praised by critics for his clean prose style, characterization, and the strong sense of place in his novels, Philip Maitland Hubbard was born in Reading, in Berkshire and brought up in Guernsey, in the Channel Islands. He was educated at Oxford, where he won the Newdigate Prize for English verse in 1933. From 1934 until its disbandment in 1947 he served with the Indian Civil service. On his return to England he worked for the British Council, eventually retiring to work as a freelance writer. He contributed to a number of publications, including *Punch*, and wrote 16 novels for adults as well as two children's books. He lived in Dorset and Scotland, and many of his novels draw on his interest in and knowledge of rural pursuits and folk religion.

Flush as May
Picture of Millie
A Hive of Glass
The Holm Oaks
The Tower
The Custom of the Country
Cold Waters
High Tide
The Dancing Man
A Whisper in the Glen
A Rooted Sorrow
A Thirsty Evil
The Graveyard
The Causeway
The Quiet River
Kill Claudio

The Tower

P. M. Hubbard

An Orion book

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CHAPTER 1

THE CAR was running easily downhill, and the engine stopped working so quietly and suddenly that at first he did not notice it had happened. Then as the slope eased for a moment he felt the car check, and saw the red light shining wickedly at him from the dial of the speedometer. He said, "Oh damn," put his foot on the brake, thought better of it and let the car run on in neutral.

It was dusk even on the tops of the hills and down in the trees below him quite dark. There were lights among the trees. It looked like a village, but he did not know what its name was. All he knew was that ahead of him, another twenty miles along the road, there was a town called Frantham with a two-star pub called the Antelope. Two stars was about his mark on this trip.

A gaggle of signs came up suddenly in his not over-bright headlights. They said first COYLE and then BEND and NARROW BRIDGE. He noted, but did not like, the name, negotiated the bend without having to use his brakes and saw the hump of the bridge ahead. The car checked at the slope, and he found himself sitting forward, like a horseman at a jump, trying to ease her over the obstacle. She got her nose between the parapet walls, crawled up the slope with unexpected momentum, paused, dipped and began to gather speed on the far side.

The hood was down, and he heard, in the suddenly almost motionless air about his head, the rush of a considerable stream below the bridge. Then the road leveled out and the car came gradually but inexorably to a halt. He turned off the headlights and sat there. His mind, as always after a long drive, was numb and unresponsive. The emergencies of movement it could cope with, but not the emergency of sudden stoppage. He said, "Damn" again, and shivered slightly.

Ahead, beyond the faint yellowish glow of the sidelights, he could just see the tarmac picking up the last of the light in the sky. It was dark on both sides with what looked like trees. He sat there wrapped in the inertia of mild despair. The stream was some way behind him now, and the silence was absolute. He shivered again, and suddenly found himself cold and stiff.

Then, not ten yards ahead of him, a voice said, "Oh God, oh God," and started to weep. He considered for a moment joining in the general lamentation, but came to the conclusion that the situation did not warrant it. It did not, to be honest, matter whether he reached Frantham tonight. Or even, he thought, tomorrow night or the night after. There might even be a pub in Coyle with attractions rivaling those of the Antelope. And someone else, at least, was unhappier than he was. He opened the door quietly and got out.

He reached into the chaos behind the driving seat, found his duffel coat and put it on. Thus wrapped, he felt better equipped to deal with what appeared, at the moment, to be a purely social problem. He wanted to ask for help. But could he decently ask help of someone who seemed, at least in his own judgment, to be more in need of help himself? If the weeper had been a woman, a sense of gallantry, or at worse a sense of opportunist adventure, might have driven him to offer help, even from his own position of relative helplessness. But he did not think it was. Admittedly, men, when they cried, cried higher than they talked. A childish response seemed to activate naturally a forgotten childishness in the vocal chords. Admittedly, too, a man did not often weep audibly on a dark country roadside, even in a village with a name like Coyle. He still thought, on balance, that it was a man weeping.

He began to walk slowly forward, and was at once aware that it would be impossible, in this dark desolation, to tiptoe tactfully past a fellow creature in distress and seek help elsewhere. The words "Can I help?" formed themselves in his mind. It was what, a minute or so ago, he would have liked some solid and mechanically minded passer-by to say to him. He walked on cautiously and, now that he came to think of it, quietly, as quietly as he could go. Then he found that the weeping had stopped.

He stopped himself and listened. Now that his ears were attuned to the silence, he could hear, very faint behind him, the murmur of the stream. Some way ahead, where the lights would have been, a voice called "Good night" cheerfully, and a door slammed. Coyle was not, as he had somehow felt it might be, steeped in universal distress. But at hand there was nothing. No voice, no breath, no movement. This at least made his decision easier. Indeed, it left no problem for a decision. You cannot offer to help, nor need you tactfully avoid, a person who on the evidence is no longer there. He gathered his coat around him and stepped out for the village.

He had not gone twenty yards before he found that he was walking slightly but definitely downhill. Twenty yards pushing on the level, and the car would be moving again. It was a heavy car for its size by modern standards, but well within his capacity on anything but a pronounced upgrade. He hesitated and then walked on. Better see, first, what the village consisted of and where he should head for. The main thing was to get the car off the road, where he could turn the lights off. He did not trust his battery an inch. If he was going to slide silently into Coyle, pulled on by gravity but pushed by himself or nothing, he must have an exact destination.

The houses came up very suddenly, first on one side of the road and then on the other. There were lights in some of them, but very faint and far back, as if the occupants were all in their back kitchens or, in the front, crouched over their television screens. Then the road turned and he saw, high up on his right, a sign which said THE BELL. It was dimly lit, and the gold paint on the picture looked cracked and tarnished. His heart sank, but at the same moment he saw, at the side of the house, a tall stone arch with the darkness of what looked like a yard behind it. Even here there were next to no lights. He thought he could hear, not far off, the intermittent murmur of voices, but he could not tell where they came from.

He stopped at the archway and peered in. There was indeed a yard at the side of the house. There were dustbins on one side, along the end wall of the house, and what looked like garages on the other. This would do for a start. He turned and began walking back to the car. He padded quietly along in his soft shoes, and heard, hard and clear on the tarmac, other feet, more substantially shot, coming to meet him. They walked slowly but not, he thought, hesitantly. If this was the weeper, the man had wept it out of himself, and was coming back with reasonable resolution to face whatever it was in Coyle that had set him weeping. From the security of his comparative silence, he got ready for the encounter.

Silence or no silence, the other man saw him first. A voice said, "Ah—? Ah, good evening." It was a warm voice, but light and medium-pitched. He tried to connect it with the desolation of "Oh God, oh God" by the dark roadside, but could not be sure either way. He said, "Good evening," and only then his motorist's eyes picked out the broad shape coming up to him out of the darkness. He shortened stride, expecting further speech and ready with his hard-luck story about the car, but the other man did not stop. Still slowly, but unremittingly, the metaled heels came down on the tarmac, and the man was past him and off toward the village.

The lights of the car looked orange-yellow and secretive. He leaned in and switched them off, conscious even in the enveloping darkness that there was a law in Coyle and that he was defying it. He took off his coat and threw it on to the driving seat. Then he put one hand on the wheel, leaned his shoulder against the side of the windscreen and started to push. With the car aggressively immobile, he had not bothered to put on the hand brake.

Another voice, this time distinctly feminine, said, "She'll go, you know, if you'd rather."

He said, "Good lord. Will she? Why?"

"It was a distributor lead. They jump off."

He said again, "Good lord. Is that what they do?"

"Well anyway, this one did."

"And you put it back on?"

"Uh-huh." There was a figure now, pale and somehow suspended a foot or two off the ground. A spirit, he decided, but a benign one.

He said, "That's very nice of you."

"Think nothing of it. Good night."

He hesitated, and then, finding nothing else to say, said "Good night" and got into the car. The engine started at a touch. He switched on the lights and saw, lit faintly in their reflected glow, a girl watching him. She was perched owl-like on the top of what looked like a milestone, her knees drawn up almost under her chin. She looked as if she had been there for hours and was still perfectly comfortable. There was no detail in the picture.

He put the car in gear and started off for Frantham. But when he came to the Bell, he braked and swung the car through the archway into the yard. He switched off the engine, turned the lights off and went around to the front door of the pub. Even inside the light was no more than yellow. There were three doors, one ahead, unmarked, one on the left marked SALOON and one on the right marked PUBLIC. He put his hand to the PUBLIC door and, as it started to open, heard a voice inside say, "He says, bugger you, he says, I'll bloody well do what I please, and you can fucking well do the same, that's what he says."

The voice was low and distinct against a background of dead silence. He pictured two men talking, one behind the bar and one in front of it. He opened the door wide on a room full of smoke and beer fumes, and then saw in the faint light that it was also full of bodies. They sat everywhere, on benches, on settles, on chairs drawn up at tables. None of them moved. Only the landlord was on his feet, leaning motionless on the bar with his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, impassively presiding. He turned his eyes as the door opened, but answered the man who had spoken. He said, "It's nasty, that, having a chap talk like that." He turned his head to follow his eyes and said, "Good evening." No one else, apparently, moved at all, except for the eyes. He felt himself suddenly caught and held in a blank concentration of eyes.

He said, "Good evening. I suppose—can you by any chance let me have a room for the night?"

The landlord looked at him speculatively. "We've got a room," he said. "You got a car?" He said it almost as if he was about to suggest an exchange of amenities.

"I put it in the yard."

The landlord nodded. "I'll tell my wife," he said. "If you'll go in the saloon?" He made it sound like a courtesy.

"Right." He nodded, backed out and shut the door of the public bar behind him. No one else had moved or spoken. The saloon smelled of polished linoleum. It was dim, spotless and quite empty. A small red-faced woman appeared suddenly behind the varnished bar in the right-hand corner. "Good evening," she said. "You'll be staying over?"

"If I may. I was going on to Frantham, but I think I've come far enough for the night." He did not say, even to himself, that he wanted to know what made men weep in the roadside trees and girls who could mend cars sit like owls on the top of milestones. The woman produced a book and opened it on the bar. "If you'll just register," she said.

He produced a ball-point from his jacket pocket and wrote, "John Smith, Ashby-de-la-Zouche, British." She watched him as he wrote, and he felt an overpowering urge to tell her that he really was John Smith. Someone had to be. She nodded. "Single?" she said.

"Oh yes, quite single." That was the trouble with John Smith. They always expected you to bring in a giggling blonde with the wrong initials on her suitcase.

"I'll see to the room," she said. She turned to go and then stopped. "Have you had your supper?" she said.

"Well, no. I—"

She nodded. "Bacon and eggs do?"

"Oh yes, fine. And could I have a pint of bitter?"

He sat back on the polished settle, pulling slowly at his tankard and letting his mind clear. He could not make out whether the dreamlike quality of his recent experience lay in the experience itself or in the daze of the recording consciousness. In any case, why worry? It was on the whole pleasant, after a long drive, to let the unreasonableness of facts take care of itself, and simply to contemplate it, placidly and impassively, while the alcohol laid healing hands on his raw nerves. It was, he decided, very strong beer, and no harm in that. As a further sign of emancipation, he yawned suddenly and deeply. Given the promised eggs and bacon, he could safely let go. With the morning light he would reconsider the evidence. The part of his mind that refused to be comforted asked whether the sun ever really rose over Coyle, or whether the village lived permanently in a soft and dimly lit darkness, through which people moved oddly without explanation. But the question remained unanswered.

The eggs and bacon, when they arrived, assumed the proportions less of a soporific than of a general anesthetic. He pushed the last pale slice of bread and butter around his plate, mopping up the rich brown grease, and wondered whether he could ever rouse himself to get his things out of the car. The voices in the public bar, which he had been dimly aware of as he ate, swelled suddenly into argument. There was some shouting and intermittent swearing against a background of rolling waves of laughter. He could not tell at all what it was all about, but nothing in any case could have prepared him for the way it ended.

A man started to sing, casually, as if he was singing to himself, but loud enough to be heard above the general uproar. "*Gloria Deo*—" he sang, with a long twisting run of notes on the rounded *o* of the first syllable. Two more voices took it up in different parts, a very sweet clear tenor led the way into *Et Filio*, and by the time *Sancto* was reached he counted four parts going great guns with several voices to each. There was a second's silence and then the whole lot came in together with *Sicut in principio*, and suddenly, unbelievably, a piercing falsetto, harshly vibrant but bang on the note, soared up in a tremendous counter-tenor descant, that hung about under the smoke-laden ceiling joists until it came toppling down to join the consort in a long-drawn unison *Amen*.

There was a second's breathless silence, and then a roar of cheers and laughter. Benches were pushed back, drained tankards came down with bangs on the bare tabletops, and the company began to bid each other good night. The landlord came through behind the bar, his hands full of empties, and apologized for the noise. John Smith shook his head at him and got slowly to his feet.

"Ready for bed?" the landlord said. "I'll get my wife to show you the room."

John nodded and went out to the car. He pulled the hood over but did not screw down the clamps. His suitcase seemed unreasonably heavy as he lifted it out. The night was full of boots on tarmac, and someone started up a car farther down the road. A man went past the archway, telling his companion that he'd be buggered if he did something that John could not catch. It was all idiotically familiar and breathlessly unreal. He went back into the yellow light of the doorway, lugging his heavy suitcase.

The room was papered with rustic trellises, in which colored birds perched at predictable intervals among a repetitive profusion of seed-catalogue blossom. The window was curtained and he did not look out.

It was the bells, ultimately, that woke him, a cascade of regimented sound that got in everywhere and would not let him sleep. He groaned, turned over and looked at his watch. It was half past seven and, as he now remembered, Sunday. The bells went on remorselessly, slipping through their changes with unhesitant precision at what seemed breakneck speed. He got out of bed, yanked aside the heavy curtains and blinked at the somehow unexpected daylight. Right opposite him, buttressed, crenelated and pinnacled, the church tower filled the foreground against a backcloth of banked trees. Motionless and unrevealing, it looked at him from behind the drooped eyelids of its elaborate louvers and poured out its staggering profusion of sound.

John Smith shook his head at it and reached for his dressing gown. He wondered if there was any chance, anywhere, of a cup of tea.

CHAPTER 2

"I'VE MADE A pot of tea for myself," the landlord said. "If you'd like a cup—" He looked at it doubtfully, as though it was in some way unfit for general consumption. "My wife will be back directly. If you'd like to wait—"

John said, "I'd like one very much," and the landlord shrugged. "Help yourself," he said. He pushed over the teapot and a cup and saucer. The dark brew had oily streaks in it which the thick yellow milk only threw up in a livelier iris. There was a grievance here somewhere, John thought. He wondered whether to fish for it or pretend not to notice it. A publican's wife who went to church at eight on a Sunday morning might well, he could see, be a professional liability as well as something of a social curiosity. He made a very delicate cast over where he judged the grievance lay. "You've got wonderful bell-ringers here," he said.

The landlord raised his eyebrows but kept his eyes in his cup. "Oh yes," he said. "Won a prize of some sort, they did, last year. There was that festival they went over for." He spoke with elaborate detachment, like an orthodox Levite discussing the goings-on at High Places with a stranger who might turn out to be a Babylonian. John dropped his fly somewhat more heavily on the same spot. "Do they ring again for eleven o'clock?" he said.

The lurking grievance made a tentative snap at it. "They do," the landlord said. "And again for six." He raised his eyes and gave John a quick appraising glance. "Can't hear yourself think on a Sunday," he said, "not in Coyle."

John nodded and sipped his tea. He doubted whether his hostess's tea, when she returned, would in any case be any great improvement. Whatever you did, the mischief was in the tea tin.

The landlord looked at him more thoroughly. "You'll be wanting your breakfast," he said. There was no question in it. It was an assertion which he dared John to deny. He went on quickly, leaving no room for denial, even if one was contemplated. "You'll get it when my wife gets back," he said. He put his cup in the sink and looked gloomily through the doorway into the stale chaos of the Public Bar. He sighed. "When she's got her hat off," he said. He went through into the bar and set about it. John got up from the edge of the kitchen table, looked apprehensively through the door of the bar and tiptoed to the sink. The window over the sink looked out on to a rather dingy back yard with something like a wash house on the far side. It was quite impossible to pretend that there was anything to keep him there. With a quick guilty gesture he swilled his tea into the sink and put his cup down quietly beside his host's. Then he went upstairs to dress.

The landlord's name, he saw, was George Curtis. He had a full license, but from what John had seen, most of his trade was in the beer. He wandered out into the road and looked about him. There was nothing wrong with Coyle to look at. The houses were stone and slate and set well back. The woodwork was mostly freshly painted. The side lanes, one in front of him and one farther to his right, made neat right angles with the central street. He noticed, as a sign of grace, that there was no street lighting. The morning was cloudy but bright. There was not a soul about.

He pottered across the road and into the lane opposite. It would be called Church Lane but, as a further sign of grace, did not say so. He saw simultaneously, at the end of the lane ahead of him, the south side of the church tower and, dwarfed by it but still very prominent, an elaborately painted notice board headed *Appeal.*

Money, he thought, the usual thing. The vast, nagging upkeep of an ancient building in traditional materials which only the experts could handle nowadays. And the dwindling company of the faithful. Or in most places, anyhow. Here he wondered. It was the tower they wanted money for. He read on and whistled. Twenty thousand pounds. Twenty thousand pounds, by the Lord Harry. He looked at the tower with fresh interest. Something was wrong with it. Not structurally, from what he could see from here, though that too, presumably. But something in its looks. The proportions were wrong, and the detail at the top was too much for the noble simplicity of the foot. Bad restoration probably. But all some way back.

"Eighteen-eighty," the man said. He was a short, broad, powerful man, with a bare head of self-consciously snowy hair. He seemed to have appeared from a path leading left-handed around the west side of the churchyard, but John, intent on the tower, had not seen or heard him come.

John nodded gloomily. "Worst time," he said. "Do you know everything about me, or only what I'm thinking?"

The broad man smiled. He was immensely friendly and almost embarrassingly conscious of his staggering charm. "Not your name," he said. "I know you're staying at the Bell. Oh—and the number and make of your car."

John nodded. "John Smith," he said. "Really," he added.

"Yes?" the man said. "Yes, well I don't see why not. The combination must occur."

"It does. Try the London telephone directory. Or any telephone directory, for that matter. It doesn't really simplify things as it should."

"No. No, I can see that. One knows, of course, that children called Gavin Dalrymple grow up into Gavin Dalrymples and behave accordingly. But I suppose it works the other way too. Do you suffer from a sort of claustrophobic aggressiveness?" He looked at John with friendly interest. "You don't look aggressive," he said. "My name," he added, "is Charles Hardcastle. A fair *via media*, don't you think?"

John, conscious of no small charm of his own, smiled back at him. "You don't look median to me," he said. "Compensation, perhaps? Overcompensation for Charles?"

"You don't bandy cheap psychology for a living, do you?"

"Good God, no. I am supposed to apply it, but that's all my eye. I explain things for a living. We had all the jargon thrown at us during an unusually laborious and useless training course. But in fact all one needs is the gift of the gab and a lot of elaborately concealed patience."

"What do you explain, then?"

"Systems. Efficiency without tears. Organization and method stuff. My firm sells it and I go and show the customers how it works."

"And they pay you for this?"

"Oh yes. They pay me quite well, I think."

Mr. Hardcastle shook his head. "Admirable," he said. "But not in Coyle, surely?"

"No, no. I'm just passing through. I've been on holiday, in fact, but the money ran out a bit sooner than I expected, and I'm rather limping home."

"I tell you what," said Mr. Hardcastle, "come to breakfast. You won't get it at the Bell yet."

"I know. Not until Mrs. Curtis has got her hat off."

"No, that's it, do you see. So come and have it with me, why not? Up there." He nodded toward the church tower, and John had a momentary vision of coffee and toast between the crenelations. Then he saw what it was. Among the trees that swept up behind the church there was the intermittent outline of a house. It was built of pale brick and looked long and low. "Thank you very much," he said. "I'd better tell Mr. Curtis."

"Don't worry. I'll ring him." Mr. Hardcastle turned and walked off along the flagged path, and John followed. "What did they do?" he said. "Diddle it up with all that fancy work? It doesn't look— I couldn't quite make it out."

"No. They built it up, don't you see? A whole new stage. They used to ring from the floor of the church like Christians, with a nice straightforward bell-chamber on top. I've got a picture somewhere. I'll show you. But that wasn't good enough for the eighties. They put the ringers in the bell-chamber and stuck a new bell-chamber on top of that. The detail, of course, followed. Even the stone's different, do you see? Hence the appeal."

The path began to climb on broad shallow steps of stone. They were already nearly level with the nave roof. Shrubbery closed in on both sides between the treetrunks, and they came to a white-painted gate. It had the name GALEHANGER on it. Mr. Hardcastle nodded at it apologetically. "The twenties, I'm afraid. The beginning of the local place-name cult. Before your time, of course. They stopped calling new roads after local councillors and called them by the old field names. They're still at it—especially the new towns. It's the wood, of course. It's the Gale hanger. If a Coyle boy says to a Coyle girl, 'I'll meet you in the Gale,' he doesn't mean *High Wind in Jamaica* stuff. He means up in the woods. Where they always have. Half the people in Coyle must have been got in the Gale. Well—not half, perhaps. Nearly all the first-born. You know what it is."

John said, "Milk Wood?"

"That's right. Then just before the planners got a grip, a chap came along and got the owner to carve him out a slice of wood to build a house in. Wouldn't be allowed now, of course. Quite right, too. But it's a lovely position. Look."

They had come out on to a flagged terrace with a low stone wall all along the southern side. Straight across from them, the bedeviled tower stood up unapologetically above the long blue spine of the church roof and the mottled angles of the roofs of Coyle. Its pinnacles and crenelations were still clear above them, and John, taking in the picture with an idle, early-morning appreciation, saw a wisp of movement between them. "There's someone up there," he said.

"Already?" Mr. Hardcastle looked at his watch. "Could be, if the congregation wasn't too large. He goes up there after the service."

"Who?"

"Oh—the vicar, of course. Old Liberty. Freeman, his name is. Father Freeman, he calls himself. He is, too. Got a son married over in Carshot. Nice chap. The son, I mean. That was before he had the call, of course."

John turned back from his contemplation of the tower. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't concentrating. What was?"

"Oh—the son, I mean. He wouldn't do it now, not Father Freeman. He's all for the celibacy of the clergy. I try to resist the temptation to tell him he's had the best of both worlds. That's too easy. He's perfectly honest. According to his lights. That's why it all works as it does."

John shook his head. "Sorry, again. What works?"

"Well, the parish. St. Udan's, Coyle."

"I see, yes. The bell-ringers. And the choir, my goodness, of course. And indeed Mrs. Curtis's hat."

"And indeed Mrs. Curtis's hat. As for the bells—well, you can imagine. From here. But it's all high jinks, and they enjoy it no end." He paused. "It's very medieval, really. There's the opposition, of course. Well—you've seen George Curtis, I've no doubt, mopping out his bar single-handed on a Sunday morning. Old Liberty thinks I'm leader of the opposition. Antichrist in person. I'm not, really. I'm a neutral. As a humanist, I like to see the fun. Come and see what there is for breakfast."

John could see at once that the house was going to be an extraordinarily pleasant one. It was in a medium, between-wars tradition of domestic architecture, which had got over both imitation antiques and overstuffedness, but not yet caught the full wind of modernity. It had something of a Georgian, or at least neo-Georgian, simplicity. Mr. Hardcastle led him into a dining room with a breakfast table laid for two. He opened a serving hatch and put his head through. "Mrs. Mallet," he called, "an extra for breakfast. All right? I'll lay for him. Oh—and will you phone Mr. Curtis and tell him his guest is here?"

Somewhere far back a voice said something, and he took his head out of the hatch. He went to the sideboard and took out mats and cutlery. "Sit down," he said. He nodded at the place already laid.

John said, "Won't your wife—?"

"I haven't got a wife. Not now. It's my daughter. But her breakfasts are always a bit unpredictable."

The hatch opened and a third set of crockery appeared, followed by food and coffee. They began to eat, but still no third person joined them.

"About the tower," said John.

"Well, what I said. They clapped this extra bit on top and hung the bells in it. They never apparently gave a thought to the foundations and lower walls. They carried the buttresses up further, but of course that's just eyewash. Well—it might have been all right, I suppose. There might well have been a factor of safety in the original job capable of carrying this extra load. But in point of fact there wasn't. It's been giving way, gradually, for years now. The foundations have sunk and the lower walls are out of winding. They've been patched up, of course. Filling the cracks, that's all. But it can't go on, or they'll have the whole thing down on top of them. Hence, as I say, the appeal."

"Twenty thousand. I saw. They can't get it, can they?"

"Of course they can't get it. And the point is, it's not necessary. The proper job wouldn't cost half that. That's why they can't get help from the central funds."

"The proper job being—"

"Well, obviously—back to 1870. Take the bells out, take off all that damned spiky superstructure, rehang the bells where they belong and Triple Bob's your uncle. That's oversimplifying, of course. There's got to be work done underneath now. But nothing unreasonable. And of course the improvement in appearance would be spectacular. I must show you that picture. It's a good tower, that, as originally built."

"Then what's the twenty thousand for?" John found himself, with the back half of his mind, wondering whether Mr. Hardcastle was the sort of man to have a daughter who perched on milestones. With the front half he listened politely.

"To make it safe as it is. An enormous job, even if they can do it properly, which I doubt. Underpinning the foundations, even jacking them up, for all I know, steel reinforcements, God knows what else. It's lunatic, of course."

John came to the conclusion that Mr. Hardcastle's daughter might be expected, in reason, to do almost anything. He said, "Then why—?"

"Old Liberty. He won't have it. Oh, hullo, Cynthia. This is Mr. John Smith. He really is John Smith. He is full of compensatory aggressions."

John, on his feet with his chair pushing at the back of his knees, could not be certain. There was too little to go on. But if there was another girl who mended cars, Miss Hardcastle would do very well as a bonus issue. She showed no sign of recognition.

She flicked a pair of green eyes at him as she made for the food on the sideboard. "How do you do, Mr. Smith?" she said. The voice could be the same. But it was difficult to see this girl roosting. There was, apart from anything else, too much of her. Not too much for other purposes—never that. Only for roosting. But he still did not know. He said, "How do you do, Miss Hardcastle?" and hung, poised, while she poked about among the dishes.

"Sit down," she said, "please. Otherwise I'll go and pick the wrong thing and feel bad about it afterwards. There seems an awful lot left. Has Daddy given you a proper breakfast?"

"I've done excellently."

"Well, come and get some more when you're ready. Have you been having the phallic symbols?"

"I don't think so. Unless you count—I had bacon and sausages."

"No, I mean the tower. That's what you were talking about, weren't you? I wondered if Daddy had been giving you the phallic-symbol treatment."

"No, I—"

"Well, that's a good sign. He only does it to shock. And that always means—"

Mr. Hardcastle said, "Mr. Smith is quite unshockable. So don't you try it either. We were talking sensibly, and you've interrupted us. Why can't you come down at the proper time? You can't have overslept. Not on a Sunday in Coyle. No one could."

Cynthia said, "No, but I was tired. I was out late." She lifted a pale, heart-shaped face and looked at John with a sort of serious candor. She was giving nothing away. He still did not know, but found her extremely disturbing.

John said, "You were saying the vicar wouldn't have it. I mean, wouldn't have the tower cut down to size."

"That's right. Nor he will. He won't see it's all wrong as it is. They've all told him. Including the diocesan architect. But he's got the Church Council in his pocket, and it's for them to decide. All the diocese can do is refuse to help. Which, as I say, they have. So he's out on his own, gunning for his twenty thousand."

"Which he can't get?"

"No. Well—there's one conceivable source. But he hasn't succeeded in tapping it yet. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile the tower is on point of collapse?"

"I don't know that, of course. Nobody does. No, I was going to say, meanwhile he's collecting money with astonishing ingenuity and perseverance from wherever he can lay his hands on it. But of course, not fast enough. I mean, apart from the time factor in the tower itself, costs are rising all the time. Unless we get a really solid deflation, it's going to be as much as he can do to keep level, let alone catch up with his receding target. But you wouldn't think so, to hear him talk."

"But why? What's his objection to the proper job? Or is it sheer obstinacy? I haven't met him, of course."

"You will, if you're here much longer. No. Well, yes, all right. Obstinacy, certainly. But I know what I think. Here, come outside a moment and I'll show you."

Cynthia said, "Let Mr. Smith finish his breakfast before you spring Lady Athaliah on him."

"He can finish his breakfast afterwards. It won't take a moment." He was already out of the door. John and Cynthia exchanged a long glance. It was John who weakened first. "Coming," he said.

Mr. Hardcastle was by the terrace wall. "Look," he said. "You can see where the top ought to be. There's a string-course round the tower now. And the stone changes. Now if that was the top—"

"It's below us."

"That's it. That's it, you see. This house was built long after

1880. If the tower came down to its original height now, I'd be sitting on top of it."

"And the vicar won't have that?"

"That's what I think. He's an odd fish. Striking his colors to Antichrist—something of that sort. But more than that, don't you see? He'd be overlooked."