

THE GREY ONES

By

J. B. PRIESTLEY

'And your occupation, Mr Patson?' Dr Smith asked, holding his beautiful fountain pen a few inches from the paper.

'I'm an exporter,' said Mr Patson, smiling almost happily. Really this wasn't too bad at all. First, he had drawn Dr Smith instead of his partner Dr Meyenstein. Not that he had anything against Dr Meyenstein, for he had never set eyes on him, but he had been free to see him and Dr Meyenstein hadn't. If he had to explain himself to a psychiatrist, then he would much rather have one simply and comfortably called Smith. And Dr Smith, a broad-faced man about fifty with giant rimless spectacles, had nothing forbidding about him,

2 J. B. Priestley

and looked as if he might have been an accountant, a lawyer or a dentist. His room too was reassuring, with nothing frightening in it; rather like a sitting-room in a superior hotel. And that fountain pen really was a beauty. Mr Patson had already made a mental note to ask Dr Smith where he had bought that pen. And surely a man who could make such a mental note, right off, couldn't have much wrong with him?

'It's a family business,' Mr Patson continued, smiling away. 'My grandfather started it. Originally for the Far East. Firms abroad, especially in rather remote places, send us orders for all manner of goods, which we buy here on commission for them. It's not the business it was fifty years ago, of course, but on the other hand we've been helped to some extent by all these trade restrictions and systems of export licences, which people a long way off simply can't cope with. So we cope for them. Irritating work often, but not uninteresting. On the whole I enjoy it.'

'That is the impression you've given me,' said Dr Smith, making a note. 'And you are reasonably prosperous, I gather? We all have our financial worries

3 *The Grey Ones*

these days of course. I know I have.' He produced a mechanical sort of laugh, like an actor in a comedy that had been running too long, and Mr Patson echoed him like another bored actor. Then Dr Smith looked grave and pointed his pen at Mr Patson as if he might shoot him with it. 'So I think we can eliminate all that side, Mr Patson—humph?'

'Oh yes—certainly—certainly,' said Mr Patson hurriedly, not smiling now.

'Well now,' said Dr Smith, poising his pen above the paper again, 'tell me what's troubling you.'

Mr Patson hesitated. 'Before I tell you the whole story, can I ask you a question?'

Dr Smith frowned, as if his patient had made an improper suggestion. 'If you think it might help—'

'Yes, I think it would,' said Mr Patson, 'because I'd like to know roughly where you stand before I begin to explain.' He waited a moment. 'Dr Smith, do you believe there's a kind of Evil Principle in the

4 J. B. Priestley

universe, a sort of super-devil, that is working hard to ruin humanity, and has its agents, who must really be minor devils or demons, living among us as people? Do you believe that?'

'Certainly not,' replied Dr Smith without any hesitation at all. 'That's merely a superstitious fancy, for which there is no scientific evidence whatever. It's easy to understand—though we needn't go into all that now—why anybody, even today, suffering from emotional stress, might be possessed by such an absurd belief, but of course it's mere fantasy, entirely subjective in origin. And the notion that this Evil Principle could have its agents among us might be very dangerous indeed. It could produce very serious anti-social affects. You realize that, Mr Patson?'

'Oh—yes—I do. I mean, at certain times when—well, when I've been able to look at it as you're looking at it, doctor. But most times I cant. And that, I suppose,' Mr Patson added, with a wan smile, 'is why I'm here.'

'Quite so,' Dr Smith murmured, making some

notes. 'And I think you have been well advised to ask for some psychiatric treatment. These things are apt to be sharply progressive, although their actual progress might be described as regressive. But I won't worry you with technicalities, Mr Patson. I'll merely say that you—or was it Mrs Patson?—or shall I say both of you?—are to be congratulated on taking this very sensible step in good time. And now you know, as you said, where I stand, perhaps you had better tell me all about it.

Please don't omit anything for fear of appearing ridiculous. I can only help you if you are perfectly frank with me, Mr Patson. I may ask a few questions, but their purpose will be to make your account clearer to me. By the way, here we don't adopt the psycho-analytic methods—we don't sit behind our patients while they relax on a couch—but if you would find it easier not to address me as you have been doing—face to face—'

'No, that's all right,' said Mr Patson, who was relieved to discover he would not have to lie on the couch and murmur at the opposite wall. 'I think I can

6 J. B. Priestley

talk to you just like this. Anyhow, I'll try.'

'Good! And remember, Mr Patson, try to tell me everything relevant. Smoke if it will help you to concentrate.'

Thanks, I might later on.' Mr Patson waited a moment, surveying his memories as if they were some huge glittering sea, and then waded in. 'It began about a year ago. I have a cousin who's a publisher, and one night he took me to dine at his club—the Burlington. He thought I might like to dine there because it's a club used a great deal by writers and painters and musicians and theatre people. Well, after dinner we played bridge for an hour or two, then we went down into the lounge for a final drink before leaving. My cousin was claimed by another publisher, so I was left alone for about a quarter of an hour. It was then that I overheard Firbright—you know, the famous painter—who was obviously full of drink, although you couldn't exactly call him drunk, and was holding forth to a little group at the other side of the fireplace. Apparently he'd just come back from Syria or somewhere around there, and he'd picked this idea

up from somebody there though he said it only confirmed what he'd been thinking himself for some time.'

Dr Smith gave Mr Patson a thin smile. 'You mean the idea of an Evil Principle working to ruin humanity?'

'Yes,' said Mr Patson. 'Firbright said that the old notion of a scarlet-and-black sulphuric Satan, busy tempting people, was of course all wrong, though it might have been right at one time, perhaps in the Middle Ages. Then the devils were all fire and energy. Firbright quoted the poet Blake—I've read him since—to show that these weren't real devils and their Hell wasn't the real Hell. Blake, in fact, according to Firbright, was the first man here to suggest we didn't understand the Evil Principle, but in his time it had hardly made a start. It's during the last few years, Firbright said, that the horrible thing has really got to work on us.'

'Got to work on us?' Dr Smith raised his eyebrows. 'Doing what?'

8 J. B. Priestley

The main object, I gathered from what Firbright said,' Mr Patson replied earnestly, 'is to make mankind go the way the social insects went, to turn us into automatic creatures, mass beings without individuality, soulless machines of flesh and blood.'

The doctor seemed amused. 'And why should the Evil Principle want to do that?'

'To destroy the soul of humanity,' said Mr Patson, without an answering smile. 'To eliminate certain states of mind that belong essentially to the Good. To wipe from the face of this earth all wonder, joy, deep feeling, the desire to create, to praise life. Mind you, that is what Firbright said.'

'But you believed him?'

'I couldn't help feeling, even then, that there was something in it. I'd never thought on those lines before—I'm just a plain business man and not given to fancy speculation—but I had been feeling for some time that things were going wrong and that somehow

they seemed to be out of our control. In theory I suppose we're responsible for the sort of lives we lead, but in actual practice we find ourselves living more and more the kind of life we don't like. It's as if,' Mr Patson continued rather wildly, avoiding the doctor's eyes, we were all compelled to send our washing to one huge sinister laundry, which returned everything with more and more colour bleached out of it until it was all a dismal grey.'

'I take it,' said Dr Smith, 'that you are now telling me what you thought and felt yourself, and not what you overheard this man Firbright say?'

'About the laundry—yes. And about things never going the right way. Yes, that's what I'd been feeling. As if the shape and colour and smell of things were going. Do you understand what I mean, doctor?'

'Oh—yes—it's part of a familiar pattern. Your age may have something to do with it—'

'I don't think so,' said Mr Patson sturdily. 'This is something quite different. I've made all allowance for

that.'

'So far as you can, no doubt,' said Dr Smith smoothly, without any sign of resentment. 'You must also remember that the English middle class, to which you obviously belong, has suffered recently from the effects of what has been virtually an economic and social revolution. Therefore any member of that class—and I am one myself—can't help feeling that life does not offer the same satisfactions as it used to do, before the War.'

'Doctor Smith,' cried Mr Patson, looking straight at him now, 'I know all about that—my wife and her friends have enough to say about it, never stop grumbling. But this is something else. I may tell you, I've always been a Liberal and believed in social reform. And if this was a case of one class getting a bit less, and another class getting a bit more, my profits going down and my clerks' and warehousemen's wages going up, I wouldn't lose an hour's sleep over it. But what I'm talking about is something quite different. Economics and politics and social changes may come into it, but *they're just being used.*'

'I don't follow you there, Mr Patson.'

'You will in a minute, doctor. I want to get back to what I overheard Firbright saying, that night. I got away from it just to make the point that I couldn't help feeling at once there was something in what he said. Just because for the first time somebody had given me a reason why these things were happening.' He regarded the other man earnestly.

Smiling thinly, Dr Smith shook his head. 'The hypothesis of a mysterious but energetic Evil Principle, Mr Patson, doesn't offer us much of a reason.'

'It's a start,' replied Mr Patson, rather belligerently. 'And of course that wasn't all, by any means. Now we come to these agents.'

'Ah—yes—the agents,' Dr Smith looked very grave now. 'It was Firbright who gave you that idea, was it?'

'Yes, it would never have occurred to me, I'll

12 *J. B. Priestley*

admit. But if this Evil Principle was trying to make something like insects out of us, it could do it two ways. One—by a sort of remote control, perhaps by a sort of continuous radio programme, never leaving our minds alone, telling us not to attempt anything new, to play safe, not to have any illusions, to keep to routine, nor to waste time and energy wondering and brooding and being fanciful, and all that.'

'Did Firbright suggest something of that sort was happening?'

'Yes, but it wasn't his own idea. The man he'd been talking about before I listened to him, somebody he'd met in the Near East, had told him definitely all that non-stop propaganda was going on. But the other way—direct control, you might call it—was by the use of these agents—a sort of Evil Fifth Column—with more and more of 'em everywhere, hard at work.'

'Devils?' enquired the doctor, smiling. 'Demons? What?'

That's what they amount to,' said Mr Patson, not

returning the smile but frowning a little. 'Except that it gives one a wrong idea of them—horns and tails and that sort of thing. These are quite different, Firbright said. All you can definitely say is that they're not human. They don't belong to us. They don't like us. They're working against us. They have their orders. They know what they're doing. They work together in teams. They arrange to get jobs for one another, more and more influence and power. So what chance have we against them?' And Mr Patson asked this question almost at the top of his voice.

'If such beings existed,' Dr Smith replied calmly, 'we should soon be at their mercy, I agree. But then they don't exist —except of course as figures of fantasy, although in that capacity they can do a great deal of harm. I take it, Mr Patson, that you have thought about—or shall we say *brooded over*—these demonic creatures rather a lot lately? Quite so. By the way, what do you call them? It might save time and possible confusion if we can give them a name.'

'They're the Grey Ones,' said Mr Patson without any hesitation.

'Ah—the Grey Ones.' Dr Smith frowned again and pressed his thin lips together, perhaps to show his disapproval of such a prompt reply. 'You seem very sure about this, Mr Patson.'

'Well, why shouldn't I be? You ask me what I call them, so I tell you. Of course, I don't know what they call themselves. And I didn't invent that name for them.'

'Oh—this is Firbright again, is it?'

'Yes, that's what I heard him calling them, and it seemed to me a very good name for them. They're trying to give everything a grey look, aren't they? And there's something essentially grey about these creatures themselves—none of your gaudy, red and black, Mephistopheles stuff about *them*. Just quiet grey fellows busy greying everything—that's them.'

'Is it indeed? Now I want to be quite clear about this, Mr Patson. As I suggested earlier, this idea of the so-called Grey Ones is something I can't dismiss

lightly, just because it might have very serious anti-social effects. It is one thing to entertain a highly fanciful belief in some mysterious Evil Principle, working on us for its own evil ends. It is quite another thing to believe that actual fellow-citizens, probably highly conscientious and useful members of the community, are not human beings at all but so many masquerading demons. You can see that, can't you?'

'Of course I can,' said Mr Patson, with a flick of impatience. 'I'm not stupid, even though I may have given you the impression that I am. This idea of the Grey Ones—well, it brings the whole thing home to you, doesn't it? Here they are, busy as bees round every corner, you might say.'

The doctor smiled. 'Yet you've never met one. Isn't that highly suggestive? Doesn't that make you ask yourself what truth there can be in this absurd notion? All these Grey Ones, seeking power over us, influencing our lives, and yet you've never actually come into contact with one. Now —now—Mr Patson—' And he wagged a finger.

'Who says I've never met one?' Mr Patson demanded indignantly. 'Where did you get that idea from, doctor?'

'Do you mean to tell me—?'

'Certainly I mean to tell you. I know at least a dozen of 'em. My own brother-in-law is one.'

Dr Smith looked neither shocked nor surprised. He merely stared searchingly for a moment or two, then rapidly made some notes. And now he stopped sounding like a rather playful schoolmaster and became a doctor in charge of a difficult case. 'So that's how it is, Mr Patson. You know at least a dozen Grey Ones, and one of them is your brother-in-law. That's correct, isn't it? Good! Very well, let us begin with your brother-in-law. When and how did you make the discovery that he is a Grey One?'

'Well, I'd wondered about Harold for years,' said Mr Patson slowly. 'I'd always disliked him but I never quite knew why. He'd always puzzled me too. He's one of those chaps who don't seem to have any

centre you can understand. They don't act from any ordinary human feeling. They haven't motives you can appreciate. It's as if there was nothing inside 'em. They seem to tick over like automatic machines. Do you know what I mean, doctor?'

'It would be better now if you left me out of it. Just tell me what you thought and felt—about Harold, for instance.'

'Yes, Harold. Well, he was one of them. No centre, no feeling, no motives. I'd try to get closer to him, just for my wife's sake, although they'd never been close. I'd talk to him at home, after dinner, and sometimes I'd take him out. You couldn't call him unfriendly—that at least would have been *something*. He'd listen, up to a point, while I talked. If I asked him a question, he'd make some sort of reply. He'd talk himself in a kind of fashion, rather like a leading article in one of the more cautious newspapers. Chilly stuff, grey stuff. Nothing exactly wrong with it, but nothing right about it either. And after a time, about half an hour or so, I'd find it hard to talk to him, even about my own affairs. I'd begin wondering what to say next.

There'd be a sort of vacuum between us. He had a trick, which I've often met elsewhere, of deliberately not encouraging you to go on, of just staring, waiting for you to say something silly. Now I put this down to his being a public official. When I first knew him, he was one of the assistants to the Clerk of our local Borough Council. Now he's the Clerk, quite a good job, for ours is a big borough. Well, a man in that position has to be more careful than somebody like me has. He can't let himself go, has too many people to please—or rather, not to offend. And one thing was certain about Harold—and that ought to have made him more human, but somehow it didn't—and that was that he meant to get on. He had ambition, but there again it wasn't an ordinary human ambition, with a bit of fire and nonsense in it somewhere, but a sort of cold determination to keep on moving up. You see what I mean? Oh —I forgot—no questions. Well, that's how he was—and it. But then I noticed another thing about Harold. And even my wife had to agree about this. He was what we called a damper.

If you took him out to enjoy something, he not only didn't enjoy it himself but he contrived somehow

to stop you enjoying it. I'm very fond of a good show—and don't mind seeing a really good one several times—but if I took Harold along then it didn't matter what it was, I couldn't enjoy it. He wouldn't openly attack it or sneer at it, but somehow by just being there, sitting beside you, he'd cut it down and take all the colour and fun out of it. You'd wonder why you'd wasted your evening and your money on such stuff. It was the same if you tried him with a football or cricket match, you'd have a boring afternoon. And if you asked him to a little party, it was fatal. He'd be polite, quite helpful, do whatever you asked him to do, but the party would never get going. It would be just as if he was invisibly spraying us with some devilish composition that made us all feel tired and bored and depressed. Once we were silly enough to take him on a holiday with us motoring through France and Italy. It was the worst holiday we ever had. He killed it stone dead. Everything he looked at seemed smaller and duller and greyer than it ought to have been. Chartres, the Loire country, Provence, the Italian Riviera, Florence, Siena—they were all cut down and greyed over, so that we wondered why we'd ever bothered to arrange such a trip and hadn't stuck to Torquay and

Bournemouth. Then, before I'd learnt more sense, I'd talk to him about various plans I had for improving the business, but as soon as I'd described any scheme to Harold I could feel my enthusiasm ebbing away. I felt—or he made me feel—any possible development wasn't worth the risk. Better stick to the old routine. I think I'd have been done for now if I hadn't had sense enough to stop talking to Harold about the business. If he asked me about any new plans, I'd tell him I hadn't any. Now all this was long before I knew about the Grey Ones. But I had Harold on my mind, particularly as he lived and worked so close to us. When he became Clerk to the Council, I began to take more interest in our municipal affairs, just to see what influence Harold was having on them. I made almost a detective job of it. For instance, we'd had a go-ahead, youngish Chief Education Officer, but he left and in his place a dull timid fellow was appointed. And I found out that Harold had worked that. Then we have a lively chap as Entertainments Officer, who'd brightened things up a bit, but Harold got rid of him too. Between them, he and his friend, the Treasurer, who was another of them, managed to put an end to everything that added a little colour and sparkle to life round our

way. Of course they always had a good excuse—economy and all that. But I noticed that Harold and the Treasurer only made economies in one direction, what you might call the anti-grey side, and never stirred themselves to save money in other directions, in what was heavily official, pompous, interfering, irritating, depressing, calculated to make you lose heart. And you must have noticed yourself that we never do save money in those directions, either in municipal or national affairs, and that what I complained of in our borough was going on all over the country—yes, and as far as I can make out, in a lot of other countries too.'

Dr Smith waited a moment or two, and then said rather sharply: 'Please continue, Mr Patson. If I wish to make a comment or ask a question, I will do so.'

That's what I meant earlier,' said Mr Patson, 'when I talked about economics and politics and social changes just being used. I've felt all the time there was something behind 'em. If we're doing it for ourselves, it doesn't make sense. But the answer is of

course that we're not doing it for ourselves, we're just being manipulated. Take Communism. The Grey Ones must have almost finished the job in some of those countries —they hardly need to bother any more. All right, we don't like Communism. We must make every possible effort to be ready to fight it. So what happens? More and more of the Grey Ones take over. This is their chance. So either way they win and we lose. We're further along the road we never wanted to travel. Nearer the bees, ants, termites. Because we're being pushed. My God—doctor—can't you feel it yourself?'

'No, I can't, but never mind about me. And don't become too general, please. What about your brother-in-law, Harold? When did you decide he was a Grey One?'

'As soon as I began thinking over what Firbright said,' replied Mr Patson. 'I'd never been able to explain Harold before—and God knows I'd tried often enough. Then I saw at once he was a Grey One. He wasn't born one, of course, for that couldn't possibly be how it works. My guess is that sometime while he was still

young, the soul or essence of the real Harold Sothers was drawn out and a Grey One slipped in. That must be going on all the time now, there are so many of them about. Of course they recognize each other and help each other, which makes it easy for them to handle us humans. They know exactly what they're up to. They receive and give orders. It's like having a whole well-disciplined secret army working against us. And the only possible chance now is to bring 'em out into the open and declare war on 'em.'

'How can we do that,' asked Dr Smith, smiling a little, 'if they're secret?'

'I've thought a lot about that,' said Mr Patson earnestly, 'and it's not so completely hopeless as you might think. After a time you begin to recognize a few. Harold, for instance. And our Borough Treasurer. I'm certain he's one. Then, as I told you at first, there are about a dozen more that I'd willingly stake a bet on. Yes, I know what you're wondering, doctor. If they're all officials, eh? Well no, they aren't, though seven or eight of 'em are—and you can see why—because that's where the power is now. Another two are up-and-

coming politicians—and not in the same Party either. One's a banker I know in the City—and he's a Grey One all right. I wouldn't have been able to spot them if I hadn't spent so much time either with Harold or wondering about him. They all have the same cutting-down and bleaching stare, the same dead touch. Wait till you see a whole lot of 'em together, holding a conference.' Then Mr Patson broke off abruptly, as if he felt he had said too much.

Dr Smith raised his eyebrows so that they appeared above his spectacles, not unlike hairy caterpillars on the move. 'Perhaps you would like a cigarette now, Mr Patson. No, take one of these. I'm not a smoker myself but I'm told they're excellent. Ah—you have a light. Good! Now take it easy for a minute or two because I think you're tiring a little. And it's very important you should be able to finish your account of these—er—Grey Ones, if possible without any hysterical over-emphasis. No, no—Mr Patson—I didn't mean to suggest there'd been any such over-emphasis so far. You've done very well indeed up to now, bearing in mind the circumstances. And it's a heavy sort of day, isn't it? We seem to have too many

days like this, don't we? Or is it simply that we're not getting any younger?' He produced his long-run actor's laugh. Then he brought his large white hands together, contrived to make his lips smile without taking the hard stare out of his eyes, and said finally: 'Now then, Mr Patson. At the point you broke off your story, shall we call it, you had suggested that you had seen a whole lot of Grey Ones together, holding a conference. I think you might very usefully enlarge that rather astonishing suggestion, don't you?'

Mr Patson looked and sounded troubled. 'I'd just as soon leave that, if you don't mind, doctor. You see, if it's all nonsense, then there's no point in my telling you about that business. If it isn't all nonsense—'

'Yes,' said Dr Smith, after a moment, prompting him, 'if it isn't all nonsense—?'

'Then I might be saying too much.' And Mr Patson looked about for an ashtray as if to hide his embarrassment.

There—at your elbow, Mr Patson. Now please

look at me. And remember what I said earlier. I am not interested in fanciful theories of the universe or wildly imaginative interpretations of present world conditions. All I'm concerned with here, in my professional capacity, is your state of mind, Mr Patson. That being the case, it's clearly absurd to suggest that you might be saying too much. Unless you are perfectly frank with me, it will be very difficult for me to help you. Come now, we agreed about that. So far you've followed my instructions admirably. All I ask now is for a little more cooperation. Did you actually attend what you believed to be a conference of these Grey Ones?'

'Yes, I did,' said Mr Patson, not without some reluctance. 'But I'll admit I can't prove anything. The important part may be something I imagined. But if you insist, I'll tell you what happened. I overheard Harold and our Borough Treasurer arranging to travel together to Maundby Hall, which is about fifteen miles north of where I live. I'd never been there myself but I'd heard of it in connection with various summer schools and conferences and that sort of thing. Perhaps you know it, Dr Smith?'

'As a matter of fact, I do. I had to give a paper there one Saturday night. It's a rambling Early Victorian mansion, with a large ballroom that's used for the more important meetings.'

That's the place. Well, it seems they were going there to attend a conference of the New Era Community Planning Association. And when I heard them saying that, first I told myself how lucky I was not to be going too. Then afterwards, thinking it over, I saw that if you wanted to hold a meeting that no outsider in his senses would want to attend, you couldn't do better than hold it in a country house that's not too easy to get at, and call it a meeting or conference of the New Era Community Planning Association. I know if anybody said to me "Come along with me and spend the day listening to the New Era Community Planning Association," I'd make any excuse to keep away. Of course it's true that anybody like Harold couldn't be bored. The Grey Ones are never bored, which is one reason why they are able to collar and hold down so many jobs nowadays, the sort of jobs that reek of boredom. Well, this New Era

Community Planning Association might be no more than one of the usual societies of busybodies, cranks and windbags. But then again it might be something very different, and I kept thinking about it in connection with the Grey Ones. Saturday was the day of the conference. I went down to my office in the morning, just to go through the post and see if there was anything urgent, and then went home to lunch. In the middle of the afternoon I felt I had to know what was happening out at Maundby Hall, so off I went in my car, I parked it just outside the grounds, scouted round a bit, then found an entrance through a little wood at the back. There was nobody about, and I sneaked into the house by way of a servants' door near the pantries and larders. There were some catering people around there, but nobody bothered me. I went up some back stairs and after more scouting, which I enjoyed as much as anything I've done this year, I was guided by the sound of voices to a small door in a corridor upstairs. This door was locked on the inside, but a fellow had once shown me how to deal with a locked door when the key's still in the lock on the other side. You slide some paper under the door, poke the key out so that it falls on to the

paper and then slide the paper back with the key on it. Well, this trick worked and I was able to open the door, which I did very cautiously. It led to a little balcony overlooking the floor of the ballroom. There was no window near this balcony so that it was rather dark up there and I was able to creep down to the front rail without being seen. There must have been between three and four hundred of them in that ballroom, sitting on little chairs. This balcony was high above the platform, so I had a pretty good view of them as they sat facing it. They looked like Grey Ones, but of course I couldn't be sure. And for the first hour or so, I couldn't be sure whether this really was a meeting of the New Era Community Planning Association or a secret conference of Grey Ones. The stuff they talked would have done for either. That's where the Grey Ones are so damnably clever. They've only to carry on doing what everybody expects them to do, in their capacity as sound conscientious citizens and men in authority, to keep going with their own hellish task. So there I was, getting cramp, no wiser. Another lot of earnest busybodies might be suggesting new ways of robbing us of our individuality. Or an organized convoy of masquerading devils and demons

might be making plans to bring us nearer to the insects, to rob us of our souls. Well, I was just about to creep back up to the corridor, giving it up as a bad job, when something happened.' He stopped, and looked dubiously at his listener.

'Yes, Mr Patson,' said Dr Smith encouragingly, 'then something happened?'

'This is the part you can say I imagined, and I can't prove that I didn't. But I certainly didn't dream it, because I was far too cramped and aching to fall asleep. Well, the first thing I noticed was a sudden change in the atmosphere of the meeting. It was as if somebody very important had arrived, although I didn't see anybody arriving. And I got the impression that the *real* meeting was about to begin. Another thing—I knew for certain now that this was no random collection of busybodies and windbags, that they were all Grey Ones. If you ask me to tell you in detail how I knew, I couldn't begin. But I noticed something else, after a minute or two. These Grey Ones massed together down there had now a positive quality of their own, which I'd never discovered before. It wasn't that

they were just negative, not human, as they were at ordinary times; they had this positive quality, which I can't describe except as a sort of chilly hellishness. As if they'd stopped pretending to be human and were letting themselves go, recovering their demon natures. And here I'm warning you, doctor, that my account of what happened from then is bound to be sketchy and peculiar. For one thing, I wasn't really well placed up in that balcony, not daring to show myself and only getting hurried glimpses; and for another thing, I was frightened. Yes, doctor, absolutely terrified. I was crouching there just above three or four hundred creatures from cold cold hell. That quality I mentioned, that chilly hellishness, seemed to come rolling over me in waves. I might have been kneeling on the edge of a pit of iniquity a million miles deep. I felt the force of this hellishness not on the outside but inside, as if the very essence of me was being challenged and attacked. One slip, a black-out, and then I might waken up to find myself running a concentration camp, choosing skins for lampshades. Then somebody, something, arrived. Whoever or whatever they'd been waiting for was down there on the platform. I knew that definitely. But I couldn't see him or it. All I could

make out was a sort of thickening and whirling of the air down there. Then out of that a voice spoke, the voice of the leader they had been expecting. But this voice didn't come from outside, through my ears. It spoke inside me, right in the centre, so that it came out to my attention, if you see what I mean. Rather, like a small, very clear voice on a good telephone line, but coming from inside. I'll tell you frankly I didn't want to stay there and listen, no matter what big secrets were coming out; all I wanted to do was to get away from there as soon as I could but for a few minutes I was too frightened to make the necessary moves.'

'Then you heard what this—er—voice was saying, Mr Patson?' the doctor asked.

'Some of it—yes.'

'Excellent! Now this is important.' And Dr Smith pointed his beautiful fountain pen at Mr Patson's left eye. 'Did you learn from it anything you hadn't known before? Please answer me carefully.'

'I'll tell you one thing you won't believe,' cried Mr Patson. 'Not about the voice—we'll come to that—but about those Grey Ones. I risked a peep while the voice was talking, and what I saw nearly made me pass out. There they were— three or four hundred of 'em—not looking human at all, not making any attempt; they'd all gone back to their original shapes. They looked—this is the nearest I can get to it—like big semi-transparent toads—and their eyes were like six hundred electric lamps burning under water, all greeny, unblinking, and shining out of Hell.'

'But what did you hear the voice say?' Dr Smith was urgent now. 'How much can you remember? That's what I want to know. Come along, man.'

Mr Patson passed a hand across his forehead and then looked at the edge of his hand with some astonishment, as if he had not known it would be so wet. 'I heard it thank them in the name of Adaragraffa—Lord of the Creeping Hosts. Yes, I could have imagined it—only I never knew I'd that sort of imagination. And what is imagination anyhow?'

What else—what else—did you hear, man?'

'Ten thousand more were to be drafted into the Western Region. There would be promotions for some there who'd been on continuous duty longest. There was to be a swing over from the assault by way of social conditions, which could almost look after itself now, to the draining away of character, especially in the young of the doomed species. Yes, those were the very words,' Mr Patson shouted, jumping up and waving his arms. 'Especially in the young of the doomed species. Us—d'you understand—us. And I tell you —we haven't a chance unless we start fighting back now —*now*—yes, and with everything we've got left. Grey Ones. And more and more of them coming, taking charge of us, giving us a push here, a shove there—down—down—down—'

Mr Patson found his arms strongly seized and held by the doctor, who was clearly a man of some strength. The next moment he was being lowered into his chair. 'Mr Patson,' said the doctor sternly, 'you must not excite yourself in this fashion. I cannot allow it. Now I must ask you to keep still and quiet for a

minute while I speak to my partner, Dr Meyenstein. It's for your own good. Now give me your promise.'

'All right, but don't be long,' said Mr Patson, who suddenly felt quite exhausted. As he watched the doctor go out, he wondered if he had not said either too much or not enough. Too much, he felt, if he was to be accepted as a sensible business man who happened to be troubled by some neurotic fancies. Not enough, perhaps to justify, in view of the doctor's obvious scepticism, the terrible shaking excitement that had possessed him at the end of their interview.

No doubt, round the corner, Doctors Smith and Meyenstein were having a good laugh over this rubbish about Grey Ones. Well, they could try and make him laugh too. He would be only too delighted to join them, if they could persuade him he had been deceiving himself. Probably that is what they would do now.

'Well, Mr Patson,' said Dr Smith, at once brisk and grave, as he returned with two other men, one of them Dr Meyenstein and the other a bulky fellow in

white who might be a male nurse. All three moved forward slowly as Dr Smith spoke to him. 'You must realize that you are a very sick man —sick in mind if not yet sick in body. So you must put yourself in our hands.'

Even as he nodded in vague agreement, Mr Patson saw what he ought to have guessed before, that Dr Smith was a Grey One, and that now he had brought two more Grey Ones with him. There was a fraction of a moment, as the three men bore down upon him to silence his warning for ever, when he thought he caught another glimpse of the creatures in the ballroom, three of them now like big semi-transparent toads, six eyes like electric lamps burning under water, all greeny, unblinking, shining triumphantly out of Hell ...

THE END