Tom's Midnight Garden

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The Way to Sattin Shore

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Philippa Pearce

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I
Exile

If, standing alone on the back doorstep, Tom allowed himself to weep tears, they were tears of anger. He looked his good-bye at the garden, and raged that he had to leave it—leave it and Peter. They had planned to spend their time here so joyously these holidays.

Town gardens are small, as a rule, and the Longs' garden was no exception to the rule; there was a vegetable plot and a grass plot and one flower-bed and a rough patch by the back fence. In this last the apple-tree grew: it was

large, but bore very little fruit, and accordingly the two boys had always been allowed to climb freely over it. These holidays they would have built a tree-house among its branches.

Tom gazed, and then turned back into the house. As he passed the foot of the stairs, he called up, 'Good-bye, Peter!' There was a croaking answer.

He went out on to the front doorstep, where his mother was waiting with his suitcase. He put his hand out for it, but Mrs Long clung to the case for a moment, claiming his attention first. 'You know, Tom,' she said, 'it's not nice for you to be rushed away like this to avoid the measles, but it's not nice for us either. Your father and I will miss you, and so will Peter. Peter's not having a nice time, anyway, with measles.'

'I didn't say you'd all be having a nice time without me,' said Tom. 'All I said was—'

'Hush!' whispered his mother, looking past him to the road and the car that waited there and the man at its driving-wheel. She gave Tom the case, and then bent over him, pushing his tie up to cover his collar-button and letting her lips come to within a few inches of his ear. 'Tom, dear Tom—' she murmured, trying to prepare him for the weeks ahead, 'remember that you will be a visitor, and do try—oh, what can I say?—try to be *good.'*

She kissed him, gave him a dismissive push towards the car and then followed him to it. As Tom got in, Mrs Long looked past him to the driver. 'Give my love to Gwen,' she said, 'and tell her, Alan, how grateful we are to you both for taking Tom off at such short notice. It's very kind of you, isn't it, Tom?'

'Very kind,' Tom repeated bitterly.

'There's so little room in the house,' said Mrs Long, 'when there's illness.'

'We're glad to help out,' Alan said. He started the engine.

Tom wound down the window next to his mother. 'Good-bye then!'

'Oh, Tom!' Her lips trembled. 'I am sorry—spoiling the beginning of your summer holidays like this!'

The car was moving; he had to shout back: 'I'd rather have had measles with Peter—much rather!'

Tom waved good-bye angrily to his mother, and then, careless even of the cost to others, waved to an inflamed face pressed against a bedroom window. Mrs Long looked upwards to see what was there, raised her hands in a gesture of despair—Peter was supposed to keep strictly to his bed—and hurried indoors.

Tom closed the car window and sat back in his seat, in hostile silence. His uncle cleared his throat and said: 'Well, I hope we get on reasonably well.'

This was not a question, so Tom did not answer it.

He knew he was being rude, but he made excuses for himself: he did not much like Uncle Alan, and he did not want to like him at all. Indeed, he would have preferred him to be a brutal uncle. 'If only he'd beat me,' thought Tom, 'then I could run away home, and Mother and Father would say I did right, in spite of the quarantine for measles. But he'll never even try to beat me, I know; and Aunt Gwen—she's worse, because she's a child-lover, and she's kind. Cooped up for weeks with Uncle Alan and Aunt Gwen in a poky flat . . . ' He had

never visited them before, but he knew that they lived in a flat, with no garden.

They drove in silence. Their route took them through Ely; but they only stopped for Alan Kitson to buy a picture-postcard of the cathedral tower. It was for Tom. Tom was bitterly disappointed that he was not allowed to climb the tower, but his uncle pointed out to him with great reasonableness that this was quite out of the question: he was in quarantine for measles. He must not mix with Peter, in case he caught his measles; and he must not mix with other people either, in case he already *had* Peter's measles. Fortunately, the Kitsons had both had measles, anyway.

They drove on through Ely and the Fens, and then through Castleford and beyond, to where the Kitsons lived, in a big house now converted into flats. The house was crowded round with newer, smaller houses that beat up to its very confines in a broken sea of bay-windows and gable-ends and pinnacles. It was the only big house among them: oblong, plain, grave.

Alan Kitson sounded the car-horn and turned into the drive—only it was really too short to be called a drive now. 'The house had a better frontage, I believe, until they built up opposite, and had to widen the road too.' He pulled up outside a pillared front-door; and Aunt Gwen appeared in the doorway, laughing and wanting to kiss Tom. She drew him inside, and Uncle Alan followed with the luggage.

There were cold stone flags under Tom's feet, and in his nostrils a smell of old dust that it had been nobody's business to disperse. As he looked round, he felt a chill.

The hall of the big house was not mean nor was it ugly, but it was unwelcoming. Here it lay at the heart of the house—for it went centrally from front to back with a sideways part to the stair-foot, in a T-shape—and the heart of the house was empty—cold—dead. Someone had pinned bright travel-posters on to the high, grey walls; someone had left a laundry-box with its laundry-list, in a corner; there were empty milk-bottles against a far door, with a message to the milkman: none of these things seemed really to belong to the hall. It remained empty and silent—silent unless one counted the voice of Aunt Gwen chattering on about Tom's mother and Peter's measles. When her voice died for a moment, Tom heard the only sound that went on: the tick, and then tick, and then tick, of a grandfather clock.

'No, don't touch it, Tom,' said Aunt Gwen, as he turned towards it. She lowered her voice. 'It belongs to old Mrs Bartholomew upstairs, and she's rather particular about it.'

Tom had never looked inside a grandfather clock, and he thought it might be something to do later, privately: surely, he could just look. Now, with his back to the clock, innocently continuing to converse with his aunt, he slipped his finger-nails under the edge of the door of the pendulum-case, to try it . . .

'If Mrs Bartholomew's particular about her clock, why doesn't she have it upstairs with her?' Tom asked. He levered gently with his nails: the door was resisting him . . .

'Because the clock is screwed to the wall at the back, and the screws have rusted in,' said Aunt Gwen. 'Come away from it, do, Tom. Come up to tea.'

'Oh!' said Tom, as if he had not realized where he was standing. He moved away. The pendulum door had been locked.

They were going upstairs to the Kitsons' flat when, from behind them, the grandfather clock struck one, with stately emphasis. Uncle Alan frowned and made some cutting comment. The clock kept good time—its fingers were now correctly pointing to five o'clock—but it seldom chose to strike the right hour. It was utterly unreliable in its striking, Uncle Alan said. Moreover, the voice of the clock was so penetrating that he could even hear it being unreliable when he was upstairs in bed, at night.

They had reached the first floor, where the Kitsons lived. Beyond, another, narrow staircase mounted to the attic flat of Mrs Bartholomew, who owned the grandfather clock and, indeed, the whole house. She was the landlady, and the Kitsons—like the other inhabitants of the big house—were her tenants.

'This is our flat, Tom dear,' said Aunt Gwen; 'and here is the guest-room—your bedroom. I've put flowers in it, and books for you to read.' She smiled at him, begging him with her eyes to like staying here.

Tom's bedroom was lofty, but otherwise only of medium size. There was another door in it, like the door of entry. The window—large and large-paned—was one of those he had seen from outside. Tom had been preparing himself to play the grateful guest; but—

'But there are bars across the bottom of the window!' he burst out. 'This is a nursery! I'm not a baby!'

'Of course not—of course not!' Aunt Gwen cried, equally upset. 'It's nothing to do with you, Tom. This window had

bars across it when we came. The bathroom window had too, for that matter.'

Tom's suspicions were not entirely stilled.

When he was left to unpack, before tea, Tom examined the room more closely. The other door only led into a cupboard for clothes; the books were school stories for girls, from Aunt Gwen's own childhood; and there, above all—however much Aunt Gwen tried to explain them away—were the nursery bars to the window.

However, tea cheered Tom a little. Aunt Gwen had made a Devonshire tea, with boiled eggs, home-made scones and home-made strawberry jam and whipped cream. She was a good cook, she said, and she enjoyed cooking; she intended to spoil Tom for food while he was with them.

After tea, Tom wrote a letter of safe arrival to his mother. He enclosed a picture-postcard for Peter, with a very fair statement of his situation. 'I hope your measles are better,' he wrote. 'This is a picture of the cathedral tower at Ely.' (Tom knew that Peter would be interested: the two of them made a point of climbing church towers, as well as trees.) 'We came through Ely, but U.A. wouldn't let me go up the tower. The house here is flats and there isn't any garden. My bedroom window has bars, but A.G. says it's a mistake. The food is good.'

After reading this through, Tom decided—in fairness to Aunt Gwen—to underline the last sentence. He signed the postcard with his private device: an elongated cat, supposed to be a tom. It signified Tom Long.

He was marking in the whiskers of the cat, when he heard the sound of the grandfather clock from below in

the hall. Yes, you could hear it striking, very distinctly; you could count the strokes. Tom counted them, and smiled condescendingly: the clock was wrong again in its striking—senselessly wrong.

II
The Clock Strikes Thirteen

The striking of the grandfather clock became a familiar sound to Tom, especially in the silence of those nights when everyone else was asleep. He did not sleep. He would go to bed at the usual time, and then lie awake or half-awake for hour after hour. He had never suffered from sleeplessness before in his life,

and wondered at it now; but a certain tightness and unease in his stomach should have given him an answer. Sometimes he would doze, and then, in his half-dreaming, he became two persons, and one of him would not go to sleep but selfishly insisted on keeping the other awake with a little muttering monologue on whipped cream and shrimp sauce and rum butter and real mayonnaise and all the other rich variety of his diet nowadays. From that Tom was positively relieved to wake up again.

Aunt Gwen's cooking was the cause of Tom's sleeplessness—that and lack of exercise. Tom had to stay indoors and do crossword puzzles and jigsaw puzzles, and never even answered the door when the milkman came, in case he gave the poor man measles. The only exercise he took was in the kitchen when he was helping his aunt to cook those large, rich meals—larger and richer than Tom had ever known before.

Tom had few ideas on the causes and cures of sleeplessness, and it never occurred to him to complain. At first he tried to read himself to sleep with Aunt Gwen's schoolgirl stories. They did not even bore him enough for that; but he persevered with them. Then Uncle Alan had found him still reading at half-past eleven at night. There had been an outcry. After that Tom was rationed to ten minutes reading in bed; and he had to promise not to switch the bedroom light on again after it had been switched off and his aunt had bidden him good night. He did not regret the reading, but the dragging hours seemed even longer in the dark.

One night he had been lying awake as usual, fretting against the dark and against the knowledge that his uncle

and aunt would be sitting reading—talking—doing whatever they pleased—by the excellent electric lights of the sitting-room. Here *he* was, wide awake in the dark with nothing to do. He had borne it for what seemed many nights, but suddenly, tonight, he could bear it no more. He sat up, threw his bedclothes back with a masterful gesture, and stepped out of bed, though as yet with no clear purpose. He felt his way over to the bedroom door, opened it quietly and passed out into the tiny hall of the flat.

Tom could hear the sound of the ordered speaking of Uncle Alan, from behind the sitting-room door: he would be reading aloud from his favourite, clever weekly newspaper; Aunt Gwen would be devotedly listening, or asleep.

A moment's thought, and Tom had glided into the kitchen and thence into the larder. This would have been a routine move at home; he and Peter had often done it.

In Aunt Gwen's larder there were two cold pork chops, half a trifle, some bananas and some buns and cakes. Tom tried to persuade himself that he hesitated only because he didn't know which to choose, but he knew that he was not hungry. As a matter of form, he laid hold of a very plain, stale bun. Then, a great weariness of all food overcame him, and he put the bun down, leaving it to another day of existence.

He had been moving all this time in perfect silence—he would have been ashamed for his skill in such an expedition to have done otherwise. But he had ill-luck: as he went out from the kitchen and larder, he came face to face with his uncle coming from the sitting-room. His uncle's exclamation of surprise and disapproval brought his aunt out after him.

Tom knew that he was in the wrong, of course, but they need not have made such a fuss. Aunt Gwen was most upset because, if Tom slipped into the larder at night, that meant he was hungry. She was not feeding him properly. He was suffering from night starvation.

Uncle Alan, on the other hand, had not been unobservant of Tom at mealtimes, and he could not credit his being hungry. Besides, Tom had admitted he took nothing from the larder. Why had he been there, then? Was it a blind? What *was* it?

Tom never really convinced them of the simple truth: that a boy would naturally go into the larder, even if he were not hungry. Anyway, they pointed out, he was out of bed far too late. He was hustled back again, and his uncle stood over him to make a speech.

'Tom, there must be no more of this. You are not to put the light on again once it has been put out; nor, equally, are you to get out of bed. You must see the reasonableness—'

'Not even to get up in the morning?' Tom interrupted.

'Of course, that's different. Don't be silly, Tom. But you are not to get up otherwise. The reason is—'

'Can't I get up, even if I need to, badly?'

'Of course you must go to the lavatory, if you need to; but you will go straight back to bed afterwards. You go to bed at nine in the evening and get up at seven in the morning. That is ten hours. You need those ten hours' sleep because—'

'But, Uncle Alan, I don't sleep!'

'Will you be quiet, Tom!' shouted his uncle, suddenly losing his temper. 'I'm trying to reason with you! Now, where was I?'

'Ten hours' sleep,' said Tom subduedly.

'Yes, a child of your age needs ten hours of sleep. You must realize that, Tom. For that reason, you must be in bed for ten hours, as I have said. I am making clear to you, Tom, that Gwen and I wish you, entirely for your own good, to be in bed and, if possible, asleep for ten hours, as near as maybe, from nine o'clock at night. You understand, Tom?'

'Yes.'

'Now I want you to promise to observe our wishes. Will you promise, Tom?'

Why could a boy never refuse to promise these large demands? 'I suppose so,' said Tom. 'Yes.'

'There!' said Aunt Gwen; and Uncle Alan said: 'Good. I knew I could reason with you.'

'But, all the same, I don't sleep!'

Uncle Alan said sharply, 'All children sleep;' and Aunt Gwen added more gently: 'It's just your imagination, Tom.'

Poor Tom had no answer except contradiction, and he felt that would be unwise.

They left him.

He lay in the dark, planning a letter to his mother. 'Take me away. At once.' But no, that was perhaps cowardly, and would worry his mother dreadfully. He would unburden himself to Peter instead, although Peter, because of his measles, could not reply. He would tell Peter how miserably dull it was here, even at night: nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody—to speak of—to do things with. 'It's the worst hole I've ever been in,' he wrote, in imagination. 'I'd do anything to get out of it,

Peter—to be somewhere else—anywhere.' It seemed to him that his longing to be free swelled up in him and in the room, until it should surely be large enough to burst the walls and set him free indeed.

They had left him, and now they were going to bed. Uncle Alan took a bath, and Tom lay listening to him and hating him. For some reason, Tom could always hear what went on in the bathroom next door to his bedroom as clearly as if he were there himself: tonight he was almost in the bath with Uncle Alan. Later he heard other movements and conversation from elsewhere in the flat. Finally, the line of light under his door disappeared: that meant that the hall-light of the flat had been switched off for the night.

Slow silence, and then the grandfather clock struck for twelve. By midnight his uncle and aunt were always in bed, and asleep too, usually. Only Tom lay still open-eyed and sullen, imprisoned in wakefulness.

And at last—One! The clock struck the present hour; but, as if to show its independence of mind, went on striking—Two! For once Tom was not amused by its striking the wrong hour: Three! Four! 'It's one o'clock,' Tom whispered angrily over the edge of the bedclothes. 'Why don't you strike one o'clock, then, as the clocks would do at home?' Instead: Five! Six! Even in his irritation, Tom could not stop counting; it had become a habit with him at night. Seven! Eight! After all, the clock was the only thing that would speak to him at all in these hours of darkness. Nine! Ten! 'You are going it,' thought Tom, but yawning in the midst of his unwilling admiration. Yes, and it hadn't finished yet: Eleven! Twelve!

'Fancy striking midnight twice in one night!' jeered Tom, sleepily. Thirteen! proclaimed the clock, and then stopped striking.

Thirteen? Tom's mind gave a jerk: had it really struck thirteen? Even mad old clocks never struck that. He must have imagined it. Had he not been falling asleep, or already sleeping? But no, awake or dozing, he had counted up to thirteen. He was sure of it.

He was uneasy in the knowledge that this happening made some difference to him: he could feel that in his bones. The stillness had become an expectant one; the house seemed to hold its breath; the darkness pressed up to him, pressing him with a question: Come on, Tom, the clock has struck thirteen—what are you going to do about it?

'Nothing,' said Tom aloud. And then, as an afterthought: 'Don't be silly!'

What *could* he do, anyway? He had to stay in bed, sleeping or trying to sleep, for ten whole hours, as near as might be, from nine o'clock at night to seven o'clock the next morning. That was what he had promised when his uncle had reasoned with him.

Uncle Alan had been so sure of his reasoning; and yet Tom now began to feel that there had been some flaw in it . . . Uncle Alan, without discussing the idea, had taken for granted that there were twenty-four hours in a day—twice twelve hours. But suppose, instead, there were twice thirteen? Then, from nine at night to seven in the morning—with the thirteenth hour somewhere between—was more than ten hours: it was eleven. He could be in bed for ten hours, and still have an hour to spare—an hour of freedom.

But steady, steady! This was ridiculous: there simply were not thirteen hours in a half day, everyone knew that. But why had the clock said there were, then? You couldn't get round that. Yes, but everyone knew the grandfather clock struck the hours at the wrong times of day—one o'clock when it was really five, and so on. Admittedly, argued the other Tom—the one that would never let the sleepy Tom go to sleep—admittedly the clock struck the hours at the wrong time; but, all the same, they *were* hours—real hours—hours that really existed. Now the clock had struck thirteen, affirming that—for this once at least—there was an extra, thirteenth hour.

'But it just can't be true,' said Tom aloud. The house, which appeared to have been following the argument, sighed impatiently. 'At least, I think it isn't true; and anyway it's muddling.' Meanwhile you're missing your chance, whispered the house. 'I can't honourably take it,' said Tom, 'because I don't believe the grandfather clock was telling the truth when it struck thirteen.' Oh, said the house coldly, so it's a liar, is it?

Tom sat up in bed, a little angry in his turn. 'Now,' he said, 'I'm going to prove this, one way or the other. I'm going to see what the clock fingers say. I'm going down to the hall.'

III
By Moonlight

This was a real expedition. Tom put on his bedroom slippers, but decided against his dressing-gown: after all, it was summer. He closed his bedroom door carefully behind him, so that it should not bang in his absence. Outside the front door of the flat he took off one

of his slippers; he laid it on the floor against the door jamb and then closed the door on to it, as on to a wedge. That would keep the door open for his return.

The lights on the first-floor landing and in the hall were turned out, for the tenants were all in bed and asleep, and Mrs Bartholomew was asleep and dreaming. The only illumination was a sideways shaft of moonlight through the long window part way up the stairs. Tom felt his way downstairs and into the hall.

Here he was checked. He could find the grandfather clock—a tall and ancient figure of black in the lesser blackness—but he was unable to read its face. If he opened its dial-door and felt until he found the position of the clock-hands, then his sense of touch would tell him the time. He fumbled first at one side of the door, then at the other; but there seemed no catch—no way in. He remembered how the pendulum-case door had not yielded to him either, on that first day. Both must be kept locked.

Hurry! hurry! the house seemed to whisper round him. The hour is passing . . . passing . . .

Tom turned from the clock to feel for the electric-light switch. Where had it been? His fingers swept the walls in vain: nowhere.

Light—light: that was what he needed! And the only light was the moonbeam that glanced sideways through the stairway window and spent itself at once and uselessly on the wall by the window-sill.

Tom studied the moonbeam, with an idea growing in his mind. From the direction in which the beam came, he saw that the moon must be shining at the back of the house. Very well, then, if he opened the door at the far

end of the hall—at the back of the house, that is—he would let that moonlight in. With luck there might be enough light for him to read the clock-face.

He moved down the hall to the door at its far end. It was a door he had never seen opened—the Kitsons used the door at the front. They said that the door at the back was only a less convenient way to the street, through a back-yard—a strip of paving where dustbins were kept and where the tenants of the ground-floor back flat garaged their car under a tarpaulin.

Never having had occasion to use the door, Tom had no idea how it might be secured at night. If it were locked, and the key kept elsewhere . . . But it was not locked, he found; only bolted. He drew the bolt and, very slowly, to make no sound, turned the door-knob.

Hurry! whispered the house; and the grandfather clock at the heart of it beat an anxious tick, tick.

Tom opened the door wide and let in the moonlight. It flooded in, as bright as daylight—the white daylight that comes before the full rising of the sun. The illumination was perfect, but Tom did not at once turn to see what it showed him of the clock-face. Instead he took a step forward on to the doorstep. He was staring, at first in surprise, then with indignation, at what he saw outside. That they should have deceived him—lied to him—like this! They had said, 'It's not worth your while going out at the back, Tom.' So carelessly they had described it: 'A sort of back-yard, very poky, with rubbish bins. Really, there's nothing to see.'

Nothing . . . Only this: a great lawn where flower-beds bloomed; a towering fir-tree, and thick, beetle-browed

yews that humped their shapes down two sides of the lawn; on the third side, to the right, a greenhouse almost the size of a real house; from each corner of the lawn, a path that twisted away to some other depths of garden, with other trees.

Tom had stepped forward instinctively, catching his breath in surprise; now he let his breath out in a deep sigh. He would steal out here tomorrow, by daylight. They had tried to keep this from him, but they could not stop him now—not his aunt, nor his uncle, nor the back flat tenants, nor even particular Mrs Bartholomew. He would run full tilt over the grass, leaping the flower-beds; he would peer through the glittering panes of the greenhouse—perhaps open the door and go in; he would visit each alcove and archway clipped in the yew-trees—he would climb the trees and make his way from one to another through thickly interlacing branches. When they came calling him, he would hide, silent and safe as a bird, among this richness of leaf and bough and tree-trunk.

The scene tempted him even now: it lay so inviting and clear before him—clear-cut from the stubby leaf-pins of the nearer yew-trees to the curled-back petals of the hyacinths in the crescent-shaped corner beds. Yet Tom remembered his ten hours and his honour. Regretfully he turned from the garden, back indoors to read the grandfather clock.

He re-crossed the threshold, still absorbed in the thought of what he had seen outside. For that reason, perhaps, he could not at once make out how the hall had become different: his eyes informed him of some

shadowy change; his bare foot was trying to tell him something . . .

The grandfather clock was still there, anyway, and must tell him the true time. It must be either twelve or one: there was no hour between. There is no thirteenth hour.

Tom never reached the clock with his inquiry, and may be excused for forgetting, on this occasion, to check its truthfulness. His attention was distracted by the opening of a door down the hall—the door of the ground-floor front flat. A maid trotted out.

Tom had seen housemaids only in pictures, but he recognized the white apron, cap and cuffs, and the black stockings. (He was not expert in fashions, but the dress seemed to him to be rather long for her.) She was carrying paper, kindling wood and a box of matches.

He had only a second in which to observe these things. Then he realized that he ought to take cover at once; and there was no cover to take. Since he must be seen, Tom determined to be the first to speak—to explain himself.

He did not feel afraid of the maid: as she came nearer, he saw that she was only a girl. To warn her of his presence without startling her, Tom gave a cough; but she did not seem to hear it. She came on. Tom moved forward into her line of vision; she looked at him, but looked through him, too, as though he were not there. Tom's heart jumped in a way he did not understand. She was passing him.

'I say!' he protested loudly; but she paid not the slightest attention. She passed him, reached the front door of the ground-floor back flat, turned the door-handle and went in. There was no bell-ringing or unlocking of the door.

Tom was left gaping; and, meanwhile, his senses began to insist upon telling him of experiences even stranger than this encounter. His one bare foot was on cold flagstone, he knew; yet there was a contradictory softness and warmth to this flagstone. He looked down and saw that he was standing on a rug—a tiger-skin rug. There were other rugs down the hall. His eyes now took in the whole of the hall—a hall that was different. No laundry box, no milk bottles, no travel posters on the walls. The walls were decorated with a rich variety of other objects instead: a tall Gothic barometer, a fan of peacock feathers, a huge engraving of a battle (hussars and horses and shot-riddled banners) and many other pictures. There was a big dinner gong, with its wash-leathered gong-stick hanging beside it. There was a large umbrella stand holding umbrellas and walking-sticks and a parasol and an air-gun and what looked like the parts of a fishing-rod. Along the wall projected a series of bracket-shelves, each table-high. They were of oak, except for one towards the middle of the hall, by the grandfather clock. That was of white marble, and it was piled high with glass cases of stuffed birds and animals. Enacted on its chilly surface were scenes of hot bloodshed: an owl clutched a mouse in its claws; a ferret looked up from the killing of its rabbit; in a case in the middle a red fox slunk along with a gamefowl hanging from its jaws.

In all that crowded hall, the only object that Tom recognized was the grandfather clock. He moved towards it, not to read its face, but simply to touch it—to reassure himself that this at least was as he knew it.

His hand was nearly upon it, when he heard a little

breath behind him that was the maid passing back the way she had come. For some reason, she did not seem to make as much sound as before. He heard her call only faintly: 'I've lit the fire in the parlour.'

She was making for the door through which she had first come, and, as Tom followed her with his eyes, he received a curious impression: she reached the door, her hand was upon the knob, and then she seemed to go. That was it exactly: she went, but not through the door. She simply thinned out, and went.

Even as he stared at where she had been, Tom became aware of something going on furtively and silently about him. He looked round sharply, and caught the hall in the act of emptying itself of furniture and rugs and pictures. They were not positively going, perhaps, but rather beginning to fail to be there. The Gothic barometer, for instance, was there, before he turned to look at the red fox; when he turned back, the barometer was still there, but it had the appearance of something only sketched against the wall, and the wall was visible through it; meanwhile the fox had slunk into nothingness, and all the other creatures were going with him; and, turning back again swiftly to the barometer, Tom found that gone already.

In a matter of seconds the whole hall was as he had seen it on his first arrival. He stood dumbfounded. He was roused from his stupefaction by the chill of a draught at his back: it reminded him that the garden door was left open. Whatever else had happened, he had really opened that door; and he must shut it. He must go back to bed.

He closed the door after a long look: 'I shall come

back,' he promised silently to the trees and the lawn and the greenhouse.

Upstairs, again, in bed, he pondered more calmly on what he had seen in the hall. Had it been a dream? Another possible explanation occurred to him: ghosts. That was what they could all have been: ghosts. The hall was haunted by the ghost of a housemaid and a barometer and a stuffed fox and a stuffed owl and by the ghosts of dozens of other things. Indeed, if it were haunted at all, the hall was overhaunted.

Ghosts . . . Tom doubtfully put his hand up out of the bedclothes to see if his hair were standing on end. It was not. Nor, he remembered, had he felt any icy chill when the maid had looked at him and through him.

He was dissatisfied with his own explanation, and suddenly sick of needing to explain at all. It was not as if the hall were of great interest, with or without a maid and all the rest; the garden was the thing. That was real. Tomorrow he would go into it: he almost had the feel of tree-trunks between his hands as he climbed; he could almost smell the heavy blooming of the hyacinths in the corner beds. He remembered that smell from home: indoors, from his mother's bulb pots, at Christmas and the New Year; outside, in their flower-bed, in the late spring. He fell asleep thinking of home.