

## The Merchant of Shadows

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I killed the car. And at once provoked such sudden, resonant quiet as if, when I switched off the ignition, I myself brought into being the shimmering late afternoon hush, the ripening sun, the very Pacific that, way below, at the foot of the cliff, shattered its foamy peripheries with the sound of a thousand distant cinema organs.

I'd never get used to California. After three years, still the enchanted visitor. However frequently I had been disappointed, I still couldn't help it, I still tingled with expectation, still always thought that something wonderful might happen.

Call me the Innocent Abroad.

All the same, you can take the boy out of London but you can't take London out of the boy. You will find my grasp of the local lingo enthusiastic but shaky. I call gas 'petrol', and so on. I don't intend to go native, I'm not here for good, I'm here upon a pilgrimage. I have hied me, like a holy palmer, from the dishevelled capital of a foggy, three-cornered island on the other side of the world where the light is only good for water-colourists to this place where, to wax metaphysical about it, Light was made Flesh.

I am a student of Light and Illusion. That is, of cinema. When first I clapped my eyes on that HOLLYWOODLAND sign back in the city now five hours' hard drive distant, I thought I'd glimpsed the Holy Grail.

And now, as if it were the most everyday thing in the

world, I was on my way to meet a legend. A living legend, who roosted on this lonely clifftop like a forlorn seabird.

I was parked in a gravelled lot where the rough track I'd painfully negotiated since I left the minor road that brought me from the freeway terminated. I shared the parking lot with a small, red, crap-caked Toyota truck that, some time ago, had seen better days. There was straw in the back. Funny kind of transportation for a legend. But I knew she was in there, behind the gated wall in front of me, and I needed a little time alone with the ocean before the tryst began. I climbed out of the car and crept close to the edge of the precipice.

The ocean shushed and tittered like an audience when the lights dim before the main feature.

The first time I saw the Pacific, I'd had a vision of sea gods, but not the ones I knew, oh, no. Not even Botticelli's prime 36B cup blonde ever came in on *this* surf. My entire European mythology capsized under the crash of waves Britannia never ruled and then I knew that the denizens of these deeps are *sui generis* and belong to no mythology but their weird own. They have the strangest eyes, lenses on stalks that go flicker, flicker, and give you the truth twenty-four times a second. Their torsos luminesce in every shade of technicolor but have no depth, no substance, no dimensionality. Beings from a wholly strange pantheon. Beautiful – but alien.

Aliens were somewhat on my mind, however, perhaps because I was somewhat alienated myself in LA, but also due to the obsession of my room-mate. While I researched my thesis, I was rooming back there in the city in an apartment over a New Age bookshop-cum-healthfood restaurant with a science fiction freak I'd met at a much earlier stage of studenthood during the chance intimacy of the mutual runs in Barcelona. Now he and I subsisted on brown

rice courtesy of the Japanese waitress from downstairs, with whom we were both on, ahem, intimate terms, and he was always talking about aliens. He thought most of the people you met on the streets were aliens cunningly simulating human beings. He thought the Venusians were behind it.

He said he had tested Hiroko's reality quotient sufficiently and *she* was clear, but I guessed from his look he wasn't too sure about me. That shared diarrhoea in the Plaza Real was proving a shaky bond. I stayed out of the place as much as possible. I kept my head down at school all day and tried to manifest humanity as well as I knew how whenever I came home for a snack, a shower and, if I got the chance, one of Hiroko's courteous if curiously impersonal embraces. Now my host showed signs of getting into leather. Would it soon be time to move?

It must be the light that sends them crazy, that white light now refracting from the sibilant Pacific, the precious light that, when it is distilled, becomes the movies. *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, the Great Art of Light and Shade as Athanasius Kircher put it, he who tinkered with magic lanterns four centuries ago in the Gothic north.

And from that Gothic north had come the object of the quest that brought me to this luminous hill-top – a long-dead Teutonic illusionist who'd played with light and shade as well as any. You know him as Hank Mann, that 'dark genius of the screen', the director with 'the occult touch', that neglected giant etc. etc. etc.

But stay, you may ask, how can a dead man, no matter how occult his touch, be the object of a quest?

Aha! In that cliff-top house he'd left the woman, part of whose legend was she was his widow.

He had been her ultimate husband. First (silent movies) she'd hitched up with an acrobatic cowboy and, when a pinto threw him, she'd joined a *soi-disant* Viennese tenor

for a season of kitschissimo musicals during early sound. Hank Mann turned her into an icon after he rescued her off a cardboard crag where he'd come upon her, yodelling. When Mann passed on, she shut up marital shop entirely, and her screen presence acquired the frozen majesty of one appreciating, if somewhat belatedly, the joys of abstinence. She never did another on-screen love scene, either.

If you are a true buff, you know that he was born Heinrich Mannheim. One or two titles in two or three catalogues survive from his early days at UFA, plus a handful of scratched, faded stills.

My correspondence with his relict, conducted through somebody who p.p.d for her in an illegible scrawl, finally produced this invitation. I'd been half-stunned with joy. I was, you understand, writing my thesis about Mannheim. He had become my pet, my hobby, my obsession.

But you must understand that I was prevaricating out of pure nerves. For she was far, far more than a Hollywood widow; she was the Star of Stars, no less, the greatest of them all . . . dubbed by *Time* magazine the 'Spirit of the Cinema' when, on her eightieth birthday, she graced its cover for the seventh time, with a smile like open day in a porcelain factory and a white lace mantilla on the curls that time had bleached with its inexorable peroxide. And had she not invited little me, me! to call for a chat, a drink, at this ambiguous hour, martini-time, the blue hour, when you fold up the day and put it away and shake out the exciting night?

Only surely she was well past the expectation of exciting times. She had become what Hiroko's people call a 'living national treasure'. Decade after ageless decade, movie after movie, 'the greatest star in heaven'. That was the promo. She'd no especial magic, either. She was no Gish, nor Brooks, nor Dietrich, nor Garbo, who all share the same

gift, the ability to reveal otherness. She *did* have a certain touch-me-not thing, that made her a natural for *film noir* in the Forties. Otherwise, she possessed only the extraordinary durability of her presence, as if continually incarnated afresh with the passage of time due to some occult operation of the Great Art of Light and Shade.

One odd thing. As Svengali, Hank Mann had achieved a posthumous success. Although it was he who had brushed her with stardust (she'd been a mere 'leading player' up till then), her career only acquired that touch of the fabulous after he adjourned to the great cutting room in the sky.

There was a scent of jasmine blowing over the wall from an invisible garden. I deeply ingested breath. I checked out my briefcase: notebook, recorder, tapes. I checked that the recorder contained tape. I was nervous as hell. And then there was nothing for it but, briefcase in hand, to summon the guts to stride up to her gate.

It was an iron gate with a sheet of zinc behind the wrought squiggles so you couldn't see through and, when I reached up to ring the bell, this gate creaked open of its own accord to let me in and then swung to behind me with a disconcerting, definitive clang. So there I was.

A plane broke the darkening dish of sky, that sealed up again behind it. Inside the garden, it was very quiet. Nobody came to meet me.

A flight of rough-cut stone steps led up to a pool surrounded by clumps of sweet-smelling weeds; I recognised lavender. A tree or two dropped late summer leaves on scummy water and, when I saw that pool, I couldn't help it, I started to shiver; I'll tell you why in a minute. That untended pool, in which a pair of dark glasses with one cracked lens rested on an emerald carpet of algae, along with an empty gin bottle.

On the terrace, a couple of rusty, white-enamelled chairs,

a lop-sided table. Then, fringed by a clump of cryptomeria, the house von Mannheim caused to be erected for his bride.

That house made the Bauhaus look baroque. An austere cube of pure glass, it exhibited the geometry of transparency at its most severe. Yet, just at that moment, it took all the red light of the setting sun into itself and flashed like a ruby slipper. I knew the wall of the vast glittering lounge gaped open to admit me, and only me, but I thought, well, if nobody has any objections, I'll just stick around on the terrace for a while, keep well away from that glass box that looks like nothing so much as the coffin for a classical modernist Snow White; let the lady come out to me.

No sound but the deep, distant bass of the sea; a gull or two; pines, hushing one another.

So I waited. And waited. And I found myself wondering just what it was the scent of jasmine reminded me of, in order to take my mind off what I knew damn well the swimming pool reminded me of – *Sunset Boulevard*, of course. And I knew damn well, of course I knew, that this was indeed the very pool in which my man Hank Mann succumbed back in 1940, so very long ago, when not even I nor my blessed mother, yet, was around to so much as piss upon the floor.

I waited until I found myself growing impatient. How does one invoke the Spirit of Cinema? Burn a little offering of popcorn and old fan magazines? Offer a libation of Jeyes' Fluid mixed with Kia Ora orange?

I found myself vengefully asserting that I knew one or two things about her old man that perhaps she never knew herself. For example, his grandmother's maiden name (Ernst). I knew he entered UFA and swept the cutting-room floor. I talked to the son he left behind in Germany shortly after conceiving him. Nice old buffer, early sixties, retired bank clerk, prisoner of war in Norfolk, England, 1942–6,

perfect English, never so much as met his father, no bitterness. Brought up exclusively by the first Frau Mannheim, actress. He showed me a still. Kohled eyes, expressionist cheekbones, star of Mannheim's UFA one-reeler of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, now lost. Frau von Mannheim, victim of the Dresden fire raid. Hm. Her son expressed no bitterness at that, either, and I felt ashamed until he told me she'd ended up the official mistress of a fairly nasty Nazi. Then I felt better.

I'd actually got to meet the second Mrs Mann, now a retired office cleaner and full-time lush in downtown LA. Once a starlet; lack of exposure terminated her career. Once a call girl. Age terminated her career. The years had dealt hardly with her. Vaguely, she recalled him, a man she once married. She'd had a hangover, he moved into her apartment. She'd still had a hangover. Then he moved out. *God*, she'd had a hangover. They divorced and she married somebody else, whose name escaped her. She accepted ten bucks off me with the negligent grace of habitual custom. I couldn't think why he'd married her and she couldn't remember.

Anyway, after I'd donated ten bucks and packed up my tape recorder, she, as if now I'd paid she felt she owed, started to rummage around amongst the cardboard boxes – shoe boxes, wine crates – with which her one-room competency was mostly furnished. Things tipped and slithered everywhere, satin dancing slippers, old hats, artificial flowers; spilled face powder rose up in clouds and out of the clouds, she, wheezing with triumph, emerged with a photograph.

Nothing so quaint as out-of-date porn. It was an artfully posed spanking pic. I knew him at once, with his odd, soft, pale, malleable face, the blond, slicked-down hair, the moustache, in spite of the gym slip, suspenders and black

silk stockings; he sprawled athwart the knee of the second Mrs Mann, who sported a long-line leather bra and splendid boots. Hand raised ready to smack his exposed botty, she turned upon the camera a toothy smile. She'd been quite pretty, in a spit-curved way. She said I could have the snap for a couple of hundred dollars but I was on a tight budget and thought it wouldn't add much to the history of film.

Foresightfully, von Mannheim had left Germany in good time, but he started over in Hollywood at the bottom (forgive the double entendre). His ascent, however, was brisk. Assistant art director, assistant director, director.

The masterpiece of Mann's Hollywood period is, of course, *Paracelsus* (1937), with Charles Laughton. Laughton's great bulk swims into pools of scalding light out of greater or lesser shoals of darkness like a vast monster of the deep, a great, black whale. The movie haunts you like a bad dream. Mann did not try to give you a sense of the past; instead, *Paracelsus* looks as if it had been made in the middle ages – the gargoyle faces, bodies warped with age, gaunt with famine, a claustrophobic sense of a limited world, of chronic, cramped unfreedom.

The Spirit of Cinema cameos in *Paracelsus* as the Gnostic goddess of wisdom, Sophia, in a kind of Rosicrucian sabbat scene. They were married, by then. Mann wanted his new bride nude for this sabbat, which caused a stir at the time and eventually he was forced to shoot only her disembodied face floating above suggestive shadow. Suggestive, indeed; from his piece of sleight of hand sprang two myths, one easily discredited by aficionados of the rest of her oeuvre, that she had the biggest knockers in the business, the other, less easily dismissed, that she was thickly covered with body hair from the sternum to the knee. Even Mann's ex-assistant director believed the latter. 'Furry as a spider,' he

characterised her. 'And just as damn lethal.' I'd smuggled a half-pint of Jack Daniels into his geriatric ward; he waxed virulent, he warned me to take a snake-bite kit to the interview.

*Paracelsus* was, needless to say, one of the greatest box-office disasters in the history of the movies. Plans were shelved for his long-dreamed-of *Faust*, with the Spirit either as Gretchen or as Mephistopheles, or as Gretchen doubling with Mephistopheles, depending on what he said in different interviews. Mann was forced to perpetrate a hack job, a wallowing melo with the Spirit as twins, a good girl in a blonde wig and a bad girl in a black one, from which his career never recovered and her own survival truly miraculous.

Shortly after this notorious stinker was released to universal jeers, he did the *A Star is Born* bit, although he walked, not into the sea, but into the very swimming pool, that one over there, in which his relict now disposes of her glassware.

As for the Spirit, she found a new director, was rumoured to have undergone a little, a very little plastic surgery, and, the next year, won her first Oscar. From that time on, she was unstoppable, though always she carried her tragedy with her, like a permanent widow's veil, giving her the spooky allure of a born-again *princesse lointaine*.

Who liked to keep her guests waiting.

In my nervous ennui, I cast my eyes round and round the terrace until I came upon something passing strange in the moist earth of a flowerbed.

Moist, therefore freshly watered, though not by whatever it was had left such amazing spoor behind it. No big-game hunter I, but I could have sworn that, impressed on the soil, as if in fresh concrete outside Graumann's Chinese

Theatre, was the print, unless the tiger lilies left it, of a large, clawed paw.

Did you know a lion's mane grows grey with age? I didn't. But the geriatric feline that now emerged from a clump of something odorous beneath the cryptomeria had snow all over his hairy eaves. He appeared as taken aback to see me as I was to bump into him. Our eyes locked. Face like a boxer with a broken nose. Then he tilted his enormous head to one side, opened his mouth – God, his breath was foul – and roared like the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth. With a modest blow of a single paw, he could have batted me arse over tip off the cliff half-way to Hawaii. I wouldn't say it was much comfort to see he'd had his teeth pulled out.

'Aw, come on, Pussy, he don't want to be gummed to death,' said a cracked, harsh, aged, only residually female voice. 'Go fetch Mama, now, there's a good boy.'

The lion grumbled a little in his throat but trotted off into the house with the most touching obedience and I took breath, again – I noticed I'd somehow managed not to for some little time – and sank into one of the white metal terrace chairs. My poor heart was going pit-a-pat, I can tell you, but the *personnage* who had at last appeared from somewhere in the darkening compound neither apologised for nor expressed concern about my nasty shock. She stood there, arms akimbo, surveying me with a satirical, piercing, blue eye.

Except for the jarring circumstance that in one hand she held a stainless steel, many-branched candlestick of awesomely chaste design, she looked like a superannuated lumberjack, plaid skirt, blue jeans, workboots, butch leather belt with a giant silver skull and crossbones for a buckle, coarse, cropped, grey hair escaping from a red bandana tied Indian-style around her head. Her skin was

wrinkled in pinpricks like the surface of parmesan cheese and a putty grey in colour.

'You the one that's come about the thesis?' she queried. Her diction was pure hillbilly.

I bumbled in the affirmative.

'He's come about the thesis,' she repeated to herself sardonically and discomfited me still further by again cackling to herself.

But now an ear-splitting roar announced action was about to commence. This Ma, or Pa, Kettle person set down her candlestick on the terrace table, briskly struck a match on the seat of her pants and applied the flame to the wicks, dissipating the gathering twilight as She rolled out the door. Rolled. She sat in a chrome and ivory leather wheelchair as if upon a portable throne. Her right hand rested negligently on the lion's mane. She was a sight to see.

How long had she spent dressing up for the interview? Hours. Days. Weeks. She had on a white satin bias-cut lace-trimmed negligée circa 1935, her skin had that sugar almond, one hundred per cent Max Factor look and she wore what I assumed was a wig due to the unnatural precision of the snowy curls. Only she'd gone too far with the wig; it gave her a Medusa look. Her mouth looked funny because her lips had disappeared with age so all that was left was a painted-in red trapezoid.

But she didn't look her age, at all, at all – oh, no; she looked a good ten or fifteen years younger, though I doubt the vision of a sexy septuagenarian was the one for which she'd striven as she decked herself out. Impressive, though. Impressive as hell.

And you knew at once this was the face that launched a thousand ships. Not because anything lovely was still smouldering away in those old bones; she'd, as it were, transcended beauty. But something in the way she held her

head, some imperious arrogance, demanded that you look at her and keep on looking.

At once I went into automatic, I assumed the stance of gigolo. I picked up her hand, kissed it, said: '*Enchanté*,' bowed. Had I not been wearing sneakers, I'd have clicked my heels. The Spirit appeared pleased but not surprised by this, but she couldn't smile for fear of cracking her make-up. She whispered me a throaty greeting, eyeing me in a very peculiar way, a way that made the look in the lion's eye seem positively vegetarian.

It freaked me. She freaked me. It was her *star quality*. So *that's* what they mean! I thought. I'd never before, nor am I likely to again, encountered such psychic force as streamed out of that frail little old lady in her antique lingerie and her wheelchair. And, yes, there was something undeniably erotic about it, although she was old as the hills; it was as though she got the most extraordinary sexual charge from being looked at and this charge bounced back on the looker, as though some mechanism inside herself converted your regard into sexual energy. I wondered, not quite terrified, if I was for it, know what I mean.

And all the time I kept thinking, it kept running through my head: 'The phantom is up from the cellars again!'

Night certainly brought out the scent of jasmine.

She whispered me a throaty greeting. Her faded voice meant you had to crouch to hear her, so her cachou-flavoured breath stung your cheek, and you could tell she loved to make you crouch.

'My sister,' she husked, gesturing towards the lumberjack lady who was watching this performance of domination and submission with her thumbs stuck in her belt and an expression of unrelieved cynicism on her face. Her sister. God.

The lion rubbed its head against my leg, making me jump, and she pummelled its graying mane.

'And this – oh! you'll have seen him a thousand times; more exposure than any of us. Allow me to introduce Leo, formerly of MGM.'

The old beast cocked its head from side to side and roared again, in unmistakable fashion, as if to identify itself. Mickey Mouse does her chauffeuring. Every morning, she takes a ride on Trigger.

'*Ars gratia artis,*' she reminded me, as if guessing my thoughts. 'Where could he go, poor creature, when they retired him? Nobody would touch a fallen star. So he came right here, to live with Mama, didn't you, darling.'

'Drinkies!' announced Sister, magnificently clattering a welcome, bottle-laden trolley.

After the third poolside martini, which was gin at which a lemon briefly sneered, I judged it high time to broach the subject of Hank Mann. It was pitch dark by then, a few stars burning, night sounds, sea sounds, the creak of those metal chairs that seemed to have been designed, probably on purpose, by the butch sister, to break your balls. But it was difficult to get a word in. The Spirit was briskly checking out my knowledge of screen history.

'No, the art director certainly was *not* Ben Carré, how absurd to think that! . . . My goodness me, young man, Wallace Reid was dead and buried by then, and good riddance to bad rubbish . . . Edith Head? Edith Head design Nancy Carroll's patent leather evening dress? Who put that into your noddle?'

Now and then the lion sandpapered the back of my hand with its tongue, as if to show sympathy. The butch sister put away gin by the tumblerful, two to my one, and creaked resonantly from time to time, like an old door.

'No, no, no, young man! Laughton certainly was *not* addicted to self-abuse!'

And out of the dark it came to me that that dreamy perfume of jasmine issued from no flowering shrub but, instead, right out of the opening sequence of *Double Indemnity*, do you remember? And I suffered a ghastly sense of incipient humiliation, of impending erotic doom, so that I shivered, and Sister, alert and either comforting or complicitous, sloshed another half pint of gin into my glass.

Then Sister belched and announced: 'Gonna take a leak.'

Evidently equipped with night vision, she rolled off into the gloaming from whence, after a pause, came the tinkle of running water. She'd gone back to Nature as far as toilet training was concerned, cut out the frills. The raunchy sound of Sister making pee-pee brought me down to earth again. I clutched my tumbler, for the sake of holding something solid.

'About thish time,' I said, 'you met Hank Mann.'

Night and candlelight turned the red mouth black, but her satin dress shone like water with plankton in it.

'Heinrich,' she corrected with a click of orthodontics; and then, or so it seemed, fell directly into a trance for, all at once, she fixed her gaze on the middle distance and said no more.

I thankfully took advantage of her lapse of attention to pour my gin down the side of my chair, trusting that by the morrow it would be indistinguishable from lion piss. Sister, clanking her death's-head belt-buckle as she readjusted her clothing, came back to us and juggled ice and lemon slices as if nothing untoward was taking place. Then, in a perfectly normal, even conversational tone, the

Spirit said: 'White kisses, red kisses. And coke in a golden casket on top of the baby grand. Those were the days.'

Sister t'sked, possibly with irritation.

'Reckon you've had a skinful,' said Sister. 'Reckon you deserve a stiff whupping.'

That roused the Spirit somewhat, who chuckled and lunged at the gin which, fortunately, stood within her reach. She poured a fresh drink down the hatch in a matter of seconds, then made a vague gesture with her left hand, inadvertently biffing the lion in the ear. The lion had dozed off and grumbled like an empty stomach to have his peace disturbed.

'They wore away her face by looking at it too much. So we made her a new one.'

'Hee haw, hee haw,' said Sister. She was not braying but laughing.

The Spirit propped herself on the arm of her wheelchair and pierced me with a look. Something told me we had gone over some kind of edge. Nancy Carroll's evening dress, indeed. Enough of that nonsense. Now we were on a different plane.

'I used to think of prayer wheels,' she informed me. 'Night after night, prayer wheels ceaselessly turning in the darkened cathedrals, those domed and gilded palaces of the Faith, the Majestics, the Rialtos, the Alhambras, those grottoes of the miraculous in which the creatures of the dream came out to walk within the sight of men. And the wheels spun out those subtle threads of light that wove the liturgies of that reverential age, the last great age of religion. While the wonderful people out there in the dark, the congregation of the faithful, the company of the blessed, they leant forward, they aspired upwards, they imbibed the transmission of divine light.'

'Now, the priest is he who prints the anagrams of desire

upon the stock; but whom does he project upon the universe? Another? Or, himself?'

All this was somewhat more than I'd bargained for. I fought with the gin fumes reeling in my head, I needed all my wits about me. Moment by moment, she became more gnomic. Surreptitiously, I fumbled with my briefcase. I wanted to get that tape-recorder spooling away, didn't I; why, it might have been Mannheim talking.

'Is he the one who interprets the spirit or does the spirit speak through him? Or is he only, all the time, nothing but the merchant of shadows?'

'Hic,' she interrupted herself.

Then Sister, whose vision was not one whit impaired by time or liquor, extended her trousered leg in one succinct and noiseless movement and kicked my briefcase clear into the pool, where it dropped with a liquid plop.

In spite of the element of poetic justice in it, that my file on Mannheim should suffer the same fate as he, I must admit that now I fell into a great fear. I even thought they might have lured me here to murder me, this siren of the cinema and her weird acolyte. Remember, they had made me quite drunk; it was a moonless night and I was far from home; and I was trapped helpless among these beings who could only exist in California, where the light made movies and madness. And one of them had just arbitrarily drowned the poor little tools of my parasitic trade, leaving me naked and at their mercy. The kindly lion shook himself awake and licked my hand again, perhaps to reassure me, but I wasn't expecting it and jumped half out of my skin.

The Spirit broke into speech again.

'She is only in semi-retirement, you know. She still spends three hours every morning looking through the scripts that almost break the mailman's back as he staggers beneath them up to her cliff-top retreat.'



'Age does not wither her; we've made quite sure of that, young man. She still irradiates the dark, for did we not discover the true secret of immortality together? How to exist almost and only in the eye of the beholder, like a genuine miracle?'

I cannot say it comforted me to theorise this lady was, to some degree, possessed, and so was perfectly within her rights to refer to herself in the third person in that ventriloquial, insubstantial voice that scratched the ear as smoke scratches the back of the throat. But by whom or what possessed? I felt very close to the perturbed spirit of Heinrich von Mannheim and the metaphysics of the Great Art of Light and Shade, I can tell you. And speaking of the latter – Athanasius Kircher, author, besides, of *Spectacula Paradoxa Rerum* (1624), *The Universal Theatre of Paradoxes*.

Her eyelids were drooping now, and as they closed her mouth fell open, but she spoke no more.

The Sister broke the silence as if it were wind.

'That's about the long and short of it, young man,' she said. 'Got enough for your thesis?'

She heaved herself up with a sigh so huge that, horrors! it blew out all the candles and then, worse and worse! she left me alone with the Spirit. But nothing more transpired because the Spirit seemed to have passed, if not on, then out, flat out in her wheelchair, and the inner light that brought out the shine on her satin dress was extinguished too. I saw nothing, until a set of floods concealed in the pines around us came on and everything was visible as common daylight, the old lady, the drowsing lion, the depleted drinks trolley, the slices of lemon ground into the terrace by my nervous feet, the little plants pushing up between the cracks in the paving, the black water of the

swimming-pool in which my over-excited, suddenly light-wounded senses hallucinated a corpse.

Which last resolved itself, as I peered, headachy and blinking, into my own briefcase, opened, spilling out a floating debris of papers and tape boxes. I poured myself another gin, to steady my nerves. Sister appeared again, right behind my shoulder, making me jog my elbow so gin soaked my jeans. Her Indian headband had knocked rakishly askew, giving her a piratical air. In close-up, her bones, clearly visible under her ruined skin, reminded me of somebody else's, but I was too chilled, drunk and miserable to care whose they might be. She was cackling to herself, again.

'We hates y'all with the tape recorders,' she said. 'Reckon us folks thinks you is dancin' on our graves.'

She aimed a foot at the brake on the Spirit's wheelchair and briskly pushed it and its unconscious contents into the house. The lion woke up, yawned like the opening of the San Andreas fault and padded after. The sliding door slid to. After a moment, a set of concealing crimson curtains swished along the entire length of the glass wall and that was that. I half-expected to see the words, THE END, come up on the curtains, but then the lights went off and I was in the dark.

Unwilling to negotiate the crazy steps down to the gate, I reached sightlessly for the gin and sucked it until I fell into a troubled slumber.

And I awoke me on the cold hill-side.

Well, not exactly. I woke up to find myself tucked into the back seat of my own VW, parked on the cliff beside the Toyota truck in the grey hour before dawn, my frontal lobes and all my joints a-twang with pain. I didn't even try the gate of the house. I got out of the car, shook myself, got back in again and headed straight home. After a while,

on the perilous road to the freeway, I saw in the driving mirror a vehicle approaching me from behind. It was the red Toyota truck. Sister, of course, at the wheel.

She overtook me at illicit speed, blasting the horn joyously, waving with one hand, her face split in a toothless grin. When I saw that smile, even though the teeth were missing, I knew who she reminded me of – of a girl in a dirndl on a cardboard alp, smiling because at last she saw approaching her the man who would release her . . . If I hadn't, in the interests of scholarship, sat yawning through that dire operetta in the viewing booth, I would never have so much as guessed.

She must have hated the movies. Hated them. She had the lion in back. They looked as if they were enjoying the ride. Probably Leo had smiled for the cameras once too often, too. They parked at the place where the cliff road ended and waited there, quite courteously, until I was safely embarked among the heavy morning traffic, out of their lives.

How had they found a corpse to substitute for Mannheim? A corpse was never the most difficult thing to come by in Southern California, I suppose. I wondered if, after all those years, they finally decided to let me in on the masquerade. And, if so, why.

Perhaps, having constructed this masterpiece of subterfuge, Mannheim couldn't bear to die without leaving some little hint, somewhere, of how, having made her, he then *became* her, became a better she than she herself had ever been, and wanted to share with his last little acolyte, myself, the secret of his greatest hit. But, more likely, he simply couldn't resist turning himself into the Spirit one last time, couldn't let down his public . . . for they weren't to know I'd seen a picture of him in a frock, already, were they, although in those days, he still wore a moustache. And that

clinched it, in my own mind, when I remembered the second Mrs Mann's spanking picture, although this conviction did not make me any the less ill at ease.

In the healthfood restaurant, Hiroko slapped the carrot-juicer with a filthy cloth and fed me brown rice and chilled bean-curd with chopped onion and ginger on top, pursing her lips with distaste; she herself only ate Kentucky fried chicken. Business was slack in the mid-afternoon and I wanted her to come upstairs with me for a while, to remind me there was more to flesh than light and illusion, but she shook her head.

'Boring,' she said, offensively. After a while she added, though in no conciliatory tone, 'Not just you. Everything. California. I've seen this movie. I'm going home.'

'I thought you said you felt like an enemy alien at home, Hiroko.'

She shrugged, staring through her midnight bangs at the white sunlight outside.

'Better the devil you know,' she said.

I realised I was just a wild oat to her, a footnote to her trip, and, although she had been just the same to me, all the same I grew glum to realise how peripheral I was, and suddenly wanted to go home, too, and longed for rain again, and television, that secular medium.