Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Chymical Wedding

Written by Lindsay Clarke

Published by Alma Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

I

The Green Man

In that part of the world the sky is everywhere, and the entire landscape seems to lie in abasement under its exacting light. It gets into church towers and between the narrow reeds along the river's edge. It glances across undulant acres of barley and beet, and takes what little the flints have to give. Everything there feels exposed, so keeping secrets is hard. It's not the easiest place in which to hide.

Also, if you don't have a car, it's quite difficult to get about. In fact the journey to Munding was simpler a century ago. These days the train takes you only as far as Norwich, then it's a leisurely bus-ride through some of the roomier parts of the county to the market-place at Saxburgh, and there's still a four-mile walk along the lanes to Munding. Just outside the village you cross the old branch-line: its rails have been scrapped, its sleepers disturbed, and the small halt closed. So much for Victorian progress!

I was in no hurry. Looking down from the bridge at the silent gravel-bed I reflected that the journey across England had been quite long enough to make specific a sense of banishment. By the time I reached the village my defection was complete.

It was a late Spring afternoon in the early '80s. I was 27 then.

The name of the cottage was painted in white on a spruce-green ground: *The Pightle*. There was something diminutive, almost elfin, to the ring of it. The name matched the dumpy lime-washed walls and poky interior. It matched my mood.

The Pightle was built of wattle and daub, timbered throughout in oak, with a reed thatch cocking a snook at the world from either gable end. It was set in a stand of beech and chestnut a quarter of a mile from its nearest neighbour. The small garden at the front was already overgrown enough for a hen-pheasant to risk nesting under a clump of fern. At the rear the cottage overlooked the water-meadows on the wilder fringes of the hamlet and you could see the round flint tower of Munding St Mary's glinting in the sunlight across the stream. The windows were leaded and small; even at midday the rooms were shady, almost dark. The Pightle felt perfect

for my needs at a time when I was no longer sure what my needs were.

Shortly after my arrival I was puzzled by a noise that grated the air outside like the tearing of tin. Then I recognized it: someone somewhere was feeding a lot of pigs.

There was a gale on that first night. It rolled out of a starry sky, a crass wind racketing among the trees and, though there was no rain, lightning floodlit the window-glass behind the blind in quick bright pangs. I counted the seconds till the thunder-stroke. Eight, nine miles away.

I lay awake for a long time thinking how strange it was that the quiet lane should be so turbulent by night, and queerer still that I should be lying on this brass bed, listening to the flux and the way the timbers of the house creaked like a ship.

When I slept I slept badly, dreaming myself ringed by a band of crazy women, their eyes bright with malignant purpose. They wanted to change me, refashion me to their taste through some ordeal of humiliation. And when I woke again I was troubled by the dream, and the gale still shuddered about the house, and I lay there thinking how complicated it is to be a man.

"Go to Norfolk," Clive Quantrill had said. "The cottage is there, I shan't need it this summer, and it could do with an airing. So could you. You're all fouled up with other people. Be on your own for a time. Get clean."

Clive was my publisher as well as my friend, and perhaps in that order. His press had barely covered its costs on my first collection, but he'd gambled on a second which did better. I'd done my best to make both slim, softback volumes intact and chinkless – too guardedly so, according to at least one reviewer. And, yes, there were moments when one would rather be a kitten and cry mew, but the responsibility remained to be as good as a poet as one could. Especially now that everything else was in pieces. Clive's offer was a moment's grace. I took it.

After all, there were few constraints on my time. I had been released from rny job at the Polytechnic. My salary would be paid through till the end of the summer, so money was not yet a problem. Also I knew I could have the job back if I wanted it.

But once you've stepped out on to the wire it seems paltry to think of the net below.

Clive had warned Bob Crossley that I'd be coming. He was a retired psychiatric nurse, a widower, living on his own down the lane. Like Clive he was a foreigner in the village, and kept an eye on The Pightle for him. He had a blotchy nose, a balding head, and the newcomer's enthusiasm for local history.

Pightle was a local word, he said, of unknown origin. "It means a small enclosure. A sort of croft, or smallholding, I suppose." He told me how he'd looked up the tithe-maps in the county archive and found that The Pightle, like most of the land round there except the Easterness Estate, had once belonged to King's College, Cambridge. "Maynard Keynes sold it all off when he was bursar there, invested the proceeds in stock. Made a fortune for the college out of properties that brought in a pittance. Clever man… if you approve of capitalism?"

I said, "I gather you don't."

"Tory heartland, this," he regretted. "They haven't heard that feudalism is over. I'm a lone voice on the Parish Council."

"Can't let them have it all their own way."

He smiled, encouraged, "If only… " then shrugged. "The motto of this county is *Do Different*, but not many of us do. Will you be about here long?"

"A couple of weeks. Maybe longer. I'm not sure yet."

"Not much social life in Munding. You might find it a bit dull… without a car, I mean. Only one bus a week."

"I'll be fine."

"Mind you, the Feathers keeps country hours… no bobby here, you see. And it's a decent pint." He sized me up again. "You can always drop in on me if you're at a loose end. I can do with some intelligent company…" Bob was that brand of exiled Yorkshireman who, on meeting another, assumes instant affinity, but my smile disappointed him: *take no interest in me*, it said; *pin no hopes*.

There was, however, a tactful soul under his cardigan and plaid shirt. "Well, if there's anything you need," he said as he left, "you know where I am."

From my bedroom window I could count the towers of four churches. Only they and the scattered spinneys were vertical. All else lay supine – acre after acre of barley and wheat, patched here and there with the yellow dazzle of the mustard fields. Outside The Pightle one was as exposed as the rat flattened to the narrow road by a passing car.

Munding was what the locals call a "pig-village". When the wind veered it smelled of cabbages and the sties. There was a little shop

which doubled as the Post Office crammed into a converted front room of the house of its owner, Mrs Jex, a comfortably proportioned woman who knew everyone's business but mine. There was a row of council houses tacked on to the end of the street, their brick injuriously red against the cooler colours of the landscape. Most had corrugated iron shacks at the back in which chickens and rabbits were kept, and one had several cars in bits and pieces parked across the front garden. Almost all the older houses had been refurbished as commuter-homes and retirement cottages: pink-washed plaster, timbers exposed, roofs rethatched. Unless you counted the church there was no other community centre but the pub. The primary school had been axed and sold off for conversion, so there were no sounds of children around. It was a quiet place except when the din of aircraft out of the nearby base at Thrandeston shattered its sky.

Those first few days I slept late and walked a lot, and wherever I walked I seemed to stand at the centre of a vast circumference of space, as though the pace of my tread was matched by the turning of the earth under my feet. The margins of the lanes were laced with cow-parsley and you could smell wild garlic in the hollows. There were larks and plovers over the fields, and the tall blue days seemed amazed by their own candour. My introspection insulted them. I knew it, just as I knew that Bob Crossley was injured by my dance-step distance from his advances; but there was a thing on my mind that resisted such exposure. It needed solitude. Cover.

I took to the little copses and the gloomy carrs, the places where starlings thronged, where willow and alder brooded over a flooded marl-pit or hankered for the river's edge. I had the engrossed, purposive air of a man looking for something – which, in a way, I was; for among the many pieces into which my life had fallen there was one that seemed to offer some rudimentary promise of renewal. It was that I was after.

I called it the Green Man.

Day after day the figure prowled my imagination. I could sense him there, almost smell him, in his rough green fell; yet whenever I came close he stole from shade to denser shade where the trees packed deep. All I knew about him for sure was that he was a woodland-dweller, so it was inevitable that the search should take me at last through the forbidding perimeter of barbed wire into the Great Wood to the north of the Easterness Estate.

There noble beeches, three or four hundred years old, were ranged almost equidistant at its heart. They were still spectral in a smoky woodland mist, and not yet canopied in full summer green. Boughs

dripped in the silence. The beech-mast crunched beneath my feet. Pheasants whirred away at my approach, and if the hares were crazy in the Spring then I was crazier – Alex Darken, escape-artist of the moral universe, dropped like a leveret on the run in the middle of the Norfolk deeps.

And it was not that I expected to encounter him *out there* – in the flesh, so to speak, this clumsy, feral creature sired sometime in the dark between the Fifth Day and the Sixth, and neither man nor beast. But this, if ever, was the season of the Green Man, and this almost medieval wood was Green Man country. If I looked long and quietly enough he might one day shiver into focus, print himself across the page, and I would know then what kin he was to me, and whether he was likeliest to injure me or aid.

Such, anyway, was the dream in which I lived those days.

Then, one hot afternoon, I was no longer alone in the wood. From somewhere down the galleries of beech the sound of laughter echoed across the glade and stopped me short. The laughter was brief, as though a joke had been cracked – almost it felt at my expense, though I could see no one – then the air was stealthy and green and very still once more, until a blackbird chattered its indignant cry, and the laughter came again, female, a little hectic, over where the ground fell away to bracken.

It puzzled and excited me; worried me too with its reminder that I trespassed there. Covertly I stepped between the trees.

Pale and naked in an auburn glow of sunlight, a man and a woman were clasped in each other's limbs, tussling and rolling in a hollow where the glade banked into mixed woodland. Beyond them a dense drift of bluebells threw their flesh into white relief.

They were laughing as they fought, the woman over the man now, holding him spreadeagled by the wrists so that he was hidden beneath the arch of her back. Her legs were astride him as she tossed her head from side to side, teasing him with the dangle of breasts above his face.

"All right. All right. I take it back," the man laughed.

"Every word?"

"Every word."

"Say "uncle"!"

"To a mere chit of a girl? Never."

"Say "I'm an old fool and I don't know which side my bread is buttered, and I should count my stars that I'm lucky enough to have such a hotshot intellectual as a partner"."

"Consider it said."

"Say it."

"I can't talk with my tongue in my cheek."

"Say it."

Then the man lurched up suddenly. The woman squealed, stretched back upright on her heels, and said, "Dammit, Edward, that hurt."

She pulled herself to her feet and turned away, one hand to a breast, rubbing the nipple. She was tall, sturdily built, the patch of hair at her groin thick and barbarous among the smooth planes of her body. Her tan was un-English and complete, except for the white flaw of an appendectomy scar. She tossed her hair back across her shoulders, and stood biting on a knuckle as though to distract some other pain.

Hands cupped beneath his head, the man wriggled a little in the sunlight, chuckling still. His body was scrawny, hollow-chested, the belly rounded like a wineskin over the grizzled cloud of his pubic hair. He must have been over sixty – some forty years older than the girl who walked away, from him to where her clothes were piled.

"You can be really hurtful, you know that?" The soft, transatlantic accent to her tones was distinct now. As she slipped an arm into the sleeve of a faded purple shirt, I saw the reddened flesh where the old man must have closed his teeth. "Sometimes I wonder about you. I really do."

"If you will sin in the sunshine with a man quite old enough to be your grandfather you should expect something other than the simperings of pimpled youth." The voice was measured and resonant, picking its way deliberately among the consonants, and he was smiling still; until he realized that the girl was distanced from him, unamused. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"I'll live."

"If you hadn't jumped… It was only in sport, you see… " He essayed a smile. "Not the true serpent's tooth at all." The face was handsome still in a punished, ruinous way, the hair shiny, iron-grey curling to white, its wildness made wilder by the two bluebells threaded through his locks. He too was tanned, but there were manifold wrinkles round his eyes and mouth, and a salt-and-pepper moustache emphasized his moue as he muttered, "And we are feeling contrite. Do look." He pointed down to the limp member slumped at his thigh. "Did you ever see such a sorry-looking fellow?"

Despite herself the girl smiled. "You're impossible."

"But amorous with it." The old man stroked the ground beside him. "Why don't you come back? Let me tender you some comfort."

"No way." Head averted, the girl resumed the buttoning of her shirt.

He shook his head regretfully. "You're absolutely right: I'm a perverse old fool. I don't know which side my bread is buttered and… what was the rest?"

"Too late," she declared, lightly aloof, "far too late."

"But such a day… such a day," he sighed. "Time has no business here at all."

It was true. The girl paused in her dressing. Eyes closed, she seemed to draw in some of the sunlight with her breath. The man lay still. The two figures might have been drowsily patient under the eye of a French painter – soft impasto light, green wood-shadow, and the dreaming mist of bluebells beyond. There was nothing Anglo-Saxon here, not even a breeze to ripple gooseflesh on their skin. Nor, while they were silent, was the long moment of this century even. It felt closer, much closer, to Theocritus – and I, squinting like the Cyclops from the shade.

Again the blackbird chattered its dismay. The girl opened her eyes. "Are you asleep?"

"Adream."

She bent to pick up the discarded denim shorts, then stopped, straightened herself, and stood listening, as though sensing they were watched. Her eyes – they were narrow, dark-lashed – surveyed the trees.

I shrank into the shade of a beech, one hand against its smooth bark for support. I could have sworn for a moment that our eyes met, but the girl showed no sign of alarm. She pursed her lips slightly, stretched her neck to tilt the chin, and then brushed back a stray tress from her face. The toes of her right foot drew a segment of a circle through beech-mast and leaf-mould.

"Do you feel anything?" she said quietly.

"Lust?" the old man suggested lazily. "A certain consuming nostalgia for your body. Remorse for a squandered opportunity… " He might have gone on but she frowned impatiently, shushed him, listening to the air. After a moment she said, "I think she used to come here."

The old man sat upright, suddenly intent. "You can feel her?"

Again the girl's eyes scouted the glade. "I'm not sure. There's something."

"Close your eyes. Keep absolutely still. Let your other senses work."

The girl raised a hand to still his urgency. The air of the glade was glassy and brittle. She stood at the centre of a silence, radiating pure attention. The old man watched, mouth ajar, as if an untimely word or gesture might break a spell.

"Yes, it's there," she said softly, "– an intense yearning… hunger… it's everywhere here."

"The emotional hunger", the man said, "… the ache you described before?"

"No, it's different."

"How?" The demand was a quick, clipped breath.

Suddenly, startlingly, the girl's voice and posture changed. "It's me," she said, "I'm starving. Let's go home." She looked back at the old man and burst into bright laughter at his outraged scowl. "Got you."

"God damn," he growled, beating the ground with the flat of his hand. "I told you never to fool about with that. Never, do you hear?"

"Serves you right."

"I'll serve you right." As he pushed himself to his feet she giggled again, snatched up her shorts, slipped her feet into sandals, then ran, fleetly, through the bluebell drift and up the bank. From the cover of the beech I watched the old man lumber after her, shouting, and saw the girl turn between two sycamores to call, "Better not leave your clothes. I might double back and pinch them and leave you to make your way back without."

"Then I'd garland my nakedness like Lear," the old man bellowed, "and walk home via Saxburgh bidding copulation thrive. But I'll have you first."

Long after they'd gone from sight I could hear their squeals and shouts, the crashing of their tracks through bracken. Part of me wanted to laugh out loud, break cover, join the mad chase. Instead, astonished by the brief spectacle, feeling cheated, envious of the old goat, I turned away.

And there was movement behind me.

A quivering in green foliage. A disturbance of sunlight off the leaves.

Swiftly, I turned my head, certain for one hot moment that I too was observed. The scent of bluebells was in my nostrils, heady and raw. My own skin might have been glowing green as nettles now. I shook my head, blinked – there was nothing but the stir of light and leaf, and the flimsy swaying of a branch; but I was trembling a little.

After a long moment, though in a different direction from that in which I could still hear the laughter of the girl, I too began to run.

You get by, an hour at a time, mulling things over, nosing for a future, not content, but managing; then the wires cross with someone else's, world and suddenly you're a shambles again. Actuality is elsewhere. You're dispossessed.

The encounter in the wood had been like a hot dream. For a few minutes it took me outside myself, then it left me chafed and restless, critical of my vacant days. And it turned chilly that evening. Or was it merely in contrast to the heat of a day in which a bare-arsed wood-nymph could frolic unflinching over a paunchy Silenus with bluebells in his hair? Either way I was cold, so I carted a basketful of logs from the shed and looked for old newspaper to start a fire.

It seemed odd that Clive hadn't mentioned such neighbours. He'd suggested I look up Ralph Agnew at the Hall ('He has a soft spot for verse'), and warmly recommended Bob Crossley. "And while you're there," he'd added, "give my love to Gypsy May," – about whom no more, except that I was bound to come across her.

From his smile I'd pictured a batty old Romany woman thrusting clothes-pegs at me and muttering darkly about the future. It seemed an improbable name for the American Amaryllis of the glade, though there had been a gypsy air about her – sallow-skinned, nomadic at a guess, and – if her joke on the old man had travestied some serious business – psychic withal!

With an arsonist's interest I put a match to the paper and watched the kindling catch. Smoke wavered towards the cowl.

So what were they up to here?

And why, once more, was I relegated to the status of voyeur?

Like most of my generation I'd grown up with a dangerous illusion: that once you were adult you were also, by a kind of evolutionary osmosis, a reasonably coherent individual. A person, no less. Only recently had events disclosed the shabby menagerie beneath the skin; and some of its creatures were bedded down in very dirty straw. In particular I distrusted the scrawny beast which eked out the narrow consolations of the voyeur's role. It was contemptible. I could do without that shade of green.

I jumped from the trance with smarting eyes.

The parlour was a cloud. The smoke had bent back on its tracks to explore the room. There'd be soot-dust everywhere. I prised open a window – too small to make much difference – made for the door, pulled it open, and saw Bob Crossley standing at the step with a fist poised to knock. We stared at one another in amazement as smoke swooped round us.

"Good God, are you on fire?"

"It's the chimney, I think. I just lit a fire and this happened."

"Let's have a look." Bob pushed past me into grey billows.

"Chimney's blocked. You've probably got a starling's nest up there. Or it could be damp. There hasn't been a fire in here for ages…

Christmas!" He came back to the doorway, fanning the air. "Come on. Outside. It's caught too far to pull it off yet."

We stood in the garden and he grinned at me. "Damp," he decided. "I remember Clive had the pots netted. You shouldn't have any trouble once the flue dries out."

"The thatch?"

"Hmmm." He stepped back, craned up at the pot where a thin feather of smoke wistfully aspired. "No, that's all right. It'll clear soon." He looked back my way. "The thing is, Clive just rang. He's ringing back in ten minutes… wants to talk to you."

My confusion was compounded. One of the attractions of The Pightle had been its phonelessness. It was Clive's bolt-hole, and I'd thought myself uncontactable there, but here was the world at my shoulder again. It was like a bill dropping through the door.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

Bob shook his head, and looked at his watch. "Better nip on down to my place. I'll keep an eye on this."

"If you don't mind… "

"What neighbours are for. Handy timing really. On your way."

Bob's house was larger, more permanently homely than The Pightle, the garden trim and well-worked, and everywhere, in the chintzed pelmets and loose-covers, the traces of a woman's hand. I found the phone in his study and, beside it, a photograph of his wife. There was a sturdy, Quakerly plainness about her, composed and unsurprisable. Her smile was patient of the camera, and vicariously, it seemed, of me. She was still the tutelary deity of the place. Other framed snapshots on the window-sill showed the couple on holiday together in Venice, and on a CND rally somewhere, in matching parkas. I sensed that, for Bob, every glance upwards from the desk must be an act of memory. There were Open University textbooks there, a scribble pad, and a paperback titled *Karl Marx: Social and Political Thought* splayed on its spine. The room smelled of Bob's pipe.

I picked up the phone at first ring and said, "Clive?"

There was a moment's silence at the other end, then an unfamiliar voice demanded, "That you, Bob?"

"Er… no… He's out at the moment."

"Well who's that?"

"My name's Darken. I'm living in the cottage up the lane – The Pightle?"

The stiff voice softened. "Oh I see. Clive's friend?"

"That's right. Look, I'm expecting a call. Bob should be back in a few minutes if you'd like to call again."

"No, no need. Quite glad to speak to you, in fact. Listen, this is Ralph Agnew. From the Hall. Just ringing to tell Bob I'm having a few people for drinks on Friday. About eight. Like him to come."

"I'll tell him."

"Oddly enough, was going to suggest he bring you along. Want to meet you."

"Thanks. I'll see… "

"Do come. Poet, right? One of Clive's stable? Yes, you really must. Someone you should meet. Nothing formal, you understand? Shall you be there?"

Damn Clive!

"I'm not sure what I'm… "

"I really think you should. Eightish then. Friday. Okay?"

Before I could answer he put down the phone. I did the same, but it rang again almost immediately.

"Bob?"

I recognized Clive's voice. "No, it's me."

"Oh it's you, is it? Nose still above water then? Bob tells me you haven't been showing your face."

"I'm settling in."

"Everything okay? Managing all right?"

"Fine – except that I've just set the place on fire."

"What?"

"Don't panic. The chimney was smoking, that's all. Bob says it's damp. He's up there now. The cottage, I mean, not the chimney."

"Well thank God it's in capable hands. Listen, mooncalf.… why didn't you tell me that Jess didn't know where you were?"

"Has she been ringing you?"

"Course she has. Half off her head. You really are too much."

"Not really her concern these days."

Clive savoured the edge in my voice. "She does still care about you. We all do, though God knows why we should."

I said nothing.

"And there are the kids. I mean, a vanishing act's a bit hard on them, don't you think?"

"I was going to send a card."

"Well get on with it, lad. I've got better things to do than shuttlecock about between you and jess."

"Did you give her this number?"

"And drag old Bob into your catastrophes? No way. But she did wring the address out of me. Expect a letter. She chewed my head off for not letting her know where you Were before."

"Look, I'm sorry about that."

"So you should be. Anyway, I think I cooled her down. You writing yet?"

"Not yet."

"Dug the garden?"

"Look, Clive… "

"Well do something useful for God's sake. You must be sick of the sight of your navel."

"I've just been invited out."

"Good. Who by?"

"Ralph Agnew."

"Better still."

"Was it your idea?"

"Mine?"

"He knew I was here… who I was."

"Village life has no secrets. You're going, I trust?"

"Maybe. Haven't made up my mind. Who's Edward?"

"Edward who?"

"Here. In the village. Oldish man. Sixty or so. American girlfriend."

"No idea."

"I saw them romping in the wood today. In their birthday suits."

"Good Lord! Sixty, you say?"

"At least."

"Not hallucinating are you?"

"For God's sake."

"It's just that I don't remember the woods being quite that lively. Mind you don't get shot at by the way. There are some mean keepers round there. Oh yes… one other thing. I've got that cheque. Royalties on *Shadowgraphs*. Not exactly a princely sum. Shall I send it on?"

"No, hang on to it. I'm not sure how long I'll be here."

"I thought you were settling in?" Clive said and, after a silence, "Well, it's up to you. Listen, post that card will you? – if it's the best you can do. And go and see Ralph, okay?"

"Okay." I put down the phone, then said aloud, twice, "Damn!"

Bob Crossley was standing at The Pightle door. "I've managed to rake some of it out," he said, "but it's still a bit thick in there." He took in my preoccupied frown.. "Don't worry. It's only smoke."

"It's not that. Look, I'm really grateful… "

He shrugged off my thanks. "Problems?" The vague shake of my head did not deter him. "Things do catch up," he fished.

To no avail.

"I was just going down to the Feathers for a jar. Why don't you come? Leave the windows open here. It'll have cleared by the time you get back."

There were things on my mind, but, "You can't sit in there," he pressed. "Anyway, it's your civic duty. If you don't use the pub the brewery will shut it down. Things are measured by the till these days. The school's gone already. The bloody accountants are tearing the heart out of the villages. Dormitories, that's what they'll be. Geriatric wards. Even the church can only run to the occasional service. Not that that's any great loss. But the pub… I mean, a pint's worth fighting for, isn't it?"

His grin was seductive.

Within the hour I was tipsy. An hour later I was drunk.

"Ah Gypsy May!" Bob had said. "Now thereby hangs a tale."

"A tail and a half," Bill Rush had added. He was the pigman at Home Farm, a man with a long thirst and a Sagittarian eye for the doubles on the darts board. The whole Snug sniggered – the verb might have been the active principle of the noun. Even George Bales, the dour gamekeeper, joined in the laughter from his solitary corner. Clearly the joke was an old friend, but I was having trouble enough with the singsong local accent, and the pun escaped my innocent ear.

"So are you going to tell me?"

"I'll do better than that," Bob had winked. "You come along to church with me tomorrow morning and I'll introduce you." The laughter enlarged itself, masculine – no women about; the old, smokily reassuring alliance.

It was the next morning now as Bob and I strolled down the green lane to the church. To my eye the tower should have been taller in proportion to the nave, but funds must have run out back in the Middle Ages for the church looked hunchbacked now where it stood on a hummock across from the Feathers, outlined against a marbled sky. The Rectory, a yew-shaded Georgian manse of rosy brick, stood empty over the way from the lych-gate. It was up for sale.

"Riddled with dry-rot," Bob told me. "The last Rector to live there died of gangrene. It's true, I promise you. The present man lives over at Thrandeston. He has four parishes to look after and not enough Christians to go round."

We entered the churchyard through a narrow wicket-gate off the lane where a path had been trodden through thick grass freckled with dandelions and buttercups among the gravestones. "He wanted to keep

goats on the grass here," Bob explained, "but the old biddies wouldn't have it – said they were creatures of the Devil. If he'd kept goats he'd have lost his congregation. Creatures of the Devil, I ask you! So we have dandelions instead, till someone puts a scythe to it." He plucked a blade of grass and stood, sucking on it, looking up at the flints of the church.

I walked on round the tower taking in the view across the village street. No one was about, and the morning was silent save for birdsong and the distant rumble of an aircraft out of the base at Thrandeston. The breeze was rich from the sties. Two stone angels shook censers over the entrance to the porch, and there was a dead fledgling inside. I pushed the door open on to a hollow silence. Light shafted down across the narrow pews from clear-glass lancet windows. Except for the usual church furnishings and more angels at the high beam-ends, it was plain and white as a dairy in there, smelling of stalled air and damp hassocks.

These days, at the end of the Christian era, the solemnity of a country church has less the air of a temple about it than that of a museum. Yes, it makes you feel you have to speak in whispers, but even the noise of your feet on the flags sounds like an intrusion, and entering such ancient space is like stepping out of time. Yet there is an awesome sense of continuity too. Here in Munding St Mary's, for instance, a board near the west door recorded the incumbents from William de Witneshame in 1190 down to Neville Sallis who had recently taken the living. There were fewer names than I would have guessed: apart from Nicholas Launce in the plague years and one Edwin Lucas Frere who'd lasted only from 1848 to 1850, most of them seemed to have had a good innings. Only boredom could have tested their nerves in this quiet retreat.

Somewhere in this building lurked Gypsy May, about whom Bob had remained teasingly reticent. Yet apart from the old propane heater with its twin gas-bottles nothing anomalous caught my eye. The two brasses let into the flags were undistinguished, and only one of the swagged memorials on the chancel wall was imposing. Commemorating Sir Humphrey Agnew, Bart, 1622–1695, it was flanked by a fanfare of Resurrection angels and bore a familiar quotation from Virgil:

Facilis descensus Averno;
Noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
Sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
Hoc opus, hic labor est.

The Agnew family were well represented here, and no doubt Ralph would eventually join these dead ancestors whom time had turned to tablets of stone. Like Louisa Anne, for example, whose name and dates, 1821–1913, were carved on the open pages of a marble book with the brief inscription *Mutus Liber*. It felt a sad little epitaph – to have lived so long and be remembered only as a silent book. I was pondering it when Bob came up the nave behind me and said, "Were you married in church, Alex?"

I hadn't told him I was married at all; but, "The works," I admitted, " – monkey suit and all. What about you?"

He shook his head. "Registry Office. Never had much time for these places. Too tied up with this for my liking." He indicated another tablet commemorating Capt. Henry Wharton Agnew, 1894–1916, and Lt. Hilary Louis Agnew, 1896–1916; brothers presumably, and probably killed in the same battle. The words *Haec Manus Pro Patria* were inscribed beneath the names. My Latin was fresh enough to recognize a clever if sombre pun, for I remembered that *Manus* meant both "a hand" (in reference to Mucius Scaevola's sacrifice of his right hand for Rome) and also "a little band of soldiers".

"*Pro patria*," Bob said aloud and sniffed. "No marble slabs for the other ranks, you see – just a list on the cenotaph outside. Would you believe that even this small village lost nine men in Flanders? There was nothing for the poor sods here, and not much in Flanders either. But I'll bet the Yaxleys grieved over their two lost sons just as bitterly as the Agnews did."

There was something faintly depressing in the air of the silent church. "So where is she?" I asked.

Bob looked back from his pondering and grinned. "You walked right past her." I glanced round- the white walls again. "Outside," he said, and led me back down the nave. The heavy door banged shut behind us. The light seemed harsher out there, and the morning was loud with the sound of a chainsaw somewhere. "This way." Bob pushed through the long grass away from the church, then turned and pointed upwards.

I shielded my eyes from the sun as they followed his finger. It took a moment or two to distinguish the slab of stone from the surrounding flints, but there was shadow enough to define the rough contours of the figure carved there. I was uncertain whether simply to gasp or to laugh out loud at the improbable sight of it.

"That's Gypsy May," Bob said.