

PROLOGUE

Snitty Bedford peeked in the bus-shelter to see if anybody was looking.

When he'd made sure they were, he whipped his mack open, and gave them an eyeful.

Ooh, but them piercing, girly screams made him feel good. *Powerful*. That and the moonlight shining on his manhood. He was off his own patch tonight: different village, same thrill. They screamed again. Trapped, weren't they, nowhere to look but straight *at* him, and couldn't get past without touching--they'd got that really gobsmacked look, all round mouths and big, frightened eyes--over-awed, the silly cows. He swelled with pride. Weren't they the lucky ones, sharing his excitement--and then it dawned on him they weren't looking at *him* at all, but goggling at something over his shoulder--he swung round, which was a mistake considering there was a walloping great dog--no, not a dog, a wolf!--only six feet away, sizing up his assets with yellow eyes, and slavering.

With a scream louder than anything his audience had managed, Snitty bundled himself into his long grey mack and ran for his life, bare feet slapping painfully on the uneven pavement. And huddled together in the bus-shelter, three young girls and Miss Agnes Dean, retired florist, watched in disbelief as Mrs. Lazenby's ginger tom, hissing and spitting, sprang over the fence and chased an enormous wolf the length of Brimwold High Street.

Miss Dean wiped her steamed-up glasses with an embroidered handkerchief, and sighed. "I know I'm an old silly,," she remarked. "But I always thought that wolves were a lot, well, *bigger* than that."

SEERS' MOON

Granny took her teeth out, and put them in to soak with her corsets.

Squirt of lemon-juice and a few drops of Old Maid's Prayer'd bring 'em up good as new. Then she took her shoes off, sank her throbbing feet into a bowl of warm beetroot-mash, and poured herself a cup of strong tea.

What a day! She'd been on the go since sun-up, and everything ached--specially her face, what with all that smiling and being sociable. Still, she had to admit, it wasn't every day you was Invested first-ever Grandmistress of the Bartlesham Guild, or *any* Guild, come to that--and all in all, she thought everything'd gone off pretty well.

Her sister Mariander had been going to stay the night, but she'd shot off home because Her Bernard'd took ill that morning. Off his food, they'd said when she'd rung "Heaven's Gate" to see how he was, so it must've been serious because he only ever woke up at mealtimes--not that she minded, really. It was nice to be by herself after being on show all day.

Course, officially Hom'd been there to help but, Highmaster or not, you couldn't get no sense out of him because he'd gone and Fallen In Love, and with her own niece Statia, if you please.

Least she hadn't been lumbered with them awful Ceremonial Robes Old Tukesley, the last Grandmaster'd favoured; making Festa Bough her Undermistress had been a good move.

All right, the girl might be short on soap, water, and social graces, but them things'd come, and it had to be said, she couldn't half sew.

She'd knocked up something Black and Dignified in no time, which even, Granny felt, made her look a mite thinner and more In Charge.

It was a lovely evening: Summer on the way at last, and about time, too. And a clear sky, after weeks of rain. She really oughter go and have a look round the garden---but then, it'd still be there in the morning.

She pushed her mind out, over the valley, but it hadn't got more than a few hundred yards before she felt it letting go, switching off--Thomas wound himself round her legs, miaouwing plaintively. The moon was full, and he could feel it, smell it--a perfect hunting night...but would Granny wake up and open the door?--would she Rats! He tried one of his green-eyed glares, to no avail. Once she started the purring noise down her nose, that was it for the night. With practised ease, he pawed the back-door latch, and slipped out into the moonlit garden. Halfway out, he froze, hackles up and tail splayed like a bottle-brush. He stood motionless, ears flat and eyes slitted, for a full five minutes, before creeping, belly-down, under the hedge. Shadow on shadow, he skirted the Beechwood, emerging cautiously into the water-meadows, his favourite hunting-grounds. Wind rustled the tall grasses, and moonlight shone on the river.

But it was no good, there was nothing doing--not so much as a shrew. Something had frightened all the prey off, and the whole outing was a disaster. Added to which, Thomas' nerve had gone, along with his timing. He was stiff, clumsy and couldn't've caught a grounded moth-- he gave up after an hour, and slunk disgustedly home with that sound still ringing in his head.

Thomas looked after himself. Dogs worried him not at all--nor even what had sounded exactly like a wolf howling at the moon. Dogs, geese, wolves--no problem. But something else stalked the night, something that sent him bolting home with his whiskers curling--something much, much worse.

Bevis Tate put a thick black line across the chart. Then he screwed up his Acceptance-speech--(jokes highlighted in yellow)--and rammed it savagely in the bin.

He should have been Midmaster by now, and, Texacum Powell's internal plumbing being what it was, well on his way up to Highmastership. He was still seething about that outrageous Investiture. Grandmistress Beamish, indeed! What the Sight had Tukesley Meredith been thinking of, nominating a *woman* to lead the Guild?

Granted, the man *had* received a severe blow to the head, and, as they'd discovered before his Passing, had harboured some silly crush on Bryony Beamish--but was that any reason to change things? Why meddle with a perfectly satisfactory hierarchy? And why deny those on the way up a chance?

Self-pitying tears filled his eyes. When he thought of the Agendae he'd slaved over! All the hours he'd spent on those immaculately-produced Minutes! The organisational skills he'd expended on the revolutionary filing-system and the colour-coded charts! The Sub-Committees and Steering-Groups he'd formed without even being asked! All the Get-Well cards and hospital visits he'd arranged for incapacitated Guild-members! So why, then, would nobody take him seriously? He recalled the collective groans whenever he raised a point of order in the Guildenhall, the reluctance of others to attend his Extraordinary Meetings, the derision aroused by his graphs, and the way people always seemed to be out when he called.

Then there was the wholesale mis-use of his paper-clips, marker-pens and correcting-fluid--and now that whippersnapper Highmaster Hewitt was talking of putting all the Guild-records on a *computer*!! Well, he wouldn't get away with it.

He, the one with the skills, had no intention of being reorganised by a callow youth or, worse, a woman--particularly that Beamish person.

He knew, from their mind-slips, that there were others who felt the same about the old order of things--Ritro Bowers, for instance, Basil Worthenshawe, and even a surprising number of women, notably Acacia Barnsdown. He'd bide his time--but when he was ready, they'd be sorry they'd under-appreciated him. Taking a fresh piece of paper, he began drawing up a list of names for inclusion on a possible sub-committee. There weren't very many, but Guildwilling, enough--thank the Sight he had his Project to turn to in times of stress. It was something to lose himself in--a precision job, demanding the skills of an artisan.

Frowning with concentration, he began chiselling delicately at the minute stone fragments he'd collected during his afternoon walk. The trick was, of course, getting them exactly angled--one slip, and his life's work would be lost.

Not one of Them, he reflected, would be up to constructing a scale-model of a matchbox, built from bits of Bartlesham Cathedral—

Granny's garden was not a thing of beauty--more of a homoeopathic repository. It boasted nothing that didn't earn its keep: if it couldn't be eaten, infused, made into a poultice or used as a skin-preparation, it wasn't allowed in. The whole area was an horticulturalist's nightmare: a seemingly chaotic jumble of fruit, flowers, weeds and vegetables, absolutely teeming with wildlife. Granny was an incidental conservationist.

She also subscribed to her old Dad's theory that a garden was a means of filling your belly, not a showplace for useless, fancy indulgences. So side by side grew roses and radishes, damsons and daisies, beetroot and buttercups.

She was very fond of nettles, too, along with chickweed and bindweed, thistles and dandelions, cow-parsley, dog-daisies and stinkweed--the things most gardeners uproot, but all of which she found a use for.

And one of those uses was her skin-preparations. She'd dabbled for years; had a few successes and her share of failures as well. The Bilgewort eye-bag remover, for instance. Worked a treat--if only she could've got the colour right. Because, for some reason, folks didn't take kindly to slapping slimey black stuff under their eyes--

She'd been waiting weeks for the rain to stop and the sun to ripen things in her garden, and now at last she'd got the ingredients she was after. She boiled up a pan of water, and got chopping.

Rog. and Steve, of Bartlesham Constabulary, pulled up outside Granny's cottage.

They'd enjoyed cruising through Brimwold because the warm weather had brought all the girls out. There'd been a gang of them hanging about outside the "Rat & Pitchfork", none of them wearing very much. Perhaps, Rog. thought, they'd go back that way, just to check on under-age drinking.

It was also their first day back on panda-patrol following the drugs-bust fiasco up on Brim Knap that'd brought about their demotion. Six months of Road Safety for Infants' Schools hadn't been a lot of laughs, specially having to wear those itchy Harry Hedgehog suits, and it had been good of the Sarge to put a word in for them--

"Looks all right." Rog. studied the thatched cottage squashed in amongst the trees. "Bit isolated, though. Well, let's get on with it."

"You reckon it's safe?" Steve peered over the dashboard. "Just a sweet little country cottage, not a crack-dealer's den or anything? After all, this *is* the same scary old woman. P'raps we ought to, you know, *raid* her--"

"Look, will you *shut* up about sodding drugs," Rog. snarled. "Anyone can make a mistake, allright?"

"Fine, fine." Steve unfastened his seatbelt. "Just don't accept any funny little cakes, O.K.? Or anything with mushrooms in!"

Granny's brew had just reached a critical stage when she heard someone knocking. Moving the pan off the heat, she grumbled her way to the door.

Allright, she supposed a rhubarb face-pack *did* take a bit of getting used to, but there'd bin no call for them policemen to scream and radio for an ambulance, had there? And then one of 'em'd rushed her into the kitchen, shoved her face under the cold tap, and held it there!

They'd both kept going on about "third-degree burns," although what being educated had to do with it she couldn't fathom.

By the time the ambulance arrived, frightening Thomas and every living thing for miles around with its siren, the face-pack had washed off, all that precious rhubarb down the sink and her neck!-- but then, it'd never really had chance to set properly.

And when she'd spluttered her way out from under the tap, them policemen's faces were redder than hers had ever been.

Funny thing was, the ambulance-crew didn't seem to mind being called out on a false alarm: couldn't stop laughing, in fact. For some reason, they kept shaking

their heads and saying: "Rog. and Steve. Wow! Living Legends of the Emergency Services! Do you do autographs?"--and they were still laughing when they drove off.

Luckily for the policemen, they rallied round Granny before she could get her own back. One of them fetched her a towel, and the other one brought her a cup of tea. She didn't recognise them, even with her glasses on, because she never gave a thought to Outsiders, who all looked exactly the same to her. But they recognised *her*, all right, and something told them apologies were very definitely in order, even if they had meant well.

And their minds told her what'd brought them before one of them stammered: "Message from your sister, Miss Beamish. We were asked to come because you're not on the phone. I'm afraid it's bad news about your brother-in-law."

Full moon again tonight: try as he might to deny it, it's all happening again, and he's feeling very, very sorry for himself.

P.L.T's s terrible thing--one whole sodding week of irritability and biting things and sleeplessness and that terrible, restless longing—he'd do anything to beat it he's that desperate, and, you name it, he's tried it. Hypnosis, meditation, acupuncture, aromatherapy, vitamins--none of 'em the slightest use. He knows only too well how it will be.

That hair, well, fur, really, and the whiskers--too much for any razor, and waxing'd brought tears to his eyes--and them great, pointy ears he can't do a thing with. Hats are impossible, and the balaclava he bought just isn't him--and then what's he supposed to do with that zonking great plumed tail? Have his trousers tailor-made to accommodate it?

Even worse, he'll get the urge to cock his leg, leave his mark, and she'll go spare about dribbles on the carpet. She oughter try living with his problems!

She'll do her best to keep him in when the time comes; beg him, like she always does, not to go out--because, sooner or later, they're going to start hunting him.

But how can he resist the call of the moon? Like it or not, he's caught and held in its relentless cycle, exactly like the tides. It's just that he could do with a month off now and then, because he's thoroughly pissed off with this whole Werewolf Syndrome.

Rog. and Steve came out of Granny's cottage congratulating themselves on a job well done. All in all, they thought they'd handled that old woman like pretty sensitive guys.

Rog. reckoned he'd make ideal Samaritan material, and Steve was trying to decide between Bereavement Counselling and an Agony-Uncle column in the "Police Gazette", when they spotted the Panda. Five minutes' silent study of its battered bonnet and splintered headlights didn't improve it one bit.

"Bloody ambulance-drivers," Rog. said eventually. "Not that anyone'll believe us."

"Oh, well." Steve said gloomily, "I was getting bored patrolling, anyway, dunno about you, but I'm just about ready for another stint as Harry, the unsquashable bloody hedgehog."

"It was awful, Bryony," Mariander sighed. "He'd been gone two days before anybody realised."

Poor ole Mari, Granny thought, That Bernard might not've been much company but it's really hit her hard. "What, er, gave it away, then?" she asked gently, "Him not snoring, was it? Or missing his meals?"

"Well, no." Mariander went suddenly pink. "Just--the flies, really, round his chair. So the Matron said. Well, there *has* been a heatwave," she added defensively.

"I'll put the kettle on," Granny said carefully, "and then help you sort things out for tomorrow."

Granny sat at the front, with Mariander and her daughters, Thuja and Statia.

She'd never been to an Outsider's funeral, and decided she hadn't missed much, because it wasn't a patch on a Seer's Passing-Ceremony. This place, for a start--talk about dismal! Nasty plastic chairs instead of proper pews, hardly any light coming in through them tidgy little windows--and *artificial flowers* everywhere! Not a bit like the Guildenhall.

And they wouldn't allow dogs in! Granny could hardly believe they'd had to leave Grufty at home. Passing-ceremonies always had as many pets as people coming to say goodbye! Brontine Clegg's widow'd even lugged his old donkey into the Guildenhall, and a fair fight she'd had to get it through the door, as well--and out again, come to that--then there was that sad, dreary music. Seers always enjoyed a nice singalong to the Deceased's favourite tunes, however rude, because, after all, it *was* their Send-Off party. But these Outsider-songs didn't mean a thing, far as she could tell--and the weeping and wailing!!

Bernard's relatives, all looking as if they'd been carved from the same block of lard, plonked themselves down opposite, glared at her and Mariander, and then let rip into their hankies. Funny, Granny noticed, that they couldn't squeeze out a single tear between them.

Then there was the Vicar. Never set eyes on Bernard, Mariander said, but he didn't let a little detail like that stop him going on and on about what a great man he'd been. Granny tried hard to recall anything saintly about Bernard, but all she could come up with was that ring he always had round his forehead where his cap'd rubbed--not that he'd been a *bad* person, it was just--Outsiders was different, and shouldn't mix with Seers, let alone wed them--still, she supposed, if the Vicar's words cheered everybody up, what did it really matter?

She'd nicely settled herself to rifle through the assembled minds, when everybody suddenly stood up. She got to her feet just in time to see Bernard's coffin, to the accompaniment of some *really* miserable music, slide behind a little velvet curtain, and disappear! Granny was outraged--fancy taking him away before they'd finished! That couldn't be right, could it?

She glanced at Mariander and the girls, but they stood blinking like rabbits caught in a lorry's headlights. Up to her, then, to Do Something.

Concentrating hard, she fixed her mind, got the thing stopped, and even managed to drag it halfway back through the curtain before the Vicar, after several increasingly desperate prods at the starter-button under his dais, leaned over and, with a sickly smile at his congregation, shoved it back.

Whereupon Granny, gritting her teeth, lugged it out again.

"Bryony, STOP it!" Mariander hissed, "Let him GO! It's what he wanted!" "Only trying to help, I'm sure!" Granny said huffily, releasing her mental hold so suddenly that Bernard departed with unseemly haste, and they all heard the unmistakeable sound of splintering wood. The Vicar buried his head in his hands--praying, probably.

Afterwards, Thuja took her aunt on one side, and explained about cremation. Granny was appalled. She couldn't see the point of it at all, and thought it the saddest thing she'd ever heard. Being *burned*! It seemed so--lonely. And useless, too, not to be snug in the ground, rotting down with all the others and helping the worms turn the soil. That was how it should be--bodies returning to the earth, same as minds going back into the Pool--

Outside the crematorium, three hefty women were huddled under the yew-

trees, looking uncomfortable. Bernard's sisters hurried forward to greet Mariander. Zinnia, Poinsettia and Begonia. Once seen, Granny thought, never forgotten.

"Mariander!" Zinnia, the youngest, mashed her sister-in-law into her formidable bosom. "We couldn't bring ourselves to go in--you know, Outsiders and that--did it go off alright?"

"Oh, it *would've* done," Mariander glared at Granny, "if *certain people* hadn't started meddling with things they didn't understand."

Granny, standing her ground, glared right back. "Well, how was I to know?" she snapped. "Anyway, I still don't think any of it's right and proper!"

"Why, what happened?" Begonia, the eldest, eyed Granny from a safe distance, knowing full well what Bryony Beamish was capable of.

Mariander told her. There was a stunned silence, and then the sisters all started laughing, and carried on as if they'd never stop.

"Bryony, you're priceless!" Poinsettia gasped eventually. "Being Grandmistress ain't calmed you down one little bit!"

"You haven't heard the end of it, neither," Mariander said grimly. "That there Vicar's waived all the funeral-fees because he thinks his conveyer-belt's broke and he's caused Unnecessary Distress to the Bereaved! Well, how could we tell him?"

Bernard's Outsider relatives filed past, nodding stiffly in Mariander's direction. Funny the way it went, Granny mused. What a lot of trouble Mixed Marriages caused! Two Seer parents, all the kids'd be Sighted, but get one Seer and one Outsider, and your girls'd always inherit, your lads only sometimes.

That'd been the way of it with Bernard--and what a lot of upset there'd been! All of which went to prove that you shouldn't put chitterlings in game-pie, as her Dad used to say, whatever *that* meant.

"You coming back for a cupper tea, then?" Mariander asked. "There's one or two things of Bernard's you could have." The sisters hesitated, until she added: "I've got some cake in."

Thuja and Sepia drove them home. It was a bit of a squash, even in two cars, owing to the size of Bernard's sisters, but there were only the seven of them. Mallon, Thuja's husband, had opted to look after Quinnie and Christom, because it wasn't done for Seer children to attend an Outsider's funeral; and Ran, Sepia's husband was on call at the Infirmary.

Grufty, sulking because he'd been left out, waggled his eyebrows and briefly waved his misshapen tail, then pointedly turned his back until the cake came out.

Sham the starling, however, loved having visitors because it gave him chance to Show Off and do his Noises. His Car-Alarm was well-received, likewise his Squeaking Bicycle-Brakes, and even his Yowling Tomcat--(his latest Impression, but not, for some reason, everyone's favourite)--went down quite well. But his Rumbling Gastric Medley with Accompanying Flatulence and Background Snores undoubtedly got the best reaction.

"Oh, Mari, listen!" Begonia had tears in her eyes. "I'd know them noises anywhere! He's Doing Our Bernard!" A reverential hush fell as they listened intently.

"Isn't that lovely?" Zinnia whispered. "That's him to a 'T'! It's--a kind of a tribute, really, isn't it!"

"Well," Granny said, when Sham had progressed to his Traffic-Jam with Horns and Revving Engines, "What'll you do now, Mari? Can't stay in this great big place on your own, with empty houses all round."

Mariander hesitated, gazing round the shabby old kitchen, as though seeing it for the first time, every crack and chip and cobweb.

"I've lived here too long." she said at last, "This house was alright once, nice

neighbours, good area, too--til they started flattening it to build on. Now it's all tramps and vandals and kids shouting through your letterbox and worse--" she shivered at some uncomfortable memory--and now I can't keep on top of the cleaning, there's too many stairs and corners, and too many noises in the night." *And too many ghosts* Granny thought. *Poor Mari. What a way to live.* Into the shocked silence, Thuja said: "Oh, Mum. We'd no idea it was *that* bad."

"Well, it was your Dad." Mariander went on sadly, "He wouldn't hear of moving, and once he retired, he just give up, til I thought the house'd fall down round our ears--I'm sorry, Sepia, but it's true--he took to his chair years ago--matter of fact, it went with him into "Heaven's Gate"—and this week was the first time he ever got out of it."

She blew her nose again, and said firmly: "So now's me chance to get out while I still can. I've had a good offer from one of them property-developers."

"You decided where you're going?" Granny asked.

Mariander shuffled her feet, frowning at the worn lino Bernard'd never got round to replacing. "Well, er, sort of." She gave her sister one of those you're-not-going-to-like-this smiles.

"Oh?" Granny's hackles went up: curse Mariander's mindblock.

"Yes, I--thought I might move out your way. Back Home, so to speak."

"*My* way?" She hadn't expected *that*.

"Brimwold," Mariander said bravely, "is where I grew up. I've had enough of city life. I want a garden and neighbours and a community, but most of all--" "Yes?" Granny saw her precious privacy evaporating like mist over the water-meadows.

"I want central heating!" Mariander announced. "Because, let me tell you, this place has been an absolute pig to keep warm."

The sisters went off bearing a carrier-bagful of Bernard's effects, and threatening to descend on Mariander when she got moved. Thuja and Statia, who were coming back in the morning to start clearing the upstairs rooms, had already gone.

Mariander closed the door behind them and went back in the kitchen to face her sister.

"See, Bry, I want to be part of things again," she explained over a fresh pot of tea. "And I want to start Practising. Join the Bartlesham Guild, mebbe get my Lower Levels--what's up, you think I'm too old?"

Granny stared disbelievingly over the teapot. "Ain't *that*," she said, "it's just--you mean Bernard didn't like you Seeing? *And you put up with it?* I dunno, Mari, straight I don't. Call yourself a Beamish?"

Mariander smiled uncertainly, like the sun coming out after a storm. "Well, mebbe now I can go back to being one," she said.

Moonlight on the Weald of Bart, lingering over the Stonebury Valley and the Healing-Stones.

Moonlight bathing the Ampleway, slipping over Brim Knap, lying quiet across the river-dykes and water-meadows.

Moonlight ghosting the Beechwood, lifting and fingering its shadows. Moonlight, nightlight, coldlight--and, somewhere, the terror of the wolf pursued.

Mariander sat herself down beside Granny's suitcase and said: "Er."

Granny sighed. "What now?"

Mariander shuffled a bit. "Well, you know when you get home? Couldn't do us a favour could you?"

"What sort of a favour? Already lumbered me with Sham and Grufty, haven't you?"

"You know I ain't got time to look after 'em proper, what with all the clearing-out and paperwork--don't mind, do you?"

"Hmmpf." She didn't, of course--just so Mari didn't take her for granted. "So then what else you got me lined up for?"

"These." Mariander produced a large envelope, from which she extracted several sheets of paper. "House-particulars," she explained, "Brimwold area. Thought you might give 'em the once-over on my behalf."

"You don't muck about, do you?" Granny squinted at the details, adjusted her glasses and squawked "How much? For that poky little place? You made of money or what?"

"Well," Mariander folded Granny's cardigan and laid it in the case, "I suppose they *are* a bit pricey--p'raps I'll just come and live with you instead."

"Eh? No, you're alright," Granny spluttered, "don't worry, I'll find you a good 'un, count on me. Well now, time we were off. Where's that Thuja got to?"

Selfish bugger'd gone off again: never a thought for her.

Oh, he'd be out there somewhere, playing, while she stayed in and fretted.

Moonlight illuminated the chewed-up remains of his latest football: and he'd had another go at the window-sills, and even, God alone knew how, what was left of the pelmet. Wearily, she fetched the dustpan and brush, and then wondered why she bothered. She was just so tired of it all--she'd go tomorrow, straight she would. If only he didn't need her so much.

At the far end of Brimwold stood a former pigman's cottage, now home to Aubrey and Hilary Bottomley.

It was cramped, low-beamed and built, as Aubrey often observed after banging his head yet again, for undernourished agricultural peasants, not *human beings*— It was a cliché of a cottage, lifted from a fairy-tale age that never was. Visitors pointed it out, and locals, according to their age, sniggered or shook their heads at what it had become. The Bottomleys had painted it sugar-pink, adding stable-type doors and double-glazed-(to exclude those annoying country noises)--mock-leaded windows. It was rose-clad and honeysuckled, and, for greater authenticity, boasted a frontage cluttered with ancient domestic and agricultural objects--a boot-scraper, a plough, a blacksmith's anvil and a restored water-pump.

Re-painted cartwheels rested against the walls, and a craftsman-made dovecote, studiously avoided by all self-respecting birds, stood in the front garden. The meagre building cowered beneath a ridiculous, top-heavy thatched roof, done in a day by passing Cowboys--("Mornin', Missus. Tired of them ole slates? Do you a thatch in no time!")--who were a lot quicker and cheaper than Gobber Watts.

All of which pleased Gobber no end. Because who else got all the spin-offs when the leaks started, when folks who'd made false economies swallowed their pride, and came grovelling to a *real* craftsman--?

Long ago, the place had been known as Clematis Cottage, but the Bottomleys had, rather wittily they thought, re-named it BOTTOM LEA. Whereupon the postman, who didn't like incomers, had promptly dubbed it BUTTOCKS' END, and the name had stuck.

Hilary Bottomley, who'd been scourging her windowsills, was shocked to see a ghastly old woman prowling round the empty dormer-bungalow next door.

Despite the heat, the old hag was wearing a long, black coat, and carrying a quite disgusting holdall, probably clanking with sherry-bottles--obviously one of those Bag-Persons looking for somewhere to sleep.

Hilary dithered. Could she shout loudly enough to penetrate Aubrey's bathtime oratorios, or ought she to phone her Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinator, using the Pyramid System?

On the other hand, why should she be intimidated on her own doorstep? Snatching up a spray-disinfectant gun, because You Never Knew, she wrenched the door open, and called sharply: "Yes? Can I help you at all?"

The bag-woman's gaze swept over her, lingering particularly on the fresh perm and the pink rubber-gloves, and seeming to look right inside her mind. It was not a nice feeling.

After a long, uncomfortable moment, she snorted disparagingly, said "No, ta," and bent to look through the letter-box.

"But look! Here! You can't just--" The old woman marched off round the back, and Hilary found herself following.

"Now you listen to me!" She said sternly, "you can't sleep here! There are Refuges for people like you--"

But the old woman wasn't listening: she was frowning over some sort of leaflet, now and then glaring through the kitchen window hard enough to dissolve the glass.

"Split-level cooker!" she muttered. "Ex-tractor fan! Lot of newfangled nonsense!" She squinted ferociously.

"Plum--for--here, what's this say? I've forgot me glasses!" She thrust the crumpled paper at Hilary, who, after reading a few words, said weakly: "Oh! You've got Details!"

The old woman gave her a Look. "Yes, and why shouldn't I have? Place is for sale, ain't it?"

"Yes, but--" Hilary felt faint. Surely this dreadful person couldn't be contemplating buying the bungalow? She felt the old woman Looking at her--no, *into* her again, as if reading her mind. Then smiling evilly, she said: "Well, I quite like it. Think I just might move in. Says here--"snatching the Estate-Agent's particulars from Hilary's hand, "Key by arrangement with next-door neighbours. That's you, is it? Good, you can show us round, then."

"But!" Hilary squawked, "You can't just Turn Up! There are Proper Channels! And, anyway--who's US?"

At that exact moment, something stuck a wet nose up the back of her skirt. Hilary let out a loud scream, and whirled round like a western gunslinger, disinfectant at the ready, to find the thing *leering* at her.

It was, as she might have expected, a small mongrel of the worst possible kind. It had something horrible matted into its beard and eyebrows, and judging by the smell of it, had been rolling in something even worse--which was, presumably, why she hadn't noticed it in the overgrown grass. That, and its *extremely* short legs.

She couldn't *remember*, as she told Aubrey afterwards, fetching the bungalow key or handing it over. But she supposed she must have done, otherwise how had she come to find herself banging vainly on the locked back door, while the terrible old crone and her unspeakable dog rampaged around inside?

Another lane, another home, a deeper despair.

He's had four aspirins, a Bob Martins, a pot of tea and a lie-down in a darkened room. But it's not going away, and it's no use. Why fight it? Come moonrise, he'll be out there again, doing that old werewolf-thing.

"Dear me, what a carry-on." You'd've thought she'd've had better things to do--the woman's shouting face had followed her from window to window, and Granny was getting plain fed-up with it.

"Come on, Grufty." She turned her back, "let's have a look upstairs." Not that it'd be any better'n downstairs, but she had promised Mariander. She'd already bin round two places looked exactly the same to her; poky without being cosy, but this one was worse because it was empty.

Come to think of it, the folks in the other places had acted none too pleased when she'd turned up, just like the woman outside--funny, that. She hadn't asked 'em to stop what they were doing, had she?

Quite happy to potter round on her own--and how was she supposed to know that ole man was dozing in the tub?--Mariander'd told her specific to check the colours of bathroom-suites, it was something she was very particular about--and this one. Avocado, the leaflet said, but she recalled nursing that poisoned mallard with the runs, and his droppings, before he got better, had been *exactly* the same colour!

Pleased with herself, she explored the bedrooms, which didn't take long because they were so small, and the biggest had--she squinted at the paper again--a *ensuet shower-room!*--Mariander was getting very grand, she thought, for someone who'd grown up with an outside privy and a bathtub on a nail!

She heard Grufty's claws clicking on the bare wooden stairs, and he came waddling in with a mouse in his mouth. Granny sighed: she'd been vaguely aware of skittering noises downstairs.

"Give it here," she told him. Sulkily, he spat the creature into her hand, where it lay trembling. She ran her finger along its spine, touched and calmed the small, panicked mind--*allright, little girl*. It was only a fieldmouse, scared but unhurt, prob'ly got in through an airbrick and nested.

"Shame on you, Grufty," she told him, "that was plain bad manners. Put her back, and mind you don't hurt her--she's got young 'uns down there."

Taking the mouse in his gums--(useful teeth being but a distant memory)--Grufty slouched off down the stairs and let it go. But he lifted his leg against the wall it'd disappeared into. All right, Granny had said he couldn't keep it, but she hadn't said he couldn't *drown* it--

Tarrill Posskenway's Passing-Ceremony was the first she'd ever taken as Grandmistress, and she wanted to get it right.

Course, she'd *assisted*, many a time, but that wasn't the same. Everybody's style was different, how you talked about the Passer, whether you made jokes--(and Tukesley Meredith certainly never had)--even what you wore, and how you wore it.

Old Tarrill had been the best shepherd for miles around, and though he'd ended his days in the Sunset Rest-Home just outside Bartlesham, he'd been Brimwold born and bred. And, up to losing his Gloxinia, he'd never left it, nor ever wanted to.

He hadn't coped on his own, though, and before long, his cottage had started going downhill, and the Guild had sent Tarrill off where he could be properly looked after. There'd been no children, and no chance of Tarrill's nephew uprooting himself from his posh house in Bassett Bream, so Shepherd's Cott had been sold as it stood. Some brother and sister had bought it, Granny had heard, kept themselves to themselves.

And seemingly they didn't go in for decorating or gardening, because the place looked just as broken-down as it had before--shame the way things turned.

She pulled on the new Passing-Robes Festa'd made: nice, bright, glittery sort of material that shimmered and changed colour every time she moved--she thought they'd cheer everybody up, unlike them things old Tukesley used to wear--

As a matter of fact, she'd shoved all the Grandmaster's Ceremonials away in a cupboard and forgotten about 'em. Least, she had until Bevis Tate had dragged them out and made a

lot of noise about displaying 'em; even starting a Seers' Museum--well, let him get on with it, if it took his mind off sulking because she'd been made Grandmistress--he wanted watching, that one, she told herself--

Festa put her head round the door and said: "Sheep's here, Mum." Granny straightened her collar. "Ta, Festa." She did wish the girl wouldn't call her MUM, and go in for all that bobbing and curtsying, just because she was Grandmistress.

She'd known Festa all her life, and always been plain Granny to her--but Position did funny things to people, and being Undermistress the girl seemed keen to do everything right, which she supposed you couldn't grumble at. Mebbe she'd settle, once the novelty wore off.

She went out into the Guildyard to greet Tarrill Poskenway's sheep, who'd come to say their goodbyes. There were nine of them, from tegs to old gimmers, all hand-reared in Gloxinia's kitchen--and most of 'em revived in Gloxinia's oven.

Course, Tarrill had long-retired when he adopted 'em, but folks would keep bringing him orphaned lambs, and he never could refuse--so that he ended up with nine pet lambs--the children him and Gloxinia never had, she supposed--growing up into nine hefty great sheep that gave his old dog something to practise on, and kept his grass down.

They'd all slept in the kitchen, too, where they'd first come back to life. Perilla Pearce took the lot when Tarrill went into the Home, and they lived with the rest of her menagerie up at the Sanctuary in Deepinwold.

Granny emerged to find them all eating their heads off as usual, while Perilla sat under the trees, smoking a cheroot. On seeing Granny, she leapt to her feet, choking and showering hot ash down her front.

"Sight save us, Bryony!" She stamped the remains of her cigar into the ground, "What the blithers have you got on?"

One or two onlookers sniggered, as well they might: Perilla, clad in a striped jumpsuit with matching tennis-shoes and a back-to-front baseball-cap, looked remarkably like a large windbreak.

"Me Passing-Robes, if you must know," Granny retorted with as much dignity as she could muster. She indicated the enthusiastically-munching flock.

"Are them sheep of yours going to leave us any grass?"

"Come on, girls!" Perilla gave the nearest ewe a hearty smack on its fat rump. "Snack's over! Gather round!" Grufty eyed them warily.

The sheep, still chewing, wandered obediently over. *Give her her due*, Granny thought, *she's got 'em under control. Like lambs they are.*

"Right, then, line up!" Perilla barked. The sheep, each of which wore a bell round its neck, had all been shorn--(by Perilla herself, naturally)--and looked extremely smart.

They arranged themselves according to seniority, the old, black-faced Marler at the front, followed by the six Durberry Downers, with the twin Stockinby tegs bringing up the rear.

"And QUICK MARCH!" Perilla ordered, at which they tripped smartly into the Guildenhall, jostling together at the back.

"Well!" Granny was proper impressed. They could certainly teach some of the kids a few manners, she thought. "You've trained 'em well, Perilla!"

"Nonsense!" Perilla snorted. "Intelligent animals, sheep. Specially those Lowland Marlers! Nothing to it!"

But that wasn't quite true. Because, for all her bluff, there wasn't an animal alive Perilla couldn't handle, or didn't care about.

The Guildenhall, Granny thought, looked beautiful: flowers everywhere and packed with folks--Tarrill had been well-liked. Wasn't just that, though--he'd been the last of a breed, part of a world that'd gone forever.

She kept the Ceremony light, and short as well, bearing in mind the average age of the congregation, and its tendency to seize up once it'd been sat awhile.

Joster Posskenway, who was stone-deaf, and what you might call the black sheep of the family, got up and bellowed a funny story about his brother's shepherding--how he'd once near broke his arm, delving about inside a ewe, trying to turn one of twin lambs, and only got it back, all covered in blood and dung and mucuous, when the lambs was born, but it was black and blue for weeks after--

He cackled at the memory, and then with an evil smile at the women present, produced a grey, matted relic he swore was the first lamb's tail Tarrill'd ever docked--(even pointing out the scars where he'd pulled the ticks off it)--and insisted on everyone having a good look, in his brother's memory.

The thing was stiff, musty and greasy. Those that hadn't already gone green listening to Joster's story gagged, passed it on, and wiped their hands--all except Perilla, who sniffed it, studied it closely and looked as if she might've been about to taste it as well--at which point Granny, feeling a song might be in order, signalled Highmaster Powell to get going on the organ.

After the singing--old Joster having got through three solo verses of "The Biggest Ram in Bartlesham" before anyone could intervene, and only stopping because he'd forgotten the words--everyone went up organ. to say their goodbyes.

And Tarrill, laid out near the organ on his Passing-Bed, grinned sociably back with huge, borrowed dentures, because he'd lost his own, years ago, out on the hills and never replaced them.

They all filed past, and everyone said how well he looked. Course, it was being so brown did it, from working outdoors. You'd of thought, Pergola Blunt whispered, he'd been off sunning it somewhere exotic.

Last of all came the sheep, bunting at Tarrill's head and hands, as if to wake him; blowing gently on his face as he'd once breathed life into them when they'd been but a sneeze away from dying.

They laid him to rest alongside Gloxinia, and Grufty watered the grave as a mark of respect. Then everyone settled themselves in the back room of the Guildenhall to enjoy a good gossip over Tassie Bough's buffet.

Joster refused tea, explaining that he'd brought his own liquid refreshment, and after a few nips from his silver flask, shambled round bawling: "Who wants another feel of me lamb's tail, then?"

When everybody had gone, Granny went into the ante-room, and flopped down in the saggy chair she'd never got round to replacing, while Festa banged about sweeping up.

"D'you reckon it went off allright, Festa?"

The girl came over and leaned on her broom. "Oh, yes, Mum," she said, "everyone fair enjoyed themselves--all except Midmaster Tate."

Granny sat up, as far as the chair would let her. "Bevis Tate?" She never saw him. "What was he doing here?"

"I dunno," Festa said thoughtfully, "they was hanging round the porch, him and that Ritro Bowers taking notes. But his Block kept slipping, and--well, he weren't thinking happy thoughts."

Taking notes, eh Granny thought grimly. She'd be having words with him--but not just now. Time for a quick nap before Gorrie came to take her and Festa

home--

Her eyelids had just started to droop when she felt the girl behind her, *hovering*, and she couldn't be doing with hoverers. Her Auntie Rhinum used to do it, breathing heavy and coughing meaningfully so's you couldn't relax.

"Yes, Festa, what is it?"

"Please, Mum, there's a man."

There would be. "And what you done with him?" Granny asked.

"Made him wait in the Guildenhall Mum, and said I'd see if you was decent."

Granny raised an eyebrow. "And d'you reckon I am?" She really didn't ought to tease the girl.

But Festa said, with surprising dignity: "Yes, Mum, you look a treat in them robes. Shall I show the gentleman in?"

"Er, no, give us a hand up and I'll come out." Granny felt quite ashamed of herself: there was a lot more to that Festa than she let on.

But when she recognised her visitor, she wished she had been sitting down, because even after all them years she went dizzy, and her heart lurched--as Tobin Hackett gave her his little-boy-lost grin and said, as if he popped round every day: "Now then, Bryony. Any tea going?"

Sitting opposite, teacup in hand, she had chance of a really good look at him, once Festa had done staring and gone back to sweeping.

Wasn't every day you met up with the man who'd jilted you, after half a lifetime--and the worst of it was, he didn't look no different.

Bit greyer, and more weathered, maybe, but still nothing on him—she wondered if he could still put his grub away like in the old days, and reckoned that he probably could. Say what you liked, Tobin always had been a grafter, up and doing, never still.

P'raps that was why he didn't look his age, which was more than she could say for herself--he laughed, and, mortified, Granny realised she'd left her mind wide open: his own was tight as a trap. "You ain't changed neither, Bryony."

"Me! Nonsense! Course I have!" she snapped. It was bad enough that Grufty had gone straight over and laid his head on Tobin's knee--he needn't think he'd get round her as well. "Don't be wasting your sweet talk on me, Tobin Hackett!"

"Sorry, Bryony. Forgot I was talking to a Grandmistress there for a moment." He set his cup down and glanced hopefully at the teapot, but Granny was having none of it.

"Well, and what brings you to me door, all these years on?"

"Two things. Heard about old Tarrill, and wanted to pay me respects. He taught me no end when I was a lad. I used to bunk off school and go up Brim Knap with him and a b--"

"You were there?" Granny interrupted, "At the Passing-Ceremony? I never saw you!"

"Sat at the back, didn't I," Tobin grinned, "with the sheep. Good touch, them sheep--give the proceedings some *ambience*. Mind, they've had a bit of a chew at your florals, and there's a few droppings under the pews that lass of yours hasn't found yet, but then you can't expect sheep to appreciate social niceties, can you?"

Just in time, she saw the mischief in his eyes. Same old Tobin. Used to drive her up the wall with his teasing, her--and Mariander. No. She wasn't going to think about it.

"Anyway," he went on, "me Dad Passed Over."

"Did he," Granny responded flatly. "Oh, dear."

"Alright, I don't blame you being bitter, Bryony. Didn't do you any favours, did he? But it's all water under the bridge now. Anyway, seems I've inherited the house in Lemmingwold--funny that, remember how he used to say he'd leave everything to the Cats' Home rather'n than give me a penny?--so I've come over to sort things out. Couldn't pass up the chance of seeing you, now could I?"

"Why not? You managed well enough all these years!" Strange how bitterly it came out, when she'd thought herself over it.

"Wasn't easy for me, neither," he said softly. "After I--well, a clean break seemed best all round. I went down Scallyford Way after Mum's Passing--too much bad blood between me and Dad.

That's where I met Dolly, through working for her Dad. After a while, we got wed, and when the old man died, we took the farm on. Raised three fine boys, and they look after things now."

"Are they--?" The question hung in the air.

"Not Seers, no. Dolly was--an Outsider. The line dies out with me." He sighed. "And I lost Dolly last year. You'd've liked her, Bryony--"

Granny sniffed. "Im sure."

"You would, you know. She had a good heart, and she tried to understand about Seeing--but it wasn't like with you and me, Bryony, though I never let on. I wouldn't've hurt Dolly for the world--but I just couldn't get you off my mind."

Granny listened, amazed: she'd never considered herself the sort men hankered after.

"And you," he said gently. "Never wed, did you? I kept up with the news, see--you should've found someone, Bryony."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself, Tobin," she said tiredly, "I've had me moments,
believe me, but the right man just never come along. I kept meself busy, getting me
Levels, even won a place at the Seminary."

Tobin whistled. "You always did have the Mindpower, gel."

"Oh, no question," Granny said flatly. "Couldn't make use of it, though, could I? First Dad went--"

"Yes, I heard," Tobin said, "I was sorry. I'd a lot of time for your Dad."

"--and then when Tolly run off--I suppose you knew about that an' all?--well, it fair broke Mum's heart, and she took ill. Someone had to mind her, so I couldn't go swanning off to no Seminary, could I?"

Tobin shook his head. "What a waste. But you've made up for it since. Grandmistress, eh! Couldn't believe it when I heard!"

"I do all right," she said defiantly, "enough to keep me mind in."

"I reckon I've got a bit behind." Tobin had the grace to look abashed. "Comes of not wedding a Seer. Look, Bryony, I'm going to be around--things to sort out--could I pay you a visit out at at your place?--I take it you are still there?"

"Oh, yes, I'm still there alright." *Me and me black cat* she thought, *proper old maid*. "I reckon you can come round sometime--after all, we're both big enough to know our own minds this time, ain't we?"

"Let's make it soon, eh?" He stood up to take his leave, scratching Grufty's head in farewell. "He's alright. Working dog, is he?"

"Yes, he's a qualified electrician," Granny said, adding deliberately, "and he ain't mine, he's Mariander's. She's moving out here soon, so you'll be able to call on both of us."

A fleeting hurt crossed his face. "Don't, Bryony. That's all in the past. If you won't have a lift, you coming out to see me off?"

"If I must." She followed him out of the Guildenhall: Festa had to lean right

round the organ and then stand on a pew with one foot on the windowsill to see properly: but she reckoned the Grandmistress looked, as she told her Mam later, sort of *radiant*.

He's been a good lad, kept his head down, bided his time. Even let the cats and dogs be, though they'd've done for skinning-practise.

Got them all shit-scared anyway, knowing he's about.

But he can't risk it, not on new territory. Don't want to go arousing suspicion does he, can't make a move til he's sure.

But it's hard, knowing that it's out there somewhere, his prey. Got the smell of it in his head, hasn't he, and it's getting stronger with every full moon.

Hilary Bottomley blitzed her outside windowsills with spray-disinfectant, briskly wiping clusters of twitching, moribund insects into oblivion with a wet cloth.

Horrid, unsanitary things--especially butterflies, with their flappy, fluttery wings.

"You'll have to put a fence up, Aubrey." She wrung the mangled bodies into a bucket. Her husband, dressed for dirty work in one of his collection of clean, pressed boiler-suits, sighed.

If his wife insisted on a fence, then a fence she would have, and he'd be the one doing the job, under her supervision. He made one last valiant attempt to get out of it.

"Why," he said carefully, "do we need a fence?"

Hilary frowned at a cobweb glistening in the sunshine: it had no business cluttering her frontage. One swipe of her cloth took care of that.

"Honestly, Aubrey! Don't you ever listen?"

All the time, dear, he thought glumly, spreading, as instructed, a clean, ironed sheet beneath the cartwheel he was preparing to rub down, lest any flakes of rust polluted the gravel.

"That old woman I told you about! What if she buys the bungalow? We can't have her overlooking us--"she shuddered, recalling that Stare--"or throwing her empties into our garden. And we certainly don't want that filthy animal of hers getting anywhere near Truffle! Do we, Aubrey?"

"No, dear," he responded automatically, "perish the thought."

"So you'd better leave that little job you're doing, and fetch the wood while you've got your working-clothes on."

"Oh, but I--" So much for watching the Test-Match later on. Aubrey, however, knew better than to argue "--might be a while, though," he corrected himself, glancing at his watch and scrambling into the car, "because they'll have to re-calibrate the platten-settings on the grimble-jibber to accommodate planks of the appropriate H4 *fencing-quality--and we only want the best, don't we my love?*"

He'd taken off in a shower of gravel before she could answer. Hilary opened her mouth, then closed it again. Aubrey was too cheerful, too co-operative: he was Up To Something.

But never having lowered herself to visit the woodyard, she wasn't to know about the fridge with the beer in it, the colour T.V. in the office, or the gathering of regulars enjoying the cricket.

Through the dining-room window, lonely as a Princess in a high tower, gazed the sad little face of Truffle, the Bottomleys' Queen Courvalier bitch.

Truffle was not allowed in the bedrooms, or on the furniture- (unless Aubrey could smuggle her onto his lap on the rare occasions when Hilary went out without lining a job up for him)--because of Hairs and what Hilary termed *secretions* or into the garden, because: "a bitch's water," Hilary had read in a magazine, "will ruin your grass and wither your shrubs."

Truffle did not have Walks, she had Exercise, which meant her on one end of an extending lead, and Hilary on the other, Super Doggy-Do Pooper-Scooper at the ready.

Her whole routine was ordered, hygienic, and boring. Dimly, she recalled her Dam and litter-sisters--the chasing and the play-fights and the comfort of warm bodies--but that life was over now. Perhaps it would never again be as good.

Or so she'd thought--until she'd spotted that funny little mongrel in next door's garden, strutting about cocking his leg up on everything. He wasn't on a lead, and didn't look as though he ever had been.

And all of a sudden, ancient Pack-memories began to surface, and with them longings too powerful to ignore.

Scavenging in ditches. Swimming. Rolling in fresh manure, or rotted-down bird. Ratting. Chasing cats up alleyways and rabbits across fields. Running free, ears blowing, into the wind--

Of course, he was ill-bred: not an ounce of pedigree. He wasn't young. And he was a funny shape: his legs were too short, and he waddled. But none of that mattered somehow, because he looked fun. And Truffle wasn't going to rest until she got to know him better.

"You ain't still driving that thing!"

Tobin smiled fondly upon his van. "Old Aggie?" he murmured, "wouldn't part with her, would I?--besides, it's been a challenge keeping her on the road."

Granny studied the vehicle she used to think of as Tobin's "bit on the side", he spent so much time with her. Funny how jealous she'd been. Though all in all, she decided, Aggie, with not a patch of rust to be seen, had probably worn better than she had herself.

And it was a fair comparison because she reckoned they were about the same age.

The van was an odd, greeny-brown colour Granny didn't think you could get nowadays, with wooden running-boards and two big brass lamps on the bonnet. She supposed she and Aggie were about the same shape, too--sort of short and squat--but for all that, she still hoped that she hadn't ever looked quite so much like a Bladderjack Toad on wheels.

"Still time to change your mind, Bryony!" Tobin grinned as he climbed in. He patted the seat beside him. "Best leather, nice and comfy--we could go by way of Fossetby Flood--remember?"

Oh, she remembered, all right. Remembered like a pain through her heart. Remembered like it was yesterday--and vowed she'd never get caught again.

"No, thanks," she said stiffly, "Gorrie's taking us home."

"Right you are." He rolled the window down, forcing the heavy brass handle round like a crank.

"When can I come and visit then? Tomorrow all right?"

Granny considered. Her head said it wasn't wise to encourage him--but when had she ever been wise where Tobin was concerned?

"Not tomorrow. I got--things to do. Best make it the weekend."

"Lovely." The engine still purred like a full-bellied tiger. "Have the kettle on, eh?--be just like old times!"

Now that, she mused, was exactly what she was afraid of.

A full moon hung, like a pound of best butter, over the night-fields.

Up at the Manse, the Animal-Sanctuary lay quiet, apart from the steady clopping of Yaw, the insomniac donkey, endlessly pacing the parquet in the Great Hall.

Out in the paddock, the ewes were settling. They'd been down in the Hollow all day, bingeing on clover: now was their time to digest and ruminate.

Nine sets of mandibles worked rhythmically on those small, tasty specially-saved squishy bits, and thirty-six stomachs rumbled companionably beneath the hawthorn hedge.

Old Gimmer, the black-faced Marler, was banging on about the size of ticks these days, niver saw 'em that big when she was a teg. And then what about them clegs and horseflies down yon Hollow, eh? Twice the sting on 'em they used to have--

The rest of the flock sighed, shifted and bleated in polite agreement. Gimmer was a nine-shear, many-lamber and Senior Sheep. You didn't mess with her, not if you knew what was good for you.

By the time she'd eventually run out steam, there was nothing left to munch. Quaather, one of the Stockinby tegs, bored with counting stars--(mainly because she wasn't sure what came after "arn, tarn, tethera, fethera")--ventured: "I spy, with my little eye--?" but there were no takers, and one by one, the flock began to nod off.

Only Horna, Quaather's twin, lay awake, racked with guilt. All that clover--how could she have eaten so much when it wasn't even winter? She could just feel her stomachs expanding. She'd never be slim in a Summer's Dipping!

Course, it was all right for Quaather, never gained an ounce, did she, even with a full fleece on--well, she'd just have to Cut Down tomorrow--that, or work it off, jogging round the meadow.

If she slept now, maybe she could get up early and do a few laps of the paddock--except that she wasn't sleepy. She tried imagining an endless queue of shepherds, old hobbly ones, climbing the five-bar gate and limping round Fouracre Field, but even that old favourite didn't work.

Sighing, she got up to stretch her legs--*and then she saw him*.

A great, grey wolf, lit by the moon, and circling the paddock. He was looking straight at her, with yellow eyes, and licking his lips.

Granny couldn't sleep, either.

Nothing unusual about that; many a night she stayed huddled by the fire, letting her mind roam the Brim Valley and sometimes, if there weren't too many thoughts circulating, as far as the Inchwoods or even the Weald of Bart.

But now, she couldn't settle for love nor Helm-flowers. It was that Tobin Hackett, of course. Coming back, stirring things up. She didn't know if she was flattered or sorry--didn't seem to know anything anymore--it was like being seventeen again, without having the looks.

And Mariander wasn't going to be overjoyed when she found out, neither.

Course, Tobin hadn't meant to string her along, but she'd been young and silly

and believed every word of his teasing--and then there'd been his Dad: another Seer-hater. Why hadn't he stood up to his Dad when he told all them lies about her? Telling Tobin the upset would kill his ailing Mam--why hadn't he been strong enough to stand by her and see things through?

Waiting in the Guildenhall, looking prettier than she ever would again, with the music and the chattering of relatives and the scent of the Helm-flowers, and knowing he wasn't coming--she'd hated him then--

But that'd all been a long, long time ago: she'd been proud and hot-tempered. She thought mebbe she understood folks a bit better now.

Her and Tobin'd been good together; true-matched minds. Most folks never found that in a lifetime. And she'd opened her mind to him--the closest a pair of courting Seers could ever get, closer than anything physical.

She couldn't help smiling, even now: her Dad would've killed the pair of 'em if he'd known what they got up to without ever taking their clothes off--if only Tobin'd kept his distance, let things be. If only---she dozed at last, beside the dying fire.

Horna, quick on the uptake, also had a good pair of lungs on her. Even as the wolf jumped the paddock fence, she blared a warning to the others.

Old Gimmer, dreaming of a Dappleby tup she'd once known, snorted awake bleating "Hey-up! What's to do?"--to be confronted by the sight of the intruder cocking its leg on her paddock-fence.

"BY THE CRINGE!" she bawled, eyes blazing red, "THAT DOES IT! Right, lasses--GO FOR THE GOOLIES!"

Perilla, who'd ventured outside for a smoke and a brandy, was just in time to witness the commotion as nine ewes saw off what looked remarkably like a marauding wolf.

She heard the sound of splintering wood as the fence went down, and then a lot of aggressive bleating, followed by a long-drawn howl which, for some reason, started off *basso profundo* and finished, well almost *castrato*--Perilla smiled to herself and lit a cheroot. Those ewes could take care of themselves, which was precisely why she'd put them in the paddock.

Better than any guard-dogs, or even geese come to that. The wolf interested her, though. She'd only caught a glimpse, of course, but she could tell it wasn't one of those Helmwood jobs like Bryony Beamish' brother had--different breeding-line altogether, and definitely not a hybrid.

No, this one was in another league altogether--bigger, coarser, better-muscled. Nice stifles, good thick coat, plenty of feathering. But she couldn't offhand think of anyone who bred the things.

Trouble was, if word got round those damned trigger-happy farmers there was a wolf on the loose, it wouldn't last the week--

Well, she wouldn't say anything--not yet, anyhow. She'd try and find out where the animal had come from, maybe catch it if she could. Not that she thought it'd dare come back, if it ever intended fathering cubs.

Whistling, she went off to fetch a hammer and nails. Better mend That fence, and round up the ewes before they chased that unfortunate wolf halfway to Lasterby-Nine self-satisfied sheep settled down in the paddock, bells tinkling gently as they sniggered together.

And somewhere across the quiet fields, a wolf howled his pain and humiliation to the uncaring moon.