ROBERT GRAVES

THE WHITAKER NEGROES

HAUNTINGS, WHETHER IN waking life or dream, are emotionally so powerful, yet can be so rarely ascribed to any exterior agency, that they are now by common consent allotted to the morbid pathologist for investigation -- not, as once, to the priest or augur. A number of hauntings 'yield to treatment', as the saying is. The great Dr Henry Head told me once about a patient of his who was haunted by a tall dark man, always standing on the bedside mat. Head diagnosed a trauma in the patient's brain, of which the tall dark man was a projection, and proved his case by moving the bed slowly around; the tall dark man swung with it in a semicircle until he ended on a veranda just outside the french-window. An operation removed him altogether. And I read in an American medical paper the other day of a man who, as a result of advanced syphilis, was haunted by thousands of women every night; after he had been given extract of snake-root they were reduced to the manageable number of one.

There are also occasional hauntings which most psychologists would tend to dismiss as fantasies or, however grotesque, as symbols of some inner conflict; but which deserve to be accepted at their face value and placed in the correct historical context. Let me describe a persistent haunting from my own case-history. I am glad to say that it did not originate in my ghost-ridden childhood and is therefore easier to assess, though I cannot claim to have been in good mental and physical health at the time; on the contrary, I was suffering from vivid nightmares and hallucinations of the First World War, in which I had fought. Shells used to burst on my bed at night, by day I would throw myself flat on my face if a car backfired, and every rose garden smelt terrifyingly of phosgene gas. However, I felt a good deal better now that the War seemed to be over: an armistice had been signed, and the Germans were not expected to renew the struggle.

January 1919, found me back again with the Royal Welch Fusilier reserve battalion, at Limerick; where twenty years before my grandfather had been the last Bishop of the Established Protestant Church of Ireland. Limerick was now a stronghold of Sinn Fein, King George Street had become O'Connell Street, and when our soldiers took a stroll out of barracks they never went singly and were recommended to carry entrenching-tool handles in answer to the local shillelaghs. This return as a foreign enemy to the city with which my family had been connected for over two hundred years would have been far more painful but for old Reilly, an antique dealer, who lived near the newly-renamed Sarsfield Bridge. Reilly remembered my father and three of my uncles, and gave me fine oratorical accounts of my Aunt Augusta Caroline's prowess in the hunting field, and of the tremendous scenes at my grandfather's wake -- at which his colleague, the Catholic Bishop, had made attendance compulsory in

tribute to his eminence as a Gaelic scholar and archaeologist. I bought several things from Reilly: Irish silver, prints, and a century-old pair of white, elbow-length Limerick gloves, left by the last of the Misses Rafferty and so finely made (from chicken-skin, he told me) that they folded into a brass-hinged walnut shell.

The shop smelt of dry rot and mice, but I would have gone there to chat more often, had it not been for a nightmarish picture hanging in the shop entrance: a male portrait brightly painted on glass. The sitter's age was indeterminate, his skin glossy-white, his eyes Mongolian, their look imbecile; he had two crooked dog-teeth, a narrow chin, and a billy-cock hat squashed low over his forehead. To add to the horror, some humorist had provided the creature with a dudeen pipe, painted on the front of the glass, from which a wisp of smoke was curling. Reilly said that the picture had come from the heirs of a potato-famine emigrant who had returned with a bag of dollars to die comfortably of drink in his native city. Why this face haunted and frightened me so much I could not explain; but it used to recur in my imagination for years, especially when I had fever. I told myself that if I ever saw a midnight ghost -- as opposed to midday ghosts, which had been common enough phenomena during the later, neurasthenic stages of the War, and less frightening than pathetic -- it would look exactly like that.

In the spring of 1951, when Reilly had been thirty years in his grave, Julia Fiennes visited me in Majorca. She was an American: Irish-Italian on her father's side, New Orleans-French on her mother's; a textile designer by profession; young, tall, good-looking, reckless and romantic. She had come 'to take a look at Europe before it blows up'. When we first met, a shock passed between her and me of the sort usually explained in pseudo-philosophic terms as 'We must have met in a previous incarnation.' Psychologists postulate 'compatible emotion-groups'. I am content to call it 'Snap!' Indeed, as it proved, Julia and I could converse in a joking verbal shorthand, which meant little to anyone else, but for us expressed a range of experience so complex that we could never have translated it into everyday language. An embarrassing, if exhilarating discovery, because this rapport between us, strong as it was, proved inappropriate both to her course of life and mine. We wanted nothing from each other except a humorously affectionate acknowledgement of the strength of the link; thirty-three years separated us; we belonged to different civilizations; I was perfectly happy in my own life, and she was set on going on and on until she came to a comfortable stop in either contentment or exhaustion; which she has since done.

With Beryl, to whom I am married, I enjoy the less spectacular but more relevant rapport that comes of having all friends in common, four children, and no secrets from each other. The only eccentric form which our rapport takes is that sometimes, if I am working on some teasing historical problem and go to bed before I reach a solution, its elements may intrude not into my dream but into hers. The classic instance was when she woke up one morning, thoroughly annoyed by the absurdity of her nightmare: 'A crowd of hags were swinging from the branches of a large tree in our olive grove and

chopping off the ends with kitchen knives. And a horde of filthy gipsy children were waiting below to catch them...' I apologized to Beryl. I had been working on textual problems in the New Testament, and established the relation between Matthew xviii, 20 and Isaiah xvii, 6 which ran: 'As the gleaning of an olive-tree: two or three berries at the top of the topmost branch'; and of this with Deuteronomy xxiv; 20: 'When thou beatest thine olive-trees thou shalt not go over the boughs again: the gleanings shall be for the stranger, the fatherless and the widow.' I went to bed wondering idly how the fatherless and the widow managed to glean those inaccessible olives, if no able-bodied stranger happened to be about.

'Well, now you know!' Beryl answered crossly.

Once when Julia and I were taking a walk down a dark road not far from the sea, and exchanging our usual nonsense, I suddenly asked her to tell me something really frightening. She checked her pace, clutched my arm and said: 'I ought to have told you, Robert, days ago. It happened when I was staying with my grandmother in New Orleans, the one who had the topaz locket and eyes like yours. I guess I must have been twelve years old, and used to ride off to school on my bicycle about half a mile away. One summer evening I thought I'd come home by a different route, through a complicated criss of cross-streets. I'd never tried it before. Soon I lost my way and found myself in a dead-end, with a square patio behind a rusty iron gate, belonging to an old French mansion overgrown with creepers. The shutters were green too. It was a beautifully cool, damp place in that heat. And as I stood with my hand on the latch, I looked up, and there at an attic window I saw a face... It grinned and rapped on the glass with its leprous-white fingers and beckoned to me...'

By Julia's description it was the identical face that had been painted on glass in Mr Reilly's shop. When I told her about it, we broke into a run of perfect terror, hurrying towards the nearest bright light.

I thought it over afterwards. Perhaps Julia had become aware of my long-buried fear, which then became confused in her imagination with childhood memories of New Orleans; and it stood out so vividly that she really believed that she had seen the face grinning at her. She mentioned no pipe; but then the pipe could be discounted as extraneous.

After supper, an American called Hank, a New York banker's son, burst into the house, in a state of semi-collapse. Since he came of age Hank had fallen down on every job found for him by his father, and now drifted about Europe as a remittance-man. He wanted to write, though without an inkling of how to begin, and was more than a bore about his problems. Hank told me once: 'The night before I sailed my father said a very cruel thing to me. He said: "Hank, you're a good watch, but there's a part missing somewhere."' As a regular time-piece Hank was certainly a dead loss; and the place of the missing part had been filled by an erratic ancillary movement which bypassed time

altogether. For instance, a few days before this, Hank had begun to jabber hysterically about a terrifying earthquake, and wondered whether the world were coming to an end. Next morning the papers mentioned a very limited earthquake in Southern Spain, which had swung pictures on walls, dislodged cornices from half a dozen buildings in a small town, and made several girls in the telephone exchange faint for terror. Now, Hank could hardly have felt the distant shock, although Majorca is said to form part of a range, mostly submerged, which continues south-westward to the mainland; but he had certainly caught the emotion of the frightened telephone girls.

'What's new, Hank?' I asked coldly.

'I've had a most horrible experience,' he gasped. 'Give me a drink, will you? I took a car to Sóller this afternoon. The heel had come off my walking shoe and I wanted to get it fixed. You know Bennasar the shoemaker, off the market square? I was just about to go in when I happened to look through the window...'

Julia and I glanced at each other. We both knew what Hank was going to say. And he said it: 'I saw a frightful face...'

That made us feel more scared than ever.

Soon afterwards Julia went off on a rambling tour through France, Austria and Italy, and next year revisited Majorca with her mother. That was September 1952. She found me collaborating in a film-script with Will Price. Will comes from Mississippi; but New Orleans is one of his family's stamping grounds, so he and Mrs Fiennes were soon discussing third and fourth cousins. One day as we all sat outside a café, Julia happened to mention Hank. 'Who's Hank?' the others wanted to know. We explained, and Julia repeated the story of the New Orleans face. Her mother gasped and shook her roughly: 'Darling, why in Heaven's name didn't you tell me about it at the time?'

'I was terrified.'

'I believe you're making it up from something I told you, sweetie. I saw the same face myself before you were born -- and the rusty iron gate -- and the creepers and the shutters.'

'You never told me anything of the sort. Besides, I saw it myself. I don't have other people's visions. You mustn't confuse me with Hank.'

It occurred to me: 'Probably her mother had the vision, or whatever it was, first. And then Julia as a child must have heard her telling the story to somebody, and incorporated it in her own private nightmare world.'

But Will eased back in his chair and, turning to Mrs Fiennes, asked in the playful

Southern accent that they were using: 'Honey, did you ever hear them up there in the old attic, sloshing water all over the place?'

None of us understood what he meant.

That night, when we were sitting about, drinking coñac, Will raised his voice: 'Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your permission to spin a yarn?'

'Why, of course.'

Will started: 'A good many years ago my father's law firm, Price & Price, acted for the mortgagees of a bankrupt property in Mississippi. Money was not forthcoming, so my father consented to take his fees in real estate -- about eighty acres of almost worthless land at Pond near Fort Adams. Fort Adams was once a prosperous river port for the cotton country east of the River; the town itself was perched on the high bluffs which overhang the water hereabouts. But the River suddenly chose to change course five miles to the west and left Fort Adams with a wide frontage of swamp, so that all trade moved along to Natchez and Baton Rouge, which were still ports. These bluffs form the edge of a three-hundred-mile line of hills raised, they say, by prehistoric dust storms blowing in from the Great Plains, and cut up by streams and swamps. There used to be dozens of rich plantations in the hills, but when the River deserted Fort Adams they were abandoned and allowed to revert to jungle.

'A victim of this catastrophe was Pond, a village that had got its name from the cattle-pond which its leading citizen, old man Lemnowitz, dug and surrounded with two-storey frame stores and warehouses. It used to be a tough job to fetch cotton over the hills from the plantations in the interior. The bales were loaded on enormous, sixteen-wheeled wagons drawn by from six to ten yoke oxen. Teamsters and planters would camp at Pond before making the final drive up-hill to Fort Adams. Old man Lemnowitz hired them extra oxen for the effort, and carried on a thriving trade in supplies of all sorts which he had hauled up from the River in the off-season.

'There were still traces of ancient wealth near Pond when I visited it -- ruins of the ante-bellum mansions and slave-quarters, with huge, twisted vines writhing up through the floors -- and at Pond itself Lemnowitz's warehouse, formerly a sort of Macy's, was still in business under the same name. But only one corner was now occupied: by a small, not very elegant, store that sold tobacco, notions, staples and calico. It also called itself the Pond Post Office.

'The rest of Pond was jungle. My mother had come down there to see whether Price & Price owned any camellias; because sometimes these old planters collected rare flowers, and camellias could still be found growing wild in their deserted gardens. No! No orchids in that area, but camellias had been imported from all over the world, including even the Chinese mountains where they originally belonged. I was there to

keep my mother company and check the land lines. Well, I went to buy a pack of cigarettes in the Lemnowitz store, and before I could get my change, a Thing walked in.

'It was undoubtedly human, in a weird way -- walked upright and had the correct number of limbs. It even strode up to the counter and held out a dime for a can of snuff. But for the rest... The face was a glazed greenish white, with four fangs that crossed over the lips, and a protruding underlip. It had dark-brown hair, dripping with wet, under a black felt hat -- the sort that gave the po' white trash from Georgia their nickname of "wool-hats". Long arms ending in gauntlets -- the local work-gloves of canvas and leather with stiff cuffs -- which hung below its knees as it walked. Muddy "overhawls", leather brogans called "clod-hoppers", and a stink as if fifty cess-pools had been opened simultaneously. I said nothing, except perhaps "Oh!" What would any of you have said in the circumstances? Imagine the dark cavern of a mouldering warehouse behind you, with acres of empty shelves lost in the gloom, and then in It comes through the door with the blazing sun behind it. When It vanished again, I ran to the window to make sure that my mother had not fainted, and then tip-toed back to the counter. "What was that?" "Why, that was only a Whitaker Negro," Mr Lemnowitz said casually. "Never seen one before?" He seemed to be enjoying the situation.'

As Will told the story my old terrors came alive again. 'Well, what was it really?' I croaked.

'I guess it was just a Whitaker Negro,' said Will. 'Later, I decided to check up on my sanity. Mr Lemnowitz told me that for a couple of nickels Boy Whitaker, who was only a half-Whitaker, would guide me to where his folk lived. And he did. There are, or were, several families of Whitaker Negroes near Pond, tucked away in the jungle swamps where nobody ever ventures, not even the Sanitary Inspector. You have to understand the geography of these hills and reckon with their amazing verdancy and complete lack of vistas. One can march in a straight line up and down hills and over swamps for scores of miles without seeing a self-respecting horizon. The jungle is so thick in places that whole families have grown up and died within a mile of neighbours whose existence they didn't even suspect; and we Mississippians are noted for our gregariousness. I don't know how I ever reached the place myself, because I was working to windward and the stench spread for half a mile around the place. I nearly threw up even before I arrived. They live tax-free and aren't mentioned in the census, and don't of course have to send their kids to school, still less get drafted for military service. The kids live in wallows under their huts, which are built on piles: apparently they don't come out much until they're fourteen years old or so -- can't stand the sun. A good documentary sequence could be taken of a sow and her litter wallowing in the slime with a bunch of young Whitaker monsters: you could title it Symbiosis -- which is what we call a "fo'bit" word.

'The adults make a sort of living by raising hogs and chickens: enough to keep them in

snuff and brogans and gauntlets and other necessities. The hair proved to be mostly spanish-moss clapped wet on the head to keep it cool -- it comes grey-green and goes dark when you soak it; but their real hair is also long, brown and wavy, not kinky in the usual negroid style. The brogans and gauntlets were filled with water. You see, they have no sweat-glands -- that's their trouble. It's a hereditary condition and their skin needs to be kept wet all the while, or they die. They're Negroes; but said to be mixed with Choctaw Indian, also perhaps a strain of Chickasaw and Natchez.'

Someone asked: 'Didn't the snuff get a bit damp, Will?'

Will answered blandly: 'No, sir, it did not! Snuff is "dipped" not snuffed, in those parts. It's sold in cans about an inch and a half high. The lid of the can is used to dip a little snuff into the buccal pouch -- which is another "fo'bit word" meaning the hollow under your nether lip, excuse me for showing off.'

Most of the coñac-drinkers grinned incredulously, but Will turned to me: 'Did you ever hear of Turtle Folk? That's what they call whites afflicted by the same disease. There are quite a few cases up and down the Mississippi -- Natchez, Vicksburg, Yazoo City, Baton Rouge -- kept a close secret, though. Once I was in a house at Natchez where they kept a turtle-man in the attic, and I heard him sloshing water about overhead. That was what Julia must have seen in New Orleans, and Mrs Fiennes before her. And I guess what you saw in Limerick was a portrait of a turtle-man brought back from the South as a curiosity.'

We asked Will: 'How did they get there? And why are they called "Whitaker Negroes"?'

He answered: 'I was coming to that. Around 1810, or so the story goes, a big planter named George Whitaker grew disgusted with his labour problems. He was an intelligent, wide-eyed, gullible New Englander, with Christian leanings, who wanted to reform the South and incidentally get even richer than he already was. He disliked the business of buying slaves and breeding them like cattle -- with the result, he said, that they had no traditions, no morals, and no discipline but what could be instilled into them by fear. Ideally, he thought, a planter should be able to take a long vacation, like a European landlord, and come back to find work proceeding smoothly under coloured overseers -- only petty crimes to punish, and the crops properly harvested. He argued that if the early slave-traders had kept families and clans together under their African chiefs, the labour problem would not have existed. Then it occurred to him: "Why not experiment?" And he went down to New Orleans, where he interviewed the famous pirate Jean Lafitte. "Sir," he said, "I wish you to visit Africa on my behalf and bring me back a whole tribe of Negroes. Two hundred is the figure I aim at, but a hundred would do. I'll pay you two hundred dollars a head: men, women and children. But mind, it must be a whole tribe, not samples from a score of them, or I don't buy."

'George was a serious man, and Jean Lafitte decided to take his offer. He sailed to the

Gold Coast with his brother Pierre on the next tide and there, almost at once, as luck would have it, surprised a whole tribe on the march. The Negroes had been expelled from somewhere in the interior, and being in a pretty poor way, offered no resistance. The Lafittes got two hundred of them aboard, made ingenious arrangements for their welfare on the voyage, and brought across alive one hundred and fifty -- smuggled them through Fort Adams and the Bayou St John until Pond came in sight. This constituted, you see, fraudulent evasion of the 1808 Federal embargo on the importation of slaves; so two hundred dollars a head was not an unreasonable price, considering the risk. But think of it in terms of modern money! Well, Mr Lemnowitz told me, at Pond, that when George Whitaker saw the livestock that the Lafittes had brought back from Africa, and realized they were now his responsibility -- though because of their constitution, of no more use as field workers than the bayou alligators -- he turned deathly white. He paid Jean Lafitte without a word; then he went home, made out his will, bequeathing the bulk of his land to the then "Territory of Mississippi" -- after which he and his young wife jumped into the River, hand in hand, and were not seen again.

'Someone took over the plantation, but allowed the Whitakers to remain in a swamp and make out as best as they could. And they hung on there long after the Whitaker mansion was swallowed up by the jungle. Their "forty" is tax-free and inviolable because the original deed of gift represented taxes paid in perpetuity. About fifteen years ago a Whitaker went crazy -- they are none of them very bright -- and hit the trail for he didn't know where. He travelled from swamp to swamp, living off the land, and eventually reached the town of Woodville which is not very far away as the crow flies, but a thousand miles as the jungle grows. The good people of Woodville, who normally publish an extra of their local paper only when a war is declared or a President assassinated, hurried one through the press with the banner headline: "MAN FROM MARS!" because the poor wretch was half-dead and couldn't explain himself, and all the horses in the town were bolting, and the women screaming their heads off.'

'And the Choctaw blood?'

'The Choctaws and Chickasaws were the local Indians, who obligingly moved away from the neighbourhood to make room for cotton. I was told that a few rogue males stayed behind in the swamps, mostly pox-cases, and intermarried with the Whitaker Negroes for want of other women.'

'Did your mother find any camellias?'

Will, detecting a hint of irony in the innocent question, answered: 'Thank you, ma'am. She got a lapful.'

Then he turned to me again. 'Do you know anyone on Time magazine?'

'Only the editor,' I said. 'I happened to rent Tom Matthews a house here in 1931, while he was still a book reviewer.'

'Then ask him to send you a copy of a piece about Turtle Folk published that year'

'I certainly will.'

And in due course of time Tom sent me the medical column of Time, December 14th, 1931, and this is what I read:

TURTLE FOLK

At Houston, Miss., A Mrs C. keeps a tub of water in her back yard for an extraordinary purpose. It is a ducking tub for her five-year-old son. Every time he feels uncomfortable he jumps in, clothes and all. Mrs C. does not scold. For that is the only way the boy can keep comfortable. He lacks sweat glands, which in normal people dissipate two to three quarts of cooling perspiration every day.

Mrs C. has another son, an infant, who likewise lacks sweat glands. He is too young to go ducking himself. So she dowses him from time to time with scuppers of water. Neither child can sleep unless his night clothes and mattress are wet. They take daytime naps in their damp cellar, with moist sacks for pillows.

Nearby at Vardaman, Miss., are two farmer brothers similarly afflicted. Each works alternate half days. While one plows the other soaks himself in a creek. Every once in a while the worker saunters to the creek for a cool dowsing. The brothers have a sister who dunks herself in the cistern back of their house.

They have a sweatless neighbour woman who must also wet herself for comfort.

At Vicksburg, Miss., there is a seventh of these folk who, like turtles, must periodically submerge themselves. The Vicksburg case is a 12-year-old boy, handled by Dr Guy Jarrett. The others are cases of Dr Ralph Bowen of Memphis.

Dr Bowen last week had on hand a medical report concerning the phenomenon. The seven suffer from 'hereditary ectodermal dysplasia of the anhydrotic type'. That is, they lack sweat glands, and the lack is hereditary. However, the seven Mississippi cases are related only as indicated above. This suggests that the failing is not so uncommon as heretofore believed (only 23 cases have been reported in medical literature). The ailment must often escape medical attention. Along with the lack of sweat glands goes a lack of teeth. None of the seven Mississippi cases has more than two teeth.

Tom also sent me a typescript from Time's research files:

FROM ANDREWS' DISEASES OF THE SKIN

Hereditary ectodermal dysplasia

There are numerous anomalies of the epidermis and appendages due to faulty evolution of the epiblastic layer of the blastoderm. The term 'ectodermal defect' has been limited to those conditions arising from incomplete development of the epidermis or its appendages, or its absence in circumscribed areas, thus excluding the keratodermias and the nevi. Atrichosis congenitalis with or without deformities of the nails and teeth is common, and is accompanied at times by nevi and other congenital anomalies. Congenital absence or malformation of the nails and teeth is also of frequent occurrence, and in circumscribed areas it is not out of the ordinary to find that the sebaceous and sweat glands are absent or impaired. In restricted areas there may be a complete absence of the epidermis and appendages at birth. It is more rare to encounter cases of extensive deformation or complete absence of all, or nearly all, of the cutaneous structures originating from the epiderm, to which group the term 'congenital ectodermal defect' is given. Guilford, an American dentist, was the first to report a case of this kind. The appearance of these patients is typical and conspicuous, as they have a facies that is suggestive of congenital syphilis. The skin is hairless, dry, white, smooth, and glossy. The teeth are entirely absent or there may be a few present, but the development is always defective.

There are dystrophic disturbances in the nails. The scalp hair is sparse and of a fine soft texture. The cheek bones are high and wide, whereas the lower half of the face is narrow. The supraorbital ridges are prominent; the nasal bridge is depressed, forming a 'saddle-back nose'. The tip of the nose is small and upturned, while the nostrils are large and conspicuous. The eyebrows are scanty, none being present on the outer two thirds. The eyes slant upwards, producing a Mongolian facies. At the buccal commissures radiating furrows, 'pseudorhagades', are present, and on the cheeks there are telangiectases and small papules simulating milium and adenoma sebaceum. The lips are thickened, the upper one being particularly protrusive.

The patient studied by Dr MacKee and myself never sweated. He was uncomfortable during hot weather due to elevation of body temperature and was unable to play baseball and running games with other boys of his age, because of great fatigue induced by such exertions. These symptoms resemble those in other cases reported in the literature, and not uncommonly the subjects find it necessary during the summer to have pails of water thrown over them if they are to keep comfortable.

The affection is familial, generally affecting males, and seems to be due to an injury during the third month of uterine life. Some of these patients are mentally deficient, but the majority of them have normal mentality because the anlage of the nervous system is distinct from the cutaneous ectoderm long before the injury occurs. MacKay

and Davidson report 4 cases occurring respectively in a woman, aged thirty-four years, and her two sons and one daughter, aged six, eleven, and thirteen years. A comprehensive article with good references on this subject has been written by Gordon and Jamieson.

I was now in a position to review the story from the beginning. In 1919, I had been neurotic, as a result of having spent thirteen months in the trenches under continuous bombardment, and had begun to 'see things' in France even before a fragment of eight-inch shell went clean through my right lung and knocked me out. Limerick was a dead-alive city haunted by family ghosts, and the glass picture focused my morbid fears of the past and future -- yes, it must have been the portrait of a turtle-man brought back to Ireland from the Southern States.

Julia and I: because of the unusually close rapport between us, partly explained by her Irish blood, it was not surprising that we should be scared by the same sort of face. Will had testified that the original was highly terrifying to any but a physician who could look coldly at it and characterize it as a facies. ('When am a face not a face, Massa Bones?' 'When it's a facies.') And why should Julia's mother not have stumbled across the same old house in New Orleans, and seen the same turtle-man peering through the attic window twelve years previously?

Hank: no natural sympathy existed between him and me, or between him and Julia. But he did have a remarkable receptivity for the emotions of people at a distance, and the trick of converting them into waking visions of his own. Clearly, he had subjectivized the fright which Julia and I conveyed to each other into something horrible that he had himself seen at Sóller. I need hardly add that Señor Bennasar keeps no tank in his patio for dunking turtle-folk in.

Will Price: he had a keen dramatic sense, but I found him far more accurate than most of my friends about names, dates and facts, and could not disbelieve his story. That is to say, I could accept what he saw with his own eyes. And what Mr Lemnowitz told him about George Whitaker and the Lafitte brothers was, Will himself confessed, 'shrouded in local myth'. On principle I suspect any legend about the Lafittes, as I do any legend about Paul Revere, Paul Jones, or Paul Bunyan. Besides, what connection could there be between the Whitaker Negroes and the white Turtle Folk who occur spasmodically on the Lower Mississippi? Nobody had suggested that sophisticated white women of Natchez, Vicksburg, Vardaman, Baton Rouge, Yazoo City and New Orleans ever paid clandestine visits to Pond in search of a new sexual frisson. It therefore seems probable that if the Lafittes did indeed smuggle a shipload of Negroes to Pond, these were healthy enough when they arrived, but proved susceptible to the turtle-disease, which is endemic to the Mississippi; and because of inbreeding it became hereditary among them. The families affected were disowned by their masters but permitted to camp on the swampy fringes of the Whitaker estate, after George dragged his wife with him into the River -- which he probably did, if at all, for some

simple, domestic reason. And because high cheek-bones and a weak growth of hair are characteristic of the turtle-folk facies -- which resembles that of the congenital syphilitic -- there seems to be no reason for bringing the pox-stricken Choctaws and Chickasaws into the story either.

But what about the numerous coincidences which hold the story together? Julia, her mother, Will, Hank, and myself had all been frightened, directly or indirectly, by the same rare phenomenon; and we met accidentally in Deyá, a village of four hundred inhabitants commendably unknown to history, which lies three or four thousand miles away from Pond, an even smaller place, to the geographical existence of which only Will among us could testify. Moreover, Tom Matthews who clarified the phenomenon (scientifically at least) for all of us -- both Julia and her mother were immensely relieved to know that it was a real face after all -- had also been living at Deyá when the Time article appeared. But these coincidences do not amount to much, perhaps, and would never have come to light had not the Whitaker facies been so unforgettably frightening. (It occurs to me as I write that the real explanation of the Glamis Monster -- the reputedly 'Undying Thing' which used to peer out from one of the attic windows at Glamis Castle -- may have been hereditary ectodermal dysplasia in the Bowes-Lyon family, hushed up because one of its victims was heir to the earldom.) Finally, I suspect myself of having exaggerated the telepathic sympathy between Julia and myself. Did the face she described so vividly superimpose itself, perhaps, on the fading memory of the one I had seen in Mr Reilly's antique shop? My imagination is not that of a natural liar, because my Protestant conscience restrains me from inventing complete fictions; but I am Irishman enough to coax stories into a better shape than I found them.

This is not yet all. In 1954, I broadcast a short summary of the foregoing story for the B.B.C. As a result, a doctor wrote to tell me that he once had under observation, in a Liverpool hospital, a white child suffering from this rare disease; but that occasional sponging was sufficient relief for its discomfort, except in unusually hot weather. Another letter came from Mrs Otto Lobstein, an Englishwoman who was going off some months later with her husband for a tour of the Southern States, and proposed to check up on the Whitaker Negroes. 'Where did you say that they lived?' she wrote.

I provided the necessary map-references, not really expecting to hear from Mrs Lobstein again; but in due process of time she sent me a letter and a photograph. The photograph showed a Mississippi fingerpost pointing south to Woodville, north to Pinckneyville, east to Pond and Fort Adams; and the fine condition of the three roads suggested that prosperity had returned to the neighbourhood since Will Price's visit there more than twenty years previously. This was the letter, which I have been kindly allowed to print here.

New Orleans,

February 1st, 1955.

DEAR ROBERT GRAVES,

We spent an interesting day tracking down the Whitaker-negroes, after camping for a night in the Mississippi woods -- a wretched night because this was the hardest frost of the winter. But the early morning sun was startlingly warm and the fields beautiful; no wind blew and thin, erect strings of smoke came from the small shacks along the road.

Pond is not on the map, so we took the road to Fort Adams until we came to a very lovely old plantation home, where one Rip White directed us to the Whitaker plantation. But he was far more anxious to tell us about his own house, which 'had been granted to Henry Stewart, son of Mary Queen of Scots about 180 years ago'. Henry was 'a contender to the Throne', so they shipped him off to America, where he was given this plantation of 2,200 acres to keep him quiet and occupied. The house did have a royal air, but I was a little troubled by the discrepancy in date between Mary Queen of Scots and King George III, and between the names Stewart and Stuart!

When we reached the plantation, we met Mr Whitaker, the owner, who was going somewhere in a hurry, but told us that the old mansion some way back in the fields had been demolished a few years before. (Its place was now taken by a large, hard-looking, unromantic modern bungalow.) He also told us that the land had been split up at the same time between the various Whitaker sons -- which didn't seem to coincide with Will Price's story that the land had been deeded to the State, unless perhaps a brother of the man who committed suicide had contested the deed of gift and won it back. Anyhow, Mr Whitaker advised us to ask Mrs Ray about the story; she had raised all the Whitaker whites for two or three generations.

Dear old Mrs Ray gave us interesting recollections of what her mother and father had told her as a child: how, when the overseer had whipped a slave over a log for not picking enough cotton, the rest would creep out of the plantation after dark and go into a 'holler' -- bending their heads low down so as not to be heard, they would sing and pray for freedom. But she had no stories about Whitaker-negroes.

At Woodville, a small town on the way to Pond, we visited the Court House to look for records of the original George Whitaker. There we found an intelligent official, Mr Leek, who had actually met some of the Whitaker-negroes, when he helped them to fill up questionnaires during the Second World War. He told us that they were dying out fast. In winter, he said, they wore ordinary clothes; in summer, heavy underclothes soaked in water. The Court House records, however, did not show that any Whitaker land had been deeded to the State since 1804, when they began. Mr Leek's explanation of why the Whitaker-negroes were so called was that the first sufferer had 'Whitaker' as his Christian name.

At last we reached Pond. Pond Post Office is a big, barn-like structure which, as in the days of trading-posts, carries everything and deals in sacks of flour and rolls of cotton; the large, serene pond mentioned by Will Price lay at the foot of the hill. Mr Carroll Smith, the postmaster in succession to Mr Lemnowitz, sold us some safety-pins. He was small and silver-haired, with sensitive brown eyes. At first he showed a certain reticence when we questioned him, but gradually shed it. He confirmed that very few Whitaker-negroes are left, and said that they lived on the plantations, not in the swamps. Nowadays, only one member of a family of five or six children would inherit the disease. Occasionally a Whitaker-negro visited the Post Office, which was always an unpleasant experience, because the glandular excretions emitted through his mouth conveyed an appalling odour of decay. Mr Smith had never heard the story of George Whitaker's suicide and believed, with Mr Leek, that the original sufferer was an immigrant negro from Virginia. He suggested that we should visit a Mr McGeehee in Pinckneyville, the nearest village, who had a couple of Whitaker-negroes working for him. He would say no more on the subject, after that, though we talked for some time about share-cropping. So we drove on.

Mr McGeehee's plantation was very English, with a tree-lined driveway running through park-like meadows (where Herefords and Red Devons grazed) to a big, unpretentious house. Mr McGeehee himself was most hospitable; so was his mother, a gentle old lady, looking like a pressed flower. We chatted politely in the spacious drawing-room about farming and children and plantation houses; but both the McGeehees remained emphatic that we must not meet the two Whitaker-negroes working for them. Mr McGeehee, very rightly, felt responsible for his employees and said that too many sightseers had come to stare at the pair recently, which made them sensitive. So my husband and I did not press the point; and, in any case, we felt the point slipping away from us. A group of people with a strange history, living in odd conditions and with a bizarre inheritance, are one thing; and a few sufferers from skin disease, who happen to have been born into normal families, are quite another.

In the 1930s, apparently, Will Price found them living in a group, and this was natural because they are not popular with the other negroes, for obvious reasons; and he must have gone there in the summer, when their distinctive habits were more conspicuous. As for the story of their origin, it seems probable that Mr Lemnowitz heard it from some source, now lost, which was as untrustworthy as that of Rip White's legend about 'Henry Stewart, the Contender to the Throne'.

A novel feature of the countryside which may interest you is that plantation owners have begun to import Brahmini cattle -- instead of orchids -- from the Far East. These withstand heat and drought better than other breeds, and make good store cattle; I saw many of them grazing in the fields -- silky-grey in colour, with huge horned heads. The bulls were humped like camels, and added a richness to the Pond landscape.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Lobstein.

This calm and practical travelogue has dispelled my haunting nightmare for ever. Terror gives way to pity; the pirates Jean and Pierre Lafitte, together with the rogue Choctaws and Chickasaws, are banished to the realms of macabre legend. Only the hospitable Mr McGeehee and his gentle old mother, who resembles a pressed flower, are left on the stage; in charge of two sensitive sufferers from hereditary ectodermal dysplasia of the anhydrotic type, whose principal purpose in life is to herd silky-grey Brahmini cattle in lush parkland -- a far more agreeable example of symbiosis than the one reported by Will Price.