

# Mallory's Farm

By Len Maynard & Mick Sims

There was the harsh chill of discontent in the air as I entered the drawing room. Lucy was sitting at the desk, furiously scribbling letters to our creditors; Anne was flicking through last year's accounts with a sour expression on her face; and Mother was knitting, the needles clicking out morse-code messages of irritation at the financial plight of the publishing company the family had built and sustained for over thirty years.

I poured myself a large scotch, and flopped down into a high-backed armchair in front of the fireplace. I felt all eyes on the room upon me, so I closed my own and sipped my whisky, delaying the inevitable cross-examination. The carriage clock on the mantelpiece ticked off ten seconds before one of my sisters spoke.

'Well? What did Geoffery say?' Anne's tone was shrewish.

Geoffery Salisbury was the company's accountant, and I had spent the best part of the morning ensconced in his dreary London office, going over facts and figures, and gradually getting more and more depressed. 'He say's that, as things stand at the moment, we should accept Uncle Willy's offer,' I said blandly.

My sisters sighed in unison. They were twins, and did most things simultaneously. My mother clicked her tongue, a sharp counterpoint to the clattering needles. She was knitting squares for the Third World; a charitable sop to the conscience of a most uncharitable woman.

'Just as we thought,' Lucy said, and swung her long legs out from under the desk, going across to the drinks cabinet and pouring herself a large sherry. She didn't offer her mother or sister one.

'You're going to have to face facts, Phillip. It's the only way.' This from Anne, who was watching Lucy with ill-concealed contempt. Anne had been teetotal for a year now, since discovering religion at an evangelical meeting at Earls Court. The meeting had come just a few weeks after our father had upped sticks and run away to Dorset with a girl younger than my sisters. Religion had filled the hole left by his going. Lucy was attempting to fill the same hole with sherry. My mother was attacking charitable causes with a vigour that bordered on the psychotic and I...well I was cheering him on every inch of the way.

I was a late child in the marriage of Russell and Isobel Scotney. The twins were born ten years before me, and I had been planned to shore up the crumbling ruins of a relationship gone stale. My father christened me Phillip. Phillip Scotney, or PS as my father would have it. PS, like a bright optimistic post-script to a long and arduous letter.

'I still think there has to be another way,' I said.

'Oh, stop burying your head in the sand, Phillip,' Lucy said.

'Geoffery Salisbury knows this company inside out,' Anne said. 'He knows how much it means to the family, but the man's no fool. He knows that Uncle Willy's offer is about the only option we have left. Without an injection of cash from him, we are going to go under. We have printers' bills to pay, our overdraft at the bank is about to be suspended, and we owe most of our authors at least two year's royalty payments.'

'But he wants a controlling interest,' I argued. 'He's been trying to get his foot in the door for years. It's always irked him that he's been shut out of the company.'

The clicking needles fell still, and we waited in expectant silence for Mother to speak. She looked at each of us in turn, annoyance barely disguised on her thin, pinched face. She sighed deeply and spoke. 'We will accept Willy's offer,' she said flatly.

'Oh, for God's sake!' I said. Mother looked at me coldly. She was no fool when it came to business, and she would have known what the outcome of my meeting with Salisbury would be before I even left the house this morning.

I made a last ditch attempt to stave off the inevitable. 'Father will never relinquish control of the company,' I said. 'Especially to Uncle Willy, and before you all get carried away, let's not forget that Father is the majority share-holder.'

Mother raised a hand for silence. The decision had been made, and she had no intention of getting into a long debate about it. 'Your father will have to be made to see reason. I'm quite aware that the relationship between him and my brother has always been strained, but your father is going to have to swallow his pride, and accept the life-line Willy is holding out to us.'

I said, 'But..'

Mother rose to her feet impatiently, her knitting sliding to the floor. 'Oh, for pity's sake face facts, Phillip. It's either hand control to Willy and take his money, or lose everything. This house, the villa in Italy, everything.' She shook her head slowly and said very quietly, 'Everything.' I swear I saw her eyes fill with tears, though she blinked them away rapidly. 'No, I have worked too hard, and sacrificed too much to see this company go under. For once in your life, Phillip, you are going to have to face up to your responsibilities and not run away from them like your father has. As you are the only one in contact with your father, it is up to you to make him agree to the offer. You owe your sisters and me that much.'

I swore under my breath. I had tried to keep my regular meetings with my father a secret from the rest of them. Obviously I had not tried hard enough. I attempted to avoid the piercing gaze from three pairs of female eyes, but they skewered me, fixing me like a butterfly on a pin.

'But how can I convince him that Uncle Willy's offer is a fair one, if I don't believe it myself?'

'That's your problem,' Mother said. 'Don't let your sisters, or me, carry on believing that all the men in this family are spineless. You can leave for Dorset in the morning.'

'I can't, not tomorrow. I have that charity cricket match.'

'Charity begins at home,' she snapped, flattening my objection in her customary manner, and left the room, slamming the door shut behind her. A crashing full stop to a one-sided discussion. My sisters looked at me smugly. I shrugged and finished my whisky.

The woman who had so completely captured my father's heart, and thrown our family into turmoil was Gillian Carter. I first met her on a blisteringly hot day the previous May, when my father invited me for afternoon tea at the Savoy. I was running late that day, and in a rush as I pushed through the revolving doors, and hurried through the imposing marble-clad foyer of the illustrious hotel. I spotted my father seated at a table, close to a raised dais where a pianist played a discreet selection of standards. I didn't recognise the young woman with whom my father was sharing the table, but they appeared to know each other well. They were deep in conversation, and only noticed me when I drew alongside. My father looked up, smiled, and made the introductions.

I was at once struck by Gillian's natural beauty. Her complexion was flawless and deeply tanned, her hair a lustrous chestnut brown. Her eyes were almond-shaped, so dark they were almost black, but they shone with humour and warmth. She rose to greet me.

'I've just commissioned Gillian to write a children's' book for us,' my father said.

That threw me completely. Scotney's had never published childrens' books before. Poetry, military history, literary fiction and biography were the areas in which we had made our reputation. Although the company was going through a lean spell, I couldn't see how such a radical departure would benefit us. I sat down heavily in my seat and poured myself a cup of tea.

'She also illustrates,' Father continued, his enthusiasm undimmed by my lack of reaction. 'Show Phillip some of your work, Gillian.'

'Do you really think he wants to see it, Russell?' At least she was perceptive.

'Of course he wants to see it. As our marketing director he will be the one with the responsibility for selling your book. Show him.'

She reached into a large folio-case at the side of her chair, and produced a few of her paintings, passing them across the table to me. 'Some of them are still quite rough, but they'll give you some idea of what I'm trying to do.'

I leafed through the paintings, and had to admit they were very good. Her style was assured, her use of colour vibrant. They were mostly woodland scenes, containing stylised animals and birds, and she had contrived to make the settings as magical as possible. I could see how the pictures would appeal to children, both young and old, but I still had reservations. 'They're very good,' I said guardedly.

'Very good!' my father said. 'Very good? They're brilliant, man. Brilliant.'

It was rare for my father to be this enthusiastic about anything, so I guessed then that there was a lot more to this relationship than just author/publisher. My suspicions were confirmed when, later, Gillian went to the ladies' room, leaving us alone to talk.

'Well, what do you think of her?' Father leaned forward in his seat expectantly.

'She seems very pleasant,' I said. 'Young though, younger than the twins.'

'Actually she's just two years older than you. Does that bother you?'

'Why should it bother me? We have younger authors than that on our books.'

He stared hard at me. 'Don't be so bloody coy. You know what I'm driving at.'

A waiter appeared at his shoulder and replenished a plate of sandwiches. The pianist was taking a break, and a murmur of conversation filled the tearoom, business being discussed, pleasant reunions, minor celebrations. The maitre d' flitted from table to table, checking everything was running like a Swiss watch. He hovered at our table, until Father shooed him away like an irritating fly. 'I'm waiting,' Father said to me.

'Does Mother know?'

'She knows. She also knows I'm leaving at the end of the month.'

'It's serious then, with Gillian?'

'About as serious as it gets. I love her, Phillip.'

I searched his eyes, looking for the lie, or at least an exaggeration. At that point Gillian entered the room, and his gaze switched from me to her. The look he gave her told me everything there was to know. 'Then I hope you'll both be very happy,' I said.

He looked back at me and smiled warmly. 'Thank you, Phillip. Your approval means a lot to me.'

Gillian took her seat. She was pretty, gregarious, warm and giving, everything my mother was not.

'How could I not approve?' I said.

Gillian looked puzzled, then realised that something momentous had taken place in her absence. Her eyes questioned my father, who smiled broadly at her. Then she leaned across the table, and

planted a kiss on my cheek. 'Thank you for making this so easy, Phillip,' she said. 'Russell was dreading this afternoon.'

'He needn't have. He deserves some happiness in his life.'

Had I known then the events that were to follow, I would have bitten my tongue.

Long, thorn-sharp branches of dog rose scratched at the paintwork of my gleaming red Morgan as I eased it along the dirt track leading to my father's new home. The directions he'd given me were clear and precise, taking me from the end of the M27, through Ringwood, on to Dorchester, and finally to the village closest to the house. Once outside the village I found the directions invaluable, as the house was still a mile away. A mile of narrow, winding, country lanes, bordered on each side by high hedges of quick-thorn and privet, with the occasional honeysuckle and blackberry growing though to provide some interest.

I nearly missed the track entirely. There was a weather-beaten wooden sign leaning back in the bushes at an angle of forty five degrees, its lettering faded and eroded by time. I had to get out of the car to read it. It said, Mallory's Farm, and pointed vaguely to an overgrown track to my right. I headed along the track and finally came upon a five bar gate, once again having to get out of the car to open it. From the gate there was a short drive leading to the farmhouse.

The drive gave onto a cobbled yard littered with builder's debris. A small yellow cement mixer stood idle to one side of the yard, next to it a large heap of sand and, against one end of the house, a skeleton of scaffolding clung to the wall. Part of the slate roof was missing and covered with a blue tarpaulin, but there was no sign of anyone working on it. The house itself had obviously seen better days, but the yellow sandstone blocks that made up the basic structure seemed solid enough. To the right of the house was a dilapidated wooden barn, a small stable block with missing doors, though there were no signs of horses.

I parked the car next to the cement mixer and got out, stretching my legs, and massaging the small of my back to remove the kinks brought on by the long drive. My knock at the door brought no response. I waited, knocked again, then made my way around the side of the house, and found my father working in the garden. He appeared to be erecting a fence. Long stakes had been driven into the earth in a line at the end of the garden, and he was busy stapling lengths of barbed wire from post to post.

'Is that to keep people out, or to keep Gillian in?' I said, coming up behind him. He turned and smiled, but it was with his mouth only. His eyes were encircled by dark rings and looked deeply troubled. He had lost weight too. His face looked gaunt, and his clothes seemed to hang on his frame. The clothes themselves were a long way from the dapper man-about-town style he usually affected. Baggy grey trousers and stained checked shirt, with shoes caked in mud and dirt. The combined effect of the clothes and the weight-loss seemed to put twenty years on him. I realised with alarm that the marks on his shirt were bloodstains. His hands were cut and bleeding, and he wiped them absently on his shirt. 'You ought to wear gloves for a job like that,' I said.

He stared down at his hands as if noticing the cuts for the first time. 'Probably right,' he said gruffly. A dog was barking somewhere inside the house, then the back door was pushed open and a huge, longhaired German Shepherd came bounding out into the garden. It was barking furiously and heading my way. I took an involuntary step backwards.

'Stay where you are,' my father snapped at me. 'He won't hurt you. That's enough, Barney. Sit!'

The dog stopped within a yard of me, and sat back on its haunches, growling deep in its throat.

‘What's going on?’ I said. ‘Guard dogs, barbed wire? Are you expecting an invasion?’ I made no reference to his appearance. That could wait.

‘Gillian feels safer in the house with the dog around. Let him sniff your hand, and don't look him in the eye. Dogs take that as a challenge. Look at a point just above his head.’

I did as I was told and nervously put out my hand, fearing that any moment the dog would lunge and take a large piece out of me. The dog sniffed my hand cautiously and started to wag its tail, apparently satisfied that I was friendly, then he wandered across to my father's side, offering his head for a stroke.

‘Where's Gillian?’ I asked, relieved that the dog now had another interest.

‘I had a studio built for her upstairs. She spends most of her time up there. Come into the house. I'm sure you could use a drink after your journey.’

My father was pouring me a drink when Gillian finally came down from her studio. I couldn't believe the change in her. She looked gaunt and ragged. Her eyes had retreated into dark hollows, and her chestnut hair was cropped short. The style would have suited her delicate features had it not emphasised the waxy paleness of her skin. Her whole body seemed emaciated, even to the extent of a small potbelly that looked dangerously like the signs of malnutrition. She regarded me with tired eyes, and a wan smile spread across her lips.

‘Hello, Phillip,’ she said, in a voice suffused with weariness. ‘It's so good to see you again.’

‘You too,’ I said and hugged her, feeling her bones, sharp and angular, through the thin material of her dress. Father was watching my face, gauging my reaction. He was quite aware that Gillian was but a pale shadow of the bright, vivacious young woman I had met at the Savoy all those months ago, and he was looking to me for confirmation of the fact. In her appearance I supposed lay the reasons for his own deterioration.

We all chatted amiably enough for a few minutes, but Gillian seemed uncomfortable. She refused the offer of a drink, and stood, holding on to the back of a chair as if for support, while we sat. Eventually she said, ‘Please don't think me rude, but I'm very close to finishing a painting. I'd like to get back to it, if you two don't mind. Besides, I'm sure you have business you wish to discuss.’ With that she left the room, the dog at her heels, and we listened to her heavy tread on the stairs.

‘I may be talking out of turn,’ I said, ‘but is Gillian well?’

Father stared moodily into the empty hearth. ‘She's pregnant,’ he said flatly.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I see.’ So the slightly swollen stomach was at least not lack of food. However the news took me completely by surprise, and it obviously showed on my face. Even with this explanation, I was concerned about the drastic change in her appearance, in both their appearances.

‘It wasn't planned, if that's what you're thinking. I wanted to get everything sorted out first. Damn it, I wanted us to be married first.’

‘Well, I can see it could complicate matters. When's it due?’

‘She's about four months gone.’ He swallowed the rest of his drink and poured himself another. ‘I'm sorry, I should have told you before.’

‘Why?’ I said, holding my glass out for a refill. ‘It's hardly any of my business.’

He was pouring my drink, his back to me. ‘You've been a good son, Phillip. The only reason I stayed with your mother for so long was because your arrival gave the marriage some point. Your sisters both take after Isobel, I'm afraid.’

'They love you, in their own way.'

'Oh, I doubt that very much. In fact, I doubt that love is an emotion either of them are capable of feeling.'

'That's a very harsh judgement.'

'Maybe, but it's true nonetheless, and you know it.' He returned to his seat. 'Let's get the business out of the way,' he said, changing the subject. 'There's a lot I need to talk to you about.'

'As you wish,' I said. 'I'll get my bag in from the car.'

I walked around to the front of the house where my car was parked, reached in to retrieve my case and then swore. Running down one side of the calfskin leather of the case were a series of scratches. Carved quite deep into the leather and at an angle, it looked as if someone had scraped a large dining fork across it. I cursed the dog because the marks looked like nothing less than the marks left by an animal's claws, and the dog was the only suspect.

Then I noticed there were similar marks on the paintwork of the car. All along one side. I remembered the thorns along the narrow lanes, but surely they couldn't have gouged out quite such deep scratches. These looked like deliberate damage caused by sharp claws.

I took the case and joined my father in the study at the back of the house. I decided not to mention the marks and kept the damaged side of the case away from him. Something in his manner, and my knowledge of the type of man he was, suggested to me that he hadn't yet told me everything about what was troubling Gillian and himself. I set my case down upon the desk and opened it up, taking out a sheaf of papers, balance sheets, statements and invoices. 'I had a meeting with Geoffery Salisbury yesterday,' I said.

Father was at the window, staring out into the garden and beyond. 'Yes, I know. He called me.'

I smiled ruefully. I should have realised that Salisbury would be in close contact with my father. 'Well,' I said. 'What do you think of his advice?'

Father turned to face me. 'More to the point, what do you think of it?'

I sat down at the desk and spread out the papers. 'I think Willy should be kept out of the business at all costs.'

'Really?'

'I know it seems to be the best solution to our problems, at least Salisbury, Mother and the girls seem to think so. But I just can't see myself working with Uncle Willy. The man's a rogue, and he knows as much about publishing as I know about nuclear physics, which isn't much. I'm sure he sees the company as an asset-stripping exercise, a tax loss. I've seen him do it to other companies he's bailed out in the past. Give him six months and he'll have halved the work force. The rest of us will be sitting biding our time until he sells the company for a profit and moves on.'

Father sat down at the desk opposite me and started leafing through the papers. 'I tend to agree with you. So if you were the majority share-holder you would reject the offer?'

'Yes I would. There are other ways to re-finance the company.'

'Such as mortgaging the house, selling the villa in Italy.'

'Of course.'

'Your mother would never agree to that.'

'But surely at the end of the day the decision is yours.'

A wry smile played on his lips. 'Geoffery's a good man. He sees the whole picture when everyone else is wrapped up in the minutiae. You realise that once the divorce begins, your mother will try to claim half of everything I own, and that includes the shares I hold. According

to Geoffery, she'll get them. At the moment she holds nineteen shares, you and the girls hold ten each. Which means that come the divorce she'll have half of mine as well. Obviously the girls will throw in their lot with her, which means that any decision I make today is totally academic.'

'She'll sell out to Willy.'

'No doubt about it. Which is why I've taken steps to see that it doesn't happen. As of midnight tonight, all my shares in Scotney's will be transferred into your name. You'll wake up tomorrow as majority share-holder.'

I was stunned. It was the last thing I expected him to do. 'You can't mean it,' I said. 'Salisbury said nothing of this.'

'I told him not to. Geoffery and I have been working very closely on this for the past few weeks, ever since Willy made his offer, in fact. The advice he gave you yesterday was a smokescreen, I'm afraid. Something to throw the hounds off our scent. If your mother had got wind of what I was planning, she would have done everything in her power to block it. Besides, I wanted the chance to speak with you first. I had a pretty good idea where you stood on the matter, but I needed to hear it from your own lips. I'm satisfied now that the company stands at least a fighting chance of survival.'

'I'll do my best,' I said.

'Oh, I know that. Besides in my new consultative role on the board I'll make sure of it.'

I smiled slowly. 'A consultative position at a salary comparable to the one you draw now, I suppose.'

'But of course.' He returned the smile.

'You're a cunning old fox,' I said.

'I'll have a new wife and child to support. I'll need an income.'

I raised my glass in a toast to him. 'To Scotney's,' I said. 'A new beginning.'

He raised his glass in reply but, before he could touch it to his lips, there came an almighty crash from upstairs, followed by the sound of Gillian crying out. He was out of his seat in an instant and running up the stairs. I was close behind him.

In Gillian's studio we found her sitting in the middle of the floor, her arms wrapped around herself. She was rocking backwards and forwards, crying softly. Her drawing board had been over-turned - the crash we heard - and paints, brushes and pencils were scattered across the floor. My father was at her side, cradling her in his arms, speaking to her softly, soothingly. I felt awkward intruding into such intimacy, so I set about righting the drawing board. As I did so I glanced at the picture she was working on, a representation of the view from the studio window, of the garden and the woods beyond.

'Is everything all right?' I asked.

My father was helping Gillian to her feet. She was still crying, and kept glancing back at the window, fear in her eyes.

'A little overwrought,' Father said. 'She'll be fine after a lie down. It's been a difficult pregnancy.'

Gillian pulled away from him. 'Tell him, Russell,' she said angrily. 'They were out there again, by the well. In daylight. Tell him.'

'Tell me what?'

Father wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders and said with all the authority he could muster, 'Nothing. There's nothing to tell.' Gillian seemed to sag in his arms and he led her from the room. I heard the door to their bedroom close, followed by my father's voice raised in anger.

The dog re-appeared on the landing sniffing around the doorway to the studio, then trotted along to the bedroom, laying down outside the door and resting its head on its paws. I went downstairs, poured myself a drink and took it out to the garden.

Someone had been working hard out here judging by the neatness of the flowerbeds and the productive vegetable plot. Beyond the garden was what appeared to be a wild-flower meadow, with poppies and wild foxgloves growing, dotting the long, knee-high grass with vivid spots of colour. Jutting up from the centre of the meadow was a small, circular, brick-built structure that looked like a well. I could not understand why it was stuck in the middle of the meadow unless, of course, the area of wild grass and flowers had once been part of the garden. At the far end of the meadow was deeply shaded woodland, tall stands of ash and elm, a dark brooding place that looked totally forbidding. Despite the warmth of the day, and the tranquillity of the scene, I felt a cold chill of discomfort creep along my spine.

I came to the fence my father was erecting, and was struck by the distance he'd left between the strands of barbed wire. To keep animals in or out a gap of about fourteen inches between strands is usually sufficient, but my father had set the strands much closer together. Four inches was all that separated one strand from its neighbour. It seemed likely that this fence had something to do with the cause of Gillian's distress, though what it was I couldn't imagine. 'They were out there again, by the well.' Her words came back to me. I looked across at the well and saw nothing. In fact the whole scene looked peaceful and rather idyllic.

'I think I owe you an explanation.' My father had come up behind me.

'If it's something private between you and Gillian, then it's none of my business,' I said.

'All the same, I'd like to talk it through with you. It's been going round and round in my head for weeks now. Quite honestly I'd like an objective opinion.' He picked up the hammer that was lying on the ground, and continued with the fence as he spoke.

'This place had been empty for a couple of years when I first came across it. It was at the bottom of a pile of property details the estate agent sent us. We looked at quite a few of the others but nothing seemed quite right, and Gillian kept coming back to the details on this place. It was slightly more than I could afford but, in the end, I agreed to come and look at it.

'It was in terrible repair, a real state. I estimated it would take several thousands to put it right. I said as much to the agent but he didn't seem to think it would be a problem. The elderly couple who lived here before had died, and the estate was being administered by their son. The agent was confident that the son would drop the price once the faults in the place were pointed out to him. I got a surveyor in to go over the house and to work out how much it would take to renovate it. Once I got his report, I sent it off to the agent. He persuaded the son to drop his price by ten thousand, which was more than enough to cover the repairs, so that sold it to us. I employed a local builder, a man called Barker, to carry out the work. It's him I have to blame for Gillian's present state of mind.

'We moved into the house with a lot of the renovation work still to do, but some of the rooms were habitable and Gillian was impatient to start building a home. We moved in and all was fine, or so it seemed. It was only when Gillian got chatting to Barker that she learned the whole history of the house, and since then things have gone from bad to worse. Gillian doesn't know, but I've tried to sell the place, even accept a loss, but nothing doing. The stories that go with it, that no one told us, put people off. Barker told Gillian about the person who owned the land and house before the old couple took it over, a man called Seth Mallory.'

Father paused and hammered another staple into a post. The afternoon was slipping into evening, and the light was beginning to fade, the sun dropping down behind the wood, painting the crowns of the trees a deep red. With the emerging dusk came the shadows. The shadows of the trees fell across the well, almost hiding it in darkness.

‘Seth Mallory was a work-shy layabout, who farmed this piece of land in a lackadaisical manner. He was married to a rather dull, unintelligent creature who bore him six daughters who, as they grew, seemed to have inherited the worst traits of both parents. Local gossip has it that all the Mallory women were slatternly, promiscuous and generally loose. There were rumours of the father going with the daughters as well as with his wife. Well, the consequence of such behaviour is pretty obvious. Occasionally one of the girls would be spotted in the village, obviously pregnant, but no babies were ever seen by the locals, and no Christenings took place at the parish church. Of course tongues began to wag, and all manner of rumour and gossip began to circulate.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I interrupted. ‘But I can’t see how the lives of a family that lived here years ago can possibly affect Gillian now. Surely it’s long past, ancient history.’

Father hammered in the last staple and pointed with the hammer. ‘See that well?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, according to the builder it’s known locally as Bastard Well. I’ll leave you to draw your own conclusions.’ He gathered up his tools. ‘Come up to the studio. I want to show you something.’

It was silent in the house. Barney was asleep outside the bedroom door. He grumbled softly as we tiptoed past him, but didn’t wake. Once in the studio my father shut the door and switched on the light. I went across to the window and looked out. The sun had dropped behind the trees completely now and, although it was still light enough to see most of the garden, dark pockets of shadow were forming in the corners and gradually creeping across from the meadow. I could barely make out the well at all.

Father spread out several of Gillian’s paintings on the worktable at the far side of the room. ‘Look at these, Phillip, and give me your thoughts on them.’

We went through them one at a time.

‘This one was painted before we moved in here,’ he said.

‘I know. This is one of the paintings she showed me that time at the Savoy.’

‘Well compare it to this one, painted a month after we arrived here.’

The painting seemed typical of Gillian’s style, a woodland setting, bright colours, the same stylised animals. There was a difference though between the two paintings. It was a subtle difference and, viewed singly, it might not even be noticed. In the first painting the animals seemed carefree and joyful, in the second their faces had a more guarded aspect, almost furtive, as if they were watching out for something. I said as much to my father.

‘This one and the one on the drawing board represent her latest work,’ he said, indicating the final painting.

The contrast between the last one on the table and the earlier work was startling. Gillian’s style was still evident, but the subject matter was much darker. In this picture the animals carried expressions of plain fear as they peeked out from behind rocks and trees. In the foreground of the picture was the long grass and wild flowers of a meadow, and something in the meadow was the object of the animals’ terror.

‘Is this the meadow at the end of the garden?’

‘Yes it is. There's the well.’ He pointed to something in the picture.

I hadn't noticed it at first, it was only lightly painted in, almost a sketch, and I had been so absorbed by the expressions on the animals' faces that I had overlooked it completely. But now, looking carefully at the animals Gillian had painted, and following their eye-lines, it was clear it was the well that was the focus of the animals' fear.

I went over to the drawing board and looked at the latest painting. This was the most disturbing picture of all. It depicted the view from the studio window, but her choice of colour, and the looser style had shortened perspective. The wood now loomed large in the background, casting shadows over the meadow, giving the meadow itself a menacing aspect, and this time the well was much more prominent. There were no animals to be seen in the picture, but there was something. Gillian had painted the long grass of the meadow in such a way that it seemed to ripple with life, as if there were things moving through the long stems, and at the well there was just the hint of a figure, pale, small and ill-defined.

I stood back from the painting to see if distance, as it sometimes does, might give me a more accurate impression of the figure by the well, but it remained just as elusive.

The paintings represented a gradual darkening of Gillian's mood that was echoed by the decline in her physical appearance.

‘Have you spoken to her doctor about this?’

‘Blake, in the village, but he's useless. Just gave me some nonsense about hormonal changes and how Gillian should try to rest as much as possible.’

‘And you don't think that's the answer, that all this might be some kind of psychological problem brought about by stress?’

‘I've considered it,’ Father said. ‘It certainly has all the hallmarks of one. God knows this hasn't been an easy time for us, but I don't know. She's been saying lately that she's hearing things, seeing things.’

‘And you haven't?’

‘Not a damned thing.’ He sighed. ‘But I'm so damned tired at the moment. It is difficult to sleep, she gets so restless at night. Then there's the fear for the baby, all this worry and stress can't be good for it.’

I tried to think of an answer, or at least a way forward. ‘What things has Gillian heard, or seen?’

‘They're crying out for their mother,’ Gillian spoke from the doorway. We had been so engrossed in the paintings and our conversation we hadn't heard the door open. She looked terrible. Her skin was stretched tight across the bones of her face, and her eyes were red from crying. The dog stood at her side, tongue lolling loosely from its mouth. She fondled its ears absently as she stood there.

‘You should be lying down,’ my father said.

‘If Phillip is staying the night he's going to need a meal. I'll go and prepare it.’ Her manner was cool and controlled, her eyes a lifeless reflection of what they once were. She turned from the doorway and made her way downstairs.

‘Did you have plans to go back tonight?’ Father said.

‘I'll stay, if it's convenient.’

‘So long as you don't mind sleeping on the couch. To be quite honest I'd welcome the company.’

After dinner Gillian excused herself and went to bed. Father and I talked for a while, mainly about business, mapping out a plan for the future. We studiously avoided talk of darker matters. At about ten, Father yawned and said he was going to turn in. He provided me with blankets and pillows, and I made up a bed on the couch.

I lay there listening to the mantel clock chime away the hours, a thousand thoughts running through my head. Being handed control of Scotney's was enough to occupy my mind, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Gillian's paintings and that shadowy figure by the well.

I finally drifted off to sleep at about two in the morning only to be awakened by Barney growling at the kitchen door. I pushed back the covers and, bleary eyed, wandered through to see what was disturbing him. I switched on the light. Gillian was sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee growing cold in front of her. She shielded her eyes with her hand as the light went on. 'I'm sorry, Phillip, I didn't mean to wake you,' she said.

The dog was pacing backwards and forwards at the back door, stopping at every turn to growl at something outside. 'I didn't know you were up,' I said. 'I heard Barney growling. That's what woke me. Can't you sleep?'

She shook her head and took a cigarette from a packet on the table. She lit it and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. 'You probably think I'm losing my mind,' she said calmly. 'I heard what you were saying to Russell earlier in the studio.'

I sat down at the table. 'I think nothing of the kind. I do think you're under a lot of stress though.'

She ran her hand through her hair. 'We should never have bought this place. If I had known at the time...' She stopped in mid-sentence and looked round at the back door.

'What is it?'

She hushed me. 'Listen.'

From the other side of the door came a faint sound, as if something was scratching against the wood. Barney growled again, pushing his nose into the gap that ran along the bottom of the door. He barked once.

Then, from the other side of the door came a sound that sent fingers of ice crawling through me. It was a kind of high pitched, chittering sound, an unearthly, feral sound.

'What the hell was that?' I said, and looked to Gillian. She was gripping the edge of the table, her face drained of all colour, panic in her eyes. 'They want their mother,' she said, the same words she had uttered in the studio earlier.

'What do you mean?'

She didn't reply but got to her feet and walked to the door. Before I could stop her she had unlocked the door and lifted the catch. From the garden, the chittering sound rose in volume as other voices were added to the first, building towards a crescendo of demented babble. It was a horrible sound. I leaped from my seat, grabbed Gillian by the arm and pulled her away from the door. She spun round, her hand flailing out, catching me a stinging blow on the cheek. 'I have to go to them,' she shouted, trying to push me away. 'You don't understand.'

The dog started to bark furiously and threw itself against the door. Before I could grab the handle, the door opened a crack and the dog was through the gap. It was all I could do to stop Gillian following. At that moment my father appeared in the doorway, rubbing his sleep-filled eyes, a look of complete bewilderment on his face. I pushed Gillian into his arms. 'Hold on to her!' I shouted over the cacophony of sound.

He grabbed her around the waist and, although she struggled, managed to restrain her. I turned back to the door and to my horror saw it was opening. A small, pink, hairless, claw-like hand gripped the edge of the door and was slowly pulling it wide. I hurled myself across the kitchen and made a grab for the handle, slamming the door shut.

Outside I could hear the dog barking and snapping. I went to the window but could see nothing but blurred shapes and movement. I ran from the kitchen and took the stairs three at a time. From the studio window I had a clear view of the garden, lit by an almost full moon.

The long grass of the meadow was alive with movement. I could see Barney's great Alsatian head turning this way and that, jaws snapping as small, pale shapes struck out at him. The chittering was an incessant, maddening clamour. The dog yelped as first one and then another of, what I can only call, the creatures leapt on his back. Within seconds he was overcome as more and more of them emerged from the long grass, weighing him down until he was buried under a writhing heap of obscene pale pink, almost white, bodies. Then the chittering stopped and the silence was deafening. The moon passed behind a cloud, shrouding the garden in darkness. When it re-emerged there was no sign of the dog, but the long grass was rippling horribly as the creatures made their way back to the well.

'What's happening?' my father said from the doorway. Gillian was still in his arms, tears pouring down her cheeks, a look of wretchedness in her eyes.

I turned to him. 'I think it's over,' I said, and looked back to the garden.

The night was silent, the long grass of the meadow now still and unmoving. We spent the rest of the night together, huddled on the studio floor, unashamedly afraid.

In the morning my father and I managed to persuade Gillian to remain in the house while we ventured into the garden. The remains of poor Barney were a sad sight and we buried them in the corner of the meadow away from the trees. He had been attacked and killed by something with animal ferocity.

We approached the well with a great deal of trepidation. Although neither of us had been able to see clearly what had emerged from it, we now knew that something lived in the well, and in fact, from what we had seen, and heard, there were several of the creatures.

My father was the first to peer into the depths. He turned to me and half shrugged as all he could see was oily black water at the bottom. As he looked at me, and we discussed what action to take, we both heard it. Once again it was that awful chittering noise, almost a squeal, from numerous mouths, merging in its intensity, into one noise.

'We must seal the well,' I shouted.

'Concrete,' my father said. 'Help me with the mixer.'

I was loath to leave the mouth of the well uncovered. I feared the creatures would escape. We piled as many of the fence posts as we could manage onto the lip of the well opening, and for good measure covered it with the barbed wire.

The mixing of the cement and the operation of the mixer took longer than either of us had anticipated. By the time we returned to the well, struggling with the heavy equipment over the grass, we were horrified at what we saw. The barbed wire had been pushed off and lay useless on the ground. Many of the fencing posts too had been removed, and there remained just a handful covering the top of the well.

From the well the noise was incessant, and as we watched another fence post fell to the ground. Movement then was quick, and as we ran to the well a small shape crept out into the sunlight.

We checked our stride but did not stop running to it. Perched on the edge of the well was one of the creatures. Small, pink skinned, but so pale as to appear white, looking like a shrivelled, hairless monkey. It raised its baleful eyes to meet mine, and for a fleeting instant I saw something repellently human in that gaze, and then it disappeared over the side of the well, back down into the hell from which it had sprung.

We wasted no further time. We threw as many of the fence posts as we could into the well, ignoring as best we could the terrible chittering cries from below. Then we added the barbed wire for good measure, before pouring in the concrete. We sat exhausted on the grass until we were certain the well had been sealed forever.

We left Mallory's Farm the next morning. For the last seven months my father and Gillian have been living with me at my apartment in town, while they wait to get a buyer for the house. It's all a bit cramped, made even more so by the arrival of the baby. But she's a bonny little thing and both Gillian and my father dote on her. Gillian is painting again, wonderful fantastic pictures, untouched by any hint of darkness. My father seems younger, more carefree than I can ever remember seeing him, and Scotney Publishing is making a slow turn in its fortunes. It's hard work but I predict that Gillian's first childrens' book will be the best seller that lifts the company out of the doldrums.

As for me, I'm finding that work takes up most of time. I no longer have any social contact with my mother or sisters. Business meetings are unavoidable and are usually icily polite. I work hard, have an active and enjoyable social life, and I go to sleep at night at peace with myself and satisfied by life.

But sometimes, only sometimes, I wake in the night convinced I have heard something. A soft, whispered chittering sound that takes me back to the horrors of Mallory's Farm.