

Timeworn Terror

He was surprised to see hostility jump into their eyes on hearing his accent.

`Château Delor?' said the elder, a grey-haired old man with a walking stick.

`You are English, Monsieur?' asked the younger.

`Yes,' answered Martin to both questions. The unshaven younger one half stood up from the rickety café table and appeared about to say something more but the other put his hand on his arm and he sat down again.

`It's the first road to the right after the church,' said the older, pointing with his stick down the village street. Martin thanked him, walked back to his car and climbed in.

`We're almost there,' he said to his two children sitting in the back. Jenny aged 9 and Mark aged 11. Or at as much of them as he could see, as their eyes were covered with shiny Virtual Reality headsets, making them look like miniature Robocops.

No reaction.

He leant forwards and pulled out the plug connecting their VR player to the cigarette lighter socket.

Immediate reaction.

`Oh, Daddy!' said Jenny, snatching off her headset to reveal a small piquant face framed in straw coloured hair. Mark more slowly removed his headset and glove, looking down to carefully clear the cable.

`We'd have lost anyway,' said Mark, dark-haired and serious. `You missed that Queen and she'd have started a new nest.'

`I'd've got her if you hadn't used up all the laser stuff,' replied Jenny indignantly, her brown eyes flashing.

`You should always keep an eye on the "Laser Charge" sign and use rockets when it shows "Empty",' replied Mark patiently. Jenny pouted.

`I don't like rockets, they're so slow. I prefer...'

`I need someone to keep an eye open for "Château Delorm" signs,' said their father, putting the car into gear and starting off.

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Their eyes followed the car until it disappeared from view then both got to their feet and entered the dark interior of the café,.

`It's him, it must be him!' said the younger to the patron behind the bar. `The Anglais who has inherited our Château.'

`Not for long,' said the patron, reaching for the telephone with a secret smile. About seventy, he had a peasant's grey-lined face, close-set crafty eyes and white hair lining his head like a monk. `Our Madame Le Fèvre knows what she has to do.' He made an odd gesture in the air with his free hand.

The older imitated him: the younger looked nervously out of the café door, down towards the church.

`There were two children with him,' said the older.

`Very good!' said the patron, his old eyes gleaming. The phone came alive. `Monsieur Le Fèvre? I would like to speak to your wife,' he said.

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Martin drove slowly down the cobbled street until he found the turning. The sun had disappeared and dried leaves spiralled up, rattling in the cold wind.

Following the battered signs `Au Château', he turned out of the village and into a narrow high-hedged country road. Steering carefully to avoid the ditches at each side he drove upwards, always upwards. Run down farms, empty fields with spiky

worn-out grass and broken fencing. It looked as though this part of the world had been by-passed by history.

The weather had changed for the worse now, with gusting wind and dark clouds. As the car climbed he caught occasional glimpses through the trees of an enormous grey pile, which could only be the Château, closer each time the road turned.

It was an odd reason that brought Martin all the way from Essex down to this primitive remote south-west corner of France. A Frenchman, Count Delor, last of his line, had recently died and had willed Martin his big house - his Château. Apparently he had been with Martin's father during the war. Martin was down to look at it and decide what to do with his eccentric windfall.

'It must be here,' said Mark after they had been running parallel to a high stone wall for about a kilometre. Martin turned in through a stone archway, broken iron gates leaning out drunkenly, crunched up a long weedy gravel drive which then swung past the main entrance and curved off, disappearing behind the Château. Martin imagined horse-drawn carriages stopping here, footmen opening their doors and the local gentry descending, helping out their ladies and arm-in-arm entering the Château for a ball. But by its decrepit appearance it was a long long time since a ball had been held at Château Delor.

He parked the car. They all climbed out and looked up silently at the elaborate facade. Close up it appeared even more decrepit, with streaks of discoloured stone and most of the windows uncurtained, staring out sightlessly.

'Spooky,' said Mark. Jenny said nothing and Martin felt her take his hand.

The massive front portal remained closed but there was some movement to the right and a smaller door opened, revealing in its frame two formally dressed figures. They stepped forwards, the woman modestly a pace to the rear.

'I am Jean le Fèvre, I was the Count's orderly during the war,' said the man in passable English. Red-faced, white haired and nervously sweating, he was about 60, wearing a shiny dark suit with a white collar and a black tie. The sleeves were too short and out of them stuck big hands on hairy wrists. 'And this is my wife Antoine,' he continued.

The woman was about the same age as her husband but with black eyes in a plump rather pale face. She wore a black dress with white lace around the collar and her black hair, streaked with grey, was drawn back tightly under a white cap. She gave a small curtsy and her face opened in a smile.

Jean told them they were the only two remaining servants, the rest having left long ago. They had stayed with the Comte until the end.

'And now we must show you to your rooms,' said Antoine.

The children closely followed their father as they all entered the small side door and clattered up narrow carpetless stairs to a wide musty-smelling corridor. This led to two high-ceilinged rooms, each with a four poster bed and heavy old-fashioned furniture. Next along the corridor was a drawing-room with a worn carpet and dilapidated couches. Jean who was behind them carrying their suitcases, burped and staggered slightly. Martin smelled drink and made a mental note to ask for the key to the Château's wine cellar.

The suit-cases were put down in the corridor and the two servants retired. Followed by the silent children Martin inspected the two rooms and decided they would have the one with a view over the park. While they were inspecting the four poster bed with big eyes he carried in their suitcase.

After the family had unpacked, Jean and Antoine smilingly reappeared to take them on a tour, which revealed that apart from the kitchens and the three rooms on the top floor, the Château was almost a ruin.

'Monsieur le Comte was the last of his line and there were generations of death duties,' said Jean with a shrug.

Martin looked at the couple curiously. They were behaving very politely. Surely they must have realised that they would not be staying on at the Château?

Outside the wind had dropped and under a streaky red sunset they were shown round the decaying stables and gardeners' sheds behind the Château. Somewhere a chain rattled and a dog barked. A tour of the grounds showed only wild run-down parkland and a small orchard. The children, normally exuberant after a long drive, were unusually subdued and kept close to their father. They returned in the darkness to the drawing room.

'What are you going to do, Dad?' asked Mark, sitting in one of the high chairs. It was a good question. The Château could be restored at enormous cost but only used as a hotel or a museum. And who would visit it, so far away from the normal tourist haunts? Maitre Rabois, the lawyer who was handling the Count's affairs, had some ideas of selling it to a property developer. Sited as it was in its own enclosed valley, it could become a horse-riding centre, country club or golf course.

Martin shrugged. 'I really don't know. I have to see a lawyer about it tomorrow.'

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Next day, after breakfast served in the drawing room, Martin made a phone call then explained to Jean that he had to go to Luz-St-Sauveur and would be back that evening.

He turned to his children.

'Will you two be alright if I leave you here?'

They assured him they would and accompanied him out to the car where he kissed them goodbye, nodded to Jean, and drove off.

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The two children returned to the drawing room and looked boredly through old leather-bound volumes in a book-case.

'Treasure hunt?' suggested Mark. Jenny had beaten him last time, but he had some ideas that should slow her down.

'Alright, but no clues left at the top of trees,' she stipulated.

'Then none with bits of poetry,' bargained Mark.

Watched uncomprehendingly by the two servants they went out into the garden where Jenny tore up pieces of paper to set up her treasure trail.

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It was now Mark's turn, and annoyed by the long time he had taken to follow the clues and find the treasure hidden by Jenny, he was determined to get his revenge. He left her smugly drawing in their bedroom and set out to lay his own treasure trail.

Only three of the rooms on the top floor of the Château were occupied. The rest of the rooms were shut off by a green baize-covered door at the end of the corridor. He was about to turn away when he saw a key hanging on a nail. He unhooked it and found it fitted the baize-covered door. Hesitating only a moment, he unlocked it and pushing it open entered a big high-ceilinged empty room, dark because two of its windows were boarded up.

Great! He cautiously stepped through, smelling the decay of peeling wallpaper, his feet crunching on fallen plaster.. Holding the piece of chocolate that was to be Jenny's prize he looked round, wondering where he could hide it. There were other doors and he tried them but they were all locked except one. Gratingly pushing it open he saw the room behind was as deserted as the first but on the wall was hung a long row of oil paintings in heavy ornate frames, like in an art gallery. He walked along looking up and saw they were of stiff-faced people in old fashioned dresses. He was about to hide the piece of chocolate behind the first one when he saw that at the very end was a painting quite different from the others.

It was the picture of a man waving his arms and running towards the painter. His mouth was wide open, reminding Mark of a picture he had once seen called 'The Scream'. In the background was a small hill and in the side of the hill was a cave guarded by a iron gate. The gate was open and the picture had a brass plate on its frame saying 'La Grotte'.

Weird, but it would do. He wedged the piece of chocolate behind it.

As he walked out of the room he pondered on the important last clue. Perhaps a plan of the top floor, showing where the key was and a man's face with a circle for the mouth. Yes, good - Jenny hated reading maps.

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Around six o'clock Jean came up to the children and said they were wanted on the telephone. It was their father and he first enquired if they were all right.

Mark told him what they had been doing and Jenny, who had been listening in on an extra earphone, asked when he was coming home. An apologetic note entered Martin's voice.

'I'm afraid things are taking longer than I thought and I won't be back until some time tomorrow afternoon. Will you be alright?' Jenny made a face. Mark assured him they would be fine. 'Good,' said their father relieved. 'But one thing, Mark,' he added. 'Bed at nine as usual. OK?'

'Yes, Dad,' replied Mark, resigned. 'With no telly and no books, there's not much to do anyway when it gets dark.'

'How about your games?'

'We've played them all, several times over,' said Jenny, in a voice of unutterable boredom.

'With all possible endings,' added Mark.

'Right then,' said Martin, slightly uncomfortable, 'I'll see if I can get some new ones here.'

He asked to speak to Jean, told him of the change in plan and returned to his children.

'We'll be alright, Dad,' said Mark confidently.

*

Jean felt a hand clamped on his elbow.

'Olin has spoken with me,' said Antoine, making the sign in the air. Jean quickly made it too, shivering. 'We must do it tonight,' she continued intensely. 'Olin says everything is right, the moon is blooming and their father is away. He wants them tonight.'

He looked in horror at her still pretty face. She had been so soft and sweet when they had married. But after he had come back from the war with his wound and his pension her personality had gradually changed, hardened. Perhaps if she had been able to have children ... And then she had been Chosen and had started hearing the Voice. She had grown further and further away from him and was now almost a stranger.

Jean trembled. He was a weak man and needed his wife like a cripple needed a crutch. Without her he would have already drunk himself to death. But he was afraid of the strange demonic power that possessed her more and more often.

`But they are just children!' said Jean sweating.

`Children?!' spat Antoine, her face working. `They are brats! Rich brats! Rich foreign brats! When Olin has them the father will go away and the Temple will be ours forever.' Her face was red and she was breathing heavily. Jean opened his mouth again to protest.

`Remember that whore,' said Antoine, fixing him with an unblinking stare.. `If I told the police all I know ...'

His eyes flinched away. Ten years ago, when they had a bigger staff, Jean had had an affair with a young housemaid. She had become pregnant and then it had happened to her - the terrifying Grotte madness followed by stillbirth and death. Jean could possibly have warned her, but had been drunk.

She squeezed his arm again painfully. `Tonight,' she repeated.

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After their evening meal Mark and Jenny roamed around the dark Château disconsolately. Their mother had died in a traffic accident long ago and they had grown up to rely on their father's company.

They wandered downstairs and peeked into the big warm kitchen. There seemed to be an argument going on and they made to back out but Antoine noticed them, said something sharply to her husband and invited them in. Mark noticed Jean pushing a wine bottle behind a big cauldron as he stood up smiling.

Antoine took them around the kitchens, showing them the enormous black stove, the old-fashioned dishwasher and the big rotating spit over the open fireplace. Mark was quite interested but Jenny was uneasy. She didn't like the way the two servants would snap at each other in French but then immediately turn friendly smiling faces to her and Mark. She wanted to leave and tugged at Mark's hand, but he was now watching Jean perform some simple card-tricks.

Antoine, who was sitting down in an old armchair called over Jenny and taking her hand asked what they had been doing that afternoon.

`We have been playing Treasure Hunt,' said Jenny, not liking the feel of the hard dry hand.

`A Treasure Hunt?!' exclaimed Antoine, staring into Jenny's soft brown eyes. `What do you mean?'

Jenny unwillingly explained how a Treasure Hunt worked. How you were given one clue to start with which led you to the next and so on until the last one led to a prize.

Antoine released Jenny's hand and stood up, her face radiant.

`What a wonderful game!' she said, clapping her hands together and laughing loudly. `Jean - that is exactly what we should play! We will make a treasure trail for you!' she said, clapping her hands again.

`Sit down here and we will prepare it now.'

The two servants left the kitchen, talking in French; Antoine animated, Jean's replies slow and mumbled. Puzzled, the children sat side by side at the table hearing footsteps running up and down the stairs and once saw Jean going through the door to the garden outside.

After a while they returned and Antoine thrust a piece of paper at Mark.

`There, we were quick weren't we?' she said, her black eyes shining. `Off you go now.'

Mark showed the clue to his sister - it was pathetically simple, just a drawing of the cupboard in their father's room.

'Oh, they are so quick, these English children!' said Antoine admiringly, following them as they climbed the stairs.

Mark opened the cupboard door and to their surprise there was not only the next clue but also two pieces of apple pie! Cool. Maybe there was a prize with every clue. He brightened.

'I like French treasure hunts,' said Jenny munching.

'Gosh, if we get something for every clue, the prize at the end must be really super!' said Mark. Antoine giggled and quickly clapped her hand over her mouth.

They carried on with the hunt. The clues were very simple and there was a little prize with each one - two sweets or two pieces of cake. Some of the clues led them outside, a little bit further away from the Château each time, it seemed. The children weren't scared but it was dark now so Jean lit an old lantern for them. That was fun and they resolved to do a night treasure hunt themselves one day.

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Through the windows of the darkened drawing room Antoine and Jean watched the lantern disappearing into the moonlit woods. The heavy grandfather clock behind them ticked slowly.

Ten minutes passed.

'The last clue. They must be there now,' said Antoine softly.

Half an hour passed. Still nothing moved in the wood. Antoine made an impatient gesture.

'We're going after them. We must make sure they go in,' she said sharply, grasping Jean's arm above the elbow.

Unwillingly he allowed her to guide him out into the warm night. Passing the kennel they heard a scuffle and the rattle of a chain as Dolan the guard-dog moved uneasily.

'Du calme, mon petit,' said Jean.

Feet swishing in the long grass, they made their way across the white-washed moonlit meadow, past a rusty metal sign pointing to 'La Grotte', then entered the suddenly dark wood, pine needles muffling their footsteps. It was a windless night and to Jean the tree branches seemed to be leaning forwards over the path with big clutching hands. In the distance was a pale patch of light that opened up into a small moonlit clearing. In the centre of the clearing was a large mound and in the side of the mound was a man-sized black hole, guarded by an opened iron gate. The children were nowhere to be seen.

'They must be in the Temple,' whispered Antoine. Jean looked at his wife's face and hardly recognised her. In the pale moonlight the pits of her eyes were black and the hook of her nose was emphasised. A cruel vindictive face.

They crossed the clearing and stood by the entrance to the Grotte listening. There was the hoot of a hunting owl in the distance and a scuffle in the grass by their feet as a terrified mouse ran for cover. The spiky shadow of the iron gate moved infinitely slowly over the path as the almost full moon drifted across an empty sky.

Silence.

A night breeze sighed in the tree-tops, freezing the sweat on Jean's face. The owl hooted again, now much nearer. The menacing black hole of the Grotte watched them unwinkingly.

'They can't have gone to the end. It's not working; we're going in,' whispered Antoine, grasping his arm.

`No, no!' he whimpered. She looked at him. Trembling like a jelly he would be useless. She turned away contemptuously and stepped through the gate.

She carefully entered the Grotte, her left hand up to feel the cold stone arch of the entrance. Now slowly down the steps, sand crackling under her feet, breathing in the familiar reek of damp earth. She paused, seeing the moonlight from outside making black irregular shadows on the steps. Five more steps down and the faint smell of a burning candle lingering in the cold heavy air drifted into her nostrils. She felt a deep glow of satisfaction. The brats were here and Olin would be content! At his name she made the sign of the upside-down cross and whispered the old words of truth.

Lustfully she imagined the children as they would be when they stumbled empty-eyed out of the Grotte, mindlessly mewling. But that was nothing to the pleasure she would have of watching the face of the father change when he saw the things that had been his children! She ran her tongue round her lips and swallowed avidly. With luck Olin would then have his soul too!

And the stupid Curie would come and uselessly try to exorcise the Temple. She chuckled deep in her throat. What chance had milksop Christianity got against the magnificent black gleaming power of Olin?

Another cautious step and now she could see a dim flickering glow in the distance, reflected off the rough rock wall. The children were in the Picture Gallery!

She crept down and cautiously peered around the last corner. Nearer she could not go.

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`So Château Delorm is finally yours,' said Maitre Rabois, smiling as he refilled Martin's glass. It was 8:15pm and they were in the noisy candle-lit restaurant of `Le Montaigu', the hotel where Martin was staying. Signing deed transfer papers in medieval French and registering them in the town hall had taken much longer than he could have imagined. They had decided to put off to the following day the discussion about what he was going to do with the Château.

`I suggest you stay at least another night here,' said Maitre Rabois, `and we could visit some other old Chateaux which have been converted. He shrugged his shoulders. `Who knows? Perhaps we could even do something with La Grotte.'

`La Grotte?' said Martin. Rabois raised his eyebrows.

`In the grounds of Château Delorm there is a cave with prehistoric wall-paintings.' He looked at Martin strangely.

`Has no one mentioned this to you?'

`No,' said Martin slowly. `I have not heard of it.'

`It's quite famous, or should I say notorious. It was supposed to have been discovered just before the war by two boys who were stealing apples: it's just beside the orchard. They entered it and came out completely insane.'

Martin felt a chill run up his spine. Neither of the servants had said anything about La Grotte.

`The local archaeological society examined it and it became quite famous for a while,' continued Rabois. `But a short time later a member entered the cave alone and went mad too.' He reached down into his brief case and pulled out a thick file. `I believe I have something here,' he said. He riffled quickly through it with his plump hands and laid on the table a glossy brochure entitled `La Grotte du Château Delorm'. There were some beautiful photos of wall paintings of stick-men hunting very realistic bison. The animals were cleverly given a 3-D effect by being painted over the natural contours of the rock.

`The cave was sealed for a while and then reopened,' he continued. `For a long time nothing happened until a young couple in a research group from Paris entered it and also went mad.' He returned the brochure to his case.

`The cave was sealed again and after the war forgotten.' He looked at Martin embarrassed. `Since then there have been rumours of a cult of strange "Earth Spirit worshippers" who hold ceremonies outside it.' He shrugged disparagingly. `In these remote villages there is a lot of inbreeding and primitive beliefs die slowly.'

`I see,' said Martin, his mind elsewhere. He didn't like at all the idea of his children staying the night alone with that strange couple who had said nothing about La Grotte.

`Excuse me,' he said. He rose quickly from the table and going to Reception asked for the number of Château Delorm. The clock showed 8:45. The children should be preparing for bed. He got through quickly but the phone just rang and rang. He put it down and returned to the table.

`I have two children with me,' he said distractedly, `I must get back to them.' Open-mouthed Maitre Rabois watched him turn and leave the restaurant almost running.

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Antoine saw the children sitting on the dry sandy floor holding hands. The lantern was in front of them and by its flickering glow they were looking raptly at the Paintings. The Spirit of the Grotte was present! She felt the first tenuous tugging at the edge of her consciousness and knew she could not stay long.

She took a last step forwards, her foot rustling against the stone. Below her the figures of the children were frozen, watching the wall. The Madness! It must be on them! But why were they not moving? She muttered the baneful words of the Curse under her breath. The invocation to Olin the Earth Spirit.

But then her ankle twisted, her foot slipped off the edge of the step and she fell forwards. She stumbled clumsily, banging herself against the rocky wall and the shock made her gasp.

And then it leapt on her!

The paintings moved. The spiky figures of the Neanderthal hunters threw their puny spears at a bison. It raised its head and looking directly at them bellowed. Three others picked up their heads too, snorted, spun on their feet and accelerating rapidly charged, heads down. She heard cries of agony as their low-slung horns impaled and contemptuously tossed the hunters aside.

She froze in cold terror. The rest of the herd was silent and alerted now. Heads were looking in all directions and then the leaders saw her! The whole herd turned as one with ferocious agility and began to trot silently towards her. Dead and extinct these thousands of centuries they came out of the wall, faster and faster, now galloping straight towards her, their feet like distant thunder! Heads lowered, faster and faster they loomed out of the clouds of dust raised by their sharp hooves, the leaders' wide-spread horns reaching out like gathering arms to gouge and slash. With flaring nostrils and small vicious eyes they came straight at her!

`Olin, All Powerful, I am your priestess, save me!'

In desperation she tore her eyes away from the hypnotic scene. The children! They were untouched - they must be protected by their innocence. They would protect her! Arms outstretched she took a pace forwards and fell into the clinging rubbery floor of the cave. Unable to reach them she looked up desperately, pleadingly.

The two small figures had not moved from where they sat but their heads turned slowly in unison towards her. Coldly, incuriously, like beings from another

planet, their eyes were enormous, blooming in their faces, as with clinical interest they watched her writhing on the ground. The enraged herd was almost on her, spume dripping from their gaping maws! Her ears were deafened by their bellowing, the ground shook beneath her body and their savage feral smell was all around her!

A harsh rattle escaped from her throat and she felt her bowels loosen.

Desperately she held up her arms and over the roar of the stampede she shrieked:

`Olin! Olin! What have I done wrong? Forgive me! Forgive me!'

It was her last sane thought before the crazed stampede swept over her and she descended into the frenzied glare of dementia.

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Hand on the cold ironwork of the gate Jean stood petrified in the quiet moonlight. He had just heard an earth-muffled scream deep inside the Grotte. The sharp-edged shadow of the gate cut across the rough-hewn granite lining the entrance and the wind sighed in the trees. Craning forwards, eyes and ears stretched, he perceived a scuffling sound coming closer and closer. Something was moving in the Grotte! A hand appeared low down on the stone entrance, white in the moonlight. He started forwards, heart thumping in his throat. One of the children was coming out, it must...

It was his wife!

She was making inarticulate gurgling sounds as she emerged slowly from the Grotte crawling on her hands and knees. Her hair had come loose and hung down raggedly. She looked up wildly at the moon, the long hair framing her white face. Opening her mouth she bayed like an animal! The Grotte Madness had her!

He clutched at the gate. His wife was mad! His whole world crumbled. Nothing would be the same again. Without her he could not live. Before him the black gaping hole of the Grotte shimmered in a red haze. His pulse hammered irregularly and there was a flash of unsupportable pain in his chest. His hand raspily slid down the iron gate and his head struck the path. In the distance the tethered dog howled, but he did not hear it.

A few minutes later car headlights fanned up over the distant trees.

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Martin's lights washed jaggedly over the facade of the Château and gravel spurted from under his wheels as he skidded into the driveway. He jammed on the brakes, jumped out leaving the engine running and ran across to the side door. He wrenched it open and feet clattering leapt up the narrow uncarpeted steps.

'Mark, Jenny, where are you?' he shouted.

Silence.

A dim light was on in the corridor but the three rooms were in darkness. He dashed from one to the other, switching on the lights. The childrens' bed was unslept in although it was after 10pm. He looked at it unbelievably, a cold hand around his heart. Where were they? Filled with self-reproach and murderous rage he thundered down the stairs to the kitchen. Lights off, cold and empty. Where were his children?!

He crashed down the stairs again and leapt into his car, ramming it into gear. Wheels spinning he drove round the back of the Château, powerful headlights flashing over the empty stables.

'By the orchard,' Rabois had said.

He bumped off the drive, savagely gunning the engine over soft meadow grass, past the orchard, swinging the headlights from side to side. The trees at the edge of a wood stood out as though etched and yes! there was something! A small rusty square metal sign on a post pointing into the woods - an overgrown path almost hidden by long grass. 'La Grotte'. He drove up as close as he could, aimed the

headlights down the path, jammed on the brakes and leapt out. If they had let his children enter the Grotte he would kill them!

He furiously ran down the wooded path, the car headlights throwing his long shadow ahead of him. Some thicker woods and the path turned to the left, suddenly dark as the headlights were left behind. Blinded he walked forwards slowly, hand in front of his face, sweating and breath rasping. A sense of openness and he found himself in a small clearing.

His eyes were adapting now and before him was the loom of a low hill. And as his panting breath subsided he could hear something, something low down in front of him. It was a cat mewling. He stepped forwards and almost struck a small iron gate, a small iron gate in front of a black cave. He remembered the picture on the brochure - this must be the entrance to La Grotte. He took another step forwards and stumbled and almost fell over a soft limp object - a man's body! It was Jean, lying on his back, one hand clutching the bars of the gate, his empty eyes looking up blindly at the moon.

God! If one of the servants was dead, how were his children?! He should never have left them alone!

The mewling was louder now and there was a sudden stench of human excrement. He recoiled and his flesh crawled when he looked down to see another dark shape in the mouth of the Grotte. It was not a cat it was a woman! Antoine! Hair hanging down she was slowly sightlessly crawling around on all fours.

The Grotte Madness! He looked round wildly. Where were his children? The clearing was empty, they must have gone into the Grotte! They must still be there! He stepped over the creeping thing that had been Antoine and ducking was about to enter the dark entrance when he saw a yellow glow of light far down in the black distance. Two small figures were approaching. It was Jenny and Mark slowly climbing up the steps towards him!

Mark was holding an old-fashioned lantern in one hand and Jenny's hand was in the other. Heart thumping Martin dashed forwards and kneeling down embraced them, an arm around each.

'Are you all right?' he asked urgently, looking up into their dimly illuminated faces, but they said nothing. They just stood there, standing stiffly in his arms, staring into the distance over his shoulders. Desperately he picked up Jenny's light form. She sat unyieldingly like a wooden doll in the crook of his arm.

'Jenny! It's me! Are you all right?' He shook her. 'Speak to me!' She blinked, and her body softened.

'It's Daddy,' she said and put her arms around his neck.

Mark, at waist-height said something and he felt his son's hand. Still holding Jenny he crouched down to look in Mark's face.

'It's me. Are you both all right?'

'I think so,' said Mark after a pause. He put down the lantern. With a feeling of almost unsupportable relief Martin hugged his children.

'Then let's get indoors,' he said swallowing. Still carrying Jenny he steered Mark past Antoine and the body of Jean and retraced his path across the meadow into the Château.

'Pooh,' said Jenny as they passed.

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He looked at them as they changed into their pyjamas, sleepily brushed their teeth and climbed up into the big bed. Two toothpaste smelling kisses and he quietly closed their door. They seemed all right but very tired - he would leave the questions until the morning when he would also have a few sharp words with those two ...

And then it struck him! Jean was dead and his wife ...!
He picked up the telephone. It was going to be a long night.

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Half an hour later blue lights crackled over the front of the Château like lightning as the police and then an ambulance arrived. White-clad paramedics ran down the path to the Grotte and returned more slowly carrying Antoine restrained on a stretcher, her head swinging loosely from side to side. Jean's stretcher needed no such restraints - he had died of a massive brain haemorrhage.

Martin wouldn't let the two reporters disturb the children; only the doctor was allowed into their room. He shone a light into their sleepy eyes and felt their pulses. As soon as he had finished they immediately turned over and went back to sleep.

'You have had a great escape, Monsieur,' said the doctor quietly, packing his bag.

'An escape from the Grotte Madness, you mean?' asked Martin. 'What is it?'

The young doctor looked at him rather embarrassed.

'I am new here and I only heard about it myself tonight. But it's real enough: you saw the woman. I will make my report to Paris and perhaps it will be properly investigated this time.'

Martin decided he would sleep in the childrens' bed that night. It was just big enough.

*

The next morning Martin overslept and was only awakened by the children climbing over him. They told him they couldn't find the two servants and asked him what had been all that fuss during the night.

Yawning he looked at them. They appeared perfectly normal after their ordeal in La Grotte. He sat up and was about to question them more when there was the sound of cars arriving outside.

It was the Press.

'Quick,' he said, 'we've got visitors. Get dressed.'

*

The family had stopped at a hotel in Bordeaux on the way back home and Martin had bought a newspaper. They were sitting on the sunny hotel terrace and he had just finished translating the newspaper article for them.

'Grotte Madness Strikes Again!' was the headline and there were photographs of the two servants. Also a photo of Martin and a touching if posed photo of Jenny and Mark standing outside the Grotte hand in hand with Mark holding up the lantern.

The leader-writer went on about the 'phlegmatiques petits Anglais' who had strayed into the deadly Grotte and resisted the Madness, whereas the two French servants who had bravely gone in to save them had not.

There was a picture of a priest standing in front of the Grotte, holding his bible and shaking holy water onto the ground.

Martin had questioned his children and now knew what had really happened. Privately he had told the police and privately they had suggested he didn't prefer charges as the culprits were dead or virtually so.

A famous professor from the Institute Pasteur in Paris had been seen wearing a face mask, taking samples of air from the Grotte. He had discovered that it contained hallucinogenic spores from mushrooms growing underground.

No, he couldn't understand at all why the children had been unaffected. It was very strange. And yes, the mushrooms had been removed and La Grotte was now safe.

Martin had told Maître Rabois to sell the Château for what he could: he didn't want to see it again.

“Hallucinogenic”, explained Martin. “It means there was a sort of gas in the Grotte that made everything seem different if you breathed it.” He looked down at his two children, napkins around their necks, noisily spooning up *soupe à l'onion*.

“Didn't you see *anything* in there?” he asked curiously.

“You mean the galloping cows and things?” asked Jenny.

Jesus!

“You *did* see something then?!” he said. “Weren't you scared?”

“Well, it was a bit spooky at first,” admitted Mark.

“But afraid...?” He looked across at his sister who shook her head. “No, not really.”

“Insect Attack” is much worse,” said Jenny, pointing with her spoon to the picture of a monster ant on the garish cover of one of their virtual reality game CD's.

“Especially if one breaks through and sticks its proboscis into you and sucks out your body fluids,” said Mark, making a slurping noise.

“Oh, yes!” said Jenny. She stuck her tongue out and shivered elaborately.

“Yuk, I hate that bit!”

The End

Author's note. Perhaps the visions or feelings some people experience in old houses are due to "mood-changing" decomposition products. And children these days are certainly much more inured to horror stories than their parents.

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