A. T. Cairns

VISITANT

Doctor Jedburgh stood silently in the doorway, watching the family at tea; his sons in their best clothes and stiff collars decorously uncomfortable as they always were after a service; Gwen, her restrained dress touching into outline her young body, seated by his wife on the old-fashioned settee, helping her unobtrusively.

The doorbell rang, and he stepped back as one of the boys, George, rose to answer it. It was his daughter's fiancé, Harry Crawford; hat in hand, he advanced tentatively into the parlour. Gwen came forward to meet him, smiling slowly, unable entirely to subdue her eyes.

"How good of you to come!" She took his arm and led him to a place beside her.

"I thought I'd drop by to pay my respects. I wasn't able to get near you at the ceremony—."

Even Martha tried to smile. "That was very kind of you, Harold. Won't you have some tea with us?"

"Thank you; I'd like that. Thank you very much."

Doctor Jedburgh walked down the hall, through the front door, and into the garden. It was his favourite time of day, early twilight, the sun just gone, its glow still reflecting from the thin clouds on the horizon. He strolled along the paths, between the rows of late-summer blooms, beneath the trellises of green, leaved ivy. Soon it would be growing cool and, ordinarily, Martha would come out with his cape to join him. It was their private hour, just before dark, and even when very small the children had understood and had left them to themselves.

He fondled a tall, supported rose bush. The blossoms were beginning to curl and fade; they would have to be clipped soon. He did not like to let flowers die, shedding their petals until they were naked and ugly: it didn't seem right to see them exposed so, and he was always careful to trim them when they started to wither. Perhaps Martha would attend to it tomorrow....

Looking up, he saw her, as he had hoped he might, coming down the path between the flowers. From the doorway of the house Gwendolyn watched solicitously, but did not follow. Standing in the shadows, he studied Martha fondly as she walked slowly, with a calm, personal grace, to the old, lightning-splintered but still-alive oak where they had always waited for the last light to disappear. Silently, he crossed to stand at her shoulder.

She did not look at him, but across the fading fields and moor. It was odd, he thought, that they never looked at each other at these times: perhaps it was because each knew the other was always there.

"Edward."

He nodded; the name had been only slightly a question. She reached out her hand to find his arm.

"Edward, how beautiful it is this evening. I thought somehow it would be all changed, all different; but it isn't, is it? It's just as it was: so very beautiful—."

She half-turned toward him over her shoulder, her eyes the same deep, tender, living blue as their daughter's.

"So very beautiful, Edward."

The light faded, and she returned slowly to the house. Watching her blend into, fuse with the dusk, he was aware in himself of a sudden desire to follow her, but it was only a momentary pressure, a vague touch, and he remained where he was.

He had never dreamed it would be like this. And yet, how apt, how appropriate; how completely *right*! Here; this spot, this house, this world had always been, to him, heaven: now he found that that was precisely what it was. No angels or halos or beatific, hymning choirs contemplating an unfathomable brightness—the whole idea had always, faintly and secretly, bored him—but simply this: the face of God. It was all he could possibly have asked and, silently, he murmured his thanks.

The next morning, Sunday, he attended service. It was strange not to be standing at the altar or delivering the sermon from the pulpit; but finally he decided that it was rather like a holiday: it was pleasant to be a spectator for a change, to sit in the stalls, so to speak, rather than performing on the stage.

Nevertheless, it *had* been *his* church for so long. . . . He was glad that, following his wishes, they had promoted Mayhew—the gesture showed again

that loyalty which had been one of the constant gifts both of his parishioners and his superiors—but still it was odd not to be in his customary place.

He wandered casually about the small church. He felt somewhat impious doing so during service; like those camera-slung tourists who, in the summer, infested the cathedral—once one of them had even drifted in here and had actually begun taking photographs during the sermon, but he had dealt with *that* in a manner the intruder would not soon forget.

Now, though, he could not possibly disturb anyone, and he enjoyed his freedom: it was, he supposed, one of the appropriate privileges of his new state.

It was the first time he had visited the church since his death. He had stayed away from his funeral—such ceremonies had always depressed him, and he had known that he would only be embarrassed by the tears and tributes. Anyway, he had felt a curious reluctance to see his body in the coffin. From the time that he had climbed out of bed and realized what had taken place he had not looked back.

He walked slowly around the small nave. How old and comfortable it was; how long people had worshipped here! There was even a rumour that the first structure had been built on the foundations of a Roman temple: as an amateur archaeologist, he had occasionally been tempted to dig about a bit, but had always put it off; he liked to think the legend was true, and had not wanted to take a chance on demolishing it.

In any case, not far away on the hill—you could see it from the south window—there was, no question, a druid circle. This was a holy place; men had sensed the fact from the first and had come here to pray, to whatever god. When he had been younger the thought of the pagan shrine so close to his parish had disturbed him, but he had long outgrown all that; had even become fond of the spot, finding himself, almost instinctively, visiting it every Midsummer's Day.

Portions of the small church itself dated from pre-Norman times; he glanced, as he had so often, at the dim, barely-visible outlines of an old Saxon wall-painting above the altar—once some photographers had asked permission to take pictures of it and later had sent him a sumptuous art book in which it had been reproduced—then wandered over to the heavy, curiously-carved baptismal font. He remembered how cold the water always seemed, and how he had felt sorry for the babies he had sprinkled with it. . . .

The service was finished, and the villagers—even old Gregor, rigidly Presbyterian, had come along this morning—filed out slowly. Gwen's young

man was not among them; he professed to be an agnostic and, the Doctor had felt, had always been rather afraid of him—unnecessarily; he was a fine boy, unsure as so many of his generation seemed to be, but stable and sensible: he would make a good husband, which was all that really mattered.

In the churchyard Martha and the children had paused beside his grave. Heaped with fading flowers, already it was beginning to blend with the other mounds, deep in grass now; even the unobtrusive headstone would soon be weathered to compatibility.

Again he felt a desire to join them, to make them aware of his presence. It was a curious, magnetic sensation, stronger now; as if the longer he was dead the further they drew apart. Still, it was foolish and he shrugged it off.

Empty, the church enclosed him. He circled to the altar and looked out over the vacant benches. He had never been able to decide whether he liked the building full of the sense of life the worshippers brought into it, or deserted, completely his own; now he knew he preferred it this way; as if, alone, he were closer to the spirit which inhabited it.

In the afternoon he went for his customary walk across the moors. To him, they had never seemed blank or barren, and he had often wondered where the Brontes and old Hardy had got their grimness. Probably, he had decided, from within themselves, as usual.

There had always been for him, instead, a curious, living openness about the landscape. The low, even, almost flat hills—no more really than undulations, like a mossed, swelling tide—had a loneliness about them certainly, beneath a storm a swaying power; but not barrenness, not a sense of death. The thick entanglement of roots and ferns provided the underlying stone with a covering, a blanket of life which gave it an identity, an existence of its own without, as in a forest or a jungle, closing out the light. From a rise you could look for miles over the almost uninhabited countryside without feeling at all isolated or alone.

As soon as she had been old enough Gwen, except in the worst weather, had accompanied him on his walks. Though there had never been any real separation of affection within the family, he had always been closer to her than to the boys—as fathers often were, he supposed, to a daughter; perhaps because there was in her constantly something of her mother, of the young and vital girl he had married.

Martha, after the children, had preferred the comfort of the house; but Gwen had looked forward as much as he to the walks across the moor. With-

out her now he felt lonely, almost deprived. Unlike the church and his home there *was* a solitude here, he realized. It was as if the presence of human beings, of those he knew and loved, was necessary to him: nature, even a familiar, benevolent nature, was not enough.

He waited, wondering if Gwen might come out by herself today, as her mother had into the garden the night before. Finally he saw a figure crossing the moor from the direction of the village and started foward to meet it, but as they drew nearer he saw that there were two—Gwen, but not alone: Harry Crawford was with her and he did not want to intrude.

He returned to the house. Usually, if it was a fine day, in the late afternoon the boys, with some of the other young men from the town, would start up an impromptu football game on the broad lawn. A few of his parishioners, he knew, disapproved, but he had never interfered: he liked to watch them exercising, enjoying the young bodies they would possess for so short a time. Today however, probably in deference to him, there was no play. It was not the way he would have liked to have been remembered, but he supposed custom and decorum must be observed.

The family had gathered for dinner. They had not, he noted with pleasure, decided to forgo the traditional roast; it seemed to him he could not only smell but feel with all his senses its rich odour, the fresh baked potatoes and the new peas. Martha, silent and withdrawn, sat at the foot of the table —his place, at the head, they had left vacant; another useless, painful custom he hoped they would quickly abandon—eating little; but Gwen and Harry, their faces flushed from the afternoon, were hungry, while the boys, he could tell, were already becoming impatient with the atmosphere of austerity and restraint.

Watching them, he felt with increasing, almost painful intensity the desire to join them, to let them know he was here. For the children, he knew, the suffering would fade; but for Martha, always now, it would be there; a deprived solitude. Yet he was so close; in every sense so near....

He wondered vaguely at the possibility of making himself visible. He had not tested the limits or potential of his new state yet; he had always had a certain scepticism about ghosts; why, with all the dead, there were so few of them. Perhaps it was because not many, like himself, found their paradise where they were.

After the meal the family gathered, as usual, in the parlour. Watching them, again from the doorway, he felt alone and isolated, a sense of impotence,

of helplessness closing in on him. They had the traditional glass of port—something, even when they were very young, he had always allowed the children—but tonight the touching of their glasses seemed more like a memorial service than a token of family unity. Afterwards, sitting about the fire, conversation was strained and desultory: he had always been the leader here, and with him gone they did not seem to know what to say to one another. He saw Harry Crawford reach across unobtrusively to take Gwen's hand, but for once she did not smile or respond. It was as if now, with the first shock receding, the hurry and distraction of the funeral and condolences past, they realized finally what had happened.

Touched—it seemed to him that he could read their minds—he wanted to comfort them. Almost in spite of himself, he stepped forward, joining the circle, taking his place in his old chair by the fire, bending to look, one by one, into the eyes of his family. He wondered if, somehow, he could *project* his presence, hint or suggest to them that he was here. Gathering his will, he made the effort, extending his understanding, his love towards them. . . .

The talk, which had been tentative and intermittent, slowed, then halted altogether. It was hard to tell with the boys, but Gwen and Martha looked up, puzzled, as if they had felt his touch. Harry Crawford, seated beside him, stiffened and glanced at the empty chair in bewilderment.

Instead of the easing, the relaxation of tension he had intended, Doctor Jedburgh felt it, all about him, increase. It was as if they realized something were there, but did not know what; as if, somehow, they did not recognize him: they were disturbed, even the boys now, rather than reassured. Suddenly Gwen rose to her feet, excused herself hastily, and went to her room.

Uncertain, he withdrew. At once the tension eased back into simple silence. He did not understand; all he had wanted to do had been to comfort, to console them; to let them know he was still present, ready to love and to aid them as before. Perhaps, new to his present state, he had miscalculated its power. . . .

Puzzled, a bit hurt, he wandered through the halls and corridors of the old mansion. Much less ancient than the church, still it had been built in Tudor times and all the life it had known seemed stored, preserved in its walls and timbers, reaching out through him.

He had, he decided finally, simply been clumsy. They had not been able to *see* him; had *sensed* something and, not understanding, taken by sur-

prise, had been bewildered, perhaps even frightened. That was all: he would just have to be more careful.

It had been Gwen of course who, even more than Martha, had felt his presence. Possibly she had recognized him, the shock reminding her unbearably of the recent past. He *had* been clumsy; perhaps he could still help her. . . .

He made his way to her room. She was asleep in bed, her face turned against the pillow, her mouth slightly open, breathing softly. Moonlight through the tall windows fell on her, and under its translucence she seemed iridescently, almost unsubstantially beautiful. Looking closely he saw that the pillowcase was stained about her eyes: she had cried herself to sleep. If there was only some way for her to realize. . . .

His glance caught the elongated dresser mirror. There was no reflection of course; he was quite invisible. Straightening, he crossed to stand before the glass.

He wondered what, exactly, *were* his limits? Could he, if he chose, become actually, if only partially, transparently visible? Most "ghosts" seemed to possess this power. If they could *see* him there would be no doubt, no uncertainty, or fear: they would *know* that he was still there, that it *was* him.

Testing himself he concentrated his will on the act of materialization, trying to force himself into concrete being. Most palpable spirits, he recalled, had been those of men of intensity or of violence; lovers and murderers, kings and courtiers, devils and saints. He had never been in any sense an extraordinary person; perhaps, for him, the transformation was impossible.

He focussed his attention on the mirror. He could not be sure, but it seemed to him that the moonlight between the glass and the reflection of the bed behind him was beginning to quiver, to undulate like the air above a hillside on a hot day.

Then, slowly but beyond question, the vibration took form, defined itself; first an outline, then details, even colour. The image was, of course, transparent, but it was there; in the uncertain light he could make out his features, the silver-grey of his thick hair. . . .

He sensed a stirring behind him; the effort of visibility must have produced a disturbance in the room which had broken Gwen's sleep. Through the curtain of his body he could see her twist on her pillow, then open her eyes and, puzzled, sit up and look about. As she reached the mirror he turned to reveal himself, holding out his arms to her . . . . . .

He stood in the garden, staring up at the lighted window of his daughter's room. The cries and convulsions had subsided now; the sedatives taken effect. The expression on her face, in her eyes, when she had seen him, though, he knew would never leave him. He had not waited for the others to come, but had slipped invisibly through to the landing and out to the yard.

Why, he wondered? He had never been unkind; they had been as close as father and daughter could be. He was no different now from what he had been when alive: his body had just been a form, a mould into which, temporarily, he had been shaped. The very way we spoke of it—*my* body, *my* arms and legs, *my* face, *my* eyes, as if it were an external, a possession—told us this. What she had seen had been himself, insubstantial but unchanged.

Yet he knew he could never show himself to her again, or even, invisibly, make his presence apparent. Whatever he must do, it must not be to hurt her.

Alone in the garden, he seemed to stand isolated in a vast solitude. All about him, unapproachable, was the familiar and the beloved. The flowers and the trees would not shrink away if he made himself visible, but neither could they respond, while he remembered from his reading the effect on animals of the supernatural.

Still watching Gwen's window, he saw, in the early light, a familiar outline looking out over the fields to the horizon. Of course: Martha. He could guess what she must be thinking—they had been companions for so long no change, no outward, ephemeral alteration could affect her, could diminish the deep, purposeful stability of her love and understanding.

That evening, standing, invisible, at their rendezvous he watched her come toward him through the garden. His own shock had faded; he was calm and certain. She reached the tree and halted, waiting, framed by its branches, the angle of its trunk. At her shoulder, he stood with her a moment, then, materializing, reached out gently to touch her arm.

Even as she turned he caught the startled fear in her eyes, and, before she could have seen him, retreated into invisibility. She stayed a few seconds longer, looking about uncomfortably, then, with the light not yet gone, returned quickly to the house.

He watched her until she was out of sight, then faced the dissolving horizon. He knew now where he was, and wondered what in his life he had done to deserve his punishment.