

Raphael Lazarus, the Painter

Raphael Lazarus opened the door. Instantly the astringent pungency of paint, oils and varnish stung my nostrils to sneezing. I turned my head back towards the unruly overgrown garden, took one restoring breath of weed, wild brambles and dandelion to the swollen limits of my lungs and dared to face the artist once more.

'Must ventilate the place,' he said with a tinkling apologetic laugh as though my sneeze were an accusation.

He was remarkably short, five feet in height perhaps, a slender sandy-haired reed, with parched cheeks collapsed and bristled, brow creviced, and eyes timid and darting like those of an animated nervous scarecrow, the whole investing him with the phiz of a prematurely-aged child. If I didn't know, from my records, that he was forty-seven . . . A brown beret, polka-dotted with blobs of paint, sat slanted over one ear, a smeared grey smock reaching mid-thigh was purse-strung beneath his chin, and he wore copperdust-brown corduroys and the kind of mock-suede boots that were, in the shops, called desert boots and, in the streets, brothel-creepers. Restlessly shifting his weight, little as it was, from one foot to another, he was wiping his hands in a polychrome oil-cloth with swift, fidgety swipes. His sharp nose twitched.

'Doctor, thank God you've come. It's my father. He's had a stroke. Felicity is with him. We were afraid to leave him alone.'

He took two graceless steps back, pivoted top-like on the balls of his feet and led me with swift, astonishingly long if inelegant strides along a narrow acrid corridor on whose cracked grimy lime-green walls hung a profusion of dull canvases and prints. We passed through the dining-room, through the cramped kitchen where the spoils of breakfast still remained uncleared and through a sunless patio to an annexe from whence there arose the clatter of metal and the splash of water.

At the door, Raphael Lazarus stood aside.

'He's in there,' he said, his face folding and unfolding with anxiety. 'You have to save him, you must, or I shall never forgive myself.'

His blue-green eyes floundered in their sockets. He bit his lower lip. A fleck of violet paint was smudged into the dimple of his chin, and for the first time I noticed his pointed pixie-like ears.

Inside the annexe, a two-roomed weatherboard outhouse with a minute kitchen and bathroom, old Max Lazarus, his head ashen, lay propped against a mound of pillows. Felicity Lazarus was wiping his forehead and cheeks, and though no nurse, she did so deftly enough. Unlike her nervous husband, she moved with a vigorous decisiveness; under her tread, the floorboards creaked; the curtains, the bedsheets, the very air rustled as she walked. Only the unwashed breakfast utensils I had seen in the main kitchen detracted from that impression of near-mechanised efficiency I had, through past contact, gained of her. But then, it was still only eight-thirty in the morning and, when there was sickness in the house, such lapses could easily enough be explained away. She was, I knew, older than Raphael Lazarus by three years; she was solid and tall, though, from ever bending towards her diminutive husband, she did possess a mild stoop; and with her prominent ridged nose, with the broad table-land expanse of her brow, and her cheeks and chin stark promontories rising from the rugged terrain of her face, she was no beauty. If Raphael Lazarus were, say, a seagull, she was in every way an eagle. The mystery I had

never been able to master was how seagulls and eagles could so harmoniously share the same nest.

'He is ready for you, Doctor,' she said in a firm tone as she stood back from the old man's bed and folded the towel with quick practised movements. Then, taking up the basin filled with grey soap-sudded water, she side-stepped her husband on her way towards the bathroom, and said over her shoulder, 'I shall be back rightaway.'

Max Lazarus, his eyes shut, their lids immobile and his bald head skewed sharply to one side, was not so much asleep as unconscious. He was breathing deeply and noisily and one thin, toneless cheek fluttered sail-like with each breath. Felicity, by shaving and washing him and combing the two puffs of white hair above his ears, had given him dignity, but not one of which he would ever be aware. His whole right side was paralysed. Like Raphael Lazarus, he too possessed a slender wizened look, but he had more colour in his cheeks – indeed they were unhealthily flushed, almost purple –, and his brow, smoothed out in the sleep of oblivion, did not show his son's tortured crevices of concern. His chances of recovery were wretchedly slim.

Behind me, stood Raphael Lazarus, a coil compressed to solidity, albeit precariously brittle. Against him, Felicity who had returned from the kitchen was a pillar of marble, unmoving as she watched me examine her father-in-law. I had the distinct impression that were Raphael Lazarus her child rather than her husband, she would have held him protectively to her bosom.

'There is little I can do for him,' I said, pocketing my stethoscope as I turned to them, 'except to send him to hospital.'

'Hospital?!' Raphael Lazarus exclaimed as though the word were a sentence.

Felicity was more practical, if also somewhat harder.

'How long do you give him?'

Raphael Lazarus was holding his beret with long thin fingers, his pupils darted in rings about my face.

'He may surprise us,' I said, 'With nursing care . . . , feeding

...
'He may survive then?' Raphael Lazarus said, the coil within him loosening.

'He may,' I lied, for his sake, looking with a more telling truthful gaze at Felicity who nodded in comprehension.

'There shall be no need for any hospital,' she said firmly. 'I shall look after him.'

'Felicity,' he said. There was no mistaking the gratitude behind the tremor in his voice. But rightaway the coil tightened once more. 'My God, if he dies, I'll have killed him.'

'Nonsense,' Felicity said to her husband, more in placation than with hardness.

'There, now,' I said. 'A stroke. He's seventy-eight and old people do suffer strokes, you know.'

'But you don't understand,' Raphael Lazarus said, a suggestion of a plea in his voice. 'Come with me. I'll show you.'

Felicity was smoothing the blanket over her father-in-law. She hunched a shoulder, almost despairingly, and with the thrust of her solid chin indicated that I should follow him.

'Perhaps you can talk him out of it,' she said.

His steps this time swift but more mincing, he led me once more across the patio, through the kitchen and dining-room and along the corridor to his studio where the paint and varnish again stung my nostrils and made my eyes smart. Taking out my handkerchief, I suppressed a sneeze.

The studio, a large room constructed on all sides of naked red brick was crammed with canvases, some framed and suspended from thick nails protruding from the cement bridges, others, more, it seemed infinitely more, standing in deep stacks on the floor. An easel stood beside the broad lace-curtained double window and on a cluttered table alongside it, a palette, rags, and a welter of jars containing pencils, brushes, paints, knives, trowels and scissors.

An inordinate degree of versatility and artistic fecundity impressed itself upon me as I looked around - a flamboyant farrago of watercolours, oils, sketches, charcoals and litho-

graphs and the occasional sculpture in bronze or clay; a jumble of still lifes, landscapes and portraits; a profusion of colour and styles crushing against one another in anarchic turmoil. I could almost taste the unsavoury pungency of the air.

Raphael Lazarus, in his element, pranced about, all of a twitter.

'What do you see? What do you see? In this landscape, this face, this apple?'

He kept adjusting his beret and brandished his free hand in every direction.

To my unschooled eye, the works seemed competent enough. In the main, they were faithful craftsmanlike representations of trees, bottles, fruit, faces, houses, cattle, flowers, books.

'They are very good,' I complimented him, 'quite realistic. I would say, very good.'

'No, not that!' he exclaimed, a shrill vehemence in his lean almost burning expression.

'Flattery I don't want, only what you see – in this tree, this flower, this ox . . .'

I was puzzled.

'Decay!' he cried out. 'Age, decrepitude! Are you so blind?'

My bewilderment was too plain.

'Why is it all so obvious to me?' he bellowed. 'Show me a clean smooth apple, a child's face, a new book, a green leaf, a clear transparent bottle, a blooming flower! In all this output, show me a sign of life . . .!'

In a sudden illumination, everything became clear. For all his versatility of form, technique and medium, one idea bound all his works alike a grand and monstrous obsession. Raphael Lazarus was the artist of decay.

Among all the still lifes, there was not indeed one clean smooth apple, nor a single child's face among the portraits, nor a green leaf among the landscapes. Apples, pears, lemons were wrinkled, yellow or green or brown fungus and rot disfiguring their shape and annihilating their sheen. The faces were those of old men and old women, their brows the texture

of scorched parchment, their mouths toothless and puckered, their cheeks sucked inward, their eyes bleary and distant and almost insane, near-dead creatures, either bloated or skeletal, sitting hunched and rigid in chairs the upholstery of which was frayed and torn and dull. And where there was a tree, it was gnarled and deformed, and where a leaf, it was rusty and curled, and where a flower it was withered, its stem sagging, its heart collapsed, its petals shrivelled and bronzed upon the parched soil beneath. There was a clear veering towards the autumnal, the fading, the disintegrating.

'Decay!' he repeated more forcibly, waving back a stray wing of hair over his exposed pointed ear, 'Everything I touch runs to decay.'

'They are perhaps pessimistic, true,' I said, 'but the seeking out and representation of things decayed is a valid artistic approach. The motif is, after all, realistic enough. In my own work, I see decay and decrepitude every day.'

'You *still* don't understand,' he said with burning vehemence. 'I don't seek them out at all. They are there, there, always before me.'

'Sure.'

'No, no, no!' He struck his forehead. His eyes glowed with blue fire. 'No . . . look here . . . at this face . . . Maybe this will convince you.'

On the wall above the fireplace hung a portrait. Obviously of his father. A thin wizened look, the head askew, a high purple flush, one cheek thin and flaccid, the two recognisable puffs of white above the ears, the eyelids closed and immobile.

'A remarkable likeness,' I said.

'Yes,' he tittered, 'Yes, a remarkable likeness. That's how he looks today. Yes. But that painting – see the dust on it, the dullness of the paint, the hairline cracks . . . I painted that portrait not today, not yesterday, but – it's madness – twelve years ago. When he was healthy, with full cheeks, hair on his head, his own teeth, when there was still strength, virility, in him.'

He leapt towards another painting.

'And this portrait here – a past president of the Returned Servicemen's League. He commissioned me to paint him. But in the end he refused to take it. I made him appear too old, ten years older at least. And ten years after I finished it, when he had come to look like this, he suffered a heart attack and died . . . And here is a past neighbour of ours, a councillor's wife – she was fifty-two when I painted her, elegant, dignified, scarcely a wrinkle, and here she looks nothing less than sixty-five, her face bloated, sallow, vacant, victim of the kidney disease that was to creep up on her and kill her just when she reached this stage . . .'

He paused. His lips quivered. His whole body was a galvanised wire.

'Do you see at last? Do you? Do you? This rotten withered apple, when I painted it was smooth and red and succulent, this mouldy cheese Felicity had just brought back from the supermarket, this crumbling flower came straight from our garden, the scorched dog-eared leaves of this book were from a new shining volume I had just bought. Do you understand now? I paint the future. I can't help myself. I paint decay, I paint death. I am the painter, the artist, the *creator* of death! So don't let him die, my father. If he dies, if he dies, I will have killed him!'

That Felicity Lazarus thought that her husband laboured under a delusion became acutely evident. She had, I felt, done her best to coax him out of it and in her poised highly maternal controlled way had asked me to do so as well.

But Raphael Lazarus clung to his belief with the conviction of dogma.

'Your father,' I said, 'the president of the RSL, the Councillor's wife – they're mere coincidences.'

'Once, yes,' he countered, 'even twice. But three times, four, no. They are not the only ones. I had a horse-trainer, a solicitor, a banker. When they reached the age I had portrayed in my paintings – with the banker it was only two years later – they died, the banker by suicide. And I despised myself and came to fear myself. At first I believed that I possessed the gift

of prophesy – I could look at a man and predict the time of his death, I could picture him as he would appear then long before the event. I had been touched by the divine. I was privileged, chosen, charmed, and I kept it as a magnificent secret. I sat by the hem of God. But after the banker, I saw to my horror – how long it took me to recognise it – that it was not by the hem of God that I sat, but on the shoulder of the grim-faced Angel of Death, by my paintings pointing his victims out to him. I was responsible, I, for their deaths. And for the rotting of apples before their time and the crumbling of flowers, the moulding of cheese, the mutilation of books. In the creation of art, I had become a destroyer.’

‘There must exist discrepancies you haven’t noticed. And you must surely have painted the portraits of others who . . . who have exceeded their age shown on your canvases . . .’

He gripped my arm with thin strong tapering fingers. His eyes were wildfire.

‘What will convince you? There are no discrepancies! None! I stopped receiving commissions ages ago, but still I continued to paint portraits – from photographs, sketches, cartoons – . . . I couldn’t help myself . . . and in all cases, Johnson, Mao, Picasso, Onassis, Pope Paul the Sixth . . . my canvas was like a last photograph. The only ones still living are those whose portraits I painted only recently. The Prime Minister, the American president, the Queen, the Pope, even Felicity, though God be thanked, she will survive to be a grand old dame. Once, I began a self-portrait, but gave it up in terror of what was emerging. I could ride on Death’s shoulder but could not look into his face . . .’

He stopped abruptly. His whole face was a hot tense coil about to spring into burning chaos. Suddenly, he howled. ‘Rid me of this curse . . . ! Save my father . . . ! Don’t, for humanity’s sake, let him die . . . !’

Felicity entered, purpose in her every movement. Tall, solid, slightly stooped, she leant over Raphael Lazarus and took his hand with calm maternal solicitude.

‘Raphael,’ she said firmly but without harshness, ‘the doctor

must be busy. Let him go now. He has many other patients to attend to.'

The coil unwound smoothly.

'Yes,' he said meekly. 'I have kept you . . . But save him, if you love your fellow man, save him . . .'

Max Lazarus was beyond saving. I visited him each day, sometimes twice in the one day, but within a week, he died. As I completed the yellow death certificate, I was struck by the uncanniness of Raphael Lazarus' predictions.

In the evening after the funeral, I visited the Lazaruses to pay my respects. Felicity treated me to tea and biscuits. Raphael Lazarus, dressed in a green crudely-knitted woollen pullover and his copper-brown corduroys, sat withdrawn in the farthest corner of the lounge-room, thin, morose, his face extraordinarily long and pointed, more pixie-like than ever, his gaze unflinching upon me like an accusation. When I left, he merely blinked, bit his lower lip and nodded.

Such muteness was an unhealthy sign, I thought upon leaving the house.

Within two weeks, I was proven right. At three o'clock one morning, I was woken by the telephone.

'Lazarus here.'

'Lazarus?! What happened . . .?'

His voice, nervous and trembling, raved.

'I had to tell you. My work, my art. It all adds up to Truth. And Truth is ugliness, decrepitude, death.'

'You rang just to tell me that?'

He ignored me.

'Trees are broken stumps, corn fields brittle stubble, forests become deserts. Even the human body, that pampered molly-coddled thing, is nothing but an ever-rotting, ever decaying chunk of meat. It's a mess of warts, tumours, moles. Wrinkles, pimples, corns. Bloating, atrophy, decline. And *that* is Truth; Truth, that toward which all things tend. Truth lies in

the future, and the ultimate permanent future of all things is death.'

'A fine time for philosophy.'

'It is not philosophy, it is *life*.'

'Well, now that you've woken me, if you want to know what I think, Truth is also the present, the now, whatever is in it that you can see, hear, feel, smell, touch . . .'

'The present changes, crumbles, hurtles towards a future state. Your so-called Truth is a little truth, only relative and evanescent; blink and it's gone. What becomes fixed in eternity is ultimate Truth. And *I . . . I . . . I*, in my work, create the future. *I* create real Truth!'

'Then you should paint dust,' I said.

There followed a pause. I heard Raphael Lazarus breathing into the mouthpiece and then a thin faint humourless laugh. I imagined the point of his nose twitch and his timid eyes blinking.

'You are right. It is an unearthly hour,' he said and hung up his receiver.

But the very next night, he rang again.

'Keats is wrong. Beauty is not truth; truth is not beauty. That's unadulterated romantic piffle. Beauty is ephemeral, relative like your little truths about the present. Truth is death, eternity, dust. And even what we marvel at as delicate skin, perfect form, elegance, shapeliness, the graceful line – it all washes away before it comes to its prime. Of what profit are beauties if they must die on earth?'

And on the following night, I was woken once more.

'Whoever said that the true artist sees the harmony, the wholeness and the tendencies towards perfection in things everywhere was no artist. Perfection is in the not-yet-formed; the formed already decays. That is its natural direction, the impulse as inevitable as the pull of gravity. Beauty is illusory, only decay is real, the dust you spoke of.'

He telephoned me every night that week. My wife became short-tempered, suggested I bring to a halt these nocturnal conversations. The children were being woken, she herself

could not teach effectively during the day, and I, too, felt the torpor of disturbed sleep by mid-afternoon.

On the eighth night, when the telephone rang, I picked up the receiver hastily, ready to deliver the rebuke I had mentally prepared and rehearsed throughout the preceding day.

But it was not Raphael Lazarus. I recognised Felicity's firm, steady, almost masculine voice. In the background, I heard an intermittent outcry rising into a tirade.

'I know the hour,' she said. 'I hoped to cope until the morning. But he's become impossible. He needs a doctor.'

Felicity let me in. She wore a heavy crimson dressing-gown with ragged tassels and old men's slippers, and her hair, thickly streaked with long striations of grey, hung over her shoulders in formless tangles. Her features appeared heavier than ever, her ridged nose higher, her chin bulkier, the shadowed folds around her eyes deeper. From the studio behind her came the rising and ebbing torrent of words. The air burnt stingingly of paint, turpentine, ether and varnish.

'Neither of us has slept since his father died,' Felicity said. 'All he does now is paint and babble and jabber and rant. He hasn't eaten for more than a week. And all he's taken is coffee, strong and black, cup after cup. I have lost all control over him.'

Raphael Lazarus, when I entered the studio, pranced before his easel, palette in the crook of his elbow, paintbrush in his hand, frantically jabbing at the canvas, shouting, howling, declaiming, rambling at the frame before him. On the floor against the walls, the number of paintings – portraits, still-lives, landscapes – had multiplied; the light from the high ceiling glinted on the still-moist shining freshness of the paint. He had evidently been working at white heat and even now he was jerkily hopping about from foot to foot, smacking his lips, blinking frenziedly, turning at intervals to sip hurriedly from his mug, and with his oilcloth wiping his brow of the beads of perspiration gathering there. His collapsed, stark-eyed, unshaven face was a smudged chaotic scape of paint. Preoccupied with his work, he did not see me enter.

‘Art . . . beauty . . . death . . . dust . . . truth . . .’

With each word, he jabbed again at the canvas – a brown streak, a yellow line, a grey smudge, an orange blob.

‘Art is the burrowing through the ugliness of the world towards beauty. Art is the probing through chaos to uncover harmony. Art is harmony, wholeness, perfection. Art is the exaggeration of natural beauty. Beauty, truth; truth, beauty. Truth is the vital breath of beauty; beauty the outward form of truth. Art is the creation of beauty. Art is aspiration. Art is life.’

I stepped behind him. I couldn’t help but gasp. For on the canvas was the emerging face of a tramp, a small tight tapering face, sunken-cheeked, straggle-bearded, unkempt, parched brow deeply-creviced, a misshapen beret askew above pointed ears, blue-green eyes vacant, dull, as if set into terminal oblivion, the whole a grim portrait of dereliction and destitution.

‘Lazarus!’, I exclaimed.

‘All lies!’, he shouted, noticing me without interest and turning back to his work. ‘Lies, distortions, illusions. Art is truth and ultimate truth is death. And I am the poet of truth and the creator of death!’

‘Lazarus!’, I called out again, approaching him, laying a hand upon his arm. ‘Don’t! That is you! Better not to know!’

He broke free. He was drawn and pale, and perspired from lack of sleep.

‘Art is truth. And who can escape the truth? I have seen the face of that restless Angel and he has now turned his gaze upon me. I have no time to waste. I must paint. There is still so much within me. Paint! Paint! Paint! What you see around you is a mere fraction . . . A universe still tumbles within me. I can’t stop. It’s my life, what is left of it, the sole purpose behind my being . . .’

‘You’re deluded. What you need is sleep, rest. Your whole outlook will then change . . . your perspective . . .’

‘My God . . . And I thought you understood . . .’

‘You are driving yourself into the ground prematurely . . .’

‘My time has been set. I’m not afraid.’

'A few nights' rest . . . a little medication . . . in a hospital . . . and you can defeat that Angel of yours . . .'

'It's fate.'

'Nonsense. You talked yourself into it.'

'You're crazy.'

'You're tired, overwrought, driven. I can help you slow down . . .'

'Ha! Only the devil within takes drugs.'

'For your sake. For the sake of your creativity.'

Felicity, who had been listening outside the door, now entered. She approached her husband.

'The doctor's right, Raphael. Just a few nights' rest . . .'

'I am not tired.'

'For my sake too . . . And yours. You are in a rut. Decay, death is not everything. The doctor is right . . .'

'Let the shoemaker stick to his last. He doesn't know the first thing about art . . .'

'Felicity glanced towards me, embarrassed. Raphael Lazarus continued to stroke and jab at the canvas with brisk movements.

'He's here to help you. Listen to him just this once.'

Alongside him, Felicity was an oak; alongside her, he was a reed. Though sandy-haired, his developing beard showed coarse strands of grey.

'If you continue in the same way,' I said, 'that portrait will be self-fulfilling. You will wear yourself out into a stupor, collapse suddenly, break down, lose your gifts, your personal vision, your sanity. Even a machine constantly driven must wear out.'

Time passed – another quarter-hour, another half, another hour. In the end – the first light was just rising outside – he completed his portrait. He stood back, studied it pensively and, letting hang his brush and palette from his hands, said sadly,

'What difference can it make to me now? I have created my own death.'

The resemblance between Raphael Lazarus and his portrait

was uncannily close. Only his own eyes showed some lustre in them and his beard was not yet as straggled and unkempt as it appeared in the portrait. Were I to believe wholly in his myth, I would have given him a mere two months to live.

In the end, coaxed by Felicity and myself, he succumbed. I administered a tranquillising injection and arranged his immediate admission into a psychiatric hospital.

On the footpath, as he was bending, about to enter Felicity's car, he looked up at me, his eyes searching my face.

'You promise me I can cheat death this way?'

A cool dawn breeze enveloped me.

'The other way, you had no hope,' I said, 'You were driving yourself into his very arms.'

'For your sake,' he said, 'may you be right.'

I heard nothing of Raphael Lazarus for three weeks. Then Felicity phoned my surgery to say he had been transferred to a public hospital. I was out on house visits at the time and my receptionist had taken the call. She had been given no further details.

That afternoon, having time on my hands, I visited the hospital.

I was led to his ward by the sister-in-charge.

'He's having tests,' she said. 'Looks bad. Cancer, the doctors think.'

Raphael Lazarus sat in a vinyl chair beside his bed. He looked more diminutive than ever and his beard, sandy streaked with thick grey, was disproportionately large. His cheeks were more sunken, his nose more pointed, his hair rose higgledy-piggledy in a dishevelled tangle, his eyes were piteously, abysmally dull. He had not abandoned his paint-pocked beret. He resembled his self-portrait more than ever.

'It's you, is it?', he said tonelessly.

'I only heard this morning.'

'They're wasting their time, the doctors.' He sniffed down

his nose contemptuously. 'The doctors! And you, now will you believe? What more, tell me, will it take to persuade you?'

I tried to sound convincing. 'It's not the end,' I laughed.

'Couldn't you have let me be, let me die in my own way? I was painting, I was delirious, happy, transported, creating, rooting the very devil out of me.'

'It's not over yet.'

He ignored me. For the first time I noticed how pale and tapering his fingers were now that they were free of paint, and how deeply sunken were his blue-green eyes.

'Once, I set out to create beauty, harmony, wholeness – I was young still, had fantasies of greatness. I ended by painting something higher. Truth. Truth in all its ugliness, decrepitude, decline. After a while, no-one wanted my work. It frightened them. It brought them too close to death. Buyers did not come, galleries rejected my works. If Felicity had not worked all these years, I should have starved. I myself couldn't work. I had to paint, had to, do you understand, the devil himself spurred me on. It was a matter of spiritual necessity, of the blood. I had to paint, if not for anyone else, then for myself. *And* for the Truth. *And*, then, not for the Truth as I saw it – subjectivity is a false and fickle mistress – but for the truth as it was, as it is, as it will always be. And now not only my art, but also my life is fulfilling that Truth.'

A white-gowned orderly wheeled a trolley into the room.

'We're off to X-Rays, Raphael,' he said cheerfully.

'You're wasting your time,' Raphael Lazarus said, rising from his chair nonetheless.

'It's not me. It's them doctors that want it.'

There was little of that former fermenting throbbing energy left about Raphael Lazarus as he positioned himself upon the trolley. Small, light as he was, his movements bore a torpid heaviness. As the orderly wheeled him out of the room, he raised towards me a long attenuated arm, craned his goose-like neck towards me and said wearily, with the weariness of resignation:

'You should have left me at home.'

Within a week, Raphael Lazarus was dead.

The funeral was a small affair. Felicity, a handful of acquaintances, myself. The ceremony was short, the sermon, too, very brief, containing some reference to Raphael Lazarus' art but more openly regretting that a man so young – he was after all a mere forty seven – should have been torn from life so prematurely.

I paid my respects to Felicity. Looking through the mesh of her black veil, I said, 'I sincerely hope that your late husband is now at rest.'

Felicity took my arm. She bowed towards me. Her expression, insofar as I could determine it, was suitably restrained, but there was a peculiar levity, even mirth, in her voice.

'I expect that Raphael may well be laughing now.'

The thought of thin, wizened, emaciated Raphael Lazarus laughing haunted me on the way home. It was hot. I had an hour to spare before the evening surgery. On reaching home, I went directly to the kitchen where my wife, herself just returned from school, was preparing dinner. She kissed me, asked whether I wanted an iced coffee and said, 'Oh, yes, there's a parcel in your study.'

'Books?' I asked.

'Doesn't look like it.'

With my iced coffee, I went into the study, glanced fleetingly through the mail – bills, medical journals, receipts, reports – then picked up the parcel. On the back of it in bold letters were printed the name 'Lazarus' and his address.

Curious, apprehensive, oddly agitated, I cut the strings and undid the wrappings. A white card fell out.

'Just a little something to remember me by. Lazarus,' it read.

My wife came in.

'Looks interesting,' she said.

'Probably his self-portrait,' I said. 'You may do the honours,' I added, handing her the parcel that she may remove the last of the wrappings.

She tore the brown paper with the gusto of a child opening a

gift. And when the frame contained within lay uncovered, she stood back, laughed excitedly and chirped, 'Why, how gorgeous! Look! How perfect!'

And I looked, stared; couldn't believe, heard vaguely my wife's remarks that tumbled in a bubbling torrent.

'It's remarkable . . . It's you all over . . . Immaculate . . . A little greyer perhaps . . . a shade older . . . the lips a trifle stiffer . . . but, sweetheart, what an astounding resemblance! . . . The eyes, the cheeks, the chin, they're so life-like . . .'

And in that moment, I remembered Felicity in her black suit of mourning. And I heard laughter, and that laughter, at first tinkling and then oddly clamorous, came from all around, arising from whatever heaven or whatever hell or whatever final niche Lazarus' Angel had taken him to for his everlasting rest. And enclosed by it, that laughter echoed in my ears, shrill and reverberating, and filled the universe and filled the ages – and filled, I knew, that eternal void in which so soon, too soon, I would consummate Raphael Lazarus' ultimate Truth.