

JACOB'S LADDER

1. VIRGIL

Jacob's eyes twitched open and he became aware that he was lying on the ground with his face pressed against the earth. Rather stiffly he sat up and looked around. He was in the middle of an enormous field. There was cropped grass beneath him, dotted here and there with tiny white flowers which seemed almost to glow in the twilight. Ahead of him, in the distance, he could see a line of trees. Nothing was moving in any direction.

What was he doing here?

He tried to remember how he had got there and why he had been lying on the ground, fast asleep, but there seemed to be nothing in his mind, absolutely nothing, as if he had opened the cupboard of his memory and found it entirely empty.

Anxiously he looked all round, hoping he would see something that would remind him of what he had been doing before he had fallen asleep, but there was nothing to see, just grass on three sides, the line of trees ahead of him and, above, a huge expanse of sky the colour of bruised flesh. He didn't like the look of that sky. It seemed to be full of a dull menace.

Fear began stealing over him, like ice-cold water

seeping through his veins. He must be able to remember something, he told himself. He sat very still and concentrated. Think! How did you get here?

But it was no good.

He stood up, feeling the need to stem the rising tide of panic threatening to overwhelm him. He made his hands into fists and held them out in front of him, squeezing them hard, as if physical force would calm him. It'll be all right in a minute, he told himself. Just be patient. It'll come back to you. Let's see, what do you know?

His name was Jacob. OK. What next?

Nothing.

That was it. That was the only thing he could remember. His name was Jacob. He put his hands on his head and tugged at his hair. This wasn't possible. He had to be able to remember something. If he could just summon up the smallest scrap, he was certain that everything else would come tumbling back. If he could just make a start.

He looked down at his clothes. He was wearing blue trousers, a green T-shirt and white shoes. Both the trousers and the T-shirt had irregular brown patches on them. He felt certain they were his clothes but he did not remember them.

Then something did stir, very deep in his mind, so deep that it was like the faintest whisper in an enormous cavern. What was it? His will stretched out to grasp it, like a blind man reaching for a candle, and suddenly he had it. He knew what it was; but with a dreadful sense of disappointment, he realised it was no more than a feeling, not a concrete fact. It was simply a conviction that he had lost something.

Not just his memory. Something different. Before he had lost his memory, he felt certain that he had lost something else. But he had no idea what it was. He sighed. This was no good at all.

What was he going to do? He had to get some help, that was obvious. He needed to find someone who knew where he was, someone who could tell him what he ought to do next. Wait a minute! What about his. . . ? What were they called? The man and woman who looked after him? What did you call them? There was a word for it. He felt like stamping his foot in frustration.

He found this inability to even remember the word for the people who looked after him deeply distressing. He tried to picture them in his mind but he couldn't. Would he even recognise them if he saw them again? If he met them right now? This was terrible. How could he possibly have got into this condition?

Well, it was no good staying here in the field and waiting for it to get dark, or for a storm to come, which by the look of things might not be all that long. He had to do something. He needed to get out of here. But which way should he go? He turned slowly in a complete circle, feeling hopelessly indecisive, but as he came round to face the trees again, he thought he noticed something moving in the distance. He looked more carefully and now he was certain that a man was walking towards him. He felt an immense surge of relief. Someone was coming to help him. Immediately he set off to meet him.

The man had clearly seen Jacob and was walking rapidly, so it was not long before the two of them drew