

PROLOGUE

I have a story to tell you. It has many beginnings, and perhaps one ending. Perhaps not. Beginnings and endings are contingent things anyway; inventions, devices. Where does any story really begin? There is always context, always an encompassingly greater epic, always something before the described events, unless we are to start every story with, 'BANG! *Expand!* Sssss . . .', then itemise the whole subsequent history of the universe before settling down, at last, to the particular tale in question. Similarly, no ending is final, unless it is the end of all things . . .

Nevertheless, I have a story to tell you. My own direct part in it was vanishingly small and I have not thought even to introduce myself with anything as presumptuous as a proper name. Nevertheless, I was there, at the very beginning of one of those beginnings.

From the air, I am told, the Autumn House looks like a giant grey and pink snowflake lying half-embedded within these folded green slopes. It lies on the long, shallow escarpment which forms the southern limit of the Northern Tropical Uplands. On the northern side of the house are spread the various formal and rustic gardens which it is both my duty and my pleasure to tend. A little further up the escarpment rest the extensive ruins of a fallen temple, believed to have been a construction of a species called the Rehlide. (6ar., either severely abated or extinct, depending on which authority one chooses to give credence to. In any event, long gone from these parts.) The temple's great white columns once towered a hundred metres or so into our thin airs but now lie sprawled upon and interred within the ground, vast straked and fluted tubes of solid stone half buried in the peaty soils of the unimproved land around us. The furthest-fallen ends of the columns - which must have toppled slowly but most impressively in our half-standard gravity - punched great long crater-like ditches out of the earth, creating long double embankments with bulbously rounded tips. Over the many