
Strict Time

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Cheltenham, 1939

It was a young old house consciously fabricated to engender permanence. It stood in the ranks alongside other young old houses. All were detached – those who lived in them seeking distance from a world now too fractious to be contemplated. On the street the developers had left a row of mature limes – once an avenue leading to a now demolished mansion. Elsewhere, however, the detritus and decay of an actual past had been summarily cast aside and a new, ersatz one put in its place; a past bought off the rack, cheaply tailored like a Burton's suit.

The Surmans' house sat squat and daintified in its young old garden. Like their neighbours, they had been quick to grab the services of a nurseryman, one of those underlings serving the former estate thrown out of work by the development. Binding briars had been grubbed out, lawns had been seeded and herbaceous borders raked and hoed, and already the frontage was alive with forced blooms screaming for attention.

To the side of the porch the open doors of the garage revealed Captain Surman's Daimler, its headlamps perched high, exemplifying a haughtiness that presaged that of its owner. The Captain was often away and his absence lent the house a more welcoming presence. So, apparently, did the occasional glimpse of Nurse Feign or Ethel the Maid of All Work negotiating the pathway that rounded the garage. It led to the rear and, in keeping with the manner of things, was designated the servants' entrance.

As a young old house must, the Surman's residence boasted a melange of leaded bay windows, blacked timber and stucco topped with a hat of terracotta slates; a cluster of tall, Tudor brick chimneys of a herringbone pattern pointed the way to heaven. The porch featured a porthole, its glass coloured to an abstracted design of a sunburst over a field of sheaved corn. Its fingers of insipid yellow light fell upon a hat stand's crown of wildly serpentine coat-hooks.

On this bright March morning, the Captain's leather-gloved hand reached for his titfer and crammed it inelegantly atop his pate. Then he retrieved his cane from the hat stand's well – a cruel, black thing whose heavy knob boasted a bloated, sneering face worn and bruised with usage. Jostling with his suitcase, he extruded himself through the open front door then brought it gently to a close. Daring a recce, he peered up and across to the side panes of his

wife's bedroom window. Reassured, he fell out onto the steps quietly drawing the door to a close behind him.

In the hallway, silence stood in the Captain's stead. The glass sun's rays bleached all, scouring away detail. Half way up the stairs, its influence gave way to a blander interior. At the landing the only view was forward towards the movement of silhouettes before the windows of Mrs Surman's bedroom. Here the light was kinder, purer. It fell in from both the south and east and all within seemed to hover in its cloud of pristine whiteness.

Nurse Feign, a stolid woman stuffed inelegantly into her apron, was planted with her back before the door; all seemed to pivot about her abrupt presence. She was surveying an assemblage of patent medicines that stood on parade atop a lacquer-topped table. The light played upon the bottles like little hammers sounding a tinkle of effervescent anticipation. She took in the turquoise shimmer of one bottle then the vapid mauve of another. *Wasn't there something missing?* She ferreted in her pocket for her notebook. Her heavy finger stabbed down upon the page. The culprit was found, its absence noted. Her hand fell onto a jar of liver salts.

"Now dear, are you Mrs Can or Mrs Can't, this morning?"

Mrs Surman, a spectre of mothballed frailty, emitted a tubercular affirmation. The cigarette stuck to her bottom lip glowered. Lost in the vastness of her chair, she was engrossed in a jigsaw puzzle – "Richard Coeur De Lion Embarking for the Crusade" – showing the king and his entourage taking ship. Nurse Feign shook a thermometer then shoved it into the vacant corner of her patient's mouth. Smoke wafted about its stem. She poured a glass of delicately pink tincture of lavender, removed the thermometer, checked the reading then handed the brew to her patient.

"Here you are, dear, your favourite."

Mrs Surman half-heartedly raised the glass in a mock toast. Nurse Feign drifted to the window. Below the Captain was making fraught progress pushing the Daimler towards the gate, attempting to steal away without turning on the engine and thus attracting attention. Sweating from the exertion, he came to a halt and leant heavily on the chassis. Sheepishly, he returned his gaze to the upstairs window. He found Nurse Feign peering down her nose at him, her arms in a self-embrace, her eyes alive with derision. He withered instinctively but then his drill-soaked disposition took hold. He straightened, showed the contemptible mare his broad back and heaved himself into the driving seat.

There was an envelope pinched to the windshield by the wiper. He strained to retrieve it. Inside he found a photographic portrait of a soft lipped boy, dark skinned, darker-eyed, a

flower peeking out from behind his ear. His djellaba was open and he leant against a grilled window in a tiled courtyard. The picture had been hand-tinted – soft moss greens, purples, violets – but now it was fading and, worse, the boy’s face was threatened by an encroachment of silvered crystals. The picture had been marked “Pour M. Surman” by the photographer, a Cairo procurer and associate of the Captain’s from his days in Egypt. The Captain felt panic rising inside him. He scratted inside the envelope but the other photos were not there. *She* had them. And there she was peering down at him, her mouth sour with odium.

The shadow that had long haunted his life engulfed him. Rage, his most constant familiar, was awakened. He would tear this white world and its mass of crowing, uppish irritants to bits – *Swank and wide trousers is what counts nowadays!* But inevitably he was drawn to the vision of Nurse Feign once more. Beneath that withering stare he deflated like a punctured blimp and, tears of frustration boiling in his eye and making much of over-revving the engine, he started off for who knows where.

Nurse Feign turned back into the room to meet Mrs Surman’s enquiring gaze.

“Ahhhhh, he’s off again! And don’t bother to cover up for him. You always cover up for him.”

“Hush now, dear, never mind it”

“He’ll be at the seaside in weather like this. At the seaside with some tart! On my money no less!”

“You must be off it, dear. Really you must. You don’t want it all about, now do you?”

“Filthy pig of a man!”

“Hush now or I’ll have to shut the window and on such a kind day. You can’t want me to shut the window, now can you?”

“His brains in his trousers...”

Voices drifted in uninvited – little girls’ voices singing splinters of nonsense:

“Against the wall for the London ball, London ball, London ball,

Against the wall for the London ball, to the bonnie bunch o’ roses...”

Nurse Feign peered out and discovered the dancing girls just beyond the newly budded hedge. She found little girls irksome. They wasted so much time on fancies of one kind or another. When she snapped the window shut she wasn’t sure if she was shutting them out or keeping Mrs Surman’s cackling in. She shifted her bulk so that her stone-like silhouette looked down upon her patient’s huddled, taut presence before the brightly lit window.

It was always this way – the mornings imbued with a fulsome promise that was inevitably reneged upon by supper time. No matter. Her patience had been rewarded. *The Captain must come to heel now, that was the thing.*

In the ballroom of the West End's Piccadilly Hotel that evening, the band leader counted in the introduction to "Bathing in the Sunshine". Then, as the strings bounded forward with superior disdain for the skirmishing, yapping brass, he turned and presented an ingratiating smile to anyone and no one. The music reverberated in the hall. Effervescent patrons peered airily from the upstairs balcony as others tumbled down the stairs and scuffled onto the dance floor.

In a pen roped off from the dining area, dance hosts and hostesses waited for their services to be taken up. Nurse Feign's only son, Julian, known professionally as Mr Byron Shade, sat apart from his colleagues, a cigarette hanging loosely from his mouth, as he once more attempted the louche comportment then en vogue. Self-consciousness stymied his intentions however. He stiffened and could only watch helplessly as female patrons handed over their sixpenny tickets to the younger dance hosts whose numbers were now irrefutably in ascendance. Of late he had found it increasingly difficult to assuage the urgent insistence of the fading pretty boy that was now emerging in the stead of his once youthful self.

At the next table, the hostess Miss Paulette was surreptitiously circling items in a mail order brochure. She glanced up and took in Julian's discomfort at a glance. Spotting a sorry middle-aged bachelor immersed in an obviously rented, ill-fitting evening suit drunkenly coggling along the edge of the dance floor, she stubbed out her cigarette and slid the brochure beneath a table napkin. The artifice of her tutored smile was not to be denied and the patron, hooked, ravenously approached the dance partners' pen waving his ticket. Miss Paulette's arm reached out like the claw crane of an arcade coin machine. Her manicured nippers fastened on the ticket, snatched it away then let it fall into her handbag which she then snapped shut with mechanical efficiency. The poor man was transported into the air as she took the lead, proffering Julian a withering, triumphant sneer as she flounced by.

The dance under way and with no possibility of gaining a ticket, Julian turned his gaze inward. His once startling beauty had so far disguised the self beneath; it had deflected any enquiry into what he was or might be. Now that prettiness was being supplanted by another false representation of his self to the world. A much crueller self because it suggested

experience and a hard-won discernment that he did not possess. He was frightened by the rapidity at which this new dissemblance was asserting itself.

Mercifully, his introspection was cut short. His eye had caught a couple attempting some showy jitterbugging. They were all over the place and continually careered into other couples. *Didn't find that Kaffir nonsense in Dancing Monthly. No nigger hubbub there and we won't be having any of it here, I say. Oh, well, there you bleedin' well are. He's wearing one them made-up dress bows. They are never worn by people of consequence. The management should be on the watch out for that sort of thing.* Julian considered the formalities – the priest's catechism, maths tables learnt by rote, the placing of cutlery and such like – to be a gaggle of necessary creeds. He was sure that the costermonger and the gunnery officer, the gypsy and the Gargoyle club tart likewise abided by their own proprieties – *It's rules that stop us bumping into each other, after all.* Not that he was likely to bump into anybody at this rate.

The dancing partners' pen cut into the dining area awkwardly and proffered an informal commerce between the partners and their well-heeled customers – the Select, the Dickies and Stoles, Them-That-Has. They had their favourites. Some found the partners deliciously outré and rewarded their presence with gifts as one would treat prattling birds with feed. Julian had been quick to learn the game. At the height of his celebrity, such gifts formed the bulk of his remunerations; now he increasingly relied on his meagre salary – four shillings a night and no allowance for evening dress and pumps.

He studied the tables looking for prey but then – *Bugger, here comes Sharpy!* Argus-eyed, the manager was patrolling the roped boundary, ingratiating himself with the Select to be sure, but primarily his imperious progress was intended to curtail any frippery. Chit chat was of no use to him – *The partners must be about the business of extracting tickets. Those sixpences all go in the ledgers. They add up.* And there was Mr Byron Shade, no custom and with his intentions all too obvious. As the music ceased and the dancers dispersed, Sharpy edged purposefully towards him.

“You are no longer the *thing*, my dear. It's lucky you have such a devoted follower.”

Miss Evelyn Margaret stood before Julian proffering a ticket. Thwarted, Sharpy pursed his lips in frustration and made off giving Julian a backwards glance as he retreated – *That sow is one of the few regulars Mr Shade has left.* He must decide what to do with Mr Shade. *Mind you, what could one do with Mr Shade?*

Julian and Miss Evelyn Margaret took up the dance. Miss Evelyn studied her partner wittingly. Julian reddened a little beneath her gaze and turned his face away.

“You should marry me, Julian. I could keep you very well and as long as you were discrete...”

“I wouldn’t be seen dead with a meese old hay bag like you on me arm. Oh, he’s rather...”

He had caught sight of a rather bullish young man with a sneer for a smile patrolling the edge of the dance floor. Miss Evelyn followed his gaze.

“Hmnm, definitely a Possible; have to be brought down a peg though...”

Both watched transfixed as the subject of their mutual admiration drifted away across the floor but then they became aware of a raucous crowd in the far corner of the room, side on to the stage. A bunch of Earls Court types were throwing themselves about in a forlorn attempt to perform “The Lambeth Walk”. Despite the simplicity of the so-called dance – “Ev’rythin’s free and easy, Do as you damn well pleasey” – they were painfully incapable of even a rudimentary rendering of the steps and postures that the craze demanded. Some were promenading in pairs, thumbs under lapels, their groins obscenely obtruded – “Oi!” Others were striding with shoulders arched upwards and their elbows in, barrow boy style – “Oi!” Then there was a slapping of knees – “Oi!” and the tilting invisible titfers – “Oi, Bloody Oi!” Julian and Miss Evelyn tripped lightly by, two delicate automatons weightlessly drifting on their own cotton clouds, gliding past the world’s profanity like two gossamer doves.

One of the more vocal of the Earls Court mummers was heckling the bandmaster demanding yet another rendition of “The Lambeth Walk” – there had been three already – forthwith. He was soon joined by a throng. The music ended and the entreaties became yet more imperative. The other dancers paused in their exits from the floor. The rowdyism – a violent, percussive breach of etiquette – held their attention. The bandmaster gave in too readily by Julian’s lights and an awkward attempt at the ditty ensued. Having no sheet music the band was reduced to barking and blaring out the main chorus repeatedly. The voluble Earls Court bumpkin promoted himself to the role of head – or should that be ‘ead – chorister. He mounted the bandstand and began hollering and jubilating the lyrics, his voice now booming and distorted as he pressed against the microphone and then disappearing to merciful insignificance as his grandiloquent swaggering – thumbs under lapels – “Oi!” – shoulders up and elbows in – “Oi! Bloody Oi!” – took him away from it. Julian thought he had seen more temperate behaviour in the monkey pen at London Zoo.

He and Miss Evelyn abandoned the floor. The ructions had turned Julian’s mind to introspection.

“Do you imagine... well I keep thinking that I should take up something new?”

Miss Evelyn eyed him up and down. His skin looked like cracked plaster and his widow's peak was malting away to nothing. He was tragedy incarnate.

"The problem is, my dear, will something new take up with you?"

Julian glowered back as the song culminated in a last, raucous "Oi!"

The evening expired awkwardly, the last gallop a perfunctory affair, the leaving crowd a mingle-mangle of the pie-eyed and the still starry-eyed, the bickering and boorish, the ready-for-more and the rueful all-spent. Julian delicately prized his way through the Jurassic flora of the palm court which remained alive with the genera of dinner-suited dinosaurs many still took to be their betters.

Once outside he progressed along the colonnaded arcade that fronted the hotel, peering warily through its arches at the thronged souk beyond. He had long feared the Dilly's turbulence. Elsewhere in the West End the queer and the wide people afforded him a place in their midst. He was one amongst many to be sure. Only the Dilly sent a shudder through him. It had long ago presented him with an ingrained fear. That fear was beside him now as he looked it both up and down.

The sniffy theatre crowd was passing through with practised condescension but for the rest the Dilly was like a snooker game at the break, collision upon collision – chorus boys and guardsmen, cabaret girls and their beaux off to the clubs, tarts and street Arabs and P & Os buzzing around the toffs, suburban office clerks with the measures safety-pinned to the inside of their shirt pockets bargaining for a bit of a taste, queans mentally totting up their earnings and desperate to get off their heels.

And then there were the Dilly Boys – youths in first blush from all corners and on the make, the newcomers lingering far too long around marks whose interests lay elsewhere whilst the more experienced ones moved on from one perfunctory exchange to another, bending an ear to whispered abhorrent demands and proffering only a vacant smile. On first arriving in London Julian too had sold himself in this emporium of estranged desire. Here he had made no claim to an identity and wished for none. Here he had been anatomy devoid of spirit, sensation devoid of sense, a corpse lover marrying with his own kind. No one – he had soon learned – ever brought their self to the Dilly. The Dilly Boys existed as mere signs; like the Circus's lights, they were there to dazzle and then die out. They were emanations of transient yearnings, all promise and no possibility and that suited, that was all that was asked.

Until things went awry as they invariably did. They say God named the animals but he didn't name them all...

Julian paused for a moment and leant against an arch watching the older boys work their way through the crowd – the Cocky Dodgers who had stayed too long, the renters who could find no nest like he had with his Frank. They darted about with practised efficiency, eyeing up the possibilities, resentful of the dolly little chickens who didn't even have to try, covetous of the pristine prettiness of the factory lads from the northern suburbs looking to make an easy bob or two off the nancies – rough as sandpaper they might be, but they were forcing down the going rate.

The Dilly Boys, or Sweeps as they called themselves, presented a potent spectacle. Yet theirs was a mechanic art that mongered faux innocence; that haggled over shillings in all weathers and nursed vile wounds in seedy lodgings. The Dilly was a dark manufactory and the Dilly's own boy-god Eros was the overseer of its revels. Julian was thankful he had done with it.

For an instant the choreography of the crowd allowed a glimpse into its core. The attentions of a startlingly beautiful young boy, a regular Pretty Billy Dimples no less, were being argued over. The boy was clearly overwhelmed and frightened by the ferociousness of his suitors' hard pressed claims. A brawny swell of an all too familiar stripe had claimed him and was threatening all comers. There might be blood.

With due reverence to his own fear, Julian moved deftly. Hunching up inside his coat, he pussyfooted out into the ruckus. Appearing by the boy's side, he awaited his moment then gently led him away, the tide of the crowd closing in behind them, taking them beyond capture.

"You'd get had for tuppence with that one. If you were lucky that is."

Pretty Billy Dimples eyed him inquiringly.

"Look, he'd have charvered you stupid then given you a right royal belting. It's the morality in him, see. Some of them come over all righteous afterwards and he's the worst of them."

"Got to take what I can get."

Julian stepped back and took in the boy's length.

"No you bloody well haven't!"

The boy merely stared back at him, his eyes pleading.

"You know the Running Horse in Shepherd Market?"

Billy looked uncertain but nodded tentatively. Julian rummaged in pocket and retrieved his purse. He picked out some silver and held it out to Billy who remained immobile.

“It’s a loan if you like.”

Billy made a fist of the coins and, after nodding his thanks, made off towards the Circus. He had only made ten yards or so when he felt Julian tugging on his sleeve.

“Lucky for you I’m going your way.”

Julian turned him about and escorted him in the opposite direction. They made slow progress, a wide-eyed Billy taking it all in but comprehending little. A corner of the crowd erupted into violent exclamations, sparked off by god knows what. Billy hesitated and Julian led him to the other side of the pavement, away from the road. They walked on.

“Dilly’s going down the pan. The Select is going anywhere but.”

Billy looked back at him awaiting further elucidation.

“You don’t want to work on the Dilly. There’s them that will pick you up and take you off somewhere and shush you for every penny you make.”

Billy eyes flashed fear.

“And you ripe as a plum with no sugar.”

“I don’t want anyone living off me. I want to save then I’m going to fuck off out this bloody country. I don’t want no pimp.”

“Then stay with the pubs and the corner houses. The screamers will keep an eye you. They know the nasties. Learnt the hard way, see. They’ll put you right.”

He nodded towards the greenery of St James’ Park opposite.

“And there’s your bedroom, for now anyways. Don’t take anyone home till you get to know them. No one’s easier to shush than a Sweep.”

“Will I see you around?”

“Yes, you’ll see me around. After the ballroom’s closed, I do me rounds for an hour or so, if me fella has night work, that is. The Black Cat in Old Compton Street and the Lilly Pond – Lyons Corner House on Coventry Street – of a daytime... wouldn’t be seen dead in Juno’s Tearooms. But never mind me, you won’t be wanting for company, honest you won’t.”

Billy still showed no signs of budging. Kindness has its limits. The last thing Julian intended was to bring the waif home. His Frank would be hard put to keep his hands off such a jewel.

“Dilly’s winding down, dear. Punters will be after the last trains and the night buses. Someone in the Running Horse will take you under their wing. One way or the other, you’ll be alright for a friendly berth.”

Billy took courage, proffered a weak, forced smile, fluttered a tremulous hand and headed off. Later he would find the extra five bob that Julian had surreptitiously deposited in his hip pocket. But by then he didn’t need it. By then he was bathing in the glow of a highly remunerative, eroticised celebrity and he assumed it to be a gratuity from a client. By then he thought it a poultry recompense for his services. And by then he was in the midst of his palmy days and gave little thought to the mild-mannered queer in the dress suit who had put him right.

Under a sooted railway arch, just off the Edgware Road, Marylebone way, a street lamp threw a yellow light onto an advertising billboard. Its poster boasted a picture of a dress-suited gent leaning over a classically beautiful girl depicted in white silhouette. Its legend barked “I’m looking for a Cream and Roses Girl” and beneath it floated a rather stumpy, squat, bulbous jar containing “Selama fond de teint algérien; a beauty treatment in every jar!” This alchemical preparation contained natural water from the “Spring of Beauty in Algeria” which Julian knew to be in North Africa but not Egypt or Mesopotamia – a fact of sorts that had lingered since his school days. Julian had tried the stuff and found it wanting; consequently, his festering indignation was excited every time he passed the poster. Tonight, another night of unrelenting abasement at the ballroom, he was brewing choler.

Nestling in the curve of a wide bend just past the railway bridge lay the commodious, modern frontage of the Bluebird Imperial and Continental Roadways and Airways Hire Service – “Chauffeur Service to Croydon Airport. Racing Traffic and Sunday Service. Please book in Good Time so as to Avoid Disappointment!” Julian trod wearily to the courtesy door in the garage’s shutters and entered. Three SS Jaguar Saloons in blue blush livery gleamed in the half-light misting in from the garage office. Julian turned the light out and headed upstairs to the flat he shared with Frank.

He trudged in. Frank had evidently been working on his figures – papers were strewn all over the settee, the ashtray was overflowing, the gramophone was unattended and cawing out its distress. Julian lifted the needle and then set about tidying up with a will, Frank

surveying him from the corner of his eye. He then headed for the drinks cabinet and downed a gin.

“Did you not have some schlumph at work? All that champagne going down them swan-like necks, did they not spare a drop for you?”

“I could drink a barrel full ...”

“So you’re down again? Just...”

“I’m not up for a barney.”

“Anyone would think you’d been Dillying all night, the look of you.”

“I’d have been handbagging it if I had.”

It was a challenge and a plea.

““Course you would. I’d dig in me pockets for you myself. You’d be alright for bob or two.”

It was the nearest thing to a compliment he was going to get.

Nurse Feign peered down Cheltenham’s Promenade clutching her shopping bag in both fists. Beside her a procession of unseeing caryatids propped up a motley of dingy, cramped first floor offices hosting letting agents and bookkeepers, commissioners for oaths and unaccredited turf accountants. Her wide-eyed stare beamed out beyond the brim of her felt bonnet, the blank expression of her moon face matching those of her whited neighbours albeit that it was deficient in their artfully fabricated femininity.

The shop’s windows were plastered with adverts for bile and nerve pills, tonic wines, health salts and what have you. Here was Nurse Feign’s arsenal. She doled out the dubious medicaments she acquired here with alchemical acumen. Their dispensation, so she maintained, ensured that those in her care rarely suffered the inequities of piles, a costive colon, neuritis, liver or kidney upsets or impurities residing in the gut. As for those patients who gainsaid her – *They would find fault with anything, whinnying like dray ponies at any passing rumpus. Better off in the mad house. But no one could say I didn’t do my duty by them...*

She had begun nursing in France during the war and had proven efficient at those tasks that others found repulsive. She had swabbed Mauser and shrapnel wounds with tincture of iodine, and had seen to the cutting out of rotting, gas-gangrened tissue and the disposal of severed or amputated limbs in makeshift furnaces. She had become a scuttling,

scurrying, but mercifully peripheral presence in the field hospitals. After the war, she had found in this bloody business a means by which she might advance herself. Nothing rankled her, not even the mewling and bleating of those who broadcast their pain to the world – *As if the world wanted to know of it.* She did not suffer with those who suffered and she considered this a kind of evolutionary advantage.

Those in her care feared hospital as much as they had feared the workhouse – people died in hospitals, fevers and bacilli were in the bones of such places. They preferred to be nursed at home. Thus, she had always been in demand. Doctors valued her strong stomach and her brutish adherence to her obligations. Her ridiculous provision of patent medicines, all paid for by her patients, was harmless enough and did not impinge on her employment as a dutiful workhorse. She naturally held to a different view – just as the judge had learnt the law from his books and the banker had learnt his figures, she regarded her dispensation of patent medicines as a practised craft. *It's what all humans have to do. Learn a craft and employ it. Like winding a clock and having it chime the hours...* And she diligently kept records which doctors forbearingly perused on occasion.

This living vessel of self-delusion now eyed the chemist's shop, waiting for it to empty of customers so that she might conduct her business with privacy. A young woman fending off the attentions of a boisterous child came out, slapped the infant ferociously and then made off towards her favourite department store and the promise that only soft furnishings and stainless steel domestic appliances might bring. Nurse Feign set off, heavy-footed and with total disregard for any esquire or madam who might hinder her purpose. Careering in, she slapped her shopping list on the counter and slumped down in the chair provided. His eye to the list, the chemist set to. He began by packing packets of sanitary towels into a large brown paper bag.

“You know I could have the boy deliver these. It would be no trouble.”

Nurse Feign chewed her bottom lip. The chemist looked to the list once more.

“And are you back at Tower Lodge, my dear?”

“I am not. That man's to and away again. I'll not sleep in my own bed for weeks, I suppose.”

In went pills, tonics, powders and salts.

“Ah, well, it's company for you, there is that.”

“There's company and there's company.”

Bottles of varying hues went into the bag.

“But Tower Lodge is a fearsome, lonely place, is it not?”

She glanced over as he placed a large syringe into its protective box.

“I have a view and I’m not overseen there. I could not abide to be overseen.”

“There is that. Ah, these syringes that you ...”

“Doctor’s doings, not mine.”

“Of course.”

He had offended the old bitch’s dignity yet again. How he managed to do it, he did not know. He quickly totted up the figures then turned his daily book round to face her.

“If you would sign against the Surmans’ account.”

Nurse Feign lifted herself out of her chair, scratched her mark, gathered the bounty that was hers and exited out onto the wide pavement buzzing and swarming with the commerce of an early provincial spring. The white-coated chemist, as always, was left ruminating upon the nature of so difficult a woman. Behind him, jars of unctions, balsams and mixtures of fancy waited with a quiet dignity on the mirrored, glass shelves.

A few days later, in the Lilly Pond, Frank sat at a corner table scanning the society pages. It was always quiet at this time; one-and-thruppenny breakfasts had been devoured by the office mob and the mid-morning suburban tea and a biscuit brigade were yet to descend. In his head numbers rattled about like the balls in a housey-housey drum. Business had been brisk and he had got behind with his bookkeeping and that made him anxious. He kept two sets of books – one for the taxman and the other to keep track of the actuality. That meant two times the work.

His inherent ability to do maths, to juggle numbers and see patterns in their mutations straight off, had made him a natural broad-man when a youth. But the cards attracted a bad sort – wild-eyed men who reneged on their owings, who raged at the peccadilloes of fate, who loved a shindy and were quick to use a razor or a chiv or a billiard cue. The numbers held no hazard for him but the quick and adventitious violence at the tables that was a different matter. And then there were the bookies and the gangs they brought with them. As a young man, he had turned to burglary; it was cleaner, no messing with people, you were on your own with only yourself to blame if things went awry...

Miss Evelyn’s hand reached in and took his cigarette lighter. His thoughts fled away, his eyes darted upward.

“You’ll get nothing more from that Miss Sellers. She’s gone away, flown her nest, you know.”

Frank had already forgotten the poor mite. He made it a maxim to forget them once they were no longer of value to him and he had known from the start that that one wasn’t worth a ha’penny sherbet. He stared back at Miss Evelyn, uncomprehending.

“That pinched little thing from... where was it? One of those seaside places... Anyhow, she’s gone!”

She made the shape of fluttering wings with her hands.

“Phhff!”

He knew the girl now.

“We did well enough out of her. Let her go and God bless the silly cow.”

Catching sight of her new quarry in the corner of her eye, Miss Margaret replaced Frank’s lighter.

“Oh, thank you, young man. Must have dropped mine somewhere.”

She began waving and wafting the air in the manner of the Queen when she was acknowledging the masses, corkscrewing her hand like she was changing a light bulb.

“Here dear, over here!”

The Cream and Roses Girl was standing in all her delicate comeliness at the centre of the room peering about but comprehending little. She had come down from the Selama poster to walk in the world and had arrived unnoticed, unrecognised in the Coventry Street Corner House. She looked lost, as if she had come upon a strange land. Miss Evelyn scuttled over to her, roped her in and brought her to a table adjacent to Frank’s.

“Here dear, this will do.”

The two women divested themselves of their wraps and gloves.

“Nippy! Nippy! Can you see one? Ah, here nippy!”

A waitress arrived, notebook and pencil poised. Frank reached for his own notebook and pencil. He flitted through the pages and found a drawing of the very girl he and Miss Evelyn had just been talking about. He ripped it out, screwed it up, chucked it in the ashtray and began to sketch. His drawings were meant as cribs so that he’d know the marks again. The Cream and Roses Girl’s fizzog began to emerge from a violent firework display of crosshatchings – not Selama’s Cream and Roses Girl but Frank’s own rendering. In fact, he hadn’t noticed the adverts at all, not even the one next to the garage. Consequently, his likeness was at odds with that version of her, a sort of relation to her, like a cousin perhaps.

He shaded her face around the eyes a little, giving her a bruised appearance and he turned the mouth down so she looked like she'd tasted something out of season. In truth that's how he saw most women – sour and asking for a bashing. Sometimes he might dabble with a jane, especially if she was stuck on him. He liked to inflict a little heartache on a woman, a bit of nasty, especially a womanish woman, one that hadn't the imagination to conjure up anything else but one of them romances that her silly magazines go on about. Women were sport, pure and simple. A bit of a change.

He tabbed their conversation as he sketched.

“Tea? Yes, green tea and... harlequin ices? Or fancies? Would you like some fancies?”

The girl's face was blank but her hands made fists.

Miss Evelyn nodded confirmation to the nippy who scampered off.

“You see dear, right now you believe that it's the end of world. But you will see spring again, I promise. Is it something particular that's bothering you? Are you unsure dear, is that it?”

The Cream and Roses Girl let go some of the weariness that threatened to envelop her.

“Yes, I have... qualms, you know, religious... But, I've no choice, have I? None at all.”

Then something erupted from deep down.

“God, I bloody well resent it, really I do!”

Miss Evelyn peered into her face enquiringly but the Girl turned her head away. The nippy returned with a tray. His view spoiled, Frank bit his lip in irritation. *Frisky bit ain't she? Could be trouble. Flighty and frisky's never a good combination.* He subconsciously fingered the diamond on his ring.

Miss Evelyn pointed out her fancies to the nippy who removed them to a plate with tongues and a serving spatula. There was no music at this time of day. In its stead a quieter ritual had possession of the place. The skirts of countrywomen up to town for the day rustled past, retired colonial types rummaged through *The Times*, crockery clinked as well-drilled nippies cleared tables. It seemed a genteel way to arrange a death.

That night, like every night except Sundays at the Piccadilly Ballroom, the cocktail waiter stared blankly into the room, his mind a flurry of erotic imaginings. Behind him a back-lit cabinet was generously stocked with spectrally coloured elixirs most of which, unlike the patent medicines that Nurse Feign dispensed, delivered on their promise. The band played a quickstep and couples instinctively formed a whirlpool, an anticyclone of motion that effortlessly accommodated the dance's prescribed vocabulary of steps – chassés, quarter turns, fish tails and cortés.

Julian's pumps skipped gingerly across the floor, his partner's however alternatively scurried to keep pace or allowed themselves to be dragged along behind like a brace of plump, shot-ridden and dispirited game birds. The ingénue to whom the pumps belonged, a ripe, ample cherry of the industrial sort from somewhere south of the river, gazed up into Julian's face, indifferent to the untidy business below. Julian imagined that she imagined they were in some imagined *moderne* heaven wherein everyone was beautiful and without the need of ornament, witty yet never verbose, and so impossibly rich that money never troubled the immaculacy of their taste. Julian's estimation of the girl's imaginative capacity was wide of the mark, however. She was thinking of Morden not the *moderne* and the boy clerk in the semi two doors down. They had been discovering sex together and though the majority opinion might have thought little of their cumbersome endeavours, she thought it rich and strange.

In the stead of this lack of insight, Julian was giving vent to his creed.

"Dancing helps to express the personality. When we dance we give expression to whatever is foremost in our character. Temperament always comes to the surface in the ballroom. A dancer's worst faults, as well as his best qualities, come to the surface... Ah! Shoulders! No drooping now!"

The Morden Dumpling continued to view him with what he took to be fascination but which, in truth, was an intuition born of a newly awakened sexuality. He careered on immune to her obvious indifference.

"A man may be assured that a woman who surrenders herself to her partner and does not attempt to lead would make an admirable and compliant wife."

This induced a perplexed response from the Dumpling. But then, writ large upon her face came a moment of elucidation. The music finished, Julian dropped his professionally tutored embrace. The Morden Dumpling stood back and knowingly took in his measure.

"Yer one of them cissies, ain't yer? Yeah, that's you alright."

She nodded with a sagacity salted with smug self-satisfaction then sauntered off into the crowd, to the last tube, to Morden and her boy.

Chewing on his indignation, Julian headed back to the pen. En route, he caught the eye of one of his old regulars, now demoted to the rank of “occasional”. Sharpy would soon see him off if he suspected Julian of doing business on the dance floor. He would be in stook then. He made to turn away but it was too late.

“Come hither, sweet sprite.”

Mr Raine, dressed in prissy, ancient attire and sporting a slightly adrift wig, hobbled into Julian’s path, his finger beckoning. A relic of a more luxurious time, he lived alone in his apartment on Half Moon Street. He enjoyed the Post Office’s pretty messenger boys as a staple, asking for his favourites by name and tipping them generously and putting in a word if they arrived late back at work – “My fault, dear man, my fault entirely”. He found his friends at the Rockingham – those that remained that is, they grew smaller in number with each passing month. He’d only been had up half-a-dozen or so times and could readily afford a good brief. His superior social caste and his attorney’s liturgy – a good school and sporting credits to his client’s name – always put him in good stead. He viewed such appearances in court as a day out, fuel for more tittle-tattle around the bridge table. Nonetheless, he found that, with age, he often fell prone to the outrage that betrayal provoked to an extent that only those gifted the easy life can muster. Julian was keenly aware of this tender spot, alive to the danger.

“Byron dear, good to see *you’re* not letting things slide.”

Mr Raine stared pointedly towards a common type ploughing his way across the dance floor like a rugby player determined on a try.

“One’s duty, you know. You’re not dancing, Mr Raine? You should take a partner, Mr Raine. Pitch-in! You shouldn’t be a sitter-outer.”

“I’m a little heavy on me tappers, as you know. I have thwarted aspirations in that direction... all too thwarted at the mo...”

“I’m sorry I haven’t seen as much of you as I would like.”

“Tonight, tonight we...”

And then there was Sharpy, on cue as might be expected and all he had to do was turn around...

“Do excuse me, Mr Raine, I really must earn my crust...”

Mr Raine wafted a deprecating hand and Julian returned to the pen and his table. The next dance had already started and yet again he was without a partner albeit, he conjectured,

that it was Mr Raine's fault and not his own. And he had undermined Mr Raine's fragile humour to boot. He must see to that later. Mr Raine was not one to be disobliged. Instinctively, he tried to make himself small as he waited with trepidation for Sharpy's good eye to find him out.

Miss Evelyn Margaret arrived at the entrance of the hall. She allowed a respectful hiatus to elapse then ushered in the Cream and Roses Girl now transfigured into a tall, chignoned, blonde vision in white slipper satin. Julian watched their progress around the edge of the dance floor with relief. He studied the girl. She was merely of a type – *As common as one of Nuffield's runabouts or the sticky buns in Lyons*. Indeed, plenty of her sort found their way to the Piccadilly ballroom on the arms of bankers and peers but never, never new money. Like Frank, Julian failed to recognise the Cream and Roses Girl whose face in silhouette adorned those podgy jars of Selama paste, stamped out by the thousands in imitation of a Georgian cameo and which ornamented the advertising poster near his home.

Miss Evelyn Margaret goaded the wisp to proffer her dance ticket. Julian accepted it, exchanged a knowing look with his accomplice and, counting in the steps, led the Cream and Roses Girl away across the floor. Poised, her head slightly raised, her arms touching him as lightly as an Aeolian wind, she peered fitfully across his shoulder to God knows what sort of storm-infested horizon; for, though you would never have known it, the Cream and Roses Girl was alive with demons and fears. Julian had learnt, however, that all the women he met in these circumstances were alive with demons and fears.

"Don't worry, we'll soon restore the smile to your lovely face."

He'd got it off pat long ago. No matter what the shape or size.

"My friend has seen to the financial arrangements?"

She gave the shallowest of nods in assent.

"Well then, we shall leave on Saturday night, after I finish here. Be outside the Eros News Theatre at two o'clock, just down the Dilly, on the Circus, yes?"

So it was happening, it was really happening and the arrangements were as mundane as a trip to the dentist. It was that that did it – the sheer ordinariness of it all. She choked back tears and, had it not been for Julian's intervention, would have stumbled – an appalling indiscretion, he thought.

"Look at me, dear. Come, come, now, look at me."

The dancing statue eyed him warily.

"By next weekend, you'll be ready to take up your life again, free of the worry. You may dance once more! Dance 'til your heart's content."

“I don’t give a damn about bloody dancing. Right now I don’t give a damn about much at all. Well, there’s not much in this world that one *can* care about, is there?”

Such violence held a terror for Julian. The riotous wisp had set him off kilter. The rigours of custom had been transgressed. Frank had been right to be wary.

Julian wasn’t to know that the Cream and Roses Girl had of late spent much of her time in the rarefied but vicious donjons of the Select. That, in repulsion, her thoughts had turned to higher things, to hopes of salvation, to imaginings of a sweeter haven, to pretty Jesus sitting on a cloud, his palms open, inviting her to come to him. But, dear God how might she come to him after this?

“Is it true undertakers bury stillborn babies in the graves of other people... in consecrated ground so that their souls might go to heaven?”

Julian proffered a weak smile, nodded an equally feeble affirmation then coddled her away across the floor, steering her to the quieter spots just in case...

A procession of limousines progressed down the Mall at a funereal pace. Each harboured a delicate young thing, pretty in her ball gown, white kid gloves and pearls and, as Frank would have it – *Served up tasty in her Sunday best, all jittery and preening herself like a novice filly*. Beside her sat her mother recollecting her own presentation at Court and all its horrors and delights, weighing up the bounty that had come to her after her own coming out and wanting yet more for her own darling, as was only to be expected. Thousands of lesser folk had come up to Town for the day to peer into the windows of each passing chariot, appraise its cargo and afford crude and voluble estimations of its worth. Mommy’s little peach would have to get used to being looked at like something in an Oxford Street window; it was part of the job.

The darlings were to be discharged in the Inner Court of Buckingham Palace. The Gentlemen of the Household, sundry potentates of the Corps Diplomatique and those of high position but not of high office awaited them. Tonight and for many more nights, the Courts welcomed fresh blood to their midst; tonight this regiment of promise was subject to more scrutiny than the commodity prices on the Stock Exchange – *Like one of them tarts’ pageants at the seaside if they but knew it*.

Frank had done well to latch on to the opportunities that the Season presented – debutantes’ balls in Mayfair and Belgravia, then a succession of sporting events that took in

half the country. *Plum it was. Ten dances a week 'till August. Three guineas a night and another guinea tip – on each car that is. Chance of making a bit more if they was going on to parties and such.* He counted up profit in his head, savoured it – *Delicious, like the ice cream the Ities dole out from their bicycle trolleys.* He had cottoned on to the poorer relations – those that had served in India or Africa and had little to show for it – by their reckoning at least – and were staking all on getting their daughter spliced with some Dickie further up the ladder. They could only afford to hire their evening attire and chauffeur-driven limousines. Even then their pockets might be stretched. And they knew nothing much about what was de rigueur nowadays – their darling daughters smarting 'cause they couldn't go to the annual rally in Bavaria like their moneyed contemporaries had. Frank had learnt much listening to them going on about the etiquette of coming out despite all that “*Pas devant les domestiques*” malarkey. The Court Usher, the Card of Command, the Throne Room, your photo taken at Lafayette's – *It was worse than taking your matriculation. Still there was a damn sight more to be gained from it, no doubt. All Bond Street and diamonds and I'll thank you kindly if they struck lucky.*

Once he'd dropped off the merchandise he followed the traffic to the back end of Hyde Park where the limousines were to wait till required. It was fags out and feet up and a chance to ditch the dirt on the Toffs. The chauffeurs flocked together in cliques whose constitution mirrored the pecking order of their respective patrons. Frank was with the hired drivers. *Don't mind that, not a bit. I'm working for meself, wouldn't be a bleedin' flunky for nothing.* His thoughts turned to Ascot and Henley, Cowes and Goodwood – *Extra few quid a throw on the out-of-London bookings. Things are looking tidy. Real natty.*

But then there was a bit of a hubbub around the radio in one of the Bentleys – drivers shushing each other to listen and then shushing those doing the shushing.

“The Natzees have gone and took Czechoslovakia!”

“Hitler's in Prague admiring the scenery!”

“It was the bombing that did it!”

The chauffeurs chewed on their cigarettes. The know-alls amongst them, sounded off. But Frank couldn't help but notice that the Sharps, some as was in the last lot, were staying shtum. Suddenly he wasn't looking half so clever. *Three Jags, cash down and no instalments. And if there was a bloody war, well then, the Select wouldn't be giddy about no more that's for sure. Dead money. Lost money even.*

He might have to keep with his sidelines yet awhile.

That Saturday night at the ballroom Julian's services were but rarely called upon. Yet, despite the demeaning spectacle of the vigorous trade the younger sorts enjoyed, their pockets bulging with sixpenny tickets, he didn't dare face the fact that his green time was spent. Instead he blamed the profligacy of the new dance crazes started by the "Palais de Danse" chains in an attempt to stave off the encroachment of the cinemas – all that "Yes, We 'Ave No Bananas", "Knees Up Mother Brown", "Cherry Hopping" and "Palais Strolling". You didn't need to be coached to join in that bunk, it was as easy as marching to war. Soon the dance hosts would be no more. He was convinced of it. Nonetheless, and being no slave to reason, he sneaked out early to save himself the mortification of another run-in with Sharpy – out of sight, out of mind.

He had half-an-hour or more to kill so he popped into the news theatre – the upstairs balcony was a haunt for young queers. When the "Silly Symphonies" came on there was a bit of a do in the seats by the aisle. Two young things were fiddling with each other under their raincoats. The usherette had caught them in the beam of her torch.

"You can stop that filthy business now! People come here to enjoy themselves!"

He involuntarily joined in with the unseen chorus's laughter.

Pathé's cockerel crowed its clarion call. The newsreel started. Julian hated them. *Nothing but rubbish! We'd all known about that Mrs Simpson straight off. It was common gossip in some circles but the news mongers kept it all hush-hush, didn't they! And what else are they keeping from us I'd like to know?* He abhorred being duped. *Things should be what they say they are, no more and no less.*

The title barked "Royal Family at King's Camp". *Some sort of jamboree with tents and public school types and slum kids looking as if they was mixing and not dying to scratch each others' eyes out. And there He was in all His Majesty tossing balls at a coconut shy with all them commoners behind Him, egging Him on.*

"A King shouldn't be mixing with the likes of that. It's belittling."

He hadn't realised he'd spoken his thoughts out loud.

A voice on the left chimed in.

"He's a rare type alright; a real mixer. Best pals with that Noel Coward and you know what he is."

No reply being forthcoming, the unseen voice looked Julian over.

"Hmmm, happen you do."

The film's narrator announced the camp sing-song – the most popular of the current crazes, “The Chestnut Tree”. Julian shifted uncomfortably in his seat; braced himself for further inequities. He was not disabused. The ragamuffin choir, the Royals and even one or two of the cinema audience pitched in. As with children's games, gestures were substituted for the inane lyric – that was the essence of the fad. Hands were poised above the head to denote an umbrella or a roof or whatever and flung out with robotic acumen to suggest tree branches and so forth.

Disquieted and with his equanimity exhausted, Julian stormed out, nose in stratosphere, his cast that of a theatrical grand dame who had inadvertently trodden in shit. The chill air outside hit him and he trembled half with cold and half in response to the social transgressions he had just witnessed. He stood in the entranceway, drawing hard on a cigarette. A gruff, neon arrow pointing down and behind him was intended to signify the theatre's entrance but instead it seemed to call attention to his enervated singularity.

The theatre's bow windows were crammed with confectioneries, cigarettes and tobaccos. Strip posters advertised other reels then showing – a forest fire raging in California, Irish bombers jailed, a new Pope crowned, a featurette on (who else but?) Al Bowlly. A peeling newspaper poster shouted “Chamberlain recalls Berlin ambassador” beneath it another barked “Hitler speaks! No demands on Czech territory.”

Next to him a full-size, pink faced, wax mannequin dressed in a commissionaire's uniform stared out vacantly at the great beyond – the Dilly and the Circus, stragglers lost in their drunkenness, tramps scouring the pavements for cigarette stubs and lost change, tired tarts taking one last turn about their patch. At this time only the offal was left and all the warty hogs in London were after them; pensioners even, rattling shillings in their pockets, hoping for a catch.

Julian sauntered out to stand post beside one of Frank's Jags parked at the kerb. He didn't have to wait long. The Cream and Roses Girl appeared floating along the night's bleak pavement, clutching a vanity case to her fragile form. Doffing his hat, Julian opened the passenger door and she climbed in. He sauntered round to the driver's side and the blue Jag glided away as the Circus's laudations to Bovril, Gordon's Gin and Ronald Colman flickered and died.

Along the trunk road Oxfordshire all was Ye Olde Shoppes and mock Tudor roadhouses. After Oxford there were fewer distractions. Julian turned on the radio. The continental stations played crooners and songbirds through the small hours – “Got a Date with an Angel”, “Midnight, the Stars and You”, “Any Broken Hearts to Mend?” They had little company apart from the night lorries but Gloucestershire did not work its magic upon the Cream and Roses Girl. Silvered clouds edging across a purpled sky, the prettifying endeavours of the Cotswold masons were all for nothing, as were the finger-pointing road signs climbing the Jag’s glistening bonnet and the gentle, noiseless waves of shadowy verdure. She remained unmoved beside him and her face, seen in profile, touched but lightly by the moonlight, became that of the Selama cameo lusted in shallow relief.

The early morning sun peeked out behind them as they deserted the high plain and fell towards the Severn valley. The music broke up in a frazzle and Julian turned off the radio abruptly.

“It’s the hill, you see. It stops the radio waves – like a dam holds back water.”

She looked into his face; her incomprehension was profound, she was somewhere else, a somewhere without music or moonlight. He let the matter drop.

The Jag turned into the courtyard of Tower Lodge through the double gates that Nurse Feign had left open for them. The Cream and Roses Girl gawped at the grey, ivy-strewn edifice now rived by spears of seeking sunlight, the pink-cream stone courtyard blushing with morning tincture, the waking sky finding blue. She had wanted it to be unreal and so far at least the Lodge had played to its allotted part. Then Nurse Feign appeared at the open kitchen door. The Cream and Roses Girl immediately thought of Tenniel’s Humpty-Dumpty with his capacious but narrow smile but then she felt guilty for thinking of something so trivial.

And then she knew. Nurse Feign’s gruff presence unambiguously portended the coming reality. No white and stainless steel clinic, no tender ministrations, no flowers in her room; despite the morning’s theatrical conjuring tricks all was bare stone, stone hearts, stone memories to be swallowed whole. She turned to Julian in the vain hope of succour. He was staring mesmerised at the crazed paving of the yard, his lips mouthing silent incantations; plainly, she had ceased to be of interest to him. She sank back into her seat in resignation. On the hill behind them some unhinged thing whined harbingering discontent.

For Julian, the following week back in London proved trying once more. Though the coming profit from his dealings with the Cream and Roses Girl would doubtless compensate for his losses at the ballroom, nonetheless here he was again, marooned in the pen and with only a handful of tickets in his pocket. He was sitting out the dances most of the time now. The trend for freak steps – kicks, dips and lifts – till then solely the province of the exhibition dances, had now been taken up by jitterbugging patrons with abandon but little proficiency. His disdain was only trumped by his revulsion for the novelty dances that now came and went on a weekly basis. Their moves were published in newspapers and magazines alongside drawings of stick men who demonstrated their particular kind of semaphore.

These impoverished proletarian developments truly frightened him. He thought of himself as an accomplished artiste. The refined grammar of movement that he had so assiduously invested in might soon count for nothing. Now things were to be much simpler. Worse, in the light of the threat of war, the squalid bonhomie of the party dances seemed frightfully prescient. Now we were all to join this brash, voluble chorus – “Oi! Bloody Oi!” – and march... and well, march towards what exactly? Blue murder by the looks of it and all the shinning of boots and oiling of rifles would be but a down payment on the bloody instalments to come.

Tension had stalked his dancing of late. His movements had become stiff and ponderous. That wasn't the worst of it. Stars and zigzags floating in his vision presaging migraine attacks and often he felt dizzy with confusion over even minor kerfuffles. He was being pushed to the very edge of his world and saw no way back.

He had been obliged to fall back on recidivistic means of maintaining his income. He was on the cadge and the filch once more. Conspicuously alone in the dance hosts' den, his predatory eyes sought out possible marks. His gaze rested upon a mob of carousing Them-That-Has nearby. Glass clinked on glass as they proffered a toast, creating a crown of champagne flutes. Then they fell back in their chairs, laughing at nothing, laughing at everything – *Happy as hippos round the watering hole*. The Piccadilly was enjoying a raucous night. The Select had consciously decided to put aside the spectre of Czechoslovakia, the watery jewelled blaze had returned to the young girls' eyes and a jaunty lightness had once more usurped the heavy-footed, clodhopping rampage of the men. Just a few old miseries – Ministry and civil service nabobs by the looks of them – maintained a grim, boorish rectitude but, in the main, the Select were tickety-boo once more. Julian readily connived in this fancy. He grasped at their devil-may-care flippancy; it offered a refuge and reinstated a measure of short-lived equilibrium.

From the stage, muffled drumbeats and war whoops sounded. A backcloth decorated with a huge painted headdress descended behind the band and buck-skinned showgirls shimmied onto the dance floor flourishing tomahawks in an Indian dance. The male patrons strained to get a view while the women conducted conversations with no one in particular, hyperbolizing, gesticulating, and broadcasting indiscretions and inanities heedlessly.

“You know your problem, dear. You’re not intelligent enough to hide your intelligence.”

“Has anyone died? Do say someone’s gawn mutton – I have a new black dress.”

Sequins shimmered, fox furs hung loosely off shoulders, a jewelled cigarette case spilt out of a handbag, a bulging wallet was opened, earrings, bracelets, necklaces winked starlight. Julian’s eyes narrowed. He half lifted himself out of his chair and surveyed the floor. With luck Sharpy was in his office. He looked warily about then bestirred himself and made for a nearby table.

“Hello every buddy!”

Startled, all instinctively turned round but then, recognising Julian, pointedly ignored him whilst the crooner, incongruously adorned in a war bonnet, dreamily warbled “Hiawatha’s Lullaby”.

A solitary Stole gestured to Julian.

“Here, darling boy, I still love you.”

He crouched next to her. She petted him and the Dickie across the table glowered contempt. Then she patted him down.

“Where’s the present I bought you? Where’s the walle... the cigarette case, where’s that lovely cigarette...”

Julian pulled out the corner of a case from his inside pocket.

“Here, close to my...”

“Show me, you beast, show... me! That’s not it!”

She forcibly extracted the case.

“Pha! That’s another one. You’ve sold it! I’ll bet you’ve sold it!”

The disapproval of the Dickie opposite now blasted across the table like a Siberian wind. The Stole became childishly peeved. All turned to quieten her. Julian was hemmed in by condemnation and distaste. The crooner meanwhile, his eyes appealing to the ceiling’s blank canopy, eulogized the heavens and called enticingly to the moon.

Julian looked about him in an attempt to discern a line of retreat only to find Sharpy impatiently awaiting his attention and squinting down at him like a biologist scrutinising a

bacterium through a microscope's lens. The crooner gave way to the showgirls' whooping and wailing but Julian perceived nought but a profound, judgemental silence descend about him. He'd been caught prattling and doubtless Sharpy had also seen the business with the cigarette case. He mumbled something inconsequential and incoherent to the Stole who had pointedly ceased to take any notice of him anyhow. As he approached Sharpy a bombardment of possible strategies came before his consciousness only to be discarded as of no use. Sentence was about to passed upon him and he had nothing to proffer in the way of mitigation. He was dizzy with it and felt slightly sick. Only then did he notice Miss Paulette standing demurely behind Sharpy, plainly relishing his discomfiture.

"Mr Michael has turned his ankle. Quite badly it seems."

Mazed and cloudy, Julian could only gawp back at him.

"Well?"

"Are you asking me to perform the exhibition dance?"

"Well, I have to find something for you to do. Your colleagues attract so much revenue that I dare not spare them, you, on the other hand..."

Ah, such was to be his penance. He dared a glance at Miss Paulette. Her smirk was unrestrained, her superiority unassailable.

"Yes, I'm asking you to perform the exhibition dance. I don't suppose you've kept up-to-date?"

It was too much all at once. He couldn't help himself – for once, he really couldn't help himself.

"The Carioca? The Maxixe? The... Caranga!"

Sharpy was about to spit blood but found himself obliged to kow-tow to a file of Them-That-Has processing regally to the cocktail bar.

"Perhaps one of the new party dances?"

Julian began larding outrageously.

"Hands knees and booms a daisy! What's a boomp between friends, eh?"

He was becoming hysterical. Only the attention of the passing crowd and Sharpy's awkward attempts to laugh off his awkward lampooning quietened him.

"Very well, Mr Shade, one of the standard dances, if you must. But something of a more elaborate nature, eh? Can you remember the turn you used to do?"

"The foxtrot?"

"Was it? Well, for God's sake put a few new figures in. And brighten it some. Verve! You need verve, Mr Shade!"

“Will some of the Darkies’ capers do?”

“Oh! You’re too staid, really you are!”

“I dance the English style, Mr Sharp...”

“Yes, but not very often! Not very often at all, Mr Shade!”

Sharpy was near bursting. His hands made fists at his sides and he was bellowing like an over-stoked boiler. He would have to see to Mr Shade after the exhibition dance. Any pretext would do given his appalling slump. He felt no compassion for the chap. *He was a sloucher. No spark in him.* He made off, obsequiously greeting patrons as he went and leaving Julian and Miss Paulette to take stock. She ventured the first move.

“Just like the bad old days.”

“It’s only for a week. Suppose you keep it shut, for a week, eh?”

He was wounded, couldn’t resist a jibe.

“Oh dear, do I ask too much?”

Miss Paulette glowered back at him – *It was going to be hell.*

The showgirls’ Indian dance reached its frantic finale. War whoops and kettle drums echoed about the domed ceiling.

The next Monday, Julian’s weekday off, he found Frank in the garage office attired in his sky blue, braided military-style chauffeur’s uniform. He was staring into a mirror carefully positioning his cap and failed to notice Julian’s entrance. Julian watched him, admired him. As Frank turned around, he trudged over and collapsed against him.

“Oh, don’t say you have a job”.

“Got a bunch of Stoles taking the twelve o’clock Albatros to Paris. Shopping, Rue de Paix and all that. Then back on the six o’clock.”

“Then we might go out, uptown, a dance...”

“Got another pick up at seven. Club types, good tippers. Nipping over to the Ostend casino. They won’t be back till the early hours. No point in coming home only to go back to the airport again. I’ll catch some sleep in the car.”

Peeved, Julian pummelled Frank’s chest. The words, as always, wouldn’t come. Frank gave him a cursory look then gently moved him away and pushed back the garage’s folding door.

“With luck it’ll only get busier. They’ve them new sky liners to America now.”

That had come out all wrong. He needed to change tack, have Julian onto the back foot.

“She’s been seen to then? When’s she gonna cough up the extra gelt?”

Julian had forgotten – no, he’d deliberately put it out of his mind as he always did. He hadn’t the stomach for a squeeze. Miss Evelyn Margaret and his mother took most of the upfront money from the abortions. He and Frank made theirs putting the touch on the girls afterwards, except it was Frank who usually ended up doing the dirty work.

“So you failed to raise such a delicate issue, eh?”

“I don’t have the cackle like you have.”

Frank stared over Julian’s shoulder into the garage. The Jags were waiting in line, each with an itinerary clamped beneath their windshield wipers, chauffeurs’ uniforms folded neatly on the drivers’ seats, bluebird pennants hanging flaccid on their bonnets. This was his future, putting the squeeze on queers and girls that had caught on – any fucker who had a reputation lose – that was his past, if Hitler hadn’t other ideas, that is.

“I’ll see to the jane at the weekend maybe.”

That was that then. Julian was out of options, not that he had many to start with. Not like Frank who was always finding something new.

As Frank climbed into the Jag, he felt Julian’s silence weighing about him, smothering him.

“Go and see that naff old tootsie from the Piccadilly why don’t yer. He’ll be good for a few measures.”

Nothing. Julian had gone into himself once more and God knows when he might re-emerge. Experience had shown Frank that there was nothing much to be done about it. He drove out into the street and away. Julian knew he would soon be leaving for good. He had no idea at all what he might do to stem that inevitability.

That Monday afternoon Julian drifted aimlessly around the West End and ended up at a matinee of Mr Shairp’s play, “Crime at Blossoms”. It was just what he needed to cheer him up. It was very clever. Superficially, it was about a couple whose holiday cottage becomes the scene of a murder. They choose to capitalise on the event and conduct paying tours about the premises. The lower classes turn up in droves in order to satiate their salacious and vicarious lusts and the entire village is overwhelmed. It was really a satire on the current

trend for shilling shockers, especially those written by Mr Edgar Wallace, which were flooding the West End and driving out the more refined sensibilities of the educated classes – *They'll turn the West End into Southend yet!*

Julian thought “Blossoms” wonderfully ripe with wit and sharp innuendo as did those of a like mind sitting about him in the gods. He tried to make a habit of going to theatre at least once a month to improve his mind and believed the cost, though a challenge to be sure, well worth it. He much preferred Mr Coward’s endeavours – *They came a bit pricey though, you had to admit* – that being said “Crime at Blossoms” gave him a warm glow that might last a week!

But such a joy was a rarity nowadays, melodrama of the common sort being so pervasive. Julian couldn’t account for it. It was the same at home, what with Frank and his “Bulldog Drummonds” and suchlike. Julian preferred the sporting adventures of the eternally callow Raffles and his chums. They had position. They led the High Life, as near to the clouds as you like. And then there was Miss Christie and Miss Sayers (he thought Harriet Vane *adorable!*) They never let one down, their stories turned over like a car engine and they started and they finished and weren’t bothersome or messy because everyone fitted in somewhere and there was no blood – that was the thing, no blood, mostly poison or chloroform or the noose. Not like Frank’s reading, all uppercuts and switchblades.

After the play he went for tea at the Lilly Pond. He was somewhat stilled in the company of the long draped, starched tablecloths and the regimented array of silvered cutlery despite the hubbub – provincials from Up North having usurped the places normally taken by military and colonial types marvelling at the decor and admiring the house band – “Just like them that you hears on the radio!” At least the office clerks were long gone. The sight of them gnawing at their shilling diners in their shinny bottomed suits and frayed shirt cuffs always distressed him. *How they ever got in was a mystery!* As for the queers, the management roved around keeping an eye open for the more overt queans and screamers but you could squeeze in with a dab of rouge as long as you kept to the first floor restaurant.

Julian found his bearings then he caught a glimpse of Pretty Billy Dimples scrutinising the sweets trolley, plainly at ease with himself and his surroundings. The sight of Billy in his first flowering somehow turned Julian’s thoughts to the horror of his faltering relationship with Frank and his inability to stave off the unavoidable. He had never really understood the origin of his limitations, though he thought it might have something to do with not being a bother to his mother when he was a child. His adolescence had doubtless been stilted by the insults levelled at him as his awkward homosexuality began to assert itself,

but in truth there were greater calumnies – getting thumped for being useless at football or stung with a nettle for failing to sport a sprig of oak on Shick Shack Day, for instance. But it was in his mother's house that he had consciously determined that it would be best to be overlooked, better yet unseen. The particular repercussions of any instances of childhood assertiveness were beyond his recall though a residual dread was imprinted upon his psyche. He had long ago learned that refuge lay in stillness and desuetude. Decisive action other than a spontaneous and typically regretted hysterical response was beyond him – it got you noticed. Firm resolve didn't bide well with him.

He finished his meal and smartened up the cutlery, placing the utensils together, straight across plate, north to south, the knife turned inwards towards the fork, the fork's prongs turned upwards. Then he examined his fingernails to see if they were clean, his cuffs to see they weren't frayed, his trousers to see that they were properly creased, and then his shoes to see they were polished. He had done the same this morning when he dressed. He would do it all again throughout the day. He had become a slave to propriety, taking his understanding of etiquette from books and "dressing in such a way that people can't remember what you have on the moment you pass from sight".

He'd never camp it up. *That sort of thing belongs in Selfridge's window. Soon get the charpers' attention that would. Save that for the seaweed home on leave and good luck to 'em. Just a pat of powder, that German stuff the theatricals use, not so you'd see it mind.* He was meticulous – he couldn't help that, and he loved the grammar of the body not its chatter, its babble. He admired the bravado of the queans, the more so for knowing what their antics might cost them. But he couldn't emulate or match them; he was too buttoned up and too fearful of the world's venom and spite, though mercifully he had found that the queer life in the West End was not without its moments of intimacy and gentleness. The queans had adopted him when he had first arrived. Their kindnesses were unbounded. It was just that he wasn't equipped to respond to such nurturing overtures. He hadn't the means.

He liked to give the impression of permanency. As though he had always been in a particular somewhere and would always remain there. He imagined that by this subterfuge he would attract as little interrogation as a tree or a lamppost. The funny thing was, no matter how hard he tried not to be a bother to anyone, the more he was. His lovers – those who expected to change and be changed by him if only in an erotic fashion, always walked away taking with them the ego-bruising understanding that they had left him untouched, that the sparks that had been ignited had been summarily dowsed by his inner rain. And that always

came as a shock to them. His beauty advertised much that was not to be had and so they left frustrated and angry with him.

Even now, on his day off, whatever he decided to do would be something he'd done before and before that. Leaving a miserly few coppers by the bill – he had made it a rule never to tip too lavishly for fear of corrupting the menials' ideas of the value of money – he headed off to the News Theatre. They'd cobbled together a sort of Jessie Mathews' dance numbers from her old movies. He was instantly cheered, warmed from within. Jessie was Julian's secret. As a child, his cheap Woolworths scrapbooks had been full of her progress – Jessie at the races, Jessie out to dinner, at flower shows, premieres, garden parties. He had braved the rude democracy of the cinema just to see her. When he first saw "Evergreen" he had found himself amazed at the flood of feeling that Jessie wrought forth in him and as the national anthem played and the lights came up he had been dismayed to discover he was part of a crowd.

Through Jessie he had discovered that his taste was for moderated glamour and movement, for honeyed fluidity not the brusque, prescriptive geometry of modernism's elementary, regular solids. He loved the soft-tinted intimacies of porcelain and chiffon and was repulsed by the noisy gaudery of the advertising hoardings and the Dilly's endlessly shimmying and shimmering neon extravagancies. In "Evergreen" Jessie was a living *moderne* figurine moulded by Chiparus or Preiss, her skin was of polished ivory and she danced precariously balanced on a storm of onyx in a white-clouded heaven. She was a lithe Aphrodite, a gravity-defying aviatrix, her limbs inscribing delicious arcs as she wrapped them around the cold chrome verticals of the decor.

Plainly, Jessie was everything Julian could never be but she held the secret to his soul. Her dancing talked in other tongues, foreign tongues, other races' tongues. In life he stayed within the prescriptions of a polite conformity – even the manner in which he held himself was gleaned from the dancing magazines; but in his inner life he was a high kicker, a lithesome beguiler like Jessie.

Outside, he was brutally returned to the actuality of his narrow existence. For the sake of having nothing else to do, or rather being congenitally unable to think of anything else to do, he determined to visit Mr Raine and make a few bob. As he wandered off towards Half Moon Street it began to drizzle. Couples gathered beneath the shelters of tea stands and shop awnings, the traffic swished by and the Dilly's neon hectoring became fractured and frazzled. Away from the lights, by Green Park, he hunched into himself as he habitually did. By the time he reached Mr Raine's, he had reduced himself to the size of a dot...

An hour or so later, that same dot reclined on a turkey carpet, naked before Mr Rain's gaze. This was all that was required of the dot nowadays – Mr Raine's fucking days were long gone and even groping and fondling were beyond his means. So he just stared, for hours, *For bleedin' hours...*

Intermittently, however, the booze temporarily excited him. Now he was in full flood.

"You are so reminiscent of a boy-poet I knew at university, so nonchalant... The gift of expression has been bestowed upon you yet you fritter it away..."

His groped about his crotch as he peered at Julian before him, bathed in the glowing firelight that irradiated the plush.

"The greatest calumny that is heaped upon is... insouciance... Oh God help us in our in our conceitedness!"

He was crying now, crying for his own past and no doubt his own youthful insouciance and conceitedness. Julian felt the old inertia welling up; that weight as lead solidifying throughout his body, all the gravity of the universe condensed in a dot, a soundless noise like some angered presence pummelling at a door. Mr Raine's insistent but unproductive rummaging in his trousers always met with Julian the Nothing, the Nowhere, the No One and yet, like so many others, Mr Raine felt the need to interrogate Julian's psyche and encourage him to be more expansive, obliging Julian to invent a past that might account for his lack – "Some things happen to one, so awful... well you know, I'm sure", and so forth.

And yes, Mr Raine did know, though God knows what he thought he knew. Julian had long ago inured himself to this fruitless ritual. *In the end, one simply has to sit it out. Let the clock unwind.* For Mr Raine the performance was plainly a substitute for sex. So on he went, probing, finding fault, cataloguing flaws, all the time fidgeting in his trousers.

Finally the tumult subsided and Julian peeked up at Mr Raine to see if he had fallen asleep. He hadn't. His eyelids fell repeatedly but in the very act of falling startled themselves back into wakefulness. He would then take in the room and establish his whereabouts once more. On the record player, Richard Tauber sang "A Sleepy Lagoon" for the umpteenth time. Slumped in his armchair, Mr Raine's withered body could be glimpsed through his open dressing gown. His wig was even more adrift than was usual, his glasses were poised precariously on the end of his nose and he dribbled like a baby.

He was an absurdity, an anachronism. His grandiloquent entrances at the Lilly Pond had long since been ignored as was his less than royal progress about the Dilly. His prissy, fin de siècle attire was boorish but it reflected the inner man – a fantasist grasping at smoke. He thought of himself as the Dilly's Wise Old Codger, its Prospero, a cartographer of the queer soul and the purveyor of beatitudes to be bestowed upon younger heads. He told the Sweeps of a now lost Arcadia under the governance of beneficent sexual connoisseurs, peopled with pretty Arab boys and lit by a sun as honest and unabashed as a bare light bulb in a tart's bedroom. He had never even ventured south of the river or caught a bus in his life but he had lived in his imaginary haven forever. His peers had long gone; the Dilly Boys, particularly the Dodgers, thought him ridiculous and thought of themselves as far from the selves that he imagined them to be. But he was generous. None of his boys saw mere coin and many had made a pleasant bundle when hocking the presents he'd given them.

Was he asleep? Just nodding? Julian took another glug of his wine and scanned the room – Mr Raine's leather bound mucky books, his monogrammed silverware, glass stemware and embroideries. Then he caught sight of himself in the heavy, gilded mirror leaning into the corner of the room. There he was amongst the other bibelots, seen from a dizzying, canted perspective. He looked himself over. Saw yet more newly chiselled imperfections, felt the tide of aging yet again.

Mr Raine's head dropped with a precipitate finality. The son of Somnus had come unannounced. Julian arose carefully and reached for his clothes – buttons and yet more buttons, laces and his tie to knot. He had once thought of this room as peaceful, quiet and still but he had soon been disabused. Mr Raine took a proprietorial interest in his boys. These relationships formed the architecture of his life and he became increasingly conniving in his attempts to hold on to them as he aged. The boys found such covetousness stifling and as they drifted away his pleading would become ever more desperate. Julian knew that this room had seen many fervid altercations. More pertinently, he had long feared Mr Raine might cause a stir at the ballroom should he ditch him entirely.

Julian had never been invited elsewhere other than the sitting room and had not really considered the totality of the place. His present emotional discomfort encouraged him to test the sureness of his surroundings. Mr Raine was now emphatically committed to the depths of slumber so he left him to his dreams and tentatively wondered about the warren of small rooms on tiptoe. He realised immediately that Mr Raine had invested everything in appearances – his clothes and the sitting room being the summit of his endeavours. Elsewhere

flaking lath-and-plaster walls were held up by brittle wallpaper, floorboards were exposed by fraying carpets and worn linoleum and a layer of grey dust monochromed everything.

He was startled into the realisation that he too had invested all in appearances, albeit that his had been moulded by his paranoid adherence to conformity. He found this realisation worrying, all the more so because of the fragility his present existence – his difficulties with Frank and at the ballroom. He had little to fall back upon that wasn't sham like this junk of a place. He felt his equilibrium being tested once more; he was spinning down into a familiar neurosis. Something had to give. The stored-up tension that stiffened the muscles of his neck and cramped his stomach had to be discharged.

He returned to the sitting room. Mr Raine had forgotten to pay him as was increasingly the case. His open wallet lay on the sideboard. Ten shillings were due. But there were only one and five pound notes – twenty, maybe thirty pounds worth, bulky things they were, substantial, demanding to be taken seriously. Julian could make up for his recent loses in one swoop and end his all too threatening relationship with Mr Raine to boot. The old dear would never go to the police. That was not done, could not be done. He turned it over, possible repercussions tumbling about his sentience like rats in a bag. There would be no going back, he would just have to brazen it out, cut Mr Raine dead if he should take him to task, as if he ever would after so embarrassing an episode.

In the end it was as if Julian's mind had been made up for him, as if he were simply following prescribed steps. There was the wallet, there the relationship he wished to put behind him. He took out the notes in twos and threes, spread them about his person – it was never prudent to flash a roll so Frank had told him. Ah, Frank! Suddenly he knew why it really must be done. Things were coming to an end. He and Frank were coming to an end. It was heartbreaking, not at all what he wanted but it would soon come about. He must put money by; he must be prepared against the eventuality that he should find himself out on the street once more. There, it was done, a little something to contribute to his cache and Mr Raine's incessant meddling put behind him. There was no avarice and certainly no cruelty in the act. It was intended as a finality; a gesture as guileless as closing a door. He felt all the calmer for it.

He went to mirror, knotted the corner of his handkerchief, wet it with spittle and rubbed off his eye shadow – he couldn't risk being stopped by the police with all this gelt on him. Fingernails clean? Trousers creased and shoes polished? He left without looking back.

Frank hated hanging about. *A man could waste his life hanging about and plenty did, by Christ they did!* The jane had been in the hairdresser's for an hour or more now. *She couldn't have much hair left at this rate.* He had glimpsed Jimmy Bland down the road – Hoxton born and bred, like Frank, a tough but a poor one for all his bluster. Frank, on the other hand, was an efficient fighter if needs must and the threat of danger hung about him. He had joined the muscle working for the Blackshirts a few years back. The rough-ups with the Reds and the Yids were no sweat and at seven-and-six a time it was easy money. But he knew that the heat of violence bred yet more capricious volatility and that if he allowed the brash and brutal side of his nature to take hold then all his conniving would come to nothing. But he always wore a diamond ring just in case he had to mark a feller to put some sense into him, a hangover from his housebreaking days – *Good for cutting glass see and better than carrying a knife. Get caught with a knife and you get what you deserve. But a ring, no one can nab you for a ring. And always have a guinea on you for a brief if you get had up – saves in the long run...*

The man he took to be Jimmy Bland was eying a jeweller's window. Frank smirked – *So that's what he's up to, casing for a bit of smash and grab, all the fashion nowadays. Still at least he's got some ambition unlike the rest of the Hoxton mob. Nothing but rattle, all tinsel and tat they are. Fancied up by wop tailors in Soho back alleys for sure but no weight in their drapes, and always coming short when it was their round.* But Frank now, sometimes he felt as if he could swallow the world whole and grow fat on the muchness of it all. He may have been born low and bred wide but he craved style – *Got to be swanked up like Jack Buchanan or the King-As-Was or that Mr Eden with his Jew homburg and all.* He was ravenous for it, he stalked it, but he was never satiated by it. He kept a neat crib and a sharp wardrobe and found pleasure in it. He eyed up the swanks in the Coventry Street Corner House counting their sleeve buttons and gauging the width of their lapels. He never paid less than twenty pounds for a suit or three guineas for a shirt. His swank had got him into the smarter clubs and hotel dance halls. He had cottoned on to the scams straight off – the dressing room pickpockets, the barmen's' rake-offs, the dancing partners who were tarts by any other name. It was at the Piccadilly that he met Miss Evelyn and, later, Julian. And so here he was, waiting on another tart, to put the squeeze on her and give her a nick with his diamond if she proved difficult, all the while knowing there was real money to be made elsewhere, back at the garage with his Jags and all, resenting Julian's rotten little racket and the weight it put upon him.

Suddenly the man at the jeweller's window came alive. A young piece in Hepburn khakis and open collar shirt was towering over him. *The grubby little tyke was fawning like a lap dog, nodding his head like it was on a spring, agreeing with everything the piece said.* They were looking at the stuff displayed at eye level, the expensive stuff, not the tat at the bottom of the window that the chap had been preoccupied with earlier. *Sunk he was. And he won't get more than a touch out of the likes of her for all his putting out.* He peered more closely at the man, studied his body language. *Na, that ain't Jimmy Bland, don't even look that much like him now that it comes to it. What would Jimmy Bland be doing round here anyhow? A tea leaf like him would soon be up on suss even loitering with intent what with his crib sheet and all.*

The Cream and Roses Girl, her coiffure shortened and waved, exited the hairdressers', proffering profuse thanks and goodbyes and then paused for one more look at her new self reflected in the shop window. *Ah! That her is it?* He compared her to the girl in his drawing. *Bingo!* Without more ado he sauntered over, making the most of his height and looking down his nose at her.

"Ah, now what a pretty thing to find in a window. And the crimper's waved your ends. Isn't that just the thing! Your feller will just love it! Sure he will. Best foot forward is it? Put all your troubles behind you and..."

She looked back at him, certain that he was one of the men she had mislaid, one of the not-so-rich ones, but then... surely she'd remember...

"Enjoy your stay in Cheltenham did you? Take in the views and that?"

He may have well had slapped her. That beautiful complexion turned from marble to grey granite. As she stood mute, Frank held up an envelope, opened her handbag and placed it inside.

"It's just like the never-never. You pay weekly by postal order. Well you wouldn't want to send a cheque would you? The post box number is on the envelope. Do you have any questions for me now?"

"Dear God..."

"No, no. Any questions to my good self, dear. I can't be speaking for Him now, can I?"

She looked up at him, searching his face. Frank didn't like that. True, she should be so stunned that she'd never take in his countenance but you never knew. He instinctively pulled on the brim his hat, covering his eyes.

“Now, now it’s rude to stare. A well brought up girl like your self should know better, if I might say so.”

She laughed. She actually laughed. *Doolally is she now?*

“You understand? Tell me you understand.”

She nodded her crimped head, her eyes watering. Frank marched off leaving her standing. He didn’t like the way things had turned out. *She wasn’t right, that one. Skew-whiff without a doubt.*

She stared wide-eyed at his receding back. A row of three sandwich board men dressed in white coats and flat caps traipsed after him. The boards were double stacked. The top board read “The truth often hurts!” The bottom read ““THE AWFUL TRUTH” will make you YELL!” The front boards advertised a film – “THE AWFUL TRUTH” starring Irene Dunne and Cary Grant – but she wasn’t to know that.

Later that evening Frank was sunk into the settee, the week’s receipts lying about in untidy piles beside him, his figuring books parked on his lap. Things were looking good. The last thing he wanted was another war just to cock things up. He looked about him. His figuring might be an elaborate falsification but at least he could boast that all the furniture was for real – the chesterfield, the matching walnut davenport and drop leaf table – all kosher or he’d bite the bleedin’ dealer’s head off. Since he’d been cased up with Julian he’d done the place up proper – *Piss elegant it is, reeks of vodeodo.*

Frank knew full well that, in Julian’s view, it shouted desperate aspiration; all that was important to him was that his surroundings should remain the same, a fixed point, an anchor grounding his emotional navigation of the world. He found Frank’s persistent acquisition of all things showy disquieting. Despite his investment in the paraphernalia of posh, Frank’s lodestone remained Hoxton and the wider East End where all sorts and half-and-halves mixed and nobody gave a fuck – not that he was consciously aware that that was the case, of course. Nonetheless, deep down, he still felt out on a limb in Marylebone, like he was out in the colonies even.

Julian stumbled in from the bedroom carrying a large cigar box. He cleared the table of its debris and pitched its contents out onto the oval expanse. Out tumbled a cornucopia of gentlemen’s accessories – watches, tie pins, cuff-links and cigarette cases. He fanned out his trove.

“You shouldn’t be hoarding things. You might as well give us over to the Busy. I wouldn’t have slept so quiet if I’d known you’d got so much crook in the place.”

“I need a completely new outfit. Have I enough here?”

“Which pieces were presents and which did you nick?”

Julian tentatively selected different items and then gave up any attempt at discrimination.

“I’m not sure any more. I can’t remember, really I can’t.”

“Then they’ll all have to go to the fence, to be sure.”

He selected a few items, put them aside.

“That’s your suit and that’s your pumps.”

Julian retrieved one of the cigarette cases that Frank had put aside. It was the one that Stole had given him, the one she had made such a to-do about. He studied it momentarily, then returned it to the selected pile.

“Brass ain’t it?”

Frank picked it up, felt its weight.

“Gold plate.”

He turned it to the light so as to admire the design of repoussé scallops.

“Do you like it? If you like it, I’ll get it engraved for you.”

“Then what would you be giving me? You don’t know if it’s been nicked or not, you said so.”

He tossed it back on the pile.

“I’ll be taking a lump sum for the lot. Don’t want to be hawking them around, going from one mosk to another, half of it being bent and all. You’ll not get the full worth but it’ll be safer.”

He went to the drinks table, poured himself a whisky, starred blindly out of the window into the street. *God but you can be a bleedin’ affliction when you want to be.*

Julian sensed Frank’s agitation. It was time to retreat into the acceptably familiar. He shuffled through past copies of “Dancing Times”, selected one and opened a double page spread of notation. Striking a pose, the magazine held out before him, he counted the beats as he mimicked the steps. Frank watched him in the reflection of the glass – a dancing ghost making his progress through the room. He shuddered; there was something horribly prescient about the illusion. He turned away, studied the real Julian as he picked his way about the Axminster. He turned to the pile of dancing magazines, flipped through them.

“You get all that from this?”

“Just the figures. The rest is... well there are standards you know. Strict tempo, no lifts or stunting like the American Negro has it.”

He had successfully assuaged Frank’s disaffection but he must risk more if he were to buy time. He reached for one his film magazines. It had a picture of Jessie’s moon face on the cover. He held it to his own face covering it. He became Jessie, she allowed him to dance steps he couldn’t dance, to shape and bend himself into an otherness. It was a game they played but rarely, Julian being what he was. But tonight he even dared to proffer irony. Time – he needed time.

“The English style demands order, modesty...”

He skittered about the room, his body arched and cambered, going beyond its tipping point, like Jessie, knowing that Frank eyed him.

“A rampart tart like you has no right to speak of modesty.”

Julian peeped out from behind the magazine cover, his face next to Jessie’s face. Mercifully, Frank had turned decidedly ruttish.

It was the day the Spanish civil war ended. That that Franco and his Africans had marched into Madrid and put a stop to all that bloody Red nonsense. The Select, especially the Dickies, were full of it. At least there was no need to worry about that any more. That just left Hitler and there were some that saw little difficulty there at all...

“PA-PAH! PA-PAH!” From the bandstand a French horn sounded a hunting call. Over a rousing, pulsating rendition of “Do ye ken John Peel” and shouts of “Tally-ho!” a treasure hunt was reaching its climax, patrons scurrying about in packs, rummaging beneath tables and behind curtains, just like they had done at their private schools – Julian had read about such japes in “The Magnet” when he was a child. Bedlam threatened as the Dickies rampaged about the ballroom. As Billy Bunter had it, “Talk about Pontius Pilate fiddling while Carthage was burning!”

A Dickie rushed forward and handed a ticket to the band leader.

“There goes the Chateau Cos d’Estournel ’34. Only the Grand Cru St Emilion left!”

Both patrons and band responded with, “To hounds! To hounds!” The search for the final prize gathered pace.

Julian and Miss Paulette waited at the edge of the dance floor.

“You’re nervous.”

“Just you keep your tits pointing in the right direction and we’ll be fine.”

A cheer from behind them signalled that the ticket for the last prize has been found.

“PA-PAH! PA-PAH!”

A young Stole dashed forward flourishing it for all to see. The rest returned to their seats, panting and heaving. The band leader exchanged the ticket for the bottle of St Emilion. As the room quietened, a spot fell upon Julian and Miss Paulette and the drummer tapped out a light single beat. Julian gestured an invitation, Miss Paulette curtsied in acceptance. The crooner sang “Every Day’s a Holiday” as a foil to their cavorting.

Julian and Miss Paulette fell into a light Foxtrot, mirroring each other’s steps. A residue of patrons, those a little long-in-the-tooth and for whom such things mattered, applauded each set of figures, figures that grew ever more complex whilst the couple maintained the illusion of floating across the floor. But the applause was only a smattering and it seemed to find an echo that somehow further enhanced its paucity.

Miss Evelyn Margret entered the room and headed straight to the cocktail bar. As she waited for her drink she watched Julian the Forlorn Hope battle on, immune to his partners’ perfunctory exertions and to the profound indifference that enveloped him. About her the cackle of disinterested patrons grew louder, the commerce of social exchange more excited. The waiter busied himself behind her, preoccupied in the mysteries of his craft, the colours of tender annihilation winking furtively in the half light.

A quick movement caught her eye. On the balcony, some ancient queer was being restrained by a heavy-set but immaculately attired bruiser. The mean-spirited barking runt she knew to be the manager was shepherding him away. Her cocktail was delivered with an awkward flourish by the waiter – *Dear god, such a clod, why can’t they get a negro, so much more style*. Her gaze turned back to the dance floor where the exhibition dance was reaching its crescendo – *If that’s what you’d call it*.

Julian gave Miss Paulette one last spin, the sequined top turned, then rested, swan-like in a full curtsy. He bowed deeply to her, and then raised her up so that they might both take the applause. In truth, there was little though Julian imagined a tumult of glittering diamond ringed-hands clapping furiously whilst above, from the balconies, monographed handkerchiefs waved in salutation. Whilst Miss Paulette made good her exit, dark with humiliation, he found gossamer-clad angels surrounding him, welcoming him to their host. He gesticulated and jabbered excitedly.

Miss Evelyn Margaret eyed these proceedings dispassionately – *Julian could be such an arse sometimes*. Then there was a purposeful motion up in the balcony once more. The

barking runt marched purposefully, descended the stairs, his bruiser in tow. Julian meanwhile was dabbing his forehead with his handkerchief. The meagre gathering about him thinned to nothing. He was at a loss as to what to do. Going back to the pen would inevitably provoke a let-down. Suddenly Sharpy was beside him, inviting him ever so politely for a chat in his office. He was delighted to comply, his excited mind imagining that a more formal encomium was to be forthcoming. The bruiser looked down at him with bemusement. Off they went, up the stairs, along the balcony, Miss Evelyn Margaret finally losing sight of them as they turned into a passageway. She was intrigued and stayed at her post awaiting developments.

Upstairs, Sharpy paused before his office door.

“We found him outside, waiting for you, in tears and making a spectacle of himself. Society people don’t want to see the likes of that and neither do I!”

He threw open door and manhandled Julian in. A distraught Mr Raine was perched on a chair before the Sharpy’s desk. They stared at each other in frozen contemplation. Then Julian became aware that Sharpy was shouting, no *screeeeeching* at him.

“You have been disloyal, disloyal to me and to the ballroom. And a man who is disloyal to his employer violates the same principals as a man who is disloyal to his country.”

That didn’t cover the half of it, of course. There was the coarseness of it all. *Too horrible, really, too horrible*. Then Mr Raine put in his two pennies’ worth. Julian was mesmerised by this cats’ chorus as was the bruiser. Sharpy flung open a window. Hooting and flummoxing blew in and gave counterpoint to their sorry duet. He jabbed his finger down towards the Dilly below as if he were sending down thunderbolts.

“You cheap bloody street Arab! Better stick on some slap and get down there – it’s the only part of the West End you’ll find a welcome.”

There? Down there?

Then Mr Raine reached out imploringly...

“But why, dear boy, why? All you had to do was ask.”

And then Sharpy was bearing down on him...

“Any more of you in this racket? As if you’d say... No, no Mr Raine, you must try to keep calm. It’s all done with now. Really, it’s...”

He gestured to the bruiser who grabbed Julian’s shoulder from behind, wheeled him round and frog-marched him out of the office, Sharpy slamming the door behind them. Off they went, the heavy-footed bruiser setting a stiff pace, cuffing Julian’s heels as they returned along the balcony and down the stairs. Miss Evelyn Margaret copped sight of them, followed warily as they progressed through the crowd and out into the lobby.

“I can’t go out into the street in me pumps.”

The cloakroom attendant looked to the bruiser who nodded assent.

“Ticket, please.”

“What?”

“Your cloakroom ticket, if you please Mr Shade.”

“Give her your fucking cloakroom ticket you queer cunt.”

It was like the carrying of the cross and no bleedin’ mistake.

The attendant disappeared into the room beyond. The lobby was festooned with hanging banners advertising the latest dance craze – “The Chestnut Tree” no less. Julian stared at the stick figures showing the dance’s steps and gestures. As if to rub it in, back in the ballroom, the band had struck up the song’s introduction. Julian gawped towards the dance floor. Patrons rushed in and awkwardly attempted the dance – tapping their heads and flailing their arms about. *Like bookies’ tic tac at Epsom.*

“This place is past its prime, anyhow. All these bloody novelty dances. Toffs thinking they’s costermongers. “The Park Parade”, “The Blackpool Walk”...”

He looked up appealingly at the bruiser.

“‘The Trollop’s’ Hike more like!”

The attendant returned and deposited Julian’s things on the counter. His hands shaking, Julian slipped off his pumps and reached for his shoes. He caught sight of Miss Evelyn Margaret standing at the threshold of the lobby. She was plainly startled by his appearance – he was unsteady, ashen-faced.

“I shouldn’t stay here, if I was you, Modom. Gone right common it has.”

Miss Evelyn Margaret proffered an encouraging smile then retreated back into the ballroom. The bruiser led Julian to the entrance. He stumbled out, paused atop the brightly lit steps, his dancing pumps hanging limply from his mitts. He gazed uncomprehendingly at the Dilly below whilst behind him the bruiser glowered down at his back.

The Dilly spent its fury upon his senses. He felt the clangourous mush of its mechanical bleating like a barrage, the machine-gun rattle of its lights like savage cuts. Was he really to be pitched into this bedlam once more? Then through this excited entropy, he heard the still familiarity of an antic waltz at the centre of the whirl. A bard in the guise of a blowzy, frowzy quean danced her way serenely through the crowd accompanied by a sorry old ome winding a barrel organ. Her voice cackled and broke like it was being beamed from some distant radio station. She affected a tremulous vibrato in the way of the music hall

singers. In between the strains of “After the Ball” she gulped air as if she were taking her dying breath.

Fear blossomed across Julian’s frozen face. He felt as if he were being called. He peered over and above the Dilly’s throng to the Circus beyond. It was coming midnight. Both arrow hands of the Guinness clock pointed up to the black beyond as if underlining the finality of Julian’s predicament but insanely the Gordon’s Gin cockerel was crowing dawn and the Schweppes’ Ginger Ale bottle popped its cork. This bonkers, tinselled world had done with him. He could be no more than an irritant if he stayed and only then if he was lucky and he’d never been that either. From now on the lights must spangle and froth without him. A dark nothingness awaited; of that he was sure.

Captain Surman eyed the road's now fully leafed trees with foreboding. They heralded his return. A forced return – he had nowhere else to go. As the Daimler turned into the driveway his soldier's soul went as lead. All his time away he had tried to push aside the gnawing importunity that plagued him; that the odious Nurse Feign, the matron of all he held to be stultifying and petty, now hoarded his photographic remembrances of the beautiful Arab boy. No matter how engrossing his diversions they failed to deflect the arrow-like insistency of the coming threat. The reckoning could be put off no more. His stomach registered his frustration.

Yet he could almost cry when he thought of the boy posed in that cool tiled room with its ogive arches and threadbare carpets. The boy naked, carrying a water jug or leaning against a pedestal; the boy tied to a wall, hands above his head, the ancient panderer with rotting teeth probing his sex with the stick he used to goad his mule; the boy roped to a plank, bent, cowed, prettily bruised a little about the face... *She* would see only vileness and opportunity in these souvenirs, of course. For her, they were windows into his weakness and, with luck, the road to a ransom and a gratuity. Out of the blue he thought of a sticky, cloying glue everywhere about him. As he shook off this figment he realised he had arrived.

Ethel came out of the porch twittering. She flitted about him making exerting grabs at his luggage then, weighed down, lumbered back into the house. The Captain slammed shut the boot and dawdled along behind her. He proffered a low grunt as he passed beneath the reach of the window's spider's web then flung his cane into the well of the hat stand; on coming to rest it displayed its grotesquely-carved face. He plodded into the living room and headed straight for the drinks cabinet where he was brought up short by the racket emanating from upstairs:

“That filth is home is he? Remembered where he lives has he?”

Nurse Feign materialized in the doorway. He had to find his voice.

“No miraculous recovery I see. How can you stand it?”

Nurse Feign stared back at him, into him. Upstairs, as Ethel busied herself separating out the Captain's laundry and hanging his suits in the wardrobe, his wife let fly once more:

“Spent up, spent up, that'll be it. Expensive was she?”

Nurse Feign affected to hear not a sound. She closed the door, stood erect and purposeful.

“I've not slept in my own bed since you've been away, Captain.”

The Captain poured a whiskey.

“Do you think I could at least sit down and take my anaesthetic before you two jackals sink your tee...”

“And you left too light a purse. I am a sight short, Captain, and I cannot away with it.”

“Yes, yes, how much is it this time?”

In the bathroom Ethel returned the Captain’s toiletries to the shelf – his hair brushes, his artificial tooth cleanser and a dry shaver. Below her, Nurse Feign unfolded a piece of paper then presented it for the Captain’s perusal. She watched him expectantly.

“There was no finding you again. What if there was an emergency? Surely, Captain, you must see that in an emergency...”

The Captain angrily disposed of the cushions inhabiting his armchair.

“You could always put it out on the BBC, eh? That would find me.”

He slumped down and dared to stare up at her. He felt like some bedraggled fellah before the face of Ramses.

Ethel scampered in with a tea tray but found she couldn’t place it because the Captain’s whiskey had usurped its rightful position on the side table. Nurse Feign moved the glass, the Captain snatched it from her and Ethel, silently whimpering, deposited the tray and scurried out.

The Captain downed his liquor, shuffled uncomfortably. He unfolded the note, ceremoniously waved it aloft as Chamberlain had on his return from Munich. The bitch had made no bones about it. His owings had been grossly inflated. It was blackmail, a prelude of greater indignities to come no doubt. Nurse Feign came forward, studied his wretchedness.

“When can you let me have the value?”

A vision of the boy intruded itself for one brief moment. His heart gave a lurch. The years reeled back. He involuntarily revisited the feeling of bathos that had whelmed his soul after the beating and the fucking of the lad. He felt as if his body were indurating, setting like concrete.

Behind the green baize kitchen door, Ethel sat huddled over her tea; her hand cupped around a cracked teacup, she seemed as if in prayer. Beside her, the tradesmen’s bills were skewered to a hook. There they were posted until the Captain’s periodic return. Then an excruciating ritual ensued – the impoverished Captain being obliged to beg for money off his wife who, of course, might have settled the bills herself but for the Captain’s own insistence that the man of the house should see to such reckonings. Ethel eyed the bills with distaste. There would be friction in the house for weeks to come.

Her gaze fell upon her cleaning-box containing her brushes, abrasives, polishes, rags and dusters. She was there to clean and Hoover and shine. *What for, I don't know. It's not as if madam ever sees it. Still, I know it's spic and span and that's the thing, isn't it?*

The starkness of Julian's room at Tower Lodge should have begat piety but that had never been its due and nor was it now. His suitcase lay open on the bed and his chest of drawers now boasted a full complement of foldable toggery. His new pumps were parked in neat order against the bare plaster wall. Above, his dress suit hung limply from a wire coat hanger that rested on a peg – it constituted an empty effigy of himself, more perfect than himself, more truly himself than he could ever be.

He had been revelling in his old collection of childhood comics – the sort that told rambunctious tales of public schoolboys – but the noise from the open window had summoned him imperiously. He stood before it, partly fascinated, partly horrified by the view. The road out of town wound awkwardly to the top of the hill. Heavily laden lorries and jam-packed charabancs heading south bellowed their discomfort. Coal drays took to the climb apathetically, all complaint long ago pummelled out of both horse and wagoner. On the downward lane bright boys in shorts and Popeye caps leant back on their bicycles as they glided down into the wide sunlit valley. Julian's eye followed their gaze to the estuary in the far beyond. Its winking glimmer teased him, proffered a somewhere else, a might have been, a might still be... But then they didn't dance there. He just knew they didn't dance there.

The gate opened and Nurse Feign shuffled in. Alerted by the loosely hanging padlock at the gate, she peered about the yard, then the kitchen window, and finally upwards to where she found Julian blankly staring back at her. She stiffened instinctively then, with her bag clutched to her chest, she pirouetted across the yard like one of Disney's dancing hippopotamuses. Deciding that he had better be doing something when she came in, Julian started to rearrange everything he had just put away so assiduously. He heard her rampaging about downstairs then she irrupted into the room, taking in everything at a glance.

"So the breeze is back about the tail again. You're to be a burden to me no doubt."

Julian stayed shtum.

"Nah, you're all about again, aren't you? It does a man no good to gad about."

His mother bit her lip then set about noisily opening the house's windows and laying siege to its warren of rooms with mop and duster. She had last performed these rites before

the Roses and Cream girl had stayed over. Other than that she had been obliged to stay at the Surmans', the Captain being away. Julian remained perched on the edge of his bed just as he had done when a child. The first few glimpses of the past wafted by but then, before he could catch and assay them, his mother burst in once more. She was armed with a bucket of soapy water and a rag and had set her sights on the grime on the window panes. She rubbed and rang out her clothe then rubbed again. The exertion took some of the temper out of her.

"Will Miss Evelyn still count my services? Will she write me herself now?"

"I... I don't want to think about that..."

She rubbed harder, then harder still.

"Julian, you won't be going gallivanting will you? I wouldn't..."

"Not much chance of that, old pal. I'm tired of love. I seem to have made a mess of it, you see."

She ceased her doings abruptly, crossed the room and parked herself next to the empty, hanging dress suit, the weight of the sloshing bucket dragging her arm. Julian took her place at the window gawping out whilst she attempted to decipher the depth of this latest tribulation that he had heaped upon her.

The following afternoon as he lay half sleeping, Julian caught a transitory glimpse of his father – Mr Feign As Was – striding into his room, reaching for the curtain and throwing it back. But the sudden intrusion of silvered light had burned away all form, evaporating the image. It may merely have been a cloud moving away from the sun, of course, but then, a few days later, he heard the drag of his father's shoes across the landing punctuated by his tubercular cough before being swallowed avariciously by the grind of heavy engines nosing their way up the hill.

Julian had no clear impression of what his father looked like. At best he remembered his collapsed bulk, his perpetual tiredness and the smell of sour booze being sweated out in the mornings. This unwanted intrusion brought him back to sense. He took stock of himself, tidying and preening his ordinariness until all was neat and unlikely to provoke notice. Then he set off.

As he crossed the yard he felt the shadow of his subconscious auditing the yellow-grey stone slabs and. As a child the yard had been his solitary play pen and the rhizome-like meanderings of the slabs' cracks of his storehouse, his machine of memory. He had first

learnt the steps to singing games by hopping and tripping across them. Subsequently, their fissuring had provided a framework for more complex but necessary memories. Reposited in their branch-like wanderings was the litany of kings' names and those of the biblical tribes, England's dominions and their exports, the tables of the imperial weights and measures. Later, when he first indulged his passion for dance magazines and the moves they contained, the steps were likewise remembered in the cracks. The diagrams – figures that outlined the steps, black shoe shapes for men, white for women, with curved dotted lines for arcs of movements – were diligently executed as he cavorted across the echoing, squared yard. Insular but preoccupied, both as a child and then as a youth, Julian had played out his rituals of rote again and again, filling his day with them, counting off familiar patterns in the place of nourishing feeling. He had felt safe in his doings. His mother had done nothing to disabuse this conviction.

He closed the gate on these stirrings and headed off into town, stepping aside for a gaggle of kids racing the charabancs up Leckhampton Hill. He allowed himself the luxury of wandering about Cheltenham and its buildings ordered by ancient precept and dressed in neat cream/pink ashlar – *Things couldn't change here, too much bleedin' masonry for a start.*

The promenades were peopled with statues – a polar explorer lost with Scott; a soldier standing “arms reversed” in memoriam; William IV on a too-grand pedestal, bedecked like a Dilly quean in tight drawers and fur cape. The town's walking statuary mainly consisted of retired military men and a smattering of colonial officers and their wives. Cheltenham wasn't so much a place as a lived creed. It possessed the possibility of immanence and spent its days waiting to be conjured up, awakened from its docility. Then its creatures would, like toy soldiers taken out of their trunk, stand to their duties and bark out the old jingoes once more, stiffening the resolve of lesser spirits as they had once done at Omdurman, Spion Kop or Tanga. This intermittent revival was yet to occur in own Julian's adulthood, however, and so he bathed in the town's deceptive placidity and found solace in its insularity, ignorant of the beast lightly shackled beneath and within.

He unconsciously reset his compass – thankfully library books would still be delivered by Boots or Smiths and there were dances at the Imperial Hotel, teas dances at the Cadena. In the Imperial Gardens families played clock golf, children toyed with whip and top, hoops, yo-yos and skip ropes, all cheaply fashioned, bought for pennies, prized like gold. But then his eye fell upon a family admiring a boy soldier in their midst. The mother nervously petted him, the father tugged at his uniform trying but failing to make it fall more elegantly about the boy's inadequate frame.

“He’s my son alright. He’s no stool-arsed jack!”

Julian moved off. He had an appointment. At the Cheltenham Dance Hall, Miss Eileen Desafilado, dance instructress, was in need of a partner to attend to her female clients. The manager was an enthusiastic:

“Fresh from London, eh? Well, we manage to keep up, Mr Shade. We pride ourselves on it. We are part of a chain, you see. I dare say we are ahead of the London ballrooms on occasion.”

They spoke in the lobby, the manager expressing his concern that Julian should not turn out to be one of those “dancing dandies” he’d read about in the Sundays. It was accepted that references would follow. A commissionaire pinned up a notice. It blazoned what was, so the manager had erroneously assumed, the latest party dance. The familiar semaphoring stick figures illustrated the required physical jerks. Julian’s heart pummelled like the raucous booming of a kettle drum. The rising tide was unstoppable. “The Chestnut Tree” had caught up with him.

In the Lilly Pond Frank cogitated on his luck, or rather the lack of it. A short while back he had been ecstatic at the prospects before him, now he was beginning to feel boxed in. All the talk was of something christened the “Polish Corridor”. Chamberlain had pledged to defend Poland and this “Corridor” was the sticking point. Amongst his peers, the Sharps, Them-What’s-In-The-Know, said there was no way out of it. Not everybody could have what they wanted so they were going to have their to-do no matter what. Clothiers were already advertising made-to-measure officer’s uniforms with all accoutrements, all regiments catered for. There was talk of mass evacuation and air raid shelters.

Frank had no idea where Julian had got to. He’d done a flit alright but as to the whys and wherefores...

“I’m in the dark”, he told Miss Evelyn Margaret, who was studying him from across the table.

To Frank, Julian had appeared as sure and stolid as a dummy in a Fifty Shilling Tailor’s window. He had never expected to share intimacies with him. Julian, he had immediately assumed, was of the world he wished to assail and infiltrate, albeit on the periphery and he had taken it that Julian’s distance was typical of that milieu. Whenever he felt that he was merely scrabbling about the surface of an immovable edifice he would let go

and return to the familiarities that nourished him – to the streets, the pubs and the billiard halls of his youth. He found no succour in the toffs' world, only transcendence, a voltaic charge induced by its shiny, polished accoutrements and he thought of Julian as one of these desired trappings. That was more than enough for him.

Miss Evelyn gave a succinct account of the scene at the Piccadilly ballroom.

"Some old queer, you say. Did he have a shyker – a wig, all skew-whiff like?"

"I'll say! He might as well have been wearing a beret, you know, on the side like the soldiers do."

"Mr Raine! It's Mr Raine and I bet he's gone and shooshed him."

"He'd do that? Really?"

"It was what he was up to when I met him. Not enough money from the dancing, see. Thought he'd try shooshing pick-ups. The posh trade, you know."

"So he's disappeared himself, gone to ground?"

"Hard labour and a bleeding plank is what he'll get if that old sod Mr Raine has gone to the lilies."

Miss Evelyn Margaret's eyes darted about the tablecloth like a general studying the deployment of his troops.

"What will he do?"

"He ain't one for the cocky-dodgering, not him."

"So what..."

Frank had no idea. Had Julian planned it? *Was he off to somewhere deliberate like?*

"He don't know London, just the West End. And he's got enough money for now – cashed in his stash the other week, see."

Miss Evelyn looked him straight in the face.

"There's a war coming. Abortions will go up – every woman's a tart in a war."

Trust her to get straight to the meat of it and here we are taking afternoon tea as nice as you like.

He thought of the flat. Apart from a depression in Julian's pillow there was nothing that told of past times – no photographs, no discarded clothes, no unwashed tea cups. There was simply a space that must necessarily be filled like when you lose a cufflink. In struggling to think of what Julian had taken away with him, Frank suddenly realised how little he had possessed. His clothes, his dancing magazines... *Oh, and that crabby puss of his, that ain't here either, more's the mercy.*

He realised he was infuriated with Julian. It wasn't the theft that bothered him, it was the rummaging about. Frank admired Mr Raine's taste or rather he admired Mr Raine having taste. He esteemed the endeavour. He knew that Julian wasn't able to shift any of the knickknacks himself and so he would have taken just cash. Nonetheless he had desecrated a finely wrought architecture of discrimination, had blundered in and disturbed a delicate equilibrium. He had committed a sacrilege, like stealing from a church.

Miss Evelyn could see he was drifting.

"I have other ladies I can turn to, of course. It's just that... Nurse Feign is so well placed. Discrete, you know."

Frank could offer no response. Miss Evelyn began to grope about in her purse. He did the gentlemanly thing.

"No, no, let's not be quibbling with that now."

Miss Evelyn Margaret rose and Frank noted the economy of her movements. There was nothing fancy about her. She was all very pragmatic, to the point. He admired that. Get the business done and get out, back to your own life. Not that he knew anything of her life or cared to know.

"Have you received anything from the Roses and Cream Girl?"

"I have not. I didn't like the look of her neither."

In reply to Miss Evelyn's unspoken query he tapped the side of his head with his finger. Miss Evelyn smiled knowingly and made off. Before she got to the stairs she was approached by a nervous slip of a thing proffering a card. More business and if the world went to war then he would have to have a part of it whether he wanted it or not – the chauffeuring lark wouldn't be worth a fig and he'd need an earner.

He hadn't really looked that hard for Julian. The Dilly, The Strand and the Coliseum were fallow ground to him nowadays. There a knowing camaraderie held sway that he distrusted and would not be part of. The bright, staining lights of the West End pubs and bars were alive with gossip. He didn't go much for them young poufs and their yapping. Moreover, the queer life was lived out under the gaze of the tecs who could pull you in at the drop of a hat on a suss charge. Names got bandied around, things got out and, before you knew what's for, there was that dreaded knock on the door. He hated the Dilly mob for that reason though that's where the pretty boys were he'd have to admit.

So Julian had rotted a posh iron from Town, one with connections, no doubt. He'd been at the shooshing lark himself as a boy. When naive steamers from the North with impenetrable dialects and bulging pockets stared agape at the open market that was Hyde

Park Corner, he would snare them, rob them blind, even beat them for being so stupid if he'd a mind to. Then it was back to Hoxton and the wider East End where all sorts had it away with all sorts and half-and-halves mixed in and nobody gave a fuck... As for Julian, he'd have to mull things over. Any decision now might prove hasty; events were not at his command. There was Easter coming up, then the Two Thousand Guineas followed by the May balls – first at the embassies, and then Londonderry House, the Grevilles on Charles Street, St James's Palace... Oh the lushness of it! He was near to tears at the thought of losing it all now that he was so near and all for the sake of a bloody war.

Then he clocked Pretty Billy Dimples. Pretty Billy all spruced like a fashion plate model in a belted-back sports jacket pecking away at a cream cake. Soft hair, soft skin, full lips, and a basket and bum to match he shouldn't wonder. Pretty Billy taking all them stares like he was entitled to it. And he was. By God he was!

At Tower Lodge the radio howled discontent like a bawling child – the interference was bad today and it had been getting worse since Julian's arrival. He remembered the evenings of his late teens, his mother away with one of her ladies, alone with the wireless, – Radio Luxembourg, Radio Normandy, the dance bands, Music Hall comics... and lots of adverts for patent medicines.

His mother had been taught the folk remedies when she was young as tradition demanded. The old country women doled out salves and balms, pick-me-ups and dreamweavers. There was aggermoney tea, royal jelly; concoctions derived from elm bark, turpentine, washing soda and lead scrapings; potions made from pennies soaked in water. Still, she had seen the biers standing at the lych-gate, the village draped black; crippled, housebound soldiers at cottage windows following the cortege with hollow eyes. Witchery had little good in it seemed; yet the esteem in which these women was held and the ways in which they challenged those all too expensive doctors with their degrees and motor cars and snooty wives stuck in her mind. Then she had become besotted with the advertisements on the radio – Orphic promises wafting in on the airwaves. She took this jingled puffery to be memoranda from a higher essence intended for her, just for her. She had few skills with which to contend with life's inequities and so she grasped the possibilities proffered. She was nothing if not circumspect, however, and objected to the radio on Sundays.

Skirmishing about Julian's thoughts, the radio crooners kept up their bleating, their voices grating and scraping as if some waxy imp had taken the scissors to their vocal cords.

Julian turned the thing off, the voices careered lower and lower down the scale before whinnying away to nothing. It wasn't just the Radio Harpies that he found so unnerving. Much of Julian was bottled up in that house – as a child the constant compulsion to put himself beyond his parents' bruising and vicious disputes had sent him crawling into its thought-shadow corners, to seek shelter in the clinch of its quarry stone, intoning the multiplication tables from two to twelve and the declensions of ancient verbs, willing himself small and unnoticeable.

Since moving to London he had rarely stayed more than a night or two there – usually when he had brought a girl down for his mother to attend to. Now he found it impossible to remain indoors for any length of time. The house invoked deep half-memories that welled up unwarranted. He realised that his head was full of stuff that he had no idea was there; that had no business being there, fearsome stuff that clogged the mind and knotted the nerves.

His association with Miss Eileen Desafilado was tolerable. She too looked askance at the fad for party dances; she too found them a profane incursion into the mysteries of their shared craft. Nonetheless, as the summer unfolded both were increasingly obliged to cower before the coarse familiarity that they invoked. The youngsters from the outlying villages walked or cycled miles to come a courting at the Town Hall on a Saturday night. They had but a few prized hours in their week and even then, their pleasantries would sharply curtailed – there would be a rushed, mass exit at 10.30 as many dashed to catch the last train to Gloucester or Stroud. The country boys and girls were left to their travail home in the blue-black, scented summer night, a forever night as yet unfussed by the glower of incendiaries or the raking of searchlight beams. They had been brought up on village hops that had afforded them the transition out of childhood. Their knowledge of dancing was rudimentary and they thought the Town Hall's maple-sprung floor dusted with French chalk very swish. They made the most of the clement evenings and gave themselves over to such pleasures as the dancing afforded them. Nonetheless, the uncertainty of the worsening situation in Europe hung heavy about them. Though from far and wide, they instinctively felt the need to become more of a mass. One and all, they wanted to huddle and possess each other before autumn brought skies spotted dark with bombers as all now thought it must. The party dances afforded opportunities that were not to be denied.

Julian could see that his time at the Town Hall would be limited. He suspected that prior to having to explain to the manager that testimonials were unlikely to be forthcoming, his and Miss Desafilado's services would, regrettably, be dispensed with. The manager had grown increasingly snarky and had already taken to prodding his tender weak spot.

“Really, I thought you’d be on top of the new fads Mr Shade... What! You get can’t the hang of this primitive little thing. Even the niggers with their toms-toms could manage such things. And with a flourish, I’ve no doubt. Keep up, Mr Shade. Keep up!”

One bright breezy morning he hired a bicycle and frittered the day away in the lanes to the north of town. There elm trees sentried dirt tracks that led to the hush of small fields. Horses dragged hay carts and ploughs, farmers’ boys who knew little of the world geeing them on. Blossom was whispering its arrival. Soon it would be bawling its ecstasy.

Julian’s thoughts ranged wide. He had been right not to bring the Mr Raine business to Frank’s door. The madness was his; he couldn’t visit it upon Frank. Frank would drown in that noisome anarchy of emotion. The madness was his to own, his own to nurture; his precious own. But he missed Frank, he just wished he wasn’t who and what he was and then nothing would have happened.

He cycled slowly through a village. The primitiveness shocked him. Window panes of greased paper, flagstone floors, tin bowls for washing, candles in jam jars, all glimpsed as if in shame through half open doors. There were nettle patches where houses had once stood, where the ancients had lived out their lives not knowing and so not wanting better things or so one wished to believe.

The sight of a limousine outside the public house quite startled him. It seemed an incongruous intrusion. It brought him back to the modern, to happenings rendered stark beneath street light, played out before a chorus of consumptive motor vehicles and the too blue eyes of advertising gods and goddesses. He thought of the Dilly queans crafting the dramas of their lives, reshaping their petty failures into an heroic theatre of the picaresque. He thought of Jessie, her near impossible contortions in heavenly rooms, her white witch Dervish let-the-animals-go-free abandon, her fucking and her follies. Yet he knew and had always known that he could only tentatively reach out to that wantonness as a pilgrim might touch a relic. What pleasure he had out of life was others’ pleasure it seemed...

The hedgerow thinned out to nothing. Patchy meadowland splattered with the colours of spring flowers led to the river, the Avon, bordered with sally trees. Here were furtive scurryings in the long, wispy grass, earth dust and corn dust, the heat bouncing back off clay, flattened mattresses of sward where lovers had lain. A boy in a Popeye hat leant against a tree and rasped out a popular song on a harmonica. Julian pushed the bike forward and stopped before him. The boy looked neat and at ease in his white flannel trousers and polo shirt, knowing, both in and apart from his surroundings, a Witching Boy.

“You do look wappered.”

“Yes, I am rather.”

Julian rested his bike on the ground and removed his jacket to reveal his neatly ironed shirt. He noticed the boy wore brown suede shoes and a ring on his little finger, ciphers that had long gone out of fashion with the confraternity of young London poufs. The boy studied him, plainly found an interest in him.

“You’re not from round yer, I hexpect.”

“I’ve been living in London.”

“You ought to gat yourself some zomer schmutter. Lenin or zummat.”

“Yes, I suppose so if I’m going to stay.”

Julian thought about sitting down. It required consideration. Everything was so... bitty and dusty and squelchy green. The Witching Boy was fascinated by his indecision.

“Come yer out of the vet.”

The Witching Boy moved over to make room and then resumed playing his harmonica. Fussing, Julian deposited himself alongside him, soaking up the shade. Across the valley, he could see the blunted saw-toothed silhouette of the Malvern Hills etched into a flat blue sky, dancing in bubbling light eddies. He realised how exhausted he was. In recent weeks he had become an unruly bundle of knots and mental lacerations. Capitulation came easily. He let the all-engulfing warmth take him away. All thought deserted him. He felt empty, wonderfully empty...

Later, they idled back towards the lane, Julian pushing his bike, finicking with his dusty clothes. The Witching Boy began to sing “Mocking Bird Lane” in a cod posh accent.

He laughed at himself; a forgiving, accepting laugh.

“Bit of a songbird me. A regular Deanna Durbin. Yer turn.”

“Oh, I don’t. I can’t.”

“Mute as a mouse, you be.”

“Yes.”

“But yer musical, ain’t yer?”

“Oh, yes.”

The Witching Boy smiled back. His eyes took in the sky, the peeking, snaking river, the rise of Bredon Hill before them.

“Frum with the wondeement of it, I am. Efen on erf this be.”

“That song takes me back to London. The ballrooms, you know.”

The boy didn't know. He'd heard the bands on the radio, he'd never seen, only imagined the rapture of it all. He had nothing to say about it.

"Your hat... is it a fad or something. I've seen a lot of boys wearing them."

"'appen you 'ave. Zycling club 'at. Zee!"

He pointed to an enamelled badge with an insignia of a wheel with wings sprouting from its hub.

"Shire Mercurials."

"I've seen cafes with banners outside."

"Different clubs – church clubs, labour clubs, servicemen's clubs..."

"What sort of club is... the Mercurials?"

The Witching Boy dum-de-dummed a faint music; about him the field was a veil of coming green populated with splodges and dabs of colour and the whisperings of small things.

"It's ver chicks. Uz dainty little willy-gills. We 'as to stick together, zee."

They walked on, the Witching Boy surreptitiously eying Julian up and down.

"Why'd you come back yer then?"

"Oh, they've finished with me in London. They've a short way with fags."

As they reached the lane the Witching Boy idled off to the hedge and retrieved his machine. They set off together down the lanes, their cycles braying in the lower gears, whispering at speed.

"I was very lonely when I lived here before."

"Still a good deal to cham but little to swallow and then you 'aft to know were they be, a gorse."

Julian looked inquisitively at the Witching Boy who leered back at him conspiratorially.

"Gallows bad me. I'm telling yer."

He laughed again. Julian studied his prettiness, seeking out a sign of corruption but there was none. The filthy little toe rag looked as peachy as the day he was born. As if to concur, as they flitted through a village, hymns played on the radio.

"I 'as it all ways. Keeps out of trouble, even makes a few bob. Known all the pennies since I were feele. They ain't no pother"

He grasped a reed of the tall grass from the hedge as he passed by and prized it between his teeth. He gloried in the coming mayflower and gypsy lace and invited the shadows of the jitterbugging leaves to play across his face.

“Vucking love it, I do. And I meanz to ’ave it!”

Having set the lure, he vamped outrageously.

“Shall uz be tootzies then?”

The Captain was all of a lather. His resources being meagre he had sought the diversion of his officers’ club. He loved the air of quiet conviviality that only a drenching in onyx and marble, leather, plush and polish could provide. Besides he had established a tab there and he had run out of headed notepaper, always useful when trying to impress. The desk clerk looked him over as he marched in. The Captain’s black hair was cut *en brosse* at the sides and was larded on top with brilliantine. He presented to the world the impression of a tar brush wedged onto a blubbery neck and shoulders. He was a brute of a man but not the sort of brute to be esteemed herein; so thought the desk clerk.

The Captain fancied a few hands at bridge.

“I’m very sorry Captain but I doubt that you will be able to make a pair. The summer coming on, you see.”

That should have served as a warning but it did not. The Captain settled down in the library beneath the heads of fine fellows whose military or civil duties had progressed the red stain of Empire and whose rituals of gavel, square and compass had trumped the black man’s juju and the fakir’s abracadabrim. Their service done but not forgotten, they were enshrined in gilt frames and tacked onto the flock-papered wall like so many trophies. The Captain gulped neat gin and immersed himself in memories of the Cairo hammams and houseboat dens and the boys to be had at the back of the tin-roofed cinema. Then that old haunting chill set in. He couldn’t go back there. He could never go back. In the Kasr-el-Nil chummery he had been rarely spoken to but much talked about. Worse, amongst Cairo wide types old grievances were doubtless still coveted, hoarded like monies in the bank. In the end, the gods of the place had proved unkind...

The desk clerk was at his elbow – would he mind stepping into the manager’s office for a moment? Not at all, in he went. The manager shammed embarrassment.

“I’m afraid... well, I’m sure you must appreciate... members’ rules, you see. Yours was a wartime commission. You must know that eligibility for membership lapsed the moment you were demobilised.”

Yes, he knew. He was a “temporary” gentleman – for the duration he had been elevated above the caste of the common man only to be pitched back down into the pit when the bloodletting had ceased. It had took them long enough to realise. Usually it was a matter of weeks – less than that in London, there he was barred from all the clubs, his debts discreetly put aside. But here...

“I dare say you would wish to settle your bill?”

“I haven’t my cheque book...”

“We can provide a cheque...”

Humiliated, he had had to dart out when the manager’s back was turned, out through that jungle of a hall, out past the smirking desk clerk, out into the too quiet square – an overlarge middle-aged man, out of puff and sweating, crimson with humiliation.

Back at home, he stood at the bottom of the stairs, staring up, ruminating, the yellow spider’s web making a halo behind his tar-brushed pate. Resigned, he climbed the stairs.

“Shoosh, shoosh! I can hear him. I can hear the devil.”

He entered his wife’s room with a sour smile.

“I must to speak to you, my dear. We should speak...”

Mrs Surman found Ethel cowering behind her, outside her peripheral vision.

“Don’t you dare leave me with him. You stay put!”

“We do have to speak on occasion...”

“He’s at me again, trying to make me sign my money away.”

Unable to meet his stare, she returned to her jigsaw puzzle of Richard Couer de Lion. She had been concentrating on the lower quarter of the picture where a gaggle of squires knelt in fealty. But now her hands shook and she fumbled with the pieces. Ethel stared warily between her and the overbearing Captain, ready to do a bunk at a moment’s notice. The Captain pointed to the jigsaw.

“When he died they chopped him up. His bones and viscera were sent as relics to all parts of France and England. And his heart.”

He sibilated on “viscera”, stabbed at the “t” in “heart”.

“Arghh” I can’t abide it! Don’t let him touch me! Dear God, don’t...”

The switch was thrown. The mare had been tripped... and so readily. The Captain could no longer contain his contempt.

He bent down, on a level, eye to eye with his wife.

“Now, now *Florence*, darling.”

She screamed.

“Rose, then. Is it *Rose*?”

Ethel uttered a cry that sounded like she had trodden on something squelchy.

“Agnes? Yes *Agnes*. We shall have *Agnes* today. Now what do we say? Come now... we say “What’s... in... a...”

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

“Oh dear, what a bait she’s in! Doesn’t know her mind from one minute to the other. My poor wife can’t even remember her own name. Oh, the pity, the...”

He stopped short. His wife had relaxed back into her chair muttering a thankful prayer. Ethel was staring over his shoulder.

He need not look. He felt her presence like a coming storm. He crumbled, the weight of life returned to him all the heavier. He retreated from the room.

Nurse Feign gave him not a glance as he left but peered down at the women before her.

“Quinine wine, Ethel. And a damp flannel, if you please.”

The road pitched down the Cotswold edge and, as it flattened at the valley floor, took on a wide sweep. Cyclists sped past cheered on by their supporters. The devotees of the Shire Mercurials huddled at the outside of the bend, owl-eyed in anticipation, thumbs poised on stop watches, drawing hard on their gaspers. Their heroes were down the field, outpaced. Julian sat perched on a stone wall alongside them, feeling their torment. Then on came the Mercurials’ riders in a tight pack. All of a rush they belted by and were gone before one could exhale a tightly held breath. There was a scramble as the boys mounted their cycles and careered off down country lanes, taking a short cut to the next viewing point. Julian in tandem with the Witching Boy lagged behind them enjoying their vibrancy, their chatter and excitement.

The Witching Boy had sponsored Julian’s entrée into the easy democracy of the Mercurials’ fellowship. At the weekends and some evenings he met up with them at lay-bys and cafes. Their pleasures were a world apart from the conspiratorial antics of the Cocky Dodgers; there was promise in them and hope perhaps. Now that the Captain was home and his mother back at Tower Lodge, Julian sought to minimize the time he spent there – especially at the evenings and weekends. Seeing little of him, his mother had assumed he had more work than was his ration. Nonetheless she was roundly peeved – Miss Evelyn

Margaret's patronage had provided a tidy fillip to her income and she was loath to lose it. Julian had put such cares aside as was his want and she could only wait until he saw sense, until it was the right time to make him see sense. In the meantime, when at home, she huffed and rattled about Tower Lodge in dire umbrage.

Most of Mercurials' devotees wore zipper jackets of suedette or corduroy and short shorts; their idols and sometime boyfriends favoured black alpaca jackets and racing tights. All sported the Popeye hats that Julian had first noticed on his arrival. The talk – a mystery to Julian – was all of Sturmev Archer speed gears, dynamos, saddlebags and frames – some of the boys had sprinters or speed irons built of aeroplane steel and aluminium. One established couple had invested in a touring tandem with a tailored luggage carrier though the rump had practical roadsters bought at half-a-crown a week. Holidays were spent roaming from one youth hostel to the next. At weekends there were trips to the pleasure gardens at Bishop's Cleeve or Tewkesbury but most important were the time trials and races.

All the while in London Julian had supposed a Gloucestershire frozen in time, as in his remembrances. It hadn't occurred to him that things might change. In his teens he had been obliged to follow the path of furtive, fleeting sexual discovery with but a few older, necessarily wary lovers – a teacher, a golf club professional, a church organist. But the Mercurials pointed to a healthier web of friendship and relationships that had come to be in his absence. Nonetheless his involvement and commitment were semidetached. He could never embrace their camaraderie wholeheartedly, it wasn't in him to be so collegial, but he welcomed it none the less, just as he had the friendship of the Dilly queans.

He had found himself a niche however. Some thought him quite wonderful – a dancer! In the West End! Dancing partners' "confessions" were a staple of the Red Tops and Sundays – working girls in search of pin money in order to maintain an ageing parent seduced by the tinselled, manufactured gaiety, brought low by perfidious cads... Well you could write it yourself, couldn't you? The boys might listen on the radio to the dance bands playing in some ritzy London ballroom, they could hear the applause of the dancers, but Julian helped them visualize the refinement, the practised aesthetic of class at work – "You ought to see them piling in. The Dickies all stiff with starch and the Stoles with all them bits of animals hanging off them – wouldn't be seen dead in a clothe coat. Too much of the farmyard in Piccadilly nowadays, I say!"

And he could boast the added frisson of the queer life as lived in the palace of their reveries, of course. He projected a version of himself, a freer more extravagant imagining. The living, breathing Julian would cross the road in order to avoid bumping into some of the

more outrageous queans in daylight but the Julian he gave them promenaded gaily down Compton Street and was a regular fixture at the Trocadero. He painted glitzy pictures of the latter's sweeping staircase, of its black and white chequered floors and walls of mirrors in ebony and silver frames. And he dropped names. But amidst all this pretension he still stayed true to his creed:

"Dancing must be neither vulgar nor immodest, but, on the contrary, the personification of grace, restraint, and good manners... All you have to do is follow the steps. There are things that are done and things that are not done, as they say. You wouldn't cackle to a Dickie or a bishop with your lills in your pockets, would you?"

They wouldn't. Of course they wouldn't.

That evening, the racing and trials done, the various clubs met up at one of the large cafes that had sprung up beside one of the improved trunk roads. A police club occupied the tables nearby. The Witching Boy was quick to notice them.

"What's a penny made ov?"

"What?"

"Copper! *Copper*, get it? Get sharp! Them's charpers. County coppers."

Julian instinctively dabbed away some of the Leichner powder on his cheek. *At sixpence a go as well. Still, it doesn't do to stint and you only need a dab.*

The Witching Boy nodded towards a stringy sort of fellow at the police table.

"I've 'ad 'im. The one wi' the quiff on the Raleigh. Not a bad zort, all things conzidered".

Julian thought that naïve but he didn't say so. Coppers acting as ploys were common. He suspected the Witching Boy was not as "sharp" as he plainly considered himself to be. He hoped the Boy wouldn't learn the hard way but then everyone learns the hard way.

The Mercurials' talk turned to the coming war.

"I can do without the misery on the nine o'clock news"

"What about the bombing and the gassing and the blight?"

"They say London's all sandbags and trenches and gas masks."

A small subgroup of Mercurials was huddled around a mountain of a man with black, bristled and heavily pomaded hair. Julian strained for a better view but almost immediately the manifestation plodded away and the coven dispersed.

Julian became aware of the chatter once more.

"I'm 'prenticed at Smiths."

"They'll have you for a soldier then."

“You never know. War work’s picking up.”

“They’ll have women doing that like they did last time.”

“Tommy Dacre’s had his cut for the army. Goin’ to the Guards.”

One of the boys from the coven pitched in.

“The Captain says that might be the death of him. Guards are going into tanks he says, the horses is for the knackers’ yard, all the yard boys and troopers in tears. Tanks are just bloody big ovens when they catch fire, he says. Better be an infantryman.”

The Captain seemed a pervasive presence in the boys’ musings. A number had been with him, most respected his worldliness, few liked him, and those with a little nouse feared him. Julian didn’t connect the Captain with the man his mother worked for in Cheltenham. There captains were two-a-penny, as were majors and colonels, as many as you like. The place was alive with mufti of a weekday, braid and brass on Sundays. After a few minutes the man himself drove past in his Daimler. Julian was again taken with the apparition. He seemed too big for this world. Like one of those shire horses that are brought out at fetes and agricultural fairs. He had plainly been bred for strength, a strength bent to a purpose no longer of relevance or import. Julian thought he had something of the Clark Gable about him. He felt something awaken inside and then fall back beyond his sentience as the Daimler tentatively assayed out on to the new dual carriageway.

The Witching Boy watched as Julian was taken by the Captain’s gravity. The knowing look that Julian had seen back by the river lighted upon the Witching Boy’s face once more. It was a look that Julian had seen many times on the Dilly. It seemed out of place here in this summery place. But it contained a warning steeped in prescience.

Frank had done well out of the Two Thousand Guineas. His party had had a few wins and tipped extravagantly. Now the season had started proper. He had got bookings for most of the London gaffs but his real earners would be the out of town balls – Leeds Castle, then Oxford and Cambridge and innumerable regimental and charity dances. At Cliveden there would parties every weekend throughout the summer. The Select were at their rites, bringing out the purple and the fur.

He stood before his dresser idly studying his reflection. Twin hairbrushes to smooth his hair and a pair of folding scissors to keep his matinee moustache in trim lay before him. He placed his pocket mirror beside them. These *objets de toilette* evoked the elsewhere he

coveted. They had come down from the heavens and had been burnished by the stars. They captured lovers made of softer stuff than he was made of; boy lovers and girl lovers, smooth skinned and longing for the touch of the man who wrapped himself in the bliss they portended. Like Julian, Pretty Billy had felt their potency the first time Frank brought him home. Unlike Julian, he thought it only right and proper that he too should be accounted rare and precious. He saw immediately that Frank valued him as such. Indeed, Frank caressed and fondled Billy obsessively, making a fetish of him.

Frank's child world had been a place of shiverings and drudgeries. Those about him were small; small in mind, malnourished and tubercular. He knew that he had to exchange that world's rammel for more nurturing fare and thieving had provided the opportunity. With the proceeds of stealing he could buy pieces of joy, dollops of energy that were as potent as those of a hand grenade. A set of cuff links would be matched with tailored shirt, the shirt to ties and a bespoke suit or sports jacket. His get-up yielded stories that might be imagined or even, on a good day, lived out; stories with himself at the centre, a new self, nourished by their grandeur, tall and severe. It had been hard work – the slow accumulation of treasure – but he had built for himself a store of possibilities, of choices, of unfamiliar perspectives, of surrogate selves. And him a poor Hoxton lad brought up on penny dabs and soured milk.

As he was driving home in the early hours, he saw the newspaper boys putting out their stands. There was to be a call-up of men between twenty and twenty-one for basic training. Pretty Billy was skittish when Frank told him. Billy's agitation centred him. He parroted vacuous advice – Billy was touching twenty – and he cosseted him, promising to save him from the trenches. He was well in with Them-That-Has, he told Billy. They'd see him right.

In truth however, he was also disconcerted. If conscripted he would have little influence over his fate – war was the epitome of uncertainty, of chance. He knew all about chance. As a kid in short trousers he had been a bookie's runner and lookout. He saw what chance did for them poor rotters down Hoxton. *It brought them low, lower than they already was. Squeezed the manhood out of them, what was left of it after years on the dole.*

He readily understood that in battle the odds were anybody's guess. As a boy during the Great War, he had followed the campaign maps printed in the papers but it was in scanning the endless lists of mortalities published daily that his fears had been fostered. It gave him a taste for numbers though. He had kept a tally of the different regiments, just like the football league tables. His lists were all bounded with a black border – a bit heavy on the India ink but he liked to keep things proper. Nowadays he found a similar kind of peace in his

fictitious bookkeeping. He had affected a gothic hand, German-like. The numbers and reckonings seemed to look more important that way. *Funny that.*

He was on the watch for a way out should war come and had taken to listening to every morsel Them-That-Has muttered in his presence in the hope of getting in the know. As well as the chauffeuring he put himself about more. Whilst he was accepted at certain parties and club carryovers as a bit of a character, up to now he had failed to gain entrance to neither the principal private clubs nor Pimlico's pouf palaces. The irons that got in there wouldn't look twice at him and he had never been taken up by them. But now with Billy on his arm he became a regular at Gennaro's and the Hungry Horse. All supposed he was Billy's sugar but Billy was delighted when he refused to take a penny out of his graft. He sought greater gain, some inside knowledge that might be exploited and him having a nice slice for his trouble. It was a shot in the dark and would take time. He had nothing concrete in mind but he paid close attention Billy's pillow talk.

Then, at a very private party, all gilding and glimmer, he bumped in Miss Evelyn Margaret once more. She had eyed him from across the room. *God the man was loud! Dressed up like a Pearly King!* It was obvious how he had got in – *He's even tarted up that lovely cherub on his arm.* She felt she should save the man from his gaucherie.

"Darling, you mustn't stand around like a street hawker, really you mustn't."

Frank felt self-consciousness flock about him.

"The boy sells himself, you know. Just leave him be and take the proceeds as discretely..."

What *was* she saying? She mustn't flummox, Frank was floundering already.

She turned to Pretty Billy.

"You see that chap there? The ancient fellow with the yellow moustache? He's a lord. Worth twenty a go but you'll have to do all the work. Tell him when and where and be brisk about it or else he'll get nervous. Then try the billiards room. Plenty of Indian types in there, they like rough."

This bit of snide went straight over Billy's head. He made off at the trot. Miss Evelyn eyed his progress.

"So this is why poor Julian went the way of the winds. He'll make your fortune, I'm sure."

She turned on Frank.

"You've not been honest with me darling."

"I have. I ain't played you wrong and you shouldn't say I have."

“When would you have told me?”

“Told you what?”

“That I can’t rely on Nurse Feign any more.”

“How do you get to that?”

“Oh, now I’m losing patience with you. How do you suppose she’ll look on you now that you’ve abandoned her boy? You took him off her hands, now she’s got him back again.”

“He’s with her then?”

“Of course. Where else would he be?”

“He doesn’t know about me and...”

“Sweetie, the whole West End knows about your beautiful cherub.”

“But you say he’s not in the West End.”

The door might still be open then but only if Julian were kept in ignorance of Pretty Billy which meant that Nurse Feign must also be lied to. Miss Evelyn mulled it over... but not for long.

“I’ll miss Julian. He was fun.”

“That’s the last fucking thing he was!”

Miss Evelyn let that go. She was looking to the future.

“If I were to get in touch with her then the arrangement might be resumed. You would have to drive clients to Cheltenham, of course, and...”

“And when am I supposed to be doing that?”

So that was it. Miss Evelyn was way ahead of Frank. She saw where he must be going even if he didn’t.

“You know, these people will drop you at the slightest whim. What you want from them can’t be had. At least Julian had the sense to know that if you don’t.”

Just then an old soak cornered Frank without a by-your-leave.

“Frank, my boy. I need your charabanc for next week’s meet at... where is it? somewhere up north...”

Miss Evelyn was the picture of feminine acquiescence. She sashayed away, glass in hand, serenely viewing the room as if at an art gallery. She came across Billy jotting down a telephone number for a mark. His memory had failed him. She looked down. It was Frank’s private number, still new to him, that he was trying to remember. She took the paper from him and jotted it down. And then with false bonhomie, she looked Billy in the eye.

“We *gells* have our uses, you know. Don’t you ever forget it.”

The news told of new Nazi laws to keep down the Jews. The Radio Harpies were most put out. They had been particularly irksome this fine morn, zealously howling their discontent. Julian cut them off. He had found an old photograph in one of the Lodge's unused upstairs rooms. Having no real memory of his father's features, he assumed that the subject was Mr Feign As Was. The photo was in tatters and Julian mounted the fragments on card with flour paste and attempted to suture it back together but there were bits missing and the face remained disassociated from the torso and the legs. Mr Feign As Was's fizzog seemed stranded, like it was painted onto a balloon that was floating skyward. It occurred to Julian that there might be hundreds of thousands of other balloons, thankfully removed from life's tacky, messy necessities, just bobbing along with the clouds. He thought that might be heaven.

He didn't show the photograph to his mother – that would have either confirmed or refuted his speculations, either way there lay disappointment he was sure. Besides, he had no wish to further agitate her. She didn't speak of her husband, hadn't mentioned him for years, even then her estimation of the man was perfunctory:

“The best of him was left in France. Made a ruin by the war he was – gassed. Go nearst a chicken coup or the seaside with them gulls and all and he was fighting for breath – fighting and loosing mostly. Nesh and always mooching he was. Down and gone. I give him cinnamon. Always worked that did but not with him. He was dreadful contrary. Not aminded to this life. Better out of it.”

Once, whilst still a child, Julian had asked her what his father's name was. She had just stared back at him and then walked away. For once he had seen her off kilter. The thought had flown out across his mind that she might not actually remember her husband's name.

Julian's memory of his father's absence was encapsulated in his heavy sample case. He had been a travelling salesman, a commercial. Strapped and locked, the case was stuffed with greetings cards boasting a profundity of joys on the front and crass, sing-song rhymes on the back. That was his game, hawking greetings cards. The case had remained after his father had left, physically and in Julian's memory. It evoked and was evoked by loneliness, a loneliness often heralded by some sharper pain that often took him unawares and which had always punctuated his life; a pain that presaged helplessness and shock and that came like a blast and left him reeling. There was no recollection of anything that had actually happened,

just that bloody case sitting squat and immovable in his memory – *Like them new No Entry signs that are popping up everywhere.*

There was no news of Frank, no letter or phone call. Julian was broken hearted but he could see no way back – Frank had tired of him anyhow. He based this assumption on the undeniable fact that this had happened in every other relationship he had had. From the outset, he had recognized Frank as more complex, more ungainly and unmanageable than any of his previous beaux. He had found him delightfully insistent and often found himself close to giving way to his clamorous emotional demands. But then, without exception, he would retreat into his old self once more. To abandon oneself to such laxity was to take an impossible risk. Who might he become?

He now saw that the management of the eventual severance from Frank had been at the back of mind all along. Better a quick cut than a slow, torturous decline in the relationship as had happened before. As for the West End, it had been his life and it was also gone, or so he adjudged. Though he still cried for the memory of what had been, he saw his losses as inevitable and beyond repair.

He and Miss Desafilado had lost their jobs at the Town Hall. However, she had picked up some occasional teaching for them and they often did demonstration dances at country shindigs, she driving her rusting Morris, Julian studiously writing out the step notation. He found beauty and chemistry in these doings as he had since a child. It was a language that few had mastered. Most dancing was taught directly, students mimicking the steps of their teachers. Yet Julian became immersed in this mysticism of his own making, sitting at his table by the window, the world beckoning but ignored. Once done, his doodling became scripture – he would not brook any innovation, any modification to the steps as written. Nonetheless when Miss Desafilado had proposed they start a modest dancing school, he had been dismissive – “With a war likely? It’s marching they want now, not dancing.” She couldn’t understand his lack of get-up-and-go but then she didn’t know him.

His work done, he came downstairs. His mother was at the Surmans’ as usual but he checked nonetheless – a contretemps with her had his mind discomposed for days on end. He got his bike and rolled down the hill. He met with the Witching Boy at one of Cheltenham’s milk bars then they set off cutting straight across town to the Evesham Road. Till this summer Julian had had little affection for the countryside. He knew about daffs and primroses, dandelions and buttercups, of course – all very nice to be sure though he thought the Burlington Arcade a prettier place. But now, with the Witching Boy, he had entered into England’s green dream and found its rumoured sprites in the flickering summer light.

As they journeyed towards Bredon the Witching Boy prattled on at haphazardly:

“I ain’t one for studying mezelf. Can’t concentrate, no patience. But I’ve picked things up over the years, if you see what I mean... I’m a little chiffchaff me, only yer fer the zummer.”

And then predictably perhaps:

“Yer of a Zunday morning my love and I would lie, an’ zee the coloured counties, and hear the larks so high” and so forth.

They were to meet the Mercurials at a favourite spot. At the back of the thick reed beds that abut the Avon below Bredon, there was a lagoon, a lost turn of the river’s snaking, now cut off. Julian could never remember how to find the place. He relied on the Witching Boy. They cycled down a B road and then down a lane to a path. The signs the Boy used as markers weren’t signs that Julian would recognise – a bush of a certain breed, a turnstile by tall tree somehow different from all the other tall trees.

The lake was curtained by a mist, an opening to an otherness, an incorporeality too lovely to be real. A flat rock, quarried and rolled down from the hill above, formed a platform where the boys basked naked and from which they dived into the cold, diamond metalled water. Their clothes were abandoned along with their bicycles in a clearing in the wood behind. From where Julian lay propped up against a tree, the boys’ bodies were seen in chiaroscuro against the sketchily rendered landscape and a bank of white, frothing cloud. The Witching Boy played his mouth organ. Some of the others entertained themselves with childish singing games, making up verses. One, Alwyn, a ponderous sort of chap, had a camera but was looking to the still life of the broader valley and so missed the moment.

Dangerously, Julian took this dubious loveliness for what he wished it to be, like when he first saw Jessie in *Evergreen* dancing in her blue-black, silvered white world. But its too-good-to-be-trueness didn’t trouble him. All that mattered was that it had come to be. He wept silently for the love of it, as he had on first seeing Jessie.

Eventually, he and the Witching Boy wished the young fauns goodbye and rambled over to the fields towards Bredon’s dip slope. Finding a quiet bank of flowers, they down and lackadaisically masturbated each other. The last heat of a perfect day kissed their flesh; insects flew about the heads of the tall grasses above them. In the wake of his orgasm Julian was engulfed by his fear of ageing once more – “Luvly boy, trust not too much to yer bloom”, the Witching Boy proffered, then recommended the use Selama foundation cream – “Likes yo zees on the advertizing an’ that.”

There was a dull but urgent thumping and trampling of grass. A tall shadow clouded over them. A spectre in corduroy britches and canvass leggings, draped in an apron of hessian sacking had found them out. The old git inside them fumed and coughed sparks like a foundry chimney.

“Vucking willy-gills! Nestin’! It ain’t ’uman barading about naiked like hamimals Vucking boy tartz!”

He snapped shut his shotgun. They struggled to raise themselves up then ran, trousers undone, coats and shirts dragging behind them, stumbling, dragging each other up when they tripped. Reaching their bikes they felt rather than saw the fellow at their heels. The road was a steep climb, their peddling arduous, the gun’s retort was far louder than it had a right to be. They strained and bent themselves to the effort. At the climb’s brow there was another explosion then over they went, freewheeling, falling down into the valley, into a sunset the colour of burnished copper.

The Witching Boy’s hand reached out and Julian took it. In tandem they rushed down the hill, laughing joyously, the wind teasing them, bigotry and bluster left stamping its frustration in their wake.

Nurse Feign strained with the weight of Mrs Surman as she lifted her.

“Now, quickly girl!”

Ethel withdrew the long-armed bed pan and Nurse Feign pulled up her charge’s vast knickers, eased her back into her chair and tidied her clothes. Ethel charged out of the room with the bed pan before her, like a soldier charging forward with fixed bayonet. Satisfied all was in order, Nurse Feign marched to the bedroom door and ushered in the doctor.

Below, Captain Surman nervously stalked the bottom of the stairs, peering up. He heard the titter of quiet laughter and the deep assertive tones of Nurse Feign. Impatient, he returned to living room and his whiskey. June had been a trial to him. Nurse Feign was yet to exact her price. He had realised that, in addition to the all of his photographic studies taken in Egypt, she had possession of his stock of German naturalist magazines. He could offer her no challenge yet he had not the means to buy her off. He could only seek to get away once more.

He had got himself a position as a salesman for the International Broadcasting Company. He had attended an induction course in Portland Place. The building bristled with the paraphernalia of a modernity that he found incomprehensible – rooms crammed with

meters and dials and cables, typewriters and telephones, efficient young men in laboratory coats and neat girls in thin cotton dresses with painted nails. The organisation preferred to take on men like himself – the effluence of the minor public schools who had been prepared for imperial service in the military or the colonial bureaucracy. Despite a backlog of evidence to the contrary, it believed such specimens were imbued with a sense of propriety and authority... or rather it believed customers might consider such types to be imbued with a sense of propriety and authority. In truth, there was little evidence for this either, moreover the Captain's stay at a minor public school had been brief, his claim to membership of the patrician class as insubstantial as that of his use of his temporary military rank.

The Captain was to drum up business with local tradesmen – butchers, haberdashers, undertakers, departmental stores and the like. Announcers would insert their advertising spots between programmes. Permanent, uninterrupted reception could only be relied upon in the south-east, so it was to the coastal holiday resorts with their ever increasing bungalow estates designed for the retired that he was to focus his energies. Road maps lay on the table next to a pile of disjointed memoranda. A cheap W.H. Smith notebook contained his random jottings – there was no order to his notes and subsequently he would later find them useless.

There was laughter from upstairs. Laughter! *That bloody doctor and his bonhomie, he's got the patter all right. Even if they were dying he'd still raise a smile out of them.*

He returned to his maps. He would stay with the old country roads – the new, hurrying arterial highways confused him, set his nerves jangling. The minor roads and back lanes were more to his scale. They branched off and branched off again and constituted a latticework of discrete smallnesses, of little Englands each with their Norman churches and community halls, squires at hounds and vicars at their masses. Journeying through such places calmed him. Besides, it was better to avoid the towns. He could never be sure – his memory not being what it was – whether this or that place was where he had reneged on a debt or given a false name, where writs and summonses, all petty, might yet be outstanding.

The Captain was one of those creatures condemned to believe that he had not been given his due – neither socially nor financially. On first returning to England he had tried to pick up the threads but he had been flummoxed by the absence of familiar topologies he had thought indelible, faces and types that had once marked the way. The old hierarchies no longer held sway though the governance of the nation, it seemed, carried on as if they did. Change was now an everyday occurrence. Everything mutated then bobbed about for bit and mutated once more. Conversely, his understanding of things evaporated at a rate.

He had thought of England as a permanence, a fixed star. But now he found it fleeting and flighty. He realised that his long sojourn abroad had put him beyond society's purview. His fellow countrymen plainly considered him to be some kind of bumpkin and yet he had never felt more English than when he was abroad. This dichotomy challenged him and he never got to the bottom of it. And he was no longer a figure of consequence; that hurt the most.

He had been under the delusion that his service entitled him a modicum of financial immunity but he had been shocked by the vertiginous rise in the cost of living and the inadequacy of his pension. On arriving in London he had followed the advice of the advertisements in the Pioneer Mail and headed straight to Austin Reed's on Regent Street to get kitted out. He was obliged to settle for a roomy camel hair overcoat and the sixpenny titfer that wore day in day out. He couldn't afford a flat in Bayswater, the first choice for his sort or rather the sort he thought he was, and so he had settled in Cheltenham, the second-best choice for the sort he thought he was. His funds soon exhausted, he found himself living on Camp chicory, stale bread and dripping. Various sorry escapades, including his dismal marriage, ensued in pursuit of the easy and substantive remuneration that he thought his due. All had failed.

He knew he would hate this mongering for the radio company. He'd tried selling before. As the remuneration was earned on commission, companies employed commercials haphazardly en masse and consequently they were indifferent to individual failures. More than once in the past he had found himself parked up somewhere, crying and yelling and thumping the air in frustration. As to this latest enterprise, he understood little of radio. Its sole function, it seemed, was to cram one's life with waste and clamour. It was as much white man's magic to him as it was to a Kaffir or a Tutsi.

There was movement upstairs. He would venture one last ploy. He covered his whiskey glass with papers and scurried into the hall. Looking up he saw two pairs of legs facing each other on the landing – one Nurse Feign's and the Doctor's. He strained to listen to their conspiratorial mumbling. The doctor's legs began to descend. He scurried back to his chair and assumed a relaxed posture.

“Ah, doctor, a word? Could we have word?”

The artful sorcerer parked himself at the threshold. The Captain stomped over, levered him into the room and shut the door. The doctor made much of catching the whiff of strong liquor.

“Doctor, I must... I must ask you again to reconsider...”

The doctor's eyes roved the room and settled on the whiskey bottle. He decided to deal with this in a perfunctory fashion. He raised an arm and proffered an open palm, stopping the Captain's foray as irrevocably as a policeman on traffic duty would halt a wagon or a charabanc.

"There is something to be said for an institution, Captain. Patients in asylums rarely suffer appendicitis so they say. Can't see the connection myself..."

Captain Surman made to pitch in once more but the doctor's hand tendered a parting benediction, then he opened the door once more and stepped back into the hall.

"Since you press me, Captain... It would in no sense be appropriate to commit your wife. It remains my unshakeable opinion that she would fare much better if she were to remain in the capable hands of Nurse Feign."

"You would say that! My wife's on one of your health plans. Pays out a fortune each month just so you do nothing. You won't commit her because the cost would have to be borne by the plan."

The doctor raised his head and seemed to stare back at the Captain from a great distance. In his younger days he had made a study of alcoholic infection that had been published in the British Medical Journal. Experience had sustained his thesis. He readily identified the species and genus before him. He need administer no physic. The grubby little cadger had doomed himself. He saw it in his pallor and effusive sweating, smelt it on his breath. He smiled, placed his trilby on his expensively barbered head and exited. The front door closed. The Captain silently cursed through gritted teeth as he returned to the lounge.

His gaze found the programming literature IBC had sent him peeking out of his briefcase – copious pamphlets and brochures for the benefit of himself and his customers: "Radio Luxembourg! The most powerful broadcasting station in Europe for British advertisers!", "Strang's Football Pools' Variety Broadcast", "Horlicks Picture House", dance music and yet more dance music. He was lost, his head swam, his mouth muttered and frothed discontent and his distorted face took on a remarkable resemblance to that on the knob of his walking cane. *What did it all mean? What was the point of it?*

Upstairs, his wife resumed her jigsaw of Richard Coeur de Lion. The Good King, the brave and noble king who would defeat the heathen and restore order – a queer king if she but knew it. She placed a jigsaw piece revealing the bowed, tonsured head of a monk mouthing prayer.

Nurse Feign remained at the top of the stairs – it had been her turn to listen in. She had been delighted to learn that the Captain had been driven down into the mire once more.

She sighed contentedly and returned to Mrs Surman's bedroom. There on the carpet before her lay a fallen jigsaw piece, unnoticed. Mrs Surman was absorbed, trying this and that shape, her eyes flitting about the puzzle. Nurse Feign pocketed the piece on the floor and deposited it in her apron pocket where her grip tightened about it.

The front door slammed violently. She walked to the window, drew back the net curtain and peered out. Captain Surman, stick in hand, stormed out of the front gate, disappeared beneath the street's greenery. She studied the cloudless sky above, heard the music of a cooing breeze, and savoured the scent of the avenue's populous shrubbery as she lightly fingered the jigsaw piece in her pocket.

Cheltenham's bosky Pump Room gardens were alive with flashes of summer colour and children's cries of delight. Middleclass families taking tea nibbled on fairy cakes and iced buns. The sun sparkled on gaudy jewellery and glacé cherries. The bandstand was empty yet people still oriented their seats and deckchairs toward it as if watching an unseen orchestra making unheard music whilst the Pump Room's statues of Hygeia, Aesculapius and Hippocrates remained indifferent to the prattle of those below and beneath them. The park keeper patrolled the periphery sniffing out any unseemly doings in the bushes.

The Captain had taken a seat beneath an oak heavy with leaf. Its shade hid him whilst his view down to the lake was unrestricted. Before him, three little girls were skipping with a double rope and chanting:

"Down in the valley where the green grass grows,

There sat she, pretty as a rose.

Up came a boy and kissed her on the cheek,

How many kisses did she get this week?

One kiss, two kiss, three..."

Some youths stood watching. One, egged on by the others, dashed forward and dared to shout:

"Down in the valley where the green grass grows

A lady stands without any clothes

Along comes a man with his hat on a stick

Down with his trousers and up with his prick."

Mothers howled their indignation, the girls' game stopped and the park keeper impotently attempted to chase the scurrying boys as they headed off, yelling and wheeling on their toes to hurl back further obscenities.

Captain Surman eyed the pale, undernourished working class youths with disdain. They were already tainted with the grey hue of the factory, any inbred attractiveness stunted by the narrowness of their pinched lives. In Egypt he had tyrannized lads of that age with a leather and brass imperium. He had had boys to polish and scrub for him, to fetch and carry for him. And in upstairs rooms, airless and sweltering and rife with the whiff of the lavender cart, he had boys to fuck and pay with worthless Egyptian paper money – beautiful boys at that!

Well, so what if he coloured his memories with all the gaudiness of a tinted postcard? It was preferable to the actuality. The truth was that he had soon realised a predestined hatred for the Cairo boy-tarts, those girly nothings and their necessary duplicity, who never understood when their beauty was spent, when their worth was exhausted like the bloody Egyptian pound. What attraction there was had lain in the endless replication of those burgeoning, salacious bodies. He remembered them as but one soft, ripening creature in different guises. Most were eminently kneadable but occasionally one disappointed and was beaten. They looked upon this as instructive and held out the vain hope that they might serve better next time. But they were bruised fruit and were of no further use to him. It had been like that with the boy in the photographs...

In his tender years before going to Egypt he had poured over Burton's *Thousand and One Nights*, read under-the-counter pamphlets on Greek love and ephebes, the Mamelukes, and the Bey of Tunis and his harem of catamites. He had listened entranced to those who had served in the colonies, who reminisced over Anglo-Indian railway clerks and Ceylonese coolies. He would, so they had promised him, find an ungoverned naturalness abroad. But Egypt had proved as sordid and hugger-mugger as the Dilly or Hyde Park Corner or the houses of any number of English provincial towns whose addresses had been scribbled for him by delicate, haunted men sipping stout in backstreet pubs. Egypt had cheated him. It had declined to offer up its fruits beneficently. He had had to barter and connive and the humiliation made him red with resentment and raw with acrimony.

He looked about him. God, how he hated these people and their bookshelves crammed with faux leather-covered tomes that they had never read, pictures of idyllic landscapes they had never visited and homilies stitched into tapis hanging from high cornices gathering dust. Just as they kow-towed to the proven whims of fashion and put a pittance on

the plate on high holidays, they thought it enough merely to advertise their pretensions. Politeness forbade them from doing more and they thanked God that more wasn't required of them. They had no idea as what life was or could be. He mused that the heartwood of being had been given to the commonplace; that the fundamental chords and bass of life had been allowed to rot and wither in favour of the facile, preening treble and alto. And this tragedy went unnoticed by the pulseless ruminants that peopled this sorry England, who scoffed their jam tarts and cream cakes on summer afternoons obliviously. *Now in Germany...*

Around the curve of the bandstand sat a rather huddled young fellow engrossed in a magazine. The Captain saw immediately that he had once been beautiful and that his aging was transmuting him into ordinariness. This undeniable degeneration chimed with his memories of the Cairo boys. He eyed the chap as he brushed away a fly then fanned the air whooshing it away. In doing so his face became more visible. The Captain knew him – but from where? He studied his formality, the hint of sissyness. He had him now. That odd fellow who had taken up with the Mercurials. Some sort of dancer no less.

He was about to turn away but then his eye caught sight of Nurse Feign descending like a cloud heavy with weather upon the chap's table. He seemed to shrink in her presence and fawned attentiveness. She handed him a glass of salty spa water. He grimaced at the taste but swallowed it dutifully. Nurse Feign, her arms folded, sitting stiff in her chair, began lecturing the chap. Her mouth yakked and yakked, the fellow quailed and funkled under the onslaught. He started to prizzy himself, finicking with his tie, dusting down his trousers.

So this was Nurse Feign's son. *Under her thumb like everyone else it seemed. And queer to boot he shouldn't wonder, what with the Mercurials and what have you.* He looked more closely at him. *Yes, queer to be sure.*

On their way to the swimming hole, the Mercurials had been passed by a small convoy of troops heading for the camp outside Tewkesbury. The soldiers cheered and leered and called them nancies and worse; some flicked lighted cigarettes at them forcing them to caper ridiculously as they attempted to divest themselves of the smouldering ash. The Witching Boy had yelled back excitedly but the others had given themselves over to black cogitations on the roughhouse future that awaited them should they be conscripted. Along the lane and then the dusty path, they passed field after field compulsorily given over to the

plough. Wars were habitually delayed until corn harvest and right beside the entrance to the wood they found a field half-stubbed and heard the cackling of a binder.

They let fall their bikes and ambled through the open gate. The brow of the hill took the long field with it. A pallid yellow and violet sky silhouetted the stooks, the sun windmilling its shine through high, thin cloud and sending down fingers of gold. Wind swished and devilled in the long grass and the field was charged with the anticipation of a coming storm. The Witching Boy cut himself a withy from the hedge and a few Mercurials followed suit. Most, however, stayed put, perched birdlike on the gate. Julian stood beside them.

Beside the hedgerows surrounding the field farm workers squatted on straw bales or leant against trees. A young man flirted with his girl, some of the gentry marched back and forth with their shooting sticks, youths in short trousers chewed on grass stalks, older men chewed on their pipes whilst children jumped and ran about in their own privy, jewelled summer. Julian couldn't fathom what was happening, what this audience was waiting for, but he felt an incongruous tension in this handsome place.

A pair of fine mares dragged the binder which spat out bound sheaves of corn every other yard or so. Men falling in behind gathered them into stooks. Yellow-hammers atop bramble and briar looked on dispassionately; blackbirds winged and fretted in the air above, then took to the stubble and their feast. The binder followed a spiralling ever-tightening circle toward dwindling uncut middle. The watchers became animated. Julian looked on, puzzled. From all sides of the field youths approached the remaining standing corn. Armed with withies, they were after the rabbits and vermin that had retreated there. Behind them, older men stood poised with nets kept for the January ferreting but which would do adequate service if kept for the larger rodents; a few had shotguns to cover the hedges.

The binder yakked, the small beasts cowered and jittered. Then it blundered toward the remaining citadel of corn. The furry things panicked and careered out of their threatened den. The youths rushed forward. They whirled and dashed about their prey, arms flaying, thwacking the ground, the withy sticks whoosh-whooshing in the air, corn dust flying. The binder cackled, the killers ran amok; some tripped, fell into stooks, turned about and charged again. Prey fell to cudgel and boot tread and shot. Some seemed mesmerised or accepting but others yelped and wheeled about in defiance. A few of the more practiced farm workers snatched rabbits and pulled at their necks. The dead were collected into piles and trampled down to a rufous mash.

And there was the Witching Boy, their drummer, with his zeds for esses and vees for efs, beamy and ecstatic, singing his pleasure. Julian could not fathom his feral dance; find any harmony in his bloody carousing. He could only gawk as Boy's withy walloped the ground and his foot stamped; as he cavorted dementedly, striking the ground again and again. Some of the Mercurials turned away and went off down the path. Most remained watching but a few answered to the call of blood, taking up sticks and tentatively joining in the cull. Then there was a yell of triumph. Some of the killers had encircled a panicked rabbit and were toying with it. One youth was parading a pole slung about his shoulders from which dead rabbits hung. He stopped to pose for Alwyn's camera.

Julian couldn't understand how he had come upon such intemperate rites. He had followed the lane and the path to the wood so many times this summer and never thought for a moment that it might lead to this one day. That night at the Piccadilly, when the Lambeth Walkers with their swaggering and oi-ing came to mind. *And that business with the King at that camp singing the bloody Chestnut Tree with all them common kids. This is what all that hands-knees-and-boomps-a-daisy leads to.* The dithyrambic dance had its hold over them to be sure.

Thoughts tumbled out. Julian realised that he had let things slide, that he had allowed himself to drift toward a tumult. He thought of his fall from grace at the Piccadilly Hotel, how, in flight, he had rediscovered Gloucestershire – its tall summer skies and the wide panoramas of the Avon valley – in a dream; but then the byway, the lane and the path to this field of atavistic rite. A din of fears clanked and clunked inside his head – a coarse, febrile music raved. His inherent dread of being exposed in the open – like one of these poor beasts turned to stone, frozen still by terror – asserted itself. He thought of his first anxious days on the Dilly, alone and exposed to brutal whim.

But then he felt another presence beyond the gate, by a stile that led into the wood. The Captain had arrived. He stood transfixed. His head was thrown back, his eyes were wide and bright, the hint of spittle was on his lips. Julian felt the flood fall within him. He instinctively shuffled sideways and fell in behind the Captain's bulk. The Captain recognised him at once; felt his nearness and his need, the debasement of his capitulation. He stiffened with relish and silently offered up a prayer to the god that made him.

The binder fell silent and stood still at last. The storm had passed over; the oblation had been made. The dark underbelly of a cloud briefly charcoaled Bredon's wide sweep then crawled on. The killers gasped for air, their wiry chests heaving, their hair slicked with sweat. The watchers turned away. Boys shooed hens onto the field to feed on the remnants. They

would stay with them till sunset when they would see them home. The remaining Mercurials went their own way. Julian followed the Captain out of the field, the Witching Boy watching his back as he was lost to the darkness of the wood.

Over the hills to the east the sky was crazed with the spit and splutter of electric flame. In the midst of harvest here had been a winnowing and now all would be still for a while.

Nurse Feign was inspecting the contents of the linen cupboard, counting the towels and sheets against her scribbled inventory. She had already seen to the patent medicines – rattling boxes of pills, lifting bottles to gauge their levels, and sniffing balms and ointments to test their remaining efficacy. Next she would inspect the house for cleanliness seeking out specs of dust and finger marks on window sills and shelves. As her progress proceeded, she noted any problems to be taken up with Ethel the Maid of All Work. She found it a trial simply to maintain the house. Ethel always missed things. If she wasn't so particular... well things would soon fall apart. Yet it was all so simple really. All that was needed was a mechanical efficiency. No more. But even that was wanting. And so she was obliged to stand before the timorous Ethel once more, her arms together and outstretched, her palms open as if holding an invisible box, gesticulating like a windmill beset by a hoard of hornets – first you must do this, then you must do that, this, that, then another this and another that, her windmilling arms proscribing ever greater arcs, her voice exhibiting weariness of the highest order, like that of a priest long ago done with the Litany.

To Nurse Feign the downward slide in the quality of servants seemed unstoppable – “Send them all to Lancashire, to the cotton mills, see how they fancy that!” was her blanket remedy. Consequently, she had no conception of Ethel's response to this weekly upbraiding. Paradoxically, foreknowledge of the misery about to descend her upon caused the only dereliction that that conscientious drudge would ever contemplate – she stiffened herself with a measure of the Captain's corrosive whiskey and, for a chaser, downed a dose of bicarbonate of soda to clean her breath. Then she contemplated the upsidedown-ness of a world in which the likes of Nurse Feign, who she habitually had to clean up after and was oblivious to own failings, had somehow achieved sovereignty over her.

As Nurse Feign made her way across the landing she remembered the note that Julian had left for her at the Lodge and which she had stuffed into her pocket as she hurried to catch the bus:

“Hello old pal,

I think I need a tonic so I'm going to let the sea air shake out the cobwebs. I'm off to Eastbourne with “My knapsack on my back” as it were. Can't stay cooped up like this.

Have I been a real trial? Ah, well that's me isn't it? I think it's pure vindictiveness that's taken its toll this time. You don't know the half of it. One of

life's martyrs, that's me. Fol-de-di! Never mind, I'll come back rejuvenated, just like the boy you used to know.

Your loving son, Julian

PS I've topped up on the coal and candles."

Nonsense, of course – *"Fol-de-di!" and all that palaver. And "one of life's martyrs" no less! And he wasn't a "boy". He had never been a "boy". And he wasn't cooped up at all. He was always out. At work and ... what of work? He hadn't been at the dance hall any more than a couple of months and they have let him swan off just like that?* She pondered this unlikelihood. As for the "vindictiveness" Julian alluded to... There was no sense in it but then Julian and sense had always been fated to be strangers. The note found its way to the bottom of one her voluminous pockets but its insinuations remained lodged in the forefront of her cogitations.

Thus discombobulated, she lumbered along the landing past the open bathroom door and then, realising something was amiss, retraced her steps and peered in. The Captain's tooth cleanser and shaver were missing from the shelf. On closer inspection she discovered that all his toiletries were gone. She went to the Captain's bedroom, cocked an ear for sound then inched in. Unwanted clothes lay strewn on the bed. She flung open the wardrobe door – half a dozen empty hangers dangled from the rail, at the bottom a pair of unemployed shoe trees stood to attention.

He was away then, gone to who-knows-where again. This was her opportunity to rummage a little, see what she might find. She probed beneath the mattress and atop the curtain pelmet. She dragged a trunk out from beneath the Captain's bed. She mounted it and felt about the top of the wardrobe. Nothing. The captain was wise to her now; it could only be expected what with those filthy photographs and all. As she was putting back the trunk, a garishly coloured brochure emerged from beneath it – bathing belles, beach balls, blue skies. Eastbourne!

She tumbled down the stairs and into the front room noting as she passed that the Captain's titter and cane were gone from the hat stand. The Captain's desk was a maze of confusion, the rammel of his recent research – notes and correspondence were parked indiscriminately in his letter rack, pinioned on a bill spike, or sandwiched together with a bull clip. Ethel dare not touch this and, for once, Nurse Feign overlooked her dilatoriness – she had often won prized advantage from the close inspection of the Captain's detritus.

Now she discovered the circled addresses of grocery stores and bicycle shops, wedding cake makers and photographic portrait artists, all of them on the South Coast, in the holiday resorts. And then letters from Eastbourne bed-and-breakfast landladies and back street hoteliers, their rates jotted down beside addresses and telephone numbers. “*Fol-de-di*” *my eye!* The Captain had him, she was certain of it, felt it in her waters; had him to wheedle little titbits of truth out of, salacious nibbles to counter her scheming, to ruin her if he had a mind to and Julian too stupid to see his game.

She remained long in that room even though it was empty to her. She became the centre of nothing. But then, when she eventually left it, she saw across the hallway, under the bright beam of the sunburst porthole, a stain in the carpet – as bold as you like, just sitting there for all to see. This challenge to her dignity brought her back to herself, recalibrated her centre of balance.

In her scullery, Ethel downed her whiskey, stirred her glass of bicarb and awaited with resolve whatever measure that was to be her due.

They had driven the circuitous miles south with Julian wanking the Captain, his arm pumping gently as he stared blankly ahead. Not that things had been straightforward, so to speak. The Captain suffered a genital abnormality – his prick curved down and to the right, his foreskin remained hooded and the hole opened beneath. At first the bloody thing repeatedly escaped Julian’s grip and when erect took on a life of its own. Eventually he tamed it though he remained concerned that things might prove painful should the relationship develop as was customary. In the meantime his administrations proved efficacious – the Captain’s chemistry was tickled, his view of the world became ever more delicately tinted and spiced, and his incongruent Buddha-like smile bestowed beneficence upon all who passed by.

They arrived at the coast in the early afternoon. The Captain parked atop a cliff next to a refreshment kiosk manned by some members of the local temperance council – all of them male, all of them holding a grudge against the world. Julian dived behind some bushes and reappeared sporting a swimsuit, plimsolls and his Shire Mercurials’ Popeye hat. They followed a path that took them east towards a secluded cove or rather a cove believed by half the holidaymakers on the coast to be secluded. Julian sauntered ahead mindful of the Captain’s flagrant ogling but unaware that his appetite was savoured by the knowledge that

every sucking and shafting minute he spent with him was an arrow in Nurse Feign's cold heart. Ahead a bird suddenly took flight and, as Julian rounded a bend, he came across a badly mauled creature that may once have been a rabbit. He was transfixed by the sight. The Captain caught up with him.

"Walk on. Walk on a way."

Julian inched around the sanguinary, palpitating muss. As he walked on he heard the heavy stamp of the Captain's boot. He dawdled a little as he sought composure. The Captain came up to him once more, looked the tremulous Julian up and down.

"You see what I'm like. Thank God I left London. There'll be the bombing and the gassing. I couldn't bear it."

"Bloody Jew-lovers have brought it down upon us."

"We'll lose this time, won't we?"

"It's the Idea, you see. The Germans have the Big Idea."

Julian considered this proposition for a while not knowing what "the Big Idea" might be. The Captain sought to enlighten him.

"No shepherd but one herd that's the trouble. England's too much of a muchness when it comes down to it. No top and no bottom."

Julian looked out over the sea. France and Poor Little Belgium were over there. They'd feel the benefit of the Big Idea before us no doubt. They walked on, Julian instinctively edging closer to the Captain and, on reaching the beach, behind a clamorous crowd of holidaymakers, he acted as he thought he must.

"Will you stop! Don't fucking well quean it with me! I've no time for that."

The Captain marched off down the beach, tapping his stick against his side as if calling a pet dog to heel. He sat down on a rock and, there being but little room, Julian sat in the sand before him. Further out toward the shore girls in white Grecian style swimwear sunned themselves whilst hikers wearing shorts and cocked French berets consulted a map then donned their knapsacks and marched off in good order. Julian was perplexed. They were on the coast, where could they be going that required a map? You either went this way or that, the sea to your right or to your left. Nonetheless there had been a great deal of finger-pointing and throwing up of arms before their disputations had been settled. "No shepherd but one herd" to be sure.

He looked up at the Captain. He was sweating.

"You might loosen your tie or take it off. It's permissible whilst on holiday. It's too hot for a tie, really it is."

“Used to it. Full drill in Egypt. Feel undressed without a tie.”

“Have you any photos? You must have looked quite something...”

The Captain looked down upon him imperiously.

“You’re quite a clever piece on the quiet, aren’t you, girly?”

Julian stared back innocently.

The Captain must assert his authority. Things always proceed satisfactorily when we know where we are.

“You think I can’t get the measure of a man after all my years of service?”

Julian sucked his lips with mock petulance.

“You think *I* can’t get the measure of a man after all *my* years of service?”

That was too much. The Captain summoned his inner brute. He leant forward, bore down upon the mite beneath him.

“Be satisfied with what you get and don’t pry. Eh, girly?”

He prodded Julian with his stick to drive his point home.

“I’m sure you can manage that. I’ll bet a pound against a penny you can manage that. Eh, eh?”

The stick skewered and maimed. Julian smarted and turned away.

“Silly me. No offence, I’m sure. I’m just a sailor on the sea of love, my dear. I don’t know me fore from me aft.”

He’d asked for it, of course. What was he thinking of? Then the thought struck him that he didn’t know why he, who never provoked anyone, he who whose greatest desire was to be invisible, had taunted the Captain, had flaunted himself in a swimsuit of all things. He had needed to assure himself that he was still at the forefront of the Captain’s thoughts, of course. Being wanted, albeit fleetingly, was the nearest he ever got to having confidence in himself and yet, inevitably, he was already thinking of how the story must end, how it was predetermined to end.

He stared out to sea. The light played on the waves close by the shore, the gulls coughed and wheeled. Children were grubbing about in a rock pool. He thought of his earlier lovers and of Frank. How all had made of him what he was not. How he had fucked them and fucked them some more to stop their probing and rummaging and to put a stop to such things as they conjured up. How eventually they had imagined him no more. But the Captain had shown no sign of investing in such magic. Something else held his interest...

The Captain rose.

“Fall in. Come on now!”

Julian peered up at the Captain's paunch.

"And don't think to try and tie me with your silliness, with your preening. I won't be held by that. Fall in and don't make a nuisance of yourself. You don't want to get noticed, do you? Where would that get you?"

No, Julian didn't want get noticed and that's the truth. He wrapped his beach towel about himself, willed himself smaller.

They were off again. On reaching the cliff top path, they passed the refreshment kiosk once more. Holidaymakers were arguing volubly about the prospect of war. Amongst the hikers and the temperance men, the Peace Pledgers were in the majority but there were a paltry few who were for Churchill and Eden and the inviolability of Empire. The Captain snorted as he passed by and then turned into the rough grassland beyond. They trounced on for about a hundred yards or so, Julian wafting away insects and wallowing in the profuseness of scent.

The Captain stopped and leant on his stick. The argument back at the kiosk was reaching its crescendo as Julian knelt on a carpet of wild flowers before him. A woman's shriek, enough to shatter glass added treble to the bass and tenor of the disputatious choir. Julian unbuttoned the Captain's fly. Butterflies patrolled about them as he set about his business.

Then back at the kiosk a martial cry sent a dozen larks and meadow pipits skywards as some old Tory let fly a verse – "Hear! Drake's Drum is sounding! The Dons are comin'! Drum 'em up! Drum 'em up!"

The Captain emitted an orgasmic shudder.

With his bowler and spotted dickie-bow, metropolitan Police Superintendent Arthur Crombie looked like a grey, piggy-eyed Stan Laurel. Many had mentally made the comparison but soon abandoned it. There was nothing of the confused, the bemused or the innocent about Arthur. He knew the world inside out and that knowledge hung about him, imbued him with a pallor that his doctor had long put down to anaemia, but he knew better. No, any comparison with the permanently befuddled Stan fell well short of the mark.

His car had taken him to the pedestrian entrance of Dolphin Square. A long tree-lined walkway through buddleias and hydrangeas led to a fountain and behind that a blind, limestone portico. The blocks of flats – ten stories, most them, over a thousand apartments –

rose out of this communal jungle. They housed fifty or so MPs, a few dozen lords, military types from the various ministries and senior civil servants of all hues. Arthur allowed himself a wintery smile. He knew full well that other, even less salubrious sorts had their nests there – speculators, kinema and radio personalities and tarts, of course, plenty of tarts. All enjoyed its amenities – a swimming pool, gymnasium, and restaurant offering room service. Dolphin Square was a hotly spiced stew, a hotchpotch that brought into proximity too many individuals of diverse caste; it was unhealthy, unhygienic even. *Yes, that's the word – unhygienic.*

Ahead, one of the Yard's sergeants, Esmond, emerged from the shrubbery.

"This way, sir. Drake House."

Each block was named after a hero of empire, an attempt to invest the flats' pragmatic red brick and concrete conformity with the semblance of a noble tradition. They entered the lobby and took the lift.

"Suicide, sir. Young bit of stuff. I haven't touched a thing yet. Just did a quick recce."

The constable at the flat door nodded familiarly and let them in. Esmond guided Arthur to the bedroom. The Cream and Roses Girl lay in repose. Her hair fell loose about her shoulders. She was sprawled on white Indian cotton sheets and she wore the white satin dress that Julian had seen her in at the ballroom. Broken light pierced the net curtain and fell upon her, teased and tickled her white stone beauty. *It was quite a turn. Arresting* – a beautiful Aryan goddess, an Ayesha. Esmond pointed to the bottle of Sonoril, empty of course, that had fallen behind her bedside table.

Arthur nodded his understanding. Esmond set about the flat with an efficiency born of long-standing experience. Arthur ambled about, peeking behind furniture and opening cupboard doors. A jar of Selama cream sat on the dresser, its label displaying the cameo of the "Cream-and Roses Girl". He bent his arthritic knees and peered at it then back at the girl.

"She's got some money, sir. More than one bank account, different towns ... oh, and a post office book. She didn't get all that playing the pools or spot the ball. She's a peach alright. I'd like to see what the tax office has on her – various addresses and the like."

Esmond didn't expect a reply and didn't get one. Arthur was engrossed, he was good at that, Esmond inwardly conceded. Arthur was trying to capture an impression of the girl moving about the flat – a bundle of feelings hot and cold, thoughts articulated or mere fragments of sense memory, a gathering that constituted the poor girl's soul, meagre as it was.

Esmond found some letters.

“Parents live in Peckham so someone’s forking out a fortune for the rent.”

Ten quid a week and “all found”. “All found”? Nothing like it, eh, my girl?

Arthur studied the jar of Selama once more.

Dreams in a jar. Dreams ...

“Here we go! Take a peek at this lot, sir.”

An open bottom drawer revealed a pile of gutted asthma inhalers. The girl had been after the Benzedrine-doused cotton wool pads in their insides.

“No chemist’s labels, of course.”

Esmond’s podgy fingers rummaged amongst the debris.

“No wonder she was down in the dumps.”

Already a picture was emerging in Arthur’s mind of the sort of company the girl kept. In particular he was beginning to sketch out the type of man who would have paid for a flat of this calibre.

He found the girl’s diary under a sofa cushion and not her pillow. The bedroom then was no sanctum of privacy as one might expect. It was a place of business and no more. He walked back in again and confirmed that it was bare of emotional investment. It smelt of carbolic and thyme camphor, of culpability and contrition. He looked down at the girl once more. *No going back – that’s what so many of them think. As if they were marked in some way, indelible like. As if the world would remember forever what they had been. Stupid! Reckless! Giving up life before it had begun for the sake of so paltry a delusion.*

He looked up to find Esmond proffering a note – *the* note, unopened.

The envelope and the notepaper didn’t match though both were fancy. They went with the garish knick-knacks thrown about the sitting room that were so unlike the Jasperware relief-like quality of the Roses and Cream Girl’s visage on the jar. The writing began expansively but then became more pinched as the testimony progressed and the poor girl gave vent to yet more grievances and protestations and the paper ran out. Arthur thrilled to the prospect of revelation. But then procedure checked him. He delved about the girl’s dressing table, retrieved various notes and scribbles. Yes, it was the girl’s writing all right.

An abortion, eh? Arthur saw immediately that this was something out of the ordinary. Most pregnancies that could be chalked up to the upper classes were terminated in the London clinics. At fifty quid a go they were minting it. So why go out of town? Especially jealous of their reputation, what’s why. The clinics were for rich married women who disdained the prospect of a pack of needy brats. This pointed to a very important lover, very important and rich and...

He felt the weight of the world suddenly press down upon him. He became unnaturally still. He forgot to breathe and his breathlessness made him dizzy. One name was repeated, no, not a name, a title and that of a Man of Note to boot. He felt the welling up of fear. He was too old for that; didn't want it, resented it. But it came anyhow.

Esmond had stopped short sensing Arthur's dread. He reached for the letter. Arthur clung to it possessively.

"I can't abide baby killings. There is the matter of spirit to be considered."

Esmond knew which way Arthur was going – the same way he always went. He attempted a diversion.

"happens ten times a day in Harley Street even if Her Ladyship must dig deep in her purse for a medical declaration."

Arthur brought himself back from his cogitations, turned to the girl's bank statements once more.

"Too many suicides after the event! Reason? Blackmail, Esmond! Her bank books... regular outgoings, eh? Way beyond her means lucrative though they be."

Esmond picked up the bank books once more, shuffled through their pages. Sure enough, on closer inspection, there they were – from different accounts to be sure, but regular payments nonetheless. About three months' worth.

"Perhaps it was life that was beyond her means, eh Esmond?"

Esmond put back the bank books into an envelope and reached for the girl's note once more. Without acknowledging him, Arthur folded it in two making a heavy crease with thumb and forefinger. He dropped it into his wallet and snapped the clasp shut with an abrupt certitude. Esmond was involuntarily reminded of a bird brought down in flight by shot.

Arthur made for the front door leaving Esmond standing.

"Yes, Esmond, you do that."

"Eh?"

"The bank accounts... the post office book. And the tax office, yes the tax office."

Esmond followed him through to the front room.

"Don't forget to open the window when you've done."

Arthur wanted the spirit to fly; to constrain a soul longing to go to its celestial home was a sin. He left and Esmond ruminated on his harbouring of the note.

The Cream and Roses Girl also remained; her body poised as if calling Arthur back.

Julian was perplexed. Ahead, on the corner of a building facing the promenade, an advertisement blared “You must be prepared for home defence – lay in a store of Ovaltine NOW!” Whatever those about him were doing or thought they were doing, they weren’t busily hoarding groceries.

These were the first crowds he had been immersed in since leaving London. There the fractious throng displayed a surfeit of purpose. The West End especially seemed to have too many “heres” from which to start and too many “theres” to go to. One always felt that one’s own trajectory was of singular merit and that “one” was indeed a “one” but as for the rest... *Well, they could be a tribe of bleedin’ wasps for all the good they seemed to be about.*

The seafront was different. It had a limited number of loci about which the crowd gravitated. The kids were all bunched round a Punch and Judy show screaming blue murder. In the midst of a flower garden, a more inhibited audience surrounded the bandstand where a military orchestra stultifyingly attempted the latest dance tunes. Splinters of brass echoings wafted over to where Julian was parked. The music sounded tubercular, wilted as if the very air about the musicians was somehow corrosive.

And before the lido there was a Pierrot show. Beneath a dangling papier-mâché moon a dozen or so sexless song and dance boys and girls disported in baggy, ruffed costumes. They were all eyes and spindly legs. Their arms imploring, they mugged and hoofed and cawed for all their worth which didn’t amount to much – Julian found himself counting the pom-pom buttons on their costumes.

At the back of the town there was a fairground. Iron towers thrust upwards or carved violently pitching waves in the sky. If you didn’t know their purpose you would have been flummoxed. The thinly-spoked Great Wheel stood still this early in the day; Julian immediately thought of the spinning wheels of the Shire Mercurials’ racing bikes. For all the effort expended in making this town come alive, Julian judged it mere mechanical edifice, but the Mercurials, they were indeed alive, they sent their wheels racing, their blood racing. He thought fondly of them but then such thinking had led him to that torrid field and its bloody business and so he shut his mind to them.

On the promenade itself the holidaymakers moved west to their lodgings or a gift shop or a pub or the “amenities” or else they moved east to their lodgings or a gift shop or a pub or the “amenities”. Then they came back again. Or perhaps they went to the pier and the amusement arcades and candy kiosks and penny telescopes... and then back again. Though noisy and bilious in their rough candour there was, nonetheless, something clockwork about

them. They never ventured beyond their purlieu. He saw immediately how easy it would be to get them to march hither and thither.

On the beach, young families paddled about in the near waters getting their best clothes wet and rejoicing in it. Donkeys paraded joyous infants back and forth, their masters kicking sand over the shit they left behind. Most, thousands that is, merely rented a deckchair and sat rooted in the sand, their backs to an England that was too bloody complicated, too much like hard work, too much blackened, flaking brick and sooted chimneys and windows of yellowing glass and cemented grime to care about. It occurred to Julian that they were waiting. That they'd got their places staked, had rented their deckchairs and unpacked their sandwiches and flasks of tea and that, thus pleasantly disposed, they waited... For what exactly? Perhaps they waited for Mr Hitler's Big Idea; for his armada and his regiments to appear out of the sea, for his tanks to plough up the beach then speed away up the A21 to the metropolis. Perhaps they hoped this would happen, if it must happen at all, before their tea went cold and their sandwiches staled.

One chap caught Julian's attention. He stood in the water, side on to the beach, his trousers rolled up to his knees, holding his boots by their laces. His flat cap pressed down upon him, the folds of his neck above his collar bulged and the swell of his stomach tested his braces. He was past his prime but he stood resolute, challenging whatever threat might be forthcoming. Or he could have been cooling his feet or getting a closer look at the bathing belles. But he wasn't. He was England; an England born old, grown older still and prepared to defend its cherished predilection for immutability.

Julian had been not a little taken aback by the morning so far. It had run counter to his initial experience of the Captain. In the past few days he had become viscerally aware of the Captain's incursion into his sensibility, the mind Captain moving about his woolgathering, irascibly elbowing his way into him and brooking no counter. It was nothing to do with love. He knew that from the start. More like a collision. Nonetheless he soon understood that the Captain had somehow changed his own history, the version of himself that he hung out for all to see. Though singular, the feeling was nonetheless familiar. He had felt the same when he had first met Frank but now even that memory seemed in some sense altered, reiterated as if by another voice, one he was yet to own. He couldn't understand this shift. Frank had meant everything to him – still did, surely? And yet he felt himself rewriting Frank, putting him into the half-light, to one side of the focal point of his living.

In a fundamental sense the Captain's incessant vituperation had left little room for much else. He had spent most of the last few days, between the pawing and the tonguing and the fucking, firing salvos.

"The way we live now is a sickness. Defectives everywhere! Apes for stockbrokers, the peasantry taken for philosophers, gifted the same worth as civilised men and scrawling their ballot."

That there was banditry on the streets did not surprise him – "There's too much swank and uppishness! The noisome breeds have been given the upper hand."

And all the while the country was wallowing in the psychic laziness of a dream paradise and spouting pacifism – "What's it called? Ghandiism! Soft as mops, the lot of them! Flabby, womanish! And the Best Blood neutered, its potent efficacy corrupted".

Democracy was the culprit. The Best Blood had been duped into accommodations with inferiors and now everything was brown ale stains and full ashtrays – "There's no one to clear things up, you see. That sort of thing's beneath the common man nowadays." What was needed was the Big Idea.

Julian meanwhile was being drawn by more elemental reckonings. He was becoming mesmerised by the smell of leather, the sharp creases in the Captain's twills, his Bull, Blanco and Brasso outlook on life. He found it reassuring. And because he broadly agreed with the Captain's reasoning or the banner headlines of that reasoning at least – "Never get close to the rank and file, better for all concerned" and so forth – he mistook this paper thin lambasting for wisdom. He was primed therefore to take the next step, to foray into territory that was new to him and which might hold a terror.

Encouraged, the Captain's rhetoric attempted ever greater strides – "We need a new yeomanry, a manly religion free of this stale morality. Active, single-minded men of a military bent. The Best Blood must come forth. *Mens sana in corpore sano*! All men are savages at heart!"

What the Captain admired most about Mr Hitler was the good sense of it all.

"Hitler's a surgeon. He'll cut out the disease – the Jew disease, the uppity mob, the Commons and the BBC, he'll amputate dead limbs and then put the body back together again...."

He barked Mr Hitler's pronouncements on war – "War roots 'em out. War's biology, nature. Peace is a trap that ties men up in knots. Everybody's talking about war and nothing else. Talking about it. Talk. Talk. It'll be on us soon. Soon see what all that talk did for us."

Julian was naturally unnerved by this latter assertion. All that he hoped for from the Captain was some way out from his predicament... and some way to get away from the coming war. He had thought that the Big Idea – whatever it was – might be just the ticket. But now his fear became palpable and the Captain sought to sooth him.

“There are those who worry that Hitler will bomb Albion into oblivion. But why would he? No, England will be preserved, only them living off it and despoiling it in the name of profit and usury have course to fear. Only those with their boot on the neck of the Best Blood will choke on the finding gas.”

But Julian had doubts. How would Mr Hitler and his bombs and bullets single them out? How could the “finding gas” be so choosy? He had always sought the patronage of those with the wherewithal to shelter him. He sincerely thought that that was the natural order of things. But ever since that business in the field, it had seemed to Julian that England had lost its sure footing. It had become as chaotic a shambles as the Dilly. *The Select were a bleedin’ disgrace. Letting things get so jumbled up and addled.* If he’d been back in London, he’d have had words and damn decorum. But he knew couldn’t damn decorum; he *was* decorum. So now it became imperative that he get in tow with those who would be part of Mr Hitler’s bunch when he came over and settled things. Yet that might not be so straight forward as the Captain plainly believed... He looked out to sea once more. The stalwart the cloth cap was still there, up to his knees in water, silently offering an inadequate riposte to Mr Hitler’s coming armada.

The Captain shot out of the shop as if he had been ejected from a canon. He was blue with rage and degradation. He had already lost much of the morning to indecision. His nerves had got the better of him. He had kept putting off the moment he visited his leads. He had forgotten his patter; he couldn’t get his tongue round the prattle, the lies. His mouth had dried, his head had spun and his eyes had seemed to go in and out of focus as if they were anchored on a piece of elastic and had wandered off somewhere and then sprung back again. On one occasion a prospective customer had become so concerned that he advised him to seek medical help.

He had already been given short shrift in most of the businesses along the front. Most wanted a trial period, the last chap had offered a trial period – the last chap had failed to make a go of it, of course. Nonetheless the Captain unconvincingly made out that the trials had been *so* successful, that customers had been *so* encouraged, that the advertising spots were in great demand. Now there were only a few left and hence the apparent price increase. He cited handwritten commendations but the leads remained dubious nonetheless. If nothing else they

were certain that a war was coming. They laughed sourly at the pieces of paper he waved at them – what use would they be when the war started. And they raised the issue of interference from the continent once more. And they told him to his face that they had no truck with salesmen and their commissions and their slippery tongues. The Captain thought that life should not be as small-minded and thwarting as this. Everything was stodgy and grey and binding, insufferably so. There were nobler aims to pursue surely?

He snatched open the driver's door and threw himself in. The Daimler ploughed through the crowds, mothers grabbed their children, the men folk offered a brief challenge before all were unceremoniously taken up and deposited in the shrinking perspective of the rear window. Eventually, *very* eventually, the Captain assuaged his temper atop a cliff some miles out of town, howling his discontent and threatening the heavens with the cleansing scourge of the Big Idea.

That evening at their lodgings Julian watched as the Captain attempted to reconcile his meagre takings with his expenses – piles of coins, a few banknotes and fewer cheques were gathered about his bottle of cheap, caustic whiskey. He couldn't get things to balance. He went around the same computations again and again, voicing his arithmetic out loud, only to fail. Scraps of paper recorded his shortcomings, gave witness to his incapacity. Julian thought of Frank and his calmness when figuring his books, his neat Germanic hand, and his delight in his fraudulent work. He thought of the flat he'd left behind, its perfectness, its balance, his own place in it. He looked around the bare floor boarded room he was sharing with the Captain, its grey net curtains, chipped furniture, tobacco-browned cornices and yellowing wallpaper.

Suddenly he was taken by some dab of recollection he knew to be of profound import. It had something to do with a heavy male presence, a seeming brute brought low by feeling. But it only briefly asserted itself before flying off. He was frustrated by its formlessness. Such insistent yet momentary traces of memory had become a common occurrence lately. Try as he might, he couldn't hold on to them – it was as if all his mental pockets all had holes. And he didn't construe this fleet presence as a memory of his father because he wasn't really sure if "father" was in any sense pertinent to him. But that darkening masculinity, that rock poised to fall haunted him and, he now realised, had caused him to seek it out in life if only to study and hopefully understand it and so put an end to the tension.

It was this haunting that was the basis of his falling into the murkiness, the monstrous bag of bellows that was Captain Butt. His father had been a commercial after the war. He had too had acquired a permanent whiskey face, the sourness of his life chiselled deep into his

demeanour, his very breath eeked out. Julian's memory, however, was but a prescient shadow and so that brooding male presence that had been Mr Feign As Was, was only realised in dreams and sometimes glimpsed peripherally in the darkened rooms of Tower Lodge. Was it about to reappear now? Was the Captain somehow taking upon the mantle of threat and catastrophic failure that had once been his father's sinecure? The moment passed, the spirit was not called forth but the stain on his mind remained.

The Captain was mumbling his reckoning out loud once more. His ashtray was filling up, his bottle emptying. *Look at him, can't even count. Full of promise and little else he is. Like a post-dated cheque.* Julian looked over the town. Flickering galaxies of light chattered excitement. They pledged all the fun of the fair, floppy Pierrots, the pier, the promenade and penny arcades. Towering over all was the now illuminated, animated roller-coaster. All ups and downs and round again. Like life; except with life there was an end.

That night Julian had one of his dreadful flying nightmares. He expended all his dream energy desperately trying to remain aloft. He awoke exhausted, the blubbery, deflated mass of the Captain collapsed over him, all his inner resilience spent, crushed.

London looked mean and savaged, the colour drained out of it. There were slit trenches in Kensington Gardens, great khaki barrage balloons bobbing about above the parks, posters warning of mustard gas, walls of sandbags protecting the hotels along Park Lane. In Mayfair, Belgravia, Knightsbridge and Chelsea, all the big houses were being boarded up, their proprietors heading for foreign parts.

To make matters worse, last week had been the anniversary of the Somme and Frank had been reminded of the black-bordered death lists he had kept as a child. The image had stayed with him all day. At least getting out of the army medical had proved easy. You just sent someone else along, some poor tubercular bloke preferably on his last legs and wanting something to set aside for his burial. Or there were plenty of doctors on the crook. They'd put you down for an enlarged heart but they were getting expensive. Frank was hiving away precious ackers for when Billy got his call up.

He'd got in with some of the Select who wanted to ensure they still had their bottle parties, their after-hours boozing, once hostilities broke out – a simple matter of making an arrangement with an all-night wine retailer to avoid the licensing laws and then ferrying the goods about Town – *What with all them officer squaddies in town it was bound to be an*

earner. Trouble was everybody was at it so there was competition and that brought in the gangs. Things were hotting up. The Sabinis' gang was now the size of a small army. They operated out of Clerkenwell whilst the Whites had Islington. There was a gang brewing up in Hoxton too, some of Frank's old mates were trying their luck – *Bound to cock it up, that mob*. The French tarts working in the flats off Old Compton Street had been seen off by some new lot, no one knew who but there had been blood. Froggy pussy was a sort of a tradition round there. It was a crying shame. Now opium pellets were the thing. *All dark corners and back alleys. It was chancy, too chancy*. Frank felt his meagre, fragile suzerainty dwindling.

The Season was past its zenith and it might well prove to be its last hurrah. This was the final ball. Blenheim was floodlight in the Quink ink blue-black night; all gold perforated by squares of chandelier-ivory-white light and hangings of yellow and blue silk. It looked like it had been there for forever. Lanterns had been hung from the trees and there were pink carnations, bloody great things, sprouting up everywhere. There were Gypsy bands and accordion players wondering about with tacked-on smiles. Frank and Billy stood smoking in the car park peeking through its screen of poplars. Frank thanked God in His Crib that there was at least some colour left in England. Billy had bought extra piping for his chauffeur's uniform. *He thought himself well flash but them flunkies in them powdered wigs and velvet breeches... That's history that is, you can't bosh that!*

He was himself falling under Blenheim's spell. The Select floated about the terraces, the flunkies buzzing about them, always in the right place at the right time. It all worked like a fine mechanism; it had regularity and precision and the Dickies and Stoles were the mainspring. Eden, the Kents and the Churchills, of course – they were all down there, in their places, as was intended, as was proper. He thought of the engine in the Daimler, the Dunhill dual dial doctor's watch he'd nicked off some timorous twat one night round the back of some bushes on Hyde Park Corner, still purring away and never a second out. *Na, you can't bosh that! And as for that Labour lot – putting on the bowler hat and a stiff collar and playing at gentlemen in the Commons – jerry-built the lot of them*.

But trouble was brewing. In the long gallery, some of the top flunkies were in a two and eight. The ladies' furs had been casually chucked over the statues as had they had been for as long as could be remembered. But now one had gone missing. Madam was a little high, however; probably forgot where she put it and so the flunkies had merely attempted to calm things down. But then another was mislaid and then another. The chauffeurs were considered natural suspects – always been a dodgy tribe. Frank awaited his turn as the police went from

car to car. His bubble, his beautiful bubble had burst. *Some cunt always fucks things up. Don't know when they're on to a good thing some people.*

Julian had left the Captain in heavy slumber. The fairground's lights had drawn him out. Assaulted by the ubiquitous bellowing of coarse music warping as it was lifted then let fall by the breeze, he walked the promenade careful of the crowds. The prescribed, somnambulistic order of march now looked decidedly macabre in the half-light – east to west, west to east along the front and back again, families and kids and ancient matrons gawping and chewing the cud, the fat, the sweet and the sticky. Though he recognised the necessity of having such a complaisant and compliant tribe ready and available for whatever sacrifices that were required of it, Julian was estranged from the England that it exemplified. It was as foreign to him as the lands of the mullahs or the Matabele. He had long ago learnt of the threat that it held for him and so he kept himself small and unseen, dodging and weaving about the host so that it might not know he was there. Between the bandstand and the booth where the Punch and Judy show had been he looked for the man awaiting the Mr Hitler's armada. He had gone – gone for his fish supper and a sousing of beer no doubt. The Big Idea would have to wait then.

He looked up and beyond the front to see the Great Wheel lit up and turning. Its vanes of coloured lights reached out like the rays of a sunrise like you see on gates and windows nowadays. The rollercoaster was also illuminated; he could hear its rattle and the cries of young girls and children thrilling to its mechanised rousings. He looked down and found himself opposite the street leading to the fairground. An archway doused in hectoring light bulbs the colours of hundreds and thousands beckoned. He crossed the promenade and stepped into the tide leading to the fair.

There he was immediately immersed in an eruption of sense magic – rodeo switchbacks and swirls, merry-go-rounds and waltzers, people being chucked up in the air on trampolines, spinning in metal blancmanges and giant teacups, flying circles in moon rockets and dive bombers, galloping on painted horses, rising and falling in great swing boats; being flung out on chair rides, losing their balance on moving cakewalks, colliding with each other in dodgem cars, rubbing up against each other on the never-stop railway, this ride and that ride whirling 'em round, whizzing 'em down; skirts riding up, hats falling off, bulbs popping,

barrel organs and traction engines snorting, the crackle-gaggle of dance music, the raggle-taggle of the flags of all the nations, tattered bunting fluttering.

To Julian everything seemed an infinite jumble of sorts, an intolerable harrying. He found only fragments, splinters, vagabond shards of meaning careering about him. Everything had been shaken up – bits here and bits there but nothing joined up. He didn't know what the rules were; how to put it all together. He doubted there were any rules. He thought it all... untidy. He looked about for succour but all he found was a Laughing Policeman

He sought out a quieter place. There was a darker area beyond the rifle shy. As he passed by, a sorry clown with a fag in the corner of his mouth banged a drum, dark-haired men stripped down to their collarless shirts and waistcoats and sporting gypsy kerchiefs, proffered tack and tat. There was a line of booths. The Bloodless Surgeon was at his craft, high-kicking girls with the legs like those of kitchen tables, all painted beauty spots and caked-on foundation, hoofed it in a desultory fashion. Julian headed for the ALL GIRL WALL OF DEATH and paid his threepence. "Miss Iris" and "Miss Ellen" dressed in neat ties over white shirts, mannish jodhpurs and leather jerkins topped with French berets, circled around with monkeys on their backs. The monkeys seemed bored. And then... "MERMAIDS ON MOTOR BIKES!" – *I ask you!*

Julian left. Try as he might, he could not resolve the melee he had just witnessed. It made no sense to him and he failed to see how it could make sense to anyone else. Further on, things seemed quieter by the boxing booth, welcoming even – he could make out fragments of cant. It was, at least in part, familiar; it certainly made more sense than the screaming, purgatory beyond.

"That's it with the clemmers. Culls ain't going down like they ought to."

"No ferricadooza then?"

"Nah."

"Cramp it then."

"Yer."

"Koo, screw that juicy duke!"

Julian had to go by them – the boxing booth barker and his mates, fairground workers all heavy boots, leather blousons, coarse corduroys and coarser tongues. The barker proffered a "Bona notche" and without thinking he answered likewise.

"Gardy loo, he's wide to it."

"Na, he ain't. Got yer bleeder 'andy?"

“Darkit, I tell yer!”

As Julian scuttled off one of them catcalled him.

“Eh barkey! Gis a tug on me mauler!”

The rest was mostly billingsgate but nasty for all that. At least they hadn’t mugged him. As he passed the last booth a row of revolving open-mouthed plaster cowboys in ten gallon hats and buckskins proffered a mute commentary. Julian scampered off into darkness, away from the fairground, the promenade, the vulgar melange that refused to cohere, and the threat of molestation.

Behind him the Big Wheel gave off barbs and pricks of electricity. He moved away furtively and hurriedly, afraid it might still reach out for him. Now, as always, he needed something, someone to put life’s noise and bustle together for him, a kind of architect or orchestral conductor. But in its stead came a familiar internal voice; censoring, admonishing – the voice of his mother when he was a child.

He stood stock still as the shadows found him out and the distant cacophony of the fairground prattled on. “Hello, old pal,” he answered bitterly.

Arthur Crombie’s mind was racing. He thought of the Cream and Roses Girl lying whey-faced and still and forever like one of the effigies in Westminster Abbey. She now reposed in her entirety, her afterlife above an annuity that her perfect, unmarred form guaranteed. He thought of his wife, likewise upstairs with the Saints should there be any justice in the next world. She had died of grief. Tens years’ mourning for their son lost in the last conflagration bequeathing Arthur a potent enmity for warmongers. His thoughts too often dwelled upon those boys lying in the mud of their trenches, mummified in their gasmasks and capes, goggle-eyed, foam-mouthed though whole, able to rise again because they died intact. But his son had been killed in the shelling, his body pulverised, limbs and sinews, bollocks and brains scattered, broadcast to seed the mud. He would not rise, could not rise.

Arthur ached in his misery but could never escape it. When he first saw the girl’s body he had imagined two ghosts – she and his son – meeting under a ghostly tree in a ghostly day. Two beautiful vapours dancing with and through each other like clouds convening. But the phantoms soon departed – she to her milky, soft, limestone-white heaven, he to his purgatory.

For twenty years Arthur had sought to find and comfort his son's spirit. The search had taken him to places ethereal. He had given the table turners short shrift – he of all people knew crooks when he saw them – and elsewhere he had met with sundry dead ends. There were run-ins with Thibetan chaps in togas or something similar proclaiming the efficacy of automatic writing and the indisputable enduringness of the astral body; then there were the spiritualists who postulated a Summerland that took in all the departed who then lived gossamer lives, unsexed and so untroubled. But he knew that his broken boy would not be found there – he knew that only the whole might rise again, only the whole might live in Summerland.

There had been just enough of the boy left to ensure identification. Arthur had never known which bits had been found and the officer who had written to him and espoused the nobility of the lad's sacrifice had tactfully overlooked the details. But Arthur's nightmares had made good the deficit. The torn and bloody vestiges of the boy groped about the charnel of his mind and communed with him most nights as it searched for more scraps of itself, in the vain hope of reconstituting its former immaculacy and in the process becoming ever more monstrous.

But Arthur had not given up hope of a more substantial reconciliation with his boy. He had found his own tack. It had been mooted that the disenfranchised dead wondered the far parameters of the space we know, or think we know; that they might be heard on the airwaves and tuned in on with a radio receiver. Sleep was of little use to Arthur so every night he would seek them out, hour after inky hour.

Arthur's mania would have proved all-encompassing had it not been for his work. The analytic rites of criminal investigation had proved to be the only mechanism that he knew that stilled those insistent voices. But Arthur was knocking on. The wasteland of retirement awaited him. And in the long, empty future to come, with nothing to divert him, the radio voices would gather for a sing-song like no other. Then it would be nigh on impossible to put them out of mind. Without the distractions of his calling, that unholy choir would gain ground. Its carpings and protestations would hold sway and the last of his sanity would be spent. *God give me murder, any day of the week.*

He had watched the political developments of the last year or so with growing anguish. Surely the world would not repeat the calumnies of the last generation? And yet with each week the drift to war gathered pace. A sense of inevitability had long governed the common mind as well as the benches of the Commons. And now came the greatest provocation yet – Hitler had sent his troops into Danzig. The House had been in uproar, the

newspapers screamed vitriol. Only Chamberlain and his diminished circle of associates remained to stem the tide – four or five men at most. Would they prove resolute?

Like his fellow citizens Arthur felt impotent before such cataclysmic events. His fevered mind postulated new conscripts for the sundered legions, yet more voices for the unholy choir. And he could do nothing. Until now... possibly. The Cream and Roses Girl's note might yet prove of greater worth than the scrap of paper Mr Hitler had signed for Chamberlain. It might... there was a possibility at least.

Arthur propped himself up against the ancient panelled wall of the Clarence public house, next door to the Yard. A number of his fellow officers were imbibing. Despite their best efforts, they looked grey and shabby when compared to the civil servants from the nearby ministries though positively dapper in contrast to the newspaper hacks skipping in and out of one pub after another along the length of Whitehall in search of a smidgeon of a lead, a steer that might get them a by-line. Arthur, incongruous in his bowler and spotted bowtie, watched the side door as he sipped brandy – how people could swallow pints in the dinner time was a mystery to him. Fag smoke fogged the room; chatter fogged any semblance of sense. He checked his watch, drained his glass – another?

Then the door opened briefly and Arthur recognised the blurred silhouette of his quarry. Inconspicuously, he made his exit by the front door on Whitehall – they must not be seen together. The short, dumpy figure of Barney Bairnsfaether skulked ahead of him, nodding to all and sundry but denying Arthur's presence behind. Arthur kept pace as Barney headed for Charing Cross and then over the Mall to the clubland of St James's. Off Little James's Street Barney slipped down a side alley where he waited for Arthur to catch up.

The pair traced a torturous path through more passages to the back of the Carlton Club. Barney peered up at Arthur.

"This had better be something pressing, Arthur."

Barney, the Man of Note's devoted political agent and a slavish devotee of Chamberlain, was a superstitious atheist who was far more frightened of a black cat than he was of the devil. A working class Tory, brought up on Kipling and the birch, he loved the infighting and was never happier than when drawing blood. But he was plainly rattled – badly rattled at that.

"How are things, Barney? You look tired."

"Worn out, Arthur. Worn out with it all."

"The warmongers, you mean? Churchill and the rest of the Disaffected, eh?"

He proffered a sympathetic ear.

“Never mind them; it’s the bloody Foreign Office that are agin him. Too slow off the mark, that lot, and he can’t wait around for them, see.”

Arthur knew that, of course. Chamberlain – “Old Brolly” – had become increasingly isolated over the summer months. Everyone knew that but plainly there was more.

“He’s holed up isn’t he?”

Barney didn’t hear, didn’t take it in, he had things to get off his chest.

“He’s vicious with the Cabinet, Arthur, has to be, see. They’re either dead agin him or wobblin’. And the Press... still got the BBC and The Mail in his pocket, of course, but the rest... He’s spiking all their stories – has the editors in to Downing Street for a dressing down he does – next minute he’s feeding them dribs and drabs to keep them sweet but half of them have had enough long ago. Well they would wouldn’t they? I mean they know what’s really going on even if the rest of us don’t.”

He stopped, looked Arthur in the eye to emphasise his desperation.

“It’s coming to the end, Arthur. There comes a point when you just can’t threaten no more and that’s where he’s coming to.”

“You mean Hitler?”

“I mean Old Brolly, Arthur. His own people, Arthur! They’re a fucking disgrace! My Christ they are!”

Barney leant towards him. His voice turned to a whisper.

“Henderson’s having to talk to the Germans direct, on the QT. If any of the buggers found out... The Foreign Office, I mean...”

So that was it; our ambassador to Germany was Old Brolly’s mouthpiece and sod the Foreign Office, sod the Cabinet, they were being circumvented. What else was there to do?

“What about your man, Barney?”

“Tell truth, he’s wobblin’, Arthur. It’s relentless, see. Fucking Hitler laying it on thick all the damn time. No help, is it? No help at all. Too impetuous, too quick off the mark. Old Brolly soon catches up, of course but then he’s off again, wantin’ more. Like a greedy kid, Hitler is.”

Arthur’s question still hadn’t hit home, Barney still had some way to go.

“Old Brolly’s the only man who can sort that Hitler, you know. He sees right into him. Got him in one first off. But none of them can *see* it.”

They entered the back of the Carlton and then progressed gloomily along service corridors peopled by stainless steel trolleys piled high with clacking crockery and crystal for the washing of pushed by boys in twee uniforms, passing rooms full of noise and cold

terracotta-tiled floors. Then it was up a narrow servant's stairway and finally a broad hallway that gave entrance to a private area of the club's interior.

Barney braced himself. He waved a deprecating hand in the direction of the club proper – the reading and smoking rooms where Old Brolly's fellow clubmen, his actual constituency, resided

"In there it's all chaffing and biting. Like a stable of fillies in heat they are. There's an election coming in less than year. Gotta make the right noises, you see. But if there is a war... well, that would put the kibosh on things. Put an end to the lot of them. It would ruin the country. We wouldn't be able to afford them then – the Toffs, I mean. But they can't fuckin' see it, Arthur."

Arthur doubted that. He looked about the rooms. *God this is precious, all right! Heaven was a gentleman's club and no mistake. No, once a man had known this... well, he just couldn't imagine a world without it. It must stand forever and bugger that noisome little upstart Hitler.*

Barney led Arthur through a warren of corridors giving onto a number of small, beautifully appointed rooms. *My house has many mansions and no mistake!* As they turned a corner they were confronted by a coterie of Special Branch men.

Barney was still giving forth – "That Noel Coward and his soirees for Eden and the other glamour boys stirring things up... That lot up at Cliveden... the Jew-haters and the Jew-lovers muddying the waters... Old Brolly's getting it from all sides, see. None of them any help, no help at all."

He took a deep breath and raked his fingers through his hair.

"Hitler's in the same position, of course. He would quite happily come to some arrangement but there's that rabble about *him* see..."

They both stood peering at their feet as servants wafted by doing this and that and Lord This and Lord That prattled on about this and that.

"It's Society that matters, isn't it Arthur? And Old Brolly... well strictly speaking, he's not exactly up to the mark, is he? He's trade, isn't he? Business. They don't rate him, you see. Not one of them rates him when it comes down to it."

Barney shuddered; the man actually shuddered.

"All they have to do is grant an early summer recess for Parliament and give him a free hand. He can talk the Poles into giving up a little. Let Hitler have his bits and bobs. Come back in the autumn and everything sorted out. No war. The banks are behind him and the King. That counts, I suppose."

But Arthur had stopped listening. He could see past the Special Branch men into the fore of a long room plainly set aside for bridge parties. Chamberlain was talking animatedly en petit comité, his eyes fierce and demanding total subjection. Of the others he recognised Rab Butler and Horace Wilson. *Was that Dunglass popping in and out?* Another he thought might be one of the minor Cecils. The Man of Note was sitting a little aside from his colleagues, his chair pushed back from the table, lost in cogitation.

“Them’s all that’s still with him, Arthur.”

At last; it was plain enough then. This was all that was staving off war. A huddle of tired men in a back room of their club huddled over a bridge table smattered with crumbs and cigar ash. Arthur knew that the regiment that was the Tory party would close ranks about the Man of Note should things come out into the open but he also that that would not save him. There was too great a metaphor for the press to ignore – his desertion, his abandonment of the Cream and Roses Girl would inevitably be compared with that of Czechoslovakia, Austria and, now perhaps, Poland. No, all possibility that latent analogy becoming currency must be headed off. It was the only way.

“Will you send in my card, Barney?”

Barney pondered for a moment, then took the card and looked Arthur over.

“I hope this won’t put any greater weight on him, Arthur.”

He approached a servant standing before the entrance to the room, handed over the card. Arthur walked over to the Special Branch men, all the while watching developments. He knew most of them; funny blokes, small minded, purposeful. The sort of chap you looked at and thought, “Well what else was he ever going to do?” They gathered about him.

“Bloody hell, Arthur, this had better be worth it, they’re deciding the fate of the nation in there.”

“The Old Story, boys. More of the same, that’s all.”

A few weeks before his colleagues had been made aware of a top notch brothel in Dover Street. Things were already pretty dicey – Eden’s resignation from the office of Foreign Secretary had stirred things up. The Flying Squad put a watch on the place and collected names. It soon became obvious that if it were raided and the clients rounded up then Chamberlain might lose his majority in the House – there were so many of his supporters using the joint. So they left it alone. As things turned out it made little difference; the House had rebelled and now Old Brolly could count only on his confederates in that room. But if he lost one of *them* to scandal... Arthur quaked at the thought.

The Man of Note peered over the servant's shoulder into the hallway. Arthur nodded and the Man of Note whispered in the servant's ear. One of the Special Branch men proffered a commentary.

"They're a right lark and no mistake, eh Arthur?"

"A right lark, yes..."

The servant proffered a guiding hand and Arthur was taken off down a plush corridor, then up in a lift and down another corridor and into a small bedroom at the back of the building where he was left to wait upon the Man of Note's pleasure. He was not to wait long.

He was a tall chap, lanky; but the top half of him drooped as if overburdened. Arthur thought of a broken stem heavy with ripe corn. With his right hand he fidgeted with his jacket button, the left hand hung heavily at his side like a stroke victim's. But his hawk-like expression gave notice that he was still in possession of his faculties. Arthur remembered that he had been on the newsreels and press photographs of Chamberlain's return from Munich; over Old Brolly's shoulder, behind him as he waved the note signed by Herr Hitler. It had been a fine day. He had gone without a hat. It's the fashion now to disparage the efforts to avoid war. But it wasn't like that then – far from it. Then Chamberlain was considered a winged Hermes who had placed a charm o'er Hitler's eyes and perhaps he had.

The Man of Note was undoubtedly preoccupied. Arthur felt obliged to make his presence felt.

"I will be brief, sir. My object is to diminish the potential for ... for disruption; to do that I must be in possession of all the relevant facts. I..."

"What facts? The girl is dead. That is the only pertinent fact, surely?"

Arthur would have to drive the point home.

"The abortion, sir, did you tell anyone else of the abortion?"

It was as if he had bowled a googly.

"Anyone else? Dear God, who would I tell? Who *could* I tell?"

"I need to find the abortionist, sir. Can you help there?"

"Find the abortionist? What are you suggesting?"

"Then the girl acted without your... without your aid, sir?"

"Yes, she acted..."

He slumped onto the bed. His eyes roved the room seeing nothing. He rambled.

"From the look of her you could never believe that she was fired from coarse clay. Her body, her skin had a translucence, like porcelain. I loved the taste of her, the taste of her

skin. She was a delicacy. I never went to her after dinner. You could only really approach her with a clean palette.”

All men are fallible as Arthur knew only too well. The Man of Note in all his grey wickedness was doing no more than giving testimony.

“Was she still beautiful? In death, I mean. Still lovely, eh?”

Arthur proffered a blank nothing. The Man of Note checked himself.

“No, I didn’t know. I might have...”

“You see, sir, this means that there are others who have knowledge of the circumstances, others who are not within your confidence.”

The Man of Note looked Arthur over for the first time since he had entered the room.

“Yes, I see.”

“If you can provide me with any...”

“No, I cannot. I knew so little of her, you see.”

“And you are certain that...”

“These matters are always handled with the ultimate discretion, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Then it’s only the abortionist’s associations that I need concern myself with?”

“It’s only the abortionist’s associations that you *will* concern yourself with, Officer.”

Well, that was that then. Whatever good I might do this end has been denied me.

But he knew he must act promptly. He still had little conception of the Cream and Roses Girl beyond that of her stilled, abstracted, stone-dead loveliness. But then statues can walk. He knew that from the depths of his soul. Oh yes, he knew that alright.

He left the Man of Note to his self-recriminations. He marched back to the hallway, to the Special Branch men and Barney who looked him over suspiciously.

“I’d better go and see to him, eh Arthur?”

“Yes, Barney, that would best.”

Barney scampered off and one of the Special Branch men offered to show Arthur out.

“Yeah, they’re a right bloody lark all right, eh Arthur?”

“A right lark, yes, that they are.”

It had been stupid to go to the fairground. Julian should have known. Now his dreams were full of the loathsome creatures he had met there, of that noise they call music wafting

about like a stench, and of all that throwing around and pulling out of shape on the rides. All he could do was strain to fly higher and beyond it all. But every night had ended in defeat. Down he plummeted. Then ne'er-do-wells set about him, trying to rip him apart, the boxing booth barker egging them on... "Ferricadooza, me bright boys! Ferricadooza!" More than ever he needed a quiet berth, a shelter.

Surreptitiously, he looked at the Captain as he steered the Daimler towards the next calamity. He was already beginning to think of the brute as preposterous, a view further exacerbated by the pain he was obliged to endure every time they fucked; a pain that was as much a result of the Captain's violence as his deformity. But his needs were so acute that he had felt he had no choice but to wait and see if the creature might redeem himself. Besides he was going to find out more about the Big Idea. They were off to hear a speech from some character called Admiral Rule. Julian instinctively thought of Cowes Week – he had been taken there once by some gentleman or other – ah, but that was a commodore not an admiral. *Why make things so perplexing! A sailor boy is a sailor boy and there's no more to it, surely? But then this one was regular navy and that wasn't the same as P&O was it?*

With all his heart, Julian prayed the coming experience wouldn't prove too testing. He longed for a place in this world that was comfortably familiar; somewhere enveloping he could just sink into like a favourite armchair. But then it occurred to him that he had never possessed a favourite armchair. Completely out of the blue, he suddenly felt anxious, as if he were naked and the object of scrutiny. He set about making himself small and invisible once more and then he felt a little better.

The Captain had been at pains to assure him that the essence of the Big Idea was simple, so simple even the female mind might grasp it. The peace of mind he coveted was at hand! *It had bleedin' well better be or I'm leaving the meese cod sod.' shush him first though, for all the trouble he's brought me!* The meeting was in a public hall in Watford. It had attracted quite a crowd; at least they looked like a crowd as they huddled in. *Still, things will soon sort themselves out. They always do.*

Alongside one wall there were the familiar notices for whist drives, tea parties and fetes as well as the calendar events of the Allotment and Esperanto Associations and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society. In front of it a large easel supporting another notice board had been set up. Julian studied the posters pinned to it – "a German supper party" to be held in a nearby village; talks about links between ex-servicemen of the "disputing nations" of the Great War, an exposition of German Kulture, notices for pen pals in the Hitler Youth and subsidised trips to the Rhine valley and the Bavarian Alps were all advertised. One flyer

promoted an approved Anglo-German friendship organisation – “Membership is open to anyone with enough sense to realise that the furtherance of Anglo-Saxon racial interests is the best work to which any Englishman or woman might apply themselves...” There were photos of British ramblers and cyclists in a bierkeller proffering the Nazi salute. The thought that some of his friends in the Shire Mercurials might enjoy the scenery crossed Julian’s mind.

Julian’s head began to ache a little. The Captain had told him that Hitler had had the Big Idea – *But really it was all so... foreign*; not at all comfy. The hall was filling up. Efficient, sour-looking women sporting swept back hair and dressed rather severely in starched linen, or so Julian thought, busied themselves with crockery and coats, pausing only to discuss the efficacy of sufficiently manured vegetables and stone-ground bread. On a low stage a row of trestle tables had been set up draped with Union and swastika flags. One of these austere females was putting out jugs of water each with a slice of lemon tacked onto its lip.

Julian picked up snippets of chatter as he huddled against the wall trying to concentrate on being small whilst staying upwind of the Captain:

“Went to the annual Durbar at Nuremberg – makes the Lord Mayor’s Show look like a parade of unkempt cretins from an asylum.”

“But my dear the whole of nature is ranked. From the slurry pit to the stars, all fall into line eventually.”

“The model reformatory at Dachau? As neat and clean an abode that could be found. A far cry from our own despicable slum prisons... the breeding ground for vice, you know.”

“Dear God you’d think they’d wash their hands – surely they could wash their hands!”

Julian gave little thought as to who might be required to wash their hands.

People had begun to find themselves seats and this was the cue for a minor miracle that thankfully the British could call forth at will. Julian sought out a place a half-a-dozen rows back from the front. As he instinctively started to preen, he looked about to establish his social coordinates. He had chosen his seat well. In the rows before him the Select were taking their places – he recognised Earl and Countess Temple, Baroness Zouche, the de Cliffords, the Sydenhams and Ismays – all of whom and more Julian had seen at the Piccadilly. Behind them the bankers and ship owners, ambassadors and Tory MPs – the Miserable Bunch as Julian thought of them, the types to sit out one dance after another in favour of glass after glass of Scotch, no ice, no water. Then the colonial service officers – policemen as well as army types, mostly minor public school, middle-aged, discontented, restless, decked out in

their best mufti, standing stiff and erect like the Captain. And there he was – among friends presumably, though they seemed a little sniffy around him. Julian could see them studying his tie and exchanging quick, incisive comments. They clearly found fault with him but what it might be Julian couldn't fathom.

A smattering of artisans and shop owners gravitated to the back seats; keepers of well-ordered workshops and accounts books, jealous of their meagre, hard won profit, the noble yeomen of England or the present incarnation of same at any rate. Behind these lower middleclass types, along the back wall, stood the watchmen, commissionaires, park keepers, doormen and the like, standing like dummies or statues seen in bas-relief upon a frieze, grey men with the colour taken off them by mean weathering. At the sides of the room and at the doors, lower class rough house merchants with wandering eyes, tight lips and smiles like a razor slash across a taut canvass, posed with their thumbs in belts or fondled god knows what weaponry in their pockets. Many had recently migrated from Mosley's bunch thinking that he had gone soft of late. They were all boots, coshes and chivs; they'd left school at thirteen or fourteen and hailed from Bethnel Green, Shoreditch, Hoxton... Frank! Was he there? Out to make a few bob on the easy-peasy? But no, Frank wasn't there...

Julian, like most Englishmen nowadays, was familiar with the sort gathered here, who had so easily steered themselves to their rightful station in the hall; who feared and hated any and all who might seek to challenge the simple, ordered world they believed had been provided for them. Childlike in their lack of intellectual maturity, they doted on the febrile intoxication of an impotent contrariness. Julian was afraid of them but then he too wished for the return to the order they espoused. And this at least was a good start; all had sorted themselves out according to rank and position, all looked toward to the raised stage awaiting the ritualised affirmation of their creed.

There was a shuffling at the back of the room. The lower orders in the back rows stood up, some doffed their caps as did the bully boys on the side walls. Julian made out two impossibly tall, young, *very* young boys, an almost as tall girl and an Amazonian wife in a silk blouse and pearls. The familial head was clearly before them leading the way but Julian could not make him out. Others clearly had the same difficulty as they lifted themselves up on tiptoe and strained to get a view. The family took to the stage and sat at the trestle table and briefly Julian thought he caught a peek of the noble patriarch who was to speak. But it was only a glimpse and he wasn't sure. And as all sat down, Julian lost his vantage point once more and was instead proffered an unrestricted view of a lady's impossibly large turban-styled hat in black silk, the type that had been the fashion before the Great War.

There was some mumbling which Julian took to be the chairman's salutations and then the Admiral began his advocacy of the Big Idea. Julian was immediately taken aback. The Admiral sounded like a canary twittering away in the vast copiousness of the pitch-black night of the lady's hat. It was too distracting.

"Today I speak to, and, I hope, on behalf of those ordinary people, often from little towns, those people of all classes and occupations without the power of importance. They know, *we* know that time is running out so let me get straight to it."

It was indeed a peculiarly high voice and it squeaked. It was thin and cutting like the voice of those posh tarts you hear on the radio. Perhaps it was something to do with the microphone. *They should do something about it, really they should.*

"The Judeo-Masonic combination, the marriage of synagogue and lodge, both mysteries to the noble spirit, acts as the Grand Puppeteer, making our democratic politicians dance to their whim in ever more twisted convolutions whilst it busies itself in tightening the chains of usury. For that reason alone do our noble working men and their families live in squalor!"

"Shame!"

"Have done with the kikes! Have done with them, I say!"

"The supposed guarantee of Polish autonomy is merely the latest example of this contortionism. It is a blank cheque. How can Britain, a sea-going nation, rescue land-locked Poland? And... as someone who has no mean experience of nautical matters, I can assure you that not even the British navy..."

Laughter, applause, then from the back, "What about Danzig?" followed by a scuffle.

"Patriotism in its old-fashioned sense is, mercifully, the only sentiment to which healthy-minded peoples will respond to in times of great stress. The new, sickly, common-citizen-of-the-world ideas are mere will-o'-the-wisp vapours. They are a blind for the machinations of Jewish financial wizardry that rides roughshod over a nation's hard-won bounty; their weapons are the slump and the whipping up of popular sentiment that leads to the warring of great powers from which they profit greatly."

Ah, so it's the Jews he's going on about. Nothing new about that. We all know about them...

"The Laws of Mine and Thine are inviolable. Security like charity begins at home. Such has been Herr Hitler's stance, such has been his attainment, and such should be *our* avowed intent!"

Applause! Somewhat out on a limb at the end of the row of mufti, the Captain took out his W.H. Smith jotting pad and recorded "THE LAWS OF MINE AND THINE ARE INVIOABLE."

Julian was losing patience. What about the Big Idea? Had he come to it yet?

"Likewise, our defence strategies must put our interests first. Let the fight between Teuton and the Asiatic Jewish hoards grind out to a bloody finality. The Slavs are not of our blood and their meddlesome Communistic religion is alien to our notions of imperial prowess. Our business is with our Empire not Europe. Our imperial possessions will feed and clothe one and all."

"That's the stuff!"

But Julian had drifted off somewhere... somewhere foreign with a warming sun and polite waiters with copper-gold skins serving him a nicely chilled stout.

"If war in Europe should come, it follows that our alliance should be with the New Germany, in providing material support in that nation's great endeavour..."

The chap next to Julian erupted with "God bless Germany!"

There you go again. Bleedin' Germany. But for all that he still had little or no idea what this had to do with the Big Idea. He began to idly look about the room; only morsels of the Admiral's speechifying filtered through. Behind him zealots with moist eyes and the dreamers' rapture, took in every word.

"Our numbers increase daily and those who rightfully sit atop our society are amongst the most numerous contributors to our cause. I am humbled in announcing that the Duke of Westminster is among our latest enlistees..."

"Good old Bendor! He'll show the kikes!"

The crowd cheered. At a table set aside for them, newsmen scrawled notes feverishly. Julian now began to suspect that all safely gathered here already knew what the Big Idea might be, that some earlier induction had brought them forth into the Light; that he had missed out. He was, however, greatly impressed that the Duke, no less, had come over to the cause.

On went the canary in the hat.

"The poison administered by the Judeo-Masonic hypodermic syringe is indeed most wounding, but it is not yet fatal. There is still time to administer the antidote, to undermine the secret powers that are leading our politicians by the nose..."

Then there were caustic comments concerning Eden and Churchill which Julian considered unnecessary and impolite and then something about the Gold Standard that was

far beyond his ken. Denied a view of the orator, he studied the Admiral's family. They sat straight, their eyes raised up to some heaven that was plainly beyond his meagre reach. He peered upwards nonetheless but all he found was a ceiling of mock Tudor beams and inelegantly hung industrial lampshades. As he looked about he realised that others had descended into a kind of mute revelry. But to him the Admiral's spectral presence seemed to have all the authority of a speak-your-weight machine. *Stunted! He's stunted! He's too bleedin' small to have a Big Idea! Too bleedin' small to have fathered that lot even, I shouldn't wonder!* Julian liked his men to be men and, in truth, he was disappointed.

"To fight another mud and blood war, another Jews' war in Europe would be to destroy all possibility of resistance to the Asiatic hordes that are bound to pour in once the conflagration has exhausted itself. Israel and Rebecca would be promenading down Friedrichstrasse and Oxford Street in all their finery and Junker and Squire would be obliged to step into the gutter to let them pass!"

There was a great deal of ponderous head-nodding and over to the other side of the hall Captain Butt jotted down "JUNKER AND SQUIRE WOULD BE STEPPING INTO THE GUTTER TO LET ISRAEL AND REBECCA PASS".

This was plainly the Big Idea – "down with the Jews" and so forth. For the life of him Julian couldn't see the novelty in it. Didn't everyone hate the Jews? It was plain sense but why go on about it? Yet they seemed to lap it up. Then it was over and there was the Captain on his feet cheering like all the rest. Julian felt obliged to follow suit but restricted himself to a gentle tap of fingers against his palm as was polite.

Eventually the unseen Admiral and his impossibly tall family paraded out, noses in the air and inhaling the florid approbations that were their due. The Select followed them and this left the other classes in possession of the hall. The sour females began dispensing tea and cake though now the room was raked with voluminous, vitriolic exchanges and martial cries. Small groupings coalesced, each with its own obsession – everything from the inefficacy of educating niggers to the swarm of communist clergy now ensconced in the Anglican Church.

Julian caught sight of the Captain standing alone – his fellow soldiers having abandoned him. He watched as the old sod briefly fell into the orbit of this group and that, only to be edged out once more. Finally, he seemed to find acceptance amongst a particularly large assemblage. Julian, shrinking violet that he was, was nonetheless intrigued and sought to get within earshot.

"What about the inverters! What's to be done about the inverters, eh?"

"Quite! Not a mention concerning the inverters, he didn't even touch upon the subject."

“But we can take that as read, surely?”

“But can we? The matter is urgent. These unnatural vices undermine the vitality of the masculine line and produce rouged hermaphrodite men-women...”

Oh, bloody hell! Julian looked over at Captain Butt who stood nodding his head in solemn accord. Then, drawing himself up and reaching down for his deepest basso profundo, the windbag pronounced with due solemnity:

“It is *undeniably* a matter of urgency. In particular, our Empire is at risk... Oh, indeed it is. It is not simply dengue fever or hookworm that afflicts the colonial officer. Pederasty is innate amongst the older races, those of the mildewed forest and arid desert...”

Julian was livid. Only innate breeding restrained him. But the Captain went on to ever greater calumnies. *Oh God, did he go on. The slicker!* Julian felt his gorge rising. But then a small delegation from the mufti mob inserted themselves into the gathering about the Captain.

“I say, you served in Egypt, didn’t you? Cairo sub-area, Kasr-el-Nil, I think.”

The Captain went white. His diatribe dried.

“Went a little adrift yourself, didn’t you?”

The speaker, a dark-haired type with a coffin cough, hollowed-out eyes and the pallor of chalk, drew his audience in.

“Ah yes, the Cairo lovelies... Fond of the bugger-boys yourself, weren’t you?”

The place went dead. The Captain was at a loss as to what to do.

The tubercular ghost in mufti stared the Captain in the eye: “Mind if we finish this outside?”

The bully-boys closed in. The sour-pussed women and the stolid yeomanry turned away – this was business best left to those who knew what was what, to those who knew how.

Julian felt a cold dread descend then a movement caught his eye. A man had detached himself from one of the smaller groups and was walking steadily toward him, peering at him in half recognition, and then raising an arm, pointing, pointing him out – *Sharpy! Bleedin’ Sharpy and no mistake!*

Julian bolted for it but was blocked by the squad frogmarching the Captain to the main exit. He shrieked, turned on his heels and made for a side door. Panicking, he became lost in a maze of kitchens and sculleries before finding a way out. Once outside he breathed in the moist air hungrily. He tried this way and that and then another door opened and the

light from the hall spilt out to reveal Sharpy and a pack of hyenas ready for their supper. He saw street lights at the far end of an alley and was off.

He had no idea how long or how far he ran. He wasn't to know that he had gone in circles and had ended up less than a hundred yards from the hall. Eventually he stalled, breathless, his fear immobilising him. He had come to a yard beside a derelict factory. All was dirty yellow London brick, pools of oily water, the reek of soot and coal gas. It seemed still at first but then he realised that there was something at work in the far corner. He thought it mechanical, lumbering. Then he heard a simpering and a breaking that sounded like the snapping of a biscuit. Staying in the shadows he edged along a wall and then found a smashed window from which he might see and not be seen.

They had the fellow in a corner. They were slugging away at him in turn. Big hefty fists were finding him out, tenderising his flesh. The thought that it might be the Captain that they were doing over filled him with dread... and exultation. The man's pomaded head was bowed and his hat lay on the ground but he was still on his feet, still had his balance. They didn't want him to fall yet, they wanted to smash more ribs – "Oi! Bloody Oi!" – and pulp the bastard's bollocks – "Oi! Bloody Oi!"; mush his mug so that his mother wouldn't know him.

But finally he tipped over and went down and, after a few derisory kicks, the men lumbered off, laughing, lighting cigarettes and passing around a bottle of ale. He recognised them – they belonged to the clique of rough house types that had been at the meeting. As they walked away he thought of Bulldog Drummond or one of Frank's other brute heroes smithereening a man's jawbone in a set to.

It wasn't the Captain but some other poor sod, maybe the chap in the meeting who shouted something about Danzig or a queer boy perhaps. Fearfully Julian left the shadows to see what might be done. It was a young chap alright, slight of build, no meat nor muscle for a fight. He turned the youth's face to the light. He looked like a queer boy. *Not that you might tell from looking. But you'd not make a Sweep now, poor mite. Dark alleys and the back row of the Regal is all you're fit for now. Shame...* Yes, he might be a queer boy but then he might be anybody, anybody at all. A little Jewish boy even, a boychick. As he looked the boy over, he heard distant mirth and heavy-handed music from an old but still bright piano, voices raised in chorus, and feet stamping to a martial beat echoed about the yard – another of those party songs no doubt. Beneath his gaze, the boy gave out a fractured kind of moan and coughed up blood.

So this was what the Big Idea could do... "Ferricadooza, me bright boys! Ferricadooza!"

As Frank drove across Town he passed radio vans exhorting the citizenry to attend to their gas bag fitting post haste and at the newsstands he clocked the headlines – cries for Churchill and Eden to join the Cabinet, announcements of increased war production. When he got to Piccadilly he felt his heart sink. They'd buried Eros under a pile of sandbags! *Looks like a mountain of turds! And his lovely boy bum put away for the duration. Things are going downhill and no mistake.*

He had to pick up half a dozen or so Harrovian young gentlemen and escort them to Lords for the annual match against Eton. Their parents were colonial types, all of a caste. Frank knew the sort. *Not a touch on the Select proper. Hardly gave you a second look. Still, easy money and no mistake.* There would be dinners and dancing in London afterwards and Frank's young gentlemen were expected to do the rounds and pay homage to their betters ending up at the Dorchester or the Savoy. Frank was allowed to park the Jag on the boundary so that his young gentlemen might have their picnic and find shelter should it rain. Beside them pretty young things were in repose beneath their parasols whilst more genteel families took tea under canvass awnings, bringing the silver and the butler with them.

It was a lazy time for Frank, three days of nothing much to do but wait on them and drive them there and back. He wondered about behind the stands eying this and that, alive to the gossip. Few except the schoolboys actually watched the game, for most it was just another event on the calendar, they were there to see and be seen. Anyhow, the result was foretold – Eton had won every game for the last thirty years.

He eyed the crowd. The women were in pastel crepes and silks this year, topped off with large straw hats. The schoolboys were victims of the peculiar intricacies of the dress code of their respective schools – the tall toppers, the flowers for their buttonholes, the colours of the tassels on their canes and the cut and cloth of their waistcoats all to the book. *Horrible mob they were but then they'd grow out of it. That was what school was for – their kind of school that is. To show them right. Show them how to rule the niggers and the chinks and the Common Herd.*

He strolled about alert to the etiquette of deference, neatly sidestepping the clergy, proffering homage to the moneyed and scraping to the peerage. Instinctively he eyed the gentlemen's fashions – at such an event display was stamped on but those with a good eye might detect subtle notes of costly élan – cufflinks peeking out from behind a black sleeve, a

jewelled tiepin or Florsheim or Keds two-tone brogues bought in New York – the high watermark of permissible aplomb.

Packs of schoolboys – Little Lord Fauntleroy all, impossible Munchkins, boy-men – bobbed about. Frank could hardly suppress a laugh when he thought of his own education. He had proved quick to pick up on anything to do with pattern and form – arithmetic was a joy to him. But he had loathed the teachers' screed – *Nothing but propaganda, they had us marked for the factories or the docks straight off*. He got out as soon as he could. He had avoided Dole School and an enforced spell with the local drill association in his teens by obliging some old soak of a shopkeeper a couple of nights a week; in return for a plating, the filthy bastard agreed to say he employed him.

The sheer numbers of black-coated and hatted schoolboys made Frank think of an ant army swarming and ransacking across the green lawns. At their age, Frank had just been starting out in life, earning his keep – snatch-thefts and prostitution had copped him a miserly income whilst his parents made the regular trawl to one mosk or other, pawning the crockery or dad's best suit. He had learnt the street trades from doing errands for fences and keeping an eye out for narks in need of knowledge to assuage the Busy; then there were bookies wanting runners and robbers wanting lookouts. Later, in his teens he had peddled smut, darting from one pitch to another to maximise profit. He'd been a corner man for dice and put-and-take games played in alleyways and a hireling tough. But it was screwing – petty burglaries – that had got a hold on him. He'd do a bit of breaking and entering just for the thrill of it when he was younger...

He checked his watch. Another half-an-hour or so before lunch. He headed off to find a bucket of ice for the lemonade. Something foreign registered over by a neat row of open tents. Some ripe bastard was having it away where the crowd was at its thickest – one of the pickpockets that plagued the Season's open events, unnoticed by his prey. *He's a neat worker though. Cool! An artist and no mistake.*

Though he admired the man's skill, Frank was glad he was out of grafting and thieving – well, he hoped he was out of it anyhow. Back in Hoxton, he'd seen where it led. All gain was dissipated in transient pleasures. All looked to each other for the shiver and thrill of life. But he'd seen the wide sort turning on each other, informing against each other, fucking each other's women, stealing from each other's pockets. In truth, most were inept and had less to show come Friday night than factory hands or shop girls. He was appalled at the ad hoc fashion by which they went about their business, how they whined at finicky fate when it was their own incompetence that brought them low. He had watched them from his

youth and now that they looked towards old age, oblivion was still their only ambition. When he met with them, for company's sake, they grasped at him, presuming an intimacy that was impossible; he had nothing to say to them, they knew nothing that was of use to him, he was beyond them ... or so he erroneously believed.

It was between lunch and tea of the last day of the match, when Frank was seeing to the crockery, that things veered violently from the set path long ago allotted for the occasion. Eton wickets fell in quick succession. In a matter of a few overs, Harrow suddenly seemed in with a chance. The crowds gravitated to the stands, pressed against the boundary. Eton were bowled out and then, to rub it in, Harrow savaged their bowlers. Frank, along with everyone else was transfixed. He managed to find a perch on the railings abutting the Pavilion and so was witness to the scandalous events that ensued.

When the final six came careering into the crowd old codgers from the imperial wars, bankers moonlighting from their city desks and peers imbibing in the long gallery set about their ancient foes, ripping carnations and cornflowers from their opponents' buttonholes, tearing coattails and ties and tassels and tipping hats. From the stands a low, long "Harrooo" murmured presciently. Then these ancients set to with real venom – there was blood and there were breakages. Women had their frocks torn, eyeglasses and monocles were smashed. And then and only then did the schoolboys join in. Before the Pavilion a parson, his top hat affixed to his head by a chin strap and sporting gaiters and black velvet breeches, egged on his boys on with his umbrella.

Frank tried to negotiate a mannerly way through to the Jag but with all sense of propriety abandoned he was obliged to remain immobile. All about him Society ripped and tore and gouged and clobbered. Old boys and schoolboys lay all pretence to decorum aside allowing atavistic compulsions to come to the fore, all the more vicious because they had been so assiduously repressed. The pitch was now flooded with skirmishes and scrimmages folding into each other then coming apart like fiery constellations. He looked up to the stands. The last of the bystanders were edging their way to safety. Another primeval "Harooooo" echoed about the ground as the disputing sides coalesced into a molten, bubbling mass of black hostility.

Frank viewed the melee with a jaundiced eye. A kind of hysteria was in play, manic, crazed. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He saw others looking on, likewise nonplussed. Society was tearing itself apart before his eyes. That which he had thought sacrosanct was devouring itself and over what he could only guess – clearly not cricket, there was more to it than a sixer sailing into the Pavilion, a few catches and stumpings. But what it

might be was beyond him. He had never understood the Select; had never felt the *need* to understand them, it was enough that they were there and had been since forever and would always be there. And now... Was this what they truly amounted to? *And with a war coming on too. God help bleedin' England.*

He came to his senses. With a will he aimed for the Jag, effortlessly flinging the fractious imps from his path as he went. His worst fears were met. Windows cracked, the paintwork scored, the bluebird pennant gone. For another ten minutes or so he had to stand guard. Then, slowly, hesitantly, the adversaries parted and then departed the field. Shreds of torn clothing, broken canes and tattered toppers lay about from the wicket to the outfield, from the pavilion to the stands. It was almost as if the Select had divested itself of the trappings of its pre-eminence and in doing so had revealed its true, brute lineage. Frank found this truly shocking. Something fundamental had changed. It was as if magnetic North had wandered away and left the compass needle spinning in frantic display.

A sorry troop of schoolboys were making their way towards him. They were chattering away excitedly;

“What a Send Up... best ever!”

“Did you see the Phils?”

“And the Greys!”

“Yes, and the Greys.”

“Where were the Blues?”

“In the stands, I saw them in the stands.”

“What a Send Up though!”

“Yes, a Send Up alright.”

They might as well be French for all the sense you can make of it. Fucking foreigners when it came down to it. Only belatedly did he realise that they were his young gentlemen. They stood beside the Jag, waiting for Frank to perform the necessary offices. Don't give it a second thought, do they? After all that they still want me to open the bloody door for them!

Then they became aware of Frank. Frank still spic and span in his uniform and still at his post, Frank cold and dangerous, a density of anger and threat. They were plainly at a loss to understand the apparition before them. The eldest gestured and they fell into the back of the car awaiting Frank's pleasure but he was staring ahead at the Pavilion, at the Union Flag lying limply in a blue sky the English always dream of but rarely know. A profound tiredness descended about him. He felt wearied with the effort of it all.

Then, picking her way gingerly amongst the debris, Miss Evelyn Margaret approached him. She lifted the tatters of a boy's trousers with the point of her parasol, studied them for a moment and then discarded them as if it were contagious. She sidled up to Frank, gave a disparaging squint to his young gentlemen in the car's back seat then hooked her arm about his and peered up at his stony face, smiling wryly.

"What do you think of our future Churchills and Edens now, my dear? Our very own tribesmen, as outlandish as the Hottentots any day of the week are they not?"

Frank stared back at her. Why hadn't he seen it coming?

"They'll do for us! Never mind Hitler, they'll do for us and no mistake!"

"Oh, don't be so silly. We always survive. We know how to survive, don't we, dear boy?"

He knew what she meant alright. *Take them, screw them, have it away with them, the mealy mob that they are. Them with their man servants and maid servants and silk drawers! The bugles could go hop. Stay out of it and go on the make. Nibble at them, take bloody great chunks out of them, devour the worthless cunts!* He smacked his lips at the thought.

That evening he rang Nurse Feign. They were back in business, though things would be more professional from now on. Frank would be bringing down the tarts and keeping all the squeeze money for himself. But first he would be coming to see her. He needed to know the back roads so as to fuddle up the dames so they wouldn't know where they were going or where they'd been. He'd look over Tower Lodge. Check the entrances and exits; make sure there was nothing lying about, nothing that a tart might remember, that might stack up against him. *Do things right and squeeze them, get them by the throat, drain the very blood out of them, then chuck them away. That's the doings.*

He didn't think to ask about Julian. Why would he?

Another cheap hotel. Julian was perched on a tremulous dining chair jotting down dance notation – a new foxtrot sequence he had dreamt up for his own pleasure, a Reverse Turn preceded by a Feather Step and incorporating a Natural Telemark and a Top Spin. Usually the steps were recorded using pairs of shoe-shaped symbols – black for the man, white for the woman. Arrowed lines traced the movements. Julian's notation, however, had two pairs of black shoes. Such were his romantic effusions – others might compose bad poetry or manufacture inadequate portraits of the ones they loved. Julian envisaged slow,

delicate prancings with an imagined, unrealised lover (Frank could dance but only after a fashion). To anyone else the notation looked like a terrible jumble – two left and two right feet falling over each other, stretched out along a sinuous curve. It looked a little like an anaconda promenading after a heavy lunch.

After the meeting in Watford, Julian had sought help for the mugged boy who had then been sent off to hospital. The police had seemed more interested in Julian than either the boy or his assailants – what was he up to in such an out of the way place, eh? The Captain had returned to their digs earlier, apparently in good order. Julian however was escorted back by the police. The landlady was justifiably outraged and threw them both out in the morning. Julian felt badly done by – another calumny that he laid at the Captain's door.

It went from bad to worse. They had followed the coast stopping a night here and there and ended up in a Dorset fishing village. The Captain had given up on the radio advertising malarkey and having now used up his meagre expenses, had resorted to an old subterfuge; signing in at hotels and boarding houses under a number of pseudonyms – “A. E. W. Mason”, “E. Childers” “J. Meade Falkner” and the like. They would then do a runner in the early hours. But “R. Haggard” had proved a stretch too far – a receptionist had laughed uproariously at the dodge and to his chagrin Julian had been obliged to pay for their accommodation. He had never supported a man in his life and considered it an abasement.

Having finished with his dance notation, Julian looked over to the other side of the room to where the Captain had prized himself into an armchair. He wriggled and protested but no matter what the strategy he attempted he just didn't fit. He appeared stricken with a sedentary St Vitus's dance and this made him yet more morose and spiteful. Julian watched him with dismay.

It was now plain that his foray with the Captain had been a blind alley. He had proven to be a man of brass, useless, feeble-minded even. Julian felt embarrassed in his company and to make matters worse the Captain had nonetheless contrived to offend Julian's delicate sensibility. As was his habit, on going to bed Julian had folded his trousers in their creases and laid them underneath the mattress. He had awoken before the Captain but had been unable to retrieve his trousers because the great lump had turned in his sleep, had forced Julian aside and was disposed prostrate and heavy upon them. Julian had been obliged to perform his ablutions and prepare breakfast half naked.

Enough was enough. He would leave him on the morrow... Then there was a moment of awakening! Usually – no *without exception* – the man had left *him*. This unique event

required ceremony. He would season the proceedings with a little malice. He would seek an opportunity to render the Captain impotent and humiliated. It was the least he could do.

He gave a sideways glance toward the writhing beast in the armchair.

“Tonight I shall go to the hotel by the harbour. They have dancing, you know.”

The Captain stirred; the armchair’s stuffing complained bitterly, its architecture creaked.

“I don’t want you skipping off just yet, girly.”

“One can’t always have what one wants, you know.”

“I know I’m not having you going out on your own, girly.”

Adopting a disaffected posture, Julian raked about his wallet for an appropriate oblation. He found a pound note and a little silver. He leapt up and planted it on the arm of the chair then retreated back to his roost.

“The hotel, you say. Need more than that for a hotel now won’t I, girly?”

Julian rummaged once more for the measures – *It’ll be worth it, I’ll bleedin’ well see to that!*

As soon as they arrived at the hotel they heard the music of a piano coming from a function room at the rear of the building. Julian boldly led the foray with the Captain grudgingly following. Whilst Julian posted himself on the boundary of the dance floor studying the rustics’ shimmying and their wives’ gauds and baubles, the Captain’s bulky frame sagged onto a barstool next to two young Guards officers and their girls. One of the guardsmen was ordering drinks.

“Oh, same as before and before that, if you will. Might as well enjoy the amenities whilst we can, what?”

Thanks to this juvenile upstart, the Captain was obliged to sit at the bar without a glass in his hand – his mood turned blacker still.

Once served the military types resumed their conversation.

“Whether we win this war or loose, it will do for us. Just the cost of making the shells to bung at the buggers will bankrupt us. England will become a fading beauty.”

“But never a tart, I hope.”

“There will hard times and few friends. Who knows?”

They drank a toast to good old England, and then another to the regiment. This confirmed to the Captain that they were indeed tedious and no respecters of his undoubtedly senior rank. Mind you, anything they did would have corroborated the Captain’s view that

were tedious and no respecters of rank. Eventually they became aware of the chill wind descending about them.

“Dear Lord, you must think we’re a fine shower!”

The Captain kept his own council.

“We reckon on being given the green light any day now, you see.”

The Captain remained immovable, like some ancient beast hacked out of the permafrost.

They looked him over.

“Who did you serve with, old chap?”

This was his opportunity to establish precedence.

“France with the Gloucesters, then the Colonial Service. Police duties...”

He proffered his latest card – the one provided by the radio company.

“Ah... police duties, yes... I say, do you think we’re ready? For a war, I mean?”

“With the factory coolies on paid holiday?”

The young officer eyed the Captain’s card and then his bulbous form.

“We’ve brought our gasmasks with us – bloody horrible smelly things they are!”

“Harrumph! Decorum, gentlemen, decorum!”

“Sorry old chap, did you speak?”

“Bah!”

They found the old sot very amusing, very amusing indeed, just what the evening called for.

Julian looked about. Some young revellers were hovering round the piano; the older parochial types sat gloomily at their tables.

“I say!”

Startled, Julian turned about. An Upper Crust Girl was waving some sheet music at him.

“You look like you could manage something other than a bloody boring foxtrot!”

She proffered the sheet music. It was yet another party dance – “The Handsome Territorial” no less.

“It’s a novelty piece, I...”

“And it’s so novel we don’t know it! Can you make it out? The steps, you know. Look there’s little stick men on the back and things. We want to learn it before we go back up to Town.”

“Why bother? They’ll be a new one by then.”

“Now don’t be a grouch. Can you make it out or not?”

Julian heaved a disparaging sigh but then caught sight of the Captain’s broad back at the bar. He was pointedly ignoring him as he always did in public. Julian thought of an immense refrigerator. He burned with resentment. But then, when it came down to it, despite his entrenched loathing of the party dances, an opportunity had been proffered...

He snatched at the music.

“Yes, of course I can make it out.”

The more voluble of the army types cornered the cocktail waiter once more.

“Oh, same as before and before that again... again. Think that’s right.”

He turned to the Captain.

“I must say I hope they don’t invade tonight. Couldn’t see to shoot straight!”

Frozen in his sheath of ice, the Captain ignored him once more.

The army types found this too jolly. They formed a huddle.

“Know who the blighter is?”

“Obviously a wog. Can tell ’em a mile off....”

One of their lady friends protested.

“He’s not a wog! Looks nothing like a wog!”

“‘War Office Gentleman’, me dear. A temporary officer given his rank for the duration – the last war, do ya see? We’ve started to take on a few ourselves. Needs must. The men hate ’em. Think too much of themselves with their courtesy titles and what have you.”

The other army type was studying the Captain’s card.

“Hmmm, some sort of salesman for a foreign radio station, I gather.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“And still using his rank.”

“Yes, that’s not on. Can’t have people parading about as something they are not, can we? Soon be in a pickle then. Best put in a report.”

At the piano Julian passed the sheet music to the pianist. He glanced over to the bar to see if the Captain was watching proceedings. He wasn’t.

He gave a final look at the music – it was all marching and saluting and “Eyes Right!” and what have you. With the Upper Crust Girl on his arm watching his every move, he counted in the dance and off they went. The pianist tentatively began to sing then finding his way he became more confident and hit the keys heavily, hammering out strident chords. The army types and their girls fell in behind. A few of the provincials joined in. The ill-

disciplined column set off round the floor, Julian at its head. At the bar, the Captain turned slowly around, then became immobile, horrified at the phenomenon he found before him.

Julian darted back to the piano and peered at the sheet music, at the next steps. He shouted over to the Captain.

“Mark Time! That means on the spot doesn’t it? Yes? On the spot, then! On the spot!”

The pianist ploughed onwards.

At the bar the Captain, his back to the throng once more, downed another large whisky in one. The ice was melting about the beast... but now steam was rising in its stead.

The revellers had the hang of things now. Behind Julian and the Upper Crust Girl, the column marched round the room, knees up, arms swinging, stopping to stand to attention, saluting and then off again, around and around, knees up, arms swinging... Older patrons, still at their tables, clapped to the beat enthusiastically.

Julian hadn’t had such a good time for... well years. He had forgotten himself. It was just like the skipping games he had played with the girls as a child – before he grew too old, too boyish in their infantile estimation and they threw him out. And here he was the centre of attention or, at least, a version of himself was the centre of attention. The column was behind him and the girl, whooping and stomping as they marched.

The Captain remained hunched over the bar, his back to the festivities, inwardly raging. Julian was deliberately humiliating him. *The little tart. The brass bum blot of a tart.*

With one eye on the pianist Julian was bringing his triumph to a close. The room echoed with histrionic jingoism. The local worldly-wise – none of whom had ever ventured further than Dorchester or Poole – the manorial squire and his dame and the fisher folk all trooped in a pinched circle, hurrahing and hectoring the prospective foe across the Channel. Let the armada come!

At Julian’s command, the column halted, then in a great crescendo sang the final chorus in unison. Julian and the Upper Crust Girl led the revellers in a concluding salute to great cheering. He bathed in the incense of approbation, exultant once more. *This should do for the Captain, meese, miserable sod that he is.* He peered across to the bar. The brute had gone

The Captain cast a globular, juddering shadow as he lolloped and scuffed up the climb to the boarding house, heavy with life and its ordinance, a wearied bull elephant done with

rampage and noise, or so one would hope. He had sought to hook Nurse Feign's birdbrain son, fuck him into submission and hold him in his grasp. Then the tables would have been turned. He'd have the blackmailing old bag then. It might even break her heart if she had one. But her little tart of a son had proved tricky. As things stood he would have to go back, back to Cheltenham and his miserly woman wife, back to Cheltenham and the conniving cunt who had her ethanol-drenched hands at his throat, back to damnation. He stopped. He mumbled obscenities, he hoisted his bludgeon into the air, and he roared his complaint to the black, heavy night clouds now spilling out buckets of chill rain.

Julian had skipped to catch him up. The dancers' approval was like a stimulant in his veins. He could chance anything now. He would bait and goad and test the beast. He hated him, him and his Big Idea and his cowardliness and his stupidity and spite. He pitched forward slipping on the wet cobbles, flaying away the rain. His prey's broad back grew ever larger until it was a mountain in his path. The Captain felt him come up behind. He braced himself.

Julian began to mince about him like a little girl prancing in a skipping game.

"Well it must be me. It's *always* me. Really it's like walking on a minefield – I don't know where to put me plates down."

The Captain's eyes followed him. He snorted. Julian wasn't done with him yet.

"Only a bleedin' novelty dance. Couldn't call it *queaning* it by any stretch of the imagination. At it every day on Horse Guards Parade."

The Captain let rip a threatening harrumph. Emboldened, Julian dared more.

"At it? *At it?* I'll say!"

The Captain flung out his arm, his cane caught Julian heavily, full in the face.

Black came.

On his knees and bleeding from the mouth, Julian groped about, dazed. The Captain studied the face on the knob of the stick. Its grimace was bloody but not bloody enough. He gave the kneeling Julian another thwack then, satiated, he took a deep breath of night air.

He straddled the bloody, writhing creature beneath him.

"Are you dancing, girly? Up on your toes are you? And whose tune are you dancing to, eh girly?"

Julian felt a fearful prescience.

"That starched cow with her pills and syrups ain't it, girly?"

The Captain came to attention in best military fashion, chest out, tummy in, and stared blankly over the prostate Julian and into the wall of rain that now troubled them.

“That fucking skirt who’s come between me and me wife. Unholy fat fucking ...”

Still befuddled, Julian simply failed to comprehend this twist in events. *Now what’s he about? Pills? Nurses?*

Something came to mind and momentarily clouded the Captain’s thoughts.

“That don’t matter, nar, it don’t matter one bit...”

He gathered himself, then glowered maniacally at the downed bird at his feet.

“You go home and tell nursy who was up her little preening tart of a son. Up his bum. Up him just nicely thank you! Up his lovely fucking bum! Tell her! Tell the sow! Tell mummy Feign!”

Julian froze. Did he hear right?

“Her with her thermometer and her thank you kindly doctor. Oh, that’s quite alright Nurse Feign. Keep up the good work, Nurse Feign. Cow cunt, crawling cunt...”

Then, quick as you like, he came to attention once more and marched off.

There should have been a battery of sounds – the shooshing and whooshing of the tide’s draining, bird caws, the cries of the crowd from the hotel careering up the narrow streets and back alleys, their carousing rebounding off privy doors and the lead painted steps. Julian saw all but heard none of it in the dire, tempestuous night – gulls atop spray, the hammer of the rain on the blue, glassy, wet cobbles and the rusted red rails buried in netting... all silent, still-voiced. He looked upward to the God he imagined peering back down at him from the roof of the Seamen’s Mission. *You made this and you put me in it. What’s the use of it, eh?* He studied the cobbles. *Couldn’t dance on that not even in me taps.* His bleeding mingled with the wash of rain. There was ice about his heart, gripping, clamping. It brought him home; home to his pain, to his hopelessness.

He watched the Captain turn a corner, out of sight. Not once did he look back.

This was what the world was like, what *his* world was like; black, ice damp and speared with acute, penetrating chills. He was nothing but a little yapping dog prancing about his mother’s skirts and he was going to go home to her now because he had always gone home; because he had failed yet again and must seek the nurturing grey-on-yellow shadows of Tower Lodge and because his mother had her arms about his world; because she held suzerainty over him, because she was his nation.

It was drizzling, the trees dribbled and the grey tarmac steamed. The Captain wiped away the mist from the windscreen with a gloved hand and the Daimler swished along, its engine ticking, its tyres murmuring. It mattered not that there was a hint of thunder, the hills could have it. Cheltenham, in their lee, would be passed over and the sun would burst out within the hour, its long arms reaching in, stirring things up.

The Captain's mind, unusually at ease, had drifted. He was thinking of the horse omnibuses in Cairo; of the street barbers and clothes pressers, of the juices sold from clay crocks, the towers of flat breads steered gingerly through the crowds by tiny urchins, the dry, dead trees left to harden and go brittle where they had expired. Cairo was a shithole. But an officer, replete with the glyphs of the life that were his due – his crowns and stars and stick – had met with no hindrance. The throng always parted of its own volition, instinctively feeling his presence and playing its part. Of course, one had to play *one's own* part. The officer must be assured of his stature, must allow no room for hesitation. He must have accepted without question the primacy of his race's own juju – that this is how things are done, *will* be done, that the imperious stamp is seared indelibly into the Englishman's hide, and that the mantle of responsibility will be born lightly because he more than meets the measure. It was as if the Britisher possessed a fulcrum, a lever that could overturn and throw off this muddlesome earth at a jolt. Why could he not have remained in those moments forever? He didn't know. That was the truth of it, he really didn't know.

The limes shuddered discharging an unwanted freight. Water rattled on the car's roof. The house came into view. As he made to turn into the driveway he was faced with a moment of numb incomprehension. The gate was shut. He moved heavily out of his seat and crossed over eyeing its still glossed yellows, blues and whites warily as if he were approaching a minefield. He leant over and jiggled with the latch. It gave easily but the gate remained stubborn, the painted white stone usually employed to keep it ajar was wedged underneath. He tugged and rattled and shoved to no avail and then returned to the car for his stick. Now he had some influence on the obstinate thing. Leaning over the gate he prized and lifted and rolled it away then he fell back laboriously. His eye caught the flutter of the net curtain in his wife's bedroom. So that was it. That great fucking pudding pest had wished to be alerted to his return and so had placed a little difficulty in his path.

The Daimler promenaded up the drive. Out he came again. He found his key and entered the yellow-hued hallway. As he deposited his stick in the well of the hat stand, the

baize door to the kitchen floated to a close. He heard a scurrying from beyond but custom forbade further enquiry. Then, as he threw his keys onto his desk in the sitting room, a heavy shadow passed before the window. She was off then. Off to see her pretty little scum boy. To see what he had done with the darling, ineffectual little tart. Must have figured things out. Put two and two together. He had lost a moment of jubilation, a chance to crow. No matter. He was in no doubt that he had once more planted his feet on firm ground, that he was treading on purple.

From his bedroom window at Tower Lodge, Julian stared down into the yard. The dark clouds were skimming back over the hill behind and the sun beamed in but could not warm the place; it always retained its gun metal chill. He was drawn as always to the crazed patterning of the stones below. He unconsciously, soundlessly mouthed some school rote from childhood – *Alfred, Edward, Ælfweard, Æthelstan...* The traffic moved up the hill, the Severn flashed silver as it passed out of England, out into the great wet beyond. *Edmond, Eadred, Eadwig and Edgar...* A horn blared, horses at their harness struck a chorus, drovers cajoled. *Edward the Peaceful, Edward the Martyr...*

After the Captain had dealt with him in so bloody a fashion, he had been found by the young Guards officers from the hotel as they escorted their girls back to their berths. They had threatened vile tempests on the Captain's head and their girls had petted and fussed him. They took him back to the hotel and commanded the manager to see to his needs and in the morning gave him breakfast. They were kind and spoke freely of friends of theirs who Julian might have met in London. They intimated that these friends moved in the same circles as Julian; that they were decent chaps all the same and they were glad to serve with them. They would have been content to have called the Captain out but Julian dissuaded them. He feared further wickedness, further comeuppance. They drove him to a train and put him on it and they gave him phone numbers and addresses – there was going to be a war and some enterprising fellows were organising touring parties to entertain the troops. He should sign up right away, they were sure he would do. He was still muzzy and couldn't take it in and their benevolences disoriented him. Theirs seemed to be a world in many ways like his own but kinder. They knew a London whose streets had the same names but there the doors stood open and commissionaires doffed their hats. They meant well but it was not for him, never could be.

On the train back, his compartment was taken up by a junior office clerk who was being overly nice to a county dame. His suit jacket was shinny at the elbows and his trousers were beginning to lose thread at the turn-ups – “No point getting another now, eh, my dear? Soon be getting a khaki one, on *very* easy terms, eh?” Advertising hoardings, desperate to have their say, rushed past; a pinched, sour-faced girl eyed the pages of her film star magazine, a dour vicar picked at dry skin as he read his Edgar Wallace.

Julian thought of all the paltry, trifling words in magazines and paperbacks flying about the communal subconscious, scouring, abrading brains, exciting and excising memory. Words like insects, swarming, nibbling away at one’s god given intelligence, worthless, a devalued currency of no purpose other than to carry the mind away for a few hours. He thought of Frank’s illustrated, unexpurgated, edition of Mister Hitler’s memoir, bound in Moroccan grand basil, a collation of 18 weekly parts. Indecipherable rattle, prattle punctuated with battle cries. He thought of it nuzzling up to the shilling shockers and imagined fugitive words escaping its bounds and imposing themselves upon the derring-do – spittle words with venom in them dribbling down amongst the pages like chewed runny black liquorice. Somehow he came to a kind of intuitive moment of realisation. That Mister Hitler and his Nazis weren’t really *that* strange. They beat people down with their fists just like people did in the other books, especially the Bulldog Drummonds. *Of common cause they were. And they probably knew each other by now, being longstanding neighbours so to speak.*

Before he knew it there was Cheltenham station with its wrought iron walkways, taxis and charabancs in colourful liveries waiting in the tree-shaded car park. He had walked back to Tower Lodge gloomily and made straight for the desert of his room; it was his due after all. He accepted it without complaint as he had always done.

Down in the yard, the gate swung open. Nurse Feign rifled in her handbag for keys, looked about for signs of her son’s return and then strode forward. He heard her pounding, creaking progress up the stairs. Then she was at the door, steeling herself, her hands wrung about the handle of her handbag, twisting.

“Is the Captain to addle me now?”

He didn’t understand. Plainly she knew that he had been away with the Captain though how was beyond him. Then he grasped it... thought he grasped it.

“Well?”

“I know how to keep my place, Old Pal. You brought me up right and I will always be grateful.”

His back was to the window so that he was rendered in silhouette. He looked like a marionette in a dress suit, like the suit hanging from the wall. She could determine no depth in him. All was surface, impenetrable. Had he told the Captain of the abortions? That was the simple meat of it. The thought speared her blunt, brusque being. She loathed the thought of the Captain's incursion and dreaded possible subjection. And, as fear was a stranger to her, she needed to be done with it. She must know where she stood. His reply had told her nothing.

"Did you let on about Frank and Miss..."

He turned his head away as if from a blow.

"Old Pal that is too painful, really ... too pain..."

"The Captain is a hateful man and an ignorant man. He shows only of copy of his countenance. Let him think he owns you and he will give all manner. He will lash out..."

He turned, the light moved about his face, revealing his wounds, those that showed anyhow. His head remained bowed.

She believed her question answered.

"Dear God, no rind will cover this injury..."

She stirred, became erect, eyed him piercingly.

"Now, now Old Pal, you mustn't take this upon yourself. It's my burden, I must bear it... I have had worse, you know. But I will not aggravate... It will not be said that I..."

At a loss what to do he wondered over to his great pile of dance magazines and shuffled through them. He self-consciously selected an issue and turned to the back where the notation diagrams were. She snarled her frustration, snatched the magazine from his hands.

He found himself making the pile of journals square and then realising what he was about, jumped back as if he had been bitten by electricity.

"Half-soaked! All cheese and butter-cakes... Puck-leaden! Up to me is it? Yes, to my tally and no doubt."

She was out of the room like a bolt. As she reached the top of the stairs he heard her stamp hard upon the floorboards. He felt worn out, heavy. He gazed at his dress suit, dangling, waiting to no purpose. He brushed away dust, pulled at the sleeves to give back some shape to the thing. He stood back, studied its sheen, remembered...

He had first put on the dancer's apparel with gratitude – it had saved him the agony of choice. Tails, stiff-shirted collar and wings and his patent leather pumps constituted a universal etiquette that served all with whom he had made common truck. Left to their own devices, given free rein, they would have soon got caught up in knots. It was a mercy really.

Though, in many cases, it was simply a veneer, of course. He thought of the chimpanzees at the circus. All dressed up like the gentry and taking tea. But they were chimps for all that.

He put these impertinent thoughts aside then set about the suit's pockets, not seeking, just rummaging. Then there it was. The last sixpenny dance ticket he had taken at the Piccadilly, unredeemed.

Arthur collected his meal from the kitchen hatch – boiled haddock in a white sauce, a few fried potatoes and stringy green beans. He ate at the dining room table and looked out on his long narrow garden, overgrown now, reverting back to nature, the last of the evening's sun peeking out as it did this time of year from behind next door's pigeon coop. He had made no mark upon the garden for – how long would it be? With a shock he realised it must be at least five years or so. He had simply run out of steam. Anyhow, the garden had been his wife's province. She had pruned and aerated the soil with a hoe, planted bulbs and deadheaded the roses. In the summertime, every two or three weeks, she would have commanded him to mow the lawn. He had found solace in her garden once. Its diverse flowers and seductive temperament diverted him and sometimes, given his duties, he needed a diversion. But now, his family taken from him and finding no future in his present – no doubt he would have been a grandfather now had his son survived – he saw no virtue in the enterprise. Still, he would have to get a man in, take it all back before it became too unruly and riotous.

He chewed the bland stodge absentmindedly; bird call and a train's rattle his only company. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Great War had just passed. Henceforth, with escalating frequency and magnitude, black bordered memorials would appear in the Times commemorating the fallen once more. His son had been one of the earliest casualties – August twenty-third, by the Mons–Condé Canal. Dread of the coming commemoration pressed down upon him with ever greater malignance; it had sent him weepy, sleep was no comfort to him, his foul dreams exhausted him. He stared out into the garden once more, seeing nothing. He remained there till, belatedly, he realised it had got dark, and he met with his own image in the window glass. Coming to his senses he returned his plate to the hatch and then set about the night's work.

The table was awash with his notebooks. He must make sense of his last jottings before settling in. His pencil was blunt. He sharpened it with his penknife then examined the

new point with the eye of watchmaker. He opened the notebook on top of the pile and flipped through until he found yesterday's observations. All his past rough notes had been scribed through with a red line as they been re-entered more methodically in his log. Marginalia brought his attention to peculiarities, repeated outbursts, echoings of earlier observations. He worked through the record systematically, setting out his hard won gleanings in columns, all the better to identify patterns. "U-mantes mauszi" between Breslau and Toulouse, "e-shar thua vesh" between Riga and Athlone, "al-panz" between Danmark and Tallin, "par-ai fugol" between Breslau and Toulouse once more.

The occultists proposed that the spirit might leave the body and travel as light or sound through the living world. And there they were, calling from the outer circles of the afterlife. His radio receiver brought them to him in the long hours after midnight. The ether was a limbo wherein all the Sundered, those souls broken apart in body and spirit who could not go on to more hallowed climes, barked their complaints and revisited old injustices with the regularity of the canonical hours. His notebooks were filled with their rantings and supplications, dashes of language to be sure, some of it recognisably foreign, much of it impenetrable. Yet one of those voices might well be his son's. So he recorded the soundings phonetically and then he sought out paradigms, anything that might give shape to their pleadings, a name, a memory, an intimation... "Vohuni wamb", "micel", "aki seipse feor"... Thus the Sundered howled their despair in the night; distant, indistinct but whining, screeching, piping, gibbering in bitter tongues; a tribe of cacophonous grouches.

The mantel clock chimed twelve o'clock. He quickly let his pencil point roam across the page, double-checking for idiosyncrasies or incorrect entries. Satisfied, he leant back, sighed deeply and eyed the radio. He leant forward and flicked the switch, the plastic imitation tortoiseshell dial glowed, painting his face sienna and yellow ochre. He turned the tuner to the end of its travel; Juan les Pins, Valencia and Ljubljana drifted by: on Luxembourg, the League of Ovaltineys complained bitterly; there were anthems to Sun-Maid Raisins and Stork Margarine, then "When the Little Red Roses Get the Blues for You", Al Bowley and more Al Bowley; a voice, measured and with clipped annunciation began a tale, "Long ago in the streets of Persepholis, a beautiful princess was being carried in her litter"; and then finally, thank goodness, after a cursory nod to California Syrup of Figs and Wincarnis, there was silence.

He was set. He began to inch the tuner along by infinitesimally small degrees, electromagnetic waves washed about the ether, the frequencies rose and died – Frankfurt, Heilsberg, Normandy, Poste Parisien. There was a whine and behind it a voice. He bit his lip

as he strained to hear. He had it now. His pencil wrote “smeoru kuiza” – and *What was it?* Ah, yes, “Smeoru kuiza gasta” and, then “Falubal hanimal! Falubal hanimal!” Tickled by the dusty heat of the radio valves, squeaky scratchy voices yaupped and yammered, the amber dial threw hashed tiers of white lettering across his face, his eyes beamed, his pencil scrawled.

He sat poised in the corner of his narrow, pinched life, reaching out to the roads beyond the stars.

A few short hours after Arthur had finally fallen into something that passed for sleep, a befuddled Julian mooched aimlessly about Tower Lodge in his pyjamas cupping his tea. He had awoken early with a headache and stomach cramp once more. In his dreams he had strained to fly over a sulphurous, boiling terrain only to fall into a clammy brine that he discovered on wakening was sweat.

He was struggling to remember yesterday’s contretemps with his mother which he had realised was in some sense morbidly prescient, yet he couldn’t get to the gist of it. Such suppressed recollections and feelings were Tower Lodge’s stock-in-trade. The inside stuff that his mother and his father and he also, of course, had brought forth into the world was deposited here – in the house and in the yard.

The child Julian had thought the house was where his mother played. That this was how it was – you were allotted a space and there you acted out your rituals. Julian had the yard. Between the front gate and the bastion of the house and the old quarry wall at the side Julian had seeded the crazed coarse stones with his outpourings of rote – years’-worth of it, from nursery rhymes to multiplication tables. But the house was his mother’s psychic domain and now whenever he stayed, it never failed to remind him that he sojourned inside the bubble of her being. The house taunted him. Sometimes the apparition of a thought, a wisp of an inkling would appear at the periphery of his knowing, only to evaporate. Sometimes a truth seemed about to be told but then the house tamped it down, taking it into its province of dust and murk.

Then as now his mother had only ever responded to a kind of shadow version of himself; a version that she could cope with and manipulate, an “it” person destined to live out his allotted time in the third person. It was this ersatz Julian that walked in the world. Life, it seemed, ran on like a wound clock; only rarely did he suspect the magic of his inner existence. It was as if he was waiting for his real self to be conjured up. In the meantime, he

went through the motions just like the child Julian who had spent his energies in the yard, intoning the necessary pedantry.

When his father had come home from the war and became a commercial, Julian had wondered where his mind stuff might be harboured. He had based his speculations on the feeble clues proffered. He imagined regiments of houses with doors unyielding; endless trampings up and down streets and paths and steps, weather in bucket loads, a perpetual inner chill, a desperation beyond tears. He felt that if he might wander into one of those sorry locales leaden with his father's bequest, he would recognise it at once. That it would retain something similar to the miasmic broodings that clung gummily to Tower Lodge.

But then there was a time when his father, having given up on selling, was permanently about the house and his trunk remained immobile and surly on the top landing. Still and foreboding, he would peer down upon Julian, testing out expressions and gestures and kindly words in an attempt to find a way into the son who was not his son nor any man's son. His mother, walking in on this pantomime would act ferociously, demanding that he not trouble the father who was already too troubled, shushing and whooshing him away with arms like brittle brooms windmilling. In truth, she had never wanted his father's complexity, his difficulty, his humanity, to rub off on Julian. She'd had enough of that, thank you. Now, he discovered himself standing on the landing in a state of undress, exhausted, gawping at the trunk; his father's mind domain, crammed full of garish images, flickers of sentience, locked, inaccessible.

He brought himself to and went downstairs. On the radio, the popular classics were interspersed with starched and laundered music hall favourites. It all seemed very reverential, hushed, and church-like. But then the interference started up, those damned Harpies, their voices like razors, slashing the fabric of his fragile sanity. He turned off the switch and smiled corrosively as they faded and fell into whatever damned pit that might be their pleasure.

He needed light and air. He rushed upstairs tearing at his pyjamas and put on a pair of newly ironed slacks and a tennis shirt. Five minutes later he was rolling down the hill on his bicycle and into town.

Cheltenham was asleep no more. There was a bustle about it. The tin soldiers were out of their box. Khaki and RAF blue strutted the streets. Lorries, military and civil, leaden with munitions and military ironwork, abounded. Army motorcyclists were parked on corners waving directions.

Only a few of the Mercurials' bicycles were stacked outside the milk bar. He entered sheepishly, keeping his head down. He heard their banter as he passed the counter.

"Oo, no! Think where his hands have been!"

"Warm though, very comfy."

They laughed. Julian laughed.

Alwyn-the-Photographer saw him, smiled then clocked his face with its bruising now yellowing from purple.

"You should have told us, really you should! He's known for it, the Captain is."

"Poor lamb, never mind it."

They made room for him and Julian noticed the Witching Boy alone in the corner keeping his distance.

"I... well I don't wish to speak about it."

"You don't have to! Why didn't you warn him, Boy?"

His lips pursed in knowing disdain, the Witching Boy stayed mum. He took an irreverent slurp at his milkshake

"Well, you won't be doing it again will you? I mean you don't make a habit..."

"No! Of course not. I was stupid, really stupid. I can be stupid quite easily but I don't look for... well, you know."

He was all the more embarrassed because they were younger than him yet in some matters they were plainly savvier – but then they were collegiate and pooled their meagre resources whilst he remained substantially apart.

"Well, the Captain will find slim pickings when he gets back anyhow."

"Have the others been called up?"

"Most of them. I'm off to the RAF on account of me hobby and me technical know-how. Can't say no more."

"It sounds very important."

"Perhaps. Can't say. Sorry."

Now that the banter had died down, it was plain that they were not the same boys that he had enjoyed by the lake in early summer. They were withdrawn. The boy with the harmonica was lost in grief for a failed affair – his first of the heart. Julian vaguely remembered his lover – a looker and no doubt. Lost to a rich man it seems. Left everything behind and gone off to Croydon and him a farmer's son and the harvest coming. Julian feared for his friends and for himself – he might well be called up if they extended the age qualifications of the uptake.

He looked to the Witching Boy sitting smugly beautiful and apart.

“What are you to do? Have they written to you yet?”

“Na, and they won’t, zee.”

Julian looked him over questioningly.

“Ov with the birdees me, come autumn. Ov on the wing like. Got a warm nest to goo to, I ’az.”

Alwyn pitched in.

“You have to serve. You just have to.”

“We all zerves in our own way, don’t we? His nob won’t send me for a soldier. Wants me by him zee. Romantic ain’t it?”

The other boys looked between themselves knowingly. A discomfort had descended though Julian was ignorant of its meaning. The Witching Boy slurped the dregs from his milkshake noisily then made to leave. As he shouldered his rucksack he starred down at Julian.

“We waz tootsies and then you ups and guzz off with the Captain and don’t zay a thing about it.”

He scowled and Julian looked for some clue to what he was about. Nothing was forthcoming but he had clearly engendered an enmity.

“Tit for tat then.”

As the Witching Boy sauntered off Julian peered down the room’s long white perspective after him.

“Waits on high table at the college. Bed and board and a few bob for his trouble. They’ll be back from the holidays in a few weeks.”

“That won’t keep him out of the war.”

“He thinks one of the senior masters will see to it. Fancies himself something awful does Boy. ”

They exchanged a look of mutual disbelief.

“I met some Guardsmen when I was away. They think I might join a concert party.”

“Oh yes, just the thing for you.”

The lovelorn chap suddenly came to life.

“Yes, you do it. Have some fun out of life!”

Julian had run out of things to say and the prospect of actually making a decision had suddenly taken on meaning of the grandest order. He felt fearful but hopeful. Not quite so worn perhaps.

Alwyn leaned into him.

“You shouldn’t upset yourself over Boy. Always has his nose in everybody else’s business. Feels it’s his right. Knows everybody and their mother he does.”

Julian shuddered. He had known a few like that in London and not much good had come of it either.

Their backs to the News Theatre once more telegraphing the latest calumnies inflicted upon world, Arthur and Esmond stood staring up at the Great Turd that used be Eros. Rent boys, having just made a bob or two beneath the dark canopy of the dress circle, stumbled out blinking at the light, seeking out further possibilities. They went unheeded by Arthur and Esmond whose interests lay elsewhere.

The government’s posters, concerning mostly gasmasks and evacuation, barracked incessantly. They had now encroached upon the Circus. Red or black bannered, with stumpy block lettering, and infested with exclamation marks, they were instantly recognisable. *More noise, more cacophony* thought Arthur. He had long since become sceptical of the many and various cure-alls proscribed for the ills of the age – the legions of keep fitters and sun worshippers, the revivalists who ranted by the thousands in the Empire Stadium, the planners of cities and economies, the eugenicists and race hygienists, the press barons, and the public lectures and the radio talks with their goings-on about the home-grown Abyss. There was altogether too much of it and now the government was at the same game, pushing out prattle and noise by the yard, adding to the heap of broken covenants. And there, buried, in the middle of vortex was poor, dumped upon Eros the Optimist, mercifully insulated from the racket at least, or so he hoped.

“You pop off now, Esmond. See if you can chase up those bank account leads. See if someone was stupid enough to sign a cheque. You never know. No stones left unturned, eh?”

Esmond looked him over. He was being gotten out of the way, sent on a fool’s errand and he knew it.

“And what are we doing here, Arthur. If you don’t mind me asking.”

Arthur did mind. His look made that clear but Esmond pitched in anyhow.

“She’d have to have been pretty stupid...”

“Maybe she was, old chap, maybe she was.”

Esmond shuffled off in umbrage. It wasn't right to disabuse the man in this fashion and Arthur knew it. He was too good a copper, too diligent and all too knowing. But it had happened before that Arthur had been obliged to draw a veil over certain things – “The Old Story, Esmond. More of the same, that's all. My worry, not yours.”

As he walked through the Piccadilly Hotel's Palm Court a Thé Dansant was in progress. A small orchestra chugged away at a spiritless tango, once fashionable dames in skirts shorter than they would dare for eveningwear flitted about like bees on the arms of younger professional dancing partners. A few uniforms were present – recently called-up probably and wanting to make something of their short leave, no doubt. Arthur's boy had been just the same at the start of the last lot. He looked at them wistfully. Crockery and cutlery clacked and clinked and, incongruously, a rummaging saxophone skunked about the place like a hungry fox.

Miss Paulette was on the arm of some ancient walrus with a tobacco-stained moustache and terpsichorean ambitions beyond his gift. She saw Arthur's progress in the lee of the front door commissionaire – *A square peg, noseys one too*. She watched his back as he was led into the ballroom and strained her neck to catch his progress upstairs to the manager's office.

Sharpy stood before the window. In his day suit he looked like a stockbroker. It was a deliberate calculation intended to put the unwary off the scent. Sharpy, if you but knew it, had risen through the ranks of the municipal dance halls – a sector of the entertainment business not that far removed from the fairgrounds and music halls in point of fact but a million miles away when it came to the pretensions of the Piccadilly Hotel's clientele. Arthur, of course, was not one of the unwary.

“I'm seeking information concerning one of your dancing partners. Goes by the name of Byron... er, Byron Shade.”

“*Former* dance partner, Superintendent. Mr Shade is no longer with us. The profession is transitory as you might imagine. In fact, Mr Shade was with us a lot longer than was ...”

“When did he leave?”

“A month, possibly two months ago.”

“Why did he leave?”

Sharpy didn't miss a beat.

“As I have said, Superintendent, the profession is essentially transitory...”

“Were you happy to see him leave, Mr Sharpy?”

“Mr Shade was hardly sportive, if you see what I mean, Superintendent. And quite insular really.”

“That seems a little out of place.”

“Quite. Though he was very handy, technically speaking. But things change of course and Mr Shade... well, very self-restrained.”

“Yet he had his own following?”

“Did he? Really, I am surprised. Hardly the Man-About-Town, our Mr Shade.”

“Then why did you continue to employ him.”

“The goodness of my heart, Superintendent. A weakness, I admit it.”

“Jot down his personal details, if you please.”

Sharpy didn't like that. He shilly-shallied about in this cabinet, ostensibly looking for Mr Shade's file, altogether making far too much of things. Then, belatedly, he whipped out a manila folder, creased its edge as he prized it open and took out his pen. He handed over the note to Arthur who first eyed him and then the information.

“A chauffeuring service? He gave you this as his home address?”

Sharpy eyed him back blankly.

“His references. Do you have his references?”

Sharpy gritted his teeth, rummaged in the file once more then threw out his arm with the requested particulars.

“Ah, not his original address then. That was far more acceptable, wasn't it? These checked out, I take it?”

Sharpy smiled weakly in affirmation.

Arthur pocketed the note, eyed Sharpy once more and sighed deeply.

When he got to the door, the commissionaire was waiting to escort him out.

“That won't be necessary, thank you. I wish to have a look about.”

Sharpy and the commissionaire exchanged looks and the later drifted off.

Arthur strolled about the balcony and shuffled down the stairs. The main ballroom was empty. A skivvy buffed the dance floor with an electric polisher, vacuums buzzed about the carpets snorting like tubercular bees. As he approached the entrance to the Palm Court he felt Sharpy's eyes upon his back. He smiled inwardly.

Miss Paulette peered out from behind round, steel-rimmed glasses, studying the slight build and piercing blue eyes of the balding interloper. Here on business alright – no pumps. She smiled up at him, clinked a teaspoon on the silver pot, reeling him in as was her gift. Arthur was happy to play the minnow. She poured Darjeeling into a cup.

“It’ll only go cold. Shame to waste it.”

“Thank you. I’m afraid I’m not here to dance.”

She raised a knowing eyebrow.

“Something’s up, isn’t it? The manager’s skittish and no doubt.”

He looked at her more closely.

“We’ve met haven’t we? But not here?”

“No, little place Hampstead way. You’re a widower, aren’t you. All alone in the world.”

He had her now. Nice girl, kind. And he had needed kindness when he had met her.

“Won’t they mind you sitting out the dancing?”

“Don’t care. I’ve got enough for my trousseau, that’s all I do it for now.”

“You met a beau then?”

“Yes, thank god. I’d left it a bit late, hadn’t I?”

“Not at all, really, not at all.”

He was quietly-spoken, she remembered that.

He sipped his tea and looked about. Patrons shuffled past, awkwardly dancing in pairs, often two women together. To one side, a dance host demonstrated figures to a small group.

“I’ve often wondered how so many people manage to do this sort of thing. In the day hours, I mean.”

“Got the money and the time. That’s all there is to it. Company you know.”

Yes, he knew.

“Never any bother from the Wondering Hands at the tea dance. Most of them are past caring, you see. Just company that’s all their after.”

“The male partners?”

“Oh, they have their followers. I’ve always thought it a little ridiculous. Not a very manly way to earn a living and, of course, they don’t last long. These ridiculous women have their fads just like young misses. Still think they’re still flappers some of them.”

“Mr Byron Shade.”

“Gosh! Really? That’s it! You’re a policeman! I remember.”

He smiled.

“Byron? In trouble? I don’t believe it! Hasn’t got the necessary, not by a long mile.”

He’d hooked her now. Let her go on. She wants to be in the know herself but she’s going to give a lot more than she’ll get.

“Bit of a sorry end, you know.”

“Ah! They let him go then?”

“No, they didn’t “let him go”! They sent him packing. They threw him out, you know, in front of the whole crowd.”

Made a spectacle of the fellow then. Making a point.

“Why, do you think?”

“Like I said, there was nothing to him. You could get tired just looking at him. No go.”

Arthur gazed back enquiringly.

“He’s *too* ordinary; *too* middling, if you see what I mean. When he’s not putting it on *like they do*, he speaks like one of those college boys, a radio voice, as if he were foreign. Learnt it, you know.”

“Did he have any followers?”

“Hardly. He was *queer* you see. Some of the Select, the women that is, they take up with a queer boy for a while but only for a while. Like having a pet and getting tired of it. There was a woman though, a shrew of a piece by the looks of her. Always purring over him and, well, Julian’s not the sort of creature a girl would really like to crawl over actually. Older than she looked I reckon. Not sheep dressed up as lamb though. Some very nice ensembles I must say. Restrained, tasteful you know.”

Arthur thought he might know. His mind was racing through possibilities. A woman working the racket alone with one foot in Society and the other in the gutter. More than a few possibilities came to mind. He tapped the pot. She poured a second cup.

“She’d turn up with some young flit of a girl, all of them lookers. You couldn’t help but notice. You see Byron’s flame had died, not that he didn’t deserve it, petulant thing that he is. I suppose he must have relied on them, whoever they were.”

Arthur knew who they were, what they were.

“They – these girls – you never saw them again?”

“No... no, never.”

“What of this woman? Have you seen her since Byron left?”

“No... no, not at all actually.”

Well that was plain enough. The manager could have told him much of this he felt sure. He might well be guarding the reputation of the place but Arthur thought there might be more.

“Oh, I’ve seen her in the Lilly Pond of a day.”

“With Mister Shade?”

“No with a girl— *girls*. More than one, you see.”

Frequented the Queer Den, did she? That narrowed the field considerably. He already had a face in mind. He’d have to dig about a bit for the name, his memory being what it was. Miss Paulette was staring back into the room over his shoulder. Arthur turned around. Sharpy was standing there, his eyes wide, biting his lip. Arthur smiled benignly at him, behind him Miss Paulette did likewise.

He came out of the place and strolled down the street towards the Circus once more. He was glad the girl was settled. London can be a lonely place for a young woman with standards. Well, that was his view anyhow, no matter how old fashioned. He parked himself beside the plaster Commissionaire outside the News Theatre. They shared the same view of the Circus. Behind him a couple of Sweeps were at their banter.

“He said, ‘I’ll ’ave you for going equipped.’ I says, ‘Thanks for the compliment, I’m sure!’”

Arthur couldn’t help but laugh. But then, imperceptibly as his mind rested and he peered out vacantly ahead, he unconsciously adopted the same air of wearisome disdain as the plaster mockery of a man beside him.

August and nothing doing – Cowes week had emptied London. For the rest of the month the Select would remove to their country houses or take to foreign climes. There would be a rump of parties in the counties to be sure but the climate had turned icy. Those left in Town were in uniform – including a number of the girls. Frank had become increasingly conscious of things winding down, being refocused. At the last race meeting he had attended loudspeaker vans had called up the regiments to their musters. English roads were now jammed by columns of marching men and the skies were alive with aircraft. The factories were working overtime, St Pauls had been sandbagged and there was hurried construction about the Palace. The air traffic to the continental casinos had wilted away as he expected, its clientele now sojourning in the South of France, but Imperial Airways had also ceased taking bookings on their Empire routes – passengers had nightmare visions of being thrown out of the skies by fire-spewing tin birds of prey. That Europe was being taken one step further into barbarity and race suicide there could now be no doubt.

Miss Evelyn Margaret, her interests rooted in Society's misdemeanours, had been becalmed and, whatever else might be said against her, she was a rather busy bee by nature. The hiatus irritated her. However, she optimistically asserted that the war would start after the harvest had been gathered in – *You could set your watch by it* – not that she knew the slightest thing about harvests or anything else bucolic. Nonetheless, so she assuredly maintained, at the termination of the gleaning, the nation's women, like the good soldiers they were, would then, *ensemble*, patriotically drop their knickers and a further month or two down the line business would pick up exponentially. Nurse Feign was only one of her "Ladies" but she had proved a reliable one. She wanted her back in the fold. So she had listened avidly as Frank had outlined his intentions regarding the reestablishment of relations.

"Always had concerns, always. Taking them straight across to Cheltenham. Might as well hand them a map. I'll be going by the trunk road west then head north at Swindon. I'll spend the afternoon learning the back ways to Nurse Feign's. Best I go opposite to my intentions there. The extra time don't matter. I want to lay down a fog, see."

Miss Evelyn Margaret stared at him benignly.

"Might as well be Fuzzywuzzyland, my dear. I only go as far as the metro does."

What she really thought was that Frank might also be out of his depth. *Hardly Hoxton after all.*

"It's an investment, see. Get it right and I can use it again and again. Tried and tested like."

"And once the doleful deed be done?"

"I'll work the black meself now and keep the bunce. I take it you want nothing of that?"

"Nothing. Far too complicated, darling."

Well that's plain. She weren't never one for cackle anyways.

The road had been plagued with traffic jams. Army convoys had precedence and so private vehicles were obliged to pull over. Many cars overheated, many tempers frayed. Exasperated, somewhere between Newbury and Swindon Frank turned north. He failed to find a straight road for the next hour or so. His lifted Ford – the Jag being far too conspicuous to employ – wheezed and clanked, up and over hill and valley, through lanes narrow and unmetalled, all on the minutest of scales. Again and again he missed the better way and put himself put once more into the maze. *It ain't London. London makes sense. Miles and miles of sense. Everywhere leads to some else in London. Here everywhere leads to nowhere. And where is everybody? Don't nobody live round here?*

He finally emerged on the Cheltenham to Oxford road – the very route he had disdained, but mistaking his orientation, headed off eastwards back towards London for five miles before realising his mistake. The sun was low and reddening over the Forest of Dean when he eventually rolled down the hill into Cheltenham.

He parked the Ford on the verge, used his handkerchief to get rid of some of the accumulated sweat, lit a cigarette and weaved across the road between the traffic of goods vehicles heading to the Bristol and Gloucester docks. A padlock hung limply from the trappings of the Lodge's wooden gate. He used his shoulder and squeezed into the narrow gap. The house sat squat and ill-tempered before him. A yellow light washed out from the kitchen. There was a rattling of pots and pans and in a room above a radio squeaked and gasped asthmatically. A shapeless animated mass in an apron shuffled about the kitchen and then stopped and faced him. Nurse Feign came into the yard wiping her hands on a towel whilst affecting a smile. Frank was immediately disconcerted.

"I was holpen you'd be sooner."

"I've been seeing to the details like. Thorough's better than fast."

"I'm glad you're mindful of it."

A thin, rakish sort of body appeared in silhouette at an upstairs window then darted back into the stone dark.

"Well, you can see we're not overseen here. And there's no going into town and the London road's just a spit away over and back."

"I've been round the houses deliberate like."

She mulled that over, staring at him.

Frank peered over Nurse Feign's shoulder. Some panic-ridden sprite darted about the kitchen. Julian shuffled out, nervously dishevelled, his head down, his fogged eyes looking up and over at Frank.

Nurse Feign had decided to go for broke – resume relations with London and, with luck, have Frank take son off her hands once more.

"I'll get tea then."

She marched off, nose in the air as if seeking a scent. Frank eyed the downcast Julian.

"So this is where you are then. Your country palace is it?"

Julian, suddenly aware of his own slovenliness, pulled at his coat, mussed his hair. Frank caught a glimpse of the bruising on his face.

"You wouldn't be in London now, it's all for war and soldiering. You wouldn't want to be in it."

Julian stayed mum. He was aware of Nurse Feign watching from the kitchen, leaving them to it, the screaming cow.

“So I come here and you’ve nothing to say to me, eh? Not a word to the whys and wherefores.”

Julian sniffled.

“I... it was my... London wants nothing of me now. I can only imagine the cackle... And, well, I could hardly go Dillying could I?”

“Did I ever ask that of you? I never would ask it. No need at all. I have a good business now. You’d have never have thought a poor rascal like me could be doing so well.”

Julian pitched in, he had no idea why.

“Lucky old you. You’ll be trolling down the bleedin’ aisle next. Now that really would make you respectable wouldn’t it?”

He proffered an ineffectual sneer.

“And bloody ridiculous too.”

He fidgeted, scuffed the ground with his shoe, the scuffing transmuted into skipping, the skipping into a dance.

“Imagine you in yer drawing room, in one of them smoking jackets, leaning on the mantelpiece with yer port, all Noel Coward an’ all.”

He mimed it, then conscious of his rising hysteria, stopped dead.

“Anyways, if you’re so well off, what are you doing here?”

It was dark now. The kitchen light threw out a widening beam that rested between them and sundered all possibility of reconciliation. They were together for the first time in months yet never so far apart.

The yard took on its night’s dreaming. All the facts and reckonings that Julian had invested in it were being spirited along the cracks and fissures, reshuffling and reordering themselves. Both were oblivious to this industry. Both had come face to face with an omnipotent impossibility.

Frank was losing patience. He was overly tired, hungry and needed a drink.

“And what’s with your split lip and the bruises on your face and all. Got you comeuppance did you? Tried to shush another old bugger and got what’s for, did you?”

On the upstairs radio, a dance band played a party tune – the bloody “The Chestnut Tree” of all things.

Frank stared back into the kitchen where Nurse Feign gazed blankly back at him. Suddenly he saw everything for what it was worth. The meanness of it, the desperation.

“For the love of God, how did I find a way to this? Killing the little babies, for Christ’s sake.”

He flicked his cigarette nub to the ground, extinguished its glow with the twisting, pressing heel of his shoe.

Something heavy and wooden clanked upon the ground, rested against his foot. Both looked towards the gate. The Captain’s walking stick had rolled across the yard towards them, its knobby face grimacing; then the slurp of running water, a pool enlarging, glass-wet upon the stones. In the shadow, at the gate, Captain Surman, fighting for balance, drunk, urinated.

Nurse Feign appeared, rolling back her sleeves, advancing across the yard with measured step and gaping mouth, her eyes peering, following the travel of their gaze. The unsteady Captain struggled to button his fly. Frank’s wariness asserted itself.

“Did he hear? Was he party to what was said?”

“Said? What is it that was said?” Nurse Feign demanded.

The Captain too was perplexed. He stared ahead into the grain of the gate as if he saw the great swirls of the heavens before him. The music from the house swelled then faded back.

“That you my darling? That you, is it?”

Frank looked from the Captain to Julian and back again.

“Bum boy! Bum boy! Where’s my... Killing the little babies? Why kill the babies? Why? Not the little ...”

He turned confusedly, peering into the yard.

“Why kill the babies? Eh?”

Music and the muss of misty static dowsed the yard. Nurse Feign’s muscular, bare arm retrieved the Captain’s stick, held it aloft. Its face grimaced as it swooped down and met with the Captain’s skull in a disappointing, squelchy thud.

Fear rose up. Frank knew violence spelt unlooked-for outcomes, the plague of serendipity. He spoke his dread.

“Now what are you about? The man is drunk... He’s drunk and cannot be...”

He squinted into the darkness by the gate. The Captain lay motionless in an unnatural pose. Frank inched forward, peered down at his blubbery bulk. He had only suffered a lightly bruised temple but the life had gone out of him, that was plain enough. Frank yelped. He gulped for air, his eyes wide. The music fell down from the upstairs window dowsing them in an incongruent gaiety.

He turned about. He scanned the dark corners of the yard, discovered the window of the brightly lit kitchen. They were busy in there, devilling away at something. Then Nurse Feign emerged carrying... carrying *What in God's name is that?*

"The entenny's open for all the world to see. You must close it. Close it, I say."

She stared into him. He walked blindly over to the gate. The Captain's foot was lodged beneath it. He awkwardly freed it, kicking at it with his own foot, unable to touch it with his hand. Avoiding the body, he peered out into the empty street. The Captain's Daimler was clumsily parked before the gate.

He retreated, pushed shut the gate, stumbled back across the yard and, finding a corner, slumped down upon his haunches. The music from upstairs was beginning to flounder. Nurse Feign shuffled up to him. He gawped stupidly up at her.

"I don't know the man. I know nothing of the man."

Nurse Feign considered. Mumbled to herself.

"He's to be a greater pother to me now than he ever was while there was breath in him."

Then, with purpose, she went back into the house. Frank appealed to her retreating back.

"You must let me go. I cannot be doing with this."

The radio music was transmogrifying. There was wailing and whinnying, the scrapping of untutored strings. Frank went woozy with it all. *Felt like I was rocking, being rocked in me cradle so's to speak. But I was sick with it. Heaving. But nothing came. The radio come back on and it weren't Henry Hall or his bleedin' orchestra. Some actor moaning on. Some fellah with something rotten in his gut.*

Nurse Feign squatted down and studied the Captain's laid out morass like Newton with his compass and chart. The Captain's shirt was pulled back and Nurse Feign's fingers were feeling for the shoulder joint – *Like her hand was a bloody big spider probing.*

"*Julian ! Julian !*" she yells.

"*Yes, I know, I know*", he says...

And there he was, towing the line, falling into place as if he'd done it a thousand times before. Dragging the washing basket over to her and then the fuckin' chopper from the wood pile. Not looking, of course. Dropping stuff by her then flitting off. Never looked at me once neither.

Then the wireless fellah was gone for a bit and there was just cackling – like wood splintering. Then he brought pillow cases. She set about the business like she was filleting a

fish and she dropped bits of him in as she went along. As neat as you like she was till there was just the lump of him left. For a second I thought he might still be alive. Then I remembered the moaning was on the radio and I knew it was just fancy. What would he be doing breathing in that state?

The wide river plain was soaked in mists and chills. A heavy lorry crashed through the black. Its half windscreen admitted a stream of cloying wet. The driver embraced the steering wheel in a fierce grip as he careered along the Ledbury road. The headlamps picked out a scrub landscape of hedgerow and fields half-shorn of their bounty. As he rounded the bend he was blinded by a beam of white. He stamped his fist on the horn. It trumped flatulently and in the afterglow of the dowsed lamps he briefly made out a Daimler sitting squat on the bridge. About it three figures he took to be men – they sported voluminous coats and trilbies – turned their faces away in concert. He saw nothing sinister in this; he thought it reaction to his own vehicle's headlights. This was the summation of the testimony he would give later to the police and to the coroner.

The lorry whooshed past. Nurse Feign squinted in an attempt to kill the afterimage of the lorry's piercing beam. Julian stood huddled by the balustrade, staring into the waters below. Frank scuttled about, pacing out his fears.

"Dear God! I thought the hounds of hell were upon us."

Nurse Feign gathered herself together.

"Be ready now. Hope me lug him over."

Frank started, swallowed his revulsion then followed her to the rear of the Daimler. She lifted the boot bonnet. The shapeless, flabby bulk of the Captain's trunk lay within swaddled in a sheet. They lifted him awkwardly, struggling to gain a purchase on the jelly-mass.

"No man's as heavy as this in life."

"All men are a burden."

As they approached the balustrade, Julian yelped at the sight of them and retreated into the dark sobbing. The shifting gelatinous weight proved slippery. There was a great deal of awkward heaving and shoving before they manoeuvred him atop the railing and sent him over into the black soak.

While Frank caught his breath, Nurse Feign removed four pillowcase-swaddled shapes from the boot, deposited them onto the tarmac and tied a brick to each one. Frank knelt down and unenthusiastically helped with the task; over they went into the river.

"The carpet!"

Frank traipsed behind her and yanked at the rug that has been used to line the boot.

"Keep it off you. Don't have it dirty your coat now."

They dragged it by its corners to the balustrade and heaved it over.

Nurse Feign peered about checking for anything dropped or mislaid. She nodded and gave out an animal-like grunt. Frank closed the boot then wiped the handle with the cuff of his raincoat. Nurse Feign grabbed Julian's sleeve and steered him back to the car. Frank shuddered involuntarily then started the engine. The Daimler inched silently away.

Below the bridge, the river's waters lapped up a bitter, enveloping sheen.

When morning came she shooed Frank and Julian out of the house with instructions to hide the Captain's car. It had been a torturous exercise. Julian had followed Frank in the Ford but he was so near collapse that he frequently lost track of him in traffic. Frank could feel the danger mounting but it was crucial he find a neat crib for the Daimler.

In a back street he discovered what he was looking for – a garage with waste ground at the back of it set aside for the temporary housing of vehicles. He pulled up before a row of petrol pumps. The bulb inside one of the pump's globes blinked erratically. An attendant stood before them in a white coat, military-style cap and Wellington boots. Frank turned off the engine. The attendant paying him no heed, he took the opportunity to swab the steering wheel, the ignition key and gearstick with his handkerchief. He parked his trilby on his head, shielding as much of his face as he dared and stepped out of the car, sweat glistening on his upper lip.

"I'll be garaging the car a while if that's all right with you."

Without so much as a glance, the attendant reached into his pocket and brought out a book of pink receipts.

"And for how long would that be, sir?"

"Oh, over the weekend and ... three days if you will, three days."

"Private or commercial?"

"Commercial, I'm a commercial see."

The attendant allowed himself a derisory snort, stuffed the pink receipt back in his pocket and brought out a book of blue receipts.

"Name?"

"Drummond."

Frank watched nervously as the attendant walked to the front of the Daimler and wrote down the details on the blank receipt and then placed it under the wiper on the windscreen. He tore out a carbon and handed it to Frank.

“Payment on collection.”

“Key’s in the ignition. Not to worry if I’m a day or two late.”

“I won’t.”

Frank grabbed his raincoat from inside the car and marched off. He turned a corner. Julian was waiting in the Ford a few yards down. He peered back at the garage. The attendant drove the Daimler to the waste ground and tucked it in between two cumbersome jalopies. Frank screwed up the receipt and threw it into the gutter. It had been a necessary gamble – he could only hope the attendant would fail to remember his face.

He shuffled over to the Ford. Julian was trembling, breathing erratically, and debating with himself.

“So you’re going to leave me now?”

Frank was fit to bursting.

“Dear God, it was you that left me. And I have stood by you. I’ve done everything I that can be done. But I’ll not risk any more for you. You see nothing, no one beyond yourself. I can carry the weight of you no longer.”

“It’s all to be left with me...”

“You must be still. It’s your gammon an’ cackle that will get us lumbered. Be still, for the love of God!”

He didn’t need to look at him. He felt Julian’s disintegration like a flurry of jags ripping through him. His heart sank.

Christ, I’m a hanging boy now and that’s for sure.

That evening, as the sun sat red on the horizon like a blood stain, Frank found himself back amongst the spider’s web of back lanes that had flummoxed him only twenty four hours earlier. He pulled over into a passing place on a high point on the road. He lumbered out of the Ford and leant against its body gasping at a cigarette, his hand still shaking. In the field opposite, the hedgerows were populated with the ever-darkening silhouettes of spindly trees – rookeries urgently alive with the day’s final disputes and reckonings. Frank, a townsman to

his boots, felt enveloped in what was to him a foreign, threatening miasma that did little to assuage his fear.

His thoughts ranged wide, he had been close to panic ever since the doing away of the Captain. How had he been drawn into this? He had been so adverse to violence because of its erratic, unrestrained constitution. He had long steered clear of it. And the little he had known of Nurse Feign had suggested a wide, straight-cut rarity, or so Miss Evelyn Margaret and Julian had led him to believe. Yet he had hardly arrived at the Lodge when bedlam ensued. And it was over in a tick. No possibility of mediation, no chance of escaping its reach. How could he explain his presence there without drawing himself ever nearer to Nurse Feign's purpose? She had tied him to her without so much as a by-your-leave.

On the way back to the Lodge he had slung accusations at the pitiable whelp that sat sniffing beside him. Julian could only plead stupidity. Stupidity in running off with the Captain, with the robbing of Mr Raine, with dropping Frank in it despite his bet efforts to do otherwise.

"I can't help being me can I? And now they'll kill me for it, won't they?"

Frank thought that that was the most likely outcome for both of them but to say so would be to tip Julian over. The whirlpool's draw was irresistible. He knew it but he couldn't admit it, dare not admit it, not yet anyhow.

When they had returned to the Lodge he had found her cleaning the paving stones of blood and gore with a besom broom and a heavy scrubbing brush. He brought the Ford into the yard to keep it from view. Nurse Feign hoisted the laundry basket and deposited it next to its boot.

"Here be his honds and his head."

She placed them inside.

"Find some ditch and go deep. Here's a spit and quicklime to keep animals and the flies ov him. When you've done, go on'rd and drop them somewheres else."

She hoisted the spade and the bag into the boot and pressed down heavily on the lid.

Frank came up to her, glowered down at her.

"Then that must be the end of it."

She looked about for Julian. He was in a corner, bobbing about as if he had lost something. She weighed things up and emitted something between a bellow and grunt that he took for grudging acquiescence.

Frank had left the Lodge in haste and that added to his confusion and so, here he was, lost in the maze of lanes once more.

His heart had stopped pounding at long last but a chill that threatened to incapacitate him had arisen in its stead. He stirred himself. He perched on tiptoe on the car's running board and peered about. The land looked empty to him. He had no conception of the profundity of life, of the scurrying and winged things that flitted about him.

In an adjacent field, a stile nudged next to a stone wall. A path followed a hedge uphill to a copse. Halfway along was a huge chestnut tree. He walked to the back of the car looking about him all the time. He opened the boot. There lay the bag of quicklime, the spade and the wicker basket with a cloth thrown over the top.

He recoiled, breathing heavily and staring wildly. He stamped the ground, muttered his protestations through gritted teeth. But he knew he must be about his business. The undertaking was etched into his fate, his doom. He reached in, gripped the spade and the bag. He traipsed along the hedge row, scuffing, tripping over clods and roots. He stopped, looked about once more, lay down his burden.

The spade's edge sliced into the earth, again, then again. He sweated as he cut deeper into the heavy ground. Night came on, a blue light rained down from the moon. Birds made their final avowals, ever-blackening clouds boiled.

He returned to the Ford. His hands reached into the boot, gripped the basket's handles. He plodded back to the tree, peering but seeing little but his own fears in the half-light. Steeling himself, weeping, he undid the knot atop the pillowcase. He turned it so its opening faced down then let the Captain's head, its eyes rolled upwards to the sky, slip out and down into the cloying, clogging, clagging chalk. He dropped in the Captain's hands – one fell across his mouth, *speak no evil*.

He tipped in the whole of the bag of lime. It dusted the Captain's tousled hair and whitened his face. Then he filled in the hole, tamped the crummy earth, slamming the flat of the spade down hard upon ground. He looked up to black sky, held the spade aloft and yelled and screamed to the heavens. But not a sound was heard.

Nurse Feign was looking through the Captain's clothes. Her gleanings lay on the kitchen table – cigarettes, keys, membership cards from various clubs the Captain had tried it on with. It was all of a muchness if you ignored the cryptic obscenities next to the names in the address book. Men's names – boys' name more probably. *Boys!* She put down her work and marched over to the stove. She bent low and reached up beside the flue and retrieved an

envelope. She took a last peek at the photographs of the young Arab boy then fed them to the fire. Then she began to cut out clothes labels.

Julian shuffled in.

“No! Not yer, not now! You can’t be addling me now.”

It was just like when he was young, always under her feet. Then, should he become too much the irritant, she would dose him with physic of hemp and, insensible to the concoction’s medicinal inefficacy, would be content in the ritual itself, as if the act was one of transubstantiation. The memory passed. She snipped some more, leaving Julian hanging there, an emotional castaway.

Julian was a child and later a man who was always getting out of the way, seeking a corner or a quiet room, finding solace in a space emptied of engagement or dispute. Now, as before, he retreated and made his way downstairs and out into the yard. A heaviness had him. Fear plagued him. He was stymied, stalled. He stood lock still. His eyes innocently searched the argumentative, cloud-busy skies. He had come to ground and was standing upon the heads of ancient crustaceans cemented into the cold, milky coloured limestone. He was back where he started. He huddled in the yard’s corners, fleeing the light as he had when a child.

It was in the yard that he had first withdrawn into the sanctuary of rote. He did so now. He conjured up Mr Sylvester’s dance notation from his depths and tentatively began to dance a quickstep (cross chassé, quarter turn, drag...). His arms embraced an imaginary partner, another queer fellow, like Julian a meticulous kind of chap, light on his taps. He skipped over the wending checkerboard cracks that, in his mind grid, marked the steps (lock step forward, natural turn...). His feet prescribed invisible arcs. A silent music sustained him, its metronomic strict tempo reassuring him. His dancing took him to a familiar but nebulous terrain – the imagined asylum of a dancehall peopled by other ghost dancers moving in circles and parabolas, together creating tightening spirals, enjoining choruses that were never still, always forming and reforming, never committed, knowing promise but never consummating that promise, all to the ephemeral do-re-mi-ed lullabies of crooners and tenor saxophones. He danced on.

As with other dancers, it was learning parrot-fashion – blind mimicry – that had given him this eurythmy and that had allowed him to hide in full view of the world. In dance, he had recognized himself for the first time but had gone unrecognised. That was why he recalled it now, why he lost himself in it, why he danced alone to an inner strict time.

Then he found something quite startling. Out of the blue, he remembered playing “Sheep come home” when he had been but an infant – his first brush with dance or a kind of

dance, at least. The caller, a robust ruddy-faced girl, stood at one end of the playground and shouted to the others who answered her in chorus:

“Sheep, sheep come home!”

“We’re afraid!”

“What of?”

“The wolf!”

“The wolf has gone to Devonshire and won’t be back for many a year, so sheep come home!”

And they believed her, of course. Poor innocent sheep that they were...

His mother looked down upon him from an upstairs window. She had always thought the boy hollow; an empty, unreasoning sentience. But now whole worlds were leeching out of him, spilling out in his blathering, his retchings. She could see that things were running backwards and that, as he peeled back the layers of rote learning, he must eventually come across bedrock, older granite memories that should not be unearthed. She realised that it wasn’t Mr Hitler and his bombers and gassings that threatened her; it was that slight, spindly shape below and its maunderings.

What’s he about now?

He was cajoling someone unseen entity in a kind of sing-song voice that made her shiver.

“The wolf has gone to Devonshire and won’t be back for many a year... The wolf has gone to Devonshire and won’t be back!”

That, she knew, could not be right.

Wingèd cherubs floated about the Cream and Roses Girl, her beau paid homage, her blank, white silhouette floated like a balloon, unanchored, ethereal. *This Selama stuff promises wonders. Eternal youth at one and thrupence and tubes at sixpence*, so Arthur noted. And there he was, unwittingly hurled back into the memories of his boy once more and the lad’s exclusion from the Life Everlasting.

The billboard poster was on the far side of the road glued onto the railway viaduct; a train clanked over the arch, horses’ hooves clomped on cobbles, the dray’s driver coughing into his handkerchief. Another caller at the Bluebird Imperial and Continental Roadways and

Airways Hire Service shuffled off, his business thwarted. The garage's shutters were down and no lights had shown upstairs all night so Esmond had told him.

They'd traced Frank from the girl's letter – she had mentioned a beautiful blue car with the bluebird pennant on its highly polished bonnet. Esmond, who had taken the night watch, snored fitfully in the back of the CID car. Two uniformed officers waited in the shadows of an arch on the garage's side of the road. Arthur let his mind meander over the last few days' business. All other enquiries had drawn a blank but he had high hopes that they would make inroads here. The owner of the hire service was known to them – a Hoxton tough, a wide boy with a past association with Moseley's bunch.

He hoped that wouldn't lead them further into the mire but whatever the truth of it he needed to make progress quickly now. He had the queasy feeling things were slipping out of his grasp. Hitler had signed a pact with Italy and Japan – Japan! That posed a threat to the China Sea, to Australia and to India on top of all the bother in Europe. The Empire from sunrise to sunset was in danger. He could only hope that Old Brolly was on top of things but he couldn't understand why Britain had been put aside, why the government hadn't got in first and made a treaty with the Japs or Mussolini, one or the other would have at least promised some surety. The sheer scale and scope of things was overwhelming and at the centre of the maelstrom was Old Brolly, alone it seemed.

Earlier, he and Esmond had gone through the weekly Hue and Cry and the Special Branch reports as he was duty bound to do – *God! That was yesterday morning!* He was losing track of time. There had been mention of a character posing as an Army Captain, a commercial selling advertising on a radio station, a foreign radio station. He had later been spotted at one of Admiral Rule's fascist tea parties. From the description the fellow might be the same chap who was working along the south coast leaving behind a plethora of phony cheques and unpaid bills. A younger man invariably described as foreign, was tagging along with him or so it seemed. Arthur hadn't taken any particular notice of these reports. They were simply part of the patchwork of information that came across his desk. They would soon be called to mind however.

He came to. One of the officers was gesticulating towards the arch. Frank plodded wearily into view. He was grossly overtired, unkempt and on edge. He had walked miles through the night to cover his tracks. He had even declined the midnight buses – too great the risk of bumping into someone he knew. He would have to go to Hoxton later; get himself an alibi for yesterday. That would put him in hock to one of the wide sort and he didn't fancy it. They'd work the black on him given half a chance. But what else could he do? Trouble was

he couldn't think straight. Hardly surprising that... He stopped under the billboard, lit a cigarette, and stared at the garage frontage. It was everything he had. Everything he had wanted to have. God, he had been so close...

A whistle blew. He froze. Then they were on him, oily black lilies, bridling him, kicking at his shins with their big black boots to make him kneel. If the Cream and Roses Girl floating above him had noticed the fracas then she gave no sign of it; plainly it was, in every sense, beneath her.

Esmond was out of the car in a flash though he had been still half-asleep when the whistle blasted. He stumbled over to the commotion and frisked Frank who was gawking wildly about and shaking like a wobbly jelly. *Funny that. Out of proportion. What's he panicking for? Not as if he hadn't been nicked before...*

Esmond marched back to the car with his booty and handed over Frank's personal possessions to Arthur. He waved a bunch of keys. Arthur nodded and, signalling an officer to join him, Esmond marched off to the garage. No one noticed pretty Billy Dimples dart back from behind the net curtain of an upstairs window. No one copped him shimmying over the brick wall at the back of the building, out of Frank's life for good. Arthur tapped his driver's shoulder and they headed off to the Yard.

Arthur took the lift to his office where he spent the best part of the day going through the documents found at Frank's garage and leaving his prisoner to stew. He found nothing to indicate where he had been that night or if he had interests other than the garage. He was done by early evening having gleaned little or nothing – just evidence of Frank's defrauding of the taxman which was no concern to him. He wasn't looking for spurious complications; he craved momentum, the arrow-like certainty of unimpeded progress. Then, as he was tidying things away, he noticed a scrunched-up piece of notepaper caught at the bottom of the large brown envelop that held the contents Frank's jacket. He pinched it with his fingers, retrieved it and opened it up. *Ah, there we are. Just waiting for me weren't you?* He gave a heavy sigh and carefully stored the paper in his wallet.

He put away Frank's files and receipts books and looked out at the Thames alive with traffic and colour. He heard a scuffling from the echoing, duck egg blue corridor, a woman's heels tap-tapping on its glazed red clay tiles, the slamming to of a heavy door, the low rumble of harsh voices. He stood for moment in thought then trooped off to the canteen for a meal. A nice bit of cod, the peas weren't up to much though and the tea had been left to stew to long in its urn as was all too frequently the case nowadays. On returning to his office, he found another file waiting for him on his desk. He opened a locker and took out his dress suit and

patent leather shoes. As he changed he made pecking glances at the open file. Once dressed, he gathered it up together with his hat and raincoat and slow marched out with the gait of a pallbearer at a funeral.

As he turned a corner his eyes met those of Miss Evelyn Margaret perched on the edge of a bench next to a woman police constable, her red-rimmed, frightened eyes darting about but seeing little. She was drawing heavily on a cigarette. She tried to read him, gave it up and lowered her head in submission.

In the interrogation room, the two constables from the raid were slouched against the back wall behind Frank who they had ignominiously shoved onto a brown tubular steel and plywood stacking chair from a pile in the corner. There was a folding trestle table of the same ilk, a metal ceiling lamp dangling from a long flex, and a high, grilled window. That was all; it was a torturer's room, not unlike that which Captain Surmon had known in Egypt if they but knew it. Such rooms are the same the world over...

No one heard Arthur enter; everyone knew Arthur had entered.

He opened the file and read out loud.

"I first met Byron Smythe two years ago when he sub-let a room in my flat. I have seen him only five or six times since. Last time I saw him was just before Christmas last year, when he came up to town and spent a few nights there."

Frank stiffened, licked his lips.

"He used the room when he made one of his rare returns to London. I never knew him very well socially or went dancing with him."

Arthur ambled past him, deposited his hat and coat on the table and, turned on his heels to face Frank, picked up from where he had laid off.

"We... um, we had not got much in common. I know nothing of his employment at the Piccadilly Hotel. He was not, in my opinion, the type to engage in acts of immorality with men."

Frank dared a peek at Arthur then peered down to study his feet once more.

"Mr Smythe's telephone number is registered to your address, Mr Teeney."

"From when he sub-let the room, see..."

"We were hoping you might be more forthcoming concerning Mr Smythe's whereabouts. Merely an acquaintance, you say?"

"He was never any trouble, you know."

"Yes, no trouble. You gladly offered him a bed?"

"He's a pleasant sort of fellow. No trouble, no trouble at all."

Arthur referred to the file once more.

“1931 ... under the name of Kevin Henry, you were charged with obtaining goods and monies by theft or extortion; two months’ hard labour.”

“My own solicitor was not present in court. There was a mix up over fees and what have you and he would not appear.”

“Cigarette cases, watches, jewellery ... and various postal orders and notes of large denomination which you unable to account for. Blackmail, Mr Teeney! Inverts terrified of being exposed!”

“I was not adequately represented.”

“Yet you asked for three other charges to be taken into consideration.”

Frank slumped further into the chair. He rocked himself, spittle glossed about his mouth. In his whirling, lightening-shattered mind he believed that all this was related to the Captain’s murder but he couldn’t see how or why things had moved so quickly. In truth, he couldn’t see much at all, only black and blacker still. *Stay dumb, stay mum...*

“What is at issue here?”

Arthur searched the file, proffered a mean smile.

“Mr Byron Smythe was a mere acquaintance, you say. Yet, Mr Byron Smythe was also wont to receive gifts of a similar nature. He was known to have acquired a number of such gifts from women and, like yourself, from men.”

“I know nothing of it.”

“More to my purpose, Mr Byron Smythe was seen in the company of a young woman who had been subject to “obstetric distress”. Other young wom...”

“What? What are you about, now?”

“Other young women who underwent illegal abortions and who knew Byron Smythe, the same Byron Smythe...”

“What would I be doing getting myself mixed up in such a thing...”

“...who you were glad to offer a bed to when you saw fit. Mr Byron Smythe who, in turn, is known to be a close acquaintance of Miss Evelyn Margaret who has frequently been brought before the police courts on charges of immorality and aiding and abetting...”.

“I can’t follow you. What road are you on now?”

Arthur dropped the file on the table, starred down unblinking at Frank, rifled his inside pocket and retrieved the crumpled piece of paper from his wallet.

“I’m off to a cabaret. At the Piccadilly Hotel. Mr Noel Coward. A favourite of my late wife’s.”

He dangled the paper in front of Frank. It was the drawing of the Cream and Roses Girl that he had made that time in the Lily Pond – the living Cream and Roses Girl, not the ghost-white floaty thing on the advertising poster and jars of paste, nor the dead thing that was fodder for the flies. Frank had forgotten the drawing's existence. He blanched.

“Young women, Mr Teeney, blackmailed over their abortions... A vile business all round. Particularly vile when, as a result of blackmail, a young woman is driven to suicide.”

That took the breath out of him. He gawped at the drawing, at the once living thing conjured up by his own deft hand.

Arthur folded the paper, picked up his hat and overcoat.

“I want the name of the abortionist, Mr Teeney. In Cheltenham... an old house on a hill. Yes, we know that much. We don't wish to put you to too much trouble. Just the name, Mr Teeney, from you or Miss Evelyn Margaret out there.”

He nodded to the officers and left unhurriedly.

The younger of the two stood before him, waiting until Frank cautiously looked up.

“Now don't go getting the jitters. We don't ever ditch out the Third Degree here. We have a neat way with dealing with nancies, befitting-like.”

He smiled. He had a nice smile.

Frank stared fixedly before him at the blank wall; his eyes registered panic.

They bore down on him.

He turned, yelped in fear, hurled himself against the wall. They dragged him back to the chair kicking and flailing his manacled arms. One of them forced his head back; the other prized open his mouth.

“Just a bit o' fun, boy. Nothing you're not used to.”

“You heathen bastards! Fucking shites...”

From above, a truncheon was prized into Frank's gagging mouth, down into his throat. Down, ever down.

“Aw, you fucking love it! You sissy cunts just love it.”

They cursed him, they jeered. Frank's feet kicked violently against the chair as if in spasm. He gurgled, he dribbled and coughed and choked and spewed. They pulled on his hair to drive his head back and forced the baton down.

“That's it boy! A treat ain't it? Sommat nice to chew on!”

Out in the corridor Miss Evelyn Margaret heard all, saw nothing save that vileness conjured up by her enkindled imaginings. It got louder then was muffled – a door opened from the other end of the corridor. Arthur advanced towards her, stared dispassionately into

her. Another muffled scream – she straightened up; bit her lip in resolute defiance. Arthur put on his hat, walked on, ruminating.

He was beginning to know his ground, get his bearings.

Julian's mother had returned to the Surmons' post-haste. She must continue as if the Captain's disappearance was in no sense unusual, predictable in fact. Everything must go on as normal. Mrs Surmon would whine her complaints, the little girls would sing and dance their noise and nonsense by the gate, the patent medicine bottles would flick scattered hues about Mrs Surmons' bedroom like so many fireflies dancing, and she would administer her ineffectual physic. And Ethel's paranoia would increase as each day brought the Captain's unwelcome return closer. Or so she would erroneously imagine.

At the Lodge, Julian stalked the emptiness of the house, its corners and crannies a home to his errant thoughts. In despair, he pondered his inadequacy. This capricious world knew too many variables. It was necessary to impose order. That was plain enough. But Julian had always found the task beyond him. It was like tamping down weeds. They grew back thicker and more enveloping and choking than before. His mother now... well she had the knack. Whatever else might be thought of her, she was a plague on weeds. He left that thought on the top landing.

He returned, as he always did, to his notion of a world whose inhabitants were cultivated by canon and tenet. He had long thought that to get to know another's mind was anathema, something akin to dabbling in excrement, and he thought the best of men felt likewise. No, it was best to look to the order of things, be a tidy-upper and keep one's thoughts neat. Things happened, of course. Many things happened, one after the other, sometimes predictable, sometimes not. He watched them go by like the Comic Cuts one saw at the newsreel theatre, Silly Symphonies one and all. These cogitations – erroneous and self-deceiving though they might be – he deposited by the great sideboard that had been ignominiously squeezed into an alcove on the middle floor passage.

He left nothing at his father's trunk, still sitting there gathering dust. It was already full to the brim with a gaudy but potent falsity – those awful greetings cards with their bawdy, brash, broken promises. His own ruminations would be repulsed by its charge should he deposit them there. So he went to his room and opened the drawer that contained his comics left over from childhood – The Magnet and Gem. He chose one randomly, let a page

fall open. Billy Bunter, “The Fat Owl of the Remove”, had pulled off a coup and had hightailed it with hot pennies to the tuck shop to buy lavender lozenges, banana glories, bulls-eyes, dolly mixtures and honey nuts. Julian laughed, Julian purred. Here was a world he had dreamt of as a child. The Captain now... the Captain had *known* that world. He’d been brought up in it or so Julian assumed. He didn’t seem to relish it though. Julian thought it wasted on him. He would have loved to have been part of that world, he would have valued it, defended it – well, as much as was within his province to do so.

From imaginary schoolboys his thoughts ranged to the very real Shire Mercurials and their welcoming camaraderie. “In groves Elysian” came to mind. Undoubtedly a remnant of something told him by ancient mark of his, but when? And “time’s sweet first-fruits—they danc’d to weariness”; *Oh God, yes! Oh mercy! The truth of it!* But where did these lines come from? What was it, what was the shape it? It must have belonged to his London days because he had never come across its figures in the cracks of the yard.

He left the half-remembrance by his dresser and went down to the yard. He followed the more potent memory deposits in the cracks whilst stalking an Easy Waltz, (a natural turn, a right closed change), his feet hardly touching the ground. Again, he imagined others likewise tracing the moves – automatons caught in a somnambulist, prescribed choreography, wound up by clockwork with no knowledge or sense of their own procession; and no context, no mess, no barter at sixpence a go here, no Sharpys or “Oi! Bloody Ois”, just immaculate, remote Dickies and Stoles and their pretty pumped toes, relieved of worry, of the necessity of engagement with real flesh, roaming like the planets in their fixed orbits, content. Tidy it was; no bother, no *travail*. And they, like him, dancing to weariness, to exhaustion and, hopefully, to sleep.

In a real ballroom, one that Julian knew all too well, a pastiche of Julian’s most revered imaginings was being critiqued. Noel Coward’s piano had been placed in the middle of the dance floor. A single spot had him in its beam. As he sang “Poor Little Rich Girl”, a lithe, gossamery dancer wended her way about him aping the lyric, looking bewitched when it required her to be bewitched, abandoned when it required to be abandoned. Then, when called upon be wary, her eyes darted, seeking out threats lurking in the shadowy whisperings about the room.

Arthur watched the dancer avidly. He thought of the Cream and Roses Girl, likewise aerial, gauzy now, or so he imagined. Just the kind of whisp of a girl he hoped his boy might meet in the beyond. No, he mustn't wish for that, his broken boy could never attain...

He found little of substance in his wife's friend's conversation. She used to say their flippancy acted as a kind of antidote to the misery and havoc that he brought home with him. They were at it now, hissing their snide, spiking the ethereal dream before him. Age had taught them nothing.

"Spiders' parlours for women of ill-repute these places – actresses, ladies of fortune, Mata Haris and Salomes, gigolos..."

"And queers."

"Bloody right! And bloody Noel Coward! Only gets away with it 'cause the King's wife's taken him up."

"Oh, don't be so prudish, my dear. It's not as if they *do* anything, you know."

The men looked at each other knowingly but kept their peace.

"And all these silly-ass names they use. And it's not just the band leaders and the song birds and the crooners and the like. Even the cocktail waiters, Bermondsey brats the lot of them, *they've* all turned American or continental or..."

Arthur was out of his chair and across the floor in an instant. He marched up the stairs and around the balcony, the stiffness of his evening attire adding solemnity to his purpose. Sharpy was startled by his entry and had no chance to gather himself together.

"Now I know what it was you kept from me. What I don't know is why. But I will know and then God help you!"

"Really I... I can't imagine why you ..."

"Mr Byron Smythe. His real name, I want his real name."

"Ah, well I don't believe... one gets so used to..."

"You will have a record. His tax receipts. You will have his real name on those."

Sharpy deflated comically like a balloon man speared by a prick. He stared up at Arthur for a few long seconds then accepted the inevitable. He shuffled over to his filing cabinet, rifled through the contents with his podgy fingers and withdrew the tax receipts.

Arthur snatched them from his hand. "Mr Julian Feign!" He had him now! He looked back quizzically at Sharpy.

"I... a bumped into the chap a few weeks ago. At a meeting, a political gathering in Watford..."

"Admiral Rule's meeting was it? 'The Laws of Mine and Thine' and so forth."

Sharpy was sweating, he gulped.

“Yes! Yes indeed! I stand by it! I have the right...”

“That might well change and sooner than you think. You should consider your position. Make note of a few names, fellow believers and the like. You might save yourself a great deal of discomfort.”

“It won’t come to that!”

“It had better not come to that! If it does, then you will be in demand, more popular than Mr Coward even. You may be assured of that.”

Arthur stormed out leaving the door open behind him. Sharpy looked blankly ahead. He felt giddy. His mouth was dry. Downstairs, Mr Coward ploughed on. He could hear the treble of the piano and the maestro’s voice cutting through... something about “cocktails and laughter”...

Billy was not there. He wasn’t out, he was gone. Frank knew it. It was like when you pull the plug out of the bath and the water drains way and somehow the bath looks bigger for being empty. *No, Billy wasn’t there no more.*

He couldn’t stop shaking. He gulped at his whiskey, sucked the yellow-brown muck out of a cigarette. It didn’t do any good. *Why fucking would it?* He looked about for something tangible on which his sanity might gain a purchase. His eyes settled on the shrine-like permanence of his dresser bedecked in its accoutrements. There was a kind of mental click like something had been switched on, then he felt his mind riffling through his remembrances, searching out the touchstone of feeling.

Ah, there it was! His fifteen-year old self, scruffy geezer, ferreting about life like it was a knickknackery shop. He was on one of his housebreaking outings, a posh gaff up Pimlico way. His heart was thumping against his chest so bad it hurt. That’s what brought the memory back – the pain-fear, as clamorous as a steam train.

His memory-self had recced every room and so far found the gaff empty. Now, on stockinged feet, he opened a bedroom door inch by inch listening intently for the regulated breathing of a sleeper. His luck was in; the only things moving were the hands of a clock. He’d got the place to himself and could take his time. He closed the room’s curtain then switched on a table lamp – polished bronze it was with a shade like a coolie’s hat. The dresser was kidney-shaped and was bedecked in silver and platinum – watches, tie pins and

cuff links, a hip flask, cigarette case and, on a chair, a vanity case. All were constrained by a common geometric precision, a confidence in their own form and all were laid out like the accoutrements for a Mass, vessels and vestments and all. He opened the wardrobe and thumbed the creases on jackets and trousers, felt the winning heft of fine, heavy cloth; he studied the stitching on the man's shoes all parked in good order in their cedar wood trees; he pawed the crisply stiffened shirts, their folded arms angular and disjointed.

He had stayed till dawn and left without taking a thing, committing no act of desecration. He couldn't tell his cronies, of course. They would have thought him doolally. But his life had been changed from that moment on. He had acquired a model for his doings. He knew the delicious rites that awaited him, he had salivated at the thought of the benedictions promised by the stinging tang of leather and scent and starch redolent of the pungent whiff of semen.

And now he was here, before his own shrine. His heart settled, his gaze returning to actuality, his mind to pragmatism. That afternoon he had gone shopping for an alibi in Hoxton. A revelation had welled up. It told him that the West Ends' dives, the tailors' shops he loved, even the Bluebird Imperial and Continental Roadways and Airways Hire Service, were at best landmarks on his inner horizons; mere zodiacal signs as seen from the anchorage of Hoxton market or the Regents Canal. Hoxton was his sanctum whether he cared to admit it or not. He had passed Pollock's Toy Theatre Shop and gazed once more on the card sets and characters that had first awakened an otherness in him, transported him to other selves and climes.

Where had it led him? Down, that's where! He'd overreached himself, hadn't he? All his trinkets were kind of stuck on, and they *looked* stuck on, foreign-like. His suits had an adulterating, outlandish body inside of them, a Hoxton body that marched and strutted and swaggered and so gave itself away. The Select now, they knew who they were, nothing bosh about 'em. West End Frank had tried it on. He had kept at it, relentless like. Hoxton Frank had wallowed in the absurdity of his own self-recreation, the bought-in rituals and the trappings that had cost him a fortune. Where had it got him, eh?

His introspection corkscrewed down. His thoughts came at him like heavy, burdensome waves; he urgently wiped the memory-water from his face and his sighs between the tides of despair came like gaspings for air. He was drowning in his popinjay present and his straitened, necessitous past. He had been repulsed at the notion of having to go back there, back to Hoxton's wide types, their graft and their tarradiddles, their artless, refashioned tellings that made him shudder at the tawdry truths to which they pointed. He had found too

much of himself there. Beyond the terror that threatened to overwhelm him – the promise of the hanged man’s jig – he felt himself adrift. He belonged to no party now – not Hoxton’s nor the Select’s. He had put himself beyond the pale of either. Both would happily betray him should it suit their purpose...

Julian... what must be done with Julian? *Must* something be done with Julian? You couldn’t read the bugger; that was the problem. He was as unplumbable as a tailor’s dummy or a fashion plate model. *Wouldn’t be out of place in Madame Tussaud’s, he wouldn’t. Then there’s all that tripe he picked up in magazines; that he hid behind and treated as scripture – “The use of a comb in public is offensive”; and “A gentleman instinctively takes to the kerbside of the pavement when escorting a lady.” And then there was that business with the cutlery – “the correct order of use” and the “resting of it” and how to hold it even – though that had put him in good stead with the Select on occasion he had to admit. But you could never be sure with Julian. Sometimes he said things just for want of something to say. Sometimes he gave aspirations flesh though you doubted they were his own. Sometimes he admitted a discomfiting truth but he wrapped it in a mist or hid it inside a pleasing lie like the coating on a toffee, all sweet on the outside but sticky in the middle. God he was a bleedin’ task! Though he’d been a thing of beauty once and no denying it.*

A thought struck him. He went to his dressing table and opened a side drawer. Immediately he saw that it had been rifled. *Bastard cops!* In spite of his confusion, he involuntarily felt violated. The thought of such brute sacrilege nearly brought him to tears. He shuffled through the disturbed papers – sketches mostly, done to pass the time. Then he found them – erotic drawings he made of Julian not long after they had first met. He held them before him, scanned one after another. *A touch of the Ivor Novello’s. Why hadn’t I copped that before. How long ago was that? A couple of years, maybe more. Not much more though. Christ he’s fucking aged! But he’s still a bleedin’ task alright. Worse than ever now, Christ help me. The stupid little cunt! Oh, God give me an inch of solace will you? Just a fucking miserable inch!*

There *was* something, something that had clicked; something that, despite his fear, had clung to the ledge of his memory. What was it that Superintendent had said? Around midnight he had walked into the torturers’ room. The two coppers, tired, sweating and in need of beer had blamed his good self for their coming up short. They had got nothing out of him. They were ashamed of their failure – well they were professionals, it was understandable. Arthur dismissed them and addressed himself to Frank, worn out, head-spinning, stomach-churning Frank.

“You’ve told me everything I want to know. No, everything I *have* to know.”

“Now what’s your game?”

“No, no, really you have.”

Arthur had bent forward, put his mouth to Frank’s ear.

“I don’t *want* you to talk. I pray that all your acquaintances possess the same reticence. I want you to be clear about that, eh?”

Frank had it now. Stay mum. Why? He didn’t want to know why. He had greater worries, more terrible fears. But then... *Well, it don’t matter which way you look at it, whichever way it was, mum was the word.* They... he... the Superintendent, he didn’t want others to know about the abortion racket that was plain enough. *But where does that take me.* It all pointed to Julian. Julian and the baby murders, Julian and... Julian and that fucking mother of ’is doing for that army type, that great lump of lard army type that Julian had been having it away with. Julian was the link between the two, the all-too-weak link at that.

The decision had proved decidedly easy to make. *What was the moon doing? Couldn’t have no moon.* He checked with Old Moore’s. Driving down them fuckin’ country roads would be a dreadful bind but he needed black night for cover when breaking in. Friday-ish said Old Moore’s. *Mustn’t renege on a booking, mind you. Looks suspicious. Best check the diary...* He was away with it now, well away; in gear and motoring. Julian was mutton already, poor sod.

The constable was peeved. He had had to leave his dinner on the table and cycle the four miles to the bridge. There was a hole where his stomach was supposed to be and the fading, dewy light was straining his eyesight. He deposited his bike by the railings and peered over the northern balustrade – nothing, well, there was some muck that wiped off on his hand. *Disgusting it was.* He smeared it away with his handkerchief then marched across to the other side of the bridge. Immediately he caught sight of a weak yellow beam emanating from a crooked black box-shaped thing on the west bank. As he looked a man emerged and waved him to come down. Carrying his bicycle lamp before him, he traipsed the riverside path.

The cowherd’s shed was open on one side; its walls and roof were a concoction of old doors and corrugated iron sheets precariously held together with nailed lengths of planking. Inside he found the two salmon fishermen who had reported the finding – a bloated torso

bedraggled with remnants of white clothe and string wrapped around it. Something had gnawed into its side, snake-like protuberances threatened to spill out.

A storm lamp hanging from the shed's ceiling blushed the fishermen with halos and spotlighted the blubbersome mass that lay on the earthen floor before them. The constable straightway thought of Giotto's Adoration of the Magi though he had no idea that the image that had come to mind was indeed Giotto's Adoration of the Magi, it was simply an old framed sepia print that his mother had salvaged from a drawer every Christmas and parked on the mantelpiece for the duration. He didn't pursue this thought. He saw no reason to.

"'e sez it be a brawn. I sez that ain no brawn. Oo'd frow a brawn in the watter? Brawn's a falubal hanimal. No, that's an uman, sez I. Mind you..."

The fisherman conspicuously eyed that which had mesmerised all three of them – the abnormality of the body's nether regions.

The constable shuffled on his heels, cleared his throat.

"That ud a bin a bit 'o an 'indrance for the pooer chap, eh?"

The Witching Boy sat huddled on a crude chair in a serviceable office staring at a functional calendar on an otherwise blank wall. He played with his Mercurials hat. It went round and around in the grip of his hand. He hummed a silent tune. It went round and around in his empty head.

He heard the door behind him open and swung round.

"Oh, hello Mr Oldchurch."

The plainclothes officer nodded, looked him over pensively then bade him follow.

"Something for you to look at, Boy."

He took the Witching Boy to somewhere he had never been shown before; a small mortuary at the back of the building, white and icy and echoing.

The lump lay before him and Sargeant Oldchurch threw back the covering and there was the headless, armless, legless Captain with his great drooping, deformed cock.

The Witching Boy jerked and jittered and fought to keep his breakfast down.

Oldchurch opened the door for him and guided him out. There was a passage way, too narrow for the careering Boy, and then they were back in Oldchurch's room once more.

"Oh God! What's 'e doing like that!"

"Know him, do you?"

“It’s the Captain...”

“Captain who?”

“The Captain... Captain Surmon.”

“Local is he?”

“Yes..., local, eez local... Oh, God!”

“I’ll get you a cup of tea.”

“How’z he’d got like that though. Oh, mercy... mercy...”

“Know of any acquaintances?”

“’alf o’ Cheltenham I shouldn’t under. ’alf the queer zort at any rate.”

“No one in particular?”

It didn’t take the Witching Boy long to bring a name to mind.

Bellows of steam and the cacophony of wittering schoolgirls welcomed Arthur to Cheltenham. He left the station and waited by the entrance for his car. It didn’t show. He asked for directions and then made the short walk to the police station. The flustered desk sergeant blustered his excuses and apologies. There had been a murder. A dismembered corpse had been found – “And no head neither, sir. Horrorsome!” The Home Office pathologist had been sent for.

A PC escorted him to the CID wing. On their way they passed a pale boy in one of those hats that were popular this summer. He was unsteady on his feet and vomited in front of them. In the lobby preoccupied officers scampered back and forth. At their hub a grey-haired soul with a ruddy face and some authority was listening intently to the younger Oldchurch who was speaking excitedly. Arthur headed straight for them – *Best get out of this mayhem as soon as possible.*

He waved his warrant card under Grey Head’s nose.

“I’m looking for the address of one Julian Feign. A large castle-like house on a hill. I may need a uniformed officer to affect an arrest...”

“Feign, you say? Fei... But ...”

Grey Head turned to Oldchurch seeking clarity.

“Julian’s mother – she’s a nurse, she administers to the Captain’s wife – that would be her house on Leckhampton Hill.”

The name from the Special Branch report floated up from the depths of Arthur's consciousness.

"Would that be a Captain Surmon?"

"Yes, it would..."

"I've a lead on an abortionist. Here in Cheltenham. Feign's..."

"An abortionist? No, we're mixed up here, somehow".

"A nurse, you say ... a nurse might not be an abortionist?"

Grey Head capitulated. It was beyond him.

Oldchurch butted in once more. *Eager this lad. And sharp.*

"I'm certain the body's that of the Captain, sir."

"A torso? Someone's identified a torso?"

"A unique anatomical deformity."

The befuddled Grey Head offered a contribution.

"A cock-eyed cock, God help us..."

"Identified by whom? Ah... the queer boy in corridor... I passed a..."

Oldchurch nodded but Grey Head was rattled, out of his depth. He gazed vacantly at the ceiling.

"Give me a domestic every time. Some labourer with fists like jack hammers and beer in his belly who gives the missus too much of what's for... Remorseful when he sobers up, of course. Fairly jumps on the trap. May not be pretty but at least it's wholesome."

He straightened, looked back and forth between Arthur and Oldchurch.

"If this is a homo killing, I want it wrapped up in quick time. I don't want my wife and kids having to look at that sort of filth in the papers week in, week out."

His eye settled on Arthur. He nodded to him to step over so that they might speak privately.

"What *exactly* is your interest, Superintendent?"

"I'm afraid I cannot let you into my confidence. It's a question of the national interest."

"Do I tell the Chief Constable that?"

"No, I'll tell the Chief Constable – though I doubt that he'll thank me for it."

Grey Head was clearly relieved to find himself sidestepped. He nodded to Oldchurch who guided Arthur to his office. Through a half partition Arthur could see the distraught Boy making his statement.

Oldchurch followed Arthur's gaze.

“That’s my snout.”

He rummaged through his filing cabinet and passed Arthur a file. Arthur read out loud:

“... young and of rather an effeminate nature... first concerned in cases of buggery and gross indecency at Churchdown in April 1937... called as a witness for the prosecution when other men were convicted for this offence.”

“Sometimes we take him over to Gloucester or Cirencester as bait, you know.”

Yes, Arthur knew.

“Actually I was at senior school with Julian... that’s the fellow I think you’re after? Odd sort. Kept to himself, always mumbling like he was chanting a prayer or something.”

He referred to his notebook.

“Our local pathologist describes the Captain’s deformity as... ah... ‘Chordee with associated hypo... hypospadias’. It’s bent you see. And the hole... it’s in the wrong place. Rare. We... we had a trail of tarts and inverters go in and have a look at it... er, him. Frightful! More like the Kasbah than the cop shop. Then we came up trumps. Boy says he’s not been seen for some weeks. His regulars are missing the money, you see.”

So someone had conveniently knocked off a witness. No, no he didn’t know that. He didn’t know who had seen to the Captain or if the Captain had known of the abortion racket. But he had found his abortionist he was certain of it. And he might well have something to threaten her with, if she and that son of hers *had* had something to do with topping the Captain. And that might well explain Frank’s terror on the night of his arrest and why he didn’t squeal...

He had only just begun to ponder whether he was reaching daylight or drifting into a yet murkier fog when things got stirred up again. Another plainclothesman struck his head round the door.

“All’s set, sir. Boats and drags all organised. Oh, and a lorry driver reckons he saw three men next to a large Daimler on the bridge in the middle of the night. The Captain drove a Daimler, sir and it’s missing.”

Oldchurch reached for his mackintosh. Arthur dumped Boy’s file on the desk.

“I’d best come with you. I’ll want a gander at the body first.”

Excising himself from the commotion, Arthur strode into the mortuary hat in hand, Oldchurch’s heated breath at his back. His lips pursed involuntarily as he ruminated upon the inevitable consequences of such a death as this; of yet another soul denied the solace of the

inner sanctum, condemned to the chill nothingness of the outer ether. He brought himself to and then appraised the killer's handiwork.

Not a professional amputation though the perpetrator knew enough to go for the joints. A butcher would know. A nurse? A surgical nurse having assisted in amputations? Certainly. An army nurse from the war, that'd fit. She would still be allowed to register even if she wasn't fully qualified but it would be unlikely that she would be employed directly by the profession. So she might easily find something less demanding – a caring position perhaps. Well it fits alright...

They took the Tewkesbury road. Arthur was squashed between Oldchurch and another officer on the rear seat of a Wolseley. The driver careered off down the winding lanes heading for the river leaving Arthur feeling queasy.

Oldchurch was trying to puzzle it out. He looked to Arthur for enlightenment. Arthur was careful to let on but a little of what he knew.

"Should a doctor defy the law and become party to an abortion for whatever reason it would almost certainly be an exceedingly rare occurrence. A friend in need or the risk to the mother... Moreover, a private abortionist acquires far greater acumen because she has greater experience."

"She?"

"Oh, yes, mostly. Women trust women, you see."

"So you have her then? Your abortionist?"

Arthur smiled benignly but he had the uneasy feeling that he always had when he was about to play God.

They arrived at the bridge. Cars and charabancs lined the kerb; bicycles lay in heaps in the hedgerows. A festival atmosphere pervaded, ice-cream salesmen on tricycles were doing a brisk trade.

Worse than the Lord Mayor's Parade. How did it get to this? Then he remembered – it was the Summer Bank Holiday Monday. He had lost track of time. This business was enveloping him.

Ahead, a uniformed officer waved them to stop. Other officers emerged from behind and formed up to keep the crowd back and effect a passage. The entourage headed off towards the bridge. There was an enclave of comparative order at the north balustrade. They barged their way through. Arthur collared one of the officers holding back the throng.

"What's this?"

"Blood and, ah, matter, sir. Sticking to the railings."

Arthur peered over. Another officer was hanging from an assemblage of ropes, a sort of improvised bosun's cradle, awkwardly collecting samples with a razor blade and dropping them into a pint pot.

Suddenly there was an awakening of the crowd. Shouts emanated above a rising murmur and there was a surge to the south side of the bridge.

"Come on, man, get to it!"

Oldchurch cleared a path and they reached the opposite balustrade.

Below was a panorama of intense activity. Against one of the bridge plinths a diver in a heavy suit was being lowered by a pulley into the waters; on the bank, beside the cowshed, policemen in dungarees pored over debris gleaned from the depths, swashing away the mud with buckets of river water; from a dinghy, another officer remonstrated with beer-swigging onlookers on a pleasure steamer; five or six boats were dragging the river and from one – that of the salmon fishermen who had found the torso – a elongated swaddled shape with a brick attached was being held aloft whilst the boat headed for the bank.

Oldchurch pushed through the throng once more with Arthur in his wake. They reached the end of the bridge and struck out along the river bank. They elbowed themselves into the tiny group that watched intently as the binding detritus was hacked away and the pillowcase was cut open to reveal a handless arm.

One of the salmon fishermen proffered a commentary.

"It be the bottom. Truvs and 'ollas gets frum on stuff. 'aft to know were they be a 'gorse. We'll be vollerin' truv along, see what elz y'll bring uz."

As he and his pal ventured out once more to follow the troughs on the river bed, there was another stir of excitement from the crowd on the bridge – a fisherman in another boat held aloft another soggy package. When they brought it to the bank they discovered that the hand had likewise been cut off.

"No matter, sir. We know it's the Captain after all."

No matter... No, no matter.

The thought of it threatened to overwhelm Arthur but he found a little consolation in the confusion now in spate. And then there was the further melee that would inevitably ensue – the Sunday papers and their outlandish theories, the cacophony of confessions from the multitude of nutters who owned up to anything there was to own up to, and, as Arthur knew too well, the confabulations of clairvoyants, dowzers and psychic mesmerists all claiming privileged access to the departed. His advantage was that only he could connect this business with the Cream and Roses Girl's suicide and her association with of the Man of Note. So long

as he kept sharp-as-a new-pin Oldchurch in the dark, he might buy Old Brolly some time to work his magic yet. But then there was the matter of those complicit in the Captain's murder. That must be seen to without delay. The situation was alive with danger. All it needed was a little bit of tinder to set the fire. He must dampen things down and be quick about it.

It was a dream night. Not the same as a real night. It was all black and blues to be sure but there was no trouble seeing anything you wished to see – there was a chrome yellow moon and, though some things were up and others were down, they all politely got out of the way should they inadvertently impede the view.

Julian was half carrying half dragging the Captain's body; the great lummoX that he is. The Captain's arms were wrapped around Julian's neck and his feet dragged along the ground behind.

They came to the cemetery. The Captain stirred in his death-sleep and pointed to an open grave. Julian trudged over with his load. They peered down. Sharpy was sleeping at the bottom of the grave. He stirred. He awoke. He glowered back at them and swore and raged.

"Disgusting! I'll not have it! Off with you!"

The Captain's arm pointed to another open grave. Julian pressed on. In this grave lay the boy who had been beaten the night of the Admiral's meeting. He too awoke.

"I won't have him in here. I won't! I won't!"

The Captain's arm pointed once more. They passed other open graves but none would have him. The Captain's arm pointed one last time. The grave was empty. The Captain let go his grip. Julian straightened, looked on as the Captain slid awkwardly into the grave and lay down. The Captain closed his eyes but then opened them again.

"Well, aren't you coming in, girly?"

Arthur looked over the house and the street. *One of those developments made to a template. Nothing bedded in yet. A 500-a-year house with a two-hundred-and fifty-a-year man living in it if the makings of your typical commercial was anything to go by. The missus has the money then, that'll be the bones of it.*

Ethel opened the door to them. They had no cause to identify themselves. They were recognised for what they were and no mistake. Ethel was immediately afeard as only the innocent can be afeard.

“Ooooh, I’m sure!”

Nurse Feign barged past her.

“Standing there at the entenny for all the world to see! Now stop being an hindrance and make way for the gentleman. To your right, if you please.”

She shut the living room door behind her.

“Madam is a regular invalid, you understand. I hope this isn’t anything that might callow her.”

“It’s the master of the house we wish to see, Nurse.”

“So wud I, sir. So wud us all.”

“Then he’s missing?”

“Missing? What’s ‘missing’? He’s off gallivanting again. On one of his larks. Been away better than a fortnight.”

“His absence is not unusual then?”

“Unusual? Of course it’s unusual! What sort of man is it that leaves his simple wife for wicks on end with not so much as a fare you well.”

“Is he sportsman? A racing man?”

“I was brought up not to twit on my employer’s confidences.”

Arthur smiled, nodded sympathetically.

“That can be a burden.”

She let out some kind of snort.

“Him and his makes! There’s a Maureen in Daggenham, and Doreen in Plymouth and a Lizzie from God knows where. I reckon that he might take them on cruises on occasion. Mind you I expect he gets them to pay. His pockets are deep, I can tell you.”

“You know of the body that has been found in Severn?”

“What, that what’s in the papers? With his carcase an’ all?”

“We believe it to be the Captain.”

She barely skipped a beat.

“He can’t be doing that! He owes me!”

She rifled in her smock; retrieved then flourished the reckonings in her note book.

“All in scrip, see!”

They stared back at her blankly.

“We should speak with Mrs Surmon. An invalid you say?”

“The delicate sort, don’t you go sending her all about!”

“Ah, a job for you Oldchurch. I’m not known for delicacy I’m afraid, the metropolis takes that sort of thing out of one. You do the dirty work, eh? I’ll finish up here.”

Ethel was called. She escorted Oldchurch upstairs and introduced him to the lady of the house; he pointedly shut her out of the white, light-kissed room. Mrs Surmon voiced the litany of her complaints against the Captain – no she hadn’t heard from him, would hope not to hear from him ever again, the rob-dog! Might the corpse be his? Oh, would it! She thought Nurse Feign “common, of course, and likely to get above her station but she knows what she’s about, you have to admit.”

Arthur and Nurse Feign remained in silence for a while after Oldchurch’s leaving then Arthur stirred, insisted that Nurse Feign take a seat. She was reticent to do so – she didn’t like to be looked down upon.

“I’ve given you a shock I fear.”

The pudding juddered, slumped down into the inadequate chair. The bulbous bits of her filled its corners like jelly setting in a mould.

Arthur gathered his thoughts, eyed her knowingly.

“This isn’t going to be like one of your Agatha Christie’s. Smiths won’t be hawking this one nor the Booklover’s Library. It won’t come to a neat end.”

“Well, I can’t make sense of it myself. There’s been all sorts of rumours flung about, always as been, the Captain being what he is an...”

Arthur craned over her, looking deep into her suet pudding self from beneath heavy lids.

“Let them fly, give them air. The more rumour and clamour the less thought. And the less thought, the less likelihood of anyone adding it all up right. That’s true, isn’t it?”

The lump straightened, its gaze turned upwards seeking out Arthur’s meaning. *Now what’s he about?*

“I don’t care for the Captain and his filthy habits. We’ll leave him in limbo. He won’t want for company.”

Errant thoughts scurried about her head like so many bees about a queen. She must aim for the meaning of it all.

“You’re not here for the Captain then? He’s not your business?”

He straightened.

“Miss Evelyn Margaret, Mr Frank Teeney and your Julian that’s my business. They have brought forth great unease. Back in London. Unwanted tittle-tattle.”

She was grasping his meaning but tentatively.

“You can’t make anything out of bits and bobs.”

“Them bits and bobs can be put together in all sorts of ways.”

He bent closer to her, face to stony face.

“I can make a noose out of bits and bobs, don’t you worry.”

That hit home. Her eyes widened. She grubbed about his rhetoric for the smell of a bargain.

“So I’m not to tell about... about Miss Evelyn’s wenchen and all that. That be it?”

“That’s it.”

Her nose was running. She groped subconsciously in her pocket for a hanky. Her podgy feeling fingers found the jigsaw piece from Mrs Surmon’s puzzle. Comforted, calmed once more by her find, she took her time. She blew into the hanky, tidied herself.

“Is it the father, then? Must be, mustn’t it? All this palaver. Must be.”

“What of your son.”

“What of him?”

“They’ll be an inquest. Witnesses. Names will be mentioned. The Captain’s friends and associates will be called. *He* might be called.”

“He’s a trouble to me. Always has been a fuss. He can’t be off it.”

“He’ll not be a trouble to me, will he?”

She had no answer to that; for now at any rate.

“I must call on him. I can’t put it off for long. His friendship with the Captain is known.”

The lump was being pulled by mighty tides. He had suddenly dumped this anguish upon her and then she had begun to see a path only to be thwarted gain. Eventually, after too long a moment, she looked about the room as if awakening and recognising a once familiar landscape. The knot of consternation had been untied – would be untied. A decision had been made; she was acclimatising herself the notion of the unnatural enterprise that must be taken in hand. Arthur could only shudder at the thought of it. There was one more thing...

“And they’ll be no more business for Miss Evelyn, no more butchery. I won’t have that. No more damning of the infant soul.”

She accepted that. Though the particulars were unknown to her and must remain unknown to her, she could see plain enough how it all stacked up.

“I’ll give you best at that”; she nodded her agreement.

Arthur made his way to door, stuffed his hat onto his dome and quit the room as quietly as he meant to leave this good earth.

At the gate, he and Oldchurch passed the little girls at their singing game. They were “Winding up the clock” – “Tick, tock, tick” – threading themselves in a chain beneath an arch made by two of the taller amongst them. Then it went all skew-whiff, the girls making the arch remonstrating with the others before they stitched their endeavours back together again.

In her upstairs sanctum Mrs Surmon demanded a glass of stout and a gasper to celebrate her loss. Nurse Feign remained below, her eyes darting about like fireflies. From outside the muffled but urgent “Tick, tock, tick” prattled on.

Julian had had another terrible night. In his dreams he had plummeted and crashed into the heavy earth and could not regain flight. Then there was some business with the Captain, in a graveyard, carrying the Captain on his back. As if he could have carried the Captain... He gave scant thought to the meaning of the dream. *Just a jumble, ain’t it? Bits of this and that, no use to nobody.* But the fact that he had dreamt or remembered that he had concerned him. *Don’t want any more of that, thank you. All that stuff whirling around, gives you the horrors.*

Dishevelled, he squatted on the bed polishing his shoes obsessively, an old newspaper across his lap to protect his trousers. The radio was on – a voice rasped, intercut with rude scrapings and scratchings, the flotsam carried by the ether’s tides.

“... the Member for Tewksbury who, it claimed, had the best collection of teapots in the House....”

The voice fell away. Julian polished with a will. The voice returned, louder, almost as if its owner was in the room, standing beside him.

“Oh, the predictability of it all! Dash it, if only one could simply fly away. But one couldn’t of course. There is one’s place to consider. One is born to it and one must stick it out and there’s an end to it.”

Julian stared down at his blackened hands. He rubbed them against the newspaper to no avail. On the radio, strings played a finale. An announcer’s sniffy voice emerged from the audible fog.

“Miss Joanna Priestley... (squish, squash, squish)... from her own memoir, *Harlequin Ices and Green Tea*.”

Julian extradited himself from the debris. The radio announcer hectored him once more: “This is the National Programme from London.”

He traipsed to the sink and scrubbed away at his hands and fingernails. The radio faded out.

He looked out into the yard, his store of rote and custom, of etiquette and measure and the place where the Captain had met his end. He started – something in the corner of his eye. *Don't you dare come back here. Nothing for you any more. Stay away, just you stay away. I don't want you.*

Who was “I”? It struck him that whenever he said the word “I”, he felt guilty like he was lying; that “I” was someone else, someone elsewhere doing something else. That that “I” was an imposter.

Another voice. Not a radio voice, a memory voice.

“Leave your father alone!”

But his father was alone. That was just about all that could be said of the man. He had always been alone in that house, with that wife and that blubbering child...

He wondered about the Lodge aimlessly and eventually found himself standing before his father's trunk once more. Physically, he knew what was contained in it but he wondered if there was more to it than that. It was all that remained of his father after all. But he couldn't think past its solidity, its mass. It proffered a sign but he couldn't decipher it. So it just sat there stoical and unspeaking. *Leave your father alone...*

He looked about the place. It was void of any nourishment, he could starve in here. He thought of the place Frank had made for himself – the deep whorls in the lacquered wood, the patterns within patterns of the Turkey carpets, the beautiful boy now gone. He should have stayed in that room. Why didn't he stay? How could he have stayed?

For all his efforts, everything he wished he might be part of was slipping away. Even when he sought to preserve it, the more his very actions contributed to its destruction. *Well, it must be me. It's always me. Really, it's like skating on ice.* The dance he danced was already in the past, as he was already in the past, had always been of the past– dead yet breathing.

He was only mildly shocked at this unlooked for acknowledgement of his coming death; though he did fear it, feared the uncertainty of it. His thoughts spontaneously turned to elementary strategies. Where? Somewhere he loved, naturally. Again, he thought of Frank's flat, their bed, their laid out in silk pyjamas...

How? His eyes discovered the bottle of Verenol his mother had brought him. He tipped the pills into his palm and counted them. Yes, enough... but not tonight... He still had work to do in yard. He had gone back away to be sure but there were still some remnants of memorizations that needed harrying away; school crib sheets and aides memoires, singing rhymes and lesson timetables cluttering up his mind-self. If all his past rote-driven knowledge were wafted away like so much dust, then he would have got back to himself, to the first man within who needed a somewhere to root into but who only possessed a nowhere, who needed to speak but who had no language. He would be in stasis, gone back into a tender madness, unborn. But it was such a nebulous thought that he didn't know what to do with it, so he put it aside and thought of death once more. That, at least, had a certainty about it.

On a whim, he raced to his room. He opened his make-up box and piled on the slap, slicked his hair. He took a sheet from the bed and draped it about his shoulder, studied himself in the mirror. He went out once more to the yard and its checkerboard promptings. As he followed its trails about the cracks, round and round again, an unformed music came to him once more – an unseen orchestra playing in strict time. He paused, positioned himself with care, his shoulders aligned with his toes. His ghost lover approached – it was Frank, of course, it had always been Frank. He stood perfectly poised, head back, looking upwards, his right palm resting on ghost-Frank's right shoulder, his left on the handsome fellow's right upper arm. Passively, expectantly, he awaited Frank's lead, that slight but inviting pressure from his right hand, the gentle sway of his body. It was, of course, the exact opposite to the posture he had habitually adopted in the dance halls but it was, nonetheless, the most natural, the most pleasurable for him.

They stepped off into space, ghost-Frank leading. He ignored the cracks, wanted nothing to do with them, that was Frank all over. He followed other signs, shadow signs, serpentine signs, bright shadow signs that sizzled and gurgled pleasure. They took the couple to an everything Julian had only ever glimpsed in actuality. They flew – *he* flew, sustained by the perfect tempo and his partner's assuredness. He was rising, flying high; stars like snow diamonds and spangled songs rained about him, under his feet clouds and planets and beyond them gawking angels blowing on pipes. He would be content in this madness until exhaustion came and that would do – *Oh, yes it would do.*

But then he felt Frank's hold lessen, his hand let go. He had been gifted a dispensation, he might truly dance like Jessie danced... His back arched, his limbs outstretched, he soared away forming impossible figures, holding them in balance against the tow of gravity; he jiggered and sauntered, threw out high kicks that sent the stars reeling, the

constellations rocketing. He felt the poison seep out of him. The heaviness that bore down upon him was lifted. He ascended beyond the reach of the leaden dread that plagued his dreams. About him whirled airy Dickies and unearthly Stoles, a chorus line of Cream and Roses Girls, caryatids with their choice bundles, minks and minxes, all in the vortex of the dance and, from the balcony, the County Mercurials in their Popeye hats and shorts blew kisses. He flitted up the stone stairs. Drenched in the soak of his senses, he pranced back to his room and posed before the sun-gauzed window, his arms akimbo, ecstatic. Gently, his inner music rested, faded and he was still and elsewhere.

Below, a heavy limousine stopped by the kerb. Arthur stepped out followed by Oldchurch. They scanned Tower Lodge's brute edifice and found framed in an upstairs window what they judged to be a crazed lampoon of femininity. Their driver joined them, likewise gaping at the loon at the window. They watched bewitched.

"Dear God, it *is* Julian, it is! He's one for the madhouse, sir, and no mistake."

Arthur didn't answer. He was watching intently, his piggy eyes taking it all in, sensing both an unwanted danger and an opportunity.

"What's to be done with him, sir?"

"Well, I doubt that he can tell us anything coherent in his present state, Oldchurch."

"He might be a danger to himself though."

Arthur had no answer to that, none that he might utter anyhow.

"We'll leave it awhile. See what we can piece together without him. I doubt that we could interrogate the fellow with any conviction. That *would* see him off. Look at him. He's like brittle glass."

"But he might..."

"Do you think that Home Office chap is here yet? Yes, he would have taken the night train, no doubt. We might get some sense from him. Something solid..."

He levered himself into the backseat of the car. Oldchurch and the driver hesitated but complied. They drove off down the hill.

Julian was blind to them. He was looking beyond them, over the glistening estuary, out over the sea and through the sky to Nowhereland. Caught in the reflecting glass the low sun sent blinks of lightening about him. Triumphantlly he fell back from the window, collapsed upon the bed. His eyes fell shut. He felt Frank's presence over him, eying him from toe to top; Frank in his sky blue uniform, a halo of bluebirds twittering about his head. Julian's lipstick-smeared lips parted. He lay poised to discover; to accept his ghost lover's embrace.

The recce that Frank had undertaken just a week or so before, for all its frustrations, had put him in good stead. He followed the back road he had chanced upon. There was a turning to an old quarry. He slipped in, tucking the car into a corner so that it could not be seen by passing traffic. A bit of a climb around the hill brought him to the back of the Lodge and its walled yard. It afforded a screen from the road – the only vantage point from which he might be overlooked. He was quickly over the wall and invested some time in choosing his point of entry into the house. The kitchen window furnished the easiest opportunity and from there he might roam at will. He put on his gloves and felt overshoes, patted his pockets and discovered his jemmy cane and knife – both less than six inches long so that he couldn't get done for "Going Equipped". It all came back to him. A born burglar, he felt as calm as you like. He had never needed a wet or a pill like some of them and though he hadn't had it off for a good few years now – not since he'd been with Julian anyhow – he recognised the familiar tingle, the chemistry that that put him in that still place.

The catch gave easily. He eased through the window and down on to the flagged floor then stood still, listening and letting his eyes adjust to the dark. Then he inched this way and that, squinting to discover the passages and the staircase and get his bearings from the rectangle of lighter black that was the kitchen window. He skipped upstairs, willing himself light and testing the treads for creaks. Then he found himself next to Mr Feign As Was's trunk – a brooding blacker black on the upstairs landing. He peered about. Only one of the doors was slightly ajar. He padded over to it. He could see the hinges were rusty so he retrieved a small oil can of the kind jewellers use and pointed its spout at the offending pins. The door gave readily but threatened to ride back so he braced it with his shoe. Julian lay on the bed before him.

Always best to stand still awhile. Wait and see if the mug is actually asleep. Mustn't wake him, that would be messy. He had never been in Julian's room at Tower Lodge before. He took in its sparseness. It was empty of desire; there was nothing of taste that might be despoiled and that was a comfort. *It's like a hole, a nothing, a monk's bleedin' cell or the nick, all crummy plaster and bare floors, a chest of drawers that a kid could have nailed together, heavy brown curtains with them tassels half rotten and the rugs in tatters. And Julian lying there under one of them Bakelite crosses on the wall that the Bible societies send you in the post. Christ he looks like he's bleedin' laid out already.*

He found an old book within reach and used it to hold open the door. He trod gingerly over to the bed. The first thing he noticed was a cast-aside bottle of sleeping tablets and beside it a letter. He couldn't make out the address in the dark. Julian seemed frozen in ecstasy. Frank bent close to him, to his open expectant lips. *Looks like a fucking clown – what with that slap on him. And what's he doin' in Ghandi's bleedin' sheet?* He couldn't fathom it. Julian was never like this – never! Nonplussed, he involuntarily pulled back. He took in the room and noticed Julian's dress suit hanging from its peg. He involuntarily thought of the hanged man's last jig, *his* last jig maybe.

He had always thought there must be more to Julian than he let on, that he was keeping things in. But this... this was something Frank was repelled by, an unfettered embarrassment. Then he realised that it made things easier. The Julian lying there wasn't the ineffectual thing that moved quietly about the world, the insignificant Julian that you might hardly notice, the Julian he knew, thought he knew – *Look at the little sod! He's a bleedin' screamer for Christ's sake!* Yes, it made things easier alright. He drew out his knotted neckerchief, steeling himself.

Then he noticed the gas fire. He looked back again at the sleeping pills and the letter. It all told a neat story. He tested the tap and smelt gas immediately. He stood still once more, staring down at Julian, silently teasing out the possibilities, arguing the pros and cons. It had to be, just had to be... *A gift and no mistake.* He turned the tap, crept back to the door and gently closed it. Behind him, Julian remained unmoved.

Downstairs he searched for the meter and found it where he had started, in the kitchen. He emptied his pockets of change, jammed in pennies and sixpences all with the blackened heads of cold dead Kings; in they went all of a muster, banging their crusts together in the tray. Upstairs the gas hissed its promise, hissy-hissy like a snake.

The town was clogged with military traffic – young recruits heading for training camps in the Cotswolds, vehicles off to the new depot at Ashchurch for a dollop of camouflage paint and a worthiness once-over. The bus was long overdue and when it eventually came it was crowded. Nurse Feign stood on the rear platform, squeezed in, her hands fiercely clutching the strap of her handbag beneath her chin. She had had too long to think of what she must do and to weigh up the many and various ways in which she might do it. A charm of voices pulled her this way and that. Once she had made up her mind about a

thing she liked to pitch in and get it over with but obstacles had been placed in her path and she was boiling with frustration.

Mrs Surmon's newly found cheerfulness had inspired a succession of hindering demands. She wanted the place doing up. She had sent Nurse Feign on a thankless errand to the departmental stores for carpet swatches and samples of curtain patterns and lace net. She wondered whether she might risk a drive in the country now that her disposition had improved. She would need a new outfit and a trip to the hairdressers first. These were major logistical operations – a car and a driver, appointments had to be booked and preparations for madam's comfort and seemliness had to be undertaken.

Nurse Feign had been all but overwhelmed but yet more worryingly she feared a revitalised Mrs Surmon might slip the binds of dependence she had so assiduously placed about her. She would have to slow her down.

"It can't be good for the nerves, can it dear? All this wonderment. The heart all a-quopping, the brain all a-dither. No tonic wine for you awhile!"

Finally, the merry widow had exhausted herself and fallen into as pleasant a sleep as she had enjoyed in years. Nurse Feign had dashed out to see to her business.

Now she peered between a gaggle of housewives all bleating complaint, aggrieved that their husbands' tea would be late. They were in a back street, all tiny shops and pubs and schoolgirls just let out from the College. She realised that the bus had been diverted. An AA man was arguing with stranded motorists on the pavement, young boys laden with suitcases were making their way towards town, their call-up papers and train ticket and their all too soon-to-be-realised fears, went with them, all of a bundle. Nurse Feign thought of the last war and the husband she had waved off at the station. The husband she had been glad to see the back of. She noticed that one of the boys was wearing the same stupid cap – the one with the wings on it – that Julian had sported when he went out on his cycle. And so her thoughts turned to her son once more.

She had never been able acknowledge Julian the wind-up clockwork dancer, the starched-of-body-and-mind, bloodless marionette that the world knew. She would not own to the begetting of such a nothingness and, if that wasn't enough, he was a constant reminder of his father and that was, perhaps, his greatest calumny. She longed to lay down the burden that he was, had always been. And now this business with the Captain – that must be laid at his door too. And you'd have thought Julian would have felt safer now that the brute was done away with but no, *It was like he was a kid again what with his daffy maunderings in the yard.*

She reached down to her bosom for the fob of her nurse's watch. Time was being eaten up: *doing* time was going to waste. Then there was a feeling of space and speed and then the bus was climbing Leckhampton Hill and she was swaying on the end of the leather straphanger, being jolted by the its new found urgency. A few minutes later and she had been deposited outside Tower Lodge. She fumbled for her keys, unlocked the gate and lumbered in.

She had thought Julian would be about somewhere – in the yard probably cruddled in some crick or corner. His bike was still leaning against the back wall. He hadn't had breakfast nor even a pot of tea. Then she caught the whiff of gas. She propped open the kitchen window and door. Handkerchief to her mouth she mounted the stairs, the clogging gas becoming denser as she advanced. She threw open Julian's bedroom door and marched over to the bed. She stared deep into his face, examined the faintly twisted smile, the cherry pinked porcelain of his skin, just like he was newly minted. Is he truly dead?

Then the gas threatened to overpower her. She fled the room, coughing, tears streaming. She reached back blindly seeking the door handle, swung the door shut then reeled down the stairs.

She fell into the kitchen and was amazed to find it unchanged. How could anything be the same as it was? Same as when? Yesterday? Last Christmas? The time of the last King perhaps? Her mind was in dire need of an anchor. She had to find a time before. Before *this* and all that had led to it. Before this house, before the winters that the hills knew when she was growing into womanhood, before the attentions of young farm boys little more of mind than the beasts they attended, before the cellar-like chill of her husband's presence, the mind-spinning numbness of her heart when he clung about her, the longed-for assurance of his last going away. She had seen to that though God it had taken long enough! *It's all in the doing, you see. Yes, it's in the doing, not the cogitating or the putting off...*

She had her anchor now, her fixed star. She had found the time before.

Cupboard doors and drawers flew open, her hand, her spider's hand reached in foraging. Then she rummaged in her purse. She needed the coppers for the bus back to town. That left only silver, sixpences and the odd half crown. *Half-a-crown! Still, it had to be done...*

She stuffed the meter with coin after coin.

Upstairs, the dream Julian, the Julian elsewhere, the Julian of that other ground where the tick of strict time gives the measure, belatedly smelt gas. Still asleep, he yelped like a frightened terrier. And then the part of him that was physical, that left a dent in the mattress

and a strain on the sheets, that part of him opened his eyes wide, saw the wide span of nothingness opening up before him, then vented his spirit like a slow fart.

Nurse Feign sat upright in her chair staring along the expanse of the long heavy oak table. To one side sat a woman police officer somewhat short on conversation. They had given her tea and then they left her here, isolated and unable to exert the superiority that was her due. The policewoman was an afterthought. She could hear the trudging of officers' boots and snatches of conversations from the corridor, she had read all the notices on the walls and she had had a doze only to awaken with a stiff neck and a sorry temper.

"Would you have a weekly, dear. I do so a'mire me weeklies. A *Woman's Own* or an old *Peg's Paper* even?"

The woman officer, knowing full well that knitting patterns, baby care and romances could not possibly hold an interest for Nurse Feign gave her an old fashioned look.

"Would you know what they're about? At the Lodge I mean. I can't think what they might be about, you see."

Nothing.

Nurse Feign undertook another study of the emptiness around her, tutted, sighed, sighed once more, and then gave up for the duration.

The dull crash of hammers on stone and the splintering of wood provided a staccato accompaniment. There was much carrying and lifting, much swearing and still more confusion and bother. Policemen in dungarees were dismantling the yard's outhouses, digging at the neglected herbaceous borders, probing into dark corners and drains. A trestle table had been set up on which finds had been laid out – a ball of twine, displaced bricks with mortar still attached, torn sheets. As they lifted the yard's stone flags the last disjointed fragments of Julian's rote-acquired learning flew out like frightened birds. The very dregs of that which had constituted his presence, that he had laboured so long to acquire, was gone.

The kitchen had also been taken apart, cabinets had been dismantled, carpets rolled back, flagstones and floorboards lifted. They had found Nurse Feign's store of supposed medical paraphernalia. It too was spread out on the table. It held little interest for them though Arthur had noticed the large syringe and immediately grasped its significance. Still it wouldn't do to raise the issue now, hopefully not at all if things held to the course they were pursuing.

The fashion for cut up bodies, often as not left in trunks, done up in old copies of the News of World, had encouraged a surfeit of rumour concerning the disappeared Mr Feign As Was. Mrs Feign added grist to the mill by merely observing that her husband had been “gone long before he went.” Though the trunk murders offended Arthur’s sensibility – by necessity the stratagem demanded the dismemberment of the corpse – the gossip had provided a timely diversion. Grey Head had taken charge pushing the chary Oldchurch aside. He was downstairs now, effectuating as much unproductive commotion as Lord Raglan at Balaclava. Predictably, it was the sample case on the upstairs landing that had initially excited their interest. But their imaginings were not to be realised and they grudgingly ignored the multitude of picture postcards they found inside albeit they were the nearest they got to the chap.

The radio had been switched on. All were aware of the developing crisis concerning Germany. The BBC had broken its established practice and was now issuing bulletins as developments ensued, heightening the suspense. Old Brolly had sent emissaries to Moscow as long ago as May. A pact with Russia in addition to that already established with France would surely put a stop Hitler’s escalating demands. So far nothing had come of these negotiations but now things were plainly coming to a head and news of a formal agreement was fervently awaited. Addled by the frequent loss of signal, the music from the radio was of the patriotic kind, sombre, processional, regal even. It provided an incongruous counterpoint to the work being undertaken.

Arthur had quickly established his sovereignty over Julian’s room. On entering, he had noted the glistening brown stain of oil on the door hinges and had rubbed away the smears with his handkerchief. Now he stood stiffly upright, square on to and beside the bed, his right hand raised in front, its palm flat and at a right angle to his body, moving mechanically from right to left and back again redolent of a radio cursor seeking out a channel. He stepped back and then to the side ... no use. The spirit’s wavelength could not be found. It had already flown. His hand fell.

He moved about the room. He was after anything relating to the abortion racket, anything that linked to Frank, to Miss Evelyn Margaret and so to the Man of Note. He found a scrapbook of cuttings of that sex-sodden actress with the sticky-out teeth, a pair of plimsolls plagued by sand, a flyer advertising cycling tours in Mr Hitler’s Germany, and a print of boys diving and swimming at a lake by some American artist he had never heard of. He searched the pockets of Julian’s dress suit still hanging from its peg, his highly polished dancing pumps fastidiously placed beneath. He flitted through Julian’s comics – the jolly japes of

public schoolboys, savoured by iced buns and tempered by masters' canes. He homed in on the pages of Julian's schoolbooks, all neatly covered in brown paper – *Rote learning, buckets of it, maths tables and lists of dates, all to be crammed into a soft moist brain, saturating the infant consciousness.* Then he found the dancing magazines smothered in Julian's tiny handwriting, dog-eared, poured over.

There was a photograph of Julian at the Piccadilly with Miss Paulette. *He looks the gigolo. It's what the girls go for nowadays, I suppose – ironic that.* On the bedside table he found the letter to the army unit organising the concert parties – “It's no use them giving me a rifle, I might hurt somebody with it!” *Funny that.* It wasn't dated and plainly Julian had delayed posting. Arthur speculated that it was composed prior to the Captain's murder. It might question the very notion of suicide, however. He placed it in his inside pocket next the Cream and Roses Girl's note. He would claim it contained references to matters of national importance should anyone question his conduct.

He walked to the window – the same one Julian had stood at when they had seen him all tarted-up and moon-addled. He looked out and found the remnants of the Shire Mercurials staring back up at him, young lads all wearing that hat he had seen before. He looked about the room once more. There was Julian's hat, peeking out of a dresser drawer. He peered back down at them. Another lead there, no doubt; he couldn't have that – he opened the window and waved to constable on guard by the gate to shush them away. They left hesitantly, Alwyn the Photographer procrastinating, his eyes suspicious, questioning; behind him, the Witching Boy having the grace to look shamefaced. Arthur watched as they rode down the hill, the imprint of consternation on their faces as they looked back.

He drew himself erect and turned to face the corpse once more. He studied Julian's peachy-pinked face, the crystal shine of his eyes like glacé fruit, Julian once again immaculate, preserved, saved, in that place where time has stopped, where nothing was entertained but “sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing” and everything was in its place just as it should be. *Thank Christ for that! I won't have that on my conscious at least...*

Arthur looked back at the photograph of Julian and Miss Paulette. Might Julian have been the beau for who whom she had long retained an unrequited passion? The thwarted affair she had intimated about when he had first met her? Hardly likely but then...

He studied Julian's features once more. He seemed young again but troubled. *The hysterical type, plainly. They'll think fear of the rope drove you to it, won't they, my boy? Too much is made of the rope!* Arthur approved of the hangman, even if he did cost seventy quid a drop. At least he kept the body intact.

Julian looked as young as his own boy had been... For a moment he allowed himself the sweet delusion that he had indeed found him. But then there was a mighty, sustained “Harroo” from the radio downstairs just as a waft from the open window lifted the coattails of Julian’s dress suit and sent a shiver and a shudder about it; then came a chorus of howls, a welcome, a triumph before the Ariel tempers fled back to somewhere far off in the ether with their catch. Downstairs someone swore and turned the bloody radio off in frustration.

Arthur wrapped his coat about him but it was an unproductive gesture. He would never know warmth again.

Ten summery days passed before Arthur returned to Cheltenham. He had come to observe the proceedings of the coroner’s court. Julian’s ending must be given the official stamp of finality. Arthur shared a table with Grey Head and Oldchurch, the former seemingly holding him personally responsible for the mayhem that had been heaped upon him and which he referred to incessantly as “London manoeuvres of the opaque kind”. Oldchurch, on the other hand, was moodily reticent and righteously indignant. He knew full well that they should have taken Julian in; that he would still be alive and good for scaffold if they had and that they might well have pressurised him into naming his murderous associates to boot. At the station most thought that Julian had got his just reward and that alive, he might have pleaded insanity and got off and anyhow, it was one less nancy to worry about.

Oldchurch had remained persistent though his efforts had been consistently thwarted. The garage owner who had housed the Captain’s Bentley was of little use – “The chap was Irish. Well, they usually are, aren’t they?” He had interviewed the chemist from whom Nurse Feign obtained her patent medicines. He had been able to deduce the entire catalogue of Mrs Surmon’s ailments from Nurse Feign’s regular orders except for the syringe. He couldn’t account for it and, not wishing to appear ignorant, he preferred not to mention it. The manager of the Town Hall dismissed Julian’s brief employment there with a shrug.

“It’s going up to London that’s the ruin of them. They get a taste for things they can’t afford, get above their station, so to speak. And then they get resentful, of course. See the things that the likes of you and I have to do to earn a living as beneath them. Those party dances that are all the rage – easy as walking but he couldn’t be doing with them. Sulked like a child. Mind you, I think there was something going on with him and Miss Desafilado even though she’s older and looks it.”

In spite of his failures, Oldchurch was the kind of chap who had to gnaw at things until he got to the marrow that was the truth. He put his frustrations to Arthur before they went into court.

“There’s more to it, sir. I can smell it. Apart from anything else, there were three men seen at the bridge, sir. And Julian couldn’t have lifted the Captain over the railing by himself.”

“A queers’ falling out, don’t you think, Oldchurch? A bunch of them did for him? You’d be in a far better position than I to take things further, I think. The local inverts are known to you...”

Oldchurch had retorted grumpily.

“I suppose there’s something I shouldn’t know. Never will know. That it, sir?”

“Yes, that’s it. But you shouldn’t let it worry you. There are greater calumnies in this life, I assure you.”

“But I do worry sir.”

Yes, he’s the sort that would, God bless him.

Arthur had smiled, patted him on the shoulder like you would a fractious but much-loved pet.

By late afternoon the forensic evidence had been produced and the few witnesses there were had come and gone. The court was alive with speculation but the chain of events that pointed back to the Man of Note had not been uncovered. Old Brolly might remain to seek peace yet.

The sun speared into the dusty courtroom finding the principal actors and leaving the onlookers in shadow. Only the most important witness remained.

Nurse Feign lolloped her way forward and made much of climbing onto the stand.

She stage-whispered the coroner:

“I’m awful sorry, Mr Crowner sir, but me romantics are giving me gyp. You do understand, don’t you?”

The ensuing suppressed laughter was quietened by the coroner’s glower. Nurse Feign affected to look a little at sea.

She took the oath on the bible Mrs Surmon had loaned her – “It’ll bring you luck, dear” – then proffered a blank smile to all and sundry.

She confirmed the account of events given earlier by Oldchurch – “Yes sir, that’ll be the way of it”. How she found Julian and though near swooning, had rushed to get help.

“It was like he was already laid out or so it seemed. Oh, I can’t hold to it, it can’t!”

The usher gave her a glass of water.

The coroner asked if she could throw any light on the rumours that abounded; about her son and the Captain and the corpse that had been brought out of the Severn. All at Arthur's table straightened in anticipation.

"I'll not peck on him. He was not half saved and I can't deny it, but I'll not peck on him."

"You know of nothing that might shed light upon these matters?"

She handed back the glass to the usher.

"You see, I have abeared the misery of knowing that my buoy Julian is accounted guilty of much and worse. I also have been a martyr to whispers and cant. Everything I say is suspected. There have been remarks and they have even been brought here. If they were aimed at none but me alone, I would not have a care. But they are not."

She stared challengingly at the court. Some eyes were lowered, some cheeks blushed red.

"My buoy is supposed to have belonged to a gang and what for I don't know why. Blackmail and dope even. And him not here to speak against such things."

She made much of composing herself. Arthur recognised the road she was taking. *"Bits and bobs can be put together in all sorts of ways", eh? So that's her bent.*

"And I know of no call for why Julian should be mired in the Captain's business or any of his doings. Why would he wish to kill the Captain I'd like to know!"

Arthur pursed his lips. *Yes, that's the meat of it, alright.*

"And anyhow, how's Julian to murder a big strapping man like the Captain?"

The coroner queried the remark, though gently.

"But David did kill Goliath, did he not? With a sling."

"My buoy had no sling. He had no sling..."

She peered out uncomprehendingly over the heads of the onlookers.

"I have lost my buoy ... I lived for my buoy. At Tower Lodge, when I guz back to Tower Lodge... I have hired ghosty voices and ghosty musicianers ther. In my bedroom I have hired the most beautiful voice chantin' a sort of lullaby. I believe my buoy calls to me. 'Hello. old pal' he sez..."

There were murmurings, stifled giggles, shuffling in seats, coughing, a wave of cynicism.

Oldchurch swore under his breath:

"Ripe as a plum! Better than the Music Hall."

Arthur whispered back, “And a touch of Falstaff’s rustics, don’t you think? Or Mrs Christie’s perhaps?”

The coroner concluded that Julian had taken his own life. He had been worried about the lack of future employment. Sadly it was not an uncommon problem. In this regard he was at one with the Lancashire cotton workers and the Jarrow shipbuilders whose proficiencies were likewise no longer in demand. He had had the unfortunate duty to preside over similar proceedings far more often of late than might be presumed. Mr Feign’s undoubted skills as a dance instructor were no longer in demand. There had been an encroachment of these so-called party dances, fads that had even taken on in the provinces. Such bestial thrashing about, often accompanied by bouts of hooliganism, presented as much a challenge to the common decency as did the brutish political endeavours of certain continentals with which all would be familiar. Mr Feign had moved back to Cheltenham but had found that the fashion had already taken hold here. He was plainly at such a low ebb that his confidence had been undermined.

He offered his sympathies to Mr Feign’s mother. Nurse Feign left the court leaning heavily on the arm of a police officer. Somehow she had contrived to appear vulnerable. Arthur thought that a minor miracle.

At the railway station, Oldchurch looked Arthur over for the last time. He seemed a lot smaller now, pinched and somehow past and already forgotten. *The Job. The bloody Job! Is this what it leads to then?* He realised that he was sick of hunting down queers, all the more so because he was good at it. And he knew that, no matter what the law might put upon them they would still be there, buried in the deep in the strata of life but there all the same. There would always be a place for a chap who took pleasure in the hunt but that wasn’t him.

It was the murky business that lay behind Arthur’s shenanigans that had brought things into focus, made him realise that the morality he supposedly defended was, in actuality, just a commodity like much else nowadays. He put Arthur on the train and watched it cough and judder away from the platform and down the line aware that this was a significant farewell, a full stop – no an exclamation mark – *Finis!* He had determined to sign up immediately should war come. A scrap with Hitler and his mob would be a worthwhile endeavour. *Something a man might take pride in taking on. Not like this filthy business.* A nice clean war, a purge, would do him good, do the country good...

At first Arthur had a compartment to himself. He mentally reviewed the inquest. Each had treated Julian's death according to their rites. The pathologist had cut him and trepanned his feeble brain looking for that which had already flown, the coroner had spake a fiction, the newspapermen would gabble it, the vicar might now pray for a soul long gone and Arthur, content, would stay mute. Though his traducements weighed heavily upon him, he had afforded the peacemakers one last opportunity to make good. He could do no more now than await the outcome of Old Brolly's endeavours.

At the Surmon's residence, Nurse Feign strode heavily across the driveway to the front porch. She indulged in the ceremony of the moment. No more back entry now. Her fingers found and grasped the key. Her handbag clip snapped shut. She went in through the front door as proud as a cock on a Sunday dinner salver. No more disruptions or distractions. She would soon have the house running as she had always wanted. She unpinned her felt bonnet, placed it atop the swan-necked hook of the hat stand where the Captain had always parked his titfer. She stared pointedly at the green baize door alongside the staircase and silently condemned the house's nod to social decorum. *That bloody thing could go for a start.*

In his compartment, Arthur remembered a letter that had been handed him by Oldchurch when they had parted. It had been forwarded from the Yard by courier. As Arthur opened it, a photograph fell out unnoticed. He read:

"The papers are saying that my wife is suspected of doing me in."

Ah, the errant Mr Feign As Was!

"Even though I hate the woman, I have to put that right. And now I suppose I could be had up for bigamy. I didn't divorce her because I didn't want her to know where I was and I don't want her to know where I am now. That's all there is to it. I know you could find me if you had the will but I ask you to let me be. What good would it do?"

There was no address at the top of the letter. Arthur glanced at the franking on the envelope – Canada, sent by sea mail.

"In my heart I always knew her warring ways would be the death of Julian. She was always going to do for him. She never wanted him. Always under her feet he was. Just like me.

She didn't want any of it really. Marriage I mean. Made life too complicated. You see, when it came down to it, there was a lot she didn't get about life, about the whys and the wherefores. The things you have to whittle at if you want to amount to something. She couldn't do that, it was beyond her means and she couldn't stand them

that had the means. So she had to have things predictable-like. Always had to have things in their place and if they weren't then she put them right soon enough.

When I came back from France and saw what she'd done to my Julian I knew there was no putting him back together or making anything of him. It was like he was walking around in a cage. Scared of his own shadow he was. Like he was shell-shocked, just wanting to hide away and not get noticed. He was all locked in, wouldn't dare look left or right, peep round a corner or over a hedge. Stayed in the yard mostly, stayed there for days on end, rattling off the things they taught him school. It was her that did that to him."

The light in the compartment fractured and shaded as they passed a flurry of steel works no doubt turning their endeavour to the production of armaments and all belching black-grey smoke alive with sparks. A procession of military vehicles were making slow progress along an arterial road; young boys waved to them as they passed. Arthur felt the blood of the nation rising, racing. He shuddered then returned to the letter.

"When I saw there was nothing to be done, I started drinking. I drank for a year solid and then I patted the boy on the head and left. She'd made it so there wasn't a place for me, not with him nor her. And I was fed up of flogging pictures of places that didn't really exist. Not as they were in them touched-up postcards at any rate. I wanted to see if there was a real loveliness in the world. I found it all right and I found people who think different too, people who aren't trying to hold on to things that are going to change anyway no matter how you try and paint over the rust. Over here they haven't made up all the rules yet and so you make them up as you go along and that suits.

I hope the enclosed cheque will pay for Julian's box and ceremonies. Please see that the enclosed photograph of his old dad is put into the coffin with him."

Arthur looked out of the window once more. Another England lay beyond now, a dreamed England given flesh – a horse-drawn plough, haystacks, the hedgerows alive with flowers owing to names as old as England itself. But it was an England only glimpsed by a few and lived by fewer still. For most, as Arthur knew all too well, there was the hobbled, smut-ridden, coal-blackened, back alley England; the unremarkable England that men and women, nonetheless, had actually died for, would once again be prepared to die for if it came to it.

He noticed the photograph on the seat beside him. This incarnation of Mr Feign As Was was a world away from the image that Arthur had brought forth in his mind. Though in middle age, the man was muscular, square-shouldered, face-creased, ruddy and burnished by the clime. A heavy leather belt girthed his overalls. The sleeves of his workman's shirt were rolled up and he held a shotgun, its broken barrel pointing down towards the kill that lay at his feet. Steep-sided hills and forest formed a backcloth behind him and before it, by a shooting-brake, his brood of little Canadians clung about the skirts of the inspiring, plumpish female with whom he shared his Garden. He had made something of himself. He was an outdoors man now, his feet firmly planted on tufting meadow grass, a man of good appetite and the means to fulfil it.

No, it would do no good bringing the man back to his true wife, his night-begat Lilith; no point in setting him down once more in the England he had hawked but which had given him so little recompense. That England of hand-tinted promises; mauve washes over dreary stone, grey skies made blue, badgered humanity given the temperament of rude nymphs and fauns; more than ridiculous – an affront really. He thought of his own frugal mortal space, its overburdened thoroughfares and mechanised human intercourse. He understood that he needed to know that someone had escaped the knots of life and walked as Adam had walked, whole, of tested sinew and even temper, mindfully well-furnished and fit for his maker. No he couldn't bring the chap back to a cheapskate effrontery such as this.

At the Surmons', Nurse Feign made her way upstairs. There was a little commotion inside. Mrs Surmon had finished her jigsaw of Richard, Coeur De Lion embarking for the crusade but was a piece short – "I'm so disappointed, really I am. I feel really let down." Ethel was on all fours peeking under furniture. Nurse Feign felt inside her pocket; her grip tightened about the missing piece. Her chest swelled, she stared down her nose at the puny people beneath her.

Arthur's train arrived at Oxford. Uniforms abounded; the various college officer corps being kept in a perpetual state of readiness, were already on their way to temporary camps. As the train pulled in Arthur could see that there was much to do about the newspaper stand on the platform. He raised himself up and wound down the window. Posters shouted the news – "Ribbentrop in Moscow", "Cabinet Called Back", "Nazi Pact". He leant out. Below and to his right, a boy from the stand was making his way along the train pocketing coin and doling out papers to outstretched arms.

He arrived at the window and looked up at Arthur.

"The Times and The Mail... and The Mirror, I'll take The Mirror too."

More pandemonium from the headlines – “Sensational Midnight Move!”, “Hitler Claims Moscow Pact”, “Nazis and Russia: World Fears”. A German treaty with the Russians! It was the last thing he expected, the last thing anyone expected. Poland was being carved up, the dictator-surgeons had donned their masks, put on their rubber gloves and had begun to cut, to saw, to slice, to hack. Hitler hadn’t kept faith with Old Brolly; he had been deaf to him all along. It had all been bluff and bluster. Poland, ripped apart, its morsels parcelled out, its soul gone to the ether, had been wafted away.

No doubt now. War was certain. He saw it in the faces of crowd as the train pulled away and left them in its wake, sent them into the forever past of “before the war”, brushed them aside, like he, like Old Brolly, would now be brushed aside. And soon they would come to think that the war might save them, that it might make England whole again. It had been like that the last time. Arthur knew better but took no joy in it.

His black machinations had all been for nothing. He would find no excuse for them now, there would no appeal to the greater good, save... well, in a convoluted way perhaps he had rescued one sacrificial offering from the war’s mincing machine and from the eternal ether. The queer boy, Julian... whatever else, *he* at least would go to the promised haven immaculate. The thought gave him scant comfort. He let the papers fall and sat blankly looking into nothingness, wishing, praying that his heart would stop and that blindness and silence would take him.

Behind him, in a Cheltenham still drowsy beneath curling, fluttering green-bright leaves and a bluebird sky, in a white room devoid of impurity or dissent, a now imperious Nurse Feign was once more planted with her back before the door. On the lacquered table beside her, her army of patent medicines stood neatly to attention, eager and ready to serve. Ethel, the Maid of All Work scatted and devilled beneath her searching for the piece that would not be found and Mrs Surmon lamented a past that that would not, could not be put together again – the Good King would not sail, his crusade was thwarted, just like Old Brolly’s crusade had been.

Outside, the singing girls played their footling games. They had a new song and as the evenings shortened and coats were put on, so they would play it all the more fervently because they knew they had to get it done. One line of girls was pressing on the other and singing:

“Are you ready for a fight?

For we are the Romans,

Are you ready for a fight?

For we are Roman soldiers.”

Then the other line advanced and pressed them back:

“Yes, we’re ready for a fight,

For we are the English,

Yes, we’re ready for a fight,

For we are English soldiers.”

Then battle was joined as the girls hopped about on one leg seeking to topple their opponents though, often as not, being toppled themselves. Nurse Feign could not entertain their nonsense and shut the window on them and then took up post once more, her back to the failing light.

Below, in the hallway, the fingers of the porthole’s yellow glass reached in and found the hat-stand. Beneath Nurse Feign’s bonnet, the Captain’s bludgeon remained, its grimacing, face now marked with a drying, browning smudge of blood. As the days passed – days of war and of sorrow – the sun would come and go, morning, afternoon, night and so again and again. Ethel could never bring herself to dust the Captain’s stick, it held a terror for her that she could not explain and equally inexplicably Nurse Feign never took her to task over her dereliction. And so the grey swirls of a fingerprint – Nurse Feign’s fingerprint, her mark – slowly took hold upon the stick’s bloody knob, claiming its weight and its purpose.

In his own elsewhere, Julian reposed in the cheapest of coffins, laid out in his dress suit and new pumps. The mortician, an avid student of the restorative arts, had taken pride in his work. Working to a picture of Julian in his heyday at the Piccadilly, he had laboured manfully with putties and waxes, then delicately shadowed in the facial features with one of the new airbrushes and applied mascara and eye liner with discretion.

Julian looked younger than he had in years.

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