

*King Albert's
Words of
Advice*

and other
extraordinary stories

Michael Allen



Kingsfield

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This stories in this book are works of fiction. All characters and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to real persons or events is entirely coincidental.

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Introduction

This book is a collection of short stories.

Which is not a very helpful statement as it stands, so let me give you some idea of what to expect.

First, I think I should say that all these stories are aimed at the general reader. Without equating myself with the great masters of the past, I would like to think that the kind of person who will enjoy my stories is the person who, years ago, would have enjoyed Saki, or Somerset Maugham, or Roald Dahl. Fans of literary fiction should not abandon hope entirely – they may well find something here to interest them – but those with less refined tastes are likely to be better served.

Second, the stories vary considerably in genre and style. Some are mainstream stories, by which I mean they are about the world of today, pretty much as it really is; others might best be described as fantasy; a couple could be categorised as crime fiction; one is a ghost story; and so on.

Third, it may conceivably help you to know that the stories have been printed in a deliberate order. Stanley Ellin (of whom more below) chose to present his collected short stories in the order in which they were written. Stephen King, for *Everything's Eventual*, preferred a random order, as determined by shuffling playing cards. I myself have followed the example of the poet Swinburne, who devoted considerable thought to the presentation of his first collec-

tion of poems, making sure that each piece was balanced carefully against its neighbours. Of course I would not wish to dictate to you how you should read the book; and, quite rightly, you wouldn't take a scrap of notice if I did. I merely point out that, if you start at the beginning and work through to the end, you will not be subjected to any sudden and unsettling changes of mood.

Which brings me to the emotional effects of these stories. I am far from being a disciple of Stephen King, but on one point he and I are in agreement. 'For me,' he says, 'the emotional payoff is what it's all about. I want to make you laugh or cry when you read a story... or do both at the same time. I want your heart, in other words. If you want to learn something, go to school.'

Hear, hear, say I. One or two of the stories in this present volume may make you smile; some deal in irony; and, although there are a couple which are on the dark side, you will not come across any out-and-out horror. As an additional guide to the reader, I have provided a few words of description at the start of each individual story.

These variations in genre, style, content, and effect, are a result of my low boredom threshold. You see, I hold the view that writing ought to be fun. It's an eccentric idea, I know, but there we are.

This attitude of mine has handicapped my career as a novelist, and yet may prove to do the same in the short-story field. The problem is that if I try to write the same thing over and over again, I just can't get interested. But of course, writing the same book over and over again (with small but significant variations) is precisely what you have to do if you wish to be a success in today's fast-moving world of conglomerate publishing. Think Dick Francis, Catherine Cookson, Danielle Steel, John Grisham. They are

all brand names, and anyone who wants to emulate their achievements, even on a much reduced scale, should endeavour to become a cult brand name at the very least.

Unfortunately I just can't hack it. For example, more than twenty years ago I wrote a series of three detective novels, each featuring a policeman called Ben Spence. This Spence series was good enough to get listed in some standard reference books on crime fiction (such as *A Reader's Guide to the Classic British Mystery*, by Susan Oleksiw); and, if I had been driven by purely commercial considerations, I would have gone on churning out the Spence books for ever. But I'm afraid I just couldn't gear myself up for it. In those days, all my writing had to be done after a full day's work, and if I was writing to a formula it just didn't feel like fun.

So, this assemblage of stories is a bit of a mixture, and at least in principle there ought to be something for everyone.

I have avoided the temptation to tell you which stories I think are the best. In his introduction to his own collected short fiction, Stanley Ellin makes the point that, to the author's eye, not all stories are of equal merit. But, he adds, the reader will time and again 'frown at my triumphs and smile upon my failures.' Eventually, he says, he came to the conclusion that 'there is no way of telling what the reader will be up to'; the only sensible thing to do is to just hand over the book 'and then quickly step back out of range.'

Which I now do.

Michael Allen
Bradford on Avon, 2003

King Albert's Words of Advice

As is fitting, the first story in this collection features a man who tells stories in return for pints of beer: pretty much what all writers do, really. In this particular instance, the story that he tells is about travel through time and space. Well now, if H.G. Wells could write a successful piece of fiction entitled The Time Machine in 1895, then there is no earthly reason to suppose that the Sony Corporation of Japan could not be developing a real-life time and space machine in 2003. Is there? After all, Sony did help to invent the modern version of Michael Jackson.

THERE'S A BLOKE DOWN OUR pub – name of Bernard – who reckons he's got a time machine in his shed. If you buy him a pint, he'll tell you about places he's been to in it. And some of them are really weird.

Course, there's other blokes who reckon that Bernard's just making these stories up, so that blokes like me will buy him pints. But I'm not so sure. I've been and had a look at his shed. He keeps it locked, naturally, because they'd nick anything round here – but he's definitely got *something* in there. It's got dials and that. You can see it through the window.

Like I say, not everyone believes what Bernard says, and I once heard a bloke with red hair tell Bernard to his face

that there's no such thing as a time machine. But Bernard wasn't having any.

'Listen, smart-arse,' he said. 'If H.G. Wells could build a time machine in 1895, there's no reason on earth why the Japanese can't build one today. They just take a little while to catch up with western technology, that's all. And as a matter of fact it isn't *just* a time machine. It's a time and *space* machine. It can visit parallel universes.'

Well, this bloke with red hair never said a word after that, because he didn't know what a parallel universe was. I don't either, of course. But Bernard's mum told my mum that Bernard has a GCSE in physics, and he uses a computer at work, so I reckon he knows what he's talking about.

'This machine I've got is made by Sony,' Bernard said. 'I'm beta-testing it for them.'

Well, this bloke with red hair looked dead impressed when Bernard said he was beta-testing this machine. Because this bloke didn't know what beta-testing meant. I don't either, of course.

'Yes,' said Bernard. 'It's all very interesting really. I reckon it'll transform society, once it becomes generally available. Bit like the internet. And of course I can go to all sorts of interesting times and places in it. Watch the French Revolution, visit Queen Cleopatra. All sorts. I had a really interesting experience just last night, as a matter of fact.'

'Oh yes?' said the bloke with red hair, who had stopped not believing in time travel. 'Where did you go to?'

Bernard pushed his empty glass towards this bloke. 'Buy us a pint,' he said, 'and I'll tell you.'

Well, the bloke with red hair said sorry, but he'd run out of money, so I bought Bernard a pint instead. And this is the story he told us.

*

I thought it would be nice to go somewhere warm (said Bernard), seeing as how it's so bloody cold here at the moment. So I sat down, and I dialled in a random choice of parallel universe, plus the factors warm, sunny, and lots of beautiful girls. I pressed the button, and after the usual two-minute whirring noises, there I was.

I opened the door and had a look out.

Just as I'd hoped, I was in a nice warm place. It was a bit like Benidorm really. I could smell the sea, there was a nice breeze blowing from the west, and there were a few palm trees to provide some shade. About half a mile away I could see what looked like a big white house with a dome for a roof. I couldn't see any beautiful girls as yet, but I was sure there would be some somewhere.

So, I set off to walk towards the big house.

I hadn't gone very far when I turned a corner and saw a bloke sitting on a wall. He had his head in his hands, as if he was really depressed, but as I got closer he looked up. And guess what – it was that Albert Coggins from Inkerman Street.

'Morning, Albert,' I said. 'How's things?'

Albert groaned. 'Oh God. Don't ask, lad, don't ask.'

And then he did a bit of a double take.

'Hang on a minute,' he said. 'It's Bernard, isn't it? Bernard from the Rose and Crown? Captain of the darts team?'

'Yes, that's me,' I said.

'Bloody hell, Bernard.' Albert was astonished. 'How did you get here?'

'Oh,' I said, 'I came in my Sony Supertravel mark IV time/space bodily transportation machine. I'm beta-testing it for 'em – me and about three thousand others. How about you? How did you get here?'

Albert groaned again. 'Oh, more or less the same way as you, I suppose. Only not quite so scientific. You see, I was cleaning out my granny's loft for her – as you do. And I came across this old lamp, lying at the back like, as if nobody wanted it. So I picked it up, rubbed the dirt off it, and – guess what?'

'A genie appeared.'

Albert looked even more astonished. 'Yes. But how did you know?'

'Well,' I said, 'since I've been beta-testing this Sony machine, I've come across places where genies are as common as muck. Some of these parallel universes are absolutely thick with them.'

'Oh,' said Albert. 'Well, anyway, after I'd got over the shock of having this particular genie come pouring out of my granny's lamp, he expressed his eternal gratitude to me for releasing him from bondage, and then he offered me three wishes. Said I could have anything I wanted. Go anywhere I wanted. Be anything I wanted. I only had to say.'

'My word,' I said. 'The genies I've met haven't been anywhere near as obliging as that, Albert. Grumpy lot most of them.'

'Yes, well,' said Albert, 'I gather they only do the three wishes bit if they've been stuck in a lamp for a few thousand years. Anyway, that's what this one said to me. So I thought for a bit, and then I said, Well, I'd like to be king of my own country for a start.'

'OK,' said the genie, 'that's one.'

'And then, I've always been fond of nice-looking girls, so I want a harem of five hundred of the best.'

'Two,' said the genie.

'And finally, I'd like a really good golf course next door to the palace, cos I've always fancied learning golf.'

‘That’s three,’ said the genie. ‘Your wish is my command, o master. And with that there was a whirring noise, and everything went blank for a second or two – and then I ended up here.’

‘Well,’ I said, taking another look around. ‘I think you could have done a lot worse. It seems like a very nice place.’

Albert sighed. ‘Yes, well,’ he said. ‘It is and it isn’t. I’ve been here four years now, and the novelty has well and truly worn off on me, I can tell you....’ He suddenly looked alarmed. ‘What time is it?’

‘Ten o’clock.’

‘Oh, bloody hell. I’m late for the union meeting.’ He stood up. ‘You can come along with me if you like, Bernard. To tell you the truth I’d be glad of some moral support. Even though I am king.’

*

King Albert led the way to the fabulously white building nearby, which turned out to be the King’s palace.

When we got closer, I could see that it stretched for miles in every direction. All the walls were white, and there were no direction signs or labels on any of the doors. Albert reckoned he regularly got lost. Sometimes he had to walk miles to find a loo.

We eventually arrived at the council chamber, which was about the size of a football pitch, all on its own.

Seated at a table in the council chamber were two people. One turned out to be the Grand Vizier. He was a really ancient-looking bloke, slightly built, with a long white beard and a flowing red robe with lots of gold trimming on it.

The other person....

Well, the other person was Esmerelda.

Bloody hell. I mean, *bloody* hell!

Esmerelda was one of the five hundred girls from the harem. She was about average height, with blonde hair, blue eyes, long eyelashes, a creamy complexion, dark-red lips, all wet and inviting – and more curves than your average fairground roller coaster. In particular the, er, the upper part of her curves were approximately 38DD, and they were covered – or rather adorned – by two little bits of gold plate held up by gold chain. I mean, talk about firm. And pert. And all those other rather naughty words that are used to describe ladies with impressive chests. These particular chests were, believe me, unusually large and very well shaped. They were a pair of most distinguished bosoms. They would have won prizes at the county show. No problem.

I was a bit surprised, however, to find that Esmerelda was not too respectful towards her King.

‘You’re late!’ she told him when we appeared. And she wouldn’t even have bothered to stand up, I don’t think, if she hadn’t noticed that I was with him, and decided to give me a full-length view.

The bottom half of her body... Ooh, and what a bottom it was – never seen one like it – the bottom half of her body was loosely covered by a triangular piece of gold cloth, strategically positioned, and a few flimsy pieces of gauzy material. These gauzy leg-coverings might, in a very posh lingerie shop, have been sold as the lower section of a pair of honeymoon jim-jams. They looked a bit fragile to me, as if they wouldn’t take kindly to being pulled off in a hurry.

By heck, it makes me sweat just to think about her, even now.

Anyway, to get back to the business in hand. King Albert introduced me as his adviser, and said that I was going to sit in on the discussions.

The Grand Vizier umm-ed and ah-ed a bit, and wrung his hands, as if he wasn't quite sure whether this was proper, but he soon gave way. And Esmerelda clearly didn't give a bugger who was there.

'Let's get on!' she snarled.

So we did.

'I wish to make an opening statement,' said Esmerelda. In tones which suggested that it would be unwise to try to stop her. 'I am here, as you know, King Albert, in my capacity as harem shop-steward of the Union of Palace Internal Slaves and Skivvies.'

'Known as UPISS for short,' King Albert whispered to me. 'And they do take the piss, believe me. They draw blood, too.'

Esmerelda stared daggers at him.

'Once again,' she declared, 'his majesty the King has fallen short in his husbandly duties. There are, if I may remind his majesty, five hundred beautiful girls in his majesty's harem. Exactly as per specification. Now, if his majesty has specified five hundred beautiful girls, it is only reasonable to suppose that he felt himself capable of servicing five hundred beautiful girls. All of whom have perfectly normal appetites. And nothing much to do except think about satisfying those perfectly normal appetites.'

I could feel King Albert going a bit red beside me. 'Ah well,' he said. 'You see - '

Esmerelda cut him off.

'In the four weeks which have elapsed since the last meeting of this joint union-management committee, his majesty has serviced only twenty of the harem girls. Of those twenty, thirteen have lodged formal complaints about the duration of the servicing, eight have complained about the size of his majesty's equipment, and twelve have

reported that his majesty got their name wrong. Even after he had been told what it was. Twice.'

King Albert was sweating quite a lot now.

'Ah, well,' he said, 'you see I haven't been feeling too lively this last month, Esmerelda.'

'*Ms* Esmerelda to you – even if you are King.'

'Sorry, sorry, *Ms* Esmerelda. You see, I've been feeling a bit peaky, what with it being so warm and everything, and I'm not really used to it, not long-term. Gets on me chest a bit, does the heat, and I've always been chesty, ever since I was a little boy. Ask my mum if you don't believe me.'

Esmerelda would have none of this. She proceeded to recite a further list of charges. These included missing appointments without advance notice, developing a headache at vital moments, and falling asleep within two minutes of completing his husbandly duties.

Speaking of falling asleep, the Grand Vizier was now well away, and snoring with it. I nudged King Albert and pointed this out.

'Oh, he always does that,' whispered Albert. 'Completely bloody useless. He's supposed to keep things running for me, but he hasn't a clue. I ask him to do something and it's Oh yes, your wish is my command, o master. And then a week or two later he denies that I ever told him to do anything.'

Meanwhile Esmerelda was finishing off her speech.

'To conclude: the Union demands immediate and full rectification of all these faults and shortcomings, and in the absence of such complete and total rectification of all management failures, will reserve the right to take strike action. Is that clear?'

'Oh, totally,' said King Albert. And to our relief, Esmerelda got up and marched off. Keeping her nose in the

air as she went.

We watched her go.

‘By heck,’ said King Albert. ‘If she was nothing but tits and arse that girl would be an absolute marvel. But unfortunately she’s got a mouth as well.’

I was too stunned by the sight of Esmerelda walking away to say anything. Her behind in movement was something that I have not witnessed the like of, nay, not in any of the universes what I have visited.

The Grand Vizier chose that moment to wake up.

‘Ah!’ he said. ‘Next item, complaints from the Union of Executioners and Torturers.’

King Albert became agitated. ‘What do they want this time?’

‘Much the same as before, your majesty. They want you to send them more customers. They are on piece-work, after all.’

King Albert groaned, even more pitifully than ever. ‘Go outside and tell them to wait a few minutes, Mr Vizier. Like, about twenty-four hours if you can manage it.’

‘Your wish is my command, o master,’ said the Grand Vizier. And he hobbled off towards the door, which was approximately two hundred yards away.

King Albert turned and looked at me. His expression was pitiful to behold. The poor fellow looked knackered.

‘You see what it’s like,’ he said. ‘Being King is absolutely no fun at all, Bernard! I’m now going to spend the next half-hour being bollocked by a gang of torturers and executioners – who are really frightening blokes, Bernard. And all because I don’t send them enough people to work on! But I don’t want to condemn anyone to death!’

And the poor chap began to sob, quite piteously.

‘I can’t play golf because although there’s a wonderful

golf course, I didn't think to ask for any clubs, you see. So there aren't any.'

'But there's always the harem,' I pointed out.

'Harem? Don't talk to me about the bloody harem.' Tears streamed down King Albert's cheeks. 'I used to enjoy a really good shag. Nothing I enjoyed more, apart from my mum's treacle tart. But now it's just a horrible chore. You go in there, and you find there's one on the bed, telling me to get on with it, and then there's a whole bloody queue of them outside the door. And I get so worried that they're going to lodge formal complaints that I can hardly get it up any more.'

Well, I could see that King Albert was in the most appalling mess, but he seemed to be unaware of the obvious solution.

'But look here, Albert,' I said. 'There's no need for all this gloom and doom. If you're not having fun any longer, why don't you just get up and leave?'

He turned to stare at me, his cheeks all wet with distress.

'Leave? How could I possibly leave?'

'Well,' I said, in a most reasonable tone, 'you could always come back with me.'

So he did.

*

Bernard had finished his story, and his pint, so I bought him another.

'And that was that,' he said. 'Albert came back with me. Last Tuesday. Of course, he'd spent four years in the parallel universe where he was king, but in our universe he'd only been away ten days.'

'But I saw Albert only yesterday,' said the bloke with red hair. 'And he told me he'd been away on holiday. In Ben-

idorm.'

'Ah, well, he would, wouldn't he?' said Bernard. 'He's a bit sensitive about the whole thing, is Albert. You would be too, in the circumstances.'

*

I don't know about you, but I thought Bernard's story about King Albert and the harem girls was really interesting. Of course, I didn't believe all of it. I mean I didn't believe that the Grand Vizier would have fallen asleep in the middle of an important meeting, for a start.

Anyway, I thought it would be quite interesting to have a word with King Albert, when I next saw him. I thought I might get him to tell me a bit more about Esmerelda and that. I think harem girls are really quite interesting. I wouldn't mind meeting one or two myself. So, for the next couple of days, whenever I was going down Inkerman Street I kept my eyes open, and eventually I managed to bump into King Albert as he was walking towards the bus stop.

'Morning,' I said. I wasn't sure if I should say 'your majesty' or not, but I thought not, on the whole, since he's back in our universe now. 'Did you have a good holiday?'

Albert shuddered, as if I had dropped an ice cube down the back of his shirt. 'Ooh! Don't ask, lad. Don't ask.'

'Bad, was it?'

'Ooh, terrible, terrible.'

I made sure that no one could overhear us. 'I, er, I gather you had a bit of trouble with the harem girls. Do you think I could have a few harem girls, if I had a rub of that lamp? I wouldn't need as many as you, though. A couple of hundred would do for me.'

Albert looked up and down the street, just as I had, to make sure that no one else was listening. 'You've been talk-

ing to Bernard, haven't you?' he said.

'Well, yes,' I admitted.

Albert looked me up and down. 'How old are you, lad?'

'Eighteen. Nearly.'

Albert nodded. 'Well, I reckon you could do with a bit of advice.' He looked at his watch. 'I've got to catch a bus in five minutes, but we've just got time. Let's nip into the Dog and Ferret.'

We went into the pub and Albert ordered two pints and a double Scotch. 'My friend's paying,' he said. So I did.

I took a look at Albert while we were waiting for the drinks. He had a very good suntan, and he did look as if he might have spent four years in a hot climate.

When the drinks arrived, Albert drank the whisky almost in one go. I was very impressed. Whenever I try to drink whisky I cough, and it makes my eyes water. Then he sank half of the pint of best bitter, and after that he guided me over to a quiet corner of the bar.

'Now then, lad,' he said. 'Have you got a granny?'

'I've got two.'

'Right. Well, the day will come when one of your gran-nies asks you to clear out her loft for her. As they do. And the thing is this, see. If, when you're poking about in the loft there, you come across an old lamp, do you know what you definitely should not do?'

'No, Albert.'

'You shouldn't rub it.'

'Shouldn't I?'

'No. Definitely not. There's quite a lot of things a lad your age shouldn't rub, and a lamp's one of them. And if, by any chance, you do inadvertently pass your arm over it, by mistake like, and a genie does happen to pop out of the lamp, you should be very, very careful what you say.'

‘Should I?’

‘Oh yes. And if this genie should offer you three wishes, and say that you can have whatever your heart desires, do you know what you should do then?’

‘No, Albert.’

‘You should say no, lad. That’s all. Just... say... no.’

He sank the second half of his pint and stood up. ‘What have I told you?’ he said.

‘Er, you’ve told me that if a genie ever offers to grant me three wishes, I should be very, very careful,’ I replied.

King Albert patted me on the shoulder. ‘That’s right, lad,’ he said. ‘Whenever you’re faced with temptation, just say no, and then you’ll come to no harm.’

And with that he rushed off to catch his bus.

Budgie Bill

As I sit here at my little typing machine, I often think that there must be many more sensible things to do with one's time than spend it writing fiction. One could go for a walk, for instance; or play bowls; or breed budgerigars.

One day, while I was embarked on this line of speculation, it occurred to me that I couldn't remember ever reading a story about a man who bred budgerigars. So I wrote one, to fill this obvious gap in the market.

IT IS BY NO MEANS unusual for a mother to worry about the kind of magazines which she finds hidden in her teenage son's bedroom, and Mrs Macklethwaite was no exception to this general rule: she was very worried indeed.

But Mrs Macklethwaite *was* unusual in one respect: in her case she was worried because she couldn't find any mucky magazines at all. Never had done. Her boy Billy didn't seem to have hidden anything naughty under his bed. Or on top of the wardrobe. Or tucked behind the radiator. Ever. And since Billy was now nineteen years of age that was... Well, it wasn't quite normal, somehow. Or so Mrs Macklethwaite thought, anyway.

Mrs Macklethwaite wouldn't have worried quite so much if Billy had been the type who preferred the real

thing to pictures. She would have been quite relaxed if her son had been in the habit of going out pubbing and clubbing, and coming home late, and being sick in the front garden; if, in short, she had been able to assume that the top-shelf magazines would reveal to him absolutely nothing with which he was not already familiar.

But Mrs Macklethwaite's son Billy wasn't doing any of that, you see. He didn't even have a motorbike or watch football on the telly. What her Billy was doing was breeding budgerigars in a whopping great aviary down the bottom of the garden. What was more, he was spending all his time and money on it. And for a young man of nineteen that didn't seem... Well, it didn't seem quite normal somehow. Or so Mrs Macklethwaite thought, anyway.

Eventually, after much heart-searching, Billy's Mum decided to do something about this unhealthy obsession.

*

Mrs Macklethwaite's first port of call was the local newsagent's shop, which was run by a Mr Patel. She waited until the shop was empty, and then she said, 'I wonder if I might have a quiet word, Mr Patel.'

'Certainly, certainly, Mrs Macklethwaite, how can I help you?'

'Well, you know my boy Billy, don't you?'

'Oh yes, young Billy is one of my very best customers, no doubt about it.'

'Yes, well, I wonder if you'd mind telling me what sort of magazines he reads.'

'Ah, well now, let me see....' Mr Patel scratched his chin. 'There is *Budgerigar Breeders' Monthly*, of course.... *Budgie Bulletin*.... *Budgie Fanciers' Gazette*.... *The Best of Birds* – rather a confusing title that one, because some young men mistake it for quite a different publication, and

I have to warn them before they leave the shop. And, er, *Budgies Galore*. I think that's about it.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Macklethwaite. 'And does he ever read any of them magazines off the top shelf?'

'Oh yes, he buys a selection of those, Mrs Macklethwaite.'

'I see.' Mrs Macklethwaite's mouth had gone quite dry. This next question was the last number on her bingo card, so to speak. And she was in two minds as to whether she wanted that number to come up. 'And, er, does my lad Billy buy the magazines from the left-hand end, or the right-hand end?'

'Oh, very definitely from the left-hand end, Mrs Macklethwaite.' Mr Patel was quite positive. 'I see very clearly what you are worrying about, but you need have no fears on that account, Mrs Macklethwaite. Your boy Billy favours such publications as *Big Ones Bouncing*, *Bare Bottomed Babes*, and *Cleavage Bonanza*.'

Mrs Macklethwaite began to breathe freely again. 'Oh, thank goodness,' she murmured.

'If you were worrying that he might be interested in *Gay Boys Go To Greece*, or *Monster Bulges Exposed*, you can stop worrying entirely, Mrs Macklethwaite. As a matter of fact we have very little demand for magazines of that kind in Inkerman Street. The only ones who are interested are the Reverend Wilberforce and his Friday-night discussion group. They all pop in here afterwards, and buy up most of my stock.'

Mrs Macklethwaite was too relieved to take in this interesting piece of news about the local Vicar. She simply said, 'Well, I'm very grateful to you, Mr Patel. Very grateful indeed.'

'Not at all, not at all. Now you can go away with your

heart singing, Mrs Macklethwaite. Because now you know that your boy Billy is a perfectly normal heterosexual wanker. Just like every other well brought up English boy.'

*

Much reassured by her conversation with Mr Patel, Mrs Macklethwaite next had a word with her best friend and neighbour, Mrs Coggins.

'I'm a bit worried about my Billy,' she confided, after several cups of tea had induced a suitably intimate atmosphere. 'Of course, it's always been very difficult, what with him being an only child, and not having a Dad to help bring him up. But I am concerned that he's spending every minute of his spare time in that aviary of his, with all them budgies, when he really ought to be out chasing bits of skirt, or playing footie, like any other hot-blooded young man.'

'Well yes,' said Mrs Coggins, who thought it all very peculiar herself but had hitherto been much too polite to say so. 'It doesn't seem quite... well, normal, somehow.'

'What I'd like to do,' said Mrs Macklethwaite, 'is sort of get him interested in girls.' She related the information supplied by Mr Patel, and added, 'So I know he's interested in principle. But he's had absolutely no experience in practice. What I was thinking was this.... If I could find a professional, or an enthusiastic amateur, and get him kick-started, so to speak, then we might begin to get his mind off of them feathery birds and on to the ones with high heels, blonde hair, and a big bust. What I'd like to do, between you and me, is give him a taste for sexual intercourse.'

'Quite right too,' said Mrs Coggins, who had three grown-up sons of her own, and firm ideas about the rights and wrongs of conduct among the young.

'And I was wondering,' said Mrs Macklethwaite, 'since you get out and about a bit more than I do, whether you

could suggest anybody suitable. Anyone who might be qualified to start him off, like.'

Mrs Coggins pondered. She had a part-time job at the shoe factory, where lots of young ladies were employed. 'Well,' she said eventually, 'I reckon your best chance is Samantha Ramsbottom. Works in accounts. I know for a fact that she's saving up for a holiday, so she's stopped being generous with it and started charging instead. I reckon she might be willing to help.'

'Sounds just the job,' said Mrs Macklethwaite. 'Will you have a word with her for me?'

'I will that,' said Mrs Coggins.

*

Two days later, Samantha Ramsbottom called round to see Mrs Macklethwaite and was given a thorough briefing on Billy's exclusive and excessive interest in budgerigars.

Samantha and Mrs Macklethwaite then discussed, in refreshingly frank terms, Mrs Macklethwaite's very understandable desire to see her son introduced to the pleasures of the flesh. And since Samantha Ramsbottom was a 38DD-32-38 sort of a girl, there was, Mrs Macklethwaite reflected, quite a lot of flesh from which pleasure might be derived; and all of it was genuine too, despite dark mutterings from some of the other girls in accounts.

For her part, Samantha provided a short summary of the services which she was able to offer, and the relevant fees that were charged. (Happily, both parties were able to agree that said fees were most reasonable, in the circumstances.) It was then arranged that Samantha should call round, on Mrs Macklethwaite's next bingo night, and express to Billy Macklethwaite an overwhelming ambition to become closely acquainted with his budgies.

'Ask him if you can meet Petronella,' said Mrs Mackleth-

waite. 'She's his prime breeder is Petronella. She's won prizes and that, and he can't stop bloody talking about her. It's Petronella this, and Petronella that – it just about drives me barmy.'

'Leave it to me,' said Samantha, who had never yet met a man who could not be turned into putty in her hands. (She was not religiously inclined, and was therefore not a part of the Reverend Wilberforce's Friday-night discussion group.) 'Oh, and as far paying goes, I don't mind if you want to wait until Friday.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Mrs Macklethwaite. Samantha was, she decided, a most admirable young woman in every way.

*

It has to be said that, when next she spent an evening in the Inkerman Street bingo hall, Mrs Macklethwaite's mind was not on the job. She won two small prizes, it was true, but even as she claimed them she couldn't help wondering whether Samantha was making any progress.

So eager was Mrs Macklethwaite to discover the results of her little experiment in social engineering that she left the bingo hall rather earlier than usual, and began to make her way home.

When she was almost there, she met the lovely Samantha heading smartly in the opposite direction. They stopped for a quick word.

'How did you get on?' Mrs Macklethwaite asked, once again finding herself unexpectedly short of breath.

'Oh, fine, no problems at all,' said Samantha. 'He's a perfectly normal lad, is your Billy. Everything works as it should, and he managed to do it twice, as a matter of fact. It's always best if they can, cos then they feel they've had value for money. Though in his case, of course, Billy wasn't pay-

ing. Well, not directly, like.'

'Oh good,' said Mrs Macklethwaite, still feeling a little faint from all the excitement of the evening. 'Well let's hope that does the trick. All I've got to do now is find him a lass who's short of a feller.'

'Yes, and I'll let you know if I think of anyone,' said Samantha. 'But I must dash, Mrs Macklethwaite. I've got to do Mr Woodison before I go home, and he's a bit of a difficult one. You see, he can't manage it at all until he's had five pints, but after seven pints the use of his organ deserts him completely. So time is of the essence.'

And off she dashed, on another errand of mercy.

*

Mrs Macklethwaite made her way home and put the kettle on for a cup of tea.

When Billy came in she looked for signs of dramatic change in his demeanour, but saw none. He seemed much the same as usual. And, as usual, he had his favourite budgie, Petronella, perched on his shoulder. But then, Mrs Macklethwaite thought to herself, he wouldn't want me to think that he was any different, would he? I'm not supposed to know about Samantha.

'Do you know what, Mum?' said Billy.

'No, dear – what?'

'That Samantha Ramsbottom called round tonight. Wanted to see my budgies.'

'Did she, dear? How nice for you.... I do hope you showed her everything.'

'Oh yes. She was particularly keen to see Petronella.'

'Lovely.... Well, if you got on well with Samantha, perhaps you should invite her to come round again, next week. Or take her to see a film perhaps.'

'Oh no,' said Billy. Firmly. Much too firmly for Mrs

Macklethwaite's taste.

‘But why ever not, dear?’

‘Because Petronella didn't like her, that's why not,’ said Billy. ‘And Petronella's my best breeder, as you well know, Mum. And we can't have Petronella getting upset, now can we? If Petronella thought I was seeing another woman, she might get jealous. And then she might refuse to lay eggs. And then where would we be?’

Mrs Macklethwaite was aware, of course, that budgies do not understand the English language. Nevertheless, if you had taken her into a courtroom and required her to tell the truth on pain of perjury, Mrs Macklethwaite would have sworn that, on hearing these words from young Billy, the budgie on his shoulder leaned forward... and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

Tears to the Eyes

I'm not quite sure where the idea for this one came from; sometimes you remember, and sometimes you don't.

Harlan Ellison, who is an American writer of some distinction in the fields of fantasy and science fiction, says that when he lectures at colleges and universities he is often asked where he gets his ideas. He always maintains that he buys them from this place in Schenectady, New York.

'There's this ideas service,' he says. 'Every week I send 'em twenty-five bucks, and every week they send me a freshly picked six-pack of ideas.'

Some of these students, he reports, are dumb enough to ask him for the address of said service. Which is ridiculous, isn't it? No professional writer would ever give away his trade secrets.

'IT'S NOT AS IF CHARLIE is a really bad husband,' said Mrs Millrunn. 'It's just that he's a bit...well, neglectful.'

'Is Caroline complaining?' asked her friend, Mrs Hornbeam.

'Well no. She's much too loyal for that. And of course she's got the baby to keep her busy. But I can read between the lines.'

The two ladies were having tea at the Savoy, as was their

habit once a month. Long ago they had been at school together, and they had remained in touch ever since.

There was a pause while Mrs Hornbeam cut herself a slice of that rather nice fruit cake that they do at the Savoy.

‘Tell me, my dear, would I be right in thinking that this neglect, as you call it, takes the form of going to work early, staying at work late, having a few drinks with the boys afterwards, and then coming home fairly paralytic?’

‘Well yes,’ said Mrs Millrunn faintly.

‘And somewhere in the middle, very possibly, young Charlie may perhaps be making a visit to one of those clubs where the young ladies dance with no clothes on, and do extraordinary things with poles?’

‘Um, yes, I fear so. I haven’t actually got any proof, of course. But you know what these young City chaps are.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Hornbeam firmly. ‘I married one, and now I’ve got two sons on the Stock Exchange.’

Mrs Millrunn sighed. ‘I just don’t know what to do. Of course, as Charlie’s mother-in-law I ought to keep my mouth firmly shut, otherwise I shall look a complete monster.’

‘Indeed.’ Mrs Hornbeam began to grope in her capacious handbag. ‘It sounds to me as if young Charlie has a touch of the Habdabs.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. My boys both had it. Named after the Habdabs club, you know. That’s the most famous of these lads’ places at the moment. Fortunately for you, my dear, there is now a cure available.’

‘Is there?’

‘Oh yes.’ Mrs Hornbeam finally produced what she had been looking for: a business card. ‘Dr Digby is the man to see. Here....’

Mrs Millrunn looked at the card. 'Dr Digby,' she read aloud. 'Harley Street. Oh dear. I suppose he costs an arm and a leg.'

'Oh no. Just a finger and a couple of toes. And besides, Marcia, you know very well that you can afford it.'

'Well yes, I suppose I can. What is this chap Digby, some sort of counsellor?'

'Some sort, yes. Kind of an all-rounder, really. You should see him at once, my dear. And take his advice.'

*

The very next day, after ringing for an appointment, Mrs Millrunn arrived at Dr Digby's office.

She was greeted by a receptionist who was the most beautiful and elegant young lady that Mrs Millrunn had seen for some time. What was more, Mrs Millrunn was astonished to see that the receptionist had eyes of different colours: one blue, and one brown. But she made no comment, of course.

Dr Digby saw her at once. He was a man in his sixties, shortish, plumpish, and very cheerful; his eyes (both blue) twinkled constantly, as if he found everything amusing. He was also wearing quite the best-fitting suit that Mrs Millrunn had seen all day; and as her father had been a Savile Row tailor, this was an area in which she had some expertise.

Dr Digby sat Mrs Millrunn down and soon had her relaxed and talking.

It wasn't that young Charlie was a bad husband exactly, Mrs Millrunn explained, but he did seem to be a bit... well, neglectful.

The two of them continued talking for some time, Dr Digby making notes. Eventually the Doctor sat back.

'Yes,' he said. 'Clearly a serious case, but by no means

beyond retrieval. What these young men need, you see, Mrs Millrunn, is a little something to bring them to their senses. Something to make them appreciate what they've got – which in Charlie's case is a good job, a lovely wife, and a healthy little boy. Now, it so happens that over the past few years I have been developing just the thing.'

'Oh....' Mrs Millrunn really began to worry now. Had she acted for the best in coming here? Still, her old friend Barbara Hornbeam had strongly recommended Dr Digby, and he did seem a very pleasant man.

'You've heard of designer clothes, of course.'

'Oh yes.'

'Good. Well what I have developed, since I retired from hospital work, is a sort of designer pill. It's a bit like the flu jab that you probably have in the autumn. After you've had your jab, you're much less likely to get the flu. And any young man who is inoculated, so to speak, with my pill, is much less likely to stray from the straight and narrow than he would be otherwise.'

'I see,' said Mrs Millrunn, though in truth she didn't see at all. 'And you think this will help young Charlie, do you?'

'Oh yes. Let me explain....'

Mrs Millrunn took quite a lot of convincing, but in the end she agreed that, if Charlie were to be given Dr Digby's treatment, it would probably be in his own best interests.

*

That very same night, young Charlie worked on at his office until past six o'clock. At that point, two fellows from down the corridor put their head in and said that they were just going out for a quick one, and why didn't he join them? So he did.

Three pints of lager later, the two chaps in question said that they had arranged to meet some lively young fellows

who were over from Wall Street, because it would be a bit rude really to leave these Yanks all on their own in a strange city. And besides, such out-of-office contact was all good for business in the long run – so what about an hour in the Habdabs Club? After which they could leave the Yanks to it and push off home to supper and bed.

Which all seemed sensible enough to Charlie. So that was where they all went. To the Habdabs Club. Along with a lot of other young fellows in suits and ties.

After Charlie had been in Habdabs for about hour, he noticed an extraordinarily beautiful girl – and a fully dressed girl at that – on the other side of the room. She was so beautiful and elegant, in fact, that he began to stare at her, rather than at Vera Velansky, who was just doing her thing on the pole. What was more, after the beautiful, elegant, and fully dressed girl had finished her drink, she came over and spoke to him.

‘Hello, Charlie,’ she said. She used his name, although he was sure that he had never met her in his life.

And it was a very odd thing, Charlie thought, but when he looked into her eyes he saw that one was blue and one was brown.

Charlie was so busy looking into the girl’s eyes, and wondering how she came to know who he was, that he didn’t even notice when she passed a hand over the top of his glass and popped a little pill into his brand-new pint of lager.

*

During the night Charlie had to get up. As you do when you’ve had, er... how many pints was it? Charlie couldn’t quite remember. And as he went to the loo Charlie did feel a slight... well, a certain amount of discomfort. But he just put it down to a hangover.

The next morning, ditto. When he relieved himself before breakfast he experienced a certain amount of... Well, without going into the sordid details, what Charlie felt was a certain amount of stinging as he emptied his bladder. But it soon passed, and Charlie went off to work.

At about coffee time, Charlie felt the need to go to the gents again. And this time...

Well, we could describe what Charlie felt in some detail. We could use metaphors and similes – phrases involving references to red-hot razor blades, shooting stars, and the torments of the Inquisition. But that would be quite unnecessarily graphic, and besides, it might put you off your dinner. So, let's just say that when Charlie passed water, it hurt so much that he very nearly passed out.

A few minutes later, Charlie staggered back to his office; he was pale and trembling, and he wondered if he ought to go home. But fortunately the symptoms seemed to disappear after a few minutes and he was back to his old self again. So he began to feel more cheerful. Whatever it was that had troubled him, it would soon pass off, he decided. Of course it would.

Just by way of a precaution, however, Charlie didn't have any lager at lunchtime. He rather thought that the less he drank at the moment, the better he would feel. And when he came to go to the gents again, after several hours of really jolly hard work, he was so preoccupied that he had almost forgotten his former problems.

Unfortunately his problems had not forgotten him, and Charlie suffered anew.

Once more we will draw a veil over the precise nature of his experiences: it will suffice to say that they made his eyes water. Quite a lot, as a matter of fact. Sweat broke out on Charlie's forehead, and when he looked in the mirror after-

wards, he saw a white-faced, wild-eyed lunatic staring back at him, the mouth sagging open and little dribbles of drool running down his chin.

Charlie went home and went straight to bed, where he was nursed with soothing words and warm drinks – which Charlie only sipped – by his affectionate and loyal wife, Caroline.

The next day he was somewhat better. But, tempting fate, he had a pint of lager at lunchtime and paid for it dearly later. In the evening he was foolish enough – nay, reckless enough – to go out for yet another pint or two with the lads. And they had to put him into a taxi, groaning piteously, soon afterwards.

By now Charlie was beginning to realise that it was the booze that was upsetting his system. And towards lunchtime on the following day, when he was obliged to visit the gents once more, he made sure that there was no one else using the facility at the same time, so that he could groan aloud without causing alarm.

Charlie stood by the urinal and emptied his bladder as fast as he reasonably could. But the sensations were such that the sweat dripped copiously off his brow and he gave vent to a number of pathetic groans and moans which would have aroused sympathy in even the sternest of moralists.

‘Ooh!’ said Charlie. And ‘Oh!’ Not to mention ‘Ah!’ And even ‘Urrrgh!’

He leaned forward against the wall on which the urinal was positioned, and wished most earnestly that he were dead; indeed, he declared aloud that it was a serious mistake on God’s part to have allowed him even to have been born.

And it was at that point that he became conscious of

someone standing beside him.

‘Hello, Charlie,’ said a kindly, sympathetic voice. ‘Having a bit of trouble?’

Charlie straightened up with a jerk and did his best to look nonchalant and carefree. ‘Oh no, no, not trouble exactly,’ he gasped. ‘Must have eaten something that disagreed with me. That’s all.’

‘Oh good,’ said his new companion. ‘So that’s all right then. Nothing serious.’

The voice sounded somewhat familiar, and when Charlie pulled himself properly together, and took a look at the man beside him, he realised that it was Reggie Fremantle, an old school chum. Well, not a chum exactly, because Reggie had been a house prefect at a time when Charlie had been merely a new squirt – but it was a face familiar from his schooldays at any rate.

Reggie looked around to make sure that they were not overheard by anyone else.

‘Couldn’t help noticing, old boy,’ he said, ‘that you were experiencing a certain amount of discomfort when you, er, had a whatsit.’

Charlie was too far gone to deny this. ‘Well, er, yes. Did have a bit of discomfort, yes.’ He took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow, which was continuing to leak water.

Reggie nodded. ‘What you’ve got is a touch of the Habdabs, old boy. That’s what you’ve got.’

Privately, Charlie couldn’t help thinking that if what he had was a *touch* of the Habdabs, he wouldn’t care to experience the full steely grip of the thing. But aloud he simply said, ‘Have I?’

‘Oh yes.’ Reggie was quite confident in his diagnosis. ‘Had it myself, as a matter of fact, couple of years ago. It’s a bug, you see, and you pick it up in City pubs and clubs. Par-

ticularly the, er... Well, you know – the places which feature the unclothed ladies and so forth.'

'Yes, quite,' said Charlie. Who was again too far gone even to think about denying that he had ever been to such a place.

'You're lucky you met me,' said Reggie. 'Because chaps are naturally a bit reluctant to talk about things like this. Some chaps might think, with symptoms of that sort, that you'd been out with a lady of the night or something. And of course you haven't, have you?'

'Certainly not,' said Charlie hotly. And privately he thought it a bit much for an old school chum even to ask the question.

'Well, it just so happens,' Reggie continued, 'that I can put you on to the right sort of medic who will sort you out.'

'Can you?' gasped Charlie, who at this point would gladly have settled for amputation of the offending organ, if only such an operation would forestall any further pain.

'Oh yes.' Reggie produced a card. 'Dr Digby's the chap. You go and see him, Charlie. He'll get you right as rain in no time.'

Charlie took the card eagerly, and Reggie seemed to disappear, just as silently as he had arrived. And it wasn't until much later that Charlie began to wonder what Reggie had been doing in the building at all – since he worked for a bank with an office three streets away.

*

Without even going to lunch, Charlie rang Dr Digby's office and begged for an early appointment, which was granted to him at three o'clock that afternoon.

When Charlie arrived at the Harley Street premises, he noticed at once that the receptionist was the young lady whom he had seen at the Habdabs Club – the blue eye and

the brown eye were, after all, something of a giveaway. But the young lady made no reference to their earlier meeting; she simply smiled and ushered him into the Doctor's office.

'Hello, Charlie!' said Dr Digby cheerfully, greeting him as if they were old friends, and the consultation began.

During the next half-hour, in response to Dr Digby's questioning, Charlie described his present life style, and his future ambitions, in some detail. The Doctor for the most part just listened, making an occasional note.

Dr Digby then began to sum up. 'Well, Charlie, you'll be relieved to know that there's nothing very seriously wrong with you.'

Charlie almost gave a little sob of relief, which would have been most undignified, but he managed to turn it into a cough, just in time.

'What you're suffering from is a bit like the common cold. It's nasty, but it will pass. But you are going to have to make a few minor changes in the way you live.'

Charlie beamed. Minor changes? *No* problem. If only the pain would go away.

'Yes, a few little changes. But if you do happen to fall back into your old ways, Charlie, then depend upon it, your symptoms will return. I speak here with complete and absolute authority.'

So authoritative was Dr Digby's manner that Charlie listened to the Doctor's advice rather carefully. Indeed he actually made notes, which says quite a lot for what he had suffered over the last few days.

'First, you must begin each day with a proper breakfast,' said Dr Digby sternly. 'None of this cup of coffee and then rush out of the house stuff. Cereal, bacon and egg, or something similar. Glass of milk. Most important meal of the day, is breakfast.'

Charlie scribbled furiously.

‘Next, you must eat a proper lunch. You needed one at school, and you need one now. And no beer.’

NO BEER, wrote Charlie and underlined it. And curiously, what would last week have seemed like an intolerable imposition now seemed like simple common sense.

‘And third, you must go home at a sensible time. You have a little boy, don’t you? Yes, well see something of him. And treat your lovely wife properly, Charlie. She’s not just there as a housekeeper. Talk to her.’

Charlie vowed that he would never again be silent in Caroline’s presence. He would talk as few husbands had ever talked.

‘Ambition is all very well, Charlie, but you must create a proper balance in your life. Promotion obtained at the expense of a happy family life is not promotion at all. Take my word for it.’

Charlie replied that he would indeed take Dr Digby’s word for it, since the Doctor was clearly a man of great experience and much hard-won wisdom.

‘And,’ concluded Dr Digby, ‘just to make sure that you start out in the right way, I’ve asked a former patient of mine to take you to lunch tomorrow.’

*

The following day, Reggie Fremantle called at Charlie’s office. They walked for a minute or two through the crowded City streets, and then Reggie led the way into a discreet but well maintained building. It was a little off the beaten track and Charlie had never noticed it before.

‘This,’ Reggie announced, ‘is the MMC.’

‘The MMC?’

‘The Married Men’s Club.’

‘Oh,’ said Charlie, who had never heard of it.

‘Membership is by invitation only,’ said Reggie, as they climbed the stairs to the dining-room. ‘But I think I can get you in if I explain what you’ve been through. Lots of good chaps are members. Many of them are Dr Digby’s patients as a matter of fact. You’ll make just as good contacts here as you ever did in any City bar or club, Charlie – and what’s more you won’t have any more trouble with the Habdabs.’

Charlie shuddered. His painful symptoms had now disappeared entirely, but even the mention of them made him wince.

They entered the dining-room, which reminded Charlie very much of the facilities at his old school: there were several long tables, with noisy cheerful fellows on all sides of them.

‘You get a proper lunch here,’ said Reggie, raising his voice in order to be heard. ‘Meat and two veg, and a decent pudding. Spotted dick, plum duff...’

‘And treacle tart with custard!’ said Charlie delightedly, as he saw one old boy passing him, plate in hand, on the way back to his table.

‘Quite,’ said Reggie. ‘Only soft drinks at the bar, of course, but you won’t miss the booze, Charlie. And the Club’s not open in the evenings, either. But that won’t bother you, will it?’

‘No, no, no,’ said Charlie. ‘Not in the slightest.’

*

That evening, Charlie went home early. Took his wife by surprise, in fact, especially when he volunteered to bath baby Patrick. She couldn’t stop smiling.

Later, when they’d had a high tea and done the washing-up, they sat down together in front of the television and watched Caroline’s favourite soap opera. Caroline had to explain to Charlie who the characters were, and what they

were up to.

Charlie put his arm round his wife and they snuggled up together. When the adverts came on, Caroline turned off the sound and gave her husband a kiss. 'This is nice, Charlie, isn't it?' she said.

Charlie took a moment to think before he replied.

'Well yes,' he said eventually, and rather to his own surprise. 'As a matter of fact, it is.'

Unblotting the Copybook

I feel obliged to give warning that this story may cause offence. In particular, it impugns the honour and integrity of the Church of England, the public schools, the army, the police force, and the medical profession.

Even if I do say so myself, this is pretty good going in a story which is less than 2,500 words in length.

WE ALL AGREED THAT IT was most inconsiderate of the Headmaster to die in the wrong bed. In my capacity as Vicar of the parish, doubling as school Chaplain, I certainly thought so. The Colonel took a strong line on the matter: said it was a thoroughly bad show. And Mrs Meadows found the Headmaster's death a most serious inconvenience – particularly as she happened to be lying underneath him at the time.

Fortunately, the Headmaster's demise occurred during the Easter holidays. I first heard of the situation at about three o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, when I received a rather breathless phone call from Mrs Meadows.

'Vicar,' she said. 'Bit of a crisis. You'd better get over here. Sharpish.'

And I, knowing something of the Headmaster's habits on Wednesday afternoons, needed no further hint.

When Mrs Meadows answered the door she was still in

her negligee, and was looking a trifle flushed in the cheeks.

‘Come in quick,’ she said, and immediately led me upstairs.

I found the Headmaster lying face down on Mrs Meadows’s king-size double bed.

‘Sorry I’m still not dressed,’ Mrs Meadows declared, ‘but I rang you as soon as it happened. As chance would have it I could just reach the bedside phone – but it took me about ten minutes to get out from under, if you follow my meaning. Because he’s quite a weight, is the Headmaster.’

‘Was quite a weight,’ I corrected her, as I tried and failed to find a pulse.

‘Oh, so he is dead then, is he?’

‘Giving a jolly good imitation if he’s not,’ I replied.

‘Yes, well, I assumed he had snuffed it. Poor dear....’

She seemed to feel obliged to tell me what had happened; though still, I noticed, without making any attempt to cover the substantial cleavage which her negligee revealed.

‘We had lunch together,’ Mrs Meadows explained. ‘And then we had a cup of tea and a bit of a chat. And then we came up here, as usual. He seemed perfectly normal to me. Gave me to understand that he was having a lovely time. And then when he’d... you know, sort of... finished... I thought he’d gone a bit quiet. And then of course I realised. He’d not just gone quiet, he’d gone completely. Which is a bit unfortunate really.’

‘It is indeed,’ I murmured.

‘I don’t think we can let it be known that he died here. I mean, there’s my reputation to consider. Not to mention the school’s. Of course, I am a widow, and the Headmaster did lose his wife some time ago. But even so...’

‘Quite, Mrs Meadows,’ I said. ‘We certainly can’t leave

things as they are. If word of this leaks out we shall have the parents taking their boys away in convoys. A public school which can't cover up a juicy scandal is hardly a school which one would trust to educate one's sons, particularly when fees are as high as they are. No, I'm afraid there's no alternative – we shall just have to arrange for the Headmaster to die somewhere else.'

*

After a few moments' reflection, I decided that I was going to need help, so I telephoned the Colonel. He arrived post-haste.

The Colonel, I should explain, acts as the school Bursar, and between us we fix most things that need fixing. Within the last year, for example, we have dealt with the case of the PT instructor who was a bit too keen on discipline, and the matron who was perhaps over-affectionate towards some of the older boys. These little difficulties were resolved by means of tact, diplomacy, threats, and bribery. In both instances we encouraged the staff concerned to seek advancement elsewhere, and we provided them with enthusiastic but carefully phrased references. ('Takes a firm line with impertinence' and 'readily provides counselling for the inexperienced.')

After the Colonel had had a recce upstairs, we had a council of war in the dining-room. Mrs Meadows, by this point, had managed to get herself dressed.

'I don't know about you,' said the Colonel, 'but I could do with a bit of a bracer.'

I looked at Mrs Meadows. 'Do you by any chance have any whisky in the house?'

'I do keep a small stock,' said Mrs Meadows. 'Strictly for medicinal purposes, of course.' She opened a cupboard, revealing an array of bottles which would have coped with

any emergency short of a major plague. The Colonel poured himself an inch of whisky – with our deeply shocked hostess having a similar libation – and then declared himself ready for action.

‘The first thing to do,’ I said, for I had been thinking while the Colonel and Mrs Meadows stiffened their resolve, ‘is to get the Headmaster’s clothes on.’

This was agreed, so we retired upstairs again, the Colonel and I.

‘You do the bottom half,’ I said, ‘and I’ll do the top.’

It is, believe me, a task of considerable difficulty to dress a man when he is dead. The Headmaster had once been a passable second-row forward, and it was no easy matter to put the arms of such a big chap into the sleeves of his shirt. The only factor on our side was that rigor mortis had not yet set in.

‘This reminds me a bit of the time when I was out east,’ the Colonel remarked as we worked.

‘Oh really?’

‘Yes. Chaps tend to go a bit doolally out there, you know. It’s the heat that does it. Anyway, one night two of our chaps had the most fearful row in the mess, and one of them pulled out his service revolver and shot the other fellow dead.’

‘Dear me.’

‘Quite. Jolly messy situation, I can tell you. Anyway, what we had to do there was drag the dead chap out on to the rifle range and make it look like an accident.’

‘And did you get away with it?’

‘Fortunately, yes.’

‘Well, it’s encouraging to hear that there is at least one successful precedent for what we’re about to attempt. And I suppose the fellow who did the shooting had to resign his

commission, did he?’

‘Good God no. No, that would have sent the wrong signals entirely. Everyone would have known there was something fishy going on if we’d done that. No, what we did was, we promoted him. Chap became a general in the end.’

*

There was then a short pause while the Colonel had a stiffener – another inch of Scotch – and after that the three of us managed to manoeuvre the Headmaster into the back seat of my car. Which fortunately was an old Bentley with plenty of legroom. We wrapped a rug round him, and if you didn’t look too closely you could have sworn he was asleep.

I then set off to take the Headmaster to his official residence, where he could die without offending anyone. The Colonel followed in his own car.

There was one slight hitch on the journey. I found myself being waved to a halt by PC Coggins, our local enforcer of law and order.

‘Road ahead is blocked, I’m afraid, Vicar,’ Coggins told me when I wound the window down. ‘Lorry’s shed its load. You’ll have to go round by Robbins Hill and up Clay Street.’

‘Oh very well,’ I grumbled.

Coggins paused and peered into the back seat.

‘Ello, what’s up with the Head? Drunk again, is he?’

I was unamused by this lese-majesty. ‘The Headmaster,’ I said stiffly, ‘is suffering from exhaustion.’

Coggins leered at me and winked. ‘Yeah, well, it is Wednesday afternoon, after all,’ he said. ‘I reckon I would be exhausted too, if I’d bin doing what he’s bin doing.’

‘Wipe that smirk off your face, Coggins,’ I told him, ‘and climb into the passenger seat. I’m going to need a beefy chap like you in a few minutes.’

*

Once we arrived at the rear of the Headmaster's residence, the Colonel, Coggins, and I lifted the deceased out of the car and managed, with some difficulty, to place him in a high-backed chair in the living-room.

That task completed, the Colonel said that he could do with a loosener, and Coggins said that he wouldn't mind one either. So they raided the drinks cabinet while I phoned the doctor. Coggins then departed, having been generously tipped by the Colonel – a sum which, he told me, he would reclaim from petty cash.

Dr Williams arrived within the half-hour, a period of time which the Colonel filled by helping himself to a belter; followed by a snorter. The Colonel and I then withdrew, and waited in the Headmaster's kitchen while the doctor examined his patient.

Dr Williams took his time but eventually appeared in the doorway. The Colonel offered him a sundowner, which he gratefully accepted.

'Yes, well,' said Dr Williams after a moment. 'The Headmaster is very much dead, I'm afraid.' He gave me and the Colonel an old-fashioned sort of look. 'Lucky it happened where it did, really. I mean, considering it's Wednesday afternoon.'

The Colonel and I said nothing. It was a rather disrespectful comment, we thought. Typical example of a medic's rather twisted sense of humour.

'Funny thing though,' Dr Williams added. 'For some extraordinary reason the Headmaster seems to be wearing a pair of ladies' knickers. Silk by the look of them. The laundry mark suggests that they are the property of a certain Mrs Meadows.'

The Colonel looked a bit sheepish and coughed apologetically. 'Ahem – sorry about that, Vicar. Didn't have the

right glasses on.'

Fortunately, with a bit more effort, the three of us managed to repair the damage before the undertaker arrived.

*

The Colonel had a dinner engagement, but before he left I explained to him that there was one further duty required of him if the school was to emerge from this crisis with its moral reputation intact.

'At times like this,' I said, 'rumour will run rife. And it is up to us, Colonel, to make sure that people discuss the right rumour. Rather than the dreadful truth.' And I explained what he had to do.

'Ah yes,' said the Colonel, when I had finished. 'Jolly good thinking, *padré*. Diversionary tactic. I'll put the word about at the dinner, as you suggest. I might pop into the pub afterwards, and plant the thought there too. I usually do drop into the pub of an evening, you know, just for a nightcap. Don't want the locals to think we're stand-offish.'

I was rather busy the following day, as you can imagine, and I arrived home late in the afternoon to find that I had a caller. It was Mrs Barley-Trubshaw, wife of the deputy head. (Her husband is a member of the Hampshire Barley-Trubshaws, by the way; the Shropshire Barley-Trubshaws are, I gather, a bunch of absolute bounders.)

Mrs B-T was in a right old lather by the time she found me.

'Oh, Vicar,' she bellowed, 'thank goodness I've caught up with you! Dreadful news about the Headmaster dying, of course, though my Harold, in his capacity as deputy head, will nobly step into the breach. But I have heard the most distressing rumour which I must consult you about at once.'

'Oh, really, Mrs Barley-Trubshaw?' I said. 'I'm sorry

you've heard a dreadful rumour. What form does it take, exactly?'

Mr B-T lowered her voice from its usual fog-horn level, looked right and left to ensure that she was not being overheard, and told me.

'You will find this hard to believe, Vicar,' she said, 'but several different people have told me the most shocking story about the circumstances of the Headmaster's death.'

I urged her to give me details.

'They are saying... and it distresses me more than I can say to repeat these words... but they are saying that, shortly before he died, the Headmaster was... he was... well... They are *saying* that he had a deathbed conversion, and was admitted to the Church of Rome!'

This last phrase was uttered in tones of such horror and revulsion that I could not forbear from shuddering myself.

'Good heavens!' I exclaimed.

'Good heavens indeed!' Mrs B-T breathed. 'Do please tell me, Vicar – do please assure me that this is not true.'

I put my hand on her arm. 'My dear Mrs Barley-Trubshaw,' I said. 'What you must understand is this. It is human nature to gossip. And the more wicked and scandalous the lie, the more people love to repeat it. As far as the story of the Headmaster's deathbed conversion to Roman Catholicism is concerned, I can tell you, with absolute authority, that there is not a word of truth in it. It is an invention, pure and simple.'

Mrs B-T almost wept with relief. 'Oh, thank you, Vicar, thank you!' she cried. 'It would have been so awful if it were true. Because the boys do look to the Headmaster to set an example in all things. He was such a noble figure, so very highly respected by all of us – the very epitome of everything a Headmaster should be. So it would have been

tragic if, in a moment of weakness, right at the end of his life, the Headmaster had, so to speak, blotted his copybook. That would have been simply awful for all of us, wouldn't it?

'It would indeed, Mrs Barley-Trubshaw,' I murmured. 'It would indeed.'

*

Several weeks later, I had a phone call from Mrs Meadows.

'I just wanted to thank you, Vicar, for all your help during those unfortunate events in the Easter holidays.'

'Oh, not at all, Mrs Meadows,' I replied. 'It was all part of the job.'

'Well, possibly so, but it seemed above and beyond the call of duty to me. However, I'm pleased to say that everything seems to have settled down nicely. There hasn't been a breath of scandal anywhere – apart from that silly story about the Headmaster becoming a Roman Catholic, and nobody really believed that anyway.'

'Oh, good. I am much relieved to hear it, Mrs Meadows.'

'Yes. So I was wondering, Vicar, since I haven't had an opportunity to thank you properly, whether you'd like to come round for a meal one day.'

'Oh, how kind. Yes, Mrs Meadows, I would be delighted.'

'I was thinking, if it would be convenient for you, that we might perhaps get together for lunch – say, next Wednesday? We could have a little bite to eat, you and me. On our own. And then we could have a cup of tea. And then an intimate little chat afterwards.... That would be nice, wouldn't it?'

'It would indeed, Mrs Meadows,' I murmured. 'It would indeed.'

Tea with Mr Swinburne

This is the first of three stories which feature the nineteenth-century poet, Algernon Swinburne. In his day, Swinburne had a gigantic reputation, and he might have become Poet Laureate but for certain, how shall I put it, irregularities in his private life.

I think I was first introduced to Algernon when I was at school. My English teacher daringly recited the poet's dismissive rhyme about religion:

*'Doubt is faith in the main,
But faith, on the whole, is doubt:
We cannot believe by proof:
But could we believe without?
God, whom we see not, is:
And God who is not, we see:
Fiddle, we know, is diddle:
And diddle, we take it, is dee.'*

My word, that was strong stuff for the 1950s, and much stronger still when Algernon first wrote it – a capital offence almost.

Anyway, from then on I was always a bit of a Swinburne fan. In the early 1990s I wrote a stage play about him, What's to be done with Algernon? This play was produced to great effect, with the redoubtable Jonathan Elsom taking three major parts; a shortened version was later broadcast on Radio 4. Later still, under the pen-name Patrick Read, I wrote

a whole novel about Algernon: it was called The Suppression of Vice. In that book, Algernon features as a detective, attempting (not very effectively) to bring to justice the murderer of an old school friend.

The first story of the three in this book is adapted, so to speak, from Act I of my play. Literary historians will recognise that I have taken some minor liberties with the facts, but in essence the story is true: Algernon really did make a scene about an early review of his new book, pretty much as described here.

ON A RECENT VISIT TO Bath, I spent some time prowling around the second-hand bookshops. In one particularly obscure shop I came across a battered and faded notebook, about six inches by three, which was filled with minute handwriting.

The script was so small that it taxed my eyes, but a quick glance suggested that the notebook was the journal, or diary, of a nineteenth-century academic. So I bought it – for a most modest sum – and took it home for closer study.

Once I got the book into a decent light, and applied a magnifying lens to it, I discovered that this small volume was mostly written in 1866. And from the internal evidence I deduced that the author of the diary was Professor Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford.

As such, the volume in my possession is clearly of some historical interest, and in the course of time I may present it to the Balliol College Library. In the meantime, however, I intend to publish some of the more entertaining extracts. Here, for example, is Professor Jowett's description of an encounter with one of the more eccentric products of Eton and Balliol, Algernon Charles Swinburne.

*

Friday 3 August 1866

I've just been re-reading the letter from Admiral Swinburne which arrived this morning. He's very worried about his son — as well he might be. He writes to me as follows:

'Algernon is about to publish a new book — *Poems and Ballads* — and there are rumours that the Society for the Suppression of Vice will seek to have it prosecuted for obscenity.'

Oh dear oh dear.

'Lady Jane and I are deeply disturbed by these developments. Ill health and old age prevent us from travelling to London ourselves. I do implore you to be so kind as to consider whether you could visit Algernon and offer him advice. You are one of the few people he will listen to....' Et cetera, et cetera. 'I would not call upon you were it not a matter of the most serious and urgent nature....'

Well, I have prayed about it, and although I can ill afford the time I suppose there is no doubt where my duty lies. To London I must go.

*

Sunday 5 August 1866

I think more prayer is called for. I fear I have not been very successful. I responded as quickly as I could, but the Admiral, it seems, was rather slow on the uptake.

Yesterday afternoon I arrived at Algernon's rooms in Dorset Street uninvited and unannounced, but he seemed genuinely pleased to see me. He sat me down, gave me a glass of sherry and told me, without any prompting, about his forthcoming book. *Poems and Ballads* it's called, and any thought of preventing its publication was immediately banished from my mind, because Algernon was actually able to give me a copy. Review copies were sent out weeks ago — which perhaps accounts for the rumours which the

Admiral has heard. Even as he handed it to me I was filled with foreboding.

'I think,' said Algernon, 'it contains my very best work. Much of it will be familiar to you already.'

I glanced through the book, and sure enough, many of the poems are ones which I have heard Algernon recite in public over the past few years. As usual, much of his work is set in a classical or historical context, and is thus cloaked with respectability. But on closer examination the subject matter is often violent and indeed overtly amorous in nature.

'A great deal of thought has gone into the arrangement,' said Algernon. 'The sequence of poems, one juxtaposed against another, you know.'

'Yes, I can see that,' I replied. 'And I cannot help noticing also that many of them are poems which your closest friends — those who care most dearly about your reputation — have advised you not to publish. Lady Trevelyan, for example, was most concerned about *Itylus* and *The Leper*. I do remember, Algernon,' I said, 'that on close examination your poem *Itylus* proves to be about who a girl who is raped and whose tongue is cut out, and then her sister avenges this crime by killing the rapist's son and arranging for the man to eat the boy's flesh in a stew.'

Algernon immediately got on his high horse. 'Oh?' he said haughtily. 'And what if it is?'

'Well,' I said, 'I simply make the point that we cannot expect reviewers to recommend it for family reading round the fire on a Sunday evening.'

'They must make of it what they will,' says Algernon.

Oh dear.

I sighed even more deeply when I turned to page 154, and found that he had included a poem called *Dolores*.

‘Lord preserve us, Algernon,’ I said, ‘you surely cannot have intended the printer to include *Dolores*?’

Algernon peered over my shoulder. ‘And why not, pray? One of my best.’

‘Very possibly,’ I said, ‘but even Rossetti cautioned you about that one.’

‘I dare say he did,’ says Algernon, looking down his nose at me again. ‘But the problem with the advice of one’s friends is that no two friends have given me the same advice. So in the end I had to depend upon my own judgement.’

Which is precisely what I was afraid of.

‘Well, Algernon,’ I said, ‘we must simply keep our fingers crossed.’ And I invited him out to tea.

We walked down Dorset Street together. I was doing my best to distract Algernon with talk of other things, but all he could think about was his wretched book.

‘Reviews should appear any day now,’ he said, so I did my best to steer him away from the news-vendor’s stall on the corner. Newspapers and Algernon don’t really mix together comfortably, I found that out a long time ago. Physically he is all too easy for cartoonists to caricature: he stands about five foot nothing, has bright-red hair sticking out at all angles, and green eyes. That’s bad enough, but his behaviour is also tailor-made for the scandal sheets – his excessive drinking and so forth. He scandalises even the members of the Arts Club with his discourses on lesbianism and sodomy.

Algernon has had a bit of a rough ride from the press sometimes, but he gives as good as he gets. There was one uniquely painful occasion on which he was asked to give an after-dinner speech to a group of journalists. He had, I’m afraid, stiffened his resolve rather too fully, and when the

time came he rose unsteadily to his feet and said, 'The Press is a damnable institution, a horrible institution, a beastly institution.'

And then he fell down on the floor.

And now — another disaster. Algernon spotted the news-vendor. 'Ah!' he says. 'Just a moment. I'll buy a copy of the *Saturday Review*. There might be a mention of *Poems and Ballads* in it.' So he hops over and buys one.

Meanwhile I am looking earnestly upwards. Please Lord — if there is a review, let it be a kind, generous, and temperate one.

We continued down the street, Algernon leafing through the *Saturday Review*, hardly looking where he was going, and I doing my best to involve him in idle chit-chat.

'Aaaargh!'

All of a sudden Algernon gave a great scream of outrage and fury, and my heart dropped into my boots. Unless you have seen one of Algernon's fits of fury, you cannot possibly imagine what they are like. Nothing breakable remains intact, nothing holy is sacrosanct, and nobody, nowhere, is safe.

Algernon now began to swear. He began to swear loudly, violently, and fluently, with scarcely a pause for breath.

The object of his vituperation was of course the wretched critic in the *Saturday Review*. Algernon questioned the legitimacy of his birth, even unto the third and fourth generation. He described the reviewer's mother as a lady of easy virtue who had regularly laid down with pigs and horses, and, when pressed for company, the occasional goat.

Passers-by stopped and stared, their mouths open with shock. We were in a most respectable district, the street was crowded, and I had the disagreeable sense of certainty

that nearly all of the onlookers knew who we were. Algernon is hardly unknown to the public, and I myself am not without some public status. And the stream of foul language continued unabated.

The obscenity and the blasphemy of it all quite took my breath away and I'm afraid I began to panic. I cast around for some way to get Algernon off the street — anywhere would do, so long as it was out of the public eye — and mercifully my gaze fell upon a restaurant. I seized Algernon by the arm and dragged him inside.

This change of scene brought about no improvement whatever. Algernon grabbed a chair, and threw it against a wall. He began to explain in extreme detail which parts of the reviewer's anatomy he would cut off and precisely which variety of olive oil he would use to fry them in.

Waiters fled for cover in all directions, hands over their ears. Well-dressed gentlemen in all corners of the room turned purple with rage and reached for their walking-sticks. Their wives went sepulchre white and started to think about fainting.

'Algernon, Algernon!' I bawled at him. 'For pity's sake, if you must swear, swear in French!'

Well, to be fair to him, he did. He stopped shouting and swearing in English and started shouting and swearing in French. He's rather good at French. He described at some length the catalogue of diseases, many of them venereal in character, from which the reviewer was said to suffer — largely, I gathered, as a result of his indulging in unnatural vice with hermaphrodites in the sewers of Paris. My French vocabulary was considerably enlarged.

But, eventually — very eventually — I calmed him down, sat him down, and was able to order tea.

Algernon fumed silently until the tea arrived.

In the midst of all this uproar I had confiscated the copy of the *Saturday Review*, and I was now sitting on it, in the hope that I could lie convincingly — forgive me, Lord — and claim that it had been lost in the street.

No such luck.

‘Would you mind,’ said Algernon frostily, ‘just removing that journal from its immediate proximity to your bottom — a position to which it is, I may say, most admirably suited — and telling me the name of the reviewer of my book?’

With a sigh I turned to the relevant page. ‘John Morley,’ I told him.

‘Aargh! Morley!’ screeched Algernon. ‘I know him! He’s a turdi-lousi-farti-shittical buggeraminous little bollock-wagger!’

Enough was enough. ‘Algernon!’ I roared at him, ‘Be silent!’

Was it my imagination, or did a little ripple of applause run round the restaurant?

I sometimes find that it pays to treat Algernon as if he is a very small boy, and for once he did as he was told.

‘Such unforgivable outbursts,’ I told him, ‘both demean you and offend me. I will have no more of it. Damns and blasts I do not mind, but buggers and fucks I will not have.’

Algernon almost smiled. ‘As you say, Master,’ he replied. ‘But that description of a critic did not originate with me. I borrowed it from Rabelais, and in translating it from the French I have softened the language somewhat, because the original borders upon coarseness.’

By common consent we let the matter lie. We were both, I suspect, heartily sick of the whole business.

On my way home in the train I read John Morley’s review myself. It pays due tribute, as well it might, to Swin-

burne's total control of the English language, to his mastery of poetic technique, to his sensibility, and to the range and variety of the poems displayed for our wonder. So far so good.

But then the review goes on to say, 'It is not every poet who would ask us to hear him tuning his lyre in a pigsty.... *Poems and Ballads* combines the lowest lewdness with the most outrageous blasphemy. The book is crammed,' says Mr Morley, 'with many pieces which a professional vendor of filthy prints would blush to sell.'

Well, that isn't true at all. Any vendor of filthy prints would be jolly glad to sell Algernon's book.

'Is it really necessary,' Mr Morley enquires, 'to include so many references to quivering flanks, splendid supple thighs, and hands hotter than fire?'

Oh dear oh dear. I fear it's that decadent French influence again. Whatever else may be said about Algernon's poems, I would have to admit that they are all terribly un-English.

*

Later....

Why is it that a man so deeply flawed as Algernon — a man with such transparent weaknesses, who is so loathed and feared by the upholders of moral standards — can nevertheless inspire love and admiration from some of the greatest minds of our time?

Ruskin said to me recently, 'Master — when we hear Swinburne declaim his poetry we catch a glimpse of divine beauty.'

I believe Ruskin is right. And that is why Ruskin and I, and all Algernon's friends, have never denounced him, despite enormous pressure to do so. For he is far more sensitive, has a far greater range and depth of feeling, than any

other of this generation. That is his unique gift, and that is his tragedy. He reaches out into the darkest corners of his mind, and he finds there feelings and emotions, hopes and fears, longings and memories, which we ordinary people have never dreamed existed, but which, when brought out into the light of day, we recognise as our own. And through hearing him, we learn to live more fully.

And yet. And yet. Algernon is in many ways a child — quite unable to see what is best for himself, quite incapable of handling worldly affairs. In his addiction to brandy he is on the point of destroying himself. It is as the Admiral says: ‘God has endowed my son with genius, but he has not vouchsafed to grant him any self-control.’

And so, we have a problem.

What is to be done with Algernon?

Verbena Lodge

This second story in the Swinburne trilogy features the formidable Mrs Addams.

The lady is an invention of mine, but someone like her certainly existed. Algernon did indeed visit a brothel of the kind maintained by Mrs Addams (he was a very naughty boy); Verbena Lodge was its name, and we even know the precise address. Adah Menken is also drawn from life; and as for Charlie Howell...

Well, read on and find out about Charlie.

MR SWINBURNE USED TO COME here quite often, you know. Come here in more ways than one, as a matter of fact.

And speaking of Swinburne, I see the little bugger's got another book out. 'Cos I can read you know.... It's in this evening's paper. Yes, here it is.

'Mr A.C. Swinburne has favoured us with another collection of his remarkable poems – Poems and Ballads, series two.' Da di da.... 'The first impression is one of great and overpowering richness. The poet seems to have ransacked all the treasures of language.'

So far so good. But now comes the nasty bit.

'However, Mr Swinburne is so firmly in revolt against the current notions of decency that to beg him to become a

little more decent, to fly a little less persistently and gleefully to the animal side of human nature, is simply to beg him to be something different from Mr Swinburne....'

Hah! You know what that means, don't you? It means these poems is mucky, same as all his others.

He always was a randy little sod – leastways he was always ready to talk about it. Doing anything mark you, that was a bit different.

The first time Mr Swinburne come here he was brought by a bloke called Howell – Charlie Howell to me, Charles Augustus to the nobs he used to mix with. Howell was a con man, and he used to get pally with all the artists and poets and that lot. He knew all the brothels as well, and the little specialities what they could offer, and he used to pick up commission from introducing people.

Now, moving in them circles he was bound to bump into Mr Swinburne before long, and he hadn't known him two minutes before he realised that Swinburne was obsessed with flogging – used to talk about it all day long. And once Charlie'd tumbled that Swinburne wanted it done to him rather than the other way round, he tipped him the wink. He said, 'You come along with me Mr Swinburne, and I'll introduce you to a lady what'll see to you beyond your wildest dreams.' And he brought him here. To me.

February it was, 1867. I shall never forget it as long as I live. I told Charlie to bugger off and leave us to get to know one another, and there I was, alone with this... peculiar little person. He was about this high – all of five foot nothing. With red hair! And green eyes! Well, mostly green, but in some lights they was greenish-grey, or even light blue. And the eyelashes! Lovely long eyelashes like you never saw on a man before. I tell you, I could have got very interested in them eyelashes if they'd been attached to a nice big

soldier boy.

But Mr Swinburne stood over there looking like a little schoolboy. And he talked nineteen to the dozen – I couldn't tell you what about. And he hopped. Yes he did! He hopped all around the room, his little feet pressed together. Hop hop hop. He looked like one of them tropical birds like what you see in the zoo. I watched him, fascinated, until he hopped right up on that settee. Hop hop hop, and pop! On to there. And that was it. 'Oy!' I said. 'Take your bloody boots off my settee!'

And he did. Climbed down as meek as a lamb. And I knew then that we was going to get on well together.

He sat down, and we had a little drink, and he seemed to calm down and become more sensible. I sat over here and passed the time of day with him, because sometimes gentlemen takes quite a little time to pluck up the courage to explain what they wants. So I never hurry them. And before long he asked me who started me off when I was a girl. Who took my maidenhead, as he put it.

'Well,' I said, 'it was me Dad of course. Same as everyone else. Him or one of me brothers, I can't remember which to tell you the truth.'

'Oh,' he said, 'and which did you prefer?'

Funny, but I had to think about that. 'Well, me brothers, I suppose.'

'Why?'

'Well, on account of they wasn't so heavy.'

'I see....' he said.

And then he said, 'And how did you progress to selling your body for money?'

So I told him all about being left on me own, when me Dad had his accident and me Mum crawled into a gin bottle. And all about Mrs Grogan's house, and making my

way up in the world, until in the end I was working in a house in Mayfair....

'I was very much in demand, Mr Swinburne,' I told him. 'Some of the finest gentlemen in the land paid a lot of money to have a go with me.' You have to have something special, see, to be a successful whore – something a little bit different – and in my case it was exceptionally large nipples. Unique in the annals of medicine, some gentlemen used to reckon. Lord Micklefield, for instance, the first time he saw me stripped, he looked at me and he said, 'Bloody hell, Doris,' he said, 'but I've pulled drawers open with smaller knobs than them....' He did, straight up. And Mr Brasswell, him what was tailor to the prince, he once looked up from his work – he was lying on top of me at the time – and said, 'You know, Doris, one careless move when he's a-kissing of your bosom, and a man could lose an eye.'

It runs in my family, big nipples do. My sister Ruby's the same. When she had her little boy Tom the poor little mite couldn't get his mouth round hers, and we had to get a wet nurse in from Clapham.

Mr Swinburne liked all that, cos he liked to talk dirty, you see, and his eyes lit up something wonderful. And then he says, 'But how did you come to own Verbena Lodge, Mrs Addams? Did you buy it with your earnings as a lady of the night?'

'No, not really,' I said. 'I more sort of inherited it. Because I was married once.'

'Oh really?' he says.

'Yes,' I says. 'I got fed up with lying on me back after a bit – well, after about fifteen years actually – so I got married to a Mr Addams. He was a shop-keeper of sorts – well, more like a high-class fence if truth be told. Nice enough feller when he was sober but he was a bit of a piss artist if

you know what I mean, Mr Swinburne.'

And he acknowledged as how he did.

'And you were widowed,' he said.

'I was.' What happened was, we was living in the East End at the time, and Mr Addams went out to dinner one night – Café Royal to be precise. Talking business he said, though what kind of business it was I wouldn't like to guess. It was about half-past nine when he come in, and I could tell by the noise he was reeling drunk. I was upstairs at the time, so I went out on the landing and I watched him come up the stairs.

He come up slow, with some difficulty, a-hanging on to the banisters. It was a nice house, with a big stone staircase, and his boots made a clang as they flopped down on each step. And when he got nearly to the landing, he saw me standing there, and he stopped. And he looked up at me, and offered me a drink from the bottle in his hand.

'Want some Doris?' he said.

'No,' I said, 'I don't.'

So he took a drink himself. And the bottle was well nigh empty, so he tipped it right up high. And higher. And higher. And higher. Until he fell right over backwards. And he went arse over tip, right down them stone stairs.

I watched him go, all the way, and I could hear his head, banging on nearly every one of them. A funny, soggy sort of a sound it was. And of course I knew he was dead long before he reached the bottom.

I thought it was best if somebody else found him, so I went back to the pub, where I'd been earlier, and when the maid come rushing in to tell me, I said, 'Sarah, if the master's fallen down the stairs you must go down to the doctor's and bring Dr. Finkelstein if you can. And if he isn't there, on account of it's Saturday, bring Dr. Veerasinghi if

you must, though the place always smells of curry when he's been in....'

'So that was how I become a widow, Mr Swinburne,' I said. 'And I moved up here to St John's Wood on the proceeds.'

'Ah yes,' he said. 'The Grove of the Evangelist.'

That's what he called it, you see – St John's Wood – the Grove of the Evangelist. Some gentlemen is very impressed when I refers to it by that name – but it's all in the Bible of course, and I can read you know. Actually in some ways this area's not much better than the East End. The streets is still thick with kept women and brothels, but on the whole you meet a much better class of person.

Of course there was those who said I killed Mr Addams, just to get at his money. But the truth is... I didn't have to. And besides – there was three totally reliable witnesses what said I was in the pub, all evening.

I think I might have another glass of port.... There, that's better.

Mr Swinburne started coming here regular after that. I soon got the hang of him. I told him the very first time he come here that I could see from his face he'd been a very naughty boy. He had that guilty look about him, I said, and I reckoned as how he ought to go and stand in the corner and wait to be punished. Which he did. Good as gold.

And then after a few minutes I told him to crawl over here across the floor. And I asked him if he thought he deserved to be punished. And he said yes he did, he'd been very sinful indeed.

'This is a very naughty hand,' he said. 'It's written some very lewd and lustful verses. It ought to pay the penalty.'

So I said, 'Give me a guinea.' And he did. And then I stepped on his hand till he nearly fainted. When I lifted off

he said, 'Step on it again, Madame Dolores, I implore you.'

So I said, 'Give me two guineas.' Which he did.

After that I knew what he wanted, and he knew what I wanted. We understood each other. We knew where we was....

What really interested him was the birch. 'You should have seen us at Eton, Mrs Addams,' he said. 'At it all day long we were.'

Flogging each other, he meant.

'I had a tutor called Joynes,' he said, 'who was a most violent and cruel man. He used to push my face down into a pillow soaked with eau-de-Cologne while he thrashed me.'

So that's what we used to do – sometimes.

'Being beaten at school never did me no harm, Mrs Addams,' he said. 'It just marked me for life.'

After he'd been coming here a few times I said to him, 'You know what you ought to do, Mr Swinburne, you being a literary man and all. You ought to write me a letter, telling me exactly what form your punishment ought to take. You'd be good at that,' I said. 'You being a writer and everything.' And his eyes really shone – I felt quite touched.

'You're right,' he said. 'I will!' And he did too. Lots and lots of letters he wrote me. Lovely they were. Proper spelling and everything. He has a wonderful imagination – but then writers are supposed to have a good imagination, aren't they? It goes with the trade – like undertakers having a long face, and pawnbrokers having three balls.

The message in all his letters was basically the same – he wanted to be the helpless victim of a beautiful woman what was very angry with him. Well, I could help him there. I think in his heart of hearts he would have liked to do things the ordinary way – but he couldn't, see. So he had me instead.

I put all his letters away in a safe place, soon as they arrived. A little investment for the future. And I charged him a bit extra, into the bargain.

After about two or three years, Maisie Bracethwaite, who's a sort of competitor of mine in the Euston Road, but a friend nonetheless, her and me decided we would go to Paris, just for a change. There's quite a bit of business to be had in Paris, in spite of what they say about *le vice anglais*, and we felt we could do with a holiday, so off we went.

It's quite a nice place is Paris. Lovely dress shops. But you have to make sure you know what you're eating.

After we'd been there about six weeks, I was walking down the street one day and what did I see in the shop window? A photograph of Mr Swinburne with Adah bloody Menken, her who I've known since we was kids.

There she was, sitting on a chair looking all respectable and lovey-dovey, if a bit big, and standing beside her was Mr Swinburne, half her size, just as if they was engaged or something. And underneath the picture it says 'Beauty and the beast?'

Well! It was quite a little talking point, 'cos Mr Swinburne's just as famous in France as what he is here, see. Even writes poems in French, 'cos he's a clever little sod. So all the Frogs knew who he was and everybody had a good laugh about it. Everyone said, 'If he goes to bed with her he'd better watch out, otherwise when she rolls over the poor little bastard'll get suffocated!'

So, when I got back here a few weeks later I made it my business to go round and see Adah Menken and find out what'd been going on.

I says to her, 'What was all this with Mr Swinburne, Adah? I seen your picture even in Paris.'

'Oh,' she says, 'Mr Rossetti came to see my act one day.'

I should explain that Adah is an artiste – works in the music halls and circuses. She does this act where she rides a horse naked. Of course she isn't really naked, she's wearing a tight silk chemise, but she might just as well be naked because it's flesh-coloured and she's a big girl is Adah, and the silk does absolutely nothing to hold things in check, if you get my meaning.

'So,' she says, 'Mr Rossetti, him what paints pictures and lives in Chelsea, he came to see me backstage, and he says Adah, I have heard it said on good authority that the beauty of your body is such, and your womanly wiles is so well developed, that, not to put to fine a point on it, you could make a corpse come. Which I would not deny,' she says. 'So, he says, I have a most distinguished friend, he says, what has reached the age of thirty without ever having had proper carnal knowledge of a woman. Which in itself he says is an offence against nature – apart from which it is entirely ridiculous, on account of he spends his whole time writing poems about people doing it to each other. So, he says, there's ten pounds in it for you if you can sort my friend out and make a man of him. And he paid me up front,' she says. 'There and then.'

'Well,' she went on, 'I was game for a tenner, and I was really delighted when I found out I was to be dealing with Mr Swinburne.' On account of Adah is for ever scribbling verses too. They're all at it, you know. 'So,' she says, 'we was introduced, and we started sleeping together.'

'Oh,' I says, 'and it all ended happily did it?'

'Well no, not really,' she says. 'He was willing enough, and God knows I did my best, but somehow things just didn't work out.'

'You mean, he never actually managed it?' I said.

'No,' she said. 'I don't know how it was, but I wasn't able

to get him up to scratch. It was most unusual and I was very put out. But I just couldn't make him understand that biting's no use.'

I don't know what she meant by that.

So she said, 'I'm afraid I had to give Mr Rossetti his ten pounds back. It was the only decent thing to do really. But Mr Swinburne and I had a lovely time reading each other our poetry. And we did have our picture took. As a memento.'

'I know,' I said. 'I seen it.'

Excuse me while I top up my glass.... Will you have another yourself? No. Well, don't say you weren't asked....

After I'd been back in London a week or two, Mr Swinburne starts coming to see me again. And I was quite pleased to see him. I thought, Well Adah Menken, I'm one up on you. He may not leave a stain on your sheets but he certainly does on mine.

And so we went on, for another year or two. And then the gaps between his visits started getting longer. And he complained about the money. Said I wasn't treating him right – though how the bloody hell you are supposed to treat him I really don't know. Anyway, I knew all the signs, so I decided it was time to cash in my investment. One afternoon I had a little word with him.

'Mr Swinburne,' I said, 'I think you ought to know that I'm thinking about retiring to the country.'

'Oh?' he said, and he looked quite relieved, so I knew my judgement was good.

'Yes,' I said, 'I've got my eye on a nice little cottage, and a handsome soldier boy to keep me company' – well two actually – 'and so I think the time has come for you to buy back from me all them letters what you have sent me over the years.'

‘Letters?’ he says.

‘Yes,’ I says, ‘letters.’

‘I don’t understand,’ he says. ‘Why should I buy back my letters?’ And this, mark you, from a man who is, according to this evening’s paper, ‘One of the greatest minds of his generation.’ I don’t think.

Anyway, I had to explain it to him in the simplest words I could think of. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘your letters. Now that I am retiring, Mr Swinburne – going away to the country? – it would be very unfortunate if what you had written to me was to fall into the wrong hands. For instance,’ I said, ‘if the newspapers was to get hold of them. Or if some of your wealthy, famous and respectable admirers was to read them. What about that Professor Jowett?’ I said. ‘Him what has defended you all these years. He might not be too pleased to read what you wrote to me. And what about the ladies?’ I said. ‘Yes, particularly the ladies. They might not all understand.’

He didn’t understand either. I mean he *really* didn’t understand.

‘But, if you’re worried about my letters falling into the wrong hands,’ he said, ‘why don’t you just burn them?’

Now, I am a very patient woman, as anyone who knows me will tell you, but I’m afraid at that point I rather lost my rag. I got hold of him by the lapels and I pulled him up close to me.

‘Come here, Swinburne,’ I said. ‘Now you listen to me, you shitty-nosed little bum-licker. I want some MONEY! And I want it QUICK! Them letters is worth a lot. Five hundred!’

‘Five hundred?’

‘Yes!’

‘Pounds?’

‘GUINEAS! Gentlemen pays in guineas!’

When I let go of him he stepped back a bit and looked at me. He was all hurt and upset. He’d thought we was friends you see. But that’s the trouble with Mr Swinburne all over. He’s just not normal. I mean, I can cope with your ordinary, average, every-day pervert, but I can’t cope with people who aren’t normal.

Anyway, I sent him off home with something to think about, and from the window here I watched him walk through the park. He looked like a little boy what had lost his way, all pale and nervous. You see, I think I had made him understand, at last, that the cows had come home to roost.....

The following day, I got a little letter from a Mr Watts-Dunton, in which he said he represented Mr A.C. Swinburne in all business matters, and could he come and see me. So I sent the maid round with a message saying yes. Nothing in writing. You don’t catch Doris Addams that way.

Now, I already knew who Mr Watts-Dunton was, see. He’s a lawyer what looks after the business affairs of a lot of writers and painters and such-like. Most of them don’t know whether it’s Tuesday or Wednesday, so they’re all very pleased to have him. And now he was coming to see me I made a few enquiries about what his own tastes might be.

I find that when you’re doing business with a gentleman it always helps to know what brightens his day. Unfortunately I couldn’t find out very much – Mr Watts-Dunton seemed to lead a life of quite unusual tedium – but I did hear a whisper as how he was interested in gypsy girls. So, I went to see Freda Cartwright, who keeps a nice respectable house two doors down, and I borrowed a girl called Amy,

whose Dad was a Spanish sailor. Or so she says. Dark skin, and dark-eyed with it, any road. Got a cheeky manner – the men like her. And I dresses her up nicely as the maid and tells her what to do when Mr Watts-Dunton comes in.

‘Not too forward,’ I said. ‘He’s not a customer. But give him a nice smile and keep close to him and see what happens.’

Next day, around tea-time, Watts-Dunton arrives. Amy lets him in. ‘Oh, Mr Watts-Dunton, how lovely to see you!’ Shows him her cleavage, sits him down in the hall and comes up here to announce him.

‘Well?’ I said.

‘He was interested,’ she said. ‘Definitely interested. But I give him every opportunity to take a liberty, and he didn’t. So he’s a man of self-control.’

Hmm, I thought, that’s a pity. Mind you, if there’s one thing I do admire in a man it’s self-control. Because most of the men I deal with have got absolutely no self-control whatever.

‘Go down and bring him up,’ I said. ‘And as you come up the stairs, walk slow and shake your bum in his face.’ Which she did, she told me after, but it didn’t make no difference.

When he gets up here, he sits down. ‘Well,’ he says, calm and friendly enough, ‘I understand that you have in your possession a number of letters from my client, Mr Swinburne. Your proposal is that he should buy those letters back from you, lest they should fall into the wrong hands. Your argument is that if they were read by people unfamiliar with the context in which they were written, they might be misunderstood, and Mr Swinburne’s reputation might suffer.’

‘*Would* suffer,’ I said. ‘And badly.’

‘May I see one of these letters?’

I showed him one, and he read it. Good poker player. Face never changed.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘And how many of these letters do you have?’

‘Forty-three,’ I said. ‘All of them give his address, all of them refer to me only as Madame Dolores, which isn’t my name, and all of them are signed Your most humble and obedient servant, A.C. Swinburne. It’s a most distinctive hand.’

He thought about it. ‘And your asking price is five hundred pounds?’ ‘Guineas,’ I said. ‘And I want it in gold too. None of your paper money, I don’t trust it.’

‘I understand,’ he said. ‘I cannot give you a reply immediately, but I will be in touch with you again within a week.’

‘Three days,’ I said. ‘Or I send one to the editor of The Times.’

And off he goes....

This next bit’s rather painful so I won’t dwell on what happened. Suffice it to say I was really looking forward to that five hundred. I’d found these two handsome soldier boys – both of ’em with nice big muskets – and I was looking forward to letting them use me for a bit of target practice. What with one thing and another it’d been a long time since I’d had meself properly seen to, and it’s not good for your health. But what happened?

What happened was, I came home one night from the music hall and found the street door standing open – which is something I never, ever, allow. I come in, went down to the cellar straight away, and found the key still in the safe. Opened the safe, letters gone. Nothing else, just the letters....

I wasn’t very pleased.

It took me a while, but I found out what had happened. Charlie Howell, him what had introduced Mr Swinburne to me, all them years before, Charlie had been approached by Mr Watts-Dunton, who said, 'If you can get inside Verbena Lodge, get me them letters, there's fifty quid in it for you.'

Fifty quid! And there was me going to get five hundred for them – no argument! It's enough to break your heart.

Well Charlie, who was always hard up, he'd talked to the girl what cleaned for me and got her to let him into the house – so's he could 'wait for me' as he put it.

Now Charlie had been a good friend over the years, or so I thought. He'd brought me quite a few customers, and he'd been inside the house many times. And I realised afterwards that he'd kept his eyes on me, and he had a pretty good idea where I kept my safe key – although I'd thought it was pretty well hid.

So that was the end of that.....

Well, not quite the end. I did try to bluff it out, because I wasn't sure at first that Mr Watts-Dunton had the letters, so I went round to his office and asked to see him. And he did see me, I give him that. And he didn't crow about it neither.

'It was most thoughtful of you to call on me, Mrs Addams,' he said, 'but I regret to say that after thinking things over, I have decided not to make a payment for the items which you offered me.'

Bloody nerve! Him supposed to be a lawyer and a gentleman and all that, and there he was arranging a bloody burglary! It just goes to show you can't trust nobody.

'Well,' I said, 'I'm sorry we aren't going to be able to do business, Mr Watts-Dunton, and I thank you for being so frank with me. And since you've been courteous to me,' I said, 'let me be generous to you, and give you a piece of ad-

vice. If I was you,' I said, 'I wouldn't go wandering about the streets at night, not without a couple of good strong lads to keep you company. Because these days,' I said, 'a man can't never be sure where he's safe.'

And off I went.

I never saw no more of Mr Swinburne of course. But I gather Mr Watts-Dunton is taking good care of him.

And as for Charlie Howell, he buggered off sharpish. I found out later he'd gone up to Scotland. He should have gone to Australia if he'd had any sense.

After about eighteen months Charlie come back down to London, thinking that everything would have been forgotten. He got himself a job with an art dealer, down Soho way, and took up with some of his old friends again. But not with me.

His job didn't last long though. Poor old Charlie – he was found one morning in Frith Street, with his throat cut something nasty. Cut so deep – they tell me – that his head wasn't hardly connected to his body.

And do you know what? Whoever done it had bent down after, and put a golden guinea between his teeth....

It was a crime that was never solved.

Theodore's Bride

The third and final story in my Swinburne trilogy is told by Theodore Watts-Dunton, and is almost entirely based on fact. Algernon and Theodore really did live together at The Pines, for all those long years, and Theodore really did get married, late in life, as related here.

It would be interesting to know, of course, what Theodore did for a sex life before his marriage. The only literary historian, to my knowledge, who has ever asked this question is Jean Overton Fuller. But as that lady tends to appear, from time to time, in television documentaries on the wartime Special Operations Executive, and post-war MI5, I think we can assume that she is unusually interested in secrets.

THERE, THAT'S DONE. THE LAST letter sent. I think I have now done my duty by all my friends and relations. Told all those who need to be told....

All things considered, I think Algernon took it very well. After all, ours has been an unusual relationship. As Edmund Gosse pointed out only the other day: 'Algernon Swinburne and Theodore Watts-Dunton,' he said, 'your household has all the characteristics of a homosexual ménage without the slightest desire on either side for physical contact!'

Yes, indeed! Homosexual ménage! Gosse is quite a wag.

So, taking all that into account, there was certainly every possibility that Algernon might take a dim view. But no – he took it very well.

I chose my moment carefully, of course. I waited until after dinner yesterday evening.

It had been a good day – a fine May morning, and Algernon had had a particularly stimulating walk on the Common. Then lunch, and a nap – and then at about six-thirty he read to us, as usual. Algernon has read to the household every evening for the past twenty-six years – and in this fashion we have worked our way through the entire works of Dickens..... Twice.

Then we had dinner. After dinner I instructed Cook to make sure that we were not disturbed, and I sat Algernon down with a cup of coffee and told him that I had something particularly important to say to him.

At first he was wary. No doubt he recalls those many painful occasions in the past when I have had to warn him that his conduct was likely to lead to trouble. Or, when speaking as his lawyer, I have been obliged to pass on bad news of one sort or another.

There was an occasion only last month, for example, when I discovered that he had been contributing, under the name of Frank Fane, to a most indelicate periodical called *The Pearl*. Needless to say this magazine could not possibly be sold through normal channels, and indeed anyone caught in possession of a copy, much less writing for it, would be liable to prosecution for possessing an obscene publication. I really did have to make it plain to Algernon that for a man in his late sixties to be indulging in this kind of thing was really too absurd for words. He was quite downcast by the time I had finished, and so he should have

been. I thought the days when I had to keep a careful eye on the plain brown envelopes were over – but evidently not.

Anyway, here I was again, yesterday evening, telling him that I had something of great consequence to impart, so naturally he was a wee bit cautious at first. But I soon put him at ease.

‘No need to look like that, Algernon,’ I told him. ‘This is not a swishing offence! Quite the contrary. This is good news. At least, I hope and believe it is good news....’

‘Now Algernon – you will have noticed, I am sure, that over the last five years or so Clara and her mother have been frequent and honoured guests in our house. And indeed Clara has been more than a guest. She has been most useful to me in my work.’

‘Ah yes, yes indeed, Theodore,’ he said. ‘She is a very delightful girl is Clara. And most obliging.’

I continued. ‘And I’m sure it will not have escaped your notice, Algernon, that I have grown increasingly fond of Clara.’

‘Ah yes, yes indeed,’ he said again. With sufficient sympathy and understanding to embolden me to go further.

‘So fond in fact, Algernon – that I, er – well, after considerable thought, and not a little hesitation... I have asked Clara to marry me.’

I made sure when I said this that Algernon was looking directly at me, and I made a point of raising my voice substantially, because in recent years poor Algernon has grown increasingly deaf. But it was clear to me at once that he had heard me.

‘To marry you!’ he exclaimed, and his face lit up with pleasure. ‘Why Theodore – how wonderful!’ And then a few moments later his eyes were filled with tears.... You know,

he is simply the best of all friends a man could hope for.

He thought about what I had said for some time, and I remained silent. I watched him carefully, and to my enormous relief I saw in his face not a trace of doubt, or envy, or fear, or dismay – all emotions which a man in his position might reasonably be expected to feel. After all, we have lived a bachelor life together for over a quarter of a century, and now here am I, proposing to change the situation completely. But not, I hope, in any way which would disadvantage him.

When it seemed appropriate I said, ‘I want you to understand, Algernon, that I propose absolutely no change in the domestic arrangements whatever, at least as far as your position is concerned. I expect you to continue to live here and share this house with me – and now with Clara – just as you have in the past.’

I don’t think he heard me. His mind was elsewhere – on other times, other places, other people. And anyway, I don’t think the idea that my marriage might change anything had even entered his head.

After a moment he looked up. ‘My dear fellow,’ he said. ‘Forgive me – I should have said this immediately. But I do offer you my most sincere and heartfelt congratulations.’ He rose to his feet and shook me warmly by the hand. ‘I have always believed,’ he said, ‘that marriage is the most gracious condition to which a man can aspire. I long ago accepted that it was one of life’s great joys that had regrettably passed me by, and for you to have achieved it so late in the day makes you doubly fortunate.’

‘Ah yes,’ I said, coughing discreetly. ‘You have touched upon the one point on which I must confess to having had some doubts. There is, after all, a certain gap in years between Clara and myself. I am, we both realise, old

enough to be her father.'

Algernon thought for a moment, and then he said, 'Well actually Theodore, since the difference in your ages is fifty-two years, you are comfortably old enough to be her grandfather.'

I had to admit he was right....

Later that evening a thought struck him. 'We must order a crate of champagne!' he said suddenly. 'Champagne is the stuff for weddings!'

Needless to say, I put a stop to that at once.

'No, Algernon,' I said firmly, 'I think not. Champagne is indeed sometimes drunk at weddings. But I think we will stick to what we know best. Good honest ale, in small quantities – and tea for the ladies.'

And such is his magnanimous nature that he accepted my decision without question.

When I first brought Algernon here to The Pines, in 1879, he was by common consent a hopeless drunk. The doctors, his family, everybody, had written him off as a lost cause. Everyone that is, except me. I brought him here, with his family's full approval, and nursed him back to something like normal health. Then, when he took to drinking again, I made no attempt to stop him for some weeks. But the day came when I went into his study and picked up the brandy bottle and said, 'You know, Algernon, I can't think why you drink this beastly stuff. It's a medicine really, fit only for the sick-room. Port is the drink for poets. I was talking to Tennyson only last week, and he recommended some really marvellous stuff – I've got a drop downstairs if you'd care to join me.'

Algernon was intrigued, and so I kept up the campaign. Port was the drink for poets – that was my motto for the next couple of months.

And then I said, 'I'm rather surprised, Algernon, that with your love of France you aren't a more dedicated student of French wines.' And for a few more weeks we worked our way through the clarets and burgundies and chablis, each week moving to a slightly less potent product of the grape.

Finally, after many months of the most careful preparation, I began to talk to him about good, honest, English ale – Shakespeare's brown October. The result was that within a year, without any outright prohibition, and without any fuss or bother, I had transformed Algernon Swinburne from a hopeless dipsomaniac into a man who drank one bottle of beer a day and no more.

And so it has remained until this very moment. Lady Jane Swinburne, before she died, was kind enough to say to me that in addition to being known as a critic, poet, and novelist, I will be remembered by posterity, above all, for having saved her son from a wretched and ignoble death.

So beer it will be when we toast the bride – and one bottle each, at the most....

As we went up the stairs together last night, Algernon was ahead of me. And when we reached the landing he turned to look at me, his face filled with wonder.

'Just think, Theodore,' he said. 'After all these years – your own dark-eyed gypsy girl at last!'

A Man of Sound Judgement

If I'm not careful, the introduction to this story will be longer than the story itself.

The point I want to make, as briefly as possible, is that a story which depends, for its effect, upon the reader possessing a piece of general knowledge, over and above what the author tells her, is technically a flawed story. This one, I'm afraid, falls into that category.

Mind you, plenty of respectable people write these flawed stories. Angela Carter wrote a piece called Lizzie's Tiger, which isn't likely to mean much to you unless you know who Lizzie Borden was. Kim Newman goes much further, and requires you to remember obscure people like Kenneth Halliwell.

Anyway, for better or for worse, here is my flawed story. If you are familiar with the history of England in the nineteenth century – if, for instance, you know who Dr Livingstone was – then you, might, perhaps, find it amusing. If not, then you will do better to skip ahead to page 92.

THE DIRECTOR OF NURSING LOOKED at the clock on the wall: ten past twelve. He was running late, but the next candidate was the impossible one, so it would do no harm to leave himself a bit short of time for her.

'Tell me,' he said, when the present candidate paused for breath, 'in your time in the Middlesex Fusiliers, did you ever come across old Colonel Talbot? Getting on a bit now I dare say.'

'Oh yes, sir,' said the young man cheerfully. 'Knew him well, I did. Why, there's a story told about him, you know...'

And he was off telling that ancient saga about Colonel Talbot at the battle of Waterloo.

As the candidate chattered away, the Director reviewed his notes. Yes, this chap would do for the job. Right age: twenty-five. Physically fit. Good background: the army taught a man to obey orders. Stable home life too: wife and two little ones.

The story of the Colonel came to an end and the Director chuckled convincingly to show his appreciation, though he had often heard it before.

'Well now, young man,' he concluded, 'I've heard what you have to say, and I think you'll do. In my judgement – and I think I can say I'm a man of sound judgement – I think you're just the sort of chap we can use here in St John's. Can you start on Monday?'

'Oh yes, sir, I should say so!' gasped the young fellow.

And he damn well should be delighted, the Director reminded himself. Job as a nursing orderly in a major hospital like St John's – why, that was a job for life. Decent pay, regular hours, fair treatment. Many a man would give a tooth or two for that.

A few more words and the interview was complete. The young man rose to go.

'Oh – by the way,' said the Director. 'There is one other candidate. A woman.' He rolled his eyes expressively to show what he thought, and the young man chuckled in his

turn. 'Would you ask her to come in please?'

*

The Director didn't even look up when the young woman entered. It was always his habit to complete his notes of one interview before beginning the next; then, when he was ready, the Director would take a good long look at the new candidate, form a first impression, and make a few more notes.

Hmm. When he did raise his eyes, the Director realised that this candidate was not quite as timid as he had expected. She returned his gaze with a cool stare, assessing him in much the same way as he was assessing her.

Self-possessed, wrote the Director. Smartly dressed but not fashionably so. Tidy but not over-concerned about her appearance. No jewellery. Dear me, if this went on he was going to find himself in favour of appointing her, and that would never do! He decided to begin the interview.

'Now then, my dear, let me explain a little about the vacant posts we have here. We employ a considerable number of nursing staff at St John's, and I'm the doctor whose job it is to select them, train them, and, if necessary, dismiss them. Many of our nurses are men, often ex-military chaps, for the very good reason that they're best suited to most of the work. Such women as we have tend to be from the lower classes – indeed in many cases they come from the very lowest order of society. Their work is for the most part menial in the extreme, involving as it does the washing and feeding of patients, and, er, other unpleasant but necessary duties.'

'Such as cleaning up the vomit and other bodily accidents,' suggested the candidate.

'Er, yes,' admitted the Director. He was surprised that the young woman should be so blunt. 'As you say, the

vomit and, er... other substances. In any event, the point I am making is that we do not employ women of character and breeding in such posts. And yet you, apparently, have applied for one – via your father's letter to me, of course.'

'Yes,' said the candidate calmly. 'That is correct.'

The Director paused, but the candidate waited patiently for him to speak next, and he felt obliged to do so.

'Er yes, well – perhaps we should begin by going briefly through your background. You were educated at home, I understand?'

'Yes, sir, I was. My father, to his regret, has no son, and so he chose to educate me as if I were a son.'

'Specifically?'

'Specifically he taught me English, history, philosophy, Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, and mathematics.'

'As for the German, have you ever heard the phrase *Kinder, Kirche, Kuche*?'

'Indeed I have sir. It stands for children, church and kitchen. It denotes the German belief that women should devote themselves solely to those three areas of activity, and not embark upon jobs, much less careers such as medicine.'

'Indeed. But you do not share the German attitude?'

'In no way. If I may say so, in confidence, I have already rejected one proposal of marriage, from a titled gentleman, purely because he wanted a wife in the German style.'

Have you indeed, thought the Director. I bet that made your mama wonderfully happy.

'You have had a tour of the hospital?'

'I have, thank you, with the other candidates.'

'You found it interesting?'

'Most.'

'Did any part of it distress you?'

'Illness and disease are always distressing, but one must

try to treat the patients objectively rather than emotionally.’

‘You did not find the smell oppressive?’ The Director himself still had trouble with the smell. Even after all these years.

‘The smell could, I think, be reduced with more effective cleaning methods.’

Hah! The Director very nearly exclaimed out loud, but he caught himself just in time. So, instead of saying what he thought, he jotted down a comment: arrogant little know-all.

‘Tell me about your practical experience,’ he demanded abruptly, and was treated to the usual account of good works done among the local poor – works which were, by all accounts, warmly appreciated. No doubt they were, thought the Director. A rich landowner’s daughter, bringing a joint of meat or a canteen of hot soup to a poor man’s door, would be welcomed like Queen Victoria herself.

The candidate continued to talk about her experience, and mentioned her acquaintance with Elizabeth Blackwell, one of the first women to qualify as a doctor. Well, the Director had heard of Dr Blackwell himself, and a fine old troublemaker he considered her. So the candidate would score no points by mentioning *her* name.

He glanced at the clock again. Half past twelve already. No need to prolong the interview further. Lunch was a most pleasing prospect, and he could truthfully say that he had a another appointment.

‘Well, my dear, I recognise your keenness and your enthusiasm, and I admire your sense of dedication. But I have to remind you that the work undertaken by women in this hospital is manual, arduous and often unpleasant in nature. A young woman of your background would hardly find it

congenial.'

'I think, sir, that I am the best judge of that,' said the candidate firmly. 'And in any case, one would not continue to work at that level for ever. There would, presumably, be opportunities for advancement.'

The Director almost sniggered. Oh, so that was it! The woman was after his job! And her without a qualification to her name. Well, that put the cap on it.

'Thank you for attending,' he said, rising to his feet. 'I will write to your father to convey my decision.'

The candidate also stood up. 'Thank you, sir. And when may we expect to hear from you?'

'Soon, my dear. Soon.'

*

As the door closed the Director sat down again. Damn and blast, he thought to himself. Bloody cheek of the woman! A first-class waste of twenty useful minutes.

He decided to dispose of the matter at once, without further delay. He drew out a sheet of notepaper, dipped his pen in the inkwell, and began to write a letter to the candidate's father. It would brief, he decided, and to the point.

In accordance with your request, I have today interviewed your daughter as a candidate for a nursing post in this hospital. I regret to say that I have found her entirely unsuitable. Florence is a young woman of undoubted character and determination, and I hope that before long she will find a field of activity in which she can put her energies to good use. But she does not, I assure you, have a future in nursing.

Last, he addressed the envelope.

To W. Nightingale Esquire, Embly Park, Hampshire.

Decent White Folk

There is a school of thought which holds that a writer should always begin writing a story without having the faintest idea of how it ends.

The main proponents of this theory are the literary types: I seem to remember, years ago, reading the famous series of Paris Review interviews, and finding that nearly all the good and the great of the literary world favoured this inspirational theory of writing; or said they did.

In the more mundane world of fantasy and science fiction, Harlan Ellison argues the same way. 'I would hate it,' he says, 'if I knew the ending, because if I know it, I figure that, if you're a smart enough reader, you would know it.'

Personally I have always thought this make-it-up-as-you-go-along idea is completely barmy. To me, it's a bit like a surgeon going into an operating theatre, and the nurse in charge says, 'What are you going to do today, doctor?' And he says, 'Well, I think I'll start by taking out Mr Smith's tonsils. Then I'll open him up and remove a couple of feet of bowel. And finally, if I'm having a really good day, I may amputate his left leg.'

No thanks. I prefer someone who's thought about things in advance.

All of which is a roundabout way of telling you that this next story was written by sitting down in front of the keyboard and letting rip. I had the first line, and nothing else. This is the only story in the book which was written in such a peculiar manner; and, having read it, you may conclude that that's probably a pretty good thing.

It would ave been all right if New Millennium Ripper ad stuck to killing Pakis. But e didn't, see. E started killing decent white folk, and then we ad to do summat. Me and Inspector, like.

First two or three times we found victims – well, four actually – me and Inspector just stood there, like, and ad a bit of a laff.

'Ee lad,' said Inspector, when we found fust un. 'If I didn't know better, I'd say this one's ad is throat cut.'

I looked at victim. Is eyes was wide open, and is throat was too, where someone ad slashed im with a carver. Or a razor, or summat. Course, e was black as the coal-ouse floor. Well, nearly black, any road. Like they are, them Asians.

'My word,' I says. 'That's a nasty accident is that, Inspector. What do you reckon it wa?'

'Oo, I dunno,' e says. 'It and run, praps. You get some sharp edges ont front of cars these days. Another five mile an our and e'd ave took is ead off.'

So that's what we put it down as, see. It and run. And carted Paki off tut mortuary, quick as you like.

And that's what we did with next three, too. First wuz it and run. Then we ad, fell though plate-glass winder while drunk, and beheaded issself. Third woz – lemme see – industrial accident. Cos e was left round back of a factory was

that one. And last one wuz trespassin on railway property. Cos we found him quite close tut railway and shifted im a few feet sideways so's next train would finish off what New Millennium Ripper ad started.

That's wot us detectives called im, see, the bloke what done these things. New Millennium Ripper. Course, they were all men, these victims, and original Rippers went in for lasses, as we all know, but we could see fromt start that this series of crimes were allt work of one bloke. Sort of trademark technique it wa. Right-anded slash from beyind – probly with a butcher's knife. Bloody sharp, any road. Fookin took their eads off e did.

Like I say, fust four was Pakis. But then we ad Mr Wilberforce. Im as kept corner shop for about forty year. Corner of Shit-hole Alley (as we used to call it) and Parson's-Nose Lane. Which is just Parson's Lane ont maps o course. Me and Inspector found Mr Wilberforce int alley, after is missis rang in and said e adn't come back from walkint dog.

'By eck, lad,' said Inspector. 'It's fookin dark out ere but I don't think Ripper ud mistake Mr Wilberforce for a Paki. Do you?'

I ad to admit I didn't think so neither.

'So what the fookin ell is e doin then?' Inspector asked me. 'Things ave come to a pretty fookin pass if a bloke can't tek is dog for a walk without some fooker tryin to cut is ead off. Breakdown of law and fookin order is wot that is.'

If I ave wun criticism of Inspector, it is that e do tend to take things personal. E were personally affrunted, you see, that Ripper ad done for a nice armless old bloke like Mr Wilberforce. Inspector ad bought sweeties off Mr Wilberforce when e were a kid, like.

'Right then lad,' says Inspector. 'This meks it serious.'

When Ripper starts separatin fookin sweet sellers from their eads I reckon it's fookin war is this. We'd better start mekkin inquiries. Set up an incident room, and all the rest of that fookin crap.'

So we did.

*

Three weeks later and we adnt got nowhere. Except that two more Pakis ad got given Sunday-lunchtime treatment. Fortunately it want too difficult to keep them two out ut paper, cos altho thez lots of readers as thinks that the only good Paki is a dead un, Mr Mandrake – im as owns the *Evenin Argus* – e didnt tek too much persuadin that if e kicked up a fuss about someone bumpin em off, e might put Ripper off doin is duty.

It were just that case of Mr Wilberforce as ad got everybody ot and bothered. Someow or other we was going to ave to book somebody for that one. Otherwise there'd be ell to fookin pay. Taxpayers and ratepayers like to feel ther getting value for money.

Inspector wa quite worked up about it. 'Fookin ell lad,' e says to me. 'I just can't figger it out at all. Same bloody bloke doin em all in, obviously, and the Paki fellers I can understand. Often thought about doin a few meself, on me night off. Or tekkin it up as an obby after I've retired. Some blokes go and work in charity shops and that, so I thought I might tek up topping Pakis. But why the bloody ell did e go for Wilberforce?'

I giv a big sigh. 'Fooked if I know, boss,' I said.

Inspector scratched is ead. 'Well go round and see Mrs Wilberforce again,' e said. 'Mebbe there's something she as-n't told us. Praps there's some dark bluddy secret in old Wilberforce's past. Mebbe e wanted special service in return for all them sweeties e anded out. Altho God knows e

never laid a fookin finger on me.'

Well, it were a desperate move were that, sendin me round to Mrs Wilberforce agen, cos I'd already interviewed er twice. But it just goes to show, see. That's whyt Inspector's an Inspector, and I'm just a simple plod. Because e could smellt truth, you see, and I couldn't.

Any road up, I went round to see Mrs Wilberforce agen. Timed it fut middle of the afternoon, when I knew she'd be brewin up. She'd got a part-time woman in to look aftert shop.

I sat down, ad a couple of pieces of er fruit cake, and three cups of tea. And then we went overt ground again.

'Is there any reason you can think of, Mrs Wilberforce, why anyone would want to top your Charlie?'

Mrs Wilberforce sighed. 'Nay lad,' she said. 'I've racked my brains and I can't think of nowt. E were no trouble to no one, want Charlie. Even when e wandered off e made sure it warra Paki.'

'Wandered off,' I said slowly. 'Owd you mean, wandered off, luv?'

'Well,' she said, 'you know. After I ad my operation I didn't fancy any more of that Satdy night stuff. Rumpy pumpy an that. So I told im to go elsewhere. Discreet like, o course. And e did. I know for a fact. E'd bin looking at them top-shelf magazines, you see. *Asian Babes* and that, and said e quite fancied some of them dark ones. Bit of a change, you know. Foreign ways, and that. Said e'd quite like to find out if it were true what they said about em.'

'I see,' I said. 'You don't appen to remember a name of any lady wot e patronised, do you, luv?'

'Oh aye,' she said. 'I know for a fact oo it woz. It were Mrs Patel. Very generous with it, Mrs Patel is. Known for it.'

‘Ah,’ I said. Though I were natrally a bit disappointed to ear that particular name, cos there’s about forty-three thousand Mrs Patels on our patch. ‘But do you ave an address? Cos otherwise I’m goin to be stymied.’

‘Oh aye,’ she said. ‘I’ve got an address all right. And so ave arf the blokes wot come in my shop. It were number twenty-nine, Inkerman Road. Er usband’s a butcher. And Charlie used to go round ther every Wednesday afternoon. Three p.m. Reglar as fookin clockwork.’

*

I let Inspector doot next bit. Always best to let boss get credit, I reckon. I give imt name and address and sent im round, so to speak. And e took me with im as it appens.

Masterly, it wa, that interrogation. Masterly. Never eard nowt like it. I reckon Inspector earned is year’s pay right then and there. Some coppers would ave gone in with a cricket bat, but Inspector were a bit more suttle like.

We interviewed bloke in is front room. Smell of curry warra bit strong, even there, but it would ave bin worse int back.

‘Now then, Mr Patel,’ said Inspector. ‘You and me’s got a bit of sortin out to do.’

‘Oh aye?’ says Mr Patel.

‘Aye,’ says Inspector. ‘Now, I don’t want to be rude, or to pry into any matters wot is none of my business, but it do seem to me as ow your missis as bin putting it around a bit.’

‘Oh aye,’ says Mr Patel. Dint argue about it. ‘Too fookin right she’s bin puttin it about. Right fookin nympho she’s bin, and made me like a right nana. But she won’t be doin that no longer.’

‘Ah, right,’ says Inspector. ‘So yuv given er a fookin good iding ave yer?’

‘Nay, Inspector,’ says Patel, all offended like. ‘Give me a bit of credit, please. I’m a civilised man, I’ll ave you know. It may be the custom to beat the shit out of naughty wives where you come from, but in my culture we talk to them, and gently point out the error of their ways. And then we cut the throats of them as was sleepin with her.’

‘Ah, right,’ says Inspector. ‘I knew there’d be a bit of logic to it somewhere, Mr Patel. Cos women, as we all know, is generally a bit feeble-minded and prone to give in to temptation. Especially when offered money. So I understand where you are comin from, Mr Patel. But, if I might make so bold, Mr Patel – without wishing to poke me nose into other people’s business, like – would you mind if I was to ask you one further question. Ave you now accounted for, and cut the throats of, all of them as ave been tekkin advantage of this particular weak-willed woman? Or are there any more to come?’

Well that made Mr Patel think a bit, I can tell you. ‘Er, let me see now,’ e says. And e counts the blokes on is fingers. ‘Er, yes,’ e says eventually. ‘I believe I have done for them all, Inspector. All that is, except one.’

‘Oo is?’ inquired Inspector.

‘Oh, the last one is a wicked evil fellow called Ahmed,’ says Mr Patel. ‘Ahmed the Wiggler, they call im, on account of is ability to wriggle out of tight spots. But e won’t be wriggling out of my grasp when I eventually get old of im. Not if e wants to take is ead with im, any road. Course, I can’t cut is throat at the moment, on account of you’ve got old of im yourselves.’

‘We’ve got im?’

‘Oh yes,’ says Mr Patel. ‘Ahmed the Wiggler is serving two weeks in the nick, for pissing on the Mayor’s garden when e was drunk.’

‘Aha!’ says Inspector, and a little light goes on in his eyes. ‘That’s very helpful, Mr Patel. And if I could just ask you one last and possibly painful question, Mr Patel, for which I apologise in advance. I’m not one to pry, as I’ve said. And I’m deeply conscious of need not to offend any sensitive inter-racial feelings in this peaceful and well-ordered community of ours. But was the late Mr Wilberforce – him as kept the corner shop at the junction of Shit-Hole Alley and Parson’s-Nose Lane – was he by any chance one of your wife’s paramours?’

Mr Patel’s brow clouded with fury and he leapt to his feet. ‘E was!’ he shouted. ‘And a more wicked, disgraceful fellow I never came across in my life. It is one thing to fuck another man’s wife – we have all done that in our time....’

The Inspector nodded gravely. I did too of course.

‘But to fuck the wife of a fellow shopkeeper, when their businesses are not even in competition with each other! Outrageous! I had no choice but to kill the foul fellow! He was just lucky that I did not cut off his dingle-dangle and feed it to his dog in front of his very eyes.’

‘Quite right, Mr Patel,’ said Inspector. He rose to his feet and shook Mr Patel warmly by the hand. ‘My sentiments entirely. Rest assured that my colleague and I are fully sympathetic to the predicament in which you found yourself. And we fully endorse the action you took. But there is, of course, on our part, a bit of a problem. On account of we have to tidy up the question of Mr Wilberforce’s murder, in a way which will satisfy the raging lust for justice which is a curious feature of all decent white folk’s modern-day mentality. But, bearing in mind the good news you have given me, I reckon as now I can see a way to bring all these matters to a speedy and satisfactory conclusion.’

*

Well, I don't suppose you need me to tell you ow things was sorted out. Folk oo is clever enuff to read books and that is quite clever enuff to see ow Inspector resolved things.

Wot e did, see, was this. Wriggling Ahmed – im wot was in the nick for pissing on the Lord Mayor's pansies, which is a filthy and disgusting offence if ever I eard of one – e was persuaded to sign a confession. Inspector ad to giv im a bit of elp with writin it o course. And it was a confession, I need arldly add, to the murder of Mr Wilberforce. Theft bein the motive.

Mrs Wilberforce kindly agreed that contents of Mr Wilberforce's wallet – two fivers and a tenner – could be found in said Ahmed's bedroom. She would willinly testify (after we'd told er wot to say) that, as was er wont, she had marked said currency notes with er own special mark wot she always puts on fivers and tenners when proffered for sweeties (on account of the fact that, on average, eighty-seven per cent of em is pretty much guaranteed to be falsies – printed by Fred Murtle in Cross Street, often as not). This fearless and selfless testimony was freely provided by Mrs Wilberforce ont sole condition that Inspector and I agreed to buy our peppermints from er in future instead of fromt Co-op. Despite fact that Co-op is threepence cheaper. Me ant Inspector reckoned this was a small price to pay, int circumstances.

Fortunately, as you will recall, we ad already sorted out deaths of Mr Patel's other victims, inasmuch as we ad writ them up to a variety of more or less convincin accidents and natural causes. And, since it was unlikely at anyone would ever want to re-open those cases – Mr Patel aving made known is intention within the Paki community to cut throat of anyone oo did – that simplified our paperwork a good deal.

That just left matter of arranging trial and punishment of young Ahmed for foul murder of an armless – but still randy – old English gentleman.

General feeling was, down at the Duck and Pullet, that they ought to bring back anging. Which was more or less what Inspector and me had in mind anyway.

So, one night, just before young Ahmed was due to be released from his pissing-on-the-pansies sentence, Inspector and me popped a little something into his cocoa. Then we went into his cell and helped him to commit suicide with his belt.

We could hardly believe it, but despite being given enough dope to knock out the average horse, bloody Ahmed was definitely unco-operative. But then, what can you expect from a wicked soul who has done for an old man by sneaking up on him and cutting his throat from behind without so much as a by your leave or if I may.

So, that was our case of New Millennium Ripper was finally solved. That great satisfaction of all and sundry. Particularly the *Evening Argus*, which had Inspector's picture on front page.

Mind you, you never heard nowt about it from me. Under the Official Secrets Act, me and Inspector is for ever forbidden from describing to anyone exactly how it was done. Sworn to deadly secrecy we are. On pain of death.

Which is just as well really.

P.S. Inspector's right looking forward to retirement.

God save the Queen.

The Last King of England

This is one of the darker stories in the collection; but then you can't have sweetness and light in every department of life, now can you? Certainly not.

The story began when I read something about turning the country into a republic. Wouldn't make a lot of difference in some ways, I thought to myself. If we had a republic, the last king of England would still live like a king, and be treated like one.

But then I thought: what if he didn't live like that? And what if he wasn't treated like that? What then?

TODAY I TAUGHT MY GRANDSON a lesson – a lesson that he will never forget.

No, I did not beat him; nowadays we are far too civilised for that. Instead, I just gave him a short lecture on history. And I am sure that he will remember what I said, even though the facts were not accompanied by strokes of the cane.

Yesterday I instructed my officials to clear an hour for me this morning – an hour in which, I said, I intended to be alone with my grandson.

The officials objected, naturally, for my duties as governor of this province are arduous, and the flow of paper-work is ceaseless. However, I insisted, and with much grumbling they made the necessary arrangements.

My grandson arrived at the appointed time, and I had him brought to me in the throne room.

The throne room is an impressive place in which to receive visitors and deputations: it is large, high-ceilinged, full of red and gold; it is redolent of history. It is a space with enough atmosphere in it to have reduced some of the most articulate of spokesmen to the level of a babbling fool. Whether brave or foolhardy, they come to present their case to me; but, even as they speak, they feel the weight of oppression choking them, and the words cannot leave their mouths. Only the very fortunate leave with what they want.

At one minute to eleven, I seated myself on the throne; at eleven o'clock precisely the door at the far end of the room was drawn silently open, and the boy was allowed to come in. Alone, of course.

He had been well trained. And either he was very courageous, or he simply did not appreciate the honour which was being done to him. Either way, he marched fearlessly forward, his short arms swinging. He was dressed, I was pleased to note, in the formal robes of the governor's court, specially made for the occasion.

He stopped at the appropriate distance from my feet, made his obeisance, and then waited, head bowed, for me to address him.

Which I did. In due course. I took a good look at him first.

'Zhang Jinsong,' I said eventually. 'Come and sit beside me. There is room.'

Which was true. The throne is large, and I am thin, and he is only a small boy.

'Zhang Jinsong,' I said, when he was settled. 'Do you like stories?'

'Yes, your grace.'

‘Yes, grandfather will do – while there are no officials present.’

He looked up at me and grinned. ‘Yes, grandfather.’

‘Good. Then I will tell you a story. Today is your birthday?’

‘Yes, grandfather.’

‘And how old are you?’

‘I am five.’

I nodded. ‘Good. As I thought. So, Zhang Jinsong, I will tell you a story of what happened to me, on my fifth birthday....’

‘I was born in our home country, as you know. And I was born in the great capital city of our country – in Beijing. It is a city which in earlier days the English called Peking.’

‘When I was a boy, I too had a grandfather, and my grandfather was a government employee in Beijing. He was not a high-ranking official, but he was a man of some standing none the less, and on my fifth birthday he decided to teach me some history.’

‘What my grandfather told me was this. For hundreds of years, China was ruled by an emperor. And the emperor was always a man who was regarded as a sort of god. He was seen as a being who could do no wrong, and he was held in awe by the ordinary people.’

‘The last emperor of China was called P’u Yi. But this last emperor was not even Chinese. He was a Manchu, from Manchuria. And he was not a man of strength, either by temperament or by circumstance.’

‘China was then a weak nation, under the control of enemies, and the last emperor was pushed and pulled in all directions. Foreigners of many nations tried to force him to do their will. The English meddled in Chinese affairs. The

Japanese meddled. The Russians meddled. And all to the detriment and harm of the Chinese people.

‘While P’u Yi was very young, the English appointed a tutor to teach him to speak the English language. And this tutor went even further: he gave the emperor an English name. He called him Henry, which was the name of a number of English kings. As a result, the once-mighty emperor of China became known to the world at large by the insulting, half-English name of Henry P’u Yi.

‘What my grandfather told me is that a man who has a foreign name can never be his own master. And eventually, as you would expect, the Chinese people rebelled against the rule of a weak emperor and the interference of foreign powers. The emperor was overthrown, and he fled the country.

‘For a while he lived abroad, but towards the end of his life he was brought back to China. There he spent nine years in a prison camp, where he learnt the error of his ways; he learnt how to do useful work which would serve the interests of the nation.

‘Towards the end of his life, the authorities had him transferred to Beijing, the city of which he had once been ruler. He was put to work in the government service, and it was there that my grandfather took me to see him.’

My grandson’s eyes widened. It is curious, is it not, how the very concept of an emperor is still impressive to the young, even after all this time. Perhaps that is because the title alone manages to convey a sense of power – indeed, it encapsulates the very essence of control – and the ideas of power and control are always fascinating to the young and the weak, who have so little influence over their own fate.

I continued to lecture my grandson. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘my grandfather took me into the Forbidden Palace – into that

enclave of twenty-four palaces of former emperors, with their white-marble terraces, elaborate gardens, and carefully tended shrines. And there we walked for a while until we came one special garden.

‘My grandfather led the way into a greenhouse, a place where particularly delicate and sensitive plants were cultivated.

‘At the far end of the greenhouse there was one solitary workman. We approached this man, and as we grew nearer I could see that he was old, and bent. But he worked quickly, interested in his task, which required him to put seedlings into pots.

‘When the man noticed my grandfather and me approaching, he stopped his work, and made obeisance, as he must.

‘My grandfather then ordered me to shake hands with the man, in the western style. Which I did, though I had never done it before. The man smiled down at me as I shook his hand, for I was only five years old, and I represented no threat to him.

‘Good,’ said my grandfather, when the act was done. ‘And now, my grandson, now you will always be able to say that, when you were five years old, you shook hands with Henry P’u Yi, the last emperor of China.’

*

I paused in addressing my young grandson, and rang the bell for us to be brought tea.

We drank the tea, and ate cake with it, in the English style.

Then I rose to my feet. ‘And now, my grandson, we will leave the throne room, and go for a walk ourselves.’

I led the way, and he trotted along beside me, his little legs working at twice the pace of mine, for I am tall and he

is small for his age.

We went outside into the garden.

My official residence, which was formerly the king's palace, has a large garden: it is quiet, and sheltered from the noise of the city. This morning there was no sunshine to warm us, but the air was pleasantly calm.

We walked for a while, and as we walked I asked my grandson some questions.

'Tell me, Zhang Jinsong, what do you know about the kings of England?'

He thought for a moment, and then said, 'They exploited the people, grandfather.'

'True. And?'

'They were bad men, and the English people grew weak under the rule of bad men. It was the duty of the Chinese nation to destroy the bad men with the breath of dragons.'

Ah yes. The breath of dragons. Well, I suppose that is not a bad explanation for a five-year-old.

'And do you know, Zhang Jinsong, what became of the last king of England?'

'No, grandfather.'

'Then I will tell you. Like the last emperor, he was sent to a prison camp, where he learnt the error of his ways, and where he was taught to perform work which is of true value to the nation. And now, towards the end of his life, I have had him brought back to London, the city of which he was once the ruler. And here he has been put to work in the service of the people. In a modest sort of way....'

I led the way along the winding path, until at last we came upon a small greenhouse.

We went in through the door of the greenhouse. And there, at the far end, working on a bench, was an old man.

He is not really old, of course – he is in his late fifties –

but fifteen years in a Scottish prison camp have aged him well before his time. His teeth, for instance, are all gone, and on my instructions he has not been issued with false ones.

We approached him, and at last he heard us, for he is also very deaf – the result of an untreated infection. He turned, saw who it was, and made obeisance.

‘Good morning,’ I said loudly.

‘Good morning, your grace,’ he replied, his head remaining bowed. As well it might, for once or twice I have seen, even now, just the faintest hint of rebellion in his eyes. And if I ever see it again I will hang him from a lamp post in the Mall, just as I hanged the rest of his family. I hanged them at the rate of one a day. For as long as it took. It was a large family.

‘Zhang Jinsong,’ I said, ‘you must now shake the hand of this man. For he is growing old and weak, and you may never have the chance again.’

My grandson shook the man’s hand, in the western manner; and of course the old gardener smiled in response, for the boy is only five years old, and represents no threat to him.

‘Tell the boy your name,’ I ordered, my voice raised.

A hesitation. A few more of those and he won’t even live till the autumn.

‘My name,’ he said at last, ‘is Henry Windsor.’

I nodded with satisfaction. ‘This man, Zhang Jinsong, was once crowned as King Henry the ninth, by the grace of god, king of this realm and of his other realms and territories, head of the commonwealth, and defender of the faith. And now, Zhang Jinsong, you will for ever be able to say, that when you were five years old, you shook the hand of the last king of England. And you will say too, that when

your grandfather was five years old, he, in his turn, had shaken the hand of the last emperor of China.'

We paused and allowed ourselves a few moments to think about that.

And then I said: 'This man, who was once king of England, has told you his official name: it is Henry Windsor. But sometimes, Zhang Jinsong – sometimes when he and I are alone together – I have been known to call him Mr P'u.'

And do you know, my grandson threw back his head and laughed! Yes, he did – he laughed till the tears ran down his little face!

And he is only five years old!

I tell you, by the breath of dragons, I have high hopes for that boy.

Event Prediction 101

At the risk of putting you off, I suppose I have to admit that this story is a piece of science fiction. I don't know what else to call it.

Critics, and others who devote thought to the serious (but tedious) business of classifying stories, have come up with various distinctions between fantasy and science fiction. Most such distinctions seem to me to be unsatisfactory – provided, that is, I can stop my eyes glazing over after I have read four words of the discussion. Nevertheless, my instincts tell me that this next story is science fiction rather than fantasy.

What's it about? Well, it's about a professor and a group of students who just happen to be aliens, that's all. In other respects they are pretty much like us.

THE PLANET EARTH. DOES IT have a future – and if so, what kind? That, ladies and gentlemen, is the question which we will be considering over the next five days.'

I looked around at the course members, who had assembled to meet me in one of the academy's teleportation vessels.

'So far on Event Prediction 101, we have confided ourselves to a study of theory. But now it is time for you to begin to apply what you have learnt.

'We are going to travel to a particular planet, which is

located at a particular point in time past, and we are going to take a close look at it. You will be provided with the usual facilities for data collection. At the end of three days I shall ask each group to spend one further day discussing the situation, and you will then be required to make a prediction about the likely state of that planet, at a particular point in the future. Finally, on the last day, we shall travel forward in time and compare your predictions with the reality of what actually occurred. In other words, we shall try to put principle into practice. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would be kind enough to secure your seat belts....'

*

While we were travelling to Earth, I spent a few moments looking at the class.

Event Prediction 101 is by no means a soft option; rather the reverse, if anything. It is considered a taxing subject; and, if I may say so, I am considered a hard taskmaster.

This year, as usual, I had divided the class into three groups, each of which selected a leader. This year's three – Bek, Kar and Soo – were competent enough. They were, however, from markedly varied backgrounds. Soo was the daughter of an Elder, and in time would doubtless become one herself; Kar came from a poor family, and was the only student on the course to have a wife and child; and Bek was the son of another Professor.

After a few minutes the arrival bell rang and the data-screens cleared to show us pictures of the planet's surface below. I stood up.

'The planet Earth is in sector B1201 of the Galaxy, and has no unusual features whatever. At present we are hovering in a convenient location above a land mass which is known on Earth as North America. Now – questions?'

Bek: 'Is there life on this planet?'

‘Yes. In size, atmosphere, and gravity it is very similar to our own world. Which is one of the reasons why it constitutes a useful case study for us. Over the past few million years, a wide variety of life forms have emerged.’

Soo: ‘What is the dominant life form?’

I smiled. ‘A creature not unlike ourselves: human beings have two legs and two arms, with hands and fingers similar to our own. They also have two eyes, which are capable of seeing much the same electromagnetic frequencies as we do. In addition, they are sensitive to sound waves, though with a much restricted range compared with us.’

Kar: ‘And how far have they progressed in terms of social and scientific development?’

‘Interesting question. The quickest way to summarise their state of development is to say that they have just become capable of space travel but are not yet capable of time travel. Like ourselves, humans measure time in terms of the Earth’s rotations around their sun. Today, we are observing the planet at the point in time which most humans refer to as the year 2001, though there are other systems of numbering. Humans first visited their moon some thirty years ago, and they have sent unmanned craft to other nearby planets.’

Bek again: ‘Are they aware of other life forms in the universe?’

‘Yes, and no. Because this planet has many similarities with our own, we have been visiting it for some centuries. Unfortunately, one of our smaller craft crashed in North America about fifty years ago. At a place called Roswell, to be precise. The bodies of the crew were retrieved by the earth authorities, and so some of the more powerful and informed humans are well aware that we exist. But no official announcement of our existence has ever been made to the

population at large.'

In response to further questions, I gave summaries of the planet's history to date, explained that humans were just becoming able to manipulate genes in order to improve the quality of crops, and to eliminate disease, and I gave an account of human mastery (or otherwise) of nuclear power. I referred to such developments as 'global warming'. Then I began to sum up.

'The problem which I want each group to consider is this. Given the state of the planet Earth, as it exists in the year 2001, what will be the general condition of this planet in one hundred years' time?'

Bek: 'Any hints, Professor?'

'It is not for me to give you hints. My job is teach you to collect information, to analyse it rationally, and make a prediction on the basis of that analysis. However, I will say that I am looking for a broad-brush conclusion, backed up by detailed argument based on known facts.

'For example, human beings are just beginning to feel the effects of a viral infection which they call AIDS. It is perfectly possible to argue that AIDS, and similar infections, will spread rapidly through the population, just as various so-called plagues did in times past. Some human groups might lose a third or more of their members. And so one possible prediction might be that in the year 2101 human life will have been severely disrupted through the spread of uncontrollable disease. Alternatively, you might take the view that, during the next hundred years, humans will learn how to cure all forms of disease.'

Kar: 'Do we need to consider the impact of natural disasters? Are there likely to be violent volcanic eruptions – or might the earth be struck by a major asteroid?'

'Good question, Kar. And the answer is no. For the pur-

poses of this exercise you can rule out major natural disasters of that kind. You should assume that events on earth will be determined principally through the exercise of human intelligence. Such as it is.'

Laughter.

Bek: 'So, at the end of the seminar we will be assessed on how close our predictions are to reality?'

'No, not entirely. One prediction I can safely make is that you are unlikely to be one hundred per cent correct in your forecasts. I shall therefore be at least as interested in the arguments which you present to support your conclusions as in the predictions themselves. And to make you feel a little more comfortable about being assessed in this way, I am prepared to make one prediction of my own.'

I produced a sealed envelope and passed it to Kar.

'Inside that envelope is a sheet of paper on which I have written a brief summary of the conclusion which I believe each of the three groups will come to. I will ask Kar to hold on to it for the time being, and in a few days' time we will see how successful I have been.'

*

The class split up into their three groups and began to collect data.

Over the next three days, to facilitate their study, I positioned the teleportation vessel over a number of major human cities, such as Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Moscow, Tokyo, and Beijing. This enabled the class to observe various human cultures and political systems. We also, of course, took note of some of the more isolated and primitive communities on the planet.

For most of the time, however, I was able to work on my book; when finished it will, I hope, be the standard authority on the subject of event prediction.

*

On the fifth day I gathered the groups together.

‘Your task, ladies and gentlemen, was to consider the state of the planet Earth in what humans refer to as the year 2001, and to predict the overall state of the planet in the year 2101. I would therefore like to begin by asking each group leader to summarise, in a few sentences, the overall conclusion that you have reached.... Bek?’

Bek stood up. ‘Group A came to the conclusion that the principal problem facing humanity is population growth. The world population of human beings has increased from approximately 1.6 billion in 1900 to approximately 6 billion in 2001. Obviously, such exponential growth cannot be sustained. Human beings do have the capacity to limit the number of births, but many communities refuse to use such means, for a variety of reasons. Our conclusion from this situation is that the human population will continue to grow, unchecked, leading inevitably to wars over the possession of vital resources such as land. This, we believe, will lead to nuclear war, and wholesale poisoning of the atmosphere. In a worst-case scenario, this might lead to the elimination of all forms of life on the planet Earth, except perhaps a few basic organisms which are capable of surviving in a kind of radioactive soup.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you. Soo?’

‘Group B,’ said Soo, ‘is much more optimistic. We believe that human beings already possess sufficient knowledge, and the necessary will power, to identify and overcome all their problems. Thus, in one hundred years’ time, we expect to see a planet in which the population has been reduced to a sustainable level, disease has been banished, and war has been eliminated. Bliss will it be, in that dawn, to be alive.’

‘Thank you. Kar?’

Kar smiled. ‘Oddly, Group C takes a position somewhere between the two extreme views which have been offered so far. We believe that the human race will survive, but that it will only survive through the introduction of brutal and ruthless central control – in other words through a form of fascism. Personal liberty will largely disappear, and all wealth will be concentrated in the hands of a few. Life for the masters will be comfortable and peaceful. But the bulk of human beings will survive only as slaves.’

Kar paused. ‘And now, Professor, perhaps I might open the envelope and see what you predicted about what we would predict?’

‘By all means.’

Kar sliced open the envelope and read what he found therein.

‘Group A will forecast wholesale nuclear destruction. Group B: paradise on Earth. Group C: salvation through leadership.’ He smiled. ‘Not bad, Professor. About alpha minus, I would say. But of course, the really interesting thing is the reality on Earth. How close did any of our groups come to predicting what really happened on this planet?’

‘Quite right, Kar. That is the interesting question. So if you will kindly fasten your seat belts, I will move forward one hundred years and then we will find out.’

*

I set the vessel’s controls and we flashed forward in time. As usual, most of us experienced a slight sense of nausea which took a few seconds to fade. When we all seemed to have recovered I spoke.

‘I have set down five observer pods in the five major population centres which we identified earlier in the week:

New York, London, Moscow, Tokyo, Beijing. If you now look at the five datascreens, I think you will be able to see, pretty much at a glance, what has happened to the planet Earth in the one hundred years since 2001.'

I pressed the button which activated the observer pods, and the screens opened up in front of us.

There was a moment of shocked silence.

Then there were a few gasps.

Finally, Soo muttered, more to herself than to anyone else, 'Well, we didn't even get close. I don't think any of us would ever have predicted that....'

Say What You Mean

This next piece was written under the influence of Somerset Maugham's famous story about the Verger of St Nicholas's Church, Palmerston Square. In other words, I wanted to write a story in which the ending was, loosely speaking, ironic.

If you poke around, you will find that there are many different definitions of the term irony; but it is usually easier to recognise the quality than to define it.

The other source of inspiration for this story is the fact that, for several years, I earned my living as an English teacher. Anyone who has done that will be for ever after acutely conscious of the innumerable spelling mistakes and other errors which litter our newspapers and magazines, not to mention the private correspondence of professional men who really ought to know better.

THERE ARE FEW NEWSPAPER REPORTS which give more pleasure to a retired English teacher than those which provide evidence that standards in the teaching of English are not what they were. Mr Robinson was therefore particularly delighted when he found an example in that morning's *Times*.

'Aha!' he exclaimed triumphantly.

His wife looked up from her sewing. Although it was only just after breakfast time she was hard at work on her latest quilt. 'Have you found another mistake, dear?'

'I have indeed. It will be hard for you to believe this, Mavis, but it appears that a man who has written a front-page report for *The Times* is ignorant of the difference between the words appraise and apprise.'

'Good heavens,' said Mrs Robinson. In what she knew, from long years of practice, was a suitably shocked tone of voice.

Mr Robinson sighed. 'I shall have to write, of course.'

'Of course.'

'I have long since recognised that it is pretty much a lost cause, but I do feel a sense of duty.'

'Quite right,' said Mrs Robinson.

Mrs Robinson was anxious to get her husband started on his letter to the Editor of *The Times* as soon as possible. Because otherwise he might start to question her about her own familiarity with these two words; and that would be embarrassing.

The truth was, of course, that if you had put Mrs Robinson up against a wall, stuck a gun in her ear, and demanded that she must identify what part of speech the words appraise and apprise were, she would have been hard pressed even to guess that they were verbs. And if, further, you had required her to tell you the precise meaning of each of these verbs, on penalty of pulling the trigger in return for a wrong answer.... Well, in that case Mrs Robinson would have been – to use a vulgarism which Mr Robinson would never have permitted – so much dead meat.

In fact, not only would Mr Robinson have objected to the use of the descriptor 'dead meat' as vulgar, but he would also have pointed out that the phrase was tautolog-

ous, since meat is, by definition, always dead.

Fortunately for Mrs Robinson's health, and for Mr Robinson's peace of mind, Mrs Robinson had usually been successful, over a period of more than forty years, in disguising the full extent of her ignorance from her alarmingly pedantic husband.

Mr Robinson proceeded to spend a contented half-hour composing a letter of rebuke to the Editor of *The Times*. These days he always headed his communications 'Not for publication', so that he did not feel so aggrieved when they failed to appear in print.

'Splendid!' he exclaimed when he had sealed the letter. 'This particular example of linguistic sloppiness will, of course, come in extremely handy as a topical introduction to my lecture this afternoon.'

'What lecture is that, dear?' asked Mrs Robinson, who had trouble keeping up with her husband's commitments. What with his being chairman of the Scouts fund-raising committee, and a member of the photography club, and secretary of the fuchsia society, he was out of the house more often than he was in it.

'This afternoon I am addressing the Townswomen's Guild Talk Shop,' said Mr Robinson. 'My subject: the importance of precise communication in English.'

'Oh, well I'm sure they'll enjoy that, dear,' said Mrs Robinson. Loyally.

*

The Chairman of the Straitford Townswomen's Guild Talk Shop was Mrs Deirdre Thorpe-Manners, and she was just the tiniest bit apprehensive.

It was, she reflected, becoming increasingly difficult to find even halfway satisfactory speakers; and the title of this afternoon's talk was scarcely enthralling. Mr Robinson had

wanted to call it 'The Importance of Precise Communication in Oral and Written English'; and he had been reluctant to change it, as suggested, to 'Say What You Mean'.

Mrs Thorpe-Manners' wishes had, however, prevailed, if only because she was in charge of publicity. Even so, she had had to ring round and twist a few arms to ensure that her speaker addressed a respectable audience. And she was quite pleased to see that she had managed to attract nearly a dozen attendees into the church hall on what was, after all, a warm afternoon in May.

Mrs Thorpe-Manners was also faintly troubled by the fear of controversy. There was a distinct possibility that even Mr Robinson's modified title might prompt some further discussion of whether it was entirely appropriate for the individual heading the Townswomen's Guild to be known as the Chairman; and whether it would be more appropriate for her to be known as the Chairwoman, Chair, Chairperson, or even, God forbid, Chairlady.

Mrs Thorpe-Manners was pretty confident that she had cajoled Mr Robinson into staying well clear of this question himself; but she feared that some trouble-making feminist with nothing better to do might creep in at the last minute and start making a nuisance of herself. Mrs Thorpe-Manners had no doubt that she would be able to stamp on any unwelcome motions from the floor – she was after all, the Town Councillor who had seen off the Archdeacon when he raised the matter of smelly drains under Any Other Business – but on the whole she preferred to avoid a scene if at all possible.

It was, therefore, with some relief that, at only two minutes past the appointed hour, she found herself with a speaker, an audience of eleven sensible-looking middle-aged ladies, and not a short haircut, a bare midriff, or a pair

of jeans in sight.

*

The Chairman and Mr Robinson were seated behind a small table, with the audience in a few rows of fold-up chairs in front of them. The Chairman introduced the speaker and Mr Robinson stood up.

He had given this little talk several times before, and as usual he began by saying that he would try to avoid being excessively sesquipedalian.

This was a joke, Mr Robinson explained. It meant that he would try to avoid using too many long words, and being too long-winded.

Mr Robinson, for one, always found this introduction amusing. And whenever he found something amusing he would chuckle in his own idiosyncratic way. This involved making a 'Hmph, hmph, hmph!' sort of noise, with his mouth shut, and moving his shoulders up and down in time with the hmphs. This mannerism had, of course, been gleefully imitated by many generations of schoolboys.

'Hmph, hmph, hmph!' went Mr Robinson on this occasion, and some of the ladies actually smiled with him. So it was quite a good start, he felt. Or rather, considered. Mr Robinson only felt things with his hands.

Mr Robinson moved on to the main subject of his talk. This involved a discourse upon the importance of distinguishing between pairs of words which were almost the same on paper, or when spoken aloud, but which had quite different meanings. Among the examples he gave were appraise and apprise (of course); poring and pouring; interment and internment; compliment and complement; and so on.

All good stuff. Some of the audience actually seemed to follow his argument, he was pleased to note.

Next came a brief reminder of the need to be careful in the use of the word 'literally'. Examples were quoted from journalistic sources. Was it really true, Mr Robinson wondered, that Arsenal had literally wiped the floor with Chelsea? Or that a particular horse had literally run away with the Two Thousand Guineas? Mr Robinson rather thought not.

Spelling came next. And oh dearie me, what a lot there was to say about that. Mr Robinson told his story about the head of English at a local comprehensive school – a school located, Mr Robinson implied, rather less than a thousand miles from the centre of Stratford – who had issued a set of notes to his pupils about Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. And, sad to relate, this particular head of department had spelt the hero's name as Ceasar throughout.

One or two of the audience even tutted.

Then there were the various newspapers – and not just the tabloids, either – which had reported that Eaton College was advertising for a burser; or that a grammar school was in need of a mathematician.

The word millennium was also a bit of a problem, Mr Robinson suggested. 'Perhaps we should all make a mental note, now, that it has two l's and two n's, so that we get it right when the next one comes along. Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph!'

Well, Mr Robinson wasn't perhaps generating gasps of horror or hoots of laughter with these stories, but he was at least managing to keep his audience awake.

He moved on to punctuation. Mr Robinson was, he declared, a fully paid-up member of the AAAA. And when one or two ladies looked shocked he explained that the initials stood for the Association for Abolition of the Aberrant Apostrophe.

Why, only recently, Mr Robinson had come across a television advertisement which had displayed a sentence on the screen which included the word 'it's' when, in fact, 'its' without an apostrophe would have been the correct version. And this advertisement, Mr Robinson averred, had continued to be shown, uncorrected, for *months*.

'Good heavens!' Mrs Thorpe-Manners felt obliged to exclaim.

'Good heavens indeed,' said Mr Robinson.

With a careful look at his watch to judge the timing of the talk, Mr Robinson concluded by pointing out that all this emphasis on the need for accuracy had very real and important practical implications. It was not just a case of an old schoolmaster being fussy. Dear me, no.

'Put a comma instead of a full stop in an internet address,' said Mr Robinson, 'and it won't work.' (He was nothing if not bang up to date.) 'That, of course, is only a trivial problem. But put a plus sign instead of a minus sign in the software designed for an aeroplane, and the plane may crash. Put the decimal point in the wrong place on an X-ray machine, and the patient gets a fatal dose.'

Over the years, Mr Robinson had collected numerous stories to illustrate the fact that failure to communicate one's meaning clearly could have fatal and tragic consequences. However, bearing in mind the age and gender of his listeners, he did not, for this particular talk, paint too gory a picture of the catastrophes which might occur. Instead, he confined himself to that old favourite, drawn from a military source and appreciated most by those familiar with pre-decimal coinage.

'There was once an army officer,' Mr Robinson explained, 'who asked his soldiers to pass a message from man to man – in whispers, because they were close to en-

emy lines. The message was: Send reinforcements, we are going to advance. By the time this message reached headquarters it had been repeated thirty times, and had become somewhat distorted. The message now was: Send three and fourpence, we are going to a dance! Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph!

‘Above all, ladies,’ Mr Robinson concluded, ‘we should all try to take advantage of the great riches of the English language. The wide vocabulary which is available to us, and the conventions of spelling and punctuation which have been established over the years, are vital tools which enable us to communicate accurately and meaningfully. We should therefore adopt as our motto the words which no less a writer than Tolstoy jotted down at the front of one of his diaries: I must try to say precisely what I mean.’

And with that, Mr Robinson sat down.

*

There was a short burst of clapping, and Mrs Thorpe-Manners rose to her feet.

It was customary, at the end of addresses to the Townswomen’s Talk Shop, to invite questions from the floor. Today, however, Mrs Thorpe-Manners didn’t want to encourage any questions. They had got this far without the Chairperson controversy raising its head, and she wasn’t about to permit it to be raised now.

‘Any questions?’ she asked, taking care to be looking down at the table in front of her as she did so. And, 1.6 seconds later, she added: ‘No? In that case all that remains is for me to do is to thank Mr Robinson most warmly for a truly fascinating address. I’m sure that we have all learnt a great deal from it....’

‘One final point. Mr Robinson has most kindly told me that he does not wish to be paid any sort of a fee for this af-

ternoon's talk. But he is, he tells me, chairman of the First Straitford Scout Group's fund-raising committee.'

Mr Robinson nodded.

'The Scout Group is working hard to raise money for a new hut, to replace their present temporary headquarters. A year ago, they were given first refusal on a large ex-army hut, admirably suitable for the job. The hut will be given to them for nothing, but they do have to pay for it to be transported and erected. A sum of three thousand pounds is required in all, and so far they have raised only five hundred pounds. So, at the present rate of progress, it's going to be another five years before the Scout Group gets its much-needed headquarters. Mr Robinson would therefore be most grateful if, in acknowledgement of his kindness in talking to us today, each member of the audience would make a modest donation to this cause. You will find a plate for that purpose situated just beside the door.'

'Thank you very much,' said Mr Robinson, with an encouraging smile.

'May I remind members,' Mrs Thorpe-Manners continued, 'that today's talk will be followed, as usual, by a little informal gathering in the Church Tea Rooms, across the road.... I now declare the meeting closed.'

The members of the audience began to pick up their handbags and other belongings, and Mrs Thorpe-Manners used the opportunity to have a private word with Mr Robinson. Without actually saying so, she managed to imply that, while he would be welcome to join the ladies in the Church Tea Rooms, their conversation was likely to concentrate on grandchildren, recent operations and the like, and that probably he wouldn't enjoy it very much.

Mr Robinson, taking the hint, said that he had to be getting home anyway. And with that, he began to gather to-

gether his notes.

He was just about to depart when he noticed that a lady was standing in front of him.

‘Um, I wonder,’ she said, ‘if I could have a word.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Mr Robinson, and the lady sat down on the other side of the table.

‘My name is Frances Goodchild,’ she said. ‘Mrs Goodchild. I really did enjoy your talk, Mr Robinson. Because of course there’s nothing that people of our generation enjoy quite so much as somebody telling them that the world is going to the dogs.’

‘Ah!’ said Mr Robinson, smiling broadly. He was glad that his subtext had been appreciated.

‘And I really was quite fascinated by what you said about the importance of precise communication.’

Mr Robinson preened himself. It was doubly gratifying to find that one had managed to be genuinely interesting.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Goodchild. ‘You see, I think I can tell you about an experience of mine which quite definitely proves your point.’

‘Oh good,’ said Mr Robinson, who was always pleased to add to his stock of examples.

‘Yes. And I think I might also be able to help with the funding of the new Scout hut.’

‘Ah! Splendid!’ said Mr Robinson.

Mrs Goodchild began to grope in her handbag, and eventually she produced a cheque book, a sight which Mr Robinson considered most promising.

‘Of course, I would have to speak to you in total confidence, Mr Robinson, and swear you to secrecy. But you won’t mind that, will you?’

‘Oh no. Certainly not. I am one hundred per cent gossip-proof, Mrs Goodchild.’

‘Jolly good.... You see, my husband is just like you. He’s a retired schoolteacher too, but in his case he was a mathematician. And you know what mathematicians are like – they’re absolute sticklers for detail and accuracy. What my husband did with the interpretation of the bowls club rule book just doesn’t bear thinking about. Took it to absolute pieces he did. The poor committee didn’t know which way to look.’

Mr Robinson chuckled. He had shared a common-room with a good few mathematicians in his time and did indeed know what they were like.

‘But what I want to tell you about is this. You see, when the national lottery started up, I decided that I would like to have a go. I thought that if we won anything it would be very helpful for the grandchildren and so forth. So I had a word with my husband about it, and he made a few enquiries and talked to his mathematical friends.’

Mrs Goodchild seemed unable to find a pen, so Mr Robinson offered her his.

‘Oh, lovely. I might have known that a gentleman of your generation would have a proper fountain pen. Thank you.... Yes, as I was saying about the national lottery.... My husband and his friends spent quite a lot of time looking at the odds against winning, and discussing whether you improved your chances if you bought a lot of tickets at one time, and whether you should use the same numbers every time, and things like that. And surprisingly enough, some of these questions are by no means straightforward. Or so I’m given to understand. It’s all well above my head, as you will appreciate.

‘Anyway, after what seemed like an awful lot of debate, Mr Goodchild decided that I should buy just one ticket a week, and that he would give me the numbers. At the time I

didn't really know where the numbers came from, but I discovered later that they were random numbers. Do you know anything about random numbers, Mr Robinson?

'Er, no. I can't say that I do.'

'Well neither did I, of course. Every Saturday morning my husband would give me a new set of numbers, and I would buy a ticket. And this went on for some time. We won ten pounds every so often, enough to keep us interested, but nothing more. And then the day came when Mr Goodchild had to go into hospital.'

'Oh dear.'

'Yes, it was all most unfortunate. It was his prostrate, you see. Blocked up entirely it did, so he couldn't pass water at all.'

Mr Robinson nodded sympathetically. He did consider, briefly, whether he should give Mrs Goodchild a short explanation of the difference between the words prostrate and prostate; but he decided, on balance, what with the cheque book open in front of her and everything, that this might not be quite the best time.

'So Mr Goodchild had to go into the hospital for an operation,' Mrs Goodchild continued. 'Which is not at all nice, Mr Robinson, is it? Have you had your prostrate done?'

'Er, no,' said Mr Robinson, who had a few worrying problems in that department but was hoping to avoid surgery.

'Yes, it's really not at all nice, you know. They sort of push a pair of scissors up the penis, you know, and sort of snip a hole in the prostrate so that you can pee again.'

'Ah,' said Mr Robinson. Whose desire to avoid surgery had just been considerably intensified.

'Anyway, there was poor Mr Goodchild, lying there on the trolley, feeling a little bit dopey from the pill they'd giv-

en him, and just about to face this nasty experience, and what do you think he said to me?’

Mr Robinson gave her an enquiring look.

‘Don’t forget the lottery ticket, Frances, he said. You must remember to buy a lottery ticket. But they must be random numbers. You understand, my dear? You must use random numbers. He was most insistent, Mr Robinson.’

Mrs Goodchild paused while she filled in the date on the cheque. ‘First Straitford Scout Group, wasn’t it, Mr Robinson?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Yes.... So off I went and bought the ticket. Helped to take my mind of things as a matter of fact. But of course, my point is this, Mr Robinson – I didn’t understand what my husband had meant. When he said random numbers, I thought he just meant that I should pick numbers at random.’

‘And didn’t he?’

‘Oh no. Goodness me no. Up till then he’d always given me the numbers himself, without telling me how he’d worked them out. So when he said I had to use random numbers I just used people’s birthdays. It happened to be Uncle Jack’s birthday that day, and so I used his birthday, and Aunt Jane’s, and one or two others. But, you see, they aren’t random numbers at all.’

‘Aren’t they?’

‘Oh no. Not to a mathematician they’re not. You see, if you go into it properly, it turns out that there’s a scientific procedure for picking random numbers. You can use a special book, which has got pages and pages of random numbers in it – but even then you have to be careful which numbers you pick. Or – and I didn’t know this at the time – you can actually get the lottery computer to pick some ran-

dom numbers for you. It's called lucky dip. There's a special box that you fill in on the form.'

'Ah,' said Mr Robinson. Who had never bought a lottery ticket in his life.

Mrs Goodchild broke off again to work on the cheque.

'Let's see now, I think you said you'd raised a little bit of money, but the total sum needed was three thousand pounds?'

'Er, yes, that's right.'

'I see. Well it'll be simplest if I give you the full three thousand then, won't it?' She filled in the figures. 'Of course, I shall have to remember to give an equal amount to the Girl Guides as well, otherwise it wouldn't be fair, would it?'

'Mngh,' said Mr Robinson, whose tongue seemed to have become stuck to the roof of his mouth.

'I mustn't ramble on,' said Mrs Goodchild, 'because I know you have to get away. But you see the point is this, Mr Robinson. You are absolutely right when you emphasise the vital importance of being clear and precise when you talk to people, and making sure that they understand exactly what they mean. Because, you see, if I had really understood what Mr Goodchild was saying to me, when he went in for his operation, and if he had made sure that I understood it, then our lives would have been completely different.'

'Mngh?' said Mr Robinson.

'Oh yes.' Mrs Goodchild finished writing the cheque and signed it. 'You see, if I really had used random numbers that day – proper random numbers – instead of family birthdays, then Mr Goodchild and I would never have won the seven million pounds. And our lives would have been quite different from what they are today.'

Mr Robinson's tongue came unglued and his mouth fell open.

Mrs Goodchild handed him the cheque.

'And come to think of it,' she added thoughtfully, 'the First Straitford Scout Group might have had to wait another five years for its new hut.'

A Motto to Die by

Thomas H. Uzzell, the great theorist of the short story, maintained that thematic stories are 'an exalted form of narrative'. A thematic story, in Uzzell's terms, is a story in which characters, settings, and action, are all conceived as a means of presenting a truth about life – or an alleged truth; some idea that the author believes to be true.

A Motto To Die By is undoubtedly a thematic story, according to Mr Uzzell's classification. But I don't agree with him in thinking that stories of this type somehow constitute the cream of short fiction. They don't seem to me to be any more important, and certainly no more entertaining, than stories which are written with no didactic intent whatever. Another snag is that, in writing a thematic tale, it is all too easy to become pompous and preachy: and these are characteristics which may appeal to some readers but not, I suspect, to most.

So, thematic stories are a risky business. However, life would be pretty dull if we didn't take a few risks sometime, and I have to admit that this story was written as a conscious attempt to illustrate a theme: namely, that honesty is the best policy, and that deliberate distortion of the facts, for personal gain, is not only immoral but likely to be self-defeating.

*Once again our old friend irony raises his head.
And on one point at least I agree with Mr Uzzell:
irony is at its best when a character collaborates in
bringing about his own appropriate fate.*

*Of course, the idea that one should tell the truth is
very old fashioned indeed; not surprisingly, therefore,
this story has an antiquated feel to it. Hip, with-it,
and cool, this story is not; for, as our politicians daily
prove to us, being honest and straightforward in our
dealings with people is distinctly old hat.*

MR CRAGBOURNE WAS A PRACTISED and fluent liar.

As a boy he displayed an inborn talent for deception. His schoolmasters almost invariably accepted his excuses for not having completed his homework on time; and for a while the whole of class IVB confidently believed that fourteen little green men had been seen descending from a flying saucer in the nearby churchyard.

After leaving school, forty years of experience in the publishing trade had sharpened Mr Cragbourne's skills in the art of dissembling. Having reached his early sixties, he had now achieved such prowess as a liar that, if he assured you that today was Thursday, when in fact it was only Wednesday, you would undoubtedly report at the dentist's, positively eager for your root-canal work, a whole day earlier than was strictly necessary.

Mr Cragbourne was currently addressing a man who was representing a firm which might, with luck, buy his ailing publishing company; and so Mr Cragbourne was using his polished skills to their full effect.

'I have always believed,' he announced boldly (adopting as he did so his sincere and trustworthy facial expression number three), 'that in any business dealings, a regard for

the truth is the most vital principle of all.'

'I agree,' said Mr Blackship. 'Absolutely.'

'Honesty is the best policy, and a man's word is his bond,' Mr Cragbourne intoned; he spoke solemnly, as if expounding a religious dogma. 'That was the credo of all civilised men when I was a lad, and it remains my watchword today.'

'Hear, hear,' said Mr Blackship.

'In fact,' said Mr Cragbourne, 'the official motto of this company is Veritas Super Omnia. Which translates as The Truth Above All, or Honesty Above Everything. Some thirty years ago, when I assumed control of Findle and Budge, I had those Latin words carved into the stone above the front door. I don't know whether you noticed the motto, on your way in?'

'I did indeed,' said Mr Blackship. 'I took particular note of it.'

'Splendid!' Mr Cragbourne beamed. 'You may be assured then, that such is the dictum upon which all my discussions with you will be based.'

Mr Blackship said nothing, but smiled politely and nodded to indicate that he had heard and understood.

Mr Cragbourne sat himself down behind his substantial desk, took a sip from the glass of sherry which he had poured for himself – with another for Mr Blackship, of course – and moved silkily into his how-can-I-be-of-assistance mode.

'Perhaps,' he suggested, 'you might like to go into a little more detail? You did tell me over the phone that you were acting on behalf a major publishing firm which is looking to expand by taking over a number of smaller enterprises. Have I understood that correctly?'

'Indeed you have,' said Mr Blackship. He handed over

his business card. 'I am now pretty much retired, of course, but I do occasional consultancies for businesses which know me from the past. One such firm, Scraper Edwards, has been perhaps the most successful publishing company of all in recent years, and, as you say, the directors are now interested in acquiring the backlist of a number of well established but smaller enterprises.'

'Yes, indeed.' Mr Cragbourne managed to avoid rubbing his hands together with glee, but in fact the visitor's words made his heart sing with delight. Times were hard at Findle and Budge, and the creditors were massing at the gates. In Mr Cragbourne's eyes, a potential purchaser constituted a sort of fairy godmother – a lady who might put the world to rights with a single stroke of her wand.

'Obviously,' Mr Blackship continued, 'I would not be here at all if the board of directors at Scraper Edwards did not hold the view that Findle and Budge is, *prima facie*, a suitable company for them to acquire. And you, Mr Cragbourne, are of course the major shareholder and managing director, so your agreement to any eventual sale is essential.'

Mr Cragbourne beamed once more. 'It is no secret in the trade,' he declared, 'that I do not intend to go on working for ever. And therefore an approach to take over the business is not, in principle, unwelcome. How would you like to proceed?'

'The first thing to do is for me to prepare an independent report on the financial health of the company. I would like you to give me your permission to examine the accounts and talk to key personnel. I shall also need to review the range of rights which you hold in respect of the best-selling books on your backlist. After I have completed that investigation I will then be able to write a report for my

principals. On the basis of that report they will decide whether to make an offer for the firm – and if so, on what terms.’

Mr Cragbourne nodded. ‘Findle and Budge would, in my view, be an excellent company for Scraper Edwards to take over,’ he said. ‘The subject areas in which we specialise here would complement and enhance, most advantageously, the specialisms of Scraper Edwards. As I’m sure your investigation will demonstrate.’

Mr Cragbourne drained his glass.

‘You may be assured,’ he continued, ‘of the utmost co-operation from me and my staff. I shall instruct my employees to hide nothing, reveal all, and answer your questions fully.’

Which was, Mr Blackship calculated, approximately the fourteenth lie that Mr Cragbourne had told him so far.

*

After Mr Blackship had left, Mr Cragbourne called together his staff. There were only about twenty of them, because a financial crisis in the spring had led to five members of staff being sacked on a number of pretexts. This massacre had not, however, resulted in Mr Cragbourne becoming unpopular. On the contrary: he had managed to convey the impression that the need to dismiss staff had arisen through unmentioned, and best forgotten, acts of impropriety on the part of those who had disappeared overnight; hence he was listened to now with something approaching respect.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ Mr Cragbourne told his employees, ‘a Mr Blackship will arrive. He is a consultant who has been appointed by another firm, which is interested in buying us out. If he reports that our business is in a healthy condition, we can expect to be taken over by that company,

which is much larger than ourselves. This will, of course, be to everyone's advantage.'

Lie number one, thought Mrs Campion, who was Mr Cragbourne's secretary.

Mr Cragbourne continued to rally the troops. 'I need hardly tell you that in recent times Findle and Budge has struggled to keep its head above water. Mr Blackship's inquiry therefore constitutes a great opportunity for all of us. If we are absorbed by a publishing giant, your jobs will be preserved, and you will certainly be paid at a higher salary level than is the case now. Furthermore, you will all have much greater prospects for promotion and career development.'

Four further lies, thought Mrs Campion.

'I therefore look to all of you to give the right impression. Know what I mean?' he asked, with a wink to all and sundry.

There was a short pause while the staff digested this information.

Eventually one of the bolder young women voiced a thought. 'Do you mean you want us to tell fibs?' she asked.

'I would not wish to put any pressure on anyone,' said Mr Cragbourne mildly. 'I merely point out that most of us have got mortgages to pay, and that it's much easier to pay for your mortgage if you still have a job. I hope I don't need to draw you a picture.'

*

The next morning, Mr Blackship arrived at Findle and Budge and began his investigation. Mrs Campion found him an empty office – there had been so many sackings over the last few years that there were several rooms to choose from – and he began to potter about.

In appearance, Mr Blackship was a very ordinary man.

He was small, slim, and quiet – but not so quiet that he made you jump by appearing from nowhere.

After a couple of days people got used to him. He would wander into an office, ask politely if he might look at this or that, and then wander off again. A day or two later he would return the borrowed papers, lay them on the desk, murmuring ‘Most interesting,’ and then go off and do the same somewhere else. He was no trouble to anyone.

It was Mr Blackship’s belief, as a result of many years of inquiring into the condition of companies, that in all organisations there is at least one person who knows what is really going on. Sometimes, but not often, it is the person who is nominally in charge; sometimes it is the person who goes round with the tea trolley; and sometimes it is an individual ranked somewhere between these two extremes. The key to a successful inquiry, in Mr Blackship’s view, was to find one or more of these knowledgeable individuals, and to pick their brains at some length.

After about a week, Mr Blackship concluded that in Findle and Budge there were two people who could reasonably be said to know what was what. One was Mr Cragbourne’s secretary, Mrs Campion; and the other was the company accountant, Mr Norton.

One afternoon, when Mr Cragbourne was attending a meeting at the Publishers Association, Mr Blackship interviewed Mrs Campion in her office.

For perhaps half an hour they chatted about this and that, discovering a few interests in common and examining photographs of each other’s grandchildren. And then Mr Blackship got down to business.

‘I don’t know about you,’ he said, ‘but I find that it is always difficult to balance out loyalty and frankness. For instance, I have been talking to quite a number of staff over

the past week – in an informal sort of way, you know – and I’ve been reading quite a lot of the paperwork. And it seems to me that Findle and Budge can be characterised in a number of ways – most of which are distinctly unflattering.’

Mrs Campion sighed and looked down at her desk.

‘For instance,’ Mr Blackship continued, ‘we could say that Mr Cragbourne’s style of management is dictatorial in the extreme. We could say that he is sexist, racist, and a bully. Sad to relate, he is not above threatening female employees with the sack unless they go to bed with him.’

Mrs Campion sighed again, and shook her head in dismay.

‘Mr Cragbourne seldom eats a meal without charging it to the company. And he does seem to dine awfully well.’

Mr Blackship turned over some papers in his file.

‘On the legal side, we could say that Mr Cragbourne’s contracts with his authors constitute a form of theft, couched as they are in terms which benefit the company at every turn, to the eternal detriment and disadvantage of the wretched author. Mr Cragbourne appears to take the view that an author is merely someone who has written a book, and therefore not a person of any importance whatever.

‘In the past, the firm did manage to publish a number of authors who were household names. But most of those big names are now either deceased, or have moved on to better publishers. Many of them complained, before their departure, about incompetence, delay, late payment of royalties, and poor marketing. These shortcomings were, they said, the distinguishing characteristics of Findle and Budge, as compared with any other firm.’

Mrs Campion examined her fingernails.

‘Staff morale is abysmal, and those who are able to find a job elsewhere normally take it as soon as possible. I be-

lieve that you, Mrs Campion, and the company accountant, Mr Norton, are the only people who have been here for more than a year or two. And in the case of you two I have heard it said, more than once, that the only reason you stay is because you are close to retirement anyway. By staying you are at least able to make sure that Mr Cragbourne doesn't steal your pension. Whereas if you went, he very probably would.'

Mrs Campion took out her handkerchief and blew her nose. Loudly.

'Now,' said Mr Blackship, 'if I were to ask you to comment on any of that, Mrs Campion, I would be putting you in a most invidious position. I would be generating an uncomfortable conflict between your desire to be frank and forthcoming, on the one hand, and your desire to be loyal to your employer on the other. And so I am not going to ask you to comment at all, Mrs Campion. Dear me no.... No, I'm just going to say that if you feel that I have misunderstood anything about the company, or exaggerated the state of affairs that I have found, you should let me know before the door closes behind me.'

At which point he rose to his feet and went back to his own (temporary) office.

As he left, Mrs Campion said not a word.

*

Later that afternoon, Mr Blackship went to see the other long-standing servant of Findle and Budge: Mr Norton, the company accountant.

Mr Blackship and Mr Norton had discovered that they were members of the same professional body, and from the start they had got along well. Mr Blackship suspected that they had one other thing in common too, though he didn't intend to ask any embarrassing questions. Mr Norton wore

a wedding ring on his left hand, and yet his clothes had a slightly rumpled appearance; in Mr Blackship's experience, this combination frequently indicated that the man in question was a widower.

'Are you aware,' Mr Blackship began, 'of the nickname by which the firm of Findle and Budge is known in the trade?'

'I am,' said Mr Norton.

'Fiddle and Fudge, I believe,' said Mr Blackship.

'So I understand.'

'And is that nickname unfair, do you think?'

Mr Norton was no good at telling fibs, and he didn't even try. 'Not really unfair, no. A bit unkind, perhaps.'

'I see....'

Mr Blackship turned over another page in his notes.

'Trade gossip also has it that Mr Cragbourne acquired the firm by playing on the affections of an extremely elderly and infirm lady who trusted him with every penny of her money. And gossip has it that he took every penny from her, leaving her impoverished in her old age.'

'You might have heard that,' said Mr Norton, with an absolutely blank expression on his face, 'but I couldn't possibly comment.'

'No indeed....' murmured Mr Blackship. 'Now, you are taking, on average, one hundred and twenty days to pay your invoices.'

'Mm, yes,' said Mr Norton.

'This seems a remarkably long time. I can't help wondering why your suppliers put up with it. I don't think I would.'

'Well,' said Mr Norton with a sigh, 'this situation has existed for a good many years, so I dare say the suppliers are used to it. Of course, they do have the assurance of knowing that I would never lie to them. The printers, for ex-

ample, sometimes ask me whether it is safe to continue to produce our books, and I give them a straight answer. What I say is that I for one would not allow the company to trade while insolvent. And although we have hovered on the brink of disaster for some time, we have always managed to pay in the end. So far.'

'And presumably,' said Mr Blackship, 'since the printers and others know that a long delay will ensue before their bill is paid, they probably add a bit on to it in the first place.'

'No doubt,' murmured Mr Norton. 'I certainly would, in their place.'

Another page of notes was turned.

'Tell me about the pension fund,' said Mr Blackship.

Mr Norton's face brightened. 'That, at least, is secure. It is locked up tight, and cannot be broken open. There was once a publisher – we don't mention his name in this building, any more than an actor mentions the name of the Scottish play in a theatre – but there was once a publisher who raided his firm's pension fund in order to keep the business going. But Mrs Campion and I have prevented any such eventuality here. Mrs Campion sees all the correspondence, of course. And occasionally, quite inadvertently, she overhears some of Mr Cragbourne's telephone conversations. And I deal with the pensions paperwork. So nothing significant could be done in relation to this company's pension fund without one or other of us knowing about it.'

'I am pleased to hear it,' said Mr Blackship. 'And one smaller point – I notice that a good many of your authors contribute towards the cost of their book's publication.'

Mr Norton nodded. 'A most reprehensible practice in my view, and not one pursued by firms of any standing. But needs must, I'm afraid. And once Mr Cragbourne learnt

that authors were innocent folk, easily misled as to the nature of general practice in the publishing trade, it became a temptation too great for him to resist.'

'Dear me,' said Mr Blackship. 'However, I also note that you do have one really steady seller.' He named the book in question. 'Year in, year out, that one continues to sell. Indeed that one book seems to be keeping the wolf from the door, all on its own.'

'Ah yes,' said Mr Norton. 'That particular book has been a little gold mine for us, on account of it being set as an 'A' level text. Unfortunately' – and at this point an expression of deep gloom came over his face – 'unfortunately, I understand that the book will no longer be required reading in schools, as from the start of next year.'

*

Having concluded his discussions and investigations, Mr Blackship was now in a position to draw up a preliminary report; which he did, with exemplary dispatch.

As was his practice, he then showed his draft report to the managing director and major shareholder of the firm, Mr Cragbourne, and invited comment.

The two men met over coffee, one Thursday morning.

Mr Blackship's report included, of course, a devastating catalogue of the company's weaknesses; the few strengths were also described, but they scarcely formed a balance in the scales of judgement. Mr Cragbourne, however, did not seem too dismayed by what he read.

'What you have written,' he told Mr Blackship, 'is pretty much the same sort of report that I would have written myself.'

'Oh, really?'

'Yes, indeed. The position is perfectly clear to us both, I'm sure. I, as the major shareholder of the firm, being of

retirement age, am naturally keen to dispose of my shares. You, for your part, know that. You have also been commissioned by a possible buyer to assess whether the firm is worth buying. It is entirely natural, therefore, for you to produce a draft report which indicates that the company is well-nigh worthless.'

'Oh? Why so?'

'Why, to persuade me to offer you a sweetener, of course.'

Mr Blackship was quite taken aback. 'Good heavens! My dear fellow – a sweetener? Are you referring, by any chance, to a possible bribe?'

Mr Cragbourne tutted. 'Bribe is an ugly word, Mr Blackship, and not one that I favour. No, no, I would never offer a man a bribe. But I have certainly pointed out to people, in the past, that it would be very much in their own best interests to paint a favourable picture of a given situation, rather than to highlight the more unpalatable aspects.'

'Ah, I see,' said Mr Blackship slowly. 'So what you are saying, if I understand you correctly, is that if I write a thoroughly misleading report, one which encourages Scrapper Edwards to buy you out, you would be willing to make it worth my while?'

Mr Cragbourne smiled. 'Very much so. And how pleased I am that you have caught on so quickly.... You see, Mr Blackship, I have made it my business to get to know something about you. I know, for instance, that you have established trust funds for each of your several grandchildren. Very praiseworthy. I also know that this means that you have had to cut back expenditure on your principal hobby – which is buying and restoring classic motor cars. I even know that, at this very moment, you are debating whether you can possibly afford to buy a beautiful old

Bentley. A Continental, I believe it's called?

'A Continental R-type, dark red in colour, with coach-work by H.J. Mulliner,' said Mr Blackship. 'And, yes, I do indeed have my eye on that vehicle. It's fifty years old, and needs work, but at twenty thousand it's a bargain. The trouble is, you see, I'm not sure if I can really afford it. My grandchildren do come first, as you say.'

Mr Cragbourne spread his hands wide in a gesture of generosity. 'But my dear sir, your problem is easily solved. All you have to do to obtain your Bentley is make sure that your report to Scraper Edwards is appropriately phrased. There's no need to tell any fibs, of course. Not real fibs. Just put a favourable face on things, that's all.'

Mr Blackship's expression brightened. 'And if I do,' he asked, 'how much will you pay?'

'The full twenty thousand,' said Mr Cragbourne. 'In cash.' He raised a warning finger. 'But only when the deal goes through, remember.'

'I understand,' said Mr Blackship with a nod. 'I understand completely. And I must say, I think your offer is jolly generous, in the circumstances.'

'What a pleasure it is,' said Mr Cragbourne, 'to do business with a man who appreciates how the world of finance really works.'

And he smiled an oily smile.

After Mr Blackship had left his office, Mr Cragbourne was filled with such a sense of euphoria at the bonanza which awaited him, that he actually gave Mrs Campion a glass of sherry. On the house. She found herself wondering if he was entirely well.

*

Two weeks later, Mr Blackship returned to the offices of Findle and Budge for a final conversation with the devious

Mr Cragbourne.

Mr Blackship arrived, curiously enough, in a beautiful dark red R-type Bentley; it was fifty years old, and had coachwork by H.J. Mulliner.

By chance, Mr Blackship happened to find a space to park on the opposite side of the road from the main entrance to the publisher's premises. And as he went into the building he took note, yet again, of the motto which was carved in the stone above the door: Veritas Super Omnia, it said. The Truth Above All. Honesty Above Everything.

Mr Cragbourne saw Mr Blackship arrive, and for his part he took particular note that Mr Blackship had already bought the car that he had been so anxious to possess. Mr Cragbourne drew the natural conclusion, and he offered the gentleman a glass of champagne as he came through the door.

Mr Blackship took it gratefully; he enjoyed champagne.

The two men then sat down and prepared for a discussion.

'You come with good news, I assume?' said Mr Cragbourne.

'Er no, not exactly,' admitted Mr Blackship.

Mr Cragbourne leaned forward in alarm; he very nearly spilt his champagne. 'What do you mean?'

Mr Blackship finished his own champagne while he had the chance. 'Well, to cut matters short, Mr Cragbourne, I have to tell you that the board of Scraper Edwards have decided not to make an offer for your company. Not under any circumstances.'

Mr Cragbourne suddenly went pale. 'But why ever not? I thought you were going to write a report which would convince them that the company was a wonderful bargain.'

'Did you?' said Mr Blackship vaguely. 'Oh dear. I don't

know what could have given you that idea.'

Mr Cragbourne now began to grow pink. He also began to splutter. 'But – but – but we discussed it here, in my office. We agreed that you would dress up the facts, cover up a few of the firm's weaknesses, and paint a favourable picture.'

'Oh dear me no,' said Mr Blackship. 'No, no. No, I didn't agree to do that at all. What you said was, that if I did write a favourable but thoroughly misleading report, then you would pay me twenty thousand pounds in cash.'

'Exactly!' snapped Mr Cragbourne. 'Which I see you've already spent – on that damned car. But if you think I'm going to give you a penny now, you are very much mistaken.'

'Oh goodness me no,' said Mr Blackship. 'No, I wouldn't expect you to pay me anything. Certainly not. That would be quite wrong.'

By this point, Mr Cragbourne's face had gone a nasty purple colour. He was beginning to get his breath back, after the initial shock, and he girded himself for a full-scale row.

'But you did seem jolly pleased to get my offer at the time!' he snarled.

'Oh I was, yes,' said Mr Blackship. 'You see, the way I work nowadays, is this. I do a few consultancies from time to time, for people who know me and trust me, and I do it for a very modest fee. But to make up for the modest fee, I always write a clause into the contract – a clause which says that, if I am offered a bribe to produce a misleading report, then the people who are commissioning me will match that bribe pound for pound. I never accept a bribe, of course, and I never solicit one. But when I am bribed I do earn a lot more money than when I'm dealing with hon-

est people.'

Despite his anger at the way things were going, Mr Cragbourne could not help exploring the ramifications of this.

'But how do the people who commission you know that you're telling the truth? You could be telling them a pack of lies. You could say you'd been offered a hundred thousand!'

'Oh yes indeed,' said Mr Blackship. 'Yes, I could. I could invent any old story. Name any kind of a figure. But I never would, of course. And the people who commission me know that.'

'As a matter of fact,' he added, 'it was the knowledge that you were prepared to tell fibs which turned my principals against you. The fact that the company is in financial trouble wasn't really a problem – that could have been reflected in the price. But once you offered me a bribe – when you asked me to tell them a pack of lies – well, I'm afraid that was too much to swallow. After that, the directors of Scraper Edwards didn't feel that they could believe anything about your company at all. Findle and Budge ceased to be of any interest to them. So the position is this: if you hadn't been so insistent on telling lies, Mr Cragbourne, you would certainly have sold the company. Whereas now, I don't suppose you ever will. I shall not say a word, of course, but news of your behaviour will soon leak out. You know what the book trade is like – chatter, chatter, chatter, all day long.'

Mr Cragbourne's mouth fell open.

Mr Blackship decided that there was no point in prolonging the meeting, which might well degenerate into a slanging match, so he stood up and prepared to go.

'It's all a matter of trust, do you see, Mr Cragbourne. My word is my bond, that sort of thing – hm? Veritas Super Omnia, as I believe your firm's motto has it.'

He picked up his briefcase and began to make his way out.

‘Yes indeed, Mr Cragbourne. Veritas Super Omnia.’
And he closed the door gently behind him.

Staring Me in the Face

There is, I suppose, no such thing as originality. And if we writers ever produced something truly original, our readers probably wouldn't like it much anyway.

I mention this because, soon after I had completed this story, I read one by Saki which uses almost exactly the same complication to produce its effect.

Well, there you go. I'm going to print it despite that.

WE CAN ALL BE REMARKABLY unobservant sometimes. If we're not careful we become so caught up in our own affairs that we fail to notice things which are blatantly obvious.

Take last week for instance. I've been applying for places at universities, and last Tuesday I was due to go for my first interview. Of course, my Mum wanted to go with me. As Mums do. But, as you would expect, I wouldn't let her.

'I'll be all right, Mum, really I will.'

'I know, I know,' she said, and there was a little choke in her voice. 'You're grown up now, eighteen years old, and you're not my little girl any longer. But I still think of you as my little girl.' And she came over and gave me a hug.

As a matter of fact I would have *liked* my Mum to come with me, because I was feeling distinctly nervous about the whole thing; I hadn't travelled all that far on my own be-

fore. But if I am going to go to uni I'm going to have to be independent sooner or later. So I said no. I said I would go alone. And I did.

*

I travelled by train, because the university's music school was quite close to the railway station, and made sure that I got there in plenty of time.

I'd been given directions, and I'm pretty good at finding my way around unfamiliar streets, so before long I was fairly sure that I was in the right sort of area. But I was still half an hour early, and I thought it would be a good idea to go into a pub rather than arrive too soon.

There was a woman behind me having a conversation with a friend, and when she had finished talking I managed to attract her attention before she rushed off.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'but I wonder if there's a pub nearby that you could point me to.'

'Oh yes,' she said, 'certainly. There's the Butchers' Arms just along here. Come on – I'll show you.'

She walked beside me until we came to the pub door.

'Here we are, dear, you'll be all right in here. The landlord's a friendly chap. He'll look after you.'

She pushed open the door and announced me.

'Albert – you've got a customer.'

'Oh, send her in,' said the publican cheerfully. 'We could do with one of those.'

I thanked the woman who had helped me, and she patted me on the back and went on her way.

I walked over towards the bar and when I got there I eased myself on to a stool.

'What will you have, dear?'

'Er, a mineral water, please,' I said. 'Still. Ice but no lemon. I'm sorry it's not a pint.'

‘Oh, I don’t mind a bit, love. There’s more profit on mineral water than there is on beer.’

The publican – evidently named Albert – snapped the top off a bottle and poured it out for me. Then he addressed a man who was sitting immediately to my right.

‘Another one for you, George?’

‘Yes, why not,’ said George. ‘Live dangerously, that’s what I always say.... Not a diabetic, are you love?’

‘No, no,’ I said hastily. ‘I do drink beer, quite often, but not at this time of day.’ And, I might have added, I don’t want to arrive for an important interview with the smell of alcohol on my breath.

‘I *am* a diabetic,’ said George. ‘That’s why I was asking. And I have to drink mineral water. No choice about it. Doctor’s warned me off the beer. Haven’t had a pint in years, though I drank gallons in me youth. Mind you, I do have the fizzy kind of mineral water. That way at least you get a bit of a kick from it.’

He took a drink from his glass. And he was rather noisy about it.

‘Yes,’ he went on, sounding thoroughly regretful, ‘I used to be a six pints a night man. But I haven’t been able to drink for years and years past. Diabetes, you see. Have to be very careful what you eat and drink.’

‘Oh dear,’ I said, trying to sound sympathetic.

George was evidently delighted to find someone who hadn’t heard his case history before.

‘Twenty-five years I’ve lived with this, you know – the diabetes. Twenty-five years. Had to give up work long before me time, though I’m sixty-six now of course. And I’ve had every symptom and problem there is going, so my doctor tells me. I was in a coma two year ago. Wasn’t I, Albert?’

‘You were indeed,’ the publican confirmed. He was setting out all the glasses, ready for the lunchtime rush.

‘I was ten minutes away from dying, so they told me. And some days I reckon I might just as well have died, for all the good living is doing me.’

‘Now then, George,’ said Albert. ‘You must look on the bright side.’

‘Well, it’s true,’ said George. ‘It’s no good pretending I’m having a wonderful time, is it? Look at me now. I’ve got angina that nearly makes me pass out with the pain. I’ve got ulcers on both legs, and me ankles is swollen something shocking. I’ve lost two toes on me right foot, through bad circulation, and most days it’s as much as I can do to stagger round here. And when I do get here I’m struggling for breath.’

I’m sorry to say that this catalogue of troubles left me largely unmoved. ‘But hang on a minute, George,’ I felt like saying. ‘You’re not the only one who has a few problems to contend with. As you would realise, if you just paid a bit of attention to others. So stop feeling so sorry for yourself.’ But I didn’t say any of that, of course – because I’m far too well brought up.

George turned to address himself to me again. ‘And of course it killed my wife too, you know – the diabetes did.’

‘Oh dear,’ I said again. ‘I’m sorry to hear that. And it does seem to be very common these days, doesn’t it?’

I tried to show a little interest, though to be honest I would have preferred to spend the time having a quiet think about my forthcoming interview.

‘So your wife was a diabetic too, was she?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes. And she only lasted ten years. Eventually fell into a coma, you see. Just like me. Only in her case she didn’t survive. When I came home from work one day, there

she was, stretched out on the floor. We got her into hospital, of course. Ambulance and that. But even then they weren't able to save her. I did think about suing, cos I reckon they ought to have been able to pull her round. What with all the equipment they've got. But I didn't sue. In the end. Because it wouldn't bring her back, after all, would it?

'I'm afraid not,' I said.

'I don't know what I've done to deserve it all, but someone's got it in for me and no mistake.'

Albert, behind the bar, seemed to feel I needed rescuing, and tried to switch the conversation round to me.

'Are you going anywhere special, love – or just doing a bit of shopping?'

'Well, as a matter of fact I'm on my way to the music school, which I think is just around the corner?'

'Yes, that's right. You go out of here, turn right at the door, turn right again at the corner of the street, and then the music school's about fifty yards down. Big flight of steps up to the front door. I'm sure you won't miss it.'

'Oh, thank you,' I said.

'Going to be a student, are you?' Albert continued. He at least seemed genuinely interested in someone other than himself.

'I hope so. I've got an interview, anyway.'

'Well, that's half the battle, isn't it? We get a lot of the students in here at lunchtime, but it's a bit too early just yet.'

'My son was a student,' said George, who was evidently determined not to be left out of the conversation for long. 'Not here, of course. Wanted to go away. Well, it's part of growing up, isn't it? He's got on a bit, I'll say that for him. Did maths at Brighton, my lad did, and now he works on computers. He's got a job in London, more's the pity, cos I

could do with him here, you know. Oh yes. Can't do anything for meself these days. I have meals on wheels and that, but it's not like home cooking, is it? And my wife was a grand cook. I've suggested, you know, tactfully like, that I might go down there and live with him, but he won't have it. Makes excuses. Says it would be difficult with young children in the house. But it's that wife of his, really. She's the one stopping him. Course, the day may come when he has health problems of his own. What with his Mum and Dad both being diabetic, he's got a fifty-fifty chance of getting it himself, you know. He's all right at present – but then I used to be fit as a fiddle meself. Played football when I was a lad. Even had a trial for the City, but it came to nothing cos me knee went. And that was the end of that.'

Poor George's troubles seemed to be endless. I took a drink of my mineral water and wondered what, if anything, to say next. However, George himself solved my problem by addressing a question to the publican.

'What time is it now, Albert?'

'A quarter to,' said Albert. And I thought I could detect just a hint of relief that George might have to be on his way.

'Oh, right,' said George. 'Well I'd best be off, then. Got the social services coming round at twelve. Going to assess me for special help, they say, though what there is to assess I really don't know. It ought to be bloody obvious I need special help.'

He eased himself down off the stool and prepared to leave.

'Now then, love, I had a stick when I came in but I seem to have mislaid it. You can't put your hand on it, can you?'

'I believe it's down here,' I said. 'On the floor. I stepped on it when I came in.'

I knelt down and groped for the stick, which I then

handed to him.

‘Ah, thanks very much, love.... I’ll be off then, Albert. See you tonight.’

‘Cheerio, George,’ said Albert, who was up at the other end of the bar.

George made his way to the door of the pub; he moved slowly, and evidently with some difficulty, no doubt as a result of his ulcers and swollen ankles. I waited for him to say goodbye to me, and perhaps wish me luck with the interview. But he didn’t, I’m afraid. I suppose he was too pre-occupied with what he was going to say to the social services. The door creaked in sympathy with his legs as he went through it.

The pub fell silent, with just the sound of an occasional passing car in the street outside. Albert came back up to my end of the bar.

‘Sorry about old George,’ he said. ‘He does tend to go on a bit.’

I smiled. ‘Oh, that’s all right. I dare say I shall be the same when I’m his age.’ Then I finished off the last of my water. ‘Well, I think perhaps I’d better be going too.’

Albert proved to be more thoughtful than his customer. ‘Good luck with the interview, Miss.’

‘Oh, thank you.’

‘If you handle them as well as you handled old George I’m sure you’ll do just fine.’

‘I hope so. Thank you for your good wishes, anyway.’

And then, a little late in the day, a thought suddenly struck me.

As I said at the beginning, we can all be remarkably unobservant at times, and it seems that I am as bad as anyone in that respect. I had been assuming, you see, that George had been so heavily bound up in his own problems that he

hadn't even noticed mine. But perhaps I too had been overlooking something which was staring me in the face – so to speak.

I paused before going. 'Could I ask you a question, Albert?'

'Of course.'

'Just before George left – did you hear him ask me to pick up his stick?'

'I did, Miss.'

'Well – this may seem a bit silly, but... what colour was it?'

'Why his stick was white, Miss. Same as yours. He's been blind for years, has George. And he wears dark glasses too, same as you.'

'Ah yes,' I said slowly. 'I rather thought so. But I just wanted to make sure.'

And then I tapped my way out into the street.

Truth in the Drama

If you're interested in the sources of a writer's ideas, you may wish to know that the idea for this story came to me in about thirty seconds, while I was standing on the pavement, outside a theatre, having seen the performance by Ken Campbell which is mentioned below.

If you're not interested in such things, forgive me for taking up your time.

‘THIS IS NOT THE WORST play that I have ever seen,’ wrote the drama critic for *The Times*. ‘But it is the worst play that I have seen in the last thirteen years. And, since I intend to retire as drama critic of this newspaper in seven years’ time, I think it unlikely that I will see a worse piece of writing, presented for our alleged entertainment, before I bid farewell to the noble task of reviewing new plays.’

We all thought that was a bit hard, really. We being Dave’s friends and that. I mean the bloke could of said that the play was a bit rough and that. He could of just said that if you wanted a really good laugh you should go and see some other play that week. He didn’t need to tear the bloody thing to pieces, did he? Course not.

Dave was very upset. Well you would be, wouldn’t you? He’d been working on that play for ages. Every since we were at uni together.

When I first went to uni I thought about what clubs to join, and I thought I'd join the drama club, because I thought it would be a good place to meet people. As it turned out, it wasn't. They weren't exactly unfriendly, but they were all doing arts subjects – media studies and that – and I was doing electrical engineering. So they asked me to do the lights. Which I did.

Dave was there right from the beginning. He was a year ahead of me, and of course I was very impressed. Right from the time I first saw him. You would of been too. He was... well, he was really cool. All the girls thought so, I can tell you. Most of the blokes too. Even those that weren't gay. You could tell from the way they talked to him. They really looked up to him. And of course he was amazingly good-looking. He looked like a Greek god. And he had this sort of calm confidence about him, because he'd been to a boarding school, and that sort of gives people confidence, doesn't it?

Dave was in just about every play we put on at the uni. Starred in most of them. And he wrote his own stuff too, even then. Course it was pretty experimental in those days. A bit rough around the edges. But everyone understood that. And we did actually do one of his plays in his last year. I thought it was really interesting. Dave had this theory that art ought to be truthful, and reflect the true nature of our times, and I could see what he was getting at. But the play was, as I say, a bit experimental, and it didn't go down all that well. Although those of us in the drama club understood what he was on about, and anyway experiments don't always work, do they?

I couldn't say that I was a really close friend of Dave's at uni. He didn't really have any close friends, if it comes to that – certainly didn't shack up with anyone or anything

like that. He didn't even go out with anyone that I knew of. He would go out in a group, of course, and some of the girls tried to get off with him, but I don't think they ever succeeded. I asked one of them once what he was like when he was alone, and she said he was quiet. Very quiet.

As for me.... Well, from time to time I used to tell him how terrific he was. As an actor and that. But he would never say very much. Just smile, and say thank you, in a quiet voice. And he would never go out for a drink or anything.

In his last year at uni Dave thought about doing a PhD in theatre studies. He had this idea for a thesis on Truth in the Drama, and some of us thought it was really good. I certainly did, and told him so. But apparently the lecturers in the media studies department didn't reckon much to it, so he never got the grant. Or something. Anyway, he disappeared off to London, and although I rang him a couple of times, and sent him the odd postcard, we seemed to lose touch somehow.

After I left uni myself I tried to get a proper job in the theatre, doing the lights, which I'd got pretty good at by that time. Most of the student directors hadn't got a bloody clue about lighting, so whenever we did a production I could pretty well please myself what I did. And some of it was really cool. It got mentioned in the reviews and that.

Anyway, I spent a lot of time trying to get a job in the theatre, but no one wanted to know, so I got this temporary job at the Hampstead dog track. Looking after the lights over the dogs and that. Very important job, as it turns out, because most dog racing is at night, and when blokes have got several thousand pounds bet on a particular dog, the lights are absolutely crucial. A bloke who's got a big bet on wants to be bloody sure he can see who's winning.

At first I was number two in the unit, but then the bloke

in charge had a heart attack, so they gave me the top spot. They seemed to think that anyone who had a degree would be able to do the job with no problems, but actually it's not as easy as all that. They did warn me that if the lights went out in the middle of a race the punters would string me up from the nearest lamp-post, and they weren't bloody joking.

I still kept an ear open for news of Dave. I used to ask anyone I bumped into if they'd heard anything about him, but nobody had.

But then I read in *Time Out* one day that he was having this new play put on! It was being produced by a little pub theatre – one of the ones I'd tried to get a job at, as a matter of fact. And I only just heard about this new play in time, because it was opening on the day I read about it.

I happened to be free that night, which was a bit of luck because I was going to be more than occupied at the dog track for the next few nights. So, naturally, off I went, and I managed to get a ticket to see the play.

I thought it was really interesting. It was a revamped version of the play we'd put on at the uni, and I thought it was really clever the way it tried to be truthful and reflect the nature of the times we live in. It was about this playwright who really wanted to be truthful in what he wrote, but the more honest he was the bigger trouble he got into with the hypocrites and that. I was really pretty thrilled by it. It's not often you see a play which was written by someone you know.

Afterwards I went round to the stage door and tried to have a word with Dave and tell him how much I'd enjoyed it, but they were going to have a bit of a party and they wouldn't let me in. I was a bit disappointed about that. Anyway, I left him a note to say that I'd really enjoyed it,

giving him my phone number and everything, and I asked him to get in touch.

But then of course the man from *The Times* put the boot in, and that ruined everything.

I rang the theatre several times, but they wouldn't give me Dave's telephone number, or his address, and the next thing I heard, about third hand, was that Dave had gone abroad. Which was not surprising really. Someone said he'd gone to Paris.

A few more months went by, and every so often I would bump into somebody, or I'd ring them up, and ask if they'd heard anything about Dave, but no one seemed to. Someone told me that he'd written a really bitter play, a sort of satire on the Arts Council bureaucracy, and posted it on the internet. Someone said he'd really burnt his boats with that lot, but when I tried to find it on the web I couldn't find a thing.

Eventually I thought the hell with this, so I rang up the uni and spoke to someone in the alumni office and asked them if I could have his home address, because I reckoned his parents would be sure to know where he was. The alumni office, *naturally*, wouldn't tell me a thing (Data Protection Act or some such crap), but they did say they would forward a letter to Dave's registered home address. So I sent one, but I addressed it to his parents and asked if they could tell me where he was.

After about a week I got a reply from his Mum, and she gave me Dave's telephone number. Turns out he was living in London after all! Also she said that she hoped I would get in touch with him, because he seemed a bit lonely. She thought he needed a good friend.

So I rang him up. I had to try quite a few times before I found him in, but eventually he was.

Same old Dave. Very quiet.

‘Look, Dave,’ I said, ‘I’ve been keeping in touch with the theatre, whenever I get the chance, and there’s this bloke called Ken Campbell who does a one-man show. And the interesting thing is, he tells this true story about how he invented a playwright called Henry Pilk. And then Ken wrote some really outrageous plays – well, short sketches, really – really outrageous stuff, far more extreme than any of yours. And of course people all thought it was true. They thought this Henry Pilk was a real playwright, and that these really way-out plays were dead serious and that, and Pilk got asked to let people do real productions of his plays, even though they were sort of satirical, really. And I thought, you know, what with you being really interested in truth in the drama and that, this was something you really ought to see. So I’ve bought us a couple of tickets, and if you’d like to go, Dave, I’d be really glad to see you. Because I haven’t seen anything of you for ages, and I’d really like to catch up with you and hear about what you’ve been doing. So what do you think?’

And then I sort of waited. And it took him a long time to say anything. But then he said, ‘Well, I don’t know...’

So I went on a bit more about how he would enjoy seeing Ken Campbell who’s a really cool sort of bloke who writes all these outrageous letters to people, taking the piss and that. And eventually Dave said: ‘Oh. Well. All right then.’

And I was really pleased. Really really chuffed. When I put the phone down I did a little dance. Because I’d tried really hard to keep in touch with Dave, and make contact with him again, and now I had.

I arranged to meet Dave outside the theatre where Ken Campbell was appearing. It was another pub theatre, of

course – Ken mostly works in small places – and I turned up early to make sure I was there when Dave appeared.

Mind you, he didn't appear for quite some time, and I was beginning to wonder if he'd forgotten, or lost the instructions I gave him. But in the end, just before curtain time, he did turn up, and we went in together.

Ken Campbell's show lasts just over an hour, and as I'd seen it before I spent a bit of time looking at Dave. Without being too obvious, of course.

He seemed just the same as before. Well, mostly the same. Just as good-looking, but perhaps a bit tired and not so chirpy as he used to be. I did hear that after the *Times* business he'd got a bit depressed and been on drugs and that, but I couldn't see any sign of it that night.

After the show was over we went outside, with everyone else, and stood on the pavement while we had a bit of a chat.

I did try to pick Dave's brains about what he'd thought of it all – Ken Campbell and that – but he never was very good at expressing himself. Not face to face that is. On paper he's bloody terrific, but in conversation he was always a bit quiet.

Anyway, after a bit I said, 'Look, Dave, I don't know how you're fixed these days, but the thing is this. I've got this pretty good job now. Pays pretty well. It's not a theatre job, of course, which is what I wanted, but it's regular work, good salary, and I've got this quite nice flat. Two bedrooms and that. And I have had a friend living with me for a while, but that hasn't worked out very well, so there's room for someone else to move in if they want to. And I don't know what you're doing these days, but I was thinking, if you want somewhere to stay while you work on a new play and that, somewhere that won't cost you anything, you could

move in with me. I wouldn't mind, I'd be really glad of the company, and it would give you somewhere that you could use as a sort of base while you work on a play or something. If you'd like to. If you are working on a play. And I hope you are, because I thought your other one was really really interesting. And I think you should keep going. Because everyone has their setbacks in the beginning and I think you're a really terrific talent. Really I do.'

And then I stopped to see what he thought.

Dave seemed a bit embarrassed at first. He always was a bit shy, and he never seemed to like it much if you told him how good he was, as an actor and that.

Anyway, after a minute he sort of looked over my shoulder, as if he'd spotted somebody we knew. So I turned round and had a look too, but I couldn't see anyone.

And then he said, 'Oh look. There's a pub over there. Let's go and have a drink.'

The Golden Boy

This is a story about a vampire.

Of course, vampires come in all shapes and sizes; a bit like birds. Not many people know that. There are nice, friendly, attractive little vampires, who might be compared with robins; and then there are the nasty, vicious, disgusting brutes, who are built a bit more on the vulture model.

This story is, I suppose, about one of the violent, greedy and brutal vampires. But you can't help feeling a bit sorry for him in the end. Well, I can't, anyway.

FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS, I used to seek out the pure and the beautiful; and when I found them, I would feed on their souls.

Feed on their souls, you say?

Yes.

How?

Well, it's a little complicated.

Basically I would sink my fangs into their neck, in the good old-fashioned vampire tradition; but then, instead of taking their blood, I would feed on their beauty and purity. I would suck out their spiritual bone marrow, so to speak; I would absorb, with great relish, the delicious and life-giving essences which derived from their physical form and moral

character.

Yes, I would hang on to their necks with my teeth – which is a brutal and frankly rather coarse procedure; I apologise for even mentioning it. But it was their virtues which passed over to me, rather than any corporeal fluids or flesh.

And then, when I had taken what I wanted, I would leave my victims to wither and die.

The individual would still be alive at first, after I had finished my ministrations, but from then on the person concerned would exist only as a mere shell of the former self. Men and women alike, they would gradually succumb to illness, and death would carry them away.

Often, that would happen sooner rather than later.

I'm afraid it doesn't sound very nice, does it?

That description of how I have lived my life sounds positively disgusting when I put it down on paper and read it aloud to test its effect. But that is how, for hundreds of years, I obtained the sustenance to go on. And I feel that I must tell you the truth.

If what I have said is distasteful to you, or causes you offence, I apologise once more. The very last thing that an Englishman of my generation would wish to do is cause offence. But I thought it best to tell you, right at the outset, and without ambiguity, how I have conducted myself, so that you may avoid hearing the sordid details if you wish.

On the other hand, you may be very interested in sordid details. Not that the story is all sordid, of course. Certainly not; parts of it concern beauty, and purity, as I have said. It's just that what I used to *do* to obtain beauty and purity was sordid. And it was greedy; and hideous, at least in the eyes of normal people. Especially nice, well brought up English people. English people do not consider it decent to

bite into the necks of the very best of every generation. Especially when the victims crumple and die soon afterwards.

I'm sorry about that, but it cannot be helped. Preying on the pure and the beautiful is in my nature. I lust for beauty and purity in the way that a bird lusts for the sky, or a salmon for the sea.

The only thing that I can say by way of mitigation is that I have not been preying on my victims so often recently. Not in the past fifty years or so.

Why not?

Why, for reasons which I will now explain. They concern a particularly pure and beautiful young man.

*

Some fifty years ago, I was living in England; though I have, of course, lived elsewhere over the centuries. Mostly in Europe.

It was soon after the end of the war – the second world war, that is, if we are to identify it properly, though at the time everyone spoke of it as 'the war', as if there had only ever been one.

England in those post-war years was a peculiar place; and especially so as we moved into the 1950s. In those days there was a conspiracy afoot – a silent conspiracy, common to all the classes of that class-ridden society – and the motto of that conspiracy was this: We will pretend that it never happened.

In reality, England had suffered two catastrophic wars in the space of thirty years, but there was a tacit agreement abroad in the land. We will all pretend that it never happened. We will act as if someone has farted loudly in church. We will ignore it, move on, wipe it from our memory. We will pretend that the bombing and the burning and the gassing never took place. We will ignore the fact

that all our best and bravest young men are dead – mostly killed in the first world war, but quite a few in the second. (For a while, the pure and the beautiful became hard to find, at least among the male gender.) And we will try to maintain that all that really matters is that gentlemen should continue to wear ties and jackets for formal occasions, and that the seams of the ladies' stockings are straight. Oh, and of course we must ensure that the hems of the ladies' skirts are the right length. Especially at Henley.

In the year 1950 I was hosted by a cricket coach at a public school called Salcey; in the midlands. By 'hosted' I mean that I had chosen to take over this man's body and with it most of his soul. That is what I need to do, you see, in order to function. Preferably I need to live within someone who has a good set of teeth, but beyond that I'm not too fussy. I will settle inside anyone for a while, for I can easily move on whenever I wish.

So there I was, sitting peacefully and quietly within the cricket coach, and one day I had a visitor. He was a friend of my host's who worked at a prep school for boys located some twelve miles away.

'My word, George,' the visitor said, 'have I got someone special for you!'

Though phrased as a question, this sentence was intended as a statement of fact. And by this statement the speaker meant to say this: Rejoice, George, for I have found you a boy who is exceptionally good at cricket.

My ears pricked up at once, for I have found, over the years, that when humans speak admiringly of another man or woman, there is often something there for me to admire too.

So we went to watch a game of cricket.

The name of the boy who was good at cricket was Se-

bastian Miller, and when I first set eyes on him he was thirteen years old.

And when I did first set eyes on him, I very near fainted with desire.

For he was so beautiful.

My golden boy was young, of course, but well built for his age. He was fair-haired. Blue-eyed. Athletic. Sexually mature already, though I later discovered that he had a genetic peculiarity: he had no pubic hair, and never grew any in future years either.

When I saw young Miller, that very first time, the world whirled about me, and I had to sit down in a hurry, before I collapsed. My heart pounded in the cricket coach's chest, and I moaned inwardly.

I wanted him, do you see. Young Miller. Seldom before had I seen such beauty and purity combined in one being, and I longed to possess him there and then. It was as much as I could do to control myself. Internally, I made slavering, hungry noises, like a madman crazed for sex.

It turned out, fortunately for me, that Sebastian Miller had passed the entrance exams for Salcey, and would be joining the school in the following September, at the start of the autumn term.

When I could manage to speak again, I asked my prep-school friend which house the boy would be entering. He told me: Wragmount.

So, within a day or two, I had deserted my cricketing host and taken over instead the body of Wragmount's housemaster. He was a quiet man in his thirties, and his name was Edward Conroy.

*

Conroy was, and is, a strange character. He had been educated at Oundle and Cambridge, and then he was in the

war, of course. He rose to be a lance corporal in the Royal Signals, but eventually his mathematical talents were recognised and he was sent to work in intelligence. Bletchley Hall and all that. He never spoke of it, naturally. Official Secrets Act. Lips sealed for ever.

After the war Conroy became a schoolmaster, and he tried to pretend, like the rest of them, that the unpleasantness had never occurred. For him, as for the others who survived, the world took up where it had left off; it continued after an unfortunate interruption.

Conroy was a bachelor, but in those days no one even wondered whether he might be gay; or queer, as they called it then. As it happens, he wasn't gay, or queer; he was just frightened of penetrative sex. I think something unfortunate must have happened to him behind the bicycle shed, one afternoon at his prep school, but he had repressed the memory and I was never sufficiently interested to delve into his subconscious and find out the truth. I can live without fucking women; or boys either.

Given the fact that Edward Conroy was going to be, in effect, the guardian of the golden boy for eight months of every year, I bit into his neck without a moment's hesitation; and thereafter, for all intents and purposes, I became Edward Conroy, and he became me.

At which point I think I need to say a brief word about what constitutes purity.

Beauty we all understand, I believe, but purity... Purity is different.

First of all, it has nothing to do with sexual matters. And it certainly has nothing to do with virginity. Some of the most luscious and tasty dishes that I have dined on, so to speak, have been married women of forty, with two or three children. If you can find me a beautiful mature woman, happily

married, with strong thighs and a well-preserved bust, you will often find in her a purity of purpose, a dazzling chastity of virtue, a selfless, good-humoured, warm-hearted, sweet-smelling dish which would have me drooling for a week, a month, a year, before I finally accepted the inevitable and sucked her into oblivion. Then, when I ultimately gave way to that long-savoured temptation, I would consume the divine morsel with a violent and greedy hunger.

Oh, I am a wicked fellow, I really am. But I can't help it, you see. It is my nature.

So now you understand what I did with the golden boy. Or rather, what I did not do.

I did not attack him immediately. Oh no. That would have been far too crude. And unspeakably vulgar. What I did do was take my time. I moved towards my goal in a slower, more measured, and more subtle manner.

I watched him, both from afar and close to. I fondled him in my mind, so to speak, allowing my eyes to play over him, and I dribbled internally with lust and desire.

I speak metaphorically, of course. But figuratively I allowed my tongue to hang out, and I generally indulged myself in technicolour fantasies of biting and sucking. Meanwhile, my beautiful golden boy grew up in the ordinary public-school way.

Not that I ever outwardly betrayed even the slightest flicker of interest in Sebastian Miller. You need to understand that. It was all in the mind, my dears. But I knew that one day I would have him. One day I would bare the flesh of his shoulder, and I would sink Edward Conroy's teeth – he had very few fillings – into the amazing curve of that wondrous neck. And then I would suck out every last hint and vestige of young Miller's beauty and his purity, and the feast would leave me sated for a hundred years or more.

I recall that, even then, I doubted whether I would ever find his equal again.

*

Three years passed.

In a school, the years have a pronounced rhythm. There are three terms in each year, and each term is divided into ten or twelve weeks. Each day has its own rhythm: the rising bell, breakfast, prayers; lessons, lunch, games; more lessons, supper, prep, prayers, sleep; and so on; the pattern and the sequence are repeated over and over. Such repetition lulls the soul; it deadens the impact of the outside world of affairs. In such a school you can indeed believe that the world need never change. There is always honey for tea.

And so, as I say, three years passed. And the golden boy, Sebastian Miller, reached the age of seventeen.

He was Rupert Brooke reborn: a dazzling sight. So much so that I literally could not bear to look at him for more than a second or two. The boys in Wragmount House noticed this, and, far from concluding that young Miller was my favourite, they decided instead that I was somehow suspicious of him.

There were various theories. Some thought that I suspected him of unmanly vice. Some argued that I saw him as a ladies' man – a fop, morally weak, too ready to accept female admirers. Or perhaps they decided that I was jealous of his artistic talents, being a failed artist myself. Or whatever. You know what boys are like. They are for ever talking, gossiping, judging.

Just in case you are in any doubt, let me assure you that the golden boy was a blazing star in the Salcey universe. He had enough IQ for an entire Welsh rugby-football team, and he mastered every academic subject with startling ease.

He was, as he had been at prep-school level, a consummate cricketer. He was an outstanding member of the rugby fifteen. He was a sprinter and a high jumper. He could sing, play the piano, read music instantaneously. And so on, and so forth. The boys held him in awe, and yet he was popular, because none of it went to his head, and he was still one of them.

Sebastian Miller had a genuine religious faith, and he felt that he had the capacity to do much good; he spoke of entering the church. He seemed untroubled by sexual desire, and avoided entanglements with a good humour.

I made him a house prefect, and he was talked of as a future head of house. More than that. He was seen as the next head of school but one.

Early in the Michaelmas term of the golden boy's fourth year, the Headmaster sent for me. When I arrived he did not waste time.

'Ah, Conroy,' he said briskly. 'I want to talk to you about Miller.'

I waited.

'As you know, I've been grooming Cassidy as the next head of school. He will take over next term. And at that point I'd like to make your boy Miller a school prefect, so that, if all goes well, he can become head of school in a year from now. What do you think?'

I said that I was in favour, of course, and we discussed the details.

And then the Head said, quite out of the blue, 'You can't have him you know.'

I was startled, and thought for a second that I hadn't heard correctly. 'I beg your pardon?'

The Head spoke distinctly and slowly, with a trace of asperity in his voice. 'I said, you can't have him.'

Not since I had first set eyes on my beautiful golden boy had I felt so close to fainting. My vision blurred and faded, and I reached out to a chair to hold me up.

‘What?’ I said. Rather rudely. ‘I can’t what?’

The Head lost patience and snapped at me. ‘You can’t have him, Conroy. Not now, or ever. He’s protected.’

I shuddered, and I think I may have moaned. I didn’t want to believe what I was hearing. Couldn’t have him? No! That could not be true. He was mine! Sebastian Miller was mine! I had longed for him for years and years. Held back. Restrained myself. And God knows that was difficult enough.

But I had to ask. I had to be told. ‘Protected?’ I said. ‘By whom?’

‘By us.’

‘And who,’ I snarled, ‘are you?’ Though I already knew. And I only asked because the reality of the situation was intolerable.

The Headmaster raised his right forefinger and pulled down the lower lid of his right eye.

A stream of intense white light shot out into the room and blinded me, causing an intense arrow of pain to penetrate my brain. I howled aloud and clutched my face, falling to my knees on the ground. I grovelled and gasped and groaned.

‘Sorry, old chap,’ I heard the Head say, eventually. ‘I didn’t mean to distress you. But you did rather force my hand.’

I remained on my knees, and moaned some more. Moaned with pain, partly, but mostly with distress. Couldn’t have him, you say? My golden boy? But he was mine! Mine, mine, mine! I *deserved* him. I had waited so long – held off, fought temptation, avoided doing anything so crude as snatching at what I longed for. And now I was be-

ing told that I could not have him! Ever!

I ground my teeth in a fury, until I spat out fragments of enamel.

At last I pulled myself together and regained a small degree of dignity. I stood up.

‘Who are you?’ I snarled at the Head.

‘Valerius.’

Valerius. That shitbag. That son of a pox-ridden whore. Or worse.

Some said that he was a by-blow of an affair between the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, but that was just idle gossip. Valerius put that about himself, to boost his standing. I can’t believe that he has any real class in his blood.... But, whatever the truth of his birth, he is certainly what human beings call an angel. And a high-ranking angel at that.

But they’re not angels at all, you see – those creatures who pose as such. They’re not remotely angelic, not in the everyday sense. They claim that they seek to do good in the world, and certainly they try to defeat and destroy the likes of me. They have bizarre ideas about the role of the English in saving human civilisation, and they work by stealth rather than through combat face to face.

But their beauty is illusory and their purity is nil. All angels are self-serving, hypocritical bureaucrats – at best. At worst they are schemers and plotters, intending no good to anyone apart from themselves and their immediate friends. And, like me, they can enter into any host they damn well please, and make a nuisance of themselves in human affairs.

‘And what is Miller to you?’ I managed to spit out.

‘He is ours,’ said the Head/Valerius calmly. ‘Ours. And I am here to protect him.’

‘Why?’ I think I may have shouted the word, making it long and loud. Oh dear, I was so very upset.

‘Because he deserves to be protected, that’s why. He is good, and pure, and beautiful, and we have plans for him.’

So. That was it. Valerius and his friends had a plan for my beautiful golden boy.

‘I just wanted to let you know,’ said the Head. He spoke in the most calm and reasonable of tones. As if we had not, the pair of us, resorted to painful violence on his part, and uncontrollable rage and anguish on mine. ‘He’s not yours. He’s ours. So whatever ideas you may have had about using him yourself – forget them.’

*

I went back to Wragmount House and I howled some more.

I howled silently, of course, without a flicker of distress on my features. Outwardly I was under control, and a stranger would have been forgiven for assuming that business continued as usual. But inwardly I seethed and moaned and swore. I planned a painful and protracted death for Valerius, and destruction for all his allies.

But it was empty wishful thinking, I’m afraid.

Angels like Valerius are jolly difficult to damage, you know, much less destroy. Provoke them, and you will discover that, for their part, they can create an awful lot of havoc, if they wish. And they do wish. For they’re underhand, cruel, and vicious – a gang of thugs and hooligans, and there is nothing nice that can be said about any of them.

Nevertheless, I was at that stage still determined that I would have my golden boy, Valerius or no Valerius.

For the first time ever, I went to watch Sebastian Miller bathe. I saw the glory of his body, his blissful shining flesh,

the size of his penis and balls. I looked with longing upon the glorious curve of his shoulder, at the point where it merged with his neck. And I knew that in time, if I approached him aright, he would come to me gladly, willingly, and lovingly; as so many had before. Not because he was gay, or queer, or perverted. Of course not. No, he would give himself to me because he would recognise instinctively that in surrendering his beauty and purity he would be merging himself with a superior class of person.

The next night, I went out and took a woman. I had been watching her progress for some time. Discreetly. She was the wife of a fellow teacher, and he was on duty at one of the other houses. I went round to her home, was admitted, and stripped her naked both literally and metaphorically. She made no protest, any more than the golden boy would. Quite the reverse. She shuddered with an ecstasy of joy. Compared with the pleasure of allowing me the use of her body, an orgasm is about as satisfying as a sneeze.

The woman died soon afterwards, as they usually do. A stroke, the doctors decided. I went to the funeral.

In that way I sent a signal to Valerius. It was the means that I used to convey to him a message; and the message was one of defiance.

*

Unfortunately, as the Michaelmas term gave way to the Lent, and the Lent to the Summer, it became apparent that Valerius was right.

I could not have the golden boy. Wriggle and squirm as I might, I could not have him, for he was protected by the angels. Protected, at least, from the consummation of my desires.

I won't go into the details. Suffice it to say that I could not penetrate the enemy's barriers. Not in the way that I

wanted.

It took me several months to come to terms with the situation, and, when I did, I also came to a rather petty and childish conclusion. I decided that, if I could not have the boy, the angels would not have him either. I decided, in short, that I would kill Sebastian Miller, and place him for ever beyond the reach of either party. For you see, whatever you may have heard, those who die do not achieve angelic status merely by dying. Dear me no. And just as well too, in my opinion.

Nevertheless, this decision of mine was an error. I'm afraid that I wasn't a very mature person at that point, even though I was over a thousand years old. And I certainly wasn't thinking clearly.

What happened, you see, was this. I killed young Miller during a game of cricket: specifically, when the first eleven were playing against the staff.

I was batting, and Miller was at square leg.

One of the faster bowlers sent me down a bouncer. The speed of the delivery was no problem to one such as I, possessed of occult powers, and in my mind's eye I slowed the ball almost to walking pace. Then I swung the bat with double the normal acceleration, and I cracked that ball like a bullet, straight at Miller's head.

As a matter of fact he very nearly caught it; which should have been impossible, in theory.

It was impossible, in practice. The ball struck him just above the eyes, in the middle of the forehead, and he was dead before he fell to the ground.

The Headmaster ran to ring for an ambulance. The school doctor, who had been watching on the boundary, did what he could. But it was hopeless.

I pretended grief and remorse. I clutched my hands to-

gether and bemoaned the injustice of fate. At least for a few minutes. But then, when the Headmaster returned after contacting the emergency services, he looked me straight in the eye.

And I realised that Valerius was not dismayed. Not dismayed in the slightest.

And I knew then that he had cheated me.

Well, I told you they were all shitbags. Unconscionable, ruthless, unprincipled scum. They will stop at nothing, you see. Sink to any depth, commit any sin – do anything, in short, which increases their power and wealth.

Valerius had told me, to my face, that they had plans for that boy. And to enrol him in their services, to take that beautiful golden boy and then to use him for their own ends, they had first to bring about his death. For the angels work in mysterious ways.

And yet they could not kill him themselves, you see. Certainly not. That step, at least, they have never taken.

I don't quite know what would happen to an angel who killed, but I imagine that the retribution would be pretty spectacular and very painful. And it would last for eternity. So I don't suppose that such a thing will ever happen. But they were quite capable of tricking me into doing the job for them. And I had done it, hadn't I?

Well, I said I was immature. And I've never claimed to be clever. Just greedy. And filled with an overwhelming hunger, which blinded me to even the simplest of traps and devices.

'You mustn't feel responsible, Edward,' said the Headmaster, in the hearing of others, who all nodded in agreement. But I did feel responsible, as you will understand. And I was.

*

It was said by the boys that, after Miller was killed, the Headmaster was never the same man again. And of course he wasn't, because within a week Valerius had left him. From then on the Headmaster reverted to being that same run-of-the-mill schoolmaster that he had been before Valerius entered him. He became... rather dull.

As for me... I was never the same again either.

I left the school at the end of the following academic year. There was no stain on my record – the Coroner absolved me from any blame or criticism – but I thought it best, all round, that I should leave, and no one tried to stop me.

I went to live in Cambridge. I had private means, do you see, as many gentlemen did in those days. My capital was much reduced because of the war, but there was enough to buy me a modest house and to generate an income to live on.

I filled my days with research into the early mathematicians, in the University library.

After a while, my old College asked me to do some teaching, and I began to take tutorials. A few more years, and I became a Fellow. I helped with the cricket and the hockey.

As the academic wheel turned, and as season succeeded season, I continued to look for beauty and purity. But after some years I began to realise that these much-prized qualities were again in short supply; at least in England. The country had begun its not-so-slow decline into multicultural ignorance, selfishness, and generalised catastrophe. The students who came to us could no longer spell or punctuate, much less dazzle us Fellows with their grasp of mathematics and science. And so I went for longer and longer periods without sustenance.

What happens, when you do that, is that you become weak. But I compared every possible meal with the glory of my golden boy at Salcey. And suddenly they did not look so interesting or inviting. They looked shabby. And slightly disgusting.

So I abstained.

Use it or lose it, they say. And I started to appreciate that I didn't care if I lost everything. I knew that, if I didn't eat soon, I would die. But I didn't care if I died. And so I continued to abstain.

There comes a point of no return. A point beyond which you cannot recover. And I am past that point now. But I don't mind. It is easy to bear. For mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord – so to speak. I had known and loved and pleased in my mind a being as pure and divine as any that ever walked upon the face of the earth. He was an English schoolboy called Miller. And once he was gone – sent away by my own hand – there was nothing left for me to care about.

And so I have chosen not to eat, and I grow feeble as the body that hosts me grows old. I begin to fade away. To forget things. I begin to lose the capacity to see things clearly. I hear less sharply. And I feel pain less acutely.

In a month or two I shall die. For ever. But the passing years have brought me one consolation. For I eventually realised that my golden boy must surely live on.

Valerius, you see, together with his appalling confrères, conspired to force me to oblige them, and I did. Foolishly. But Valerius's reaction proves to me that, at the moment of Miller's death, the boy's beauty and purity will have been transferred to another shell. Another human being. One for whom the angels, God help us all, have plans. But he will again be a human being, despite that. And so he, at least,

survives and prospers.

I take some pleasure in that.

The College has taken me in to nurse me through my last days. Well, not taken me in literally, for they haven't the room, but they have arranged my affairs for me, as they do for many an old College bachelor. I am past caring for myself. Now I lie in a bed, which oddly enough is not in some quiet country village, but perched high above a busy Cambridge street.

Down below I can hear the world going about its business. The undergraduates pass by, chattering as they go. And I lie here and think about my golden boy. I think over all the times we spent together, and all the pleasure that I derived from his grace.

I wonder where he has gone.

Gunner Balfour Treated Fairly

One of my many peculiarities is that I am interested in yew trees, and the oldest yew trees are often found in churchyards.

One afternoon I happened to visit a churchyard which was unusual in that it contained many rows of identical gravestones; and when I looked at them I discovered, of course, that they were military graves. They marked the last resting place of soldiers from overseas who had survived the first world war, but had then succumbed to the influenza epidemic which followed immediately afterwards.

I found this churchyard unusually upsetting. It just wasn't fair, I thought, that so many young men should have dodged all the bullets and shells, only to die a few months later, many thousands of miles from home. I began to wonder how the dead soldiers felt about their fate; and after that, I decided to write a story about one of those young men.

NOT MANY OLD LADIES WOULD ask their granddaughter to have a one-night stand with a soldier – especially if the two young people have not even been properly introduced. But that is what happened to me, in the summer of my twentieth year.

It was June, and I was at the end of my second year at

Oxford. I received this slightly mysterious letter from my grandmother – my mother’s mother – asking me to phone her urgently. When I did, she invited me to go and see her. Well, more than invited – she pretty well demanded that I go and stay with her for a couple of nights. She said that she needed my help, urgently, but wouldn’t elaborate on what; just said that it was a family matter, and something of the utmost importance.

I dearly love my Granny, and I would go to quite a lot of trouble to help her, and as it happened I had finished all my exams so I was able to agree; though I must say I was a bit puzzled. ‘Bring that blue dress of yours – the one with buttons up the front,’ Granny had said. Which all added to the mystery.

My grandmother lives in a small village in Wiltshire, on the edge of Salisbury Plain. The Plain, as you probably know, is a big centre of military activity, and most of Granny’s neighbours are retired colonels or brigadiers. The tank regiments use the area for various war games, and the infantry practise street fighting in some of the deserted villages. These villages were not deserted willingly: they were taken over by the army during the second world war, and have never been returned to civilian use.

Granny, needless to say, is heavily involved in church affairs and village activities generally. She is president of the flower club, a member of the women’s bowls team (despite being over eighty), and is secretary of the women’s institute (or some such body – I forget the details).

I arrived soon after lunch on a beautifully warm June day: a taxi from the nearest railway station delivered me to Granny’s door.

We spent the afternoon resting and chatting, drinking tea, and then calling on various neighbours. We distributed

excess vegetables from Granny's garden. 'Helping the old folk,' Granny called it, oblivious of the fact that she herself was older than many of those we visited.

Nothing whatever was said about 'the matter of the utmost importance', and I knew better than to press the point. Like many old people who live alone, Granny talked a great deal whenever she had company, and I knew that she would tell me what was troubling her when she was good and ready.

After a light evening meal we chatted some more, and watched a television programme that Granny was particularly anxious to see.

Then she said: 'I think we'll just go for a little walk. Not very far. Just around the churchyard.'

Granny lives in a detached house, set in a comfortable garden, directly opposite the church – which is fourteenth century – so a walk round the churchyard was not going to tax either of us.

The sun had now set, and the light was fading, but the sky was still perfectly clear. The air was calm and sultry.

As we came out of Granny's drive, and prepared to cross the road, I was struck by the almost complete absence of signs of life. Cars are few and far between in the village nowadays, because a new road has taken all the traffic away; and on that particular evening there weren't even any dog-walkers about.

Granny took us on a small diversion, to look at the house of an absent neighbour and make sure that it was in good order, and then she led the way through the lychgate and into the churchyard.

I should explain that the churchyard in Granny's village is one of a number in the area which contain both civilian and military graves. As usual, the civilian ones cover sever-

al centuries, and come in all shapes and sizes. The military graves all date from 1919, soon after the end of the first world war; almost without exception they mark the final resting place of soldiers from New Zealand, and they are absolutely standard in design. They are about three feet high, and arranged in lines, like a platoon on parade: the white headstones carry little more than the name, rank, and date of death.

I have been familiar with these graves since I was a little girl, and as I walked through the churchyard with Granny I paid them little attention. I was just listening to her telling me how difficult it was to find anyone who would cut the grass regularly.

It did occur to me that Granny was talking even more than usual, and perhaps a little louder than usual, but I made nothing of that: just an old lady's eccentricity. If I noticed anything, it was that the soldiers' headstones seemed to glow in the twilight, as if they were softly illumined from within.

We went into the churchyard at the west end, walked around the north side of the church, where most of the soldiers are buried, and then began to approach the east end, where there is a huge old yew tree. This yew is older, some say, than the church; so old that its trunk has divided into two sections, leaving a gap large enough to walk through.

As we approached the east end of the church, I began to hear this loud humming noise. At first I thought it might be a swarm of bees, or something similar, and I looked round in some alarm. But it was a bit too late in the evening for bees, I thought, and anyway I couldn't see any. The loud humming continued. It sounded almost as if it was a human being, making a sort of Mmmmm! sound, in warm appreciation of something – as if someone had tasted

something really juicy.

I said nothing to Granny, and we walked slowly on, with Granny still prattling away about the churchyard management committee and the curious intractability of its members – which meant that they didn't always agree with her.

And then Granny seemed to notice my puzzlement. She stopped and turned to look at me. 'What's the matter, dear?'

'Well... nothing,' I said. 'But can you hear that humming noise?'

Granny stood and listened. 'No,' she said. 'I can't. Not any more. But I used to hear it when I was younger.'

'What is it?'

Granny went into her evasive mode. 'Oh, nothing to be alarmed about,' she said vaguely. And began to walk on again. But still very slowly.

After a moment I followed her.

By now it was almost dark, but we were just able to see where we were going. And it was at that point that I heard a man's voice. Quite distinctly.

'It's not fair!' said the voice. The man spoke sharply, with a good deal of emphasis and some bitterness. 'It's not fair, I say! Do you hear me? It's not fair.'

As you will understand, I looked around to see where this voice was coming from. The speaker was obviously some distance away, rather than right behind me, but at first I could see no one.

So I carried on walking, following Granny, who was doddering a bit, looking down to make quite certain where she was putting her feet.

I caught up with Granny as she prepared to walk along the south side of the church, completing our circular tour and heading back towards the churchyard gate. I put my

hand on Granny's arm to stop her progress.

'Did you hear someone speak?' I asked her.

'No dear, I didn't. Did you?

'Yes.'

'What did they say?' The tone was innocent – so innocent that even then I guessed that Granny knew more than she was admitting.

I told her. Speaking quite distinctly myself, I said: 'It was a man. and he said, "It's not fair."'

'Ah,' said Granny, with a slightly guilty tone to her voice. 'In that case it was Gunner Balfour. Is he, perhaps, under the yew tree?'

I turned to look back at the ancient yew, and sure enough, I could now see the dark figure of a man, almost hidden under the lower branches.

And again I heard him speak. It was almost a shout, with a note of desperation: 'It's not fair! Not fair at all! I should have had my turn. And I never did. And that's not right. I won't rest till I do. Do you hear me? Won't rest until I do.'

The voice was now so loud and aggressive that I began to feel a little alarmed. 'I think we should go,' I said firmly, and took Granny's arm to hurry her along.

'Oh you mustn't be frightened of Gunner Balfour,' said Granny. 'He sounds a bit fierce but I assure you he's harmless.'

I looked back at the figure under the tree, and was relieved to see that the man had not moved. And now that I looked more closely, I could see that he was wearing army uniform; his belt buckle sent a brief flash of reflection from the distant street light, as did his boots.

'Harmless he may be,' I said, 'but it's very late, and I think we should go home.'

Once we arrived back at the house, I locked the front door after us, and went round making sure that all doors and windows were fully secure. Granny, meanwhile, made some cocoa.

When she handed me my cup I said, 'Now then, Granny, I think it's about time you told me what that business in the churchyard was all about. Are you going to tell me who Gunner Balfour is, and what he means by hanging around out there?'

Granny took refuge, once again, in a sort of geriatric fatigue. 'Oh not just now, dear. I don't think now's the right time. I'll tell you tomorrow, dear. In what is sometimes called the cold light of day.'

*

The following morning we took our time about getting up. Then we had a neighbour in for coffee, and finally, after the neighbour had departed, I told Granny once again that I wanted hear about Gunner Balfour.

'Oh,' she said, as if faintly surprised. 'I thought you might have forgotten.'

This was a transparent lie. She thought no such thing.

'How could I forget?' I said. 'I want to know what on earth this man was doing, lurking about in the graveyard late at night, and scaring people by shouting at them. Is he a regular soldier?'

'Oh yes.'

'And what does his commanding officer think of him doing that sort of thing?'

Granny didn't answer. What I got was a thoughtful question instead: 'Tell me – how did he look to you?'

'What do you mean, how did he look? You saw him, didn't you?'

Granny shook her head. 'No, dear. I can't see him any

longer. Or hear him either. Though I did once, of course. When I was younger.'

'Granny, you're not going blind, are you?' I was quite upset and concerned.

'No, no, dear. I'm not blind. Neither am I deaf. Not really.'

'Well what then?'

I think it was at that point that I first began to understand; and, despite the warmth of the day, I shivered.

'My dear,' said Granny, 'you've gone quite pale. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.... I tell you what, it might make better sense if we go across the road again. And Gunner Balfour won't be there at this time of day, that much is quite certain.'

So that is what we did.

Granny led the way, and we wandered through the ancient graves until we were among the regular rows of New Zealand soldiers. And there, of course, we found the grave of Gunner Albert Balfour. Aged seventeen.

We stood and looked at the grave together.

'He lied about his age, of course,' said Granny. 'They were farming people, his family. Good church-going folk, from somewhere near Christchurch. This boy was their only son, and they needed him on the farm really, but he thought he ought to volunteer for the army, and so they all conspired to let him. As soon as he left school he signed the recruitment papers, pretending he was older than he really was. And I expect the army knew what he was doing, but they weren't too fussy about details in those days.'

'And did he die in action?'

'Oh no! None of these men died in action. What happened was, at the end of the war, in November 1918, the troops gradually began to drift back to England from

France. Of course in an ideal world the troops from overseas – Canada, Australia, and so forth – they ought to have been sent home immediately. But there simply weren't the ships available to move them. So lots of the troops were left hanging about in England, with nothing much to do, for months on end.'

I was astonished. 'I bet that was popular.'

'Well, exactly. The officers used to take them on endless route marches across Salisbury Plain, that sort of thing. I believe some of the Canadian troops actually mutinied, in protest against the delays, and the futility of wasting time. But that didn't happen here. What did happen, of course, was influenza.'

'Influenza?'

'Oh yes. There were epidemics of influenza all over Europe in 1918 and '19, and it wasn't just your usual bad-cold-and-a-headache type of flu. This was a killer. And it did kill them. Even fit young men. Killed them by the score, as you can see.' She looked around, at the rows of pale creamy headstones.

Suddenly – and this was most unlike my grandmother – her face seemed to crumple and she grew ten years older, right in front of my eyes. She began to weep.

'I met his parents,' she said, in between great gulping sobs. 'They came over after the second war, because they knew they were going to die soon, and they wanted to see his grave. And it's all my fault, you see! That's the worst part. It's all my fault!'

*

I took Granny home, sat her down, and gave her a nice strong cup of tea. It was what she would have done for anyone else in a similar state of distress. And when she had regained control of herself I asked her to explain what she

had meant about it being all her fault.

Granny sighed deeply and looked down at the damp handkerchief in her hands. 'Well, you see, it's my fault that Gunner Balfour cannot rest in peace.'

'Start at the beginning,' I said firmly. 'And go on to the end, and then stop.'

For once in her life Granny did as she was told.

'Well, you see, at the end of the first war, all those New Zealanders died in England, as you well know. They survived all the shooting and killing, and then they died of a disease which most of us recover from in a week or two. Which is a dreadful irony in itself. And there they all lie, in a Wiltshire graveyard, many thousands of miles from their homes and their loved ones.

'I don't suppose the dead men were very happy about their situation, but they put up with it, as soldiers do. But then after the second world war, something happened. Something happened to upset them. Well, it upset Gunner Balfour, anyway.'

I waited, but nothing came. So I prodded. 'What, exactly, happened?'

'Well...' There was much hesitation, and some embarrassment; a little guilt. 'Well, you see, at the end of the second war there was a great deal of joy, as you can imagine, and a good deal of celebration, both formal and informal. And I think what happened was, a young soldier and his girlfriend went into the churchyard one night and celebrated in the way that young people do.'

Another pause.

'You mean they made love?'

'Yes. Under the yew tree. Quite near to Gunner Balfour's grave. Too near, for his liking.'

'It can't have been very comfortable for the couple con-

cerned.'

'Oh, it wasn't too bad,' said Granny immediately. 'It's all right on a nice warm summer's evening.' She gave me a reproving look. 'And besides, young people then weren't as free as you are now, you know. They couldn't just say to the family, Excuse us, we're off upstairs for a quickie. They had to be more discreet. Take walks in the evening. That sort of thing.'

So, the rabbit was very definitely out of the hat. I now knew that my grandmother was rather more familiar with the couple in question than had appeared at first sight.

'I see,' I said, totally straight-faced. 'But just assuming you're right about the couple under the yew tree, why should it be Gunner Balfour who took offence, rather than any of the others?'

To Granny it was perfectly obvious. 'Oh, because he'd never done it, you see. That's why. He'd never made love to a woman himself. He says so, doesn't he? "It's not fair," he says. "I should have had my turn." That sort of thing. You've heard him, haven't you?'

I had to admit I had.

'It was after the second war, and after that bit of, er, informal celebration, that people began to hear him for the first time. Well, I say people. It's only women, of course. Women of child-bearing age, so to speak. Children can't hear him, or see him, and the oldies can't either.... He's not so bad in the winter – he lies quiet for most of the time. But in the summer, in the long hot evenings, he is troubled by desire.'

And he is not alone in that, I thought, but I said nothing.

Granny began to cry again. 'And the worst thing is, I could have put a stop to it then. And I didn't.'

'How do you mean, you could have put a stop to it?'

‘Well, I could have gone with him, couldn’t I? I could have given him what he wanted. I could have given him the experience of having a woman.’ Her hands twisted together as she sought to express her guilt and shame. ‘He only wants to do it the once, you see. I’m sure of that. It’s just that he was so young, and he died so far from home, without ever having had a girl of his own. And that’s what he means when he says it’s so unfair! And he’s right! It is. Horribly, horribly unfair.’

I looked out of the window. Yes, it was still a normal June afternoon, in a perfectly normal English village, with a couple of perfectly normal English women, having a chat about ghosts in the churchyard.

‘So the figure that I saw and heard last night, he was a ghost, was he?’

Granny wiped her eyes and became very serious. ‘I prefer to think of him as a presence,’ she said. ‘People get frightened and come over all silly when you speak of ghosts. But technically Gunner Balfour is a ghost, of course. A ghost, you see, is the spirit of a dead person who for some reason remains earthbound. Such a spirit may generate an illusion, that is to say something which is actually unreal, but which looks and sounds convincingly real. That is why you can see him and hear him.’

‘I see,’ I said. ‘Well, I sort of see. But if he is a ghost then surely he ought to be exorcised.’

Granny was dismissive. ‘Oh, we’ve tried that. Last Vicar but one.’

‘And?’

‘Well, the Vicar went into the churchyard late at night, with his bell book and candle, or whatever, and he hadn’t got more than three words out when Gunner Balfour punched him full in the face and knocked him flat. The

Vicar came out of that churchyard a sight faster than he went in, I can tell you. “I don’t know what that ghost wants, Mrs Bannister,” he said to me afterwards, “but one thing he doesn’t want is to be exorcised.” So that was the end of that.’

I tried another track. “Well why not leave him alone then? Just let him be. Is he very troublesome?’

“No, not... particularly. It’s only young girls who can hear him clearly, and they tend to keep well away. Or they used to. Modern girls are bolder – I’ve heard them shout back at him. Telling him what he can do with himself, that sort of thing. Well that’s not kind, and it’s not at all helpful.’

‘Time has not mellowed him then.’

‘Oh no. For they shall not grow old as we that are left grow old.’

That thought struck home a bit, and I paused.

Then I said: ‘What does the current Vicar think?’

‘He raised it at the last churchyard committee meeting. Tactfully. And I said that I had an idea for dealing with the matter. So I was appointed. Mrs Jenkin, the secretary, minuted that Mrs Bannister was appointed as a subcommittee of one to deal with the churchyard ghost. She made a bit of a joke of it. But it’s not a joke at all. It’s not a bit funny. It’s a serious matter, and it has to be dealt with properly. And I’m afraid it’s a family matter – because as I explained, I’m the one who started it all off.’

There was another pause, while I digested what Granny had told me. ‘Well, if you’ve been deputed to deal with it, what are you going to do?’

‘Well for a start, I sent for you.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘So it’s a plot, is it?’

Granny looked just a little bit sheepish. ‘I’m afraid so. You see I’m a wicked, scheming old woman.’

*

I called a halt at that point. Subconsciously I had decided that I didn't want to hear any more, at least for the time being.

We went out to lunch at one of the two village pubs. Then we came home, and after Granny had had a nap and a cup of tea, I asked her what she thought I could do to help.

'Ah well, you see,' she began, and I knew at once that she was going to take a roundabout route. 'You've heard the noise, haven't you – that low, rumbling, murmuring sound.'

'Yes,' I said – cautiously.

'Well that means Gunner Balfour likes you. And you've seen him under the yew tree.'

'Yes....'

'And you've heard what he said. About it not being fair.'

'Yes.'

'Well then....'

I genuinely didn't understand, even then. And I must have looked blank, because Granny felt obliged to be more specific.

'You're not engaged, are you?'

'No.'

'Or spoken for in any way?'

'No.'

'Good. I was pretty sure you weren't. It wouldn't do otherwise.'

'Granny, what wouldn't do?'

'Well, you see, you are exactly the sort of person he needs. Gunner Balfour needs a young beautiful woman, preferably someone who is not attached to anyone else, and who has enough experience to help him. Because he hasn't

had any experience.'

I was, I must admit, incredulous. 'You mean, you think I should go into the churchyard and let Gunner Balfour make love to me?'

'Oh yes, dear. That's the whole point.'

I must have looked stunned, and I was certainly speechless, so more argument followed.

'It's not much to ask, is it? Poor Gunner Balfour was robbed and cheated of fifty years of life. He was a perfectly healthy and decent young man, laid low by a terrible virus. And all he asks in return for his sacrifice is a little affection. That's all. He doesn't want a lifetime's devotion, or a drawn-out love affair – he just wants a few moments of kindness and generosity and sympathy. A little recognition of the sacrifice he made. Now that's not unreasonable, is it? And I'm sure you can put it all right for him if you choose. I mean you have spent two years at Oxford – so you're not without experience are you?'

At last she stopped for breath, and I almost laughed. But I was forced to admit that she was right. About that last bit. 'No, Granny,' I said solemnly. 'I am not without experience.'

'Oh good. So you'll do it then?'

I sighed deeply. 'What precisely do I have to do?'

'Well, you have to go into the churchyard at midnight tonight.'

'Has it got to be tonight?'

'Oh yes. It's midsummer's Eve.'

Well, there was no arguing with that. 'And it's got to be midnight, has it?'

'Oh yes. That seems the appropriate time to me.'

'Hmm,' I said. 'I think I'm going to need a minute or two to think about this.' But of course we both knew that she

had me.

‘Jolly good,’ Granny said chirpily. ‘And by the way, whatever happens, I don’t think we should tell your mother.’

*

After tea we went for a walk and watched part of a bowls match. Then we had non-alcoholic drinks in the pub and wandered home at about ten.

Granny disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later she emerged with a bowl of cereal, made with hot milk. I was mildly astonished, because we didn’t normally have any supper.

‘What’s this?’

‘Well, dear, I look at it this way. If I was going to go out into the churchyard, at midnight on midsummer’s eve, to meet Gunner Balfour under the yew tree, I think I would want to get a couple of weetabix inside me first.’

I was beyond protest by that time. I ate it all up, like a good girl.

‘I think you should wear that blue dress,’ said Granny. ‘The one with buttons all down the front. Nice and easy to get out of. And sandals.’

‘And nothing else,’ I added sarcastically, but Granny thought I was being vulgar and refused to reply.

‘I shan’t wait up,’ she said, ‘any more than I would if you were going to a disco.’

And when I had finished the weetabix she took the bowl from me and pottered off to bed.

After about half an hour I changed into the suggested outfit, feeling distinctly foolish and self-conscious, and then I waited, alone, in silence, until the church clock struck twelve. Perhaps I dozed, I don’t know, but the time seemed to pass quite quickly.

I turned off all the lights in the house and then went out, quietly, through the front door. There I paused for a few moments, letting my eyes become used to the gloom.

It was fairly dark, because there was no moon, and there was scarcely a sound to be heard. Just once, in the far distance, I heard the engine of a car. Then silence again.

My feet crunched on the gravel as I went down the short drive, and when I crossed the road I could see no sign of a light in any of the houses.

As soon as I reached the gate to the churchyard I heard the hum again – that hum of desire, as I now realised. It was much louder now than the first time, and for a moment I hesitated.

As if sensing my uncertainty, the hum paused, and then, when I did not run, it began again, more intense than ever. Too late to turn back now, I thought.

I went in through the gate, and I saw Gunner Balfour at once. He was waiting for me under the yew tree. As on the previous night, an indirect beam of street light, far away, flickered briefly on his belt and his boots.

As I approached the low boughs of the ancient yew, Gunner Balfour came forward to greet me, and I could see at once that he was far younger than I had imagined. He was nothing more than a tall, lanky boy. Shy, and little reserved. His eyes shone, and his belt buckle shone, and his boots shone like black gold. He had polished them just for me.

I led him, rather than he me, until we were hidden deep under the yew. And when we were both naked and ready I reached out my hand and took hold of his manhood. It seemed quite unusually hot and firm – but then he had been kept waiting for a very long time.

After it was all over, his hand stroked my face. And then

he quietly faded away.

Nothing remained of him except his neatly folded uniform, and his belt, and his boots. I could see them clearly defined in the half light of midnight, and when I reached out and touched them they were as real as my own hand. But I left them there on the ground. I thought he might need them again.

The following morning I was awake at dawn. And when I had gathered my senses I remembered about the uniform.

I thought it might somehow alarm people – cause gossip and talk – if a soldier's uniform and his boots were to be found under the yew tree. It might generate enough speculation about the ghost to get into the local press; and then the nationals would pick it up, and after that the village would have no peace. So I pulled on a few clothes – not the blue dress – and hurried across the road.

I knew exactly where the uniform, and the belt, and the boots, had been left. And I went straight to the spot.

But of course... there was nothing there.

Afterword

The first story in this collection dealt with a young man who was a storyteller; he told tall tales in return for a pint of beer. In the introduction to that story, I said that, in some ways, that was what all storytellers did.

The last story in the collection has featured a ghost; and, as mentioned in the body of the story, a ghost may be regarded as a creature who generates an illusion.

That too is what storytellers do.

The teller of tales creates an illusion which, with luck, will generate real emotion. But when you go back the next morning and try to discover what brought about those effects, you find that there is nothing there.

Well, not much, anyway.

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