

LET US THEN REJOICE



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DRAMA

Now Another Day

No Contract For Love

Account Rendered

The Pit Digger

The Bahrat Tender

Your Humble Investigator (a TV series in collaboration with Lory Alder comprising: *Chase The Ace*, *Special Twist*, *Crooks' Tour*).

MUSICAL COMEDY

Two Hours of Happiness (in collaboration with Malcolm Knight)

LET US THEN REJOICE

**A selection of new poetry
and old prose**

by
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My thanks to Stephen Page for his cover picture of my youngest grand-daughter Katie. And my thanks, as always, to Tony Jenner for his design of the ASPEN logo.

For my wonderful children and grand-children

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PREFACE

I offer no apology for inflicting yet one more book of poetry on my readers, but I do offer the palliative thought that it will probably be my last.

For this reason, among others, I have appended a number of short stories written many years ago and not previously published, as a sort of clue to the direction that my future work will take.

Indeed, the course has already been plotted and the vessel has set sail (you see, even now I cannot resist metaphor!) and the fruits of this endeavour will be found in my work *You Do Not Apologise for Chutzpah* that will be published electronically.

It will, in effect, be an extension of the autobiographical sections of this and my previous book, with greater emphasis on the places, people and events that have been the major influence on my life and my personal philosophy.

As far as the current work is concerned, it consists of three sections, the first being the 50 or so poems that I wrote during the past twelve months; the second is the autobiographical section in free verse, continuing the story of my lives and loves from the end of World War II; and the final section is the eight short stories referred to above.

Please enjoy!

NEW VERSE

This section comprises a collection of verse written in 2016, partly suggested by the monthly initiative of the Jewish Poetry Society, and partly encouraged by the several poetry LinkedIn groups in which I have participated.



THE BEACH (Page 12)

BUT NOT YET

He's back.
Recovered from suspected heart attack.
Sense of humour undiminished.

To those who thought that he was finished,
unwilling to rest supine
and echoing Saint Augustine,
although aware the sun will set:

but not yet.

THE BEACH

There are no grains
of golden sand
to be seen
upon this black and burning beach
where we once spent our honeymoon.
In Ostia.

The brutal sun,
so uncompassionate,
that desiccates our skin
and burns the unshod feet
that venture on that dirt-black sand
in Ostia.

Why should one choose
to indurate the body
in such an unappealing
coastal strip that serves
as beach to Romans who betake themselves
to Ostia.

Particularly since
It'll cost ya.

VALE ANNUS HORIBILIS

[Some thoughts in verse as midnight fast approaches]

And so I finally can say “goodbye”
to monstrosly distressing twenty-sixteen
reflecting back with inward shrug and sigh
on happenings that never should have been.

But I have lived through all that could be thrown
by Nature with insouciant disdain.
retaining sensitivity alone
that I have sought to disregard in vain.

And now as these last few hours pass away
I sit with solitary glass of cheer,
ready to greet the dawn of a new day
that is the harbinger of a New Year.

And I reflect however bad may seem
the slings and arrows of life’s jesting style
it does no good to rant and rave and scream;
such immature response is juvenile.

Better by far embrace the positive
though hard to find in the twelve months now gone,
there’s always much denial to forgive,
and clemency comes easy when alone

MOVING

Moving is not the
sweet sorrow of parting,
but the sad joy of
exploring new beginnings.

I would cry
but I need no tears
to move me.

The memory of your dear self
beside me when I awake . . .
moves me.

The recalled sound of your dear voice
insistent within my ear . . .
moves me.

A review of those joyful times
within a photo album . . .
moves me.

And now that you are gone
I must move on.

THE MAGICAL LAND

There is a country that is far away
In time and space no more than shadow play;
A land designed to elevate the soul
More lofty than a soaring oriole.

A place that helps to make my spirit sigh
And soar as light as any dragonfly,
Respecting each the rights of every other
Where every man to me is my blood brother.

I lived there in miasma quite opaque
Within a dream I dreamt while still awake.
A land that's still as far away in heart
As this which very soon I must depart

Although they seem so very far away
Neighbours are a cynic's sobriquet
For people who are simply non-aligned
With nothing but contempt for all mankind.

Within the real world all is selfish interest
But not so far away in truth this is the best.
True patriots there are who here assemble;
Be warned you tyrants that you stand and tremble.

BIRTHDAY SOLACE

And so another year has passed me by
And once again I sigh a mournful sigh
As I recall the wondrous gift of joy
The passing seasons gave me as a boy.
(Nostalgic loss almost too great to bear)
Where have they gone those thrills of yesteryear?

And now the time has come to say goodbye
And as I give one final mournful sigh
My memory flies back on sylvan wings
And turns its gaze on all those bygone things
That filled my days and nights with pure delight.
How to recapture that elusive sporophyte –
The asexual and diploid stages of my strife
To herald the despair and hope of afterlife.
How to revisit scenes of mirth and joy
And find again the pleasures of a boy?



I DID IT

They said I couldn't do it;
They said I wouldn't do it;
They said I shouldn't do it.
But I did.

They said I couldn't bear it;
They said I wouldn't share it;
They said I shouldn't wear it.
But I did.

The tears that burst
The pain I cursed
that was the worst
that e'er befell.

I thought I'd never find it;
I hid myself behind it
which merely underlined it
and I cried.

They said that I'd regret it
I'd do better to forget it.
I said "You want to bet it?"
And I died.

JUST A METAPHOR

[1]

Did you compare me to a Shakespeare sonnet
dear friend my head would not fit 'neath my bonnet.
But, on reflection, I feel much better for
the recognition that it's a mere metaphor.

[2]

A small craft bobbing on an endless sea
is nothing but a metaphor for me.

[3]

I regard the thin shavings
produced by my use of a paring knife
as being but a metaphor
for the diminished substance of my continued life.

LET US THEN REJOICE

The sun has brightened up
the dull autumnal morn
and those remaining birds
who have not yet begun their exodus
have now commenced their song.

Let us then rejoice.

AUTUMN

It comes, it comes,
the air sweetly thrums
to herald the presence
of chrysanthemums



WIDGETS AND GADGETS

Widgets and gadgets
gizmos and apps.
Whatever happened
to cause the collapse
of my simple world?
What happened to the
simple pleasures?
The joy of simply living;
the joy of simply loving?
All consigned to the limbo
of a thousand electronic
gizmos.

I used to love a lass.
I gave her all I had
in time and space
and multiple delights.
But it is not enough
to satisfy her nights.
Without apps
she snaps.
That bimbo
needs her gizmo.
Without widgets
she fidgets.
She must have
her gadgets.

I'd like to bury hatchets
in her gadgets.

FOR EMILY

There is an invisible tie
that links my daughter and me.
Though not visible
It is as strong and as sharp
as tempered steel.

Though we have spent
so much time far apart,
the bond has never weakened,
and nothing can diminish
the way we feel.



DEATH IS AN ADVENTURE

I have lived many lives;
I have worn many hats;
I have sown many oats,
and touched many hearts.
I have enjoyed adventure
and reaped a rich harvest.

And now there are
no more lives to be lived,
no more hats to be worn,
no more oats to be sown,
no more hearts to be touched,
I look forward to the next,
perhaps the last, adventure.

ON DEATH

Epicurus put it well.

We need not concern ourselves
with death, for
so long as we consider it,
it does not exist.
And when we cease to exist
and can no longer consider it,
it is of no concern.

So . . . what the hell?
Epicurus put it very well.

DE MORTUIS

I've reached the age when most of my contemporaries have
kicked the bucket,
turned up their toes,
popped their clogs,
and other such unsavoury activities.
I take every opportunity
to memorialise their lives.
The question I ask myself is:
when I finally pop my clogs,
kick the bucket, and so on
who will provide the tribute to me?

De mortuis nil nisi bonum is the Latin phrase
of Greek invention.
Speak nothing but good of the dead.
I cannot accept this.
What good can I speak of Adolf Hitler,
Osama Bin Laden
or even Senator Joe McCarthy?
Better would be De mortuis nil nisi veritas.
Speak nothing but the truth.
But, if I had to choose one for my own obituary,
I think I would turn to the late, great Harold Laski,
who coined De mortuis nil nisi bunkum.

I'd be very happy to have nothing but claptrap
talked about me.
after my demise.
At least let there be something written,
be it good,
truth
or codswallop

EPIGRAM . . . OR EPITAPH?

I am experiencing something
that is unique for me:
a growing belief in
my own mortality.

MEDICAL PARADOX

You have to acknowledge the worst
before you can console yourself
with the tenuous belief
in the possibility of
something better.

A RANDOM THOUGHT

The irony is not
that old men forget
but that we remember;
and much of what we remember
is fantasy.

SEMINARS AND WEBINARS

There were so many superstars
Conducting somber seminars
And I've attended many in my time.

And they seemed to take for granted
We could only be enchanted;
That their facilitation is sublime

And since those presentations are
Now displaced by the webinar
Their pedagogic hubris is enlarged.

And they can add computer skill
To their old-fashioned power drill
Engagement thus is positively charged.

And we still can choose to slumber
Through a course no longer somber
The internet will simply intercede

So gird your loins and drop your guard
Send reverence to the graveyard;
The superstar is an endangered breed

WINTER TREES

Why is it that
the foliage of the trees,
with their multi-faceted
shapes
and multi-coloured
hues,
that mask my bedroom windows
from the doubtless uninterested gaze
of neighbours,
endure for eight months of the year
and are absent for four,
and yet those eight fleet by
while the following four
persist so boringly long?

Is there a parallel
with my own life?
Each day is boringly long,
and yet
the preceding eighty-six years
seem to have vanished in
the blinking of an eye.
And those past boring days
seem also to have
disappeared
without a ripple to disturb
the historical calendar
that preceded them.

FLAPJACKS

So you don't put me
on the rack
Or give you
an anxiety attack
for failing to
report back
How I found your
great flapjack,
I'll tell you that,
matter of fact,
A flapjack has
now replaced
the great Big Mac
as my preferred
late supper snack.

But oh! it does plays hell
with dental plaque.

THE NEOPHYTE POET

How strange
that such a nonsense
piece of trivia
inserted tongue-in-cheek,
should bring forth
such a dynamite
response
to my own neophyte
essays in versifying.

Can it be perhaps that others
who might be thought
to understand much better
see it as mere aggression
instead of, as intended,
intercession.

But, metaphorically,
before you close my book,
turn to the final page
and have a look.

THE HOLOCAUST

Decomposing bodies
swollen stomachs
hollow sunken eyes
beaten and degraded
less than animals.

Music bursts forth from their wounds
the blood long since gone from dried veins.

Those chimneys stand there still
as vast totem poles
to pay silent tribute
to those six million souls.

They will be reborn
as new flowers from the dust,
new life from death.
Remember them
but for an accident of birth
it might have been you . . .
or me.

PEE INJUNCTION

I used to have to shake the bottle
to disperse the cream within the milk.
It was considered impolite
not to do so.

In later life skimmed milk
replaced the full cream of before
so that injunction
of my early days
was no longer of concern.

Nowadays I have to shake my penis
to avoid the last few drops of urine
staining my underpants.
It is a chore
that becomes more onerous
by the year.
I'm waiting for the day you see
when they may invent freeze-dried booze,
to dehumidify my pee.

ME AND MY SHADOW

Where does my shadow end
and I begin?
Or, contrariwise,
where is my ending
and my shade's beginning?

Captive
in my body's helpless
state,
I am aware
of the detestable
but inexorable
consuming of my body
by its shadow.

PIG LATIN

There is a tendency among
those poets who may be very young
frequently to put in verse
those foreign phrases, or much worse
the now dead words of oh so vulgar Latin
to boast of classrooms that they've sat in.

And just in case you've never heard 'em,
Let's reduce a few to *ad absurdum*.

It was *amore a prima vista*
until he left her for her younger sister
for, after all, who could resist her,
so moving on to *secunda vista*
he took that step and boldly kissed her,
behaviour that is hardly *utopista*.

The trouble with *modus vivendi*
is that it sometime rhymes with eye
but there are those who don't agree
and think that it must rhyme with tea.
Who cares? It's all the same to I.
Or should that be the same to me?

You may say it is not *de rigueur*
that I defend with so much vigour
what surely is no more than hubris
that I attribute to Confucius
for he surely *ha detto tutto*
albeit *un po convoluto*.

And everyone's heard of *carpe diem*.
If not, then I have yet to see 'em.
But I prefer to seize a waist
which may be thought somewhat unchaste
though far more likely to have shocked 'em
would be to *carpe* in the *noctem*.

Perhaps you think it's *ipso facto*
that I'm intolerant of *lacto*
unless it comes directly from the breast.
I think it's better that the rest
of this is left to your own *opinatus*
for which I offer no blank *cartus*.

Then there's the *modus* of my own *vivendi*
that I indulge in *cacoethes scribendi*
the itch to write for which I daily
scratch myself or play my ukulele
which is my form of *modus operandi*
before I pour myself a king-size brandy.

And thus we leave this boring dull *citare*,
by this time you have certainly grown quite weary
of any further venture into tedium
Or as Dirty Harry might say, *fac ut gaudeam*
For after all a day *senza* sunlight
Might *altrettante facilmente* be night.

ONE MORE TIME

I want to see her one more time;
One more time to say the things
I should have said before;
One more time to say I'm sorry
and how much I deplore
the ill-concealed behaviour
that she could not ignore.

I want to see her one more time;
One more time to gaze upon
that so beloved face;
One more time to visualise
that look of peace and grace
so unappreciated
while it was commonplace

If only I could see her one more time,
I'd be able to expiate my crime,
express contrition
for that disgraceful act
unintentionally hurtful
and more a lack of tact.
If I were granted only one more time.

DO ME A FAVOUR!

(On facing a critical appraisal)

I appreciate your concern
but much prefer your challenges.
The former I did not earn;
the latter causes me to flex my phalanges,
to face the fears that I did spurn;
to gird my loins.
embrace your rectitude
and all that that enjoins,
and face the stain upon my aptitude.

But on reflection
it seems a kick-turn
may be a better flexion.
In fact I welcome your concern,
so disregard my circumspection.

WE SHOULD NOT OUTLIVE OUR CHILDREN

We should not survive our children,
it really is not fair.
The loss that I may suffer
is more than I can bear.

It is contrary to
every single grain of pride and hope
and nurturing love.

It flies in the face of
the biblical promise of
three score years and ten.

How horrifying then that we
the parents
may so far exceed that promise
and yet continue to face
the sickening prospect of
offspring loss.

Our children should not
predecease us!

It simply is not just.

THE PATRIARCH

He has gone.
A mere shadow of his former self.
But I still see him in the passing faces,
or queuing for the bus,
or shopping In the supermarket.
I see him
not as I saw him last
wasted in his bed:
his penultimate resting place,
but as he was throughout those
years.

A child,
a playmate,
an adolescent evacuee,
a youthful, excited participant
in all those artistic delights.
The nudes, the landscapes,
the biblical, familial and historical
inspirations.

And during those
Italian years.
Honing his artistic style.
Enjoying, and being enjoyed by,
that colourful scene
as eccentric as he himself
was destined to become.
And now he is no more.

And I am suddenly
and painfully
struck by this terrible thought:
he was the oldest surviving relative
of that generation,
the offspring of
a mother who was
the sister of my father.

It is a mantle I have had thrust on me.
I am now the patriarch.



(RIP dear cousin Walter Dorin)

POT POURRI

NO HAWKING

I used to have expectorations
But now I don't give a spit.

HE DID IT

If he feared to do it,
he simply hid it.
He knew it must be done
and he did it.

ANENT A SLEEPING PROBLEM

Paradoxically
it is easier forsooth
to seek
a more complicated explanation
than to accept
a simple truth

CONFERENCE

Attending such a conference
of matters quite obscure
and placing undue inference
when one is so unsure.

APHORISMS ON REVENGE

May the fleas of a thousand camels invade
the crotch of the person that ruins your day.
And may their arms be too short
to scratch that invasion away.

Imagined hurt should always long be chewed;
imagined bonds should ever long be gnawed
De Laclos said it well, if somewhat crude:
La vengeance est un plat qui se mange froide.

By all means serve it cold,
but season it with venom
even though I may not be
your enemy.

He may not share the views
that you believe in,
so please do not get mad . . .
get even.

But when you start your journey of revenge,
first build a pair of graves.
One for your enemy
the other for yourself.

APHORISM

Don't despair and do not cease from trying
To finally achieve a happy circumstance.
You know what really is so gratifying.
With time even a bear can learn to dance.

[Based on a Yiddish epigram]

LIFE IS A HALL OF MIRRORS

As I wander through my life,
the distortions of my existence
provide an illusion
of famille rose.

Opacity and semi-opacity
to replace the famille verte
that warps my perspective

PARODIES

Attributed to Dr Johnson is the aphorism that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

My own variation on that apophthegm would suggest that parody is the first resort of a plagiarist. I have yet to come to terms with the degree to which my attraction to parody is my own substitute for plagiarism.

Two of the following parodies reveal my lifelong love of music in all its forms, and particularly my early efforts at creating the music and lyrics of popular songs, none of which is repeated in this volume.

But I have enjoyed writing the tongue-in-cheek parody of *The Windmills of My Mind* and the translation into French of *Come Fly With Me*, produced at the request of a family member to be used as background to a stage presentation of *Boeing Boeing*.

This latter gave me particular pleasure because it enabled me to give substance to my belief that the majority of such translations fail because the translator attempts a too-precise rendition of the original without consideration of the nuances of meaning of the new language within the context of rhyme and metre.

I believe I have succeeded in producing lyrics that retain the spirit of the original English, respecting rhythm and metre, while honouring colloquial French.

THE WINDS OF MY BEHIND

(A parody of *The Windmills of my Mind*)

Like a bad smell that's gone viral, like a fart within a fart,
To expel it in a spiral is effectively an art
You may squeeze it out quite gently, or let it just go rip,
You may do it differently, hold it in a tight clenched grip,
Knowing it will not be anything like lavender in bloom
As the fart moves like a zephyr sending fumes around the
room.

Like the noises that I find coming out of my behind.

Like a small bug that's attacked me, like a pill on top of pill
What it does to my digestion is a matter of ill will
If I know that it is bad for me why do I ask for more?
Like one tequila, two tequila, three tequila - floor!
I have a simple question, Is it something that I ate?
If I wasn't meant to eat it, why'd you put it on my plate,
Producing noises undefined coming out of my behind?

Food that gurgles in my belly, drink that goes right to my
head,
Why does my stomach rumble every time I go to bed?
Like a morsel that you swallow, it simply holds its own
As it travels through a passage where the sun has never shone;
And though it would appear that my obsessive petomania
May be derived from meat that I once ate in Transylvania,
I hope you will excuse me; I don't mean to be unkind,
And I know that this last comment is completely unrefined,
But take your nasty thoughts and blow them out of your
behind

JEREMIAH WHO TOLD SUCH FAIRY TALES

(After Hilaire Belloc)

The tragedy of Jeremiah
Was people took him for a liar.
Jeremiah would, when supping ales,
Contrive to tell such wondrous tales.
His friends, or such as there might be,
Would scorn his pagan repartee
Or they might sometimes ask in vain
For Jeremiah to explain
His need to thus exaggerate
What really was quite adequate.

But Jay would simply smile unfazed
By such enquiries sorely phrased.
Where others seized their vorpal swords
Jerry would just swallow words.
He'd feast his fairy ganders on
The works of Christian Anderson;
And praising them as though a hymn
He'd venerate the brothers Grimm.
He didn't have too far to go
To emulate old Chas Perrault
And found that he was quite unable
To put aside an Aesop fable.
While Lewis Carroll's language droll
To him was more than fol-de-rol.

To friends, when dining at the Ritz,
He'd confess his own great favourites.
Though he could be good as gold,
Rumplestiltskin left him cold.
Rapunzel was his great despair:
He never could let down his hair.
And he would brook no "ifs and buts"
Yet he adored Kate Crackernuts.

So if you would be thought as serious
Avoid these tales so deleterious
Or else like tragic Jeremiah
You may find you're a sad pariah
Provoking mere hostility
And lose all credibility
Unable to just turn the tables
While wreathed about with classic fables.

And if I've gone beyond the pale,
This is, of course, a fairy tale

FOUR BRIEF PARODIES

DOROTHY PARKER

Men's blood often curdles
At women in girdles.

OGDEN NASH

I must confess the work of Nash
Contrives to make my dentures gnash
His complex efforts at verse
Are such as to produce a pain in my ass
that I find quite hard to disperse

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

Ill fares the Man
To hastening ills a prey
Where mind disintegrates
And falls into decay

ANDREW MARVELL

Had we but rosemary and thyme
this casserole would be sublime.

VIENS AVEC MOI

(Come Fly With Me)

Viens avec moi, volons à l'outre mer
Si t'veux avoir un boisson rare
Ça se trouve à vieux Niger,
Allons, allons, volons chérie, ailleurs.

Viens avec moi, flottons à Tuvalu
A Zanzibar il y a un gars
Qui fera musique pour nous
Allons, prenons l'azur à Timbouctu.

Si nous sommes ensembles
Où on trouve cet atmosphère
Nous glisserons, yeux ouvert.
Quand nous sommes ensembles,
Je te serrai dans mes bras
Tu verras le ban des anges,
Car nous sommes ensembles

Voyons comme ça fait une belle journée
Dis les mots pour que les oiseaux
Cherchent la plage à Monterey
C'est parfait pour un grand voyage
Des noces tu sais,
Viens avec moi, volons, volons,
Voilà une belle journée!

SONG OF MYSELF

(Part II)

ALL THE LIVES OF MY LIFE

Song of Myself – All the Lives of my Life - in my previous book of poetry *Metaphors and Matzo Balls* (2016) Episode 6 ended with the victory celebrations following the end of World War II in 1946, precisely seventy years earlier.

I had returned to London from evacuation in South Wales armed with an educational exemption from London University matriculation as a consequence of having achieved the required number of credit (or better) grades in the Central Welsh Board's School Certificate.

One of the personality traits that I have exhibited as long as I can remember, is regularly to lose interest in subjects of study. Perhaps, more precisely, it is regularly to exhibit interest in subjects other than those I am studying. Thus, in South Wales, I preferred to study shorthand, typewriting and book-keeping rather than art and general science, as I felt they would be more useful to me in my projected career of journalism.

A demonstration of my habitual *chutzpah* (if any were needed) was provided by my persuading the educational authorities to permit me to make those changes to my curriculum despite the fact that they were not on the Boys' School syllabus and the examinations would have to be sat with the Girls' School. After a brief test of my abilities in all three subjects (my having studied them privately at evening classes one year before evacuation to South Wales) and a suitably demeaning report from both art and science masters, I was permitted to make the changes. I presume they considered their decision justified when I achieved the highest marks that year in Llanelli Girls' Grammar School and had to decline a bursary offered by Clark's College, Swansea, after informing them that I was Joseph and not Josephine.

Now read on . . .

Episode 7 – Post-War

So the last shreds of bunting
have been removed.
and I moved back soon after.
Back to the “smoke” from
the “saucepan”.
But a part of me would always
remain in Wales.

I never did learn to play rugger,
but I did learn to love it.
It also taught me a love
of music and of words,
and of physical delights,
(although not consummated).

Ymlaen Llanelli.

Cymru am byth.

My debt to you is everlasting.
You taught me love;
you gave me values;
you uplifted my soul
and enlarged my heart.

A heart that suddenly was filled with joy.
and once again I saw those sights which, as a boy,
had haunted all my dreams
and overflowed into the waking hours

Episode 8 – Back to the bosom of my family

The major lasting influence
of five years spent
in an environment
that would previously
have been regarded as alien,
was the increased alienation
from my familial heritage.

My mother shared her father's home
throughout the years of war.
I myself briefly returned
between changes of school
and in order to satisfy
an old man's wish
to witness my religious confirmation.
And so I was a bar mitzvah boy.
It marked my antepenultimate visit
to a synagogue.
But therein lies
another story, as they say.

My years of exposure
to other religions
and to non-conformity;
my political and intellectual
precocity;
all these had produced a chasm
between myself,
my friends and family.

How far these flames
of dissent
had been nurtured and fanned
by the barely recalled
incident beside that church
in Stepney
I cannot say.
But I suspect
a subconsciously unending effect.

A humiliation suffered in one's childhood
may influence the remainder of their life.
There had always been questions,
asked or suppressed,
but certainly never resolved.

The *Shabbos goy*
was a regularly heard expression
that related to the religious
requirement that no task
must be performed
on the Sabbath.
Wherefore the *Shabbos goy*,
whose job it was to light
the oven fire on the Friday night
or Saturday morning,
ready to slow-cook the
Saturday evening stew (the *cholent*),
and to perform other menial tasks.

No concern was expressed or felt
over the offence that such an
appellation might have caused.

Conversely, the Sunday Yid
would have been considered
grossly offensive.
Why?

Jews have always been offended
by the variety of epithets
employed to describe them in
degrading ways.
They are appalled by
Yid, Ikey, Kike or Hebe.
Yet many find
perfectly acceptable
the use of equally demeaning
Yiddish expressions for
adherents of another faith:
shaygets, shiksa, yok or goy.

Episode 9 – Forward to Adulthood

The war had ended but tension remained
Completion of my pre-university studies
being interrupted by the hateful National Service
that, in the event, turned out to be
as much an education as anything
that had preceded it.

And finally I took my first tentative steps
towards fulfilment of the mysterious,

increasingly urgent yearnings
that had started haunting me in Wales.

I now look back to that period
of innocence
and deplore its brevity.
I recall when
we bathed ourselves
beneath the fountain of youth
and I believed
that our love would never die.
Was it a lie,
or just unspoken truth?

Every breath I took
brought me closer to you.
But it was not enough.
Why could I not understand
that all I lacked
was the recognition
that there was nothing
I needed
that I didn't already have?

It is a lifelong pattern.
A concern over what I might be missing
has always spoiled my enjoyment
of what I already possess.

Then suddenly my heart broke into a
million shattered shards of pain and grief
and all that I could do
was to bemoan the unjust tragedy of
the loss of shared experiential love.

And, as so often is the case
the fact that this memory
has endured through seven decades
of existence demonstrates and
gives substance to
the certainty that age is no begetter
of love and fear, regret and guilt.

In any relationship
there is always one who gives more
and one who receives less.
There is one who leaves
and one who grieves.
It is as if it were
an immutable law of nature.

Ah Rita, ah Rita.
Have the years diminished
an accurate memory of that
relationship?
Do you still inhabit this mortal coil?
And do you sometimes have
a half-remembered recall of
that juvenile attachment?



That a ruptured connection
should persist in memory
for so many decades
accompanied by a residual
feeling of guilt
strains the boundaries of belief.

And while we continue
to blame others
for our own shortcomings,
we fail to recognise that
a voyage on
the vessel of forgiveness,
must begin with forgiving oneself.

We have freedom of choice,
but apparently
we prefer to choose regret
rather than happiness.

Episode 10 - Family Recollections

I hugged my father
the day before he died.
My mother later told me
that he was filled with wonder
at that unexpected display
of emotion.
In her recollection,
we had never hugged before.

In my own recollection
we were not a demonstrative family.
My mother, tottering on the brink
of what was to be a life-annihilating
dementia asked me, in a rare, lucid
moment, if she had ever loved me.
It was a question whose meaning
I have pondered for years.
Was it a sudden recognition of
a coldness that she might exhibit
to the world, but which did not reflect
the love that she really felt but
failed to reveal?
Was the “me” really me or was it
some other family member with whom
in her later stages of dementia
she confused me.

My mother survived the death
of her spouse for many years
and I am convinced that her
major preoccupation with her family,
despite any overt demonstration
of her feelings was responsible for the
diminishing of her faculties
after we had all left.

My father died
too young, too young.
He stopped breathing on
a number 73 bus travelling home

at the end of his working day.
The bus made a complete
circuit to the garage before the
conductor tried to rouse the
“sleeping” passenger on the top deck.
It was a coronary occlusion.

That evening I accompanied my mother
to the mortuary to identify the body.
It was the first time I had seen a corpse.
The bag that held him was opened
and his face looked as pink and cherubic
as it had always appeared.
The body, however, had shrunk and
the suit he was wearing
hung loosely and unattractively
on him.
It was then my mother told me
of his joy at our embrace the previous day.
It was a joy that echoed within me
and I experienced an obscure delight
that this was the memory of me
he had carried to his death.

And at the subsequent rituals
that filial and familial
obligations dictated
my participation,
I recalled all those long-forgotten
moments of joy and pleasure
we had shared.

Was it only nineteen years
since we had enjoyed

the pleasure of each other's company
so unexpectedly in Paris?
I on an exchange of students;
he serving out his remaining time
in the British army
in a transit camp in Calais.



Quai de Valmy, Paris, August 1946

Episode 11 - Last Apple Revisited

The last apple is in a different location this year,
and I am also now in a different place,
metaphorically speaking.

A new man in a new setting.

Perhaps the metaphor
is not with a solitary apple,
but the entire tree.

The tree is subject to a protective order,
but what order protects me?

“All things are dust
and unto dust all things return”

is a biblical pronouncement.

But while we may rail
against the losses and perils
of our existence

it is too easy to forget that
the bough may have broken,
but the tree still stands.



Only one thing is more important
than adopting for yourself
the esteem in which others hold you
and accepting its veracity,
and that is to love yourself.
Self-love is not selfish,
it is the key to loving others.

As we move seamlessly through life
with everything pre-organised
from pre-digested food,
through pre-packaged entertainment
to our final pre-arranged departure,
we have to face the fact that
Everything is a trade-off.

The secret of longevity
is never to look back.
If we think positively,
we live longer.
We should harbour
no regrets
for past actions taken
or for failures to act,
but should
look to what is left
for us to achieve
in the future.
Thus will we attain
immortality.

And in our search for immortality
we must not forget
that
all flesh is grass.
It's better to die
having made the journey
than to stifle
one's advancement
in the embrace
of adventure unfulfilled.

*(Men grow old
Pearls grow yellow;
You may be soiled,
I'm just mellow.)*

Is it noon?
Or is it eventide?
When I was young, it was the first.
Now I am old, it's harder to decide.

Sitting in the wings
gives one an oblique view,
and oblique views
distort the basic
impartiality of comprehension.

The days run into one another;
the weeks, the months, the years.
Where have they gone?
What have I enjoyed
and what is past remembering?

*(How did it unfold?
It's such an outrage
that friends who look so old
are only half my age.)*

The didactic nature of my life
has never ceased to be.
I still retain within my psyche
The journalist of schoolboy days;
the student at university
questing in so many ways.
The shorthand typist so acclaimed
that employers begged for me
and offers of employment
came incessantly.

And so I accepted one such offer
and moved to office work
considerably more treasured,
involving the full gamut
in the export trade,
from marketing
to shipment.

Accounts were the most onerous task
unlike the correspondence that I enjoyed,
but was so frowned upon when I
insisted on using clients' languages
(where known)
instead of basic English which was
"good enough for our fathers".

Episode 12 - The Wives of My Lives

I have loved not wisely
but too often.
And my romantic relationships
reveal a quite amazing affinity
with my academic infidelity,
the need always to search
beyond what I already enjoy
in case I might be missing
pleasure that lies elsewhere,
be it subjects for study
or objects of devotion.

*(When I was in my early years
I set my hand to writing.
I tried to make my work exciting
and called myself a writer.*

*When I was in my middle years
I gave workshops on death and ageing.
I tried to make myself engaging
and wanted to become a guru.*

*Later I made the discovery
that gurus are mostly self-styling.
So I tried to make myself beguiling
and styled myself a guru.*

*And through the varied twists and turns
of different applications
I embraced sundry occupations,
and I am once again a writer.)*

It seems appropriate
that my first bride
appeared before my full-time studies
were complete.
Too young, too young
I hear you say,
but cast not the first stone
unless you too have been exposed
to the pressures and temptations
imposed on adolescent youth
when female adults have been deprived
of the company of their male
contemporaries by the exigencies
of war.

The strait-laced exhortation
of my mother,
who doubtless recognised
temptations available
to her teen-aged son,
was undoubtedly to blame
for the guilt-inspired
and negative reaction
to those female advances.
This effectively ensured
that my very first fall from grace
had to be accompanied by
a proposal of marriage.

A union that was to be short-lived.
Everything conspired against it,
but in memory there were some happy times.

The breakthrough came quite unexpectedly with the acquiescence of her parents, whose gift of the deposit on a house was conditional upon our remarriage in a synagogue.

It was my second, and to be my last, appearance in such an establishment following my *bar mitzvah* ten years earlier.

Two years later we divorced.

And then I embarked upon a voyage such as Sinbad could never have imagined. My travels took me to places of magic, to encounters with monsters deriving from my own imagination and experiences of phenomena that previously had appeared solely in my dreams. And I was rescued from that nightmarish behaviour pattern by the arrival of wife number two.

*(I shall have stories to recite
Before they place me in that hole,
Of such enchantment
As has stirred my soul
To flights of wild delight)*

This was a union that promised much, a shared physical appetite and work ethic that enabled me to follow my own ambitious dreams,

without concern for the aspirations
of my partner, in pursuit of her
own ambitious search for a career
to justify the years of study
and travail that saw her achieve
unique success in her chosen
fields of accountancy and computers.

Dreams recur in different ways.
The first hesitant holding of hands.
The first tremulous brushing of lips.
and when we try to recapture
that sleep-borne reminiscence
we are left with
the residue of sadness
or a residue of sourness.
We try to clutch at an ever diminishing
straw of recollection.
We almost have it.
Then it is lost.
Dreams die in strange ways.

In similar fashion to life imitating art,
so life sometimes imitates dreams
rather than provoking them.
For so long were we happily united.
The divergence began a few years later.
It marked a time of sad and poignant loss.
A death with no cadaver.

What had we lost?
What had been ours to share and was no more?

How to apportion blame?
Why should blame even need to be considered?

There had been so much unity.
Our lives had meshed so thoroughly
and what had fingered one,
had snared the other.

Nothing is ever lost (a physical law).
Every negative implies a positive.
So where was to be found
the serenity and joy
that had marked so many gleeful years?
The vacuum was vast and needed to be filled.
Her arms were opened wide;
while mine were clenched about myself.

There remains the memory of one night.
It was a night that revealed the immensity of space.
Bathed in the moonlight that carved figures
on our bodies,
our conversation had been filled with
pledges and promises.
We had lost
our awkwardness, our hesitation, our concern.
We had meshed into a single entity,
emitting little grunts and sighs of pleasure.
Did it hold a promise for the future?
Or was it a transitory affaire?

I thought I could discern a pattern:
a repetition of highs and lows.

Perhaps, I thought, this could be the start
of a voyage of self-discovery,
and since, as Proust has said,
such voyages are less concerned
with seeking new landscapes,
than having new eyes,
I will have to microscopically
examine every facet of myself,
in order to find my true identity.

Then, perhaps, I will also learn
how to restore that unity.

And yet, and yet, the question
returns and re-echoes again and again:
After so many years, so many years,
how could we diverge so rapidly?

*(We thought that we could have it all;
we were wrong.
We were naïve
to believe
that love would keep us in thrall.*

*We thought that we would simply scale
those mountains of deceit;
that should we fail
we'd simply use
our own ejection seat.*

We were wrong.)

Nothing is forever.
Everything ends ultimately
and the eternity of time
will cover it in a silence
of dust and overgrowth.
All we can accept are
the constraints of pain and time,
greed and need,
joy and love,
fear and lust,
and the paradox of self-awareness.

But while grief and introspection
and hesitancy
may sharpen and heighten awareness,
it is important to avoid
the indignity of being an impertinence.
The axe never mourns the tree it fells.

The relationship may have
charted a new course,
but it never ended.
It survived in a different
though more perseverant
form.
We were more than survivors;
we were veterans;
we were fighters.
We stood up to all that life
had to throw at us
and remained friends
for more than forty years.

My third and final wife was Dutch
My romantic relationship with travel
and languages allied to my
commerical ability and desirability,
saw me washed up on the shores
of the Netherlands.

Our life was
delightful and tempestuous;
it was fulfilling and disappointing.
It produced progeny and acrimony.
It carried me to greater heights
and lower depths
than any other affiliation of my life.

Ah Ines,
the bright gloss of our love
was foully soiled.

I was given a sight
of heaven,
and then most cruelly
blinded.

The wanton wallowing
and amorous dallying
proved as ephemeral as a dash
of candy floss on the tongue.

Alas, the tides of time
have swept away
the sands of connubial bliss
and too few are left perhaps
to fill an hour-glass.
In Spring a young man's fancy turns they say.
Who knows?
Perhaps a few springs yet remain
in the Autumn of my life.



Ines - Rijswijk 1965

□

Episode 13 - All the places of my lives

I looked into a tiger's cage
and contemplated
the symmetry of the occupant.
And then I sat upon the beach
and viewed twenty billion grains of sand,
twenty billion potential worlds,
and mourned my lost innocence.
It seemed I would do better
to contemplate my navel
and Blake should have stuck to tigers.

And yet, and yet.
The mind and memory
are discriminatory.
Amidst those grains of sand
are to be found
so many treasured experiences
mostly recalled in song,
such as my youth in Wales.

I remember the strange beauty
of the rolling streams
coming off the high ground
and forming deep pools in the valley
in which we used to frolic and bathe.

The music that echoes in my mind.
Sosban fawr yn berwi ar y llawr.

I recall the great excitement
of those later years
of youth and innovation
and the descent of the aircraft
over the City of Light.

My heart singing. Snatches of a song.
Paris tu n'as pas changé mon vieux.

The later years.
The tremulous exultation
of snow-clad peaks and troughs;
of cleanliness and order.
Weirdly home to both Calvin and Chaplin.
*In die Schweiz, in die Schweiz bist immer zu hei'
Auf der Berg o hei' o hei'.*

And then more recently
the lives and loves of the Orient,
marked by the joys of musical
accompaniment in Tokyo, Taipei and Manila.

Naomi Ohara and accompanist Kawahara
and the delightful live karaoke
performances.
Watashi baka yo ne obaka san yo ne

Timmy and Noriko Huang, and the
“gigs” in the clubs of Taipei.
The duets with Noriko
Wo ai ni I love you.

And Vida always there from Baguio,
always there in Manila.

Buhat ng kita'y masilayan

They may be recollections that have
little basis in reality,
being the mere product
of a failing memory.
But that makes them, if anything,
more beautiful.

Moving in one's lifetime tends to follow
a distinctive pattern.
First we start accumulating:
family, friends and treasured possessions,
and with that vast accumulation comes the need
for an expanded premises
within which they be housed.

Finally with family gone
and friends sorely decimated,
comes the time to massively downsize
and all that treasured furniture and bric-à-brac
needs to be discarded
and persist only in memory.

I have to ask myself, when the time comes
for me to move to my last resting place,
who will then remain
to guard those precious memories?

Episode 14 - The Rest Will Not be Silence

I have now reached the age
where concern with
the colour of my urine
and the colour and consistency
of my faeces
have become matters
of matutinal preoccupation.

I find the simplest things
begin to have the power
to irritate me.
The fumbling with the buttons on my shirt;
the standing, balancing uneasily upon one leg
while pulling on my socks;
the insecurity of standing on a chair
to change an electric bulb.

Today marked the low mark
of my dejected spirit.
The simple act of fastening
the zipper on my coat which
caught up in the cloth and then
refused to budge.
I was reminded of that symptom of ageing:
first you forget to pull your zipper up,
then you forget to pull your zipper down.

But I will not let it depress me.
I will fight and I will win.
And should I find it difficult
to succeed,

I shall simply
redefine success.

*(Before I lay myself to rest
there are mountains I must climb.
Before I go, I must construct
the perfect paradigm.
There are bridges that I have to cross
and rivers I must ford;
and metaphorically at last
cut the umbilical cord.
Those things that I have left undone
from my long bucket list
must rapidly be tackled before
they can be dismissed.
And superficially at least
are tasks that need to be addressed,
and any sins remaining
that need to be confessed.)*

I will not go gentle.
I will shout and scream
and beat my breast,
withstand all mental
pressures that would seem
to put me to the test.
It will suffice just to resist
the forces that will persecute,
and, knowing I have done my best,
shall raise my fist
into a victory salute
and lay myself joyful to rest.

SHORT STORIES

MY FRIEND THE GENERAL

The Colonel was angry.

It wasn't what he said, or what he did, but we all knew he was angry. I suppose it was, if anything, because of what he didn't say and couldn't do. And thereby hangs a tale.

Permit me to introduce myself: Sapper Harry Flagg, at your service. Fifteen years in the R.E.s; three times promoted - once to sergeant - three times reduced to the ranks. Still, as Ginger Morris, our Staff Sergeant, sometimes says: "Even the Colonel's a sapper in the Royal Engineers." Which brings me back to the Colonel.

He'd a bit of a cold that morning and found it difficult to speak in more than a hoarse croak. I suppose that's why, when he heard the General was planning a spot inspection of the camp that day, it put him in a bit of a temper straight off.

It wasn't often we were inspected by top brass during the War; I suppose they were too busy most of the time moving little flags across great boards. When they did inspect us, though, it was usually done at short notice as a surprise. I reckon that's why, after the Colonel had been caught on the hop a couple of times, he arranged for Captain Matthews to be transferred to GHQ. Their sons were at school together, or some such thing, and he could always rely on old Matty to tip him off if something was in the wind. On the particular day I'm talking about it didn't take the Old Man long to get cracking, in spite of his cold. Not that he could make it too obvious, for the inspection was supposed to be a surprise. But by eight ack-emma the instructions had percolated through the system until the camp was a hive of feverish activity. At least, that's the impression it gave; not a man jack of us could be seen walking about without at least a bucket or a brush in his hands. My allotted task was relatively simple. Or should have been. According to Ginger Morris, I was to "Get a brush and shovel, Flagg, and tidy up the borders. Then rake them over if necessary."

“Yes, Staff,” I replied dutifully, though I didn’t feel a bit dutiful. The “borders” were something else we had to thank the Colonel for. He’d had flower borders laid along all the paths surrounding Company H.Q. and Wing H.Q. and he’d had geraniums planted in them. This meant that once a year they had to be taken up and potted, and once a year they had to be replanted. The rest of the time the borders were left to go to pot - no pun intended! Except, that is, when we had an inspection. It wasn’t the job I minded so much as the fact that the whole time I would be subject to the gaze of whoever cared to look out of the CHQ or WHQ windows, and there’d be no chance of a crafty fag.

Anyway, I got on with it and I expect it was the fact that some other bigwig had visited us a few weeks earlier, because I had the whole flipping lot looking as spick as an unused thingumbob inside the hour. That was when I got the idea of using up the two cans of white paint that had been left lying around the motor pool since the beginning of the War. You see, I had to keep busy for at least another hour if I didn’t want someone to keep me busy, and the border surrounds looked as if they could use a bit of brightening up.

Really, I reckon, I shouldn’t have done it. And presumably if anyone had spotted me they’d have laid the law down. But - isn’t it just marvellous! - when they should see you, they never do. Perhaps they were all too busy with their own duties - or just lying doggo.

Whatever the case, I got the job done with about ten minutes to spare before the General was due and, even if I do say so as shouldn’t, those borders sparkled like the eyes of a girl who has just had her first kiss. Then it was time for me to do a disappearing act - and I knew just where to go.

Into the latrines behind the cookhouse, through the door into the shower-room, and then it was just a case of pick up the stool from inside the door, put it in one of the cubicles, and smoke in peace for thirty or forty minutes until the coast was clear.

Believe you me, old Flaggy's not been demoted three times without keeping a trick or two up his sleeve. Besides, I'd done all this before.

This must have been my unlucky day all round though. I hadn't got half way through my second snout when the door of the shower-room opened and two pairs of feet stepped inside. Believe me, that fag was out and my breath was held before you could say Adolf Hitler.

I reckon it must have been about two minutes that I heard them walking about and talking, wondering how much longer it would be before they discovered me, when I heard the plane overhead. And I reckon it was less than thirty seconds after that when the bomb started to fall.

Well, I've heard it said that the only bomb that gets you is the one you don't hear. For all I know that may be quite true. But I tell you, without a word of a lie, not only was I not prepared to test that theory at that particular moment, but I was out of that cubicle quicker than a greyhound from its trap.

And that's when it happened. Some goon had left the remains of a bar of soap just outside the cubicle and, true as a dye, my size nine landed on it. A second later I was skating along the shower-room floor on a part of my anatomy they haven't yet built skates large enough to fit, gathering up another figure in khaki on my way, until the two of us landed up outside the shower-room door amidst a huddle of figures who had already thrown themselves to the ground. Which was the precise moment the bomb landed about thirty yards away.

After the dust had settled we picked ourselves up and I extricated myself from the tangle that was me and the General. The General dusted himself off and turned to Ginger Morris, standing stiff as a ramrod beside him. "D'you know this man, Staff Sergeant?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Sapper Flagg, sir."

“Well I want to commend him for his quick thinking and prompt action,” said the General. “And you’d better get the Colonel out,” he added.

From inside the shower-room came the sound of gurgles and splutters. It appeared that the blast had demolished the shower-house cistern, and the Colonel, who had thrown himself on the floor of one of the cubicles at the time of the explosion, was now under about three feet of water.

Well I reckon you’ve guessed what had happened. Jerry, on his way back from a raid on London, had a bomb left it would seem. From where he was, the white-painted border surrounds must have shone like a beacon. A regular invitation. But after the General’s commendation there wasn’t much the Colonel could do to me.

Which, I reckon, is why he did nothing.

As for why he didn’t say anything: he couldn’t. By the time they’d got him home and dried him off, he’d lost his voice completely.

A COOL SOUND OUT OF GREER

It started with Greer.

He was anxious, he said, to prove once and for all that talent - true talent - is no longer recognised. He was fed up, he insisted, with what was being palmed off on the public as Art, in all its forms and through every medium; he felt that this was less a reflection on the dearth of real talent than on the lowered state of public taste.

The four of us were at our regular Friday night get-together in a King's Road espresso bar when Greer first propounded his theory. His sentiments were nothing new; we had all expressed them at one time or another, usually when we were on the down-swing of a manic-depressive cycle - the latest rejection slip having been received. This time, however, Greer took it a stage further.

"What we should do," he said, "is to prove to ourselves conclusively that the only way to achieve success is by jettisoning our artistic integrity."

"You mean commercialise?" Porky Witherspoon invested the word with all the distaste he could muster.

"And why not, laddie?" asked Greer. "Don't make it sound so dirty. While you are starving over your post-impressionist canvases, others are getting rich by cycling over theirs on lacquer-coated tyres."

"Or stamping on them with one-coat daubed, canvas-soled gumboots?" Nosey Pinkerton ventured.

"Precisely," agreed Greer.

"But I can't afford a bicycle," complained Porky.

"Laddie, oh, laddie!" Greer's tone was pained. "Where's your imagination? What about those empty beer-bottle cartons you use for cleaning your paint brushes? Cut them up, embellish them slightly, and take them to your dealer - art, that is, not liquor - as examples of your tacheist period."

We all sat up a bit straighter on the spindle-legged milking stools that passed for chairs. When Greer got started in this way there was no telling where the flights of his fertile fancy might lead.

“What about me?” asked Nosey, who had never quite got over Betjeman’s success.

“Ah! For you, laddie, there is only one course to follow. Forget about your poetic saga of the Trojan War - which, in any case, I feel sure has been done before. Concentrate instead on the Dirge of the Detergent, or the Sonnet of the Shampoo. In other words: doggerelise! There’s a whole new vista spread before you thanks to commercial television, and with your gift for finding obscure rhymes you’re a made man.” His eyes grew misty and a dream-like quality crept into his voice. “What wonders of imaginative delight are not conjured up by: Spreadnot the Wonder Diet, or Smellnot the Chlorophyll Deodorant?”

“Or even Gurgito the Miracle Indigestion Tablet,” I suggested.

“Why not,” demurred Greer.

The faraway look left his eyes which were now turned in my direction. “As for you, dear laddie, the path is clear. Forget about your Chronicle of a Happy Young Man in Search of Anger, and discard your Dog in a Lukewarm Collar in three acts, or whatever feats of prosaic versatility you may be currently exploring. That is not the way to economic salvation. The days of the artistic best-seller may not be lost, but they have certainly found a good hiding place.

“No, laddie, what the public wants now are paperbacks with lurid covers. Half-naked females in the grasp of a drape-suited thug holding a knife to their throats; half-naked females in the grasp of a space-suited galactite, with antennae protruding from its helmet; horse-riding cowpokes with blazing forty-fives . . . “

“Dragging lassoed half-naked females behind them?” interjected Porky.

“Precisely,” conceded Greer.

“But how do I write such trash?” I wanted to know.

“You don’t, laddie. That’s the beauty of it. The writing has already been done for you; you merely adapt.”

“You mean plagiarise?” I was, I confess, a little shocked.

“Tut, tut, dear laddie. Plagiarism implies theft; theft implies ownership; ownership implies originality. I defy you to find an original plot in a pulp magazine. Come to that, I defy you to find an original plot in anything that’s been written in the past 2000 years. All I’m suggesting is that you remove from your artistic sensibilities the onerous, not to say painful, task of composing such trash. You take a Western, say, and by altering the names and the setting, but retaining the situation, you achieve a science fiction story. Similarly a detective story may be transformed into a Western. The possibilities are limitless and no-one can accuse you of theft since they were all stolen, so to speak, to begin with.”

Greer sat back, clearly delighted with the confusion into which his suggestions had thrown us. It was several seconds before anybody spoke, then Nosey asked: “But what about you, Gregory? You’ve suggested our recipes for success, but what about your own?”

“Ahah, laddies one and all, I have already taken the first sacrificial plunge into the maelstrom of commercialism. Gone are my concertos and sonatas . . . “ he paused thoughtfully, “or should that be concerti and sonati? Never mind, they have been consigned to their respective Valhallas . . . Valhalli? And the core of each, the heart, the nucleus, now forms the basis of my excursion into the realm of POPULAR MUSIC.” I swear he spoke the words in capital letters. “Pop songs,” he continued, “as they are known to the cognoscenti . . . “ He paused again, seemingly considering the word, then shook his head and continued speaking. “Tomorrow morning at ten a.m. I shall be presenting myself at the offices of those well-known music impresarios Rummy, Eagle and Chaser when, I have little doubt, these germs of my fruitful intellect will achieve their merited recognition. If you will kindly pardon my few cliches and mixed metaphors.”

In the incredulous silence that greeted this announcement, I found my voice to demand four more lemon teas of the boyish looking girl in tight black jeans behind the bar. Or perhaps it was a girlish looking boy.

"Thank you, laddie" said Greer. "You know my weakness. Although I'm not sure I should. I usually get hoarse after three lemon teas."

"You should worry," I consoled him, "it won't affect your piano-playing tomorrow morning." And, after drinking our teas, we all left - to mull, no doubt, over Greer's words after our various fashions in our several abodes.

The following Friday we were clearly all eager to hear the latest developments in the saga of Gregory Greer, Songwriter, for the espresso bar found us all at our habitual table a good thirty minutes earlier than usual. All, that is to say, save Greer and, as the minutes passed, all conversation between us ceased, while our eyes remained fixed on the door, awaiting his arrival. Promptly at the usual hour, he appeared; but this was a Greer none of us had seen before. Gone was his shaggy mane of hair and beard; gone were his roll-neck sweater, his khaki drill trousers, his open-toed sandals. Instead we gazed at a smooth-cheeked, crew-cutted, midnight-blue-suited, and slim-Jim-tied fugitive from a rock'n roll dancehall.

"Four lemon teas," he ordered in a husky voice as he sat at our table. Then, looking at me he said, "I can see my appearance astonishes you, but it's you who are responsible."

He paused, allowing his words to take effect, then continued: "Yes, dear laddies, it was that third lemon tea last Friday. I awoke on Saturday with a mere croak where my voice used to be. This, needless to say, did not unduly disturb me, since I am used to it. That is until Rummy, or it may have been Eagle, or even Chaser asked me to sing my songs."

“Oh, my God,” I gasped. “I guess that really put paid to your song-publishing hopes.”

He smiled benevolently. “You could say that. Actually, though, the songs would not have been published anyway. Between us I think they were just a little bit too good. But in any case it was my voice that interested them. Chaser, or it may have been Rummy, said it had a certain something that was the answer to the teenagers’ prayers. And Rummy - or is it Eagle? - has arranged for a recording session next week. The clothes and hair style are their idea: it seems there’s a recognised uniform for this sort of thing and my fans may not like it if I break any of the taboos. Therefore I hope you will understand if I refrain from coming here in future - I feel my appearance will only embarrass you - but, you will understand, my Art must come first.”

There was the merest suggestion of a twinkle in his eyes as he drank his lemon tea, wished us all success in our own endeavours, and left the cafe. All that must have been about three years ago, since when success has graced all of us - after a fashion - and gradually we have grown apart, possibly because we might each feel a bit embarrassed at meeting the others. Too much like a finger of conscience from the past.

Porky Witherspoon is now quite well-known - in the circles that know of such people - as a design artist, and every one of you will have at least one article in your homes to which his hand has been laid, be it carpet, or curtains, or crockery.

Nosey Pinkerton, alas, is less well-known. But who has never heard:

Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Who is the fairest of us all?
Be she short, or be she tall,
It’s she who uses Sunbleach oil.

It doesn't scan too well, and the rhyme is even worse, but someone has put a very catchy little tune to it and it's a fairly typical example of the sort of thing that has given Nosey a mews flat in Chelsea and a Jaguar XK140.

As for me? Well I wonder how many of you have prepared for a train journey by purchasing from the station bookstall a western by Slade Slattery, or a detective story by Don Jerome, or a science fiction story by Buck MacMasters. All in lurid covers, of course. And very little difference in the story line of any of them. Yes, they are all by me. And I suppose we all owe our success, one way or another, to Greer. At least, he it was who first pointed us in the right direction. As for Gregory himself . . . I last saw him about two years ago, when a sentimental whim - my last - carried me over the threshold of that Chelsea coffee bar. He had reverted to his old style of dress and shaggy mane of hair and beard, and seemed to be on fairly intimate terms with three more budding "artists". This was quite a shock to me, as I had believed him to be doing quite well. You may recall his record "Give me a rocking horse, baby" which reached the top twenty, recorded, of course, under his stage name of Noah Hope. I didn't want to pry, but I thought I ought to buy him a lemon tea for old time's sake. In fact he told me what had happened without any prompting.

"You see laddie, what appealed to the public was the particular timbre my voice took on after I had drunk three or more lemon teas. The trouble began when I became really popular. What with recording dates, stage appearances, and charity concerts, to say nothing of radio and television, I was singing more and more, and drinking more and more lemon tea. Ultimately I developed an immunity to lemon tea, and then I was of no more use to them."

"You mean . . . ?" I ventured.

"Yes, laddie," he interrupted. "I lost that certain something." His face grew wistful. "They could understand the words."

THE DAY HAPPY ROBERTS LOST HIS SMILE

“Happy” Roberts, as his nickname implied, was a happy man. Not for him the cares and hustle of the workaday world. Not for him the frustration and worry of economic existence. Above all, not for him the demands of a nagging wife.

Three years earlier he had had the good fortune to inherit a small country cottage from his aunt Agatha who, having willed her adequate estate fairly equitably to her anxious relatives, suddenly remembered her scapegrace nephew Charles. Whereupon, in a moment of Christian charity, she bequeathed to him the one thing none of her family seemed to want: a dilapidated two-roomed gamekeeper’s cottage and a half-acre of land on her Argyllshire country estate. Then, doubtless overcome by her own generosity, she died.

In all justice to aunt Agatha, her failure to remember Charles until the last moment was not deliberate. It was more an unconscious act of repression of something painful that had thrust him to the back of her mind. The unhappy truth was that Charles Roberts was an embarrassing thorn in the flesh of an otherwise respectable family; a family that boasted one doctor, one vicar, two army officers and several important somethings-in-the-city.

Charles, by contrast was obviously destined for none of these careers. The only son of the vicar, he had perambulated his way through school and college, being content consistently to squeeze through his examinations by the barest margin necessary to ensure further postponement of a choice between equally undesirable economic alternatives. Having done which, he refused all offers of a wangled army commission from each of his top brass uncles, preferring to spend his two years compulsory military service as assistant cook in the Army Catering Corps.

Then, just when he was engaged strenuously in resisting the efforts of several other uncles to make him a minor something-in-the city, his aunt died.

Thereupon Charles Roberts embarked upon the first and only attempt at manual labour in his twenty-three years of indolent existence. He spent two weeks repairing the structural defects of the gamekeeper's cottage, restoring the crumbling decor of the interior, and cultivating thirty square yards of the surrounding half-acre as a vegetable garden. Then he moved into the cottage and spent a further two weeks recovering physically and spiritually from the effect of his labours.

While this was greeted with relief by the members of the family for whom the migration of nephew Charles meant a respite from approaches for financial assistance, it was less cheerfully regarded by the General, now retired, who had taken possession of the manor forming part of aunt Agatha's estate.

This worthy had viewed Charles's fevered physical activity with some suspicion, but had eventually dismissed it from his thoughts. Nor had he been greatly concerned when Charles took up residence in the cottage. But as the months passed he became more and more aware of the eccentricity of his nephew's behaviour until, eventually, he felt the subject had to be broached. Accordingly, one late spring morning found him seated in the cottage, awaiting his nephew's return from heaven-knew-where.

When Charles walked into the cottage he was clumsily attired in a voluminous and dirty raincoat which ended where his muddy gumboots began. Seemingly oblivious to his appearance, however, he greeted his uncle with apparent pleasure.

"Hello, squire."

“ The General’s ruddy complexion grew purple. There’s no need for insolence, young man. This isn’t a social call.”

Charles, who had not stopped smiling from the moment he stepped through the door, now positively grinned. "Oh, in that case I won't have to offer you a cup of tea." He removed his coat and hung it inside the door. "What can I do for you?"

"You can stop behaving in this tomfool fashion for a start."

"Why, squire - I mean uncle - I don't know what you mean."

"You know very well what I mean, you young jackanapes. You're making me the laughing stock of the district. My nephew - a common poacher! And wipe that silly grin off your face. If it's money you want, I'll give you a thousand pounds for the cottage on condition that you return to London and never let me see you again."

"Now, uncle, I hope you're not suggesting I have any mercenary motives in living this life."

"Well if it's not that, what is it?"

"I doubt if you would understand," Charles said. "Freedom, independence . . . I don't suppose the words mean anything to you. Anyway, what harm am I doing?"

"Hrrmph! The harm you are doing is to my reputation. As local J.P. how do you expect me to deal with the poachers brought before my bench, knowing that my own nephew is one of them?"

"That's all right, uncle. If ever I come up before you, I shan't expect leniency."

The General appeared to be choking. "You young rascal," he

finally got out. "You insist on misunderstanding everything I say." He struggled to regain control of his temper. "Anyway, you can't go on forever in this way. One day you'll want to marry and then you'll have to give up this hand-to-mouth existence. And think how welcome a thousand pounds will be then."

Charles laughed. "Nonsense. Marriage would mean the end of my freedom. Besides I'm unlikely to meet anyone I want to marry up here."

"All right." With the utmost military bearing the General marched to the door. "You mark my words, you'll come to a sticky end yet."

"Half a mo', squire." Charles went over to the raincoat and withdrew something from the inside pockets. "You wouldn't care to buy a pair of rabbits for half-a-crown, would you?"

"Pah!" said the General, and walked off.

Charles shouted after him. "You shouldn't be so disdainful of them. After all, they did come off your land."

The General subsequently made further efforts to get rid of "Happy" Roberts, and even enlisted the aid of other members of the family, including Charles's own father, but to no avail.

It was several months after the recounted meeting with his uncle that, while returning home one day with a rainbow trout in one pocket and a brace of pheasant in another, Charles was startled by a moaning sound issuing from a thicket near the cottage.

Upon investigation the noise was found to be coming from a fair-haired woman, in her early twenties, who was sitting on the ground with one leg tucked invisibly beneath her. Which was a pity, Charles felt, judging by the shapeliness of the other leg.

“Hello,” he said. “What seems to be the trouble?”

That was how it all started. That was how "Happy" came to lose his smile.

For the next three weeks she visited him at the cottage every day, and even accompanied him on his poaching expeditions. Her name was Cynthia, her father a London stockbroker, and she was spending a month at her friend's invitation at the manor. Her friend was Charles's second cousin, the General's grand-daughter.

Incredibly Charles decided, with only two days remaining of Cynthia's stay at the manor, he was in love with her. Even more incredibly he suspected that his feelings were reciprocated. He therefore had no alternative but to speak seriously to her about the situation - as seriously, that is, as was possible with his head in her lap, her fingers in his hair, and the scent of new-mown hay in his nostrils.

"Please understand, my darling," he said, "I love you very dearly. But how can I give up this life I've made for myself?"

"You old silly," she whispered. "You don't think I'd ask you to give anything up, do you? Why do you think I've taken so much interest in your way of life?" Her lips brushed his ear. "I want to share it with you."

And Cynthia turned out to be everything a husband could expect of a wife - and a lot more besides. She was understanding, domesticated and solicitous. She seemed to want nothing more than to share with Charles his simple existence.

It took about six weeks of this connubial bliss to finally destroy "Happy's" smile. For Cynthia was too solicitous and too understanding; she was too complaisant and too uncomplaining.

Charles grew more and more morose thinking about how wonderful she was, and how selfish he was to deprive her of the sort of life that other men provide for their wives. A wife as perfect as Cynthia, he convinced himself, deserved nothing less than the many little things in life that other women craved: a washing machine, a refrigerator, a fur coat, a car. Despite all her remonstrance to the contrary.

Strangely enough - or was it? - she did not remonstrate very strongly when Charles finally decided he would have to work for her father. But by then, of course, the smile had vanished beyond redemption.

And it was just as well, perhaps; for a few months later Charles junior arrived on the scene with what looked suspiciously like a smile on his face. The knowledgeable said it was wind, but they, perhaps, knew nothing of the thousand pounds the General had given Cynthia as a wedding gift.

THE MAGIC STONE

(A Fairy Tale for Adults)

Once upon a time there was a little boy, a very trusting little boy.

He believed all the nice things he was told and, because the nicest things always seem to appeal more to the emotions than to the intellect, he became incurably sentimental and romantic. It was so reassuring to believe in goodness and honesty, and that right must always triumph, and that faith could move mountains, and that the knight will always be victorious over the dragon. So very reassuring, in fact, that he began making excuses and finding reasons for his beliefs when, occasionally, they became hard to accept.

He even believed in Santa Claus.

One night, one Christmas eve, when he was already quite grown up, he succeeded in remaining only half asleep in his bed. It was the first time he had managed this. Every Christmas eve he had tried, but long before the witching hour of twelve struck its sombre chimes on the church clock he had always been sound asleep.

This year he made a very special effort and – lo and behold! – at one minute after twelve a faint scuffling at the door handle roused him fully awake. He opened one eye very gingerly and saw the handle slowly, softly turning.

For a moment he was surprised. Father Christmas was supposed to come down the chimney! Then he remembered that the house was centrally heated and, of course, Santa could hardly be expected to squeeze down a hot water pipe.

Then came his second surprise. The figure which came through the door bore a remarkable resemblance to his own father. Yet it had to be Father Christmas for heaped high in his hands were large

numbers of exciting-looking packages, all gaily wrapped, which were placed at the foot of his bed. But when Santa Claus leaned over the bed and gently kissed his cheek he knew it was more than mere resemblance, for the smell of tobacco and beer, and the prickle of moustache whiskers, were undoubtedly his father's.

So he had to un-think his previous belief. And quite soon he found the answer. And it was even more wonderful than he had imagined. Of course! His father was Santa Claus! And obviously he had already delivered his presents to all the other little girls and boys, for he had changed back into his un-Christmas clothes and had shaved off the long white beard.

I tell you this story to show you just what a trusting, believing, sentimental little boy this was.

Now, when he was a *very* little boy he had been told of the magic stone which we all must look for: the fabulous stone that brings its finder all the happiness, all the success, all the love and beauty that his heart desires. He was told that there were a great many of these stones, of all shapes and sizes, of many colours and complexities; some harder and some softer; some seemingly hard, but soft inside like a chocolate cream; some seemingly soft, but with cores of iron. He learned that some glittered brightly, but that the gloss could rapidly wear thin; and that some seemed terribly dull, but could be polished until they shone like diamonds.

He knew, too, that while there were many such stones, there would be only one stone that was created just for him and, unless he was very, very lucky, he would have to pick up many, many wrong stones before find his own. So he began his search for the magic stone.

The little boy grew up and became a man. And the man who had been the little boy carried on the search for the magic stone. He knew that it must exist, for he had been told that it existed, and his

heart would not let him believe otherwise. Yet some days his heart would grow heavy with sorrow as the search for the stone seemed so hard and so long. Still he would not despair, for he had faith and trust; he believed, and he knew that everything comes to him who patiently seeks.

And finally his patience and trust were rewarded. One day he found a stone which shone with such a sweet and magical radiance that he knew it had to be the one.

So he gathered the stone to him, and he cherished it, and for a long time he was made exceedingly happy. This was indeed his stone, he thought, for how else had it come to pass that all his dreams were coming true?

It was a hard stone which somehow seemed to soften on the outside with his touch. It was never so bright as when he held it in his hands. It came to life at his touch and brought him joy such as he had never believed possible.

Oh, he thought, if only I could make sure that everyone finds a stone as perfect as mine. How happy the world would be.

And then, one day, a change seemed to come upon the stone. As he held it in his hand the softness started to peel away. For a second it shone with an extra brilliance, then the glow faded and it turned to ashes, and he was left holding a lump of coal which was hot and painful and made his hand terribly black.

What torture! What agony! What a cruel and horrible trick to have had played on him.

Yet such was his trusting nature, he very quickly realised that the stone had been a test of courage, of the strength of his belief, and that his must stiffen his shoulders and continue his search.

So he put his heartbreaking disappointment behind him, took a deep breath, and went on seeking. The right was his; the victory had to come. His faith was as strong as ever; the mountain had to move. He pointed his lance and . . .

He found the stone.

This time it had to be the right one for it was so different from the other. Instead of sparkling it was dull but warmed to a pink glow at his touch. Instead of being soft outside and hard within, it was soft right through, and therefore had to be genuine. A perfectly perfect stone.

With one unhappy difference. The love, the kindness, the warmth and the joy which should have come to his heart from possession of the stone did not appear.

He tried everything. He cherished it and warmed it; he loved it and nurtured it. But it produced too little response and, bit by bit, he found his heart growing heavy once more within him. In the end he had to face the fact that he had made yet another mistake. The stone so incredibly perfect, so desirable, so clearly a good stone, was not for him. He could feel nothing but regretful shame at the thought that he was depriving its rightful owner of the bliss and blessing which was the stone's to give.

With tears in his eyes and a hammering in his heart he took the stone out of the snug, warm casket in which it had lain, fondled it for the last time, and carefully, tenderly placed it where its true owner might perchance find it. And, as if it realised exactly what was happening, and wished to thank him for it, the stone suddenly shone with a blinding lustre and then as swiftly faded into obscurity.

The joy of knowing he had done the right, the honest thing, sustained his spirit for a while. But it did not last. He grew sad and listless,

weak and weary. Rather than risk a third shattering experience, he stopped longer for the magic stone. He immersed himself in other activities, lest too much time to think would merely be time to doubt. And he did not want to doubt; he did not want to lose his trust and faith.

Time went by too quickly; the essence of his previous existence, the search for his own, special, private, magic stone faded in the recesses of an unprovoked memory so that when it came, when it happened, he was helpless, defenceless.

But happen it did.

He was engaged in a completely different activity than stone-seeking at the time. So different, in fact, that the stone was in his hands for a long time before he recognised it for what it was. And then his heart gave a lurch, and there was a pounding in his temples like a pneumatic drill on a cobbled street, and ten thousand angels were chanting in his brain.

He was, as I have said, helpless and defenceless when it happened. Nothing could have been further from his thoughts than a magic stone. So he behaved precociously and unthinkingly. He forgot all the lessons of the past. Rapture and joy and heartwarming bliss were his for the taking, and were to be taken without thought and without examination.

The stone of course he examined; himself he did not.

It was of a delightful shape and texture, unlike any he had found before. (He forgot that this was always the case.) It was warm and comforting and thrived on warmth and comfort. (Is this not a prerequisite of all magic stones?) It could make him forget the bitter disappointments of his previous experiences, just as he could repair the ravages wrought by some of the unkind hands through

which the stone had passed. (He overlooked the fact that magic stones, too, can have bad experiences, and that they too may sometimes clutch at straws.)

But for a time, for a brief, wonderful moment of time, he was able to reap the fruits of all the years of belief and faith. For an incredible instant his romantic, sentimental trust was repaid one hundredfold. Did you not know that an instant of bliss may compensate a lifetime of despair?

Yet the reckoning must always come. And the reckoning came.

It was the stone itself which first became aware that, delightful and desirable as the situation was, it did not fulfil the essential requirements of a stone and owner relationship. There was something lacking, something incongruent in their liaison. The stone became worried and fretful. It felt deeply for its new owner. It did not want to cause him any more pain and woe than he had already suffered. Yet it knew that the situation could not be allowed to continue. For a magic stone, too, will suffer from misuse and, eventually, they could both end up shattered.

We must sometimes be cruel to be kind, as the cliché has it. This is also true of magic stones. The magic stone tried to explain, it tried to help, but at the first rumbling suspicion of what was to pass the man wept and fled.

Yes, after all the years of faith and trust, the man ran away from what he had always previously faced in a forthright manner. He ran straight into the depths of hell. His heart and soul burned with the torment of doubt and disbelief. His tears of self-pity hissed in the fires of self-disgust. He could think of nothing but his own hurt and shame. He forgot completely the joy and wonderment, the ecstasy and thrill that for a brief time had been his.

And then the period of mourning, of self-immolation, passed; it drained out of him and left him limp and empty. And into the vacuum that remained, a stray thought, a faint reminiscence returned, a pathetic memory of the magic stone.

What had it tried to tell him? That trust must be tempered with reason? That belief must be bound by responsibility? That faith must be fathered by judgement?

Why had he not listened? What could he do now? He had leapt from wild acceptance into blind rejection.

And what of the little stone? Had it not also earned the right to patient approval and consideration? He had twice been mistaken, but each time he had permitted himself a lengthy period of probation before admitting his mistake. Could he not have shown the same generosity to the magic stone?

For that matter, perhaps the magic stone had not been mistaken.

Perhaps it had merely been too hasty. Perhaps it was his magic stone. How could he ever find out? He could look for it again, that's what he could do. He could find it, if he were lucky, and beg for a second chance . . . this time to probe their relationship properly, sedately, thoroughly. No, luck did not come into it, but faith and trust, tempered by reason and judgement.

He would start looking now.

Dear reader, all fairy stories start "once upon a time . . ." and end with "they lived happily ever after". But this fairy story is for adults, and our little boy is now a man, and we cannot say that he will live happily ever after, for this is not the end, and he is only now at

THE BEGINNING.

A REALLY GOOD THING

I am innocent, innocent, innocent.

The words echoed inside my head and, for a moment, I was afraid I had shouted them aloud. Not that it would matter, I thought; I suppose they all proclaim their innocence up to the last moment. Briefly I visualised a march to the scaffold, with the criminal singing his song of innocence to the accompaniment of a movement from a Berlioz symphony, and I had an insane desire to giggle. But I controlled myself thinking: That way madness lies; a form of reproach I had often found effective.

Yet it was true. If anyone was guilty it was Muggsy. If only he had shown a little more patience, or if, maybe, he had not been so threatening. But what was the use? If, if, if. If pigs had wings. In a way it was ironical. Here was I, in a prison cell, awaiting trial for murder, and I hadn't been within two hundred miles of the crime.

It all started last week when Muggsy issued his ultimatum . . . or perhaps it really started last month when I first met him in the Pink Python Club. Graham introduced us.

"This is Mr Benson," he said. "But everyone calls him Muggsy. Muggsy, I want you to say hello to Jim Farrell, a good friend of mine. He's all right." This with the faintest of winks.

Graham and I had been at school together. Now he was in business, though nobody quite knew what his business was. When asked he would reply that he was "something in the City." I was also in business - buying and selling. Anything, anywhere. Building up connections; finding short-term demands and satisfying them. Frequently selling short and then hastily using my connections to obtain - at a discount - the material I'd sold. Nothing very brilliant, but I had been able to make ends meet for a number of years.

Now I suddenly had the opportunity to clear a cool five thousand pounds on a deal. Legal, of course; but only just. The snag was that I had to finance it in advance and I needed a thousand pounds

quickly. So I contacted Graham. As I said, nobody quite knew how he made his money, but what was certain was that he made it. Enough, that is, to run a Bentley, a flat in Mayfair, a house on the upper reaches of the Thames. You must know the type. He would end up in prison or the House of Lords. It had been Graham who had suggested meeting at the Pink Python.

It's amazing how often the people who seem to have the money are those most loath to part with it. Graham was no exception. Even in the case of a friend - and I had always regarded myself as his friend - and even when the proposition put up to him was really sound and a reasonable amount of collateral offered from my side. Unfortunately, although I had the collateral, it was not a proposition I would have liked to discuss with my bank manager. Not to mention the Government's credit squeeze which had made the possibility of a bank loan as remote as a Soviet affirmative.

Graham had oozed charm, but his "Sorry, old boy," was final: the door closed, the key turned, the bolt pushed home. He went on talking, but only half of me was listening; the other half was compiling a mental list of alternative sources of funding. Unfortunately I was unable to think of a single candidate for the honour. In the meantime Graham had been mumbling his apologies: the credit squeeze . . . money is so tight . . . dearly love to help, old boy, but . . . Then something he said shook me out of my semi-stupor to demand, rather curtly I regret, "What was that you said?"

Whatever Graham's faults, discourtesy was certainly not numbered amongst them. My question might have been couched in the politest of terms, to judge by his reply.

"Excuse me if my suggestion should have been offensive or ill-considered, old boy, but I assure you he's the soul of discretion. A bit of a rough diamond, of course, but if any man can help you, it is he."

"You mean," I asked, "that you know someone who might put up the money?"

He smiled, a cat at the cream smile, not too condescending, and rather more pitying than smug. Unquestionably a House of Lords' type.

"I can't guarantee it, old boy. Still he's probably your best bet and that's why I suggested meeting you here."

That was when he introduced me to Muggsy.

A rough diamond, Graham had said, and while the adjective seemed appropriate, any similarities with the qualities of the precious stone were not immediately apparent.

"Pleased to meetcha," said Muggsy. "Any friend of Mr Graham's a friend of mine." A tender if rather banal sentiment. Momentarily I was tempted to reply, "Mutual," but Mr Muggsy Benson was "my best bet" and even he might not have been insensitive to irony, so I contented myself with a speech of "Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr Benson," and tried to look as if I meant it.

"Call me Muggsy," invited my potential benefactor, a smile revealing a missing front tooth and spreading still further across his face the nose which had evidently gone walkabout at some time in the past, possibly assisted by a carefully placed fist.

"Thank you, I will . . . Muggsy." I returned his smile, but was as yet unwilling to return the invitation of familiarity he had extended to me. Graham broke in to make his excuses; he had another pressing engagement and was sure Muggsy would look after me. When he had departed, Muggsy suggested that we seat ourselves at a table, in a booth, where our conversation would be at once more private and less liable to interruption. He then promptly informed me that he understood I required to be financed. It appeared that Graham had already acquainted him with my predicament.

"That's quite right, Muggsy," I said. "All I need is a thousand pounds and I should be able to repay it within ten days, plus whatever you consider to be a reasonable amount of interest."

"Oh no, Mr Farrell," Muggsy grinned. "You and me ain't quite understandin' each other. I can't lend you the money."

"But Graham said . . ."

"Yerss, yerss, I know. He told you I could probably 'elp you, and so I can. But you know what they say, the Lord 'elps 'im as 'elps 'imself. Now then, if you need a farsand quid I can put you onto a really good fing at 'Arringay tonight."

I interrupted him hastily. "Mr Benson . . . er Muggsy . . . I don't want to gamble for the money."

His face creased in a look of pain. "Mr Farrell, Mr Farrell, 'oo said anyfing about a gamble?" He was plainly aggrieved at the suggestion.

Enlightenment struck. I had heard of certain things. "Oh," I said, "you mean . . ."

"Now, now, Mr Farrell, no names, no pack drill, eh? Now look, you wanna make a farsand, right?"

"Right."

"Well the odds on Fearless Fred in the third, at the moment stand at five to one. There's only one other dog to touch 'im, Lucky Strike, and I 'appen to know Lucky Strike'll come in last."

"That means," I said excitedly, "that I can put two hundred pounds on Fearless Fred and win a thousand."

He shook his head sadly. "It's easy to see, Mr Farrell, that you don't understand the dogs. The money won't go on until just before the race and by that time the odds may be a lot less. Ter make absolutely sure you've got to put on as much as you 'ope to win, since we know they won't shorten to less than evens. See what I mean? If you want to win a farsand, you've got to stake a farsand. An' you may end up winnin' a lot more."

My joy was short-lived. "I'm sorry, Muggsy," I said, "if I had a thousand to stake I wouldn't be bothering you in the first place. All I can raise is two-fifty."

He waved his hands at me. "That's okay, Mr Farrell. That's where I come in. I'll stake you and you can pay me back out of yer winnin's."

"Well," I offered, "if that's the case I can give you a cheque right now for two hundred and fifty pounds."

He looked offended. "Please," he complained, "you don't want to 'urt my feelings, do you?" It was nice to know he had feelings. "Yer a friend of Mr Graham's ainchya? You just leave it to me and tomorrow you'll 'ave a cool farsand in yer pocket."

He politely refused my invitation to a drink and we arranged to

meet in the Pink Python again the following evening.

It was in the newspaper next morning. I spotted it long before I had turned to the greyhound results. The headline said: DRUG PLOT FOILED AT HARRINGAY. There was really no need for me to read any further. A sick feeling in the pit of my stomach already told me all I wanted to know, but I forced myself to continue:

"Acting on information received, officers of the Criminal Investigation Department were last night posted at Harringay Arena and were instrumental in foiling an attempt to drug the favourite in the third race. Lucky Strike was odds-on to win the race, although a considerable amount of last minute betting had shortened the odds of the second favourite, Fearless Fred, to two to one. In the race itself Fearless Fred came second to Lucky Strike by a short head. Later two men were taken . . . "

I read no further; I was feeling too weak. Now I was not only as far as ever from obtaining my thousand pounds, but I owed a thousand to Muggsy Benson.

I kept the appointment that night expecting to find Muggsy a much sadder man. Not that I was prepared to spare any sympathy for him; I was too full of self-pity over my own plight. To my utter amazement, however, he appeared to be as cheerful as ever. He could have made a fortune rather than lost one, to judge from his greeting.

"Well, well, Mr Farrell, y've 'eard the news I suppose? Yerss, I can see from yer face that you 'ave. Never mind, eh? Luck of the game. Rahndabahts and swings. Could of bin a lot worse."

"Not for me, I'm afraid, Muggsy. I now owe you a thousand pounds."

"That's all right, Mr Farrell. Yer among friends. You take yer time. 'Ow long do yer want? Seven days? Ten days?"

I gulped. "Could you make that weeks?"

Muggsy's face seemed to freeze instantly and a tight knot of wrinkles appeared above the squashed nose. Then, just as quickly, his face cleared and the familiar ear-to-ear smile reappeared. "Well,

Mr Farrell, it's 'ighly unusual, but wot say we compromise on one month? Okay? An' you can always find me 'ere. Any evening."

For the next four weeks I spared no efforts to obtain the money. I investigated ceaselessly all possible business deals that might produce quick returns, but the net result was a loss of a further fifty pounds. I approached Graham again. And others. I got a lot of sympathy. Sympathy is fine, but hardly negotiable. Finally, one month later, I went to see Muggsy again, considerably richer in experience and advice, fifty pounds poorer in liquid resources. And this time Muggsy seemed different; the parallel to a rough diamond more apparent. At least so far as the quality of hardness was concerned.

"Nar then, Mr Farrell, what's all this? You can't pay? Come, come, come, Mr Farrell, that's 'ardly the way to conduct a business deal, an' you a businessman an' all."

"Look, Muggsy," I pleaded, "I can give you two hundred pounds now. Just give me a little longer to raise the rest."

"Sorry, Mr Farrell, no dice! I really am sorry. You know, Mr Farrell, I like you. I've liked you from the first moment we met. An' what's more, I trust you. But business is business, Mr Farrell, and I'll 'ave to report it to my associates. They're a good lot of boys, but 'oly terrors wiv the razors. But I'm sure you understand. If I let you off, what 'appens to my reputation? I'll tell you. Every Tom, Dick and 'Arry will immediately fink 'Muggsy Benson's gorn soft'. And if the news gets out that I've gorn soft, I'm going to lose some of me best clients. You see what I mean? I've gotta protect my reputation. Believe me it's gonna 'urt me a lot more than it will you, and if you'll take my advice, Mr Farrell, you'll keep off the streets at night, an' don't let anyone creep up be'ind you."

Suddenly the club felt unbearably hot, and my shirt collar felt too tight. I ordered another round of drinks.

"Now Muggsy," I said, "you would obviously prefer the money to my neck, so let's discuss ways and means like civilized men. Look, I'll tell you what, take my car in part payment."

"Forgive me, Mr Farrell, but in our game it's cash only. But why don't you sell the car?"

"I could, of course, but I'd probably get no more than four hundred and fifty for it in today's economic climate, and it's worth a hell of a lot more than that. It's insured for nine hundred."

"Is it?" Muggsy look thoughtful, then he said, "See 'ere, Mr Farrell. As I said, I like you and I'd like to try and 'elp you to get the money. D'you know the Royal Eagle just down the road? Well you go along there and ask for the Weasel. You can't go wrong; everyone knows 'im and besides 'e looks just like 'is name. Now, when you see 'im . . ." and Muggsy proceeded to give me a series of elaborate instructions.

Two days later, while I was sitting in my office during the afternoon, my secretary announced that two gentlemen wished to see me, and I asked her to show them in. The taller of the two removed his hat as he entered the room and asked:

"Mr Farrell?"

I said, "Yes."

"Mr James Farrell?" he persisted.

Again I said "Yes."

"I am Detective Inspector Aitken of the CID and this is Sergeant Hastings."

"Ah," I said, "you've come to see me about the car. Has it been found?"

"Yes," he replied. "Your car was found in south Cornwall, at a spot known as Smugglers' Cove. It had evidently gone over the cliffs, a seventy foot drop. A Mr Harold Arbuthnot, otherwise known as the Weasel, was also found - dead, in the driver's seat."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. My shock was genuine.

"James Farrell, I am here to arrest you on suspicion of the murder of Harold Arbuthnot, and I must caution you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence."

"Good God!" I repeated. Again my shock was genuine. And that was how, one hour later, I came to be locked in a prison cell, charged with a murder committed over two hundred miles from where I was at the time.

You see, that morning I had reported to the police that my car had been stolen during the night. According to Detective Inspector Aitken, the Weasel, who was known to the police as a small time crook and blackmailer, was carrying in his pocket a cheque from me, made out to cash, for the sum of fifty pounds. Their assumption was that he was blackmailing me and that I had killed him.

Some time later the Inspector came to my cell.

"Now, Mr Farrell," he said, "you have been far from helpful so far. You must realise that you are only making things more difficult for yourself. Why not be sensible and tell us the whole story."

He was right, of course. So I did.

"You see, Inspector," I said, "I needed money and somebody introduced me to this man Arbuthnot. I gave him a duplicate key to my car and a cheque for fifty pounds. He was to pick up my car last night, drive it to south Cornwall, and dump it in the sea. Then he had to make his own way back to London. I was supposed to report the theft this morning and collect the insurance money in due course. But as to his death, why I am as much in the dark as you."

Aitken smiled. "Thank you, Mr Farrell. We suspected as much. I take it you have no objection to giving me a signed statement to that effect? Fine."

And so the statement was duly written and signed. Later I asked Inspector Aitken how he had been so quick to accept my story and prepared to believe I had not killed the Weasel.

A charming man, this inspector. He smiled again. "Well, Mr Farrell, we knew all along that Arbuthnot had not been murdered. You see, the slope up to the cliffs is too steep for the car to be pushed. The rear doors and the nearside front door of the car were all locked on the inside, so it was impossible for anyone to have jumped out of them. Arbuthnot himself had been at the wheel and his doorlock was jammed. There were signs that he had tried to open the door with the obvious intention of jumping out before the car went over. There was only one thing that had

us puzzled. There had to be a reason why he was driving your car and carrying a cheque from you. We guessed it wasn't blackmail, for he would have insisted on cash. But it was obvious you had to know a lot about it and we decided that the best way to get the information was to arrest you on suspicion of murder. There was enough evidence to incriminate you."

Something still bothered me and I asked, "But how were you able to get onto it so quickly?"

He gave me a startled look. "Surely you know the answer to that. Didn't you telephone us last night and report the loss of the car? I must confess that I don't see why you should have risked having the Weasel apprehended before he had disposed of the car."

Now I was really bewildered. I had certainly not telephoned the CID the previous night. It was obvious, too, that Detective Inspector Aitken knew nothing of my visit to my local police station in the morning. But who could have telephoned them? The only other person who knew of the arrangement had been Muggsy. Of course, Muggsy . . . Instinct suddenly warned me I would do better to play dumb. I said, "Of course. Silly of me. Well, it was still a smart piece of work on your part. Tell me, Inspector, what happens to me next?"

"Well you are still under arrest, although no longer for suspicion of murder. You may now apply for bail."

I thought quickly. If I were granted bail I would then be once more at large and exposed to the tender mercies of Muggsy's "associates", so, to the Inspector's evident amazement, I told him I had no intention of applying for bail.

He told me that I would come up before a magistrate in the morning and left me.

I lay on the hard bench which appeared to be the sole provision for the prisoner's comfort, but which was equipped with blanket, pillow and a toilet accessory at one end. Still, it was undoubtedly more comfortable than a hangman's noose, metaphorically speaking, and at least here, for a while, I was safe from Muggsy.

Or so, in my ignorance, I believed.

That evening I was informed that I had a visitor. It was Muggsy.

I permitted myself the luxury of a smile across the table that separated us and said, "You're making a big mistake, aren't you Muggsy? You can't collect debts in gaol."

He laughed. "You are a one, Mr Farrell, and no mistake. I'm glad to see you 'aven't lost yer sense of 'umour. I understand they've booked you for attempted fraud."

"That's right, Muggsy."

He winked. "You are a lad! And all the time I thought you was simple. 'Ow you tumbled me I shall never know. Mind you, I didn't fink you'd end up be'ind bars. But to be able to get away wiv . . ." he lowered his voice, "murder."

"What?" I shouted, unable to credit my hearing.

"Now then, Mr Farrell, you don't have to worry. It's all between friends. You were smart to realise that the Weasel was blackmailing us over the 'Arringay job. All wanted was to get him nicked for car stealing and out of circulation for a bit. To teach 'im a lesson, you understand. You'd of 'ad yer car back and I'd 'ave accepted whatever you could 'ave sold it for in settlement of yer debt.

"But why am I telling you all this? You obviously realised it and it took a man of yer genyuss to dispose of the Weasel permanently. I must admit we're 'appier wiv him right out of the way. Still it's a pity you gave 'im a cheque or you might 'ave got away wiv it altogether."

"Well . . ." I attempted a laugh which, even to my ears, sounded forced, but Muggsy seemed not to notice. He continued to regard me with a look of rapt admiration.

"Yerss, I've certainly got to 'and it to you Mr Farrell. A neater job I 'ave never seen. 'Ow you managed it I shall never know, but . . . " and here he contrived a wink which transformed his face into so gruesome a mask that an involuntary shudder passed through me. I hoped he had not noticed. "But," he said, "it'll be a trade secret, I've no doubt. Well, I know better than to ask questions. Y'know," he added thoughtfully, "I'm not sure my associates couldn't use a man wiv your ability for - what should I say? - painless extraction?" He

guffawed at his little play on words and then continued, "At any rate, wot I really came to ask is: would you do me the great honour of considering yer debt as cancelled."

I stared at him. For a few moments the words failed to penetrate my consciousness and, obviously misunderstanding my silence, he hastily added, "Look, Mr Farrell, I know yer a man of honour and want to pay yer debts. But please, please regard this as a favour to me, eh? If you like, call it payment for services rendered. Now then, wot d'you say?"

"Well, Muggsy, I don't know what to say."

"Then say nuffink. We'll consider it settled. And other fink. I want you to see me when you get out. I shouldn't fink you'll get more than three months for a first offence - two months wiv good behaviour - and it may even be a conditional discharge and a fine if you get yerself a good lawyer. But you see me when you get out and I promise you I'll put you onto a really good fink."

I could no longer control my laughter and, although I feared it would disturb Muggsy's finer sensibilities, I said, "You know, Muggsy, I think it might be safer for me to stay in prison."

THE EYES

He walked along slowly, carefully, anxious to get there yet, paradoxically, content to delay the moment of arrival as long as possible. The early morning air was crisp and bracing, and seemed to alert all his senses. Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, his mind returned to their first meeting, to the very first time he had looked into those eyes, mocking yet inviting, scorning yet bewitching, when George Marshall introduced her . . .

“Phil, I want you to meet Grace Chester, the next Maude Adams. Grace, you’ve heard of Philip Ransome.”

He left Ransome holding her hand, gazing into her eyes, lost in the mystery of their simultaneous invitation and rejection. For Ransome, standing there mute and motionless, the laughter and the chatter of the party had faded into oblivion; he was conscious of nothing but two eyes, two deep, limpid, violet pools, and the sudden turbulence of his emotions.

She disengaged her hand with a small laugh. “Please, Mr Ransome, you’re beginning to embarrass me.”

“I’m terribly sorry.” He blushed, tried desperately to think of something to say, something clever, something to impress her, and could think of nothing but the wonder of her effect on him.

George returned with their drinks and ended his dilemma. George put his arm around her waist and, with a laugh, remarked, “I can see it was a mistake introducing you two. At the rate he’s devouring you, Grace, there will be nothing left for me to dance with later.”

Ransome grinned, the unnatural restraint gone. “You should have prepared me for this gradually. Don’t forget I’ve been leading a hermit’s existence for the past six weeks. I’ve forgotten how to cope with beauty such as Miss Chester’s.”

She curtsied gracefully.

"Well," said George, "as he seems to have recovered his voice, do you think it's safe to leave you with him?"

"Oh . . ." She pondered the question. "Perhaps. Providing you stay within shouting distance."

As George wandered off to indulge his hostly duties elsewhere, Philip Ransome took her arm and guided her to the momentarily-vacated window seat.

"So you're a talented actress?" He asked the question quite guilelessly.

Her dimples grew a fraction deeper as a smile flickered at the corners of her mouth. "You mustn't believe everything George says. Though I do take my work seriously. But if we're talking about talent, let's talk about you. Do you know I'm one of your greatest fans? I've read everything you've ever written - and as for your last play . . ."

"Home From the Hill?"

"Yes. That fabulous second act, where Gertrude goes frantic with worry. God, what I wouldn't have given for that part."

"What exactly are you doing at the moment?"

"Oh!" She pushed an imaginary stray blond hair back from her face. "At the moment I'm waiting for the right part to come along. George didn't think much of the last two parts I was offered." Her face, which had settled into repose at his question, suddenly reanimated itself. "Do I gather from your remark to George that you've just finished another play?"

"Yes," he replied, thinking how often he had had similar conversations under similar circumstances. Ordinarily he would simply dismiss her as another theatrical social climber, were it not for her eyes. But those eyes! There seemed to be, hidden in their depths, the promise of a fulfillment, the mere contemplation of which left Ransome weak with anticipatory pleasure.

"Won't you tell me about it?" she begged.

He shook his head. "I never talk about something I've just finished." He grinned at her disappointment. "Tell you what, though, have dinner with me one evening and I'll let you read it."

She snatched at his hand and the sudden contact startled him. "Oh, Mr Ransome," investing the name with a mixture of reverence and awe, "must we wait? Couldn't you take me back to your place now and let me read it.?"

The abruptness of the suggestion surprised him and, at the same time, excited him. For a moment he didn't know what to say, as he glanced around the crowded room.

"But George's party . . ."

"I know. But no-one will miss us and we can come back later."

Ransome knew it was ridiculous to agree. His common sense told him he should make a polite excuse as he had so often had to do in the past. Then he looked once more into her eyes, and was lost.

Had that been a mere six months ago? He was conscious of his heart beating more loudly; the pounding of a captive soul pleading for release, as indeed his heart had been - was - captive. But willingly and eagerly, rejoicing in the sacrificial abandonment, grateful for the enslavement, for the opportunity to surrender freedom of choice and liberty of action. He had made that quite clear to her . . .

"I'm not sure I should introduce you to this fellow."

"Why? What do you mean?" She turned to face him, a look almost of anger on her face, which was quickly lost in a smile as she saw his expression of amusement.

"Well," he smiled back at her, "Ambrose Hudson does have a certain reputation. Or hadn't you heard?"

She grimaced. "Oh, that! Dear, foolish Philip. Are you already afraid of losing me?"

"Afraid? No, I suppose not." He pressed the bell on the door in front of them. "But what we've found together is unique in my experience. It is so precious that, every now and then, I think maybe I'll wake up and find it was all a dream."

She squeezed his arm gently. "Then you needn't worry. It's not a dream and it's pretty marvellous for me too, you know."

"Is it?" He grasped both her arms, rather more firmly than he had intended, and looked down into her eyes. "Is it? You know how I feel about you. You know how much you mean to me. Yet you refuse to marry me."

She pulled her arms away with a nervous, impatient gesture. "Please, Philip, let's not start all that again. Certainly not now. You know how I feel about marriage at this stage in my career and, in any case, we've only known each other a few weeks." She pulled a face. "Anyway, what could marriage give you that you're not getting already?"

The angry retort that sprang to Ransome's lips was cut off by a voice from the doorway

"Hello, what have we here . . . a lovers' quarrel?"

Ambrose Hudson was smiling scornfully as Ransome turned sharply, an angry flush on his face.

"Oh, Ambrose! I'm sorry. We didn't hear the door open. We . . . we were rather engrossed."

"So I noticed." Hudson's smile grew more mocking, as he flicked ash from the cigarette held in a long black holder. "I imagine this is the Miss Chester I've been hearing so much about. You mustn't take Philip so seriously, my dear, he's far too intense about everything. I suppose that's what makes him such a good writer. Sincerity, would you call it?" He held Grace's hand all the time he was talking. "But let us not stand here all day. Come inside. Come inside."

There were three people in the room to which he led them.

"You already know George and Adele," said Hudson. "This is Miss Larue. Angel, I'd like you to meet Grace Chester and Philip Ransome."

Angel Larue. Ransome smothered a laugh as he shook hands with the leggy redhead, ensconced in an armchair deep enough to ensure that her skirt rode up well beyond the garter-line of her flesh-coloured tights. The name was obviously that of a burlesque queen and she herself no less obviously the product of a burlesque show. All in keeping with the known form and taste of Ambrose Hudson.

"What do you think of Angel's birthday present to me?" Hudson indicated the burgundy velvet smoking jacket he was wearing.

"Oh, many happy returns, Ambrose. I didn't know it was your birthday."

Hudson beamed. "It isn't. Not for another three months. This is my *last* birthday present. Angel couldn't buy it any sooner - we didn't know each other nine months ago."

God, Ransom thought, how sickening the man is. And I'll bet he's totally unaware that the smoking jacket is in the most abominable taste. But he said, "Well, it's very nice Miss Larue."

She simpered. "Oh ah couldn't resist it in the shop window. And ah just had to get Ambrose somethin' to show him what I thought of him." The "had" came out as a bi-syllabic "hay-udd".

"I'm helping Angel with her career," Hudson volunteered nonchalantly. "When you arranged to come over Philip, I thought it would be nice to make a sort of party of it. So that you won't be alone while Miss Chester and I have our little private chat. In fact I suggest we go to my study immediately, Miss Chester, before the party spirit gets you."

As Hudson left the room with Grace, George Marshall took Ransome on one side. "Would you mind telling me what's going on, Phil?"

"Well, since you're here, you presumably know as much as I do."

"All I know is what Ambrose has told me: that he'd invited you and Grace Chester for drinks and thought I might like to come along with Adele. Since you like Hudson about as much as I do, I was intrigued to find out what it was all about. I'm still intrigued."

Ransome laughed. "Don't worry, George, I haven't grown any fonder of that skunk. I'm only doing this to please Grace. When she found out I knew the notorious Ambrose Hudson, nothing would satisfy her but that I introduce her to him. She's after a part in the new play he's casting."

"And you trust her with him?" Marshall grunted. "You know the swine waves parts around like carrots to a donkey. And you know where he leads the donkeys."

"I've got no fears on that score." Ransome almost failed to look as confident as his words suggested.

"Then there's another thing, Phil. What's been happening to you lately? The last I heard from you was a phone call apologising for having skipped out on my party. And taking Grace Chester with you! Not that I blame you for that. I might have done the same thing twenty years ago. But where and why have you been hiding for the past three weeks. Don't tell me you're working again. I thought you were going to take it easy for a bit."

"Working?" Ransome grinned. "I haven't done a stroke since I met Grace. What time I haven't spent with her, I've spent thinking about her."

Marshall's expression grew troubled and he glanced over to where his wife was talking to the leggy Miss Larue. "I hope you know what you're doing, Phil. I hardly knew Grace myself when I introduced you. Adele had got talking to her at the hairdressers and invited her to the party when she learned Grace was an actress. I don't even know how good an actress she is - although I'll grant you she damned good looking."

"Quit worrying, George. It's no wonder you've got ulcers. For your information I've been pestering Grace for a week to marry me, and I intend persevering until she says yes. As for her acting ability, that's why we're here. Ambrose Hudson is just a means to an end, for me as well as for Grace. The sooner she recognises the limits of her talent, the sooner she's likely to become Mrs Ransome."

Their conversation ceased as Ambrose Hudson led Grace back into the room. Her face was flushed and her eyes bright with pleasure as she announced, "Mr Hudson thinks I'll do, Philip. He's going to find me a part in his next production."

"Yes, Philip, my congratulations on your discovery." Hudson looked smugly pleased with himself. "Miss Chester is a remarkably talented person. She read Gertrude even better than your leading lady. We'll have to get together again and go into things in more detail . . . yes, more detail." He repeated the words as if savouring their sound.

Ransome thought he spotted a look of jealousy on the face of the "burlesque queen". Not that she had anything to worry about, he told himself. And then, momentarily, he wondered.

Not much further to go now. He felt a sudden prick of curiosity at what it would be like, and then thrust the thought back into the recesses of his mind, where had had determinedly laid it earlier. The thought was replaced by a recurrence of self-recrimination for not having anticipated the pattern of events, when the signs had been displayed so prominently. Or had he been too conceited and confident to see them? Even now though, he knew he should not have blamed her. She had, after all, done only what she felt she had to do.

He paused and looked up. Here I am, he thought. In a few moments, who knows, I may see her again. He felt wildly elated at the prospect, though a little afraid of having to face the accusation in those eyes. But he went on, up the steps, remembering the last time they had met . . .

He was at home, trying to write, but the words would not come. The paper before him remained blank - a silent reproach and a symbol of censure. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? He knew Grace was busy rehearsing, and this was what he wanted. This, he knew, was something she had to do before they would finally and permanently get together. But the doubts and anxieties kept crowding back. Suppose she were successful. Suppose success went to her head. Suppose she decided her career would not allow her to marry him. Suppose, suppose, suppose . . .

Then the phone rang.

"Hello Mr Ransome, is Grace Chester there?" The anxious female voice at the end of the line sounded faintly familiar.

"Who is this?"

"Angel Larue."

Of course! He could recognise that southern drawl now.

"I'm sorry, Miss Larue, she isn't here. Why don't you try the theatre; they're rehearsing this week."

"I've tried the theatre." She was beginning to sound tearful. "There aren't any rehearsals. I was looking for Ambrose. He was supposed to be at the theatre."

"What do you mean, Philip?" Her features were perfectly masked. Only her eyes, those amazing, profound eyes, betrayed a possible apprehensiveness.

"You know very well what I mean. Where is he?"

This time the mask slipped fractionally. "Who?" she asked.

"Never mind, Grace. I think I can find him. The apartment layout hasn't changed, has it?"

Ransome paused, his hand on the bedroom door handle, and looked back at Grace Chester, standing there with a look of fear - or was it fury? - and then he entered the room.

Ambrose Hudson sat back casually in the armchair and unconcernedly crossed his legs and adjusted his dressing gown over his knees. Then he struck a match to the cigarette protruding from the omnipresent black holder. One eyebrow flickered gently as he looked at Ransome. "Do you make a habit of bursting into other people's bedrooms? And without an invitation. Tut, tut."

The cool effrontery of the man left Ransome speechless for several seconds. Finally, in a voice trembling with emotion, he said, "And what the hell do you think you're doing here?"

A slow smile spread across Hudson's face. "Come, now, Philip. I hardly expect such a question for a writer of your standing. What's happened to your imagination?"

The smile and the question, added to the earlier torments of suspicion, seemed to do something to Ransome's control. Not fully conscious of his actions, yet dimly aware of them, as if he were viewing a shadow play, he took two strides towards the armchair and vaguely saw an arm snake out and a fist crash against Hudson's mouth. The knuckles that suddenly throbbed from their contact with Hudson's teeth were his own.

The armchair went over backwards and Hudson slid over one of its arms and landed in the hearth. His head made a cracking noise as it came into contact with the steel grate. From behind him Ransome became aware of the screams and turned to face Grace.

"I don't know what you've got to scream about. By rights it's you I should have hit."

"You brute. What have you done to him?" She rushed to Hudson's body and knelt beside it.

Ransome lifted her to her feet. "Leave him alone. He's not dead - more's the pity. I want you to tell me how he came to be here. Why did you let him in?"

She started to laugh, slowly at first, then more and more hysterically until, abruptly, she stopped. "You fool. You stupid fool. Do you imagine this is the first time he's been here?"

Ransome stared at her. "What do you mean?"

She laughed again, but sharply this time, mockingly. "What do you think I mean? Why do you think I wanted to meet him? Do you think I didn't know what he'd want? I knew precisely what I was letting myself in for and I didn't care - if it could get me what I want."

Ransome grabbed her arms. "But what about us? What about those things you said? How marvellous it was, and how it had never been like that before."

"Oh, you poor fool. Of course it was marvellous. It always is. I thought you would like to hear me say it. You had your part to play and you played it." Her face grew angry. "And now, you stupid idiot, you may have spoiled everything."

Ransome's face was ashen and he started to tremble again. "I don't believe you. You're making all this up for some reason."

He looked into her eyes and realised she was telling the truth. In the depths of those eyes he saw something he had not seen before. A mixture of scorn and pity; of annoyance and disgust.

This was how it had all started. Losing himself in the bottomless depth of those twin violet pools which seemed to engulf him, to rob him of will and reason. Now they were mocking him, laughing at him, despising him. For a brief instant her eyes seemed to widen in astonishment as the emotions they reflected changed to shock, incredulity, fear. Slowly they glazed.

He removed his hands from her throat and stared at them in wonder, disowning them, refusing to believe they belonged to him. And then, as her body slid to the floor, he heard the shrill, hysterical laughter of Ambrose Hudson.

He had reached his destination. He braced himself and took a deep breath, thinking how appropriate it was that this State should still have death by hanging. His body shuddered only slightly as they put the noose around his neck.

HE PLAYED IT SMART

As he watched her walking slowly past him, Harry Webster smiled to himself. This was the one he had been waiting for. There was no mistaking the type: middle thirties, stiletto heels, sheath dress, too much lip rouge. It was a rare evening he didn't find at least one of them, and this one seemed too good to be true: clearly looking for a man. But there was something he had to find out first.

He followed her to the next stall and stood close behind her as she opened her handbag and extracted a coin for the attendant to change. He pressed against her for the brief moment necessary to see the well-stuffed purse in her handbag and then said,

"I'm so sorry. Somebody pushed me."

She smiled to let him know it was all right and then proceeded to roll the first coin onto the squared and numbered board.

Harry Webster persisted. "It's a mug's game, really, because you never stop when you're ahead."

She turned round and smiled again. "Oh, you're an expert on these things, are you, Mister . . . ?"

"Call me Harry," he suggested. "Yes, I've seen too much of this sort of thing. The percentage always favours the house. Of course the stakes are different in Monty."

"Monty?"

"Yes. You know, on the Riviera."

"Oh . . . Oh yes, Monty."

"Look here," said Harry, the light of inspiration shining from his eyes. "I hope you won't think me too forward, but you seem to be alone. How about sharing some of the other things with me? They're far more fun than this lark, and it's more enjoyable when there are two of you."

This was the part he liked most. Knowing they were dying to say "Yes", and desperately hoping he wouldn't give up too easily. Well, she needn't worry; he had no intention of giving up.

“I don’t really know.” She looked at her watch and pouted. “I was supposed to meet a friend here, but it doesn’t look as if she’s going to show up now.”

“Well that settles it then,” said Harry, taking her arm. They usually liked that little touch - the masculine approach - but wasn’t it marvellous the way they were always waiting for a friend. Aloud he said: “Well now, you know my name, so what am I to call you.”

They went to the hoop-la stand first and left it with a china dog. Then on to the dart boards and rifle range, by which time they had added two ashtrays and a plastic comb to their collection of trophies. They were both a little breathless by the time they had ridden the dodgem cars, and rolled around the big dipper, and revolved in the airplanes, which made it, Harry decided, just about the right time to suggest the Tunnel of Love.

“Ooh,” she drew a deep breath at the suggestion. “I don’t think I ought to, really.”

But of course she did, as Harry knew all along she would. Oh he was really a smart fellow! He even knew the precise moment at which to put his arm around her shoulders in the tunnel, and exactly when to press his lips on hers.

“No, you mustn’t,” she squealed, right on cue.

“Go on,” laughed Harry. “The attendant would think he had to refund our money if I left here without lipstick on my face.”

And so she kissed him, and went on kissing him, right up to the moment when the boat drifted out into the evening air. Then, as they left the boat she looked once more at her wristwatch and said,

“Good heavens, look at the time.”

Harry looked at his own watch.

“My goodness, yes,” he exclaimed, “I’ve got to dash.”

Her face dropped.

“Oh, must you? I was hoping I could invite you back for a cup of coffee.”

It always gave his ego a boost when the invitation came, even though he knew it was inevitable. This time, however, as he looked at her disappointed face, he felt he could almost detect, beneath her make-up, some little thing extra that the others had not had and, for a moment, he was almost tempted to accept her invitation. But, of course, he couldn't.

He said, "No, really, I'm sorry, but I've arranged to meet someone at ten o'clock, and it's almost that now."

"Not a girl friend?"

"No, silly, a man. But I'll tell you what, give me your phone number and I'll ring you up. We might make the flicks sometime later this week."

She grabbed his wrist and giggled, then took a pen that was clipped to his top jacket pocket, and wrote a number on the back of his hand.

"Now make sure you don't wash it off before you call me." She giggled again.

Still playing it smart, as always, Harry waited until he got home before examining the purse he had so cleverly lifted from under her nose, while kissing her in the Tunnel of Love. My word, he thought, looking at its bulk, I've made a real haul here. And then his face dropped as he withdrew sheet after sheet of toilet paper from inside the purse, coming finally to a small card on which was written: "Never forget there's always someone a little smarter than you. But don't worry, there are enough suckers to go round."

And that was when he discovered that his wallet was missing. And not only his, but the two others he had lifted earlier that evening.

BITER BIT

I leaned against a pillar in the foyer and watched them leaving the theatre. Five minutes later, as it was beginning to look like another wasted evening, I saw her. She walked through the foyer and stopped by the street doors, slowly pulling on a pair of long black gloves. She seemed a bit younger than I would have preferred, but the coat was obviously mink, and I had already wasted too much time. I studied her a few seconds longer and then approached her.

"Excuse me," I removed my hat. "I hope you won't think this too presumptuous of me, but I couldn't help noticing you were alone."

Wrong approach. She looked at me with startled apprehension, but said nothing. I tried again.

"Please don't be alarmed. It's just that we've both been alone at the theatre and I wondered if you'd like to join me for a spot of supper."

Still no response. Really, Andy, what's happened to your charm? Let's face it old man, your judgement has let you down for once. Now extricate yourself as gracefully as possible and do the vanishing trick. First the flustered smile.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you." Now the small embarrassed laugh. "It's simply that the play was so moving, I felt I simply had to discuss it with somebody." And now a little shrug. "However . . ."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, she smiled. "I'd be delighted," she said.

"Thank you," I said. "If I may introduce myself, I'm Andrew Hamilton."

"Monique Duval," she said, briefly pressing her hand to mine.

As I helped her remove her coat in the restaurant I was pleased to note the perfect proportions of her shapely figure in the snug-fitting, short black cocktail dress. Her looks, too, left little to be desired: pert nose; full, but not overfull, lips; silver rinsed blonde hair, fashionably styled. She seemed to be about five years younger than myself; certainly no more than thirty-five. Quite a change,

in fact, from my previous two "business" contacts. I might even enjoy it this time, I decided.

I held a chair back for her to sit, then sat in the facing chair. "Your name suggests you may be French. But you have no accent."

She smiled. "French on my father's side, but I've lived in England most of my life."

"And your family? Do they live in England or in France?"

She hesitated, then replied, "My father died in the war. I live in London with my mother."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry."

"That's all right. It was a long time ago." She put her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands. "So tell me, what did you think of Gielgud's performance?"

By the time we reached the coffee stage I was bored with the theatrical small talk and began to steer the conversation to where I wanted it.

"Well, it's obvious you love the theatre. But how is it that someone as attractive as you should have to visit the theatre alone?"

She pulled a face. "It's a long and involved story. I wouldn't dream of boring you with the details. In any case I was supposed to be working tonight and the theatre was a last minute decision."

"Oh. You work?" I almost allowed my face to drop in disappointment, but changed my expression quickly into the cultivated lift of an eyebrow. Had I been wrong after all? "I suppose you have to support your mother?"

"My mother?" She seemed taken aback, then said hastily, "Oh, father left mother more than adequately provided for, which is fortunate as she's a permanent invalid. No, I work because I like it, because I want to be independent, and because I can earn so much money."

It was a good recovery and the story flowed fluently. But I had caught the momentary hesitation and there and then I knew my senses had not let me down; I knew I was on to a good thing. For the first time since our meeting I felt able to classify her.

She presumably took my silence for enquiry as she explained, "I'm a model. Fashion during the day and photographic in the evenings and, as you can imagine, the useful working life of a model is limited. That's why I'm determined to make as much as I can while I can, and then do what I've always wanted to do."

"Oh . . . ?"

"I want to buy a small hotel in the south of France. Antibes or Juan."

"But surely even a small hotel in either place would cost a fortune?"

"Quite a lot," she agreed, "for what I have in mind. So you see why I work so hard. I already have most of what I'll need and I've allowed myself another three years for the rest."

Well, well. I had learned far more than I expected, and far more quickly. Andy, I told myself, this is it my boy. This could be the one you've always hoped for. There was still one mystery to be cleared up, but I had the first glimmering of a theory and decided to explore it.

"What about marriage?" I asked. "Doesn't that enter into your plans?"

She grimaced. "The only men I ever seem to meet are those who can't wait to start pawing me. That, I'm afraid, is not what I'm looking for. Should I ever feel the need of male protection, I hope I'll be independent enough to take a man on my own terms."

"That sounds a bit hard-hearted. You're not really that cold and calculating, are you?"

Some of the earlier animation left her face and she stared at me coldly. "I think the conversation's getting too personal. Tell me about yourself. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a stockbroker." As usual the aptness of the title pleased me. Playing the market summed up my business activity perfectly.

Later, as we stood outside the restaurant, I asked if I could see her home.

She said nothing for a few moments, and then, "I'd rather you didn't. Perhaps you would call a taxi for me."

I hadn't really expected her to agree, but it did complicate things. "How about coming to the theatre with me one evening?" I asked.

"It's very difficult. I told you how often I have to work evenings."

"Look," I said, "suppose we arrange to meet here next week, about seven. I'll give you my phone number and, if you can't make it, you can let me know."

It was the best I could think of in the circumstances. At least it put the onus on her to get in touch with me again, and I could see no reason why she shouldn't do so.

In a way things had worked out rather well and her behaviour and refusal to allow me to accompany her, after her obvious enjoyment of the evening, merely served to strengthen my theory. I was pretty certain now that there was a "sugar-daddy" somewhere in the background. It would explain all the hesitations and weaknesses in her story. It would also explain that strange remark about men pawing her. Well, I'd be a refreshing change for her. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that she would meet me next week.

She did. And the week after. It became a regular thing for us to meet once a week, see a show, have some supper and, eventually, round off the evening with a drink at my apartment. Then she would take a taxi home.

She would never let me accompany her. I used to take delight in making the offer, just to see what excuse she would make. It was usually the same one: there was no point in making the journey as she couldn't invite me in. Her invalid mother could not be disturbed. It certainly didn't disturb me. I would have hated to bump into her aged Lothario and possibly deprive her of that wonderful source of income. That money, I hoped, was going to be very important to my future.

It was about three months after our first meeting that I decided

the time was ripe for my next move. I waited until we were back at my place, poured us both a brandy, and sat beside her on the settee. Then I took her hands in mine.

"Monique, my dear, you know what has happened, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You must know I've fallen in love with you." She laughed, a mixture of amusement and embarrassment. "Don't laugh. I'm serious."

The amusement left her face; the embarrassment remained. "You don't know me well enough yet to know that." She forced a smile. "Or is it my money you're after?"

I decided to treat the question seriously. I made myself sound a little stuffy as I said, "Don't be silly, I have money enough of my own. Anyway, I know you well enough to know that I want to marry you."

"Oh, Andy, if only I could believe that."

"You must believe it. You must have noticed."

She smiled nervously. "I suspected it, of course. But I've been afraid to trust my suspicions."

My heart leapt with exultation. I'd done it again. Perfect timing and faultless execution. I tightened my grip on her hands. "Then you feel the same way? Oh, my darling . . ." I put my arms around her and tried to kiss her. A slight tremor ran through her body and she pulled away. "What is it, Monique? What have I done wrong?"

"Oh, Andy . . . darling. I'm sorry. I suppose I'm not ready for that yet."

I remembered what she had said about men pawing her. It was the principal reason why I had so carefully avoided pressuring her into a physical relationship for the past weeks, despite the physical attraction. God knows what she had had to endure with her "sugar-daddy". "That's all right, my sweet. I understand."

"I know it's silly of me, but please be patient. Give me a bit more time. When we're married . . ."

"Then you agree?"

She smiled her assent and, for a moment, I almost felt guilty at what I was going to do. Happily the weak moment passed.

"Andy, hold me tight." I put my arms round her again and she rested her head on my shoulder. "I'm so happy. I don't deserve . . ." Her voice trailed off. "You know so little about me."

I knew, or guessed, far more than she imagined. "I know everything I need to know," I said, thinking of a neat row of figures in black on a bank statement.

"You're so good," she whispered into my chest. "And I feel so guilty . . . and nervous."

"Guilty of what?" I asked. I wondered if she would tell me.

She was silent for a moment, then she said, "Andy, let's not wait. Let's get married straight away. I'll give up work and . . ."

I interrupted her. That would never do. "No!" That was too abrupt. I said it again, gently. "No. I'm not going to ask you to do that, darling. I know how much the dream of owning that small hotel in the south of France means to you. But just think! We can share that dream now. If we open a joint bank account and pool our savings, we could probably buy that hotel in months rather than years. Think how wonderful that would be, spending our honeymoon in our own hotel in Cannes or Antibes."

"Oh Andy . . ."

It took about a fortnight for the banking formalities to be completed. Then I booked a first-class air ticket to Rio-de-Janeiro for one week later.

The evening before my departure I lay back on my settee, a glass of brandy by my side, packed suitcases spread around me, too excited to sleep. Instead I was studying a small blue book which showed the total of three hundred and eighty thousand pounds transferred to the credit of Andrew Hudson's bank account that morning.

I was reflecting on the structure of that impressive sum. Most of it had come from Monique. Three thousand remained of Iris Porter's twelve thousand. Iris Porter of Bath. She had been a

ghastly creature. Fifty-five if she was a day, and all she had wanted to do was dive in and out of bed with me. I laughed, remembering the pleasure it had given me, and the look on her face, when I told her the company she'd allowed me to invest her money in had gone bust.

And what was the name of that horror in Southport? Murphy? Mahoney? It was an Irish name. That was it! Malone! Mona Malone had provided almost thirty thousand - and another lot of physical gymnastics.

It was ironic, really. Of the three of them, Monique was the only one attractive enough to have aroused any desire in me - and she was the only one I had never slept with. I wondered what it would have been like. Then I dismissed the thought; there would be attractive women galore in the years to come.

Then the doorbell rang. I wondered who the hell would be calling at this time of the night, and opened the door.

"Hello, Hudson."

The taller of the two men pushed his way past me into the room and motioned to his companion to join him.

"What the hell do you want?" I said.

He smiled. "Come, come, Hudson. That's no way to greet an old friend."

I shrugged off the hand he had put on my shoulder. "You're no friend of mine, Jarvis. Take off, and take buddy-boy here along with you."

"That's right," he said. "You've never met before. Allow me to introduce Sergeant Evans. I dare say you two are going to see a lot more of each other."

I swallowed. "Where's the search warrant, Inspector?" I tried to make the title sound like a dirty word.

"Search warrant?" He smiled the guileless smile of a cherub. "We haven't come here to make a search." His gaze swept the room and took in the signs of my imminent departure. "Thinking of taking a trip, Hudson?"

"Yes. And I'm extremely busy. So if you don't mind . . ."

"Oh, but I do." He clucked his tongue. "And you were leaving without saying goodbye." He turned to the sergeant. "He's packed far too much, wouldn't you say, Evans?"

"Look here, Jarvis, what's this all about? You've got nothing on me."

"No?" He grinned. "It was two years you went down for last time, wasn't it?"

"That was five years ago. I did my time. What are you bothering me for now?"

Suddenly I felt weak. I could sense the beads of sweat on my forehead. This was stupid, I thought. Neither of the two previous old bags had put in a complaint or I'd have heard from the police long ago. Anyway, I had covered myself pretty well there. As for Monique, she hadn't had time to suspect anything yet. And apart from that I'd kept myself pretty clean.

Detective Inspector Jarvis started talking to the sergeant. "You see, Evans? You see the trouble these people give themselves when they get out of their depth? They should stick to their regular line of work."

I was feeling sicker by the second. There was obviously some mistake, but right now I couldn't afford the time to hang around and straighten it out. Any delay might be fatal. I forced my face into a smile.

"Now see here, Jarvis . . . er . . . Inspector. I don't know what this is all in aid of, but suppose you both sit down and have a drink. If you're after information of any kind, you can depend on my cooperation. You know that." I took a handkerchief out and mopped my brow.

"It's too late for that, Hudson," said Jarvis. "Or should I call you Hamilton? You know, you people astound me. You've obviously had a really good racket going for you for the past three years. I mean, you've been living pretty well, and we haven't been able to lay a finger on you. Suddenly you get a rush of blood to the head and - wham!" Jarvis smacked an

enormous fist into the palm of his other hand. "We've been watching you for some time. At first I couldn't believe it was true. And then you opened that joint bank account."

I flopped into an armchair. "Would you mind getting to the point, Inspector."

Jarvis turned to Sergeant Evans. "You tell him, Sergeant."

You know, that was three years ago; and when the sergeant spoke, they were the first and only words he said. Yet, as if it was only yesterday, I can still hear his words, as he intoned: "Andrew Hudson, otherwise known as Andrew Hamilton, we have a warrant for your arrest, on the charge of living on the immoral earnings of a known prostitute - one Monique Duval."

They are letting me out tomorrow.

