

THE ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF PROFESSOR FIST

Part I

My wife was nagging me about my driving, telling me to ignore the impatient lout who had been driving too close for a while and *not* to swing out - *if you don't mind* - before taking the imminent left turn. I pulled a face she could not see and, as usual, said nothing. I turned left and, miraculously, the space just five yards away outside the post office was free for the first time in many years! Exclaiming *what a piece of luck*, I shot straight into it and inwardly mocked the motorist who was winking to go into it from the opposite direction, and watched him glower at me as he sped away in a much, much posher car than mine. Such are the triumphs retired people, who have started making mountains out of molehills, love to celebrate. But my triumph was short-lived. In the ten yards since my wife had spoken, she had died and sat staring at nothing. I prodded her - and knew for certain she was dead when she did not complain. A traffic warden rapped at her window. I wound it down. He asked whether I realized that my back wheels were touching the double yellow lines. *My wife's dead*, I replied. He looked at her, blinked and said he would call an ambulance. Once he had, he asked me if I would mind pulling forward a foot or so. So I did, making sure I did not hit the car in front of me. It was traumatic to have my wife die in the passenger seat without warning me - and come so close to getting a parking ticket. To be absolutely honest - and as a philosopher, a lover of the truth, I can be no other way - I have to confess that my lovely wife had vanished a long, long while ago, to be replaced by an acid-tongued and ferret-eyed woman the image of her mother who had struggled quite ineffectively to conceal her disapproval of me. Enid had become a series of Russian dolls of which the original pretty, carefree girl I adored became concealed beneath other layers, each less smiling and less pretty than the last, until the stoutest one acquired a pair of jowls, an upside-down mouth and - as it turned out - a weak heart. I grieved for the original, for myself and my spent life. How could I be sixty-one so soon? Then I blamed myself for turning Enid the First into Enid the Last, without really knowing for certain how much the fault lay with me or with her genes. I had tried to shed a tear at the service for the sake of appearances and had to concentrate really hard on all those lost years and our wilted salad days in order to squeeze one out. There were signs in the faces at the tea-party after the funeral that some on Enid's side held me responsible for the state of her - external and internal. The pointed absence of our only daughter who had hurried away from the crematorium seemed to give them encouragement. Even the dreadful silence after their departure was preferable to their unspoken accusations. I closed the door on the last one and went into the lounge. My wall-to-wall library was full of silent words too. I spent the next few days in there - a room Enid had come to hate the more it filled with books - but could not summon up the will to open one single tome.

I tried to become a pleaser-of-myself in the early weeks and months of my new solitary life in widowhood. Writing began to dominate the day, and I did briefly flirt with water colours. The piano, after my daughter's disappearance, stood unplayed, but my wish to re-familiarise myself with the keyboard would have to wait; likewise field walking, chess club, bridge club and many other projects. The television which had satisfied Enid's undemanding tastes would never be turned on before evening and then only sparingly. The only external entertainment I allowed myself was Radio Three - and I allow myself here a brief digression (as I am in no hurry, as I sincerely hope you are not) in order to describe one of the greatest pleasures there is, and which only a very few people, I think, know of. And it is absolutely free!

It has two requirements: first, a vile, atonal travesty of music which some aloof pseudo-intellectual in the cellars of the BBC pretends to rate; second, an on-off button. The longer - and louder - one can tolerate the former, the more blissful is the negating effect of the latter. The purity of the silence, the sweetness of the absence of cacophony is truly exquisite. (The trouble is with such a view is that it parallels so alarmingly the views of Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin and The Daily Mail that I am tempted to delete that sentence and pretend to be as avant-garde as the man in the cellar.)

To my surprise, however, my life without Enid became empty and I felt more and more guilty even though there was no good reason to. And anxious. The freedom of early retirement from my university department and from a nagging wife had turned to loneliness and pointlessness, accentuated by the meowing of Enid's cat who now had only me to complain to. It seemed to be accusing me of not loving it and her enough, and I do have to confess to these pages one piece of deception playing on my mind, regarding Enid's face. She had, at regular intervals, bemoaned her sagging chops (getting saggier every year), and talked about the possibility of having a face-lift. It would "only" cost a few thousand pounds - which we could "afford" if we economised here and there, for example "on books". "Books" always sent her face to the bottom of the lift shaft. I always managed to hide my alarm when she resumed this theme, and had a stock answer: "Enid, you are beautiful. Your face does need lifting. Just smile." I consoled - and console - myself with the thought that this was not entirely a lie because she really needed to eliminate her scowls not her jowls. And besides, what would have been the point of spending money to rejuvenate the face of a woman with a dicky ticker? Had she been able to come back to life for a second, she would, I was sure, have agreed that it would have been a waste of money.

I looked in the local paper for a new departure. On the personal pages there were plenty of divorcees and a few widows offering *genuine friendship*. As far as the *and maybe more* was concerned, I could probably get along fine without it. The phrase brought the thought of the silted-up Dee estuary to mind and I threw down the paper in disgust. My GP advised me to go to bereavement counselling - I refused - and prescribed me anti-depressants. They did not work. An advertisement in the local paper caught my eye: **Dr Mephostopholous, Your Personal Helper.** *Suffering from addictions, compulsions, stammering, sweating, nervous disorders, anxieties? Erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation (men), anorexia, bulimia, lack of confidence?* The photo showed a dark, genial, handsome man with a sharp beard and animated eyes which locked down my attention. He looked uncannily like the motorist whose parking place I had usurped. I was dying to ask him if any women really suffered from premature ejaculation. On impulse I called his secretary to make an appointment. It slipped my memory to ask how much it would cost.

"Doctor, I would give anything to shake off this awful depression and these feelings of guilt. I did love my wife - I know I did." *Once upon a time.....*

He tapped his pen on his notepad and swayed left and right in his chair. We sat amidst candlelight and the smoke smelt of something suspect. He had invited me to talk and I was surprised to hear, not the stumbling intonation of a Greek, but a voice as smooth, as rich and as dark as melting chocolate, an old-fashioned Oxford voice which put me in mind of the cinema newsreels.

“*Did* love.....*Did*, Professor Fist, *did* is such a simple word. A silly word even, a palindrome definitely. Is it not monstrous that such a silly word conveys the grave notion of things being over and done with for ever? The ineluctable effect of entropy? The dissolution of form and energy like the fading of wonderful music?”

“Er,,,I’ve never really thought about it, Doctor, but -”

“You were a professor of philosophy, were you not?”

“Yes - but how ever did you know -”

“*Did. Did. Did. Did. Did* - sorry to interrupt - *Did. Did. Did. Did. Did*. I want you to say the ridiculous little word out loud ten times. Please. Do not be shy.”

I did as I was told and by about the eighth time I did begin to laugh as the word became just a futile noise. I laughed with genuine hilarity as I had not done for years. I felt immediately more cheerful.

“You see, if you say words - love, pain, despair, guilt - often enough, they begin to lose fibre and meaning - like clothes spinning too long in a machine lose texture and colour. Listen carefully - stop laughing. Look at me. **Fist**, you are new - if less - every day, **Fist**. The Professor Fist who did exist is shrouded in mist and you must desist from feeling guilt - and any urge to reg-urg-itate the past you must resist. Don’t you see? If you were not possessed by a memory, Professor X, you would be a new creature every morning and as fresh as an April daisy! Memory and Conscience Pie stuffed with half-baked morals is the curse of you all. Does the lion feel sorry to eat the gazelle? The sea eagle regret devouring a sea trout? Does he hell! Memory and conscience are the well-springs of guilt you must quell- not the deeds one did or did not do! Rebel against your conscience!”

I felt sure he had made an error in logic and wanted to tell him so but my lips were glued tightly together. Those eyes.....

“Of course you loved your wife, old fellow! In spite of all her faults. Do feet smell - or the bacteria and their excreta on them? You hated her for her obsessions with tidiness; her terrible worries over absolutely nothing; her tightfistedness; her attempts to control and define you; her irrational loathings of people she had never met. Bruce Forsythe? Noel Edmonds? Harmless men compared to Hitler or Stalin - except to good taste one might think. And of course, her demerits were beginning to take over the free and easy, uncomplicated person you married who never used to wash her fundament or clean her teeth or fill a hot water bottle or check all the doors were locked or that the cat had a dish of food - before flinging caution to the wind and her body into your arms. I expect it was quite difficult already to muster the necessary - shall we say *sturdy impetus* - when she might mention, as she climbed onto the marital couch, a particular flavour of food no longer in favour with the cat. Not the stuff of wild romance....How often did you have sex?”

Blushing, my mouth opened to tell him to mind his own damned business but only a squeak came out.

“So infrequently? Well there you go. The passion had gone as if the juice from a squeezed orange. You had erectile problems - did you deploy elastic bands? - and Enid’s libido - once a great lake - had evaporated like an equatorial mudflat. But I know magical words to whisper into the ear to get the juices to flow again.”

I tried to leave but my bottom seemed glued to the chair. I asked how much I was paying to be insulted and told him that I was a widower of 61 and had no desire for juices.

“Ah! You see! People at your stage of life begin to think - *oh, we’re getting past that sort of thing, we prefer to be company for one another, go for walks, go to the theatre - blah,blah,blah* -

And thus the mind, the powerful mind, conditions the weak body to age more quickly than it ought - and, of course, its canals of hormones drain themselves. So the good old companions sit side by side, watching some drivel, each secretly sick and tired of the other as they bite into their chocolates. Did you take Enid dancing? Fine dining? Cruising? Away for romantic weekends? No, you entombed yourself behind walls of books. You, Fist, were too tight-fisted to spend on pleasures.”

“You are wrong, doctor! I wanted to go places - on cruises - but she always found a reason to stay at home. You were right when you said she was tight-fisted. She even put old dish cloths in the washing and ran off the cold from the hot tap into a bowl first thing!”

He gently shook - no rocked his head and smiled wryly. He had seen, he said, and heard so many self-deceiving people of a certain age boring their friends with their travel plans.

“What, they declare, is the point of amassing savings? They usually refer in their self-righteous wisdom to an old parent who is rich but too lame or infirm to enjoy their wealth. *No pockets in a shroud; time flies and you're old before you know it; you can't take it with you, who wants the Chancellor to get his greedy mitts on it?* - they mutter, mutter, mutter, mutter - forgetting that they themselves are the son or daughter of that old skinflint and by consequence pre-conditioned not to open their tight little fists and spend. So - pathetically - the ten years of their prime begin to pass - not as years - but as days and weeks and months - one hundred and twenty months, five hundred and twenty weeks and - they sound even fewer though their number is greater - a mere three thousand and six hundred and fifty days. And every month a situation arises - a large bill, a hospital appointment, a problem with the car - which means the great projects - the train journey through the Rockies, the world cruise, the flight to New Zealand - must be put on hold....until that son or daughter, shrivelled up by old age, hobbles across to occupy that great armchair in the retirement home vacated by the parent and sits dreaming, as they did, of missed opportunities locked away in a great vault labelled THINGS I SHOULD HAVE DONE....Professor Fist, do not deny it - you sniff the washing-up sponge to see if it can last one day more.”

“How much am I paying to hear this nonsense. What have you done to this chair?”

“Be quiet! When you wipe your bottom why do you see how many times you can fold the paper over to make a new pad? Because you are stingy.”

“Surely everyone does!” I exclaimed. He raised his dark brows.

“The first consultation is free. You can come again - or never. Let me tell you now before you are allowed to go what I have concluded. You are timid as well as mean. Your wife nags you, you do not respond. She nags you more. She was a teacher and they nag the most, even the better ones. Had you once turned to her and said *Enid, for pity's sake shut the FUCK up!* - she would have stopped. Say it out loud now and she will respect you.”

The ugly expletive in such a fine mouth was like oily junk in a rural idyll.

“This is madness, Doctor.”

“Say it! You came to me wanting to feel better, did you not? Enid is in your head, old fellow. Say it just once and she will laugh!”

I shouted it in anger. And as clearly as she had used to laugh, she laughed out loud, causing a strange euphoria to invade me from somewhere inside.

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“I told you that you would feel better! Your old wife, the first one - (she now occupies a part of your brain there, just above your left eyebrow) - is telling you everything is fun. The universe is one gigantic firework display and you and the rest cannot see it for clouds. She is saying - now

she is stripped of her woes and on the other side - Gerald, go out and enjoy it and stop worrying. Be as outrageous as you dare and know for sure that nothing matters! In a sea of eternal time, your pain, your despair, your guilt, your worry and all the other black fishes are tiny tiddlers soon to be gulped by a huge black whale. And what is that sound? Close your eyes and listen hard, Gerald. What is that sound echoing from the beginning to the end of All? It is - can you hear it? - it is not the Cosmic Hiss but laughter - the Laughter of God who is too kind and wise to let anything - pain or joy - last for long. Listen!"

I heard it. It was not frightening. In fact the opposite - warm and generous. He lit more candles and told me to watch. The air was heavy and sweet, intoxicating like a dense dessert wine. He blew out the candles nearest to him, slowly, like Pan playing his pipes, never letting his eyes stray from mine.

"You see, old fellow? Flames are temporary. You are temporary as are all the concerns which anchor and trap you. Those are not weighty matters at all - as they wish to pretend - but as light and insubstantial as the flames. Blow these out - yes these three - and I guarantee you shall feel free and no longer slave to your anxiety."

I blew. The flames tried to cling to their wicks but vanished, leaving liberated wisps of deliciously scented smoke which I could not stop from myself inhaling deeply. He placed a box of those green candles on his desk and told me I was to light one if ever I felt low again.

"Throw away those poisonous tablets and breathe in the incense of pure delight. Blow and blow, your depression will go, contentment will flow and pleasure will glow inside you like a star."

He gave me a paper and a pen and bade me write down at least ten things I despised. At the top I wrote *banks, call centres, cold-callers, youths, door-to-door salesmen, Nick Clegg, David Cameron, Chris Tarrant* and carried on until the sheet was covered with, as they say, all the usual suspects, many more than ten. He took the paper, never looking at it, and held it a foot above the one remaining candle flame and I watched it tremble in the rising air. As it turned faint yellow then tawny he slowly recited all the evils which I had written in perfect order - I could still make out the writing as it turned black on the darkening background - and then laughed as it all shrivelled in flame to cinder. He let it go and it ascended into the dark space above.

"You see. Everything is subject to decay. Do the widows and the daughters of the fallen at the Battle of Crécy still mourn their men?"

Slowly he shook his head, still possessing my eyes. In the end, he said, God had been kind to them all. Those who had writhed in agony on the field and those who had grieved in their cold beds - where were they and their despair now?

"Close your library door, old fellow. The Deed is more vital than the Thought! Do one outrageous thing and the rest will follow. **Live** - for Enid's sake who now regrets that she died before she lived. She didn't love that new old man you had become, so stop feeling guilty NOW!"

He stared at me harder and I felt strange as he whispered in a language which made no sense. When he stopped I heard the word *vacuum*.

I drove home half-dazed. Like a child with a lump of plasticine, he had played with my brain. Gradually, in the greying light of late afternoon, my good old voices began to speak to me. The windblown debris in the dirty winter town began to destroy his mantras. *It is not conscience which plagues the world - but a lack of it!* - And - *Was not psychology the biggest fraud of modern times? Freud the Fraud! As if men wished to penetrate their mothers!* - And - *As if those who dropped litter had been too strictly toilet-trained!* But then, as I was getting into my

pompous mental stride, my doctor's face appeared in the windscreen and laughed. "Shut the fuck up!" I yelled. And Enid giggled like a girl.

Once home I walked into my library-lounge but something seemed to drag me out. The cold and dark emptiness of the room felt like outer space. That was when I began to notice a droning in my head, like a distant aeroplane. As soon as it stopped I felt better. I poured myself a brandy and then another. When the cat would not shut up after several attempts to find a flavour in the cupboard he would eat, morbid thoughts of suicide - and then felixicide - began to pour in and I remembered the candles and lit one. The noise began again and I realised then what it was. I pictured Enid vacuuming the spaces around my feet as I read and made my notes - (I was writing my great work - a Key to All Philosophies). The doctor seemed to have placed a vacuum cleaner in my head!

That night I could not sleep and in the end I got up and drove into town. With a felt tip pen I wrote the word BONUS on a brick and hurled it through the great window of a prominent bank. To hear the window ring - it rang like a bell! - and to see it shatter made me howl with laughter. The pity was there was no-one there in the dead of night to share my delight. I jumped back into my car, drove home and returned to bed. With a great jolt I awoke and realised I had dreamt the whole event. The disappointment I felt was nothing compared to the urge to get up and do such an act. All my old resolve was needed to withstand it.

The next afternoon, a policeman was outside looking at my car, probably the last Austin Montego in the universe. I opened the door and he asked me if the car belonged to me. *Yes, indeed.* Had it, he asked, been borrowed by anyone in the past twenty-four hours? It did not occur to him to ask if it had been stolen. I heard Enid, who had nagged me for years to get rid of it, laugh at such a preposterous idea.

"Borrowed? What a strange thing to ask, officer!"

"Mr Fist?"

"Professor Fist."

I asked him in and bade him sit down in my library-lounge while I made tea. I returned to find him reading Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

"You have a lot of books, Sir," he said, slotting it back into its gap. "Have you read all of these? Really? Mmm, my word."

He took his mug of tea and came to the point. Someone had taken my car from the drive and gone into town in the night.

"The driver got out and threw a brick through the main window of the bank opposite the old cinema."

I went cold. He took a printed out photograph and began to unfold it. He looked at me and enquired if my grandson or son ever borrowed the car. Or did I have a much younger brother?

"The reason I ask, Sir, is that the culprit, this fellow hurling the brick, bears quite a resemblance to you, although it cannot be you because - and I do not wish to give offence in any way, shape or form.....in terms of.....offensiveness - this person is as thin as a rake and could not possibly grow such a thick bushy grey beard as you have in terms of less than twelve hours!"

I told him I had no male relatives and saw his eyes grow very large. I followed them to the source of his amazement. On the sideboard stood our wedding photograph. He looked at his print-out, then at the handsome groom and finally me. He attempted to speak but no proper

words came out. Enid, my blonde and beautiful bride and angel, with her now lost bouquet of apricot roses, seemed to have acquired a broader grin and seemed to be aiming it straight at the officer. I thought of my BONUS brick and let out a bark of laughter which did seem to belong to me. The policeman emptied his mug, stared again at my embonpoint and got up to take his leave, thanking me for my cooperation.

The photograph - with my licence plate fuzzed over as they can do these days - appeared in the local gazette the next day, Friday. There was an appeal for readers to phone a police line with any information on the perpetrator of this heinous act of vandalism. Unfortunately, this publicity backfired rather, such that by Sunday night many similar bonuses had been paid into other banks in Earlstone and neighbouring towns - and then beyond. I had never been a trendsetter. It felt quite good. My phone rang on Saturday morning and the voice was familiar. A young woman's voice.

"Gerry! How on earth did you do it?"

The phone went immediately dead, so I rang that number you have to ring but was told that the caller's had been withheld. It bothered and intrigued me all day. I had not been called Gerry for years (Enid insisted on Gerald). Perhaps it was a fellow pupil from years ago, even an old flame.

I rang Doctor Mephostopholous and told him he was a great magician and illusionist. I asked him to explain his craft. He laughed. Was I not aware, he drawled, that such as he never gave their secrets away?

"Make the most of it, old fellow. Very few men are blessed with such opportunities."

"But what will it all cost?"

"Oh, not that much. I'll send you the bill when your time is up."

"Can I pay by credit card?"

I was not aware that I had cracked a joke, but he laughed so much that he could hardly get his breath, and then he was gone.

My word! It was as if I had become invisible! A man of dishonest or criminal inclination could have had his head turned by such ingenious magic. How many enemies could he be revenged upon, how many scores settled with impunity? How much could be obtained from stores - even banks! - as I laughed at the security cameras while they recorded the very proof of my alter ego's innocence! I fetched a pen and paper to make a list of targets, but after an hour it remained blank. I had no personal enemies, had no acquisitive desires and was not in want of money - my generous pension, my sound investments and Enid's insurance settlement meant that I was comfortable, even wealthy. However, like the brick, there were countless acts of subversive vandalism I could have committed - billboards pasted with the smiling lies and claims of Satan's appointees on Earth, the banks, cried out for adulteration - but even though I went as far as to buy a spray-can, in the end it seemed rather pointless and childish. For if people could not work out for themselves that they continued to be cheated, then their gullibility and inertia rendered them deserving of the poor service and derisory interest they received.

There was one poster which particularly sickened me. It showed bank clerks smiling, and I could hear the advertising gurus brainstorming and exclaiming - *Heads up, people! How do we persuade the plebs to forget the whizzkids and the bosses with their obscene bonuses? Of course! We show them the ordinary, decent guys in the bank - people like themselves! Let's run the idea up the flagpole and see how many salute.....*

Was this called repositioning? Re-imaging? Would the plebs gradually have their mindsets

repositioned by dint of exposure to smiling bank clerks, cute cartoon characters representing themselves, the customers, and promises of - wait for it - independent reviews? In the mean time, the crafty cheats in the back office were busy paying out pittances to the forgetful, the indolent and the ignorant. To deface a poster or to abuse the advisors at the end of the phone at the call centre was futile. The Culprits were as remote as galaxies, as untouchable as their stars - and that was just how they liked it. This was the case for all those we loved to hate - the insurance companies, the energy providers, the supermarkets, the railways and the oil companies. The villains hid behind their employees. I put the pen and paper away.

I was refuelling the Montego and cursing the fact that the pounds and pence were easily outstripping the litres when a fiendish idea came to me. I stopped at half-full, paid and hurried home. On the internet I searched for the Theft Act (1968) and read it through carefully. The first clause convinced me that what I was about to do was legal - or not illegal. And I did not need the doctor or my younger alter ego to execute my plan. Since my meeting with the doctor I feared nothing - neither the law nor the censure of my fellows - indeed, I reasoned that my action would earn their approval. I took a deep breath and drove to another filling station - part of a supermarket chain whose pretentiousness I loathed, with its Village Street mock-up. Having filled the petrol tank to the brim, I joined the queue to pay. My heart was thumping - not with fear but with eager anticipation. Now it was my turn.

“Pump number three, please.”

“Forty-six pounds twenty-two.”

“That’s too much.”

“Sorry Sir?”

“Too much, young man. At £1.86 per litre I consider I’m being exploited by the producer and/or the retailer.”

The queue was lengthening behind me. Someone sniggered . Someone sighed.

“I am prepared to pay twenty-five pounds. A fair price.”

I put the notes on the counter with my calling card.

“If your employer would like to negotiate or discuss the matter - or would care to call on me to arrange the removal of some of the petrol by means of a siphon - this is my address. Good day.”

The startled boy behind the counter could say nothing and I left under the gaping stares of the queuers.

A knock on the door announced a second visit by the police - the same officer as before, and he seemed far from comfortable.

“We’ve had a report that you have stolen petrol from a supermarket filling station, Sir. May I come in?”

I led him into my library and he took a seat. I told him what I had done and what I had said and sat back while he thought it over. It was obviously not an easy thing for him to do, so I began to help him out, firstly producing the clause from the Theft Act which I had printed out.

Basic definition of theft

(1) A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it.

The officer cleared his throat and told me I had taken petrol which I had not paid for.

“That, Sir, is dishonest.”

“On the contrary, Officer. Had I driven away without offering payment, that would have been dishonest. I told the attendant - before witnesses - exactly how I felt, concealing nothing. Was that dishonest?”

“But, when you filled up you knew the price. If you disagreed with it, you should not have put even a drop in your tank.”

“I think it would be impossible for a prosecutor to prove that I “knew” the price. I could simply maintain that it was only at the counter when it became clear to me that I was being overcharged. I offered what I considered to be a reasonable sum - and left my address. Which of those actions could be deemed dishonest?”

“You underpaid - deliberately.”

“I was overcharged - deliberately. It is not a criminal but a civil matter. Look here ” - (I tapped the paper) - “I was not intending to permanently deprive the owner of the petrol, should he have objections. He has a number of options - he can sue me, or he can arrange for the petrol to be siphoned off - it’s out there in the tank on the car - he can have the lot if he wants to return my twenty-five pounds and negotiate a fair price for the Montego.”

“But if everyone did what you have done, how could he send people out to siphon out the fuel? He’d need an army of siphoners!”

“Ah! That is not a matter relevant to the Theft Act. Would you like to have a full look at it on the internet? It’s only nine or so pages long.”

He declined and seemed very uncertain what to do. Taking his walkie-talkie in hand, he told me he would have to speak to his sergeant, and left the room. The sun came out and lit up one wall of books. I smiled.

Upon his return, he informed me that I was not under arrest but was required to make a statement down at the station where it was likely I would be charged with theft. I offered to accompany him and he drove me there.

A phone call a few days later informed me that charges had been dropped but offered no explanation. I concluded that the impact on businesses any publicity of a trial would have might well have been a key factor in the decision. When I tried the same trick the following week at that filling station they were ready for me. My Montego - the only living Montego in the cosmos - identified me, and the attendant would not activate the pump. Since then I have been to a number of filling stations - deliberately avoiding the small retailers - and repeated the trick. There is nothing they can do. Fancy trying it? Or are you as timid as I used to be? I think the most daring thing I had done before Enid’s death – and afterwards it played on my mind that I had been captured on security camera – involved one those two nasty tabloids – I shall not mention them by name – who appeal to the lower middle classes by infuriating them with stories of scroungers and bureaucratic lunacy. One morning the slightly less intelligent of the two was trying to get up the dander of its balding, stooping readers with a front page story about asylum seekers, and it so incensed me that....can you imagine what I did? While Enid was turning over fifty peaches looking for two which were not soft or scabby, I actually put the whole pile of newspapers in my trolley under Enid’s baking parchment and went and deposited them on top of the toilet rolls.

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Doctor Mephostopholous gave me paper and asked me to write down the names of people I

admired on one list, and another with those I abhorred. I began the list with Plato and Mozart and when it was finished he held it as before in the candle flame until it vanished as a cinder from the pinch of his thumb and forefinger. He took the second list and did likewise. He wondered if I had felt depressed in the previous few days and I had to admit I had not. Tidying the garden in advance of the imminent spring and going out walking looking for signs of its arrival had occupied me. There had scarcely been time to pick up a book. I had even begun to write a novel. "And what about your Key to All Philosophies?"

"Oh, I've hardly given it a thought. I expect I shall return to it - once I feel wholly better."

"You should burn it, old fellow."

"I beg your pardon? It's my life's work!"

"And burn all your philosophy books! They are the pretentious thoughts of idle, obsessive men in dark rooms, written while their slaves or servants did their work for them. All error. The Truth is laughably simple - none of them would ever guess it. God's riddle. It is not that you humans are not clever enough, but that you are too clever. When you were a simpler species, you "knew" it. Homo Erectus knew it. Think of a cat and you will come close. All the rest is diversion and elaboration - a vulgar fraction. Cancel it down!"

"B-but the history of thought is fascinating - mankind's greatest achievement!"

"But generally absurd. Think of that lunatic Bergson! And that fascist precursor Nietzsche. And Plato with his silly ideal forms - the perfect wheelbarrow - for *goodness sake, give me a break!*" He got up and returned with his black cat. He put it on the table and patted its back just in front of its tail. It screwed up its eyes in ecstasy.

"Is there a perfect cat in heaven - the mould of all imperfect sublunary cats such as Blackheart here? Absurd! What, in essence, is this creature about, Professor?"

The cat meowed in reply, a purry meow.

"Look," he said, turning it round and round "It is a tube, a furry tube, a gut with an inlet and an outlet; I lift its tail; now you see it, now you don't. It has four legs to take it to food, and whiskers to aid its eyes as it negotiates space. It has claws to secure its prey. It has other features, of course - organs - some less essential than others. At base, it is emblematic of all matter. Matter - like organisms - tends ever towards the complex as entropy increases. Under certain warm and wet conditions life forms are certain to emerge over time. As particles, matter possesses momentum and energy and is predisposed to fill space and thereby clash with other matter. So too with animals - the very embodiment of such energy. Equally true, as with matter, the more complex animal will dominate the simpler in competition for that space. Complexity confers advantage. Hence this deceitful creature you see here, and beyond him, your worthy self. What I have said would fill barely one page amongst those millions on your bookshelves. But it is the essence of the truth. How men should live together and treat each other *in that space* is quite another matter - political ethics, not philosophy. And God knows how badly you have all done! If history was your test, each generation has failed! History is not the story of humanity, but of *inhumanity*....Do you want to stroke him? He never bites. No point. He gets fed."

"What about his tail?"

"For balancing in trees. And to stop your hand falling off the end, old fellow - or from getting too close to...*that puckered thingie*...."

The cat meowed and the doctor laughed, saying *there* - it agreed with him.

"But of course I jest. His is a knowledge *in the very doing* - a physical, non-verbal enactment of that basic principle of assertion. God creates the simplest of material and sees what comes of it. He is not omniscient - biblical bullshit - for he would be bored if he knew the ending on the last

page and would not take the trouble to open the first chapter. He sometimes stands back as an observer and sometimes joins in as a character in his great Play. It is one fantastical, spectacular chain of events and only one species - foolish men - choose to be ascetics and hermits, such as you. How he laughs at such an irony!"

"But just a minute," I said, inspired. "What of you? You sit behind *your* desk. You are not such an active free spirit either!"

"Ah, but I am, old fellow! This is a tiny fraction of what I do - and it amuses me to hear all your stories and set your minds free from their chains of guilt etc, etc. You, Sir, are a formidable and challenging case and it will be a triumph when you leave your scholastic cell. Look at the impossible world all your *philosophies* have created. You are all the *prisoners* and not the *owners* of things, as you are led to believe. Men are slaves to the very production of those objects of desire and have to spend their precious time within dismal walls collecting the tokens to acquire them. Your young are slaves to alcohol and your generation as much slaves to goods as you are to your precious, specious books."

"But total freedom is impossible! We have to clothe ourselves, shelter ourselves, move ourselves and feed ourselves - and that all consumes time. We cannot all be like the jungle Indians who – who... "

" - Who are truly the freest people on Earth! *Cannot* be? *You and other civilised men* would call them primitive. How many books and goods have they got? Yet how much leisure and freedom do they enjoy?"

"They die earlier..... I think."

"But when you measure and compare your hours of freedom and theirs? Who is closer to Eden - you or them? Your Karl Marx perceived that people have to work far longer than necessary, solely for the benefit of their employers. Has the lesson been learnt? No. You are slaves to production and consumption. Your health and morale deteriorate. You live amidst dereliction and in a state of anxiety, bombarded by the message that salvation will only come through the stilling of your aspirations - aspirations which have been stirred up by the brainwashing power of advertising. You secretly dream of escape from this madhouse but have no idea of to *what*, poor fools, or *how* - because you are addicted to your gadgets, to your shops, to your stuff and to your *lifestyle* - a paltry substitute for LIFE. This furry beast here is more free than any of you! But to you, old fellow, I have given the opportunity to escape and be outrageous, to show the other prisoners how absurd their captivity is. Your brick was a promising beginning."

He opened his drawer and handed me the same photograph of young me - former me - heaving the brick. In addition to the blurring on the number plate of my car, its windscreen was also opaque. I rubbed at the plate with my finger and the number appeared; then at the windscreen and was shocked to what was revealed. Staring at me was his eye.

"How do you do these tricks?"

"You must trust me, old fellow. I'm sorry, but now you will have to go as I have another client to see."

As I left the waiting room, a most beautiful, fragrant woman, dark-haired and dark skinned, came past me with a smile which left little doubt as to what her agenda with the doctor was.

I could not settle to any book, neither my novel nor my Key To All Philosophies. After a few lines his voice rang in my head laughing in ridicule - and so infectiously that I had to smile. I went out to dinner in a seafood restaurant which Enid and I had avoided on a number of spurious grounds, the true one being expense. I chose oysters, mussels and lobster and the dearest wine on

the list. Afterwards, the moment I turned the key in my front door, a bump upstairs made me wonder if the damned cat had gotten onto the bed again. The door was ajar and there was a smell of sweet lemon - that is the only way to describe it - and when I pushed the door open, the dark woman was lying naked with a silken scarf across her torso and loins. I caught a sharp breath. She drew me with her hand to herself and I had no power to resist. She was a wonderful, inexhaustible box of dark chocolate delights and when I fell asleep the owls were calling. I awoke with the dawn to find her gone. Doctor Mephostopholous sat at the end of the bed, staring and smiling in her manner. But for the skin colour, he might have been her brother. He blew me a kiss and went, leaving me in a trance I could not rouse myself from, watching the grey light turning silver at the curtains, wondering again if I had dreamt the whole event due to the rich food and heady wine I had consumed. Downstairs my library door was ajar, and I thought I could hear whispering. Were the two of them in there? I went in and found the room empty but the whispering carried on, seeming to emanate from the very walls of books.

It became louder and I caught snatches of lines from their pages, laughter and singing and shouts until the crescendo was so deafening that I had to shut the door. Instantly the noise abated and there in the hall was Enid's precious cat I had reprieved - after much internal debate - from a one-way trip to the vet's. He knew I hated him and he hated me. He sat licking his paws, then stopped and screwed up his eyes. Turning from ginger to black, he told me in a purry voice exactly what the doctor had told me about how free he was.

"I choose to live with you, because you are fool enough to turn on the central heating and fool enough to feed me."

I pinched myself but I did not awake as I was expecting to. The cat laughed and - naked as a neonate - I rushed out of the front door in terror - just in time to be almost run down by a huge carriage. The coachman, staring down at me from a great height at that very instant, unleashed a terrible oath which I did and did not understand, and an imperious face - bewigged - looked out at me from the window as if I was some cur in the gutter. I turned to go back into home but the front door and my house were no longer there. Muddy water from the coach wheels had splattered my green stockings and buckled shoes, but my tan velvet coat was untouched. I was in the middle of a wide avenue, rutted by traffic, and on all sides were tall buildings, many palatial. A horse rider gave me a wide berth and as soon as I could escape from the tangle of carts and coaches I hastened to the far pavement. As far as the eye could see, there ran an ornate railing and on the far side of it were wonderful lawns and flower beds. Behind tall trees was a white building of classical design and proportions. A stubby hand appeared on my sleeve and, turning, I spied a ruddy, portly gentleman who seemed very relieved.

"Ah, Herr Doktor Fist! Zer you are! I zought zat I you in zer crowds lost hed! Come, ve vill miss ozzervise zer beginnink."

My companion turned and almost broke into a trot and I lengthened my stride to keep pace with him. A queue was forming around the great wrought-iron gates standing open. Two lackeys in red, one a Negro, were bending forward to inspect the white cards proffered to them and I realized as we got closer that they were printed tickets. Along the avenue, carriages large and small were parked with horses nodding and steaming in the warm sun. The sweet stench of their manure stopped my breath but it seemed of no consequence to my fellows who were chatting and laughing in a sing-song language. We were admitted to the park and followed the stream of those elegant and fashionable people towards an opening with a natural arch in a towering hedge of yew, clipped into an impossibly flat and dense finish. Beyond, I could see rows of chairs, mostly occupied, and at the front of them a stage and what looked like an orangerie. Suddenly the word

“Vienna” spoke itself in my head. An orchestra of perhaps twenty players were fiddling and blowing, warming up their instruments. Centre-stage was occupied by an elongated forte piano. The stench of the horses was now replaced by the smell of the audience who had drenched themselves in perfumes.

“Everyone is zo excited to hear zer young maestro’s new piano vork” said my companion as soon as we had squeezed ourselves onto our chairs. “And he knows you are here, Herr Doktor, you who zo well his farzer, Leopold, attended, ven he voz zo ill in Lon-don. He is sittink in zer first row in zer blue coat, zer, see him? - by zer lady in red vith zer tall vig - zo *very zelfish off her.*”

I could not speak. My eyes were re-seeing the list of names which my mentor had released from his thumb and forefinger as the flame consumed the last corner. The tuning-up on stage was subsiding, bringing the chatter down to whispers. Someone on the front row began to clap, and as the applause spread and rippled backwards, many in the middle stood on tip-toe, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of their idol, and I joined them. And there he was, almost skipping towards the steps on the right hand side in a red frock-coat, a tiny man, almost a child, now ascending the stage to stand before his long instrument, now bowing to acknowledge his admirers as the violinists tapped their music stands with the back of their bows to show their love of the greatest musical genius ever - Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Our eyes seemed to be destined to meet and as he looked in my direction I nodded and his boyish face beamed even more brightly. He sat straight down on his stool and spread out his music, then smiled at his fellow-players. I pushed the skin on the back of my hand and the wrinkle only slowly vanished. The heavenly music began and there were sighs of joy from every quarter as Viennese ears heard for the very first time his piano concerto number 23 in the carefree and cheery key of A Major, a piece which I knew so well and loved so dearly. I knew immediately that the year was 1786, Mozart’s heyday in the great city before his fall from popularity.

During the slow movement - (which I maintain, though written in a minor key, is *not* melancholy, but meditative, as the composer, seeming to yearn for enlightenment, contemplates the great mysteries) - as the slow movement developed I looked, as he must have done when composing it, heavenward; and I noticed for the first time how those high clouds were embroidered and edged with rose and gold by the hiding sun, given away by three shafts of light. The sky was of a faint porcelain blue, putting me in mind of immense murals in rococo churches. Only the cherubim, seraphim and saints were missing from that canopy, and, in their place, Mozart’s piano seemed to be sending out notes and chords to fly briefly on the air, melting before they could reveal the Mystery which only the Eye, also invisible there, was able to see. The movement lasted not quite six minutes but the whole city seemed to stand still and stop what it was about; only one thing moved - a distant white bird tracked slowly across the clouds before vanishing like each note of music. The applause was long and generous and Mozart bathed in its warmth until at last he held up his hand, beat time quickly to his players and dived into the keyboard to release the impatient energy of the third movement, a box of musical birds and fireworks dazzling the ear with its brilliant and unpredictable twists and turns. The world, having rested, began to dance along to it, the treetops, the doves, the flowers and, not least, Mozart himself, bouncing up and down on his stool to the delight and laughter of me and everyone. The concluding chord was greeted with such acclaim and such prolonged calls of encore - *de capo!* - that the whole piece - not just the third movement - had to be repeated. It was an even more sublime performance than the first, since the audience could now anticipate the climaxes of the phrases, and their bursts of applause and delighted sighs so encouraged the players that they

drew the plenitude of that divine music from their instruments.

At the end, the audience did not disperse but wandered through plane trees onto another lawn where platters of sweet delicacies and trays of wine were being handed round. The breeze which had sprung up, as if stirred into life by the third movement, was lifting table cloths and the flimsy chiffon of the ladies. The cherubimic clouds had been replaced in the northern sky by a lower menacing brood of devils, and the chill air seemed to announce an end to high summer and the imminence of autumn. Of course, to ask which month we were in of my chaperone, that kindly old gentleman, would have been imbecilic. I watched as a plane leaf, as big as the open span of a hand, drifted down and landed gently, but ominously, on the shoulder of the old gentleman in front of me, Leopold Mozart. I was reminded that he had barely a year of life left in his bent frame. His son, the great little man, was only yards away to my right with a very elegant set who clearly expected to be pampered in return for their praise of him. I noticed how pale he was and remembered how little he slept and how little he saw the light of day. A moment later I was staring into the grey face of the father to whom my stout companion was explaining something about myself. The face lit up as if an ember had been stirred to life in ashes and he took my hand into his and shook it with vigour. His words of gratitude and obligation were translated for me and in reply I dismissed my efforts on his behalf as a trifle.

“Oh, kindly tell Herr Mozart it was nothing. An inflammation of the chest caused by our London soot!”

“Wolfgang!” he shouted “Komm doch her!”

And there he was, my great little hero, his eyes staring into my eyes, expressing in slow English his regards to me - me, a modern man, who could have astounded him, had I been able to produce one of those thin, shiny metal disks containing the whole of his 23rd Piano Concerto - and two others besides.

“You gave me chocolate, Herr Doktor, when Father was ill. I played for you the first few bars of my first symphony very quietly.” His voice was a surprise - a pleasant growl. For a moment I was speechless.

“Did I, Herr Mozart? I can recall only that you were no older than six years of age - and that your playing astonished me - as it still does. It is a great honour to meet you twenty years later in this beautiful city and hear you play what has always been one of my favourite concertos on such a fine day!”

I had gone way too far. He looked perplexed.

“*Always* been? Have I understood you well? I wrote down only last night these notes!”

“Ah! I am overcome with the joy of meeting you. I meant *will* be.”

He could see I was embarrassed. My face felt hot.

“It is so beautiful and optimistic a piece, that it is already a favourite. You will, and I am certain of it, be celebrated in all the years to come as the greatest composer ever to live.”

He stared at me in wonder. Optimistic? I could have told him there and then that he had only five years of life left.

“How do you come to be in Vienna, Herr Doktor?” he asked, still intrigued.

“Oh - at the invitation of Herr - -”

I did not know the gentleman’s name.

“Herr - -”

“Herr *Kolb*” he said. “Herr Kolb is my father’s friend.....Look, while you are here, I would be delighted if you would honour my household by coming to take tea with me and my wife.”

“Constanze.”

Now he was truly astonished. How had I, he asked, come to know the name of his wife - of only four years - from the great distance of London? Was I in such regular and detailed correspondence with Herr Kolb?

The light and clouds had thickened in the swirling air. A storm was ready to break. A gentleman's wig took flight, revealing a bald dome and Mozart laughed. The doors of the orangerie were flung wide and guests began to scuttle indoors, hurried along by a jagged streak of gold splitting the purple sky. I found myself running next to the composer who was holding his wig down, but then my body was rising above the people into the low clouds. Mozart's face, all amazement, was staring upwards after me. A startling thought came to mind. If I was not dreaming, perhaps my Doktor Fist was a character in *his* waking dream. Then a cold grey mist, as on a mountainside, was wrapping me round. Was this to be then my demise, the price demanded for such a perversion of the natural order?

I drew back in terror but then saw the mist become framed by a riveted square window. The thunder had turned to a drone. Propellers, suddenly caught by the sun, glinted silver out of the mist. I saw myself clad in light blue serge and huddled in a tartan blanket. Looking around the cabin, I counted five others; three seated middle-aged men in pinstripes, heads nodding, and one young woman with crimped blonde hair standing over an elderly gentleman in a seat across the gangway. She was fighting to keep her balance as she jotted down his dictation on a pad, and I felt annoyed that she had not been invited to sit with him. He had a dark moustache and wore a high collar. In profile he reminded me of a politician I knew of.

The glint of light had been no accident for the plane was ascending and at last the full glory of the sun and blue sky were there to behold. The drone of the engines had me closing my eyes from time to time, and then I must have slept because the next time my eyes opened the blonde secretary, whose breath smelt of coffee was shaking me gently and saying *Flight Lieutenant Faust*. Through the window I could see a plain, a great city and then high mountains.

"Flight Lieutenant Faust, the Prime Minister wishes to speak with you."

I looked across and he smiled.

"When we land" he said, voice like a flute, "You and I and Miss Stribblehill will proceed to the Berghof in the first car and my advisors will follow. I wish to speak to the Chancellor as soon as possible. We do not have a moment to lose. He will have his interpreter. You must ensure that whatever he or she says renders exactly and truthfully the words the Chancellor speaks. Any deviation, and you must alert me immediately with a signal. I suggest you raise you right eyebrow."

I tried to raise the one without the other but could only raise the two together.

"Very well, young man. Then rub your nose."

I leant back in my seat and watched the buildings grow and the mountains approach. It was quite an ordeal for me - who had only flown once before - to land in such a primitive craft. It shook, wobbled, drifted and then leapt back into the air when it hit the ground as if scorched by the impact, finally settling and trundling like a fat humming insect until it came to a halt. The droning faded and stopped. The Prime Minister got to his feet and went to the front.

"Lady and gentlemen" he said. "We have come on a vital mission with the peace of Europe and maybe the whole world at stake. We must all be on our metal. I do not possess the rhetorical gifts of a King Harry or a Queen Bess but let us all do our duty to the best of our ability."

As the starchy gentleman turned one person clapped and then stopped. Miss Stribblehill looked round at me and grinned at me briefly, very briefly, with the beguiling eyes of the doctor and his

dark-skinned lover. She hissed my name and my reverie was broken. I was required.

“Come, Flight Lieutenant Faust. It is time” said my leader.

We descended the steps at the aerodrome into gusts and lashes of rain and stepped straight into a black Mercedes. We drove, climbing all the time, through villages and past farms until the dark mountain took us. The clock on the dashboard stood at three twenty and the scene outside was very gloomy, as if preparing for an early night. The deciduous trees were still in full leaf however and I deduced that it was September. Miss Stribblehill was squeezed in next to me and her thigh slowly began to burn into mine. Whenever I glanced at her she seemed oblivious of her effect on me. There was a signpost for Berchtesgaden and our road became steeper. There were isolated lights from farms above us, and beyond the line where the trees gave up their march, snow was already lying. Unexpectedly, the car veered sharp right to confront two great gates and a sentry post. The chauffeur and a soldier exchanged a few words and one gate was swung back to allow us to pass. At the end of the drive stood an imposing building with a chalet roof.

“May I introduce to you, Sir, my secretary, Miss Stribblehill, and my interpreter, Flight Lieutenant Faust.”

The man with the little legs standing warming his front by the log fire had turned to look at us as we entered. He was about five foot nine and singularly unimposing in view of the fact that he was able to hold multitudes spellbound. He nodded but did not smile and did not advance to greet us. He looked at me and asked - in German - if I was a German. My reply came out so fluently that I astonished not only him but myself. (I translate)

“No, Sir, I am British. My grandfather came to England from Brunswick in 1873. He was an army officer, overlooked by Bismarck, whom he hated and never forgave.”

“Ihr Deutsch ist perfekt, Herr Leutnant Faust.” was all he could say after a long pause, although the malevolent glint in one eye said precisely what he thought of my grandfather - and of me for being his grandson. We were curtly bidden to take a seat at a large oblong table facing him, his own secretary, Frau Kirsch - whose lumpy plainness was exaggerated by slender Miss Stribblehill's beauty - and a rather nervy man who looked desperate for a drink or a cigarette; Schmidt, the interpreter.

Herr Hitler began slowly and patiently to stress how he had taken pains to act in accordance with international law and custom but the situation in the Sudetenland was extraordinary and would require extraordinary measures. Mr Chamberlain replied by saying in quite a long-winded fashion that his principle concern was to prevent the crisis in Czechoslovakia from getting out of control, and that he could only hope that his counterpart was minded to seek a peaceful resolution. Hitler's reply was as blunt as Chamberlain's exposition had been urbane.

“I will risk a world war rather than allow the situation in that unhappy and persecuted province to continue!”

My leader's response was unexpectedly fierce and evidently took the Führer - as well as me - aback.

“Kindly ask Herr Hitler” he retorted “Why I have been permitted to fly to Bavaria - in my seventieth year, on my first ever flight - if he is already decided on war? Please tell him that such a message could have been communicated to His Majesty's Government through the usual diplomatic channels!”

I translated this slowly and calmly while the ashen-faced little man never took his eyes from mine. Schmidt nodded briefly in agreement with the sentiments I had interpreted. Hitler seemed lost for a reply. Round One to Chamberlain. Inwardly I cheered and Hitler seemed to sense it.

His dislike of me became more discernible. He began to ramble on and seemed to lose Schmidt who made a bad mistake in omitting a vital clause and I rubbed my nose. Chamberlain's mood changed from dismay to optimism.

"Could Herr Hitler please crystallize his words into a proposal - as on this side there is some confusion. Is he saying that he would welcome my intervening - along with the French? - in persuading President Benes to grant cession of the Sudetenland to Germany?"

Hitler's eyes gleamed as, with a heavy heart, I translated this faithfully. Chamberlain had, of course, just unwittingly persuaded Hitler that he would never go to war over the Czech question and that he was even prepared to do his dirty work for him in Prague. Upon seeing a great opportunity emerge in that great hall of the Berghof, whereby the Czechs might be blamed for armed conflict as a result of not responding to British mediation, Hitler purred that if the British were in favour of secession and were to state their position publicly, then there might be a chance *to have a talk*. Chamberlain, promising to consult his Cabinet, asked for an assurance that Hitler would not take action before he had a reply. To this a beaming Hitler assented.

During dinner - a tedious and uncomfortable affair - Hitler, who bent his head so low like an animal to shovel in his food that his lock of hair almost touched the plate, went on and on about his admiration of England - (not Great Britain) - and of its great empire. His favourite film, he said, was *The Four Feathers*, whose action was set in the Raj, telling the story, he told us excitedly, of a man branded a coward for not enlisting in the army but who had regained his reputation by acts of amazing derring-do. My Prime Minister did his best to keep up but he was evidently no man of small talk, and after such a long day on the move - an old gentleman with only two more years to live - he was exhausted. It was not long before he asked me to tell his host how terribly sorry he was, but he felt so fatigued that it was imperative he retire even though he would love to stay and get to know him much better. The clock stood at eight ten and I saw Miss Stribblehill's eyes stray to it before engaging mine with a look which needed no interpretation. Adolf Hitler spoke of his concern for his honoured guest and made a half-hearted effort to persuade him to remain at table just long enough to sample the best apple strudel in Bavaria. Neville Chamberlain hung his head and within five minutes we were bidding Hitler good night and being escorted to our rooms which were on the same corridor.

After ten minutes there came the lightest of knocks at the door and with a leap of my heart I imagined curvaceous Ms Stribblehill shaking her curls outside the door. I was rather disappointed to find Schmidt there. The Führer wished to speak with me in private. I followed Schmidt to an apartment on the floor above and was left there alone. Hitler kept me waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour and then appeared. I stood up. He smiled but it was an effort. I was, he told me, a man who intrigued him - a better man at my trade than poor Schmidt who, as he spoke, was down in the kitchens drinking Asbach Uralt and smoking.

"Herr Leutnant Faust, you learnt German at your mother's knee."

"No, it was my father who spoke to me always in German. My mother was half-Scottish, half-Welsh."

"I hold you - to be a German."

"Well, I assure you that I am a Briton. A true mongrel. And proud to be such."

He ignored this provocation and told me what invaluable service I could provide for the Reich.

"Your *Fatherland* !You are a second generation German and as such would be less likely - particularly in light of your military career - to be interned in the event of war with England."

"Are you asking me to become an agent for the Third Reich?"

“I am asking you to remember your natural duty. Your native duty. Your grandfather abandoned his duty to the new German nation. You could make amends for him.”

“My grandfather was a man of principle who - against his better judgment - did a favour for Bismarck, and was subsequently *abandoned* by him - for his own selfish ends.”

“Your grandfather was a weakling who did not understand that *talking* politics is just for debating societies. Great men are aware that, to achieve glorious goals, *Force* - as in the heat of a forge - is the only way to fuse together squabbling factions for the sake of unity. Such a craftsman and genius was Bismarck!”

“Bismarck was a liar and deceiver. Through him many good men were ruined and many perished.”

“Bismarck loved above all things - as I do - the German nation, and told - as I have told - any lie to advance its cause. What were his or *my* scruples - or the scruples, or rights, of any other mere individual - set against the happiness, security, prosperity and future of an entire Volk? To be squeamish about a few sins one may be forced to commit at the back or in the wings of the Theatre of History of a *Great People* is to be a selfish coward!”

He had come closer to me in his passion, but I did not flinch, looking down on him from my greater height, although with rapidly beating heart.

“So, mein Führer, welchen Dienst verlangen Sie von mir, Ihrem Untertan?” I asked as slowly as I could manage and with a hint of sarcasm. *What service did he, my Leader, wish from me, his subject?*

He did not mistake my tone of insincerity. He returned to his position by the log fire and studied me. He leant forward on the balls of his feet.

“Fool!” he spat “I offer you a great honour and you spurn it because of some vague....*principle* you have inherited and never examined! I ask you, what miseries and deprivations have been endured for the sake of your great British empire? To make an omelette eggs must be broken - and I will break every egg I can lay hands on at the farm to make mine!”

With such amoral cynicism and Realpolitik it was useless to argue. Chamberlain believed that Hitler was within the range - if on the extreme edge - of his moral compass. It would require the events of 1939 in Poland to show him how far beyond the pale he was. In the presence of this man I felt exhilarated and terrified - a Saint George in the dragon's cave. Here now was my chance - even though it be a dream - to rob the monster of his fire. Should I pick up a knife and kill him? It so happened that Alan Bullock's *A Study In Tyranny* - albeit a history and not a philosophical work - was amongst the most well-thumbed volumes on my shelves. I inhaled deeply to slow the quavers in my voice to semi-breves.

“Herr Hitler, I truly appreciate your confidence in me and I thoroughly understand your arguments. Be aware, however..... that I find them abhorrent. Nationhood is a myth, as will be proven by genetic research....of which you will never have an inkling. The truth is.....I would rather work.....for the Devil Incarnate, than for you.”

His nostrils flared, his moustache twitched, his eyes bulged and his hands shook.

“I know that you plan to invade the Sudetenland - whatever my kindly Prime Minister may do or say - on October 1st. And that you have already given the order.”

The fury threatening to erupt at my previous insolence seemed to stop dead in his throat and instead he gaped.

“I know you will claim Danzig in Poland for the Reich. This will provoke a war on September 3rd next year. Initially, you will succeed. You will overrun Belgium, Holland and France and your bombers will blitz London. You will seem invincible by 1941. And yet, and yet.....”

“AND YET?”

“By 1945 you will be dead, and your body, shot by your own hand, will be ashes amongst the ashes and ruins of Berlin.”

He began to shout and bluster. Was there a traitor in his entourage - *some cowardly general?* - who had contact with me? And what nonsense was I talking of defeat? How dare I, a mere Flight Lieutenant, an interpreter, address him, the Leader, the greatest German since Barbarossa, in such an insane and provocative manner??

He was as terrified as he was furious.

“You call *me* a mere Lieutenant? *You* rose no higher than Corporal - and have always resented the way your High command sneer at you behind your back!”

“I - am - your - Führer! You owe me respect, diligence and OBEDIENCE!”

I thought he would strike me but he stopped short. He was so close that his vegetable breath was in my nostrils. I slowly shook my head at this - essentially - mediocre man who would soon put fifty million people in their graves. The knife was close but my hand would not move. I saw – only for a second - a black cat’s claws digging into the back of it. I took another deep breath and spoke.

“Give it up now, Herr Hitler. Retire. Enjoy the scenery and take your hound for walks.”

He stared up into my face unable to speak.

“Otherwise, your only Memorial will be the hatred and revulsion good men and women of the future shall feel when the word *Hitler* is mentioned. Your deeds will blight Germany for generations. Your name will be synonymous with Evil.”

He composed himself and returned to the fireplace, keeping his back to me.

“Faust - I have offered you the chance to be a hero of the Third Reich - to achieve a kind of greatness by association - but you prefer to remain a low-grade RAF officer and an *official*” - (he spat the word out as if it was a nasty taste) - of that bumbling old *gentleman* - that stuffy *bourgeois* who cannot keep his eyes open after dinner. Very well. This was your decision - ” (and now he turned to show me his venomous contempt) - “- A decision which you will live to regret.”

I left him and went back to my room. I seemed to float down the stairs and knew the dream would soon end. But when I switched on the light I found Miss Stribblehill propped up naked against my pillows, cradling her lovely and surprisingly ample bosom in her arms.

“I thought you would never come back” she said, sliding down in the bed and raising and parting her knees. I tore off my uniform and joined her. She was fragrant and warm and amazingly forthright and uninhibited for a woman of that decade. The song *Roll Me Over In The Clover* kept singing itself in my head as she yelled and gasped instructions at me. Eventually, when I was thoroughly spent, she reached out to the table and lit herself a cigarette.

“You’re pretty good for an airman” she said. “Navy’s the best. What did old Adolf want, then?”

“Nothing really. Offered me a job as a spy. Twenty thousand Marks a year and a Mercedes Benz.”

She giggled and offered me a drag of her fag.

“No thank you. Well, Miss Stribblehill, you will be able to tell your grandchildren that you had dinner with Adolf Hitler.”

“Horrid little man! How can the German women swoon over him? His breath smells like bad wind.....Oh dear, look. In your haste to roger me, you tore a button off your jacket. I’ve got a little sewing kit in my room. You do me one more *big* favour and I’ll sew it back on.....”

“What? The button, you mean??”

*

When I woke the phone was ringing downstairs. I picked it up and found myself listening to that familiar voice again.

“Gerry? Can I come round? I’d like to catch up on your news.”

“Who is this?”

“Surely you remember me. It’s Judith.”

School. Sixth form.English.

“Jude! Of course!”

“How is Enid?”

I was about to tell her she was dead when I noticed I was in the old house. A tricycle - my daughter, Natalie’s - stood at the end of the hall.

“Enid’s fine. So happens she’s taken Natalie shopping for shoes. She won’t be back until this afternoon.”

I looked at my hand. The skin was firm. The phone receiver was one of those heavy, old-fashioned efforts. Judith was a tiny *hello?* coming out of the holes. I told her I was still there.

“I live at number 49, The Crescent.”

I put the phone down and looked at me in the mirror. I was my early-thirties self, filled out, but not yet fat, with a neatly trimmed beard. I opened my fist which had been closed all that time and something fell out. A brass button. There was no time to be amazed because the doorbell rang. It was Judith. She was more beautiful than I remembered her - all dark curls and clever blue eyes - but with a fuller figure like mine. I leant forward to peck her cheek but she gave me her lips instead. How soft and sweet they were - and when she wiggled the tip of her tongue between my teeth my ears rang, my back tingled and my serpent began to uncoil. Breathlessly she opened my dressing gown and saw for herself. She looked up at me with that old cheeky smile, and patted me.

Upstairs, I savoured all her delights which as a seventeen-year-old she had hesitated to unveil to me. She was soft and sturdy and eager. My own prowess and resilience were astounding, and the delight turned out to be not entirely one-sided - confirmed at last by her cries of triumph - an unearthly and wondrous music, almost as wondrous as Mozart’s concerto. I watched her pretty face gurn, becoming almost ugly, and then relax to a state of serenity. We slept and I dreamt I had dreamt of her, but when I woke she was still there, dressing. She was such a beautiful perfectly made woman, and as I watched I desired her again, and she noticed.

“Oh, my word, Gerry” she giggled. “Not again already? Well, too bad. I have to go. Paul will be home soon.”

“Paul?”

“Surely you remember Paul Wells. Handsome guy in the second year sixth?”

“Oh yes! Is he.....”

“Is he what?”

“Alright?”

“Mmm” she hummed wryly. “That would be a fair assessment. Alright. He always suspected me of cheating. So I thought I might as well. Glad I did.”

I put on my dressing gown and followed her down. She lingered at the open door and said she would phone me when Paul was out of town again. After she had left I remembered the brass button, but it was not where it had fallen. It was not upstairs either. Had Judith picked it up?

I woke again at twilight and could not decide whether it was dawn or dusk. The bedclothes were a twisted mess. But I was in my old bedroom and my flabby stomach was rising and falling. A terrible disappointment filled me when I felt the bushy beard on my chin. The experience with Miss Stribblehill and Judith had been so real. How could they have been dreams? Even the cat had gone back to ginger from black and his persistent meowing brought him within a whisker of being given the bum's rush when I went downstairs. In the hall I sniffed the air. Was that Judith's peachy perfume I could smell or was I imagining it? There was a patch on the carpet which I rubbed over with my finger. It was damp and for a second the cat was the chief suspect until I smelt the earthy smell of rain. A shoe had brought it in; a thinner shoe than mine. Mephostopholous was playing games with my mind - and I was loving every minute of it. It was in fact early evening and I felt hungry; paella and a lemony bottle of Chablis would go down nicely. Having dressed, I was about to turn out the bedroom light when I noticed something gleaming by the pillow where Judith's head had been. It was a green teardrop. I picked it up and pressed it hard into my palm until it hurt me. It left a white mark on the skin which slowly went pink as the blood flowed back. It was an earring.

The next day I picked up the Gazette and turned immediately, as all people of a certain age do, to the obituaries. I was shocked to read

Wells, Judith Caroline 61, suddenly, on 24th March. Enquiries to: Slope and Underwood, undertakers. Family flowers only please; donations to The Stroke Association.

In a fury I phone Mephostopholous.

"Why did you have to kill Judith?" I ranted. For a while he did not reply and then he said - in his richest voice - that he had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. This was so convincing a speech that I began to apologize. But afterwards, as I drove to the address I had persuaded Mr Slope to give me, the conviction that I had been told the truth began to ebb.

The house was huge and old and stuffed with antiques. Paul Wells was tanned and had a very good skin for a sexagenarian. He had a full head of silky silver hair. I remembered him the instant I saw him and the faded image I had of his teenage self chimed very closely with the present incumbent of that space. The word "success" flashed across my mind like a neon strip. "You don't remember me?" I asked, as he dithered on the doorstep. "I was in Judith's English class. We shared the Poetry Prize one year. We went to the pictures - once. I just couldn't believe it when I read she'd passed away."

"Your face is familiar" he lied. "Were you a friend of Ian Moore?"

"Ian Morris. My name is Gerald."

"Foster! I remember. Do come in."

"Gerald Fist. Thank you. But only if...if you're...."

"Up to it? Yes..... Judith and I were in the middle of a divorce."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I'll leave you in peace. It was insensitive of me to disturb you."

But he had opened the door fully and wafted me in. His breath and the hot room smelt of spirits. He welcomed, he said, the chance of someone to talk to.

"Bereavement makes friends retreat in embarrassment. Please make yourself comfortable."

As I said, the house was stuffed with antiques and a whole series of that tedious Roadshow programme could have been held on his long lawn. I began to suspect that Wells' motives were

not entirely born of hospitality and friendship; had I not been cast in the role of effusive admirer? After all, once objects have been paid for, stared at, handled and polished etc, etc, they only generate more value - short of being sold - when fresh eyes gaze and fresh mouths gape at them, and, to his evident delight, as much gazing and gaping was done by me as the objects seemed to demand. From a crystal decanter, with an unsteady hand, he poured brandy into two opaque, ancient glasses. The knick-knacks, sticks and bits and bobs were like a besieging army and I thought queasily of my books.

"I built this collection up over many, many, many years" he said smugly. "First, it was a bit of a hobby. And then the main interest in my life. Try your brandy - it's a ten-year-old Gran Reserva."

I asked how long they had lived in the house and was told it had belonged to his mother.

"She lived in the back. The house is just as it was when she died, even the wallpaper and carpets. This one is stained and a bit worn here and there, as you can see, but she'd come back and haunt me if I replaced a single thing. We had to move in with her when my first business failed. I lost nearly a million. But then I got into beauty products and aromatherapy. Never looked back. Parlours all over the county now."

"Well, as you can probably tell, beauty therapy was not really my scene."

He laughed in order to show me his pearly white teeth. Then, weightier matters reoccupied his thoughts and a pearl of a tear appeared in his eye. I felt motherly.

"Let me pour you another brandy, Paul. You've had a terrible shock. It happened to me a few weeks ago. My wife died as I was parking the car.....Bloody warden nearly gave me a ticket."

He told me how he had come home from a Rotary Club meeting and found Judith sprawled out on the carpet.

"She had, of all things, a brass button in her hand."

I stifled my surprise but he was not paying attention to me, only staring deeper into his own misery. He was drunker than I had realised and getting less inhibited by the second.

"She had asked me for a divorce three or four weeks earlier. Were you and Ethel...you know...."

"*Enid*. What, were we happy? Mmm....toddling along, I suppose, Darby and Joan, settling down to a long decline."

He began to weep. I sipped my brandy and looked more honestly at all that ancient clutter - occasional tables, vases, clocks, curios, boxes, candle sticks etc, etc - and wondered if Judith had tired of living amongst a luxurious obstacle course - as much as *Enid* had tired of my books.

"When she said she wanted a divorce.....I asked her if she had another man. But she hadn't....said she hadn't.....Said she was just depressed living in an antique shop."

He looked at me for a reaction but I could only silently agree with her. Still he continued to look, so in the end I said what a livewire she had been in class.

"Great fun. What a terrible shame....."

How lame! He swirled his spirit around in the great glass and gulped it, seeming to fight against what was on his mind.

"Oh God! I've never told anyone. No. I mustn't. No!"

At this, I thought it the right time to take my leave but he begged me not to go. He said he just had to tell someone - and better a stranger than a friend or relative.

"Or I shall burst! She had.....an affair! I'm almost certain of it. Years ago. She strenuously denied it but I could tell. I could tell....Came home one evening - absolutely elated - a few days after her thirty-third birthday. I'd bought her emerald drops for her ears - and one was missing. I noticed as soon as she came through that door and I pointed it out. Went bright red, she did. And

it was so obvious! Stood there - just *there* - and blushed like a girl - I can see her now as if it were yesterday. So I accused her. She shook her head. *So why are you blushing? - Because I'm so ashamed to have lost it.* She even put a reward in the paper to cover her tracks. All those years it divided us - a place we daren't go to and never talked about. There, now it's out, thank God!" My hand was in my jacket pocket fingering the very earring, pressing it into my thumb until it hurt. Doctor Mephostopholous's face flew into my head. In my top pocket there was his card. "Paul, I know a man who can help you. He's really clever. He uses hypnosis in some strange way. After Enid died I felt so guilty - for no real reason, and after one visit I felt better. He deals with obsessions. Here's his card."

He took it and smiled. He went into the next room and returned with an identical card of his own. "Amazing!" I exclaimed. "So you're already going then. I promise you that you'll soon feel -" "Not me. Judith was seeing him."

I asked him for a glass of water, and while he was out of the room I took the earring and pushed it into the crevice between carpet and skirting board by the door.

I had been back home an hour when the phone rang. It was the Doctor asking me to come in for another session. I told him a Mr Paul Wells - husband of Judith - might well become a patient. He replied that he had already phoned him.

"Can you tell him where he might look for a certain object which his wife lost years ago?"

"The emerald earring?"

Astounded, I asked him how he knew about it. Judith had told him, he said.

"And did you send her round to see me - on purpose? Or did I dream it?"

"I told you not to pry into my methods, old fellow. I just thought I might kill several birds with one stone. Kindness itself, me.....I will see you on Friday afternoon."

Early the next morning Paul Wells phoned me. He was overjoyed. He had been to see the Doctor and in a dream had "seen" where the emerald was.

"I dragged my finger along the gripper rod and felt a little bump. And guess what? It was in exactly the spot where she stood all those years ago. It must have just dropped there and somehow found its way down. Judith was telling the truth. I'm selling the place - my bloody mother can turn in her grave as often as she wants! - and everything in it! I feel twenty years younger. I'm off on a world cruise. Will you come, Gerald?"

The offer - from a virtual stranger - took me aback until I realised whose idea it really was. I told him I was honoured to be asked and would give it some thought.

I went upstairs and, on an impulse, stripped naked before the mirror, turning from one profile to the other, flexing my muscles and sucking in my flab. I fetched the scissors and snipped away at my beard until it lay all around my red, pudgy feet with their thick, opaque nails; poor feet which had trudged so many thousands of miles; did I really want them to trudge around the world? I went to the window. My garden was full of spring flowers and the feeders were swinging to and fro under the weight and impetus of the tits and finches. The sun was a bright yolk, broken by the dawn into a clear blue sky and even if I could be whisked five thousand miles in an instant east or west, it would scarcely shiver. Was staying better than going?

In my head was a secret which would sink - if it were genuine - Paul Wells' new-found contentment. Contentment? How soon would guilt set in when he reviewed the strains his suspicions had placed on his marriage? No doubt the Doctor had remedies for that too. Poor mankind! How many of his ships sail blithely on waves of lies and deception? I decided I did not

want Paul's kind of freedom - hedonistic and touristic - with not a glance backwards at regrets or forwards to consequences. All at once a feeling of revulsion at the whole charade I was living overcame me. I looked at my poor beard, my bristly companion for so many years and unaccountably wept. I hastened downstairs, phoned Wells, thanked him, but told him that under no circumstances could I entertain his proposal.

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"Suffering is short? What nonsense you talk! That poor man Wells has been suffering for nigh on twenty years - with good cause - regarding his wife's infidelity."

"Twenty years! What is twenty years compared to a billion? And besides, his relief sweeps all that away. The past is elastic and becomes just as long or short as the time one decides to spend a thought on it."

"Fiddlesticks! Relief only for a short while. Then he will blame himself for making Judith unhappy. I suppose you will hypnotize him - or whatever it is you do - so that he doesn't feel any of that! It's all illusion. You are a trickster. A demon."

"Thank you."

"I'll report you."

"What for? For making people happy? When they are the root of their own unhappiness in the first place? People come to me. They are not forced to."

"Yes, but then you take control of them. It isn't healing - it's fooling."

"And just who will you report me to, Professor?"

"To your professional association. Unless you release me from your...influence...or *fluence*. I want to pay you now for your time and trouble - and go back to my old ways."

I took out my cheque book and he guffawed.

"My *professional association*! And what is that? Where is it?? It is no use looking at the walls for a certificate such as the worthless one you have on yours.....**Ingrate!** You have made my mind up, Professor. I *had* decided to offer you a further six months free trial before asking you to commit yourself. Now you will not be free unless you can persuade me - with all your philosophy - that I am in error."

"Not be free? Then I really am your prisoner??"

He refused to answer.

"But what pleasure do you derive from my capture? Do you benefit financially? No. Does it make you feel better about yourself, that you have power over me? What is the.....fucking....POINT? If you carry on like this, I'll go to the police!"

He told me to calm myself and sit down. He would explain something he did not readily discuss with clients.

"As I have said, you were a special challenge. I do admit that it does amuse me to entertain you and your fellows, as the gods sported with the ancient Greeks. To see your face when you stared first in the face of the most sublime of Austrians and then into the cruel eyes of that nation's worst of men - was rewarding! Can you understand, my dear fellow, what pleasure I derive from showing that moralising Queen Victoria in her dreams the vulgar antics of your naked young women lying in the gutter in their drunken stupor? From showing such a proud and bombastic man as King Henry what his wives confided, sniggering, to their ladies-in-waiting about his prowess - and showing him in nightmares the experience of being beheaded - when the eyes stare for a frozen second in horror at the trunk they have left! And those pedantic physicians of the 1820s - who warned against speeds of twenty miles an hour on the railway - when I take them

for a flight on a dream jet, how wonderful is that? And I have shown Hitler multi-cultural Hamburg in his nightmares and heard him scream as he woke! Shown Stalin post-Soviet Russia! And a thousand other treats! Novelty and ingenuity are my life-blood. I laugh at the poverty of your wealthiest men - the poverty of their imagination - who grow tired of what their money can buy - the best champagne, the best foie gras, the most luxurious yacht - and who have to resort to stupid gimmicks for distraction. You, with your library, your frugal wife, and your frugal, gloomy ways - what a challenge! What a delight when you came in answer to my advertisement - you, who stared straight at me and smiled so smugly to take my parking space outside the post office! You were mine the second you thought you had put one over on me, you pathetic creature! You should have driven on to the car park. But you are so mean, you would not pay seventy pence to park!"

"This is preposterous. You were not in that car!"

"Then how did I know about you, old fellow?"

"The story was in the Gazette. I think I told you *myself* how Enid died?...Didn't I?"

He smiled and slowly rolled his head - that infuriating gesture. I wanted to get up and strike him but he seemed to read my intention. Staring through his smile, he made me sit down and I felt my muscles weaken. For a second his piercing eyes were framed by the face of Adolf Hitler and I gasped.

"For your impudence you will also have to perform, I have decided, seven deeds to benefit your suffering fellow men - as well as persuade me, O great lotus-eating philosopher, of an error in my logic. Yes, you are going to have to DO something USEFUL. Now go. I am busy."

My head had become fuzzy as if I had a concussion. I came to my proper senses again only when I was sitting behind the wheel of my car. As soon as I was home, I phoned him.

"Seven good deeds?"

"Seven."

"Was the brick a good deed?"

He began to laugh and laugh so that he could not get his word out. Eventually it came. NO!

"What about helping poor Wells? Surely that can count?"

"Mmmm....very well."

"What sort of good deed must I do? Give a hundred pounds to charity?"

"A thousand. But I will only allow one such gift. The other deeds must directly benefit your community."

"Digging an old lady's garden?"

"Mmmm.....it might count."

"Might?? So I could dig it and then you might decide it doesn't count! How fair is that??"

"But it might get some of your flab off, old fellow.....Very well. Dig an old person's garden and you will owe me four."

"If I do a really imaginative thing - which affects lots of people - could it count as two?"

"Good God, man! It sounds like BOGOF at the supermarket. DOGOF - do-one-get-one-free."

Finally he said he would judge the deed first and decide afterwards. I asked him how much time I had to do all these things and he told me a year. I did not mention the logic test, not wishing to give him the chance to read my thoughts. I had, you see, already found a way to defeat him.

Part II

Deed the second.

I wrote a big cheque for an African charity and felt very good about myself.

Deed the third

Finding a garden to dig for an old person was less easy than one might think. Suspicion greeted every rap on a door. I had a motive to do good but no-one, it seemed, wanted good to be done unto them. *How much would you charge? Nothing? What do you want to dig it for, then? To do a good turn?? I'll have to think about it / No thank you / I'm not sure / I don't know you etc, etc.* But who could blame them?? There were some odd folk around and to offer one's services for no reward was decidedly odd. Since my retirement I had in fact toyed now and then with the idea of doing good deeds. In my dreams it would be achieved by selling a million copies of my poetry or my short stories or my Key to All Philosophies in order to donate the profit to charity. And I wanted to tap my barometer needle back towards fair and reverse my descent into pessimism and misanthropy where my reading of philosophy had taken me so that my generous impulses of youth might burgeon again like buds on December twigs. And that metaphor links very nicely to my other long-nursed but unachieved ambition - namely, to have an allotment, full of the vegetables I loved to eat. Ah, in my boyhood garden I can still see my beloved grandfather - a distant figure in striped shirt-sleeves with Y-braces yanking up the back of his trousers - toiling in that early morning sun which dazzled on his polished spade. My eye still runs like his trowel did (and my fingers on the sly) along his rows of peas and carrots with their lacy tops. I still watch his fork lift the wilting potato plants and watch the trove of tiny spuds emerge from the deep, rich tea-leaf soil into which he had invested so much love and goodness. I still taste those huge blackberries, almost painfully sweet, which he had allowed to take over one corner and still stare at my rubied hands which would have incriminated me, had anyone in the house given them a second thought and made them forbidden fruit. And I still "sit" in the dark, musty den which had been the pigsty watching the scratty, gossiping fowl beneath the ancient trees whose sour apples were always eaten with a generous saucerful of sugar.

And I give you now my adult daydream.....

A long expanse of dark soil with canes overrun by twining beans, red-flowered or podding, frilly, ruby lettuces, sweet carrots, smelly brassicas with intensely flavoured sprouts, leafy potatoes, cream-flowered peas and blackcurrant bushes whose leaves gave off such a sharp smell when crushed. At the bottom of the garden - setting amongst the branches - a swollen sun - turned considerably orange so that I can stare at it, as I sit with a well-deserved glass of beer or wine, flexing my deliciously aching muscles and staying until all those branches, deserted by the birds and the light, have turned black against the ashen sky, and it is time to carry my freshly lifted vegetables home.

But how different the reality would be - and this prevented me from ever trying to achieve it. The allotments were in fact on the edge of a run-down estate and, instead of my vision, I saw my shed broken into and torched and the precious harvest stolen. A cousin had lived near there and, returning from holiday years ago, he had found his private garden invaded and every single potato lifted. Ironically, this was the very area where my disenchantment with politics and with people had taken root, bloomed and set seed in a space of hours. It was 1983 and we were canvassing for the Labour candidate - a young, insincere man with a hideous fixed stare and a worse smile. This was the area of Earlstone where we should have been received with warmth. But here too the disgusting Falklands Factor had penetrated deep and we were made to feel

unwelcome. Within weeks of Labour's electoral rout that young man had defected to the Conservatives, sharpening the edge of my disgust. It was then that I had begun to bury my disillusion in my growing private library of philosophical works.

Anyway, back to the deed. I was beginning to think about putting a notice in the local paper advertising my free gardening services for a share of the produce, when out of the blue one morning I remembered Evelyn. As an elder of the church, Enid had a round of people she visited and supported. One was Evelyn. Her husband had been hospitalized and when my wife offered to take her to see him in Naunton I insisted on coming along because the Montego had been overheating. While Enid took Evelyn to the ward in a wheelchair I waited below with my head in a book.

Evelyn was timid and Enid told me that she was rather afraid of me. It was my tendency to be rather forward in my dealings with people and my readiness to express my opinions which put her off. My maternal grandmother had been of a similar cast and had never made much of a secret of her thoughts and feelings. As a child I had been wary - even afraid of her. My paternal grandmother, Elsie, on the other hand, had been serene and gentle, expressing her kindnesses in smiles, quiet words and delicious blackberry pies; Grandma Doris had served up more robust fare - earthy sayings (" You hev to eat a peck o' muck afore you die" - "Theer's nowt so sure as death and rent-day") and pungent brown bread, steak and mushroom puddings, brains.

Evelyn was in her mid-seventies, very frail and walked with a stick, a shuffle and a wobble. How she did not fall was a mystery. She was straight up and down and very thin. To be frank, out of sight, she meant little to me, although when I saw her I did feel keenly sorry for her. She was lonely. Her husband had spent weeks in hospital with digestive problems and complications, and his discharge was not imminent.

What made her situation worse, Enid explained, was her lack of a close relative. She had ever had children and a niece had to do. But the niece had troubles enough of her own, having lost her husband to cancer and her house after the family business had gone bankrupt. Evelyn also had an invisible nephew-in-law and a cousin who, having sold a lucrative butchery had no pecuniary motive to be of assistance or comfort to her. She told Enid that she had never even been inside the brand new dormer bungalow which he had had built in a prestigious area of the town.

Evelyn's husband, having been promisingly stable for a time then took a distinct turn for the worse. One by one his organs failed and one bright July morning, in spite of Evelyn's pleas to him not to leave her, he died. Enid called around her house later the same day and came back very upset. She had, she said, never seen such an abject study in misery. He had been her companion for nearly sixty years, and she had returned home to an empty house which could offer nothing in either hope or consolation.

This news struck a wholly unexpected chord with me. I must admit I had been rather irritated that Enid, a woman not in the most robust of health herself and no relative of Evelyn's, had insisted on taking her under her broken wing. But I had bitten my tongue. Evelyn's bereavement and grief affected me. I wondered how she could bear it and not go mad. At the funeral service (Evelyn had expressedly wished me to attend) I studied her closely as she tottered between two helpers up the aisle in vain pursuit of the long, dark coffin containing the young man she had married there. I felt a strange relief. She sat trembling as if very cold and if she wept she did so silently. I briefly entertained the arrogant thought that perhaps her grief was no deep ocean in

which to drown, and would after a decent time evaporate. Enid continued to be much moved by her predicament. The disabilities which she and her husband had long suffered had restricted their scope for socialising and visiting friends and increased still more the distance between themselves and distant relatives. Enid suggested that we take a salad round one night and Evelyn grew less wary of me. Her house had changed little over the years. It could have been a museum exhibit of the seventies or earlier. The kitchen cupboard doors were painted in brown gloss - could that once have been fashionable? - and the anaglyptic walls were painted in yellow emulsion. The chimney breast wall, where stood the most functional gas fire imaginable, was bright orange. The sink was of heavy white earthenware, stained with years of emptied teapots and worn with scouring, and the thin metal taps were dulled and ancient. Houses are eloquent about their inhabitants and betray their secrets. This one told of frugality, of a hatred of extravagance and of a fearful certainty that a rainy day would eventually arrive. It clearly had. Everything was worn out. The carpet was threadbare and dirty. Penny-pinching had turned to neglect as the strength of Evelyn and her husband had given out.

She plucked up the courage to mention her ants. Until that point Enid had never penetrated much beyond the hall. We followed her in that evening and were horrified to see on her lounge carpet and in the window sill, amongst the tatty lace curtains - as if formed from them - winged ants, dead and dying. I pulled a chair away from the wall and saw along the skirting board ant trails, safaris of them, on a carpet whose pattern had faded into darkness. She told us that she paid a lady so much a week to clean for her. We looked at each other and nodded. While Enid got the vacuum cleaner and dustpan and brush I set to work outside by the bay window with ant powder where I could see cracks in the brickwork. One consequence of old age, I reflected, as I filled the cavities with white, was the forfeiture of privacy. Evelyn had been forced to show us what five or ten years ago she would never have dreamt of revealing to anyone. The house where she had been mistress had become master of her.

Such little acts of kindness gradually grew into a responsibility - especially after Arthur's death - until we felt an obligation and then a commitment to her. I was retired by that time and I began to phone her to see how she was, to do the odd errand for her and minor repair; Enid would go around and sit with her, and when she needed it, to hold her hand and comfort her. She was fragile emotionally as well as physically. The least reference to Arthur - a letter addressed to him or a sudden memory - would set her to weeping and sobbing intensely, but only for a few seconds when her sense of dignity stifled the grief. Curiously there was no wedding photograph of them and, apart from his bus pass stuck behind a pipe, none of him. He was not a handsome man, craggy like a long cliff face and with a large nose and ears. Although we would never be taken for relatives there was a faint resemblance between us, especially in the nose and ear department. Apparently these organs grow larger as we grow older, no doubt for sound reasons of survival; perhaps the *diminishment* of our favourite organ is caused by its reverting gradually to the sole function it had in childhood. That being the case, the same argument applies to it as the one which tried to justify a first-strike nuclear missile policy in the eighties: *use it or lose it*.

Evelyn was an intelligent woman. Had she been born in the present era she would have undoubtedly made more of herself than she actually had - she had been a seamstress in one of Earlstone's long defunct knitwear factories- and would surely have made at least a Junior School teacher. She had loved children and had been a Sunday School helper in her prime. Arthur had been a motorbike mechanic. In the conservatory were photographs of machines he had lovingly owned, serviced and restored in his own workshop behind the house. Until their old age they had

gone off at every opportunity on two wheels touring Britain and Ireland. That long journey ended, she was now left in a lay-by watching the world tear past, scarcely giving her a glance.

That is the background to my decision to phone her one lovely spring morning and offer to call on her. I had no idea even whether she was still alive and three years at least had passed since I had last seen her. In that time, Enid had broken with the URC and someone else had taken over her role as visitor and comforter. But Evelyn remembered me instantly and recalled with a sob Enid's shocking death. Recollecting all those kindnesses of Enid toward Evelyn caused me to feel a terrible guilt that I had not felt enough grief over her death. (She had become in retrospect a much nicer woman than I previously gave her credit for. I told her I was sorry and she laughed.)

Anyhow, as I poured myself another cup of tea, I looked out through Evelyn's kitchen window and took notice of her garden really for the first time. A wilderness of weeds and brambles, it stretched as far almost as my granddad's had done. To the left behind the padlocked workshop were two trees in early leaf. She told me they were a damson and a plum.

"Who picks your fruit, Evelyn?"

"Nobody. It falls to ground every autumn. Not been picked since Arthur took bad. What a waste."

She began to sob and then shook herself and stopped like a sudden shower.

"Are they sweet?"

"Come round in September and try one. If the good Lord spares me - which I wish he wouldn't. Oh dear....."

I sipped my tea until her sorrow relented.

"Did you make jam or wine?" I ventured after a decent interval.

"Wine? No fear!" She blew her nose and laughed. "I've never touched a drop in my entire life!"

"Never?"

"No."

"So you never had any vices then?"

She laughed again at my cheek. "Oh, plenty! But I'm not saying!"

I searched for another line. "Did you ever make damson chutney?"

"No, just jam. Chutney??"

"Yes, with apples, sultanas...red onions, carrots diced, chilis, vinegar - it would be lovely. We could go into business "**Auntie Eve's Jam and Chutney. And Mystery Plum Jam!**"

A faraway look came into her eyes as if she was relishing the thought of a reason to live.

"Evelyn, I need to do someone like you a big favour. Could I try to bring your garden back to what it used to be?"

"I don't think so. It's a lot to take on. You don't realise how much work there is.....you *need* to do someone a big favour??"

"Well, look. I'm willing to give it a go. I've always wanted to grow vegetables and I've no room at home. There would be plenty for you and plenty for me. I'd like to try if you don't object."

"I don't *object!* But don't count your chickens! If you really want to, then carry on. But if you have to give up I won't mind. Arthur was big and strong but it got too much for him in the end."

I saw tears in her eyes and she turned away. She struggled then to her feet and shuffled to a drawer, returning in a moment with a pack of photographs from which she drew four after a brief search. They were of the garden in its prime.

When I see photos, after my initial curiosity has waned - usually within three seconds, especially if they do not feature my mug - two other trains of thought take me. Firstly, I ask almost compulsively when the picture was taken and try to imagine or vaguely recall where I might have been that very day - sharing the same light which hit the magic coating to be captured there. What was I doing, and what frame of mind was I in? This had been taken in about 1992, she murmured after a long thinking silence. It must have been some time in May, I thought, - because the plum was in blossom. Most likely I had been in my study with sleepy undergraduates, tearing Nietzsche to pieces.

On my second train, I imagine what might have preceded and then followed on in the life-lines of the subjects; I think of them as threads mingling with the countless threads of others right up to the present, and imagine how a clever and patient time-traveller might untangle them all from that great skein, and follow them back to their starting point all those years ago. When we think of the past we see events in isolation with dark voids between; but in fact there are no gaps and every move we make from our first - our birth - to our last are not separate at all but one long unbroken string from which our gaudy experiences hang like wall decorations, a little decided on by ourselves but mainly arranged by others and blind fate.

Evelyn's life had led from that instant in the photo to this instant of her looking at it and in her silent, head-shaking stare I sensed wonder that it was so impossible to re-enter and re-conjure a scene so present, so vivid and so visible. In the photo she was wearing dark glasses and was another person, as my dear Enid had once been. Had our threads passed in the street in that small town and had we taken some kind of note of each other? Here she was standing confidently in front of another garden in full glory in the same space, on a perfect lawn, by a pretty rockery - since dismantled - and a flower bed full of hollyhocks, sweet peas on canes and orange daisies. This garden was obedient, neat and promising like a well-turned out youth. The one through the window was derelict, ugly and exhausted. I imagined its slow decline, by slow degrees, similar to the one my own grandfather's had undergone.

How cruel photographs are.

"Lovely" I whispered seeing her silent distress. "I'd like to try and restore some of its former glory." How pretentious that sounded. I wished immediately I could unsay it.

But she had not heard. She held her precious photographs with trembling hands. She looked up and smiled. She almost looked pretty. She passed me a photo of her husband bent over a row of peas. He looked strong and sturdy, capable and masterly. This was his garden, his pride, his daily gift to his wife. *There* he was. *Here* today he was nowhere. What he had prized had also gone. How on earth, I wondered, could Evelyn bear to be surrounded by this constant reminder of a lifetime burnt out and spent like a dead firework? Surely it would be better to move? To me then - a mere outsider - her situation felt unpleasant and intolerable. How despairing did it make *her* feel when alone - as she mostly was? I was forced to my feet in an attempt to ground the tension I felt in the air like electricity. Surely she felt it too? Did she look at her photos for long, for hours on end as gateways to the past, as the starting point for stories of happy times like the tattoos on Ray Bradbury's *Illustrated Man*? Was this how she coped with a desolate present, by escaping it?

She insisted on following me to the door to lock up. I cracked a very lame joke that the house-

breakers were having their lunch break and she need not worry. As I went to leave she burst into tears and I took her to me and held her tight. I promised to be back with my spade soon and left her.

*

When I woke the next day it was early. The light was growing and the pigeons had started their monotonous round of chanting, putting me in mind of monks trooping off to their matins. Knowing I would not fall back asleep, I began to survey the day ahead when it dawned on me what a duty I volunteered to do, pulling my soaring balloon down with its lead weight. The garden. I got up and peeked through the curtain. The fading stars predicted that it was going to be a day with a blue sky from rim to rim, without the flimsiest cloud of excuse for not turning out with my spade and boots. In my mind I saw the vast expanse of tough grass as a battlefield, with an occasional roll of bramble like razor-wire. I groaned. But if I wanted my release from the Doctor, it had to be done, and surely, once I had got stuck in, pleasure would follow.

The door was locked. I rang the bell. I opened the letter-box and shouted her name. I listened. Nothing. Did she go to a day-centre on Thursdays? Had she gone and tumbled, as I knew was inevitable, and hit her head? I knocked again and put my face to the distorting glass of the door panel. An apparition - shapeless and grey - grew larger, came nearer and almost turned into Evelyn.

“I’m coming.”

With her arthritic fingers she eventually turned the key and opened the door.

I held up my wellies and my spade. “Head gardener, Madam, reporting for duty!”

She smiled and looked really pleased to see me. I came through the hall, sat on her outside toilet and changed my shoes. Coming out, I scared the sparrows again from her swinging bird-feeder and strode up the long path, resolved to quash all defeatist doubts, as I let the spade balance in my hand. There were eight fence panels’ length of grass to dig - each panel six feet long - making nearly fifty feet of soil and many, many hours of toil. I thought of Mao’s homily, that a march of a thousand miles begins with a single step and launched the spade furiously into a huddle of bramble, despatching it with a single swipe. I felt better. I remembered granddad’s method of “trenching”. First I needed to create a trench at the very top in which to bury subsequent grass, rubbish and weeds. How easy would the earth be? In the top corner, on the right, I let the spade drop and pushed the blade deep into the soil. There was no resistance. I threw the spit of turf and soil behind me and worked my way across and back until I had my deep trench of two rows. The soil was heavy but not clay. Now I was ready to turn my first spadeful. I pushed the blade in as far as it would go with my boot until the grass was well up the shaft. I lifted up the spit - it was over eighteen inches long - and turned it. It was vital not to leave grass on the surface. I saw where the soil changed colour - from light brown at the limit of the grass roots to a darker brown, almost black where nothing had grown for years. This was the soil I wanted on the surface - rich and crumbly - into which the roots of our vegetables and tubers would penetrate easily and thrive. I slammed in the edge of the spade and saw the grass and white roots, resembling the hair of old men, separate from the rest. I dragged the clod into the back of the trench and trampled it down. My spirits rose. It would be easier than I had imagined. I took care to scrape back any separated roots into the hole as these would grow of their own accord. When all was dug and done I would take a rake, smooth out the topsoil and pull to the

side any roots I had missed. I worked until I had a whole row turned. I stood back and got my breath back. I thought of the rubbish lying at least a foot below the surface beyond the light. By summer it would rot down to provide a rich compost for fresh fibres to tap into.

I looked at my watch and could hardly believe an hour had almost elapsed. I was not even half way down my first panel but knew I had the right theory and way of working. I would be master of that wilderness! I calculated; two hours a week and by the middle or end of April the grass would be gone, the garden restored and the soil ready to be sown. And one more good deed would have been done, perhaps even counting as two.

The noise of children shouting brought me back to the present. I looked at my watch again. It was eleven o' clock and break time on the school field just beyond the fence. I thanked my lucky stars that I was on this side of it.

From the kitchen window there was the thinnest pencil line of brown soil to be seen at the very top. I felt disappointed that I had worked so hard with so little impact.

"It's longer than you think," said Evelyn, appearing to sense my disappointment.

"I'm burying all that grass. It won't come back."

"You HOPE!"

She brought me a jittering cup of tea as I massaged my cold hands to restore their blood supply.

She asked me if I was still writing stories.

"Yes, Evelyn. I'm starting a new one."

"Really?"

"Yes. Writing takes my mind off other things."

"What's this one about?"

I considered what to say but as so often could not help blurting out the truth.

"You. It's about you."

"ME? Who wants to read about me?"

"Oh, you might be surprised. I'm calling it The Garden. I shall write it out there - in my head."

Here for the time being I shall leave my gardening deed. The astonishing secret it threw up will have to wait until I have dealt with my next exploit.

Deed the fourth

I looked through the paper for some local problem I might help to solve. The articles were the usual mix of petty thuggery, drink-driving and fund-raising efforts. Where was the sufferer - victim - whom I might help? On the Letters Page I found the answer, but before I tell the story a little background will prove useful.

My adopted home town, Earlstone, on the periphery of which I lived, was notorious for its parking problems. The council - reflecting perfectly the narrowness and mean-spiritedness of the residents who elected it without fail for keeping rates low - had daubed most of its gutters with double yellow lines to force motorists into the car parks, where a minimum stay of an hour cost seventy pence. Nipping to the market, for say, a bag of apples, was thereby discouraged as the price of such simple items was driven up far beyond what they cost at the supermarkets on the edge of town. The council was reputed to make forty-odd thousand pounds a year - (a nice contribution to councillors' expenses and Christmas office parties?) - in overpayment into its meters alone, as many people did not have the correct coins. The greedy meters gobbled their

pounds down but did not belch back a halfpenny in change. In addition, the meters, too stupid to give change, were cleverly programmed not to recognize the final ten or five pence coins introduced into their guts, so that **sixty** or **sixty-five** pence remained stubbornly displayed on their grinning faces whatever new bits were introduced, causing the parker - by that time turned into a homicidal maniac only too willing to machine gun every councillor, traffic warden or parking attendant who they could imagine giggling at them behind the big tree around the corner - to have to stick in a pound coin anyway. And of course, by asking for registration numbers, those machines - too clueless to offer change - were clever enough to preclude subversive acts of generosity by exiting motorists who were keen to spite the council in offering their unspent tickets to the newly arrived.

The car parks raised hundreds of thousands in revenue, and taking all into consideration, that meanest of councils deemed it cost-effective to spend a few measly bob employing five wardens - specially trained to be the meanest bastards imaginable in their navy and red paramilitary outfits, yet reminiscent of Thunderbirds characters - to terrorize the citizenry off the streets and into those tarmacked robbing grounds. The wardens were feared and hated. Armed with cameras, they made sure that no double-yellow-liner could pull away unsnapped and argue that they had been in Penzance or John O' Groats on the day a ticket was issued to their number plate. Of course, those poor bastards had their targets like everyone else in those vile days - *and somebody* - like the people who built the gas chambers - *had to do it* - and they were rumoured to be prepared to stoop so low as to conceal themselves in hidey-holes in the most busy and therefore most lucrative streets in the town, whence they could spring like red and navy spiders as soon as some foolish nipper decided to nip to a cash machine when he thought the coast clear. Protest, like the struggle of a fly in a web, was futile. Out came the dreaded pad and down went the details.

And down and down went the town. Gradually only those who walked or took the bus - the less wealthy - patronised the shops and a domino effect took hold. Motorists got sick of driving around looking for the odd space, meanly accorded a half-hour stay of execution, and took themselves off to other towns with better shops and a less bloody-minded parking Gestapo - or to malls where parking was free.

Old Bond Street, a main artery of the town, had latterly been pedestrianised - ostensibly to promote safety and relaxed strolling - but in reality to deny the last few on-road spaces to frustrated motorists. Here I pick up the strands of my fourth good deed, for in that brave new strolling world (in effect a wasteland with boarded-up shops and without pedestrians) Earlstone United Reformed Church, non-conformist and rebellious since the seventeenth century, had been cornered. I shall now give you the letter I found in the Gazette.

Dear Editor,

When Old Bond Street was sealed off from through traffic, the elders of Earlstone URC were given assurances, though sadly not in writing, that at the Grand Union Hotel end off the street through which the buses pass, access would be allowed to a loading space in front of the church so that the elderly and infirm could be set down with their helpers. Now it seems that the avaricious council, not satisfied with the way it has driven the motorist and shopper out of town, will deny the use of that space to those who set down, forcing church-visitors during the week, be they sound of body or not, onto the car parks where they can be charged and forced to stagger,

crawl or be pushed in wheelchairs to the church.

Not content to place ornate bollards - at considerable and pointless expense - at the steps of the church to hamper the disabled and their helpers, as well as funeral corteges, the powers-that-be are now denying the congregation the right of parking access during the week. Hearses will have to park away and pay seventy pence. Coffins will have to be wheeled or carried in, New Orleans style, through the streets into church. Perhaps the motley band who play in the park bandstand now and then could bring up the rear.

Yours etc, etc

What a despicable meanness and abuse of power - petty though the power was! I looked in Enid's address book and found the telephone number of the vicar of the URC where Enid had once been an elder. A broad Geordie, he amazed me by being furious not about the parking restriction but about *the letter*, which had been penned by one of his congregation, a Mr Holmes, renowned, he said, for his cantankerousness.

"He's deliberately misconstrued the situation and just trying to cause trouble between the church and Saunders, the chap in charge of the Highways Committee."

He explained that the definition of (un)loading had been altered. Only *heavy* loads could be unloaded, such as coffins and mourners. Shepherds pies for lunch events at church during the week were not heavy and not included, so that their deliverers and bearers would be given a ticket if caught parking outside.

"*Coffins will have to be wheeled or carried in* - what rot! Holmes is just trying to stir things up. Saunders phoned me before you did and he's furious."

I expected a lot more indignation from the vicar of a non-conformist church and began to side with Holmes.

"Heavy? But that's illogical, Vicar. All things have a weight and are therefore heavy. And some pies and cakes (*I thought of Enid's*) can be very heavy. I think the correspondent has a point. What about an arthritic old lady? Doesn't she count as a heavy load? Should there be a weighbridge on the pavement? Will she have to walk from a car park from now on?"

"Not on Sundays. Only in the week. We have a wheelchair."

"Only in the week? Cruel and absurd! Only a bureaucrat could come up with such a mean and futile ruling."

"Saunders is a *councillor* not a bureaucrat. Old ladies are alive and can walk. Corpses in coffins cannot. They are loads, like cartons."

"But what if the old lady was carried or wheeled in? Wouldn't she count as a load? Why does a load have to be inanimate? If I delivered an animal in a crate, it would be a load. And *pies* in a crate would be a load."

This, he declared was getting all rather silly and out of hand, so he hung up. I understand then why Enid had stopped going to his church and why she had branded him a wet fart.

I strolled into town and took a look at the plaque mounted on a wall by the church. It said **LOADING**, not heavy loading. An innocent parker or visitor would have no inkling of this arbitrary decision. I saw a chance to reverse it and score a victory for the oppressed against a bureaucratic clique which, I knew from experience, contained some of the pettiest and most callous bullies in the community. Here was my next good deed in the community!

I walked home, picked twenty daffodils from my garden and returned in my car to that disputed

spot. I did not have more than five minutes to wait. A young man in navy trousers, a red jacket and a peaked hat - a cross between a brass bandsman and Virgil Tracy - was soon approaching, cruel device in hand. He was, I was convinced, the same young man who had nearly given me a ticket outside the post office that awful day when Enid had died. As he began to write out a ticket with pomp and circumstance, I wound the window down and smiled. He told me with the warmth and intonation of a Dalek that my *ve-hi-cle* was illegally parked. I was quite pleased to have my Montego described as a vehicle. Pointing to the flowers on the passenger seat, I informed him that I was unloading. He hesitated. I pointed to the sign. He sniffed and said that flowers could not be defined as a load.

“But they can be. A load of flowers. When I get down to four or five I concede that would probably not be a load and you would have the right to penalise me.”

“But loads have to be heavy.”

“No. Loads of hundreds and thousands - those cake sprinkles - would be very light. But they would still be loads. It’s all semantics you see, as Korzybski pointed out. The semantic loading of the word load is unfortunately restricting your comprehension of it. And besides, each flower weighs a few grammes.”

“That ain’t heavy!”

“Compared to one atom they are very heavy. Heaviness, like intelligence and all sorts of categories, is relative, young man. That plaque needs to be the size of the whole wall to define exactly what is meant. I’m surprised that it’s not, considering how councils like to plaster advice and prohibitions around the place.”

I got out with a daffodil and propped it against the foundation stone inscribed with the year 1697, then got back in. He looked perplexed and called up support from a colleague, who duly waddled onto the scene, a grim-faced stout young woman who obviously extracted pleasure from what she did and might well have manned (or womanned) the watchtower at a concentration camp with an easy conscience.

“You can’t count flowers as loads,” she said.

“You do not have the moral, official, lexical or philosophical authority to restrict the meaning of load, young woman. You issue tickets and cannot arbitrarily set a rule upon which an army of philosophers would struggle to reach a consensus.”

To reinforce my point I fetched another flower and propped it by the door. A knot of pedestrians - a rare phenomenon in the pedestrian precinct - had gathered and someone cheered.

“O downtrodden Earlstoners!” I intoned. “I am come to free you from this tyranny!”

Applause.

“Okay, okay” said she. “You have had your little joke, Sir. Time you went. *This time* we’ll turn a blind eye.”

“A blind eye?? But that too is arbitrary! Civilisation begins to break down if rules are not applied consistently - or if rules are bent on a whim. And you mention time? Where, young woman, does it say on that sign that there is a time-limit on unloading? It does not. I therefore intend to unload a flower every twenty minutes from this point; I have eighteen. So I shall be here for another six hours.”

I wound up the window. Embarrassed by the cheers of what was by now a crowd, the pair of them slunk away. They had, as I expected, contacted some superior at the council, for within the hour a grey, stooping man in a shabby suit was knocking on my windscreen as I sat, eyes closed, listening to a Mozart quartet.

“My name is Eric Saunders,” he rasped. “I am given to understand that you have been taking the

mickey out of my traffic wardens. They have a difficult and unpleasant enough job to do as it is, without the likes of you trying to score clever points of them!"

"The likes of me? What about the likes of you who have turned Earlstone into a ghost town by demonising and persecuting the motorist? How much do you skim off the takings, you jumped-up, pompous little man?"

"How DARE you? The next time you park here, you'll get a ticket. Your number's been taken."

"I dare because I don't care. I was not parked. I was unloading."

"Unloading daffodils? Poppycock!"

The next morning I drove to Slope and Underwood's yard and knocked on the back door. A ghastly, hungover youth opened up.

"I wish to borrow a coffin."

"A coffin?"

"Nothing special but not too heavy. I'll have it back before your boss knows. Here's twenty quid."

I looked through the gap in the door and saw there were stacks of them. Perhaps one near the bottom was destined for me.... Within fifteen minutes I was back at the church with a coffin lashed to the roof of my Montego. People stopped to stare. Some took photos on their mobile phones. The young woman warden was soon on the scene.

"And what do you think you're doing now?" she demanded, wrinkling her brow.

"What does it look like?"

"Sir, you are too *old* to be playing these silly games!"

"Au contraire! He who dares is old! Only people like me who have no concern about what an employer or a spouse might think, dare to defy absurd authority!"

I heard the doctor laugh and looked for him in the crowd, but of course he was inside my head.

"Your boss, Saunders, is an obnoxious, petty, self-important man who would (*and I raised my voice to be audible across the square*) deny easy access to disabled worshippers and servants of this church. Give him a call!"

Within ten minutes he was there again, parking on the double-yellow lines in front of me. I demanded he be given a ticket but she refused, saying it was an emergency. As he emerged from his black Audi I announced to the crowd that there stood the man who had emptied the town.

Boos.

Saunders went into a huddle with the warden and then declared that he was calling the police.

Jeers.

A photographer from the Gazette happened by and at the very moment a squad car stopped. Out climbed the bonus brick cop - who looked skyward in dismay on seeing me - and a male colleague.

"Officer, please arrest this gentleman for causing an obstruction and loitering." demanded Saunders. The other officer, a tall, proud man looked down on him.

"And you are?"

"Eric Saunders, councillor for De Montfort ward and chairman of the Highways Committee."

"You've called the police and require this man to be arrested? I am bound to point out to you,

Sir, that the police service is not the arm of the town council and you cannot presume to tell me how to go about my duty.”

Cheers.

“But, I represent the legally elected council. You cannot speak to me in such a deprecatory manner!”

Boos.

The officer turned to me and stared at my car. I told him, pointing at the plaque on the wall, that I intended to unload the coffin. He asked if it contained a body.

“Is there a body in there? It’s a good question, officer. Even if I said there was and showed it to you, there would be no empirical way - short of X-Rays - of proving there still would be with the lid back on. I’d have to keep taking it off and putting it back on ad infinitum. So the question is rather irrelevant. And, besides, it is not a police matter. The sign, as you see, allows me to *unload*. Mr Saunders here has said that loads have to be heavy to count as loads. While I refute that, I am prepared to suspend my disbelief and go along with him. In the coffin there could be; a dead or anaesthetised sheep; a load of bibles; a tailor’s dummy; or nothing. The coffin is quite heavy as it is. It’s a load.”

“A load of rubbish!” shouted Saunders in a fury, provoking hilarity.

“Thank you,” said the officer to me, ignoring him “I know what a load is. But *why* unload it? Is there going to be a funeral and you can’t afford the undertaker? Why unload an empty coffin?”

“My God, Officer! You have asked a question which the sages could debate for a lifetime and not resolve. I could argue that this moment was predestined to happen since the beginning of time and that I am simply the tool of a deterministic universe. Thereto, one could object that it would be a pure act of Free Will and not predetermined. Indeed, I could at this very moment fling off all my clothes and do a samba - an absurd act to show how free I really am. The philosopher-novelist Denis Diderot would approve and disapprove.”

The bonus brick cop sighed and got back into the squad car.

“But WHY unload it?” screamed Saunders. “There is no funeral. What is the POINT? You are wasting police time!”

“No,” I replied calmly “You have wasted police time by calling them. But metaphysics aside, may I ask you to tell me where on the sign it says FOR A SENSIBLE REASON? And even if it did, what you deemed sensible I might deem idiotic, and vice-versa. There is no legal requirement written there which requires a justification, sensible or otherwise, for unloading. A circus owner - a stranger - might turn up in town and in all innocence drop off a load of dwarves. Would it be fair to give him a ticket? In a moment I intend to unlash the coffin, wait five minutes and then tie it back on the roof.”

Hoots and cheers.

The bobby announced that it was not a police matter, told an apoplectic Saunders that he would have to decide whether I should have a ticket and drove away. Before he could react I got my retaliation in first.

“You will rescind your petty new rule, you will paint over four car lengths of those double-

yellow or I will be back here every day with something new to make you look the proper Charlie you are.”

I got in and drove back to Slope’s yard. In Friday’s Gazette the story was front page news and Saunders came off very badly. On Monday the vicar phoned me to confirm that the new rule had been scrapped and more space made available. The Doctor phoned to congratulate me.

DEED 3 (continued)

The days and weeks crept by. As I dug the garden and very slowly edged backwards towards the house I cursed myself for throwing those original clods over my shoulder, for it had been so wet that they were now clogging my boots and weighing me down. I had to stop regularly to scrape the mud away. But I had become so adept at seeing exactly where to strike the spit I had turned, that I rarely wasted any good soil or left any roots lying on the top. I kept wondering, as I brought up to the light whole layers which had lain in darkness for years, if I might find an artefact - a button, a cufflink or perhaps a coin carelessly dragged out of Arthur’s pocket with his handkerchief. If I found one I wondered whether Evelyn would be pleased or aggrieved to see it again. I looked into each section of dark soil but saw nothing; there at the bottom of each one was, I fancied, what remained of the weeds, and of the stems and roots of exhausted vegetation buried there many years ago. That was the stratum which his tiring muscles had been unable to reach in those last few years when the garden, as Evelyn said, became “too much for him.” As I turned the soil I imagined his despondency in accepting that as yet another ruling made by the Court of Old Age, against which there was no appeal. I wondered if he had given up the garden wholesale or had tinkered at the edges for a while. Maybe he had dug just a few rows, sowing potatoes and one or two other crops requiring less attention. I hardly dared ask Evelyn for fear of setting her off. I contented myself with the evidence around me; I saw him stacking up that pile of debris, since sunken, near the top of the garden, perhaps for a bonfire he never lit. There were prunings of old bramble, a wheelbarrow on its side, a bag of compost and seed trays behind the outhouse, a couple of panes of glass standing against a fence post, house bricks built into a three-sided square for some forgotten purpose - all telling of good intentions but insufficient energy, as if the love of his garden had left him overnight and never returned, in the same way as one might lose interest in one’s appearance in the aftermath of a some insurmountable grief. I was amazed to feel tears prickle my eyes.

My thoughts returned to the long layer in which new seeds would thrive. Out of interest I forced the spade further down into the bottom of the trench I had just excavated. After a few inches it stopped. I glimpsed navy blue clay. I was close to the sub-soil. Here Arthur had never worked. In each spit I turn I am looking down into the long history - maybe three or four decades - of his middle age. The cries on the school field subsided. As I worked, churned, chopped and buried, I began to see other metaphors and other stories in the earth. The scruffy surface in front of me was gradually disappearing and being replaced by a high plateau of dark brown; I saw in those sods, which I could wait to bury, my recent history too, spade after spade laden with shabby memories of a career and a marriage ended in disappointment and fruitlessness. I fancied I was unearthing the unspoilt layers of youth with its untapped energy into which I had once hoped my efforts would throw strong roots and eventually flower to bear fruit I would be so proud of. Ah dear me! How few of those there were in my plot choked with thistles and thorns of disgust and resentment! I heard the engine of the Doctor’s ingenious device which he had implanted to combat my depression and, on cue, a robin landed on my spade handle causing me to burst out laughing.

In one long cut, in which hardly any roots for some reason had penetrated, there was almost a foot of good soil ready to crumble. I could smell its musty fragrance. After standing back and resting for a moment, fascinated by the gradual darkening of that earth, which reminded me of the skill of a water-colourist, I fetched out more and more from underneath, until it was virtually black and almost oily, oozing the richness of things long dead. If this represented my life then I was at the beginning.

I am at infant school. Martin and his twin brother - I can never remember his name - sandy-haired and freckly, are sitting side-by-side crying until their faces are as red as their heads. It is as if Martin is sitting with his cheek against a mirror; he and his twin pull exactly the same expression at the same time. It was synchronized misery. We other children are so fascinated by them that we forget our own homesickness and pining mother-love.

Now I am outside alone in the playground. I ask a very tall lady whose name turns out to be Mrs Beecher - its strangeness frightens me - when I can go home. She makes a noise between a snort and a laugh and what she says back I cannot recall.

That is the first day.

Now I am in the paved area playing with others in large boxes. They are the rooms of a house. We climb in and out of each other's spaces and around each other. There are no arguments. We have been singing about Bobby Shafto going to sea and about Michael Finnegan growing whiskers on his chin-igan. I am lying on the floor next to Roger Beasley who is sitting crossed-legged. He is wearing shorts too large for his legs and I cannot help but stare down to the end of his thigh where I can see a hollow and a bone. I feel myself there and realise I am made his way too. I keep staring and wonder if he has a willie. Is he a girl? Am I still four, or am I five? I only have a brother. Have I realised yet what girls are?

Miss Horseybrooke is sitting on a stool by a huge flipchart, pen in hand. It is Monday morning, and on Mondays she always asks us what we did at the weekend. Nobody will speak. She asks again and looks around. She is disappointed. I feel hot and sorry for her. I put up my hand.

"Yes, Gerald!"

"Please Miss Horseybrooke, I saw a lorry. It was packed with flower pots."

Her eyes widen and she reaches for another pen nearby. I know she loves to use lots and lots of colours. She asks me and I tell her all the colours I know. The lorry magically appears in a few strokes with large black wheels, and behind the red cab, in descending rows, she draws dots, dashes and splashes of blue, green, red, orange and yellow.

"Where do you think the lorry was going, Gerald?"

"Please Miss," says little, Enid, pretty little Enid with the hair slide I so wanted to touch. "I think it was going to a flower show."

"Did you see it too, Enid."

"No, Miss."

I found it hard to understand why that slender, pretty girl was called Enid. It was a name better suited to a nasty goblin, but I am so glad she has butted in.

*I feel as red as those flowers now. Miss Horseybrooke must know I have made the whole thing up. She must be able to see straight into me and spot the lie. Will she stand me up and tell me and everyone what a naughty boy I am? It has gone too far. Shall I put my hand up and confess? She is writing the title, *THE FLOWER LORRY*, and underlines it with a great ruler. She gets other children to tell the story and describe the flowers. We are sent to our tables to scribble the*

scene and copy a few words about it.

And then Miss Horseybrooke really is angry with me. I am out in the corridor with a boy whose face I can no longer see. We have been given a box of things called dominoes. She wants us to play with them, hoping, as I realised many years later, that we would discover the matching dots and arrange them end on end properly, but we have not. She comes onto the corridor with a strange man in a dark suit. He is not smiling. She is not smiling and it worries me because she nearly always does.

“Gerald Fist, you are a very naughty boy! You can forget your holiday next week! You can’t go!”

We were going to Skegness, I think. I had brought in a note to tell her. I sniffle a little. She turns redder. I had really thought she would be pleased with me. I love Miss Horseybrooke and she is mad with me for leading the other boy astray and building a really long tunnel through which we have been looking into each other’s eyes and making train noises.

All the way home I am worried. How shall I tell Mam and Dad they will have to go away without me? Shall I have to stay at Auntie Eadie’s and eat her sliced carrots which make me feel sick? All the next week I keep thinking on the beach of all the trouble I shall be in when I get back to school. But the Monday after, when I go back, Miss Horseybrooke asks me with a big grin if I have had a nice time. I lie to her and say “yes”.

And then Miss Horseybrooke looks very sad and red again. Miss Nourrish is shouting. She is the headmistress.

“I will smack the very next child if I cannot get two fingers between every word on their page!” Immediately most of us put two tiny fingers (should it have been three of ours?) to our work to check. A girl begins to cry. Martin and his brother throw back their heads together and wail. We await with horror and fascination to see who the first victim will be. I hope it will be blarting Martin. Martin’s brother hopes it will be Martin and not him. I pray it will not be me.

Miss Nourrish is little tubby lady and she terrifies us. She has a face with heavy eyebrows like a clown’s and large eyes. She ought to make us laugh but she does not. If still alive today she would be gradually shrinking from the world in a nursing home; back then she is skipping around the room like one of those Sugar Plum Fairies we charge around to in the hall. But she looks and must taste like a sour plum. She flits, she looks, she measures, she touches, she tuts and moves on and finally, with a very strange stare at poor Miss Horseybrooke she vanishes like the fairies always do. But no-one gets a smack. Are we disappointed?

One day Miss Horseybrooke really does have a nice lady with her. They are laughing and whispering. She asks me to come to the front. She says she needs to talk to her friend in the back room for a little while, and asks me to tell the class a story while they go off together. I make up a story about magic underpants. Anyone who wears them can have adventures, can fly, can sing and can do anything they never could before. I love to make my friends laugh at me, just as they had that day in the cloakroom when I kept singing about my new dickie-bow.

“I’ve got a dickie-bow, dickie-bow, dickie-bow, dickie bow, I’ve got a dick-dick-dick-dick bow!”

After a while the pair come back and I am told to sit down. It only occurs to me very many years later, straight out of the blue, that the whole thing was pre-arranged to show the nice lady through the door crack what a strange boy I was.

I have to wait for Auntie Eadie. She always meets me at the gate and walks me up the long road to the big factory where Mam works. But where is she? I decide I will show them what a big boy I am now and get there on my own.

On the way I meet up with William Duffey – a boy I have told another terrible lie about, that he has no mother - and Robert Newton and Bob Gatherer. They are playing a brilliant game. I stop and join in. We charge up and down the pavement with our hoods up on our duffle coats which hang down like capes, like wings behind us with our arms out of our sleeves. We are beetles, we are bats, we are crows, we can fly. Suddenly I remember my mother and dash off towards the factory. But there she is! She is running towards me with Auntie Eadie! How glad they are to see me!

But I am not a good boy. I am a very, very, very naughty boy. Auntie Eadie has been crying and is saying “never again“. Mam is very upset and I nearly get a smack. Auntie Eadie hates me and tells me she will never meet me out again. And yet she does, the very next day, after I have secretly spit out a slice of carrot at lunch while she was in the kitchen.

Was that all that there remained of infant school? I remembered what the Doctor had said about the past reduced to a moment in the present. How many of my memories have really been dreams? I dug, I turned, I stood back and looked. Scraping the white roots, which reminded me of rats' tails, into the trench, I angrily stamped them down into a solid block.

Deeper down still there is a rocking horse, a white cat, a newspaper I cannot yet read, raspberries at the bottom of the garden and something hot and burning trickling down my leg, and then nothing but a blackness, like the blackness of the soil, stretching backwards for ever, in which billions of eyes, like spring flowers, opened and closed, but not until 1950 - for some inexplicable reason - did the eyes open which I had borrowed for a while.

I had to be dreaming. It was not April in the dream, but late November. I was drinking tea in Evelyn's cold kitchen.

“Evelyn, where will you be spending Christmas Day?”

She looked shyly away as she always did to hide her upsets.

“H-here, I suppose,” she stammered as she fought back a sob.

In my dream I told Enid and she frowned

“Surely her niece will ask her? Or a cousin?”

As the days shortened in dreamy seconds and the windows and gardens lit up in the houses around her, it was clear that nobody would invite her for Christmas. It was settled that she would come to us and Enid planned to tell her so. Evelyn loved being with us and we loved to have her. She put a very brave face on it when she left to return to that cheerless house and lonely routine, with no prospect of a happy new year.

I woke up in a cruelly beautiful April dawn and wept. The old Enid – the original Russian doll was steadily emerging from her hiding place. The dream decided me to invite Evelyn for Christmas - and that would count as another good deed. Realising I needed to spend much time at Evelyn's if I was to sow seeds in time for the summer, I sprang out of bed. Enid's young photograph in the dining room was smiling brighter. Her apricot rose bouquet seemed to have sprung another bud.

The garden was by now almost dug. It had been mild and I had feared a return of that vile grass, but there were no shoots of it in sight. I set about a new row with vigour and confidence. The dream of a vegetable garden was now becoming a real prospect. As I dug, the new metaphorical bee in my bonnet that beautiful day was the link between Evelyn's garden and the garden of Eden. What accuracy did the link have? Superficially, not much. I had been picking exotic forbidden fruit in my new life but not there. And this was not a loss of Paradise but the gradual restoration of an urban one in a town of little importance through the toil of an insignificant son of Adam. I smiled and tried to bury the connection, but it insisted on resurfacing like a root, like a tune I could not stop. I had long had a sense of a divine presence in the world, though no personal relationship with God, as Enid had. I was often moved by the quest for virtue and spirituality - surely, with love, the most noble of goals in a violent and selfish Creation - a Creation which only we have the potential - though mostly not the inclination - to enoble. Genesis was an intriguing myth for me as a philosopher.

It was in no way incompatible with the theory of evolution - quite the reverse - as it posited a gradual creation; but what I found most insightful, poetic and intelligent was the legend of the apple. The taking of it from the tree was an elegant and beautiful allegory of the dawning of self-awareness and of free will in creatures marked from other beasts as special by virtue of the size of their brains. It was the beginning of mind, of thought, of culture and of history, as well as of sin. The myth implied that sin was the inevitable consequence of mind. I could not help but wonder whether - and here there would never have been agreement with the Doctor's theory - whether the ultimate point of the universe might be God's eternal quest to fashion out of base material an intelligent **and** obedient being. The universe might be an endless Fluctuation as, Time and Time again, that quest proved fruitless on all His planets and in all their Edens, where a despairing God felt obliged to round up and reduce all matter once more to a captive single point - the so-called singularity - as He sought a Formula to fine-tune substance into obedience prior to its re-release. Could God overcome that paradox of freedom and obedience? Might that, Doctor Mephostopholous, be the whole point of Time and Space?

What was sinfulness.? It was futile to speak of a tiger sinning, as it had no choice but to be governed by its own instinctive drives. It killed and ate the antelope because it was hungry. Men and women chose how they behaved and could consider the moral implications of eating such a creature. Even if there were no other choice but antelope on the menu, to eat it or not was a question which only a human being could consider and a decision which only a human being could take. The taking of the round apple was a beautiful symbol of the take-over of the round Earth, as the tribes of Man, restless and discontent, left behind the safe, unchallenging environment of Eden for the uncertainty, the tribulations and the excitement of a turbulent world, in which they increasingly only paid lip-service to God or gods, turning to them only when they were confronted by events beyond their wit and control, like children running back full of tears and terror into the nursery. Here was the basis for the jealous and retributive Parent who sent the Flood and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

And yet, and yet.....As I turned over the earth in Evelyn's garden, I thought over a previous conversation with the Doctor. There were still tribes today content to sustain themselves by the fruits, the roots and the animals within their easy reach in the rainforests. Would all the sons and daughters of Adam have stayed put had local conditions remained favourable and had not the pressure of population growth forced many to move? Did not the growth of technology come

about whenever, wherever and only because adversities taxed the wit of mankind to overcome them, necessity being ever the mother of invention? The cultures of the rainforests were ingenious but were only valid in that environment. “Advanced” technology was universal. And the planet sadly displayed the consequences of it.

Travellers or settlers? Apart from the exigencies of habitat, the urge within the tribes - and within individuals of the tribe - to be both travellers and settlers created tensions and strains on unity, leading to conflict, criminality and war. The adventurers would eventually yearn for the peace of Eden, and the settlers for the novelty of adventure - as I myself had recently so yearned. This paradox had led to the world of today. Our temporariness, restlessness, dissatisfaction and greed led us - with our eyes set firmly ahead and never looking back - to press on to physical and mental pastures newer and greener - leaving behind or burying our mess.

Would the children of the rainforest have strained at the leash, if, over the hill, there had been a something else - a metropolis?

The character who emerged least creditably from the Genesis story was, in my view, the Almighty - a lonely, jealous being who insisted on the unquestioning obedience of His creatures. He was supposedly omniscient but had failed to spot straightway Adam and Eve’s transgression of His Law and also Cain’s act of fratricide. I had neither the desire nor the expectation of going to heaven, and would certainly not relish spending eternity with such an incompetent sulk – and to be absolutely honest – with vulgar, ugly, stupid, fat people. Were souls faint images of the body, or lights – some dimmer, some brighter? Was heaven like an eternal lighting array, like candle racks in Catholic church?

Where was I? Ah yes. Yahweh. Although an abstraction, Yahweh had all the traits of a graven image, miniaturised by the limited intellect of his worshippers. The true God, however, would be beyond all understanding, and if He took any notice of us, He did so in His own way, for His own purposes, not following the route or way markers we had built for him. The doctor’s account of him – as if he had met him personally – truly intrigued me. Was prayer futile? Did God intervene in our affairs? With what fervour did He require us to worship Him, the Great Being? Was He that kind of God? Surely, things were much, much weirder than we could ever imagine or understand! I did not understand what prayer was for and how it could possibly work. I preferred to imagine a non-interfering deity, otherwise many awkward questions posed themselves, such as why there was no Finger raised to save the victims of the Holocaust. Answers such as “it passeth all understanding” might be adequate for some less enquiring minds but for others it begot further questions such as “What sort of God is it who permits some aspects of Himself to be understood (Genesis, the Ten Commandments, the Messiah) but draws an impenetrable veil across the rest of Himself? How much of the bible is God’s revelation and how much is man’s aspiration? Would it not be less “messy” to view God as an utterly impenetrable secret? The Church itself seemed confused on this issue, for the word “ineffable” from a famous hymn sprang to mind. How could God be ineffable and “effable” at the same time?

The banks and the government were certainly very effable.

As I turned the spade in the garden, those unanswerable questions absorbed me. One day I would ridicule the Doctor’s absurd conceit - whereby he pretended to have some superior knowledge of

the Divine Intention. I looked around. Since Eden, what a hash and a slash we had made of the world. What ugliness we were the authors of. We had no prospect of ever returning to Paradise.....Or did we? I wondered and reconsidered. Did mankind have a future *unless* the world was restored to its virginal condition and mankind developed a compliance with its natural laws? Would that not be an act of **knowing** obedience, rather than blind obedience? Might the maturation of the inquisitive, impulsive, explorative, exploitative child into a wise and thoughtful adult - and his reconciliation with the creation and its Author - be the true end and goal of history, indeed, as I implied above, of the very universe? Sin at that stage would, I conjectured, become any act which ran counter to those natural laws and the stable peace they engendered on a restless planet.

Perhaps hundreds or thousands of years in the future, at the very end of our technological obsession, when we would have developed an efficient set of means for sustaining ourselves - ensuring even our immortality through gene and organ banks and yet undreamt of solutions to our tendency to wear out and be damaged - perhaps then we would see not only the logic but the necessity of returning to a stress-free agrarian lifestyle - co-operative and peaceful in a true Age of Enlightenment. In other words, Heaven. (Any restless ones left could have their spacecraft to "boldly go where no man has ever been before" - to leave the contented ones in contemplative peace.)

Progress as conceived today was merely a cover and excuse for a few people making more and more money churning out more and more things which we had to be persuaded to desire and then persuaded again to discard for the newest version of them. There the doctor was entirely correct. I might well be sitting in my incredibly advanced car with satellite navigation but if I was driving through a wasteland, physical and spiritual, what sort of progress was that?

I turned over another spadeful and thought of a detail in Michelangelo's Last Judgement - the instant where Adam and Eve, throwing back their wailing heads in reddened ugliness and sorrow, were expelled from Eden; Eve to experience the agonies of childbirth and to have the heels of her offspring bitten by snakes, and Adam to wrestle with thorns and thistles in an imperfect world. I looked at the perfection of my soil and imagined the story with a happy ending, with the smiles on those tormented faces restored.

Of course, I mused, we might be embarking on a very rocky road of developing ever new remedial technologies to counterbalance those damaging ones we wished to persist with, in order to maintain an extravagant and wasteful lifestyle, producing more and more things. Or we could rein back the production of things - preferring quality to quantity - in favour of producing good **environments**. Was not the urban squalor of Britain not only shameful, but also demoralising to those who lived in its midst?

Capitalism was proclaimed by its smug and complacent advocates as an economic model compatible **with** the grain of human nature. This was precisely **why** it was unsustainable. It was primitive, wasteful, destructive and ultimately as lethal to ourselves as our primitive impulses were. The point was to educate the greedy Child in us to grow up and to live within the guidelines of the planet, or face annihilation.

Imagine a nation of ten million adults in bare feet. There is a choice.

A planned economy would perhaps produce twenty million shoes for the year, as most people

have no more or less than two legs and an annual need for shoes of no more than one pair. Walkers and dancers and such could apply for extra ones. It is the economic system of the rational.

A Capitalist economy would “leave it to the market” and hundreds of thousands of shoes would be produced, with advertisers competing for customers’ attention. People would either buy more shoes than they needed, as Imelda Marcos, or thousands would go to waste. It is the economic system of the irrational, the stupid and the shallow.

Which was the only practical system for the future, given increasing populations and diminishing resources? Which one was absurdly wasteful? Which one would lead inevitably to conflict and war as resources shrank and population increased? Just how many things did each of us need? If every drawer, cupboard and loft was emptied and their contents strewn on the streets we might finally see how ridiculously profligate a species we were. As we looked back today with horror on an era where public execution was commonplace, so might our descendants look back upon our insane consumerism. Another thought - immediate and practical - struck me as I imagined the garden full of produce. As food and transportation became more and more expensive, how important would gardens like Evelyn’s become?

The hideous dinosaur-like cries of the pupils beyond the fence yanked me back to the present. The sound, unaccountably, filled me with terror. I gazed skyward and blessed my invisible lucky stars yet again that I was that side of it. I turned the soil and thought of all those years wasted casting pearls before undergraduate swine who were not motivated by a love of knowledge but by obtaining a passport to employment in first Thatcher’s, then Blair’s Gilded Ages. What a cost there had been in morale and to me as a person. I imagined all the buried weeds in the thirty yards in front of me and saw them as the events which were now for ever in the past, but which would, unlike the weeds, serve no future purpose.

I spotted something in the earth I had just turned. It was white and round. It was a golf ball. I pocketed it as a surprise for Evelyn. The noise beyond the fence has ceased. They were contained in classrooms again, like plutonium.

I had been wondering if I would find a hoard of Roman coins or the foundations of a villa. I was digging deeper than surely anyone had before. On the school field in the nineteen twenties a Roman bust had been discovered poking out of the side of a ditch below a hedge, as if looking for the person who had dropped it there. How extensively had this area been settled by the ancients? I considered its position - quite high and suitable to defend, yet far from water. The nearest brook was down on the common, about a mile away. But the soil was so rich it must have been valuable farmland. I struck something hard and could not get around it. I revealed a series of bricks, but they were not mortared together and their regularity spoke of modern times and of some recent purpose. How often we received immediate answers to the questions we ask!

“Did Arthur play golf, Evelyn?” I asked sitting down to drink my tea. She looked baffled. I produced the golf ball I had just washed clean under the tap.

“Well I never!” she exclaimed. “I bet that’s the lad from two doors away. He practises.” She considered what she had said and sat down all of a sudden, shaking her head.

“But he’s a grown man now with kids of his own. Arthur used to fix his motor bike. Where on

earth have all the years gone?"

She looked up from her recollections and said she had a portrait of herself in pencil, the work of a man in the same regiment as Arthur, done in 1946. Naturally, I asked her if I could see it. She told me to look in her living room, in her cupboard of treasures. I helped her to walk in and sit down on a chair. I looked on the top shelf of the cupboard and took the photo and drawing out. I was astonished to see how attractive she had been at the age of twenty, how sincere and earnest her eyes had been, and how full and strong her features. It was the face of a confident, happy young woman, ready to take on life and make the most of it. The painting was good but did not quite do justice to her spirit

"But Evelyn, how lovely you are!"

She laughed freely and with genuine delight.

"*Were*, you mean. Over sixty years ago. It hardly seems possible."

I feared she might cry but she took a deep breath and studied her former likeness, evidently with pleasure. I was more resolved than ever to make this a fruitful year for her. From her cupboard I took, at her prompting, other memorabilia. The old seventy-eight records I found particularly fascinating, having lost the ones in childhood which Joan and Gordon, my parents' friends, had given me. I remembered above all the Drinking Song from the Student Prince sung by Mario Lanza, who was far too fat to act in the film. In Evelyn's collection there was Vera Cruz and Jealousy by Eddie Fisher, September by Dinah Washington and Rosemarie by Slim Whitman.

"I bet these are worth something, Evelyn. These old shellac records were so fragile there can't be many left in this condition. I could ask at that shop in Queens Road for you."

"I wouldn't sell them. Even though I can't play them any more."

I inspected Arthur's medals and the Victorian sovereigns which had been come down to her from her grandmother. I thought of the millions of objects which had passed through her hands in a lifetime. These were amongst the few for which she had any real affection and which she kept in her cupboard and in her thoughts.

If we were all ordered by aliens to leave the planet and take only one thing, mine would be my old school photograph of Enid, I decided there and then. I missed her more and more - the young Enid I had loved. Never, never, never, never would I hold her tight and love her again.....

There is little to surpass the pleasure of resting after a period of intense physical effort. I lay on my bed and did a mental inventory of my aching muscles, relaxing each one and imagining each being replenished by the soft, steady beat of my heart. How delicious the fatigue of usefulness can be. I surveyed the garden in my mind and watched it sprout into life. I previewed taking Evelyn out the following day, as I had promised, to the garden centre to buy seeds. I would treat her to lunch. I rolled into a shallow pool of sleep and dreamt of the garden. As in the photograph Arthur was stooping over the peas. Evelyn was watching nearby through her dark glasses. He straightened up and walked up to the corner on the left and pointed down into the pile of prunings. Evelyn summoned him for a cup of tea and he looked around. He had become me. With a jolt I woke. The voice I had heard was Enid's. She had been holding a mug in her hand and leaning over me, calling my name. Now she was gone again. I got up and fed the cat, then myself, then the cat again. And again...then, screaming and crying bitterly - the cat, not me - gave him the bum's rush.

*

At the garden centre Evelyn was sitting in a wheelchair surveying the display of seeds. She pointed and I took down packets for her perusal. She was in charge. She shook or nodded her head and muttered such comments as “good cropper” or “not very hardy” or “too prone to blight”. Soon we had a basketful, including carrot, beetroot, runner beans, French beans, red onion sets, spring onion, lettuce, brussels, spring cabbage and purple broccoli. We asked for directions to the seed potatoes and Evelyn rummaged through the nets until she found the variety she wanted.

“These are good early croppers. New pots in June if you sow soon. As long as the weather is reasonably warm.”

I took her to the café and bought her a jacket potato. Afterwards I wheeled her around the local supermarket before taking her home. What to us is a chore and a routine had been a real treat for Evelyn; to drive three or four miles down country lanes and to mingle with folk in the bustle of supermarket aisles and just to look at things was so special. I resolved to take her out for lunch regularly from that point on. Doctor Mephostopholus phoned me out of the blue and told me he was so impressed, he would count all this as two good deeds.

“I think Evelyn enjoyed the supermarket best,” I told Enid in my sleep.

“She did. She told me. Gerald? Gerald?”

“Please don’t leave me, Enid.”

One panel to go. It was mid April and warmer. The woman who had come up behind me in the garden was about my age, rotund and obese. Her rasping breathing had made me turn. She announced she was Marion, Evelyn’s niece. She had unkempt, washed out hair and an unpleasant painted moon-face which had obviously long ago given up the effort or pretence of smiling. I sensed I was under suspicion and felt unaccountably guilty. I told her who I was and she raised a pencilled-in eyebrow. Did unpleasant faces determine over time the inner person or betray it; or was it a little of both? What history was written on mine? What had turned Enid’s so sour? Me?

“I’m digging Evelyn’s garden.”

“So I see.”

“My late wife knew her from church. I’ve retired and need to do aer, need the exercise. It should be good for her to see the old garden come back to life - and there will be plenty of vegetables for everyone.”

I was talking fast. I was justifying myself to a woman who could not even be bothered to visit her aunt on special days, let alone invite her for dinner. She sniffed, nodded and turned to go back in. I watched her waddle to the veranda and disappear. I could almost hear her thinking that Evelyn would change her will under my pernicious influence and leave her property to me. Did she think I was just waiting for the chance to go upstairs and steal the savings under her mattress?

Two nights later, as I settled down after dinner, having shut the angry cat in the kitchen, there came a knock at the door. It was the police again. They had come about some missing gold sovereigns. A lady called Evelyn Watts had given them my address. I was asked to confirm that I had been working there. I gulped. I went hot. Then cold. I was so choked I could hardly speak.

“T-that’s right. I dig her garden.”

“You’re her gardener,” confirmed the woman officer who had clearly concluded that my

nervousness declared me guilty. I was told that the sovereigns were no longer in the cupboard where they are always kept and nowhere to be found. I was asked to confirm that I had been shown them the previous week and I did so.

“We have to ask you this, Professor Fist,” sighed the man, the officer who had come to check out the bank-brick and the petrol wheeze. “Did you take them? Perhaps borrow them without thinking to tell her?”

I sensed that this time he felt he had me bang to rights, as I think the expression goes. Now I found my proper voice. “Borrow them? Of course not!”

A suspicion entered my head. “Please tell me officers. Does her niece have anything to do with.....prompting this investigation?”

“Her niece?” said the female not pleasantly. “Why ever do you ask?”

“Just a hunch.”

“She is involved, isn’t she?”

“That’s confidential, Sir.”

“Very convenient. You want to go around her house and ask her about the coins. Mind you, she would have to rack her brains to know which old lady you’re talking about, she sees her and thinks about her so seldom! You come around here accusing me of stealing her money on her say-so! Evelyn even looked after her children when they were small and lent her money when her business got into trouble. Never paid it back of course! She can’t even be bothered to go and see her at Christmas. I dig her garden for nothing - and all the time I’m only weighing up how to steal a few old coins!”

I was told to calm down. The officers had been taken aback by the vehemence of my outburst.

“I swear to you that I have taken nothing from Evelyn Watts’ house. You can search here if you want. You needn’t get a warrant!”

As soon as they had gone I returned to my cold dinner - or what was left of it as the cat jumped down from my plate and fled. I made a mental note to phone the vet. Enid told me she would never speak to me again if I did.

Later I phoned Evelyn. She admitted that her niece had called the police when she mentioned to her that she couldn’t find the coins. They had asked her to tell them all the people who had been round. Of course she had named me. And when they had asked who had seen the sovereigns only I had. Evelyn was now convinced that I would never call again and that the garden would return to waste. Quietly I put her mind at rest.

At about eleven that same night, Evelyn phoned me. The coins had turned up.

“Oh that’s great! Where were they?”

“Upstairs in a bedroom drawer. I must be getting forgetful. I never put them in there. I’m sorry that Marion called the police. I wish I hadn’t mentioned them to her.”

I did not ask her if her niece was aware of their normal hiding place. I knew the answer. Cursing her, I went to bed.

I opened my eyes on another fine day....but instead of my ceiling I was looking at the canopy of a forest through which diffuse sunlight was streaming.

“Now where have you taken me, Doctor?” I growled. “I told you I’d had enough ofadventures!”

For answer there came the exotic shriek of a distant bird. My mattress and bedclothes had

vanished and instead I was in a couch of warm bracken.....Pushing my way through the undergrowth beneath giant tree ferns, I was astonished to come across a dangling mass of flowers which were very like begonias and orchids. In the utterly blue sky, not a golden, but a silver, almost blue sun, larger and more generous than our own, was shining. It was warm and pleasant on my skin...my dark, naked skin. There was mainly silence, only the occasional cooing of unseen birds, and no harsh cries of jay, or rook or crow. The earth under my bare feet was warm. I pulled back the skin on my hand and it instantly unwrinkled. What a wonderful dream! My heart swelled with joy and gratitude to be brought there – from my bed in dingy, mouldy old Earlstone. I reached out for the luscious red berries and found they tasted like those in my grandfather's garden, painfully sweet, and they made my jaw ache. My feet were in a sea of flowers – candy-striped, pink, red and maroon, resembling godetias but with larger cups. I feared to tread on them but they sprang up undamaged behind me as I went.

Beyond the forest was a pale grey mountain topped with sparkling snow, breathtakingly beautiful, reminding me of times in Tyrol, of those rare days of calm and of cloudless skies. I heard the trickling music of water and soon came upon its source, a stream picking its way unhurriedly between round stones, some golden, some green with thin lichen. In rock pools, shoals of tiny silver fish shot around like sparks.

I followed the stream down a slope and watched it spill over the edge of a cliff into a much larger pool in which a man and woman were bathing. As I crouched behind a fern, they stood together and embraced. The man was dark and slender and particularly well blessed. The woman was shorter and paler, reminding me of someone. She was not pretty but earnest – and looked intelligent. Was it young Evelyn? Her breasts were delicate and rounded like young Enid's. Oh, Enid!

Creeping a little closer I began to hear what they were saying. I had to stifle a giggle because their sing-song accent reminded me of Brummies.

“What's up wi' yo?” asked the man.

“Om fed up” said she.

“Ee-yer. . 'Old on. Oi'll fetch yer a berry.”

“Sick o' berries. Berries, berries, berries, note but berries.”

“Well...worrabout a root then?”

“A root? Stick it. If we cloimb the mountain like oi wanna, who knows what we'll foind?”

“But we're sposed to stay ee-yer. 'E said so.”

“ ‘Im, 'Im, 'Im.....Kern't we think for us-sens? Om sick of 'im watching us! Why kern't 'e leave us in poice? We could sneak away at noight and goo somewhere 'e'd never foind us ”

“Course 'e would! You know perfectly well 'e's omni-what-ever-it-is ee is! Keep yer voice down!”

“Don't care! There has to be more places to goo than this. It's just boringg.....”

They fell silent and splashed around a little more. Boring? How could she be bored in this idyll?

I followed them at a cautious distance as they walked, dripping, through the bracken. They were soon emerging into a glade where the sun, partly obscured further back by treetops, now sent down a wide beam which lit up a magnificent, stately tree laden with large crimson fruit like elongated apples. It was a vision of beauty made more alluring by a sweet fragrance which forced me to inhale deeply. Fervently and silently, I prayed that I would not wake. The woman reached up to touch a fruit and the man stayed her hand.

“You know what 'e said! We ain't to touch.”

“No! ‘E said not to *eat*. Touching’s alright.”

And she caressed the dark red, golden-freckled fruit and drew her fingers lovingly across her nostrils. Oh, she cried, and invited the man to smell too. What she would give, she said, for a tiny bite or a little of its juice....surely *He* had only meant don’t eat, not don’t try.

“Otherwise, whoiy put it ee-yer? Whoiy would ‘e be so cruel?”

The man looked irresolute as she wafted her fingers under his flaring nostrils, until, all at once, a voice I recognized rang out across the clearing.

“She’s right, you know, old fellow! It’s a little joke of his.”

Both stood terrified and clasped each other tight

“Anyway, your master isn’t around. He’ll never find out. He’s not as omniscient as he pretends!”

“That’s the word I was looking for!” exclaimed the man. “Er, what does it mean, loik?”

“It means he knows everything but that is nonsense. How can he, if a particle can be in two places at once...but you needn’t bother your sweet heads with nuclear physics....*yet*. That, dear friends, under which you are standing is the Tree of Knowledge.”

“What’s knowledge?” she dared to ask after a long pause. “And who are yo?”

“An old friend of your master’s. We sort of work together, so I know him pretty well. He can get grumpy and overzealous but don’t take what he says too seriously. Knowledge - and I mean this most sincerely, friends - will carry you to the four corners of this wondrous world and you’ll do things of which now you can only dream - and things you never could dream of! Would you like to fly like that bird? - swim and ride across great oceans, much, much bigger and wider and deeper than your tiny pool? - climb the mountain yonder to look down on all the wide world, and climb a thousand others? How would you like to fly to the moon and look down on this garden from there?”

“Oh yes!” cried the woman. “I would, I would!!”

“Then eat” exclaimed the Doctor.

“No!” I countered.

“God, it’s ‘im!” screamed the woman.

“It’s not him at all,” he sneered. “It’s another man, a man like you who used to sit on his dreary own in a dreary place all day in the gloom. I set him free and I can do the same for you.”

I shouted that they should not listen to him.

“If you eat thereof, you will have to leave and you can never come back!”

“Good!” retorted the woman.

“You don’t understand. If you leave, you will grow old and die.”

“Die? Grow old?”

I looked around for something shrivelled to make my point, but everything - every leaf, frond and flower was pristine.

“Imagine being no more. No sun, no stars, no moon, no earth, no trees - only darkness. That is being dead.”

“No sun?” asked the man, voice all quiver and quavers. “Will the sun fall?”

“No, the sun will not fall. Only your eyes will close and never open again. Your lips too, never to speak, not to eat, nor kiss. Your beautiful body will turn to the dust like the dust under your feet.”

The doctor laughed. What lies, he declared, I was telling. He accused me of being a spoilsport, a man who had lost his savour of life, forfeited his desire to try the sweetest of fruit for a life of mediocrity and who would jealously wish to deny that flavour to others. The woman was tugging at the swaying thing which now looked distinctly obscene. The man looked bewildered. I

shouted that they would be driven away if they succumbed to temptation; that the man would be forced to till the dusty land amongst stones and thistles to grow the most meagre of food; that the woman would suffer in childbirth and that her heels would be ever at the mercy of serpents.

“You say that you are bored here, young woman. Wait until you suffer the hardships and uncertainties of the places beyond!”

“He exaggerates! There may be occasional hardship – but the thrill of the new will always be compensation enough, as you round the next bend and ascend the next slope or cross the next river, lake or sea.”

“But there will be sin and evil. Here there is none – unless you eat! Not only will there be natural death, but also destruction, pestilence and despoilment. And murder. Indeed, one of your sons will destroy the other because the master you fear will favour – quite unjustly – one over the other.”

“If so, what kind of master is he to serve and obey?” urged the doctor. “Shun him! Go your own ways before the tyrant returns!”

The woman, eyes fervent with desire, now made up her mind and tugged down the heavy fruit into her palm. Juice oozed out from the top where the stem had broken and the scent was unbearably sweet, excelling all eloquence. She bit it and swallowed and handed it to the man who dithered then did likewise. Both seemed overcome with ecstasy and they looked at the sky as we all do when in a state of such delight. They shivered. Clouds swelled up, the sun vanished and there was thunder. Rain, such as I had never seen before, sharp and long as nails, fell on and about the pair and they ran in the direction of the sunlit mountain slope, grabbing great leaves as they went to wrap around themselves.

“I hope you’re bloody pleased with yourself!” I screamed in the direction of the disembodied voice. “Why couldn’t you just leave them as they were? What good has it done you to get them thrown out??”

There was at first no reply and I thought he had gone. Then a much quieter voice, sorrowful and slow, spoke out.

“I was hoping that this time, in such a perfect creation, my beings would be content to remain within my boundaries. This has all been for nothing. Now they will destroy it. I have made them just slightly too clever to be obedient, and just slightly too stupid to understand what is good for them. Back to the beginning, I fear...”

I wanted to tell him of my hope for the future, but I was falling. I was hurtling down a long dark tunnel as I began to wake; I glimpsed a sword being hammered flat in a shower of sparks in a forge, saw city walls besieged, armies clashing in a frenzy of slaughter, heard a cacophony of screams and laughter, saw naked men hung, drawn and quartered in rapid succession, and screaming women ablaze at the stake; great guns fired salvos and lit up the night, until I landed on my twisted mattress and bounced onto the floor, twisting my ankle. I climbed back into bed, screwed my eyes shut, counted sheep, put on soft music but nothing helped. I could not go back. In the end I got up and was waylaid by the cat.

*

When Evelyn told me that her niece had had a very strange accident, I heard the doctor chuckle in my head. I remembered my bedtime curse.

“She was walking under a ladder at home when a tin of red paint fell on her. Thing is, she was going to dye her hair red.....now she doesn’t need to.”

“Oh dear! Did the tin hurt her?”

“No. It bounced on a rung and just emptied itself on her head.”

She shook, sniggered, tried to stop it and then burst into guilty laughter. I had never seen her throw back her head and laugh before, and I joined her. A while later, while she was mashing tea, she said that the seed potatoes needed to “chit”. I frowned. She smiled in superior fashion..

“Arthur always put them in a drawer in the workshop. They have to sit on newspaper not touching each other until they sprout. You have to leave the drawer just a little open for the light to get in.”

She told me to look behind the pantry door. There are four bunches of keys on hooks.

“You’ll have to try them to see which fit.”

The door of the workshop was padlocked in the middle, and top and bottom there are two more keyholes. I wondered again at their obsession with security. After many failures I found the right keys and opened the door. The scene was remarkable. On the wall, hanging from hooks, there was a xylophone of spanners descending from huge to tiny with gaps here and there. On the benches the missing ones were lying amongst many other tools. There was an open vice with a metal pipe still in it, one enormous and one tiny oil can, transistor-like objects sprouting wires, and steel discs, screwdrivers, a hammer, drill bits, spare parts and a scatter of things whose functions were secrets, all left about as if the mechanic had at that moment broken off for lunch and would resume hammering, sawing and assembling in the afternoon.

On the wall were large photographs of bikes without and with riders, one of whom was a boy, possibly the great-nephew of whom Evelyn had spoken but never saw. On two of them Arthur, in navy overalls, towered above a machine sporting a smile of immense pride. I looked at the floor. It was unswept and that intrigued me.

I felt like an intruder, breaking into a scene and a moment of the past for ever suspended, like the dust in the air. Light was streaming in through top windows and it was surprisingly warm. I cautiously opened one drawer and found it full of alien bits and pieces. Its neighbour was however almost empty and it was that one I lined with newspaper and arranged the tiny spuds in. I left the drawer an inch open, as instructed, and retreated with a final look at the busy, abandoned set I had walked onto. I locked up.

“This place is like Fort Knox, Evelyn, with all those keys!”

“I know, but it was a case of locking the stable after the horse.....”

She could not complete the sentence. She was sobbing.

“What on earth? I’m sorry Evelyn. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s alright, alright..”

But it was far from alright. I put my arm around her. She wiped her eyes but cried again. I sat in an agony of embarrassment and helplessness. What on earth had I said? My big mouth, my least appealing asset - or one of them.....

“What horse would that be?” I asked her gently after a decent interval and when she had brought herself under control.

And she began to tell me about the motorbike.

It had been Arthur’s last major project at around his age of retirement eight years before. He had rebuilt an old Vincent and meant to sell it at some point to provide a nest-egg for himself and Evelyn.

“It would have fetched eighteen thousand pounds back then - goodness knows what it would be worth today.”

“And it was stolen? How dreadful. It must have taken some getting over.”

She burst into a fresh set of tears and stammered that they never had.

“It was the beginning of the end for Arthur. He just gave up. Left the workshop for good and let the garden do as it pleased. His knees got worse and he became almost a cripple. He seemed to lose the will to live....”

They had come down one morning and seen the door of the workshop open. The bike had gone.

“We knew who it was, but the blooming police didn’t come round for a month to take any details and by the time they went round to see the thief, he’d gotten rid of it.”

“A whole month?”

I felt so angry. I had little time for the police having been for years the victim of minor vandalism which they had had no appetite to investigate.

“Arthur and his friend Johnny Applegate were going to go round and sort it themselves, but Johnny had a record for assault and the police told him to stay out of it. Arthur was too old by himself. The chap who took it were twenty years younger.”

“About my age?”

“He would be now.”

“Where does he live?”

“Down Coventry Road somewhere, name of Hollingworth, I think. But it’s too late now. The police said it had probably gone abroad. Of course it had! Their idleness made sure it did!”

“Why are you so sure it was a man called Hollingworth?”

“A man overheard my Arthur talking about the Vincent in Tilley’s bike shop. Tilley told Arthur that he had asked for our address, and then one day he came round, offering to buy it, but Arthur wasn’t ready to sell it. He kept pestering him but he wouldn’t change his mind. In the month after it went, he never came round once. Why? Only one answer. It had to be him.”

I felt more furious than was good for me. I had an idea. I entered “private collections of motorbikes” into a search engine and came up with a hundred thousand results. I scrolled through, wondering if there was a private collection near to Earlstone and after twenty fruitless minutes I found myself staring at a name I had not thought of since my childhood. Alan Morgan. Are you old enough to remember those Sunday lunchtimes on the television where men on motorcycles scrambled up and down muddy embankments, trying to beat the times of their opponents? I used to love it. Alan Morgan - surely it had to be the same one - had been one of the top riders and I was sure it must have been the same man who owned a motorbike shop - long since closed - in the nearby village of Bragwell. I found Tilley’s phone number and asked if he knew where Morgan’s shop had moved to.

“Oh he’s been closed for years. He retired. He’d be in his seventies now. If you’re looking to buy, we have everything from spare parts to leather gear.”

“Thanks. Was it the same Alan Morgan who used to be the scrambler?”

“That’s him! He moved out to near Dadlingcote and bought a farm. The outbuildings house his collection.”

I thanked him and looked for Morgan in the phone book. On the website I had found there was no address, no phone number and there was maddeningly no entry under that name in Dadlingcote either. I went back to my laptop and clicked on his email.

Dear Mr Morgan,

I was looking for a collector of bikes in the Midlands who might be in the market for a Vincent Black Knight built in 1949.

(Having already looked on the Vincent HRD Owners' Club website, I had found a rare item to use as a tempting piece of bait.)

The next morning I had my result.

I am always in the market for rare machines. I need to know where it comes from and who you are. Then we can talk it over.

I took a chance.

If you are not interested on my terms I will go elsewhere.

Three days elapsed. There was no response. Was I barking up the wrong tree? I phoned the doctor for inspiration but there was no reply. Evelyn had already told me that Arthur had used a magic pen to write his name on the underside of the engine which was only readable via ultra-violet light. Should I take a chance and put my cards on the table to Mr Morgan? On Friday, after I had dug another three rows to finish the garden and mowed Evelyn's lawn, I returned home. She had told me that the motorbike was a Black Shadow. I wrote an email to tell the whole true story to Mr Morgan but as I went to press SEND, the refined voice in my laptop told me that I had email. I read the following message.

Alright. We'll do it your way. Meet me in The Pheasant in Dadlingcote tonight at seven. Bring the machine. Come alone. If your (sic) with anybody I'll walk straight out and have nothing more to do with you.

The unscrupulousness of these words hardened my suspicion into a conviction that I had the villain in my sights, a man so obsessed with possessing a rarity that he would ask no questions. And there was no other collector within miles of the town. I had, nonetheless, nothing to bargain with and no evidence to interest the police other than a hunch. How keen would they be, anyway, to look into the theft of a motorbike eight years previously? It seemed pointless to alert my correspondent to the possibility - a very remote one I admit - that he was in possession of a stolen Black Shadow. Reluctantly I added Mr Morgan to my blocked list and logged out. I needed to ask the doctor for a favour. I phoned him again and told him the story so far.

"If you can demand seven deeds from me, I want three wishes."

"What - you mean - as if I am some sort of djini?"

"Yes. Exactly so."

He hesitated.

"But who are you to bargain? And what with?"

"Come on. I need you help to do a really, really good deed. To get the bike back. Do you know where it is?"

"Of course not! What do you think I am, old fellow? Omniscient?"

“I really don’t know. Three wishes. That’s all.”

“Mmmmm. I’ll see what I can do.”

Of course, I did not keep my appointment with Morgan. I had what I wanted in the message he had sent.

*

To see the first shoots appear of those seeds sowed with such care was a thrill. It was May and most days were generously warm with showers usually early or late on, as Eden surely was. I had borrowed a wheelchair from Red Cross to take Evelyn down the garden to see the new life appearing everywhere. She told me to pile up the soil around the potato plants. I took the hoe and did as I was told. The soil was richly dark and moist. I pictured all the tiny toes of new potatoes which I would fork up in a month or so. The bean canes stood ready for their runners and the plum and damson were in fragrant blossom. She asked me to prune the blackberry by the damson of all of its old brambles and scrape all the rubbish at the top into a corner.

“If you mix it all together and chop it up small with soil and shredded newspaper you’ll have a great compost heap by the end of the season ready to spread next spring.” she added.

I was secretly overjoyed that Evelyn, for so many months and years a prisoner of grief and of the past, was now thinking of days to come. My dream of Arthur returned to me and I asked for his approval, wherever he was. I saw him again, as in my dream, pointing into that far corner. There, I decided, I would build the compost heap. I hoed a few weeds away from the rows of seedlings and wheeled Evelyn back in so that she could make some tea before I locked everything away. I had an appointment at the doctor’s in an hour so I could not stay long. Should I leave the heap of rubbish until my next visit? I looked at my watch and took the rake. Five minutes should do it. I decided to dig the soil a little first to provide a good base for the compost heap and release the earthworms to work their magic through it. In the long grass as I pushed in the spade I saw something metallic. A coin? I stooped to pick it up and I was holding a ring with two keys on it, both very dull but not rusted. One was a yale and the other a car key. On the plastic fob it read ROVER. I smiled to myself. I took them in to show Evelyn and she shook her head.

“We’ve never had a Rover. They must have belonged to Mr Brown who we bought the house off.”

I shook my head in turn. That would be over forty years ago. The keys would be in a far worse condition if they had lain there all that time. I pocketed them and drank my tea.

I was half-way home when the name *Hollingworth* spoke itself in my head so loudly that I answered *What?* It was a weird experience - and put me straight in mind of an incident when I was a small child. Our mother had popped round the neighbour’s leaving my brother and me alone for a little while. I heard a voice call my name and saw - or did I only imagine? - the door handle move slightly downwards. I thought then, of course, of the doctor and wonder if he had granted me one of those wishes. But it had not been his voice. It sounded Northern Irish. I drove on and saw Arthur again, pointing into the far corner. I almost failed to see the lights change at a Pelican crossing. As I waited for an old couple to hobble across I saw in a flash exactly how Hollingworth had gained entry. I did a U-turn at the next junction and drive back to Evelyn’s.

“Hollingworth, Evelyn. Can you remember what he drove?”

“Goodness! How should I know? Why?”

“Was it a Rover?”

“I’ve really no idea. But Johnny would know. Johnny Applegate.”

She got up and wobbled to a drawer, returning with a shiny brown address book. Her fingers shook as they slowly turned the pages

“Here it is. Shall I phone him?”

She dialled and waited. She told me that if anyone knew it would be Johnny because he had kept parking near Hollingworth’s house to keep his eye on him after the bike had gone.

“Hello? Is that Johnny? This is Evelyn Watts. Listen Johnny, can you remember what car that man Hollingworth drove at the time when the Vincent went? A red Rover? Are you sure?”

I beckoned for her to give me the phone and told Johnny who I was.

“Whereabouts in Coventry Rd did he live? Just past the old bus garage? And the number? You can’t remember. Not to worry. I can find out. Thank you.”

I was absolutely convinced that Hollingworth was the culprit.

“Evelyn, he didn’t gain entry the way you thought he did - not up and over the garden gates”

The gates been bolted together from the inside. He had clambered over the high fence from the school field. And there in the corner he had somehow managed to lose his keys. I explained my theory to Evelyn, but she was rather upset, indignant even.

“There is no way to pin it on him after all this time. And it won’t bring the bike back, no matter what else happens.”

Back home I looked at the Electoral Roll website and entered the data I had. Within seconds I had the house number. He was still there. I went to the sink and filled a bowl with warm soapy water. Carefully I cleaned the keys up. The house key was not an old-fashioned brass yale at all as I first thought but the stainless steel type which fitted plastic doors.

It took me a while sitting in the Montego outside the ramshackle front garden in Coventry Rd to work out exactly how to play my hand. I had had a copy of the house key made as extra insurance. Taking a deep breath I strode down the path - in which tall grasses with pollen heads were sprouting between the cracks - and quietly put the spare key into the lock. It stuck. My heart sank. I tried again and it clicked. Then grudgingly it squeaked and turned.

I looked across at the houses on either side. Had anyone noticed me? Apparently not. Then I thought for the first time about what sort of man Hollingworth might be. To judge from the state of the drive and unkempt lawn he was someone who neither took pride in himself nor worried whether he made a good impression on others. I realised with an icy chill that I might be walking into the lair of a careless, dangerous man. There was one of those signs in the door window warning off canvassers and salesmen and I imagined a gruff voice delivering that speech and the door slamming.

And yet I was in better physical shape than I had been for years due to my gardening and to bolster my confidence I flexed my muscles and felt my flat belly. I thought of Evelyn lamenting still, eight years later, the loss of the motor bike. I pushed my finger onto the bell and stood back. A broken image grew in the frosted glass and there was the sound of grumbling. It was past the time for calling on people and, besides, how did I dare ignore the notice in the window? The image condensed into a ruddy round face looking up at mine through the door panel. It asked me curtly what I wanted. His rudeness of speech had the immediate effect of making me speak very decidedly the Queen’s English.

“Mr Hollingworth, I need to show you something very important.”

There was a silence while he took this in. The handle turned and slowly the door opened. Framed

by the gloom of the hall he blinked in the low sun. There was an overpowering odour of ancient tobacco and neglect. He was unshaven and had dark, greasy hair, like Adolf Hitler. His eyes narrowed in the bright light to ferret-like slits. He spoke and I caught the sour smell of something cheaper than I had smelt on the breath of Paul Wells.

“Whad’ye want?”

My initial pleasure to see that he posed no physical threat in me was replaced by a depressing thought. He was so derelict and apathetic that he might fail to respond to my proposal.

“ ‘Ell’dye want? Kern’t yer read the sign?”

He tapped it from his side of the glass.

“I’m not selling anything.”

“Ah!” he guffawed unpleasantly, “That’s what they all say! Bloody cheek! Bugger off!”

He went to shut me out and I put my toe in the door.

“How come I know your name, Mr Hollingworth if I’m just a salesman?”

He stopped the volley of abuse about to fly from his lips and looked at me more closely.

“I ain’t gorra clue who you are.” He took a step back and opened those slitty eyes properly.

“Hold on. Plain clothes??”

I was tempted to say yes because he looked quite alarmed, but said neither yes nor no.

“Would you care to take a look in the lock, Mr Hollingworth?”

Now he came forward, opened the door a little more and stared at the key which I had left in there. I turned it and he watched mystified as the mechanism snapped shut. I turned it backwards and forwards and he was fascinated.

“ ‘Ow the ‘ell did yer mek a copy of me key? ’Ev yer stole it?”

“No, Mr Hollingworth. I found it. In a garden. Try it for yourself.”

He turned it for himself and then pocketed it.

“Who are yer?”

“A friend of an old friend of yours in Summerwood Road. Number 120. If you let me in I’ll make you completely au fait with the story - so far.”

I thought I saw a dim awareness creep over his depleted features. He stood back and opened the door fully to let in the late light of a fine May day, revealing domestic shabbiness and more of his shabby self. He was obese back and front and one tail of his shirt was hanging out at the front. I followed him into the lounge. Clearly there had been no hand of a woman at work here for many years, if ever. By his armchair there was a parade of empties and on a low table a half empty bottle standing guard over a heaped up ashtray. He coughed and indicated with a wave of the hand that I could sit down if I wish. I sat adjacent to him and he took the remote to switch off the television.

“Remember Arthur Watts, Mr Hollingworth? Remember the Vincent he built which you said you wanted to buy, but which you intended to steal from the word go?”

“Steal? I never did!”

“Well explain then how your front door key came to be lying by the fence at that property? How else can it have gotten there unless you dropped it when you climbed over? You broke into his workshop, undid the gate bolts and walked away with the bike while the whole neighbourhood was sound asleep.”

“Rubbish! You kern’t prove that! One key ain’t enough to hang me! Look at me! Do I look like the climbing sort?”

“Not now, maybe, but I think a jury would be pretty impressed even if you’re not the sort.....*Hollingworth.*”

I had leant forward and spoken his surname with as much menace as I could summon up into a whisper. For the first time he looked afraid. He picked up the bottle and drained it. Drops splattered onto his jumper, stretched tight over his large stomach. I smiled.

“One key is not conclusive, I agree. Two or three soft-hearted liberals on the jury might give you the benefit of the little doubt. Your key might fit twenty other doors. Or perhaps the bike thief stole your front door key first, perhaps to incriminate you. By the way, it is a copy.”

Now I took the ring out and dangled it a few inches away from his red nose. His mouth fell open.

“Can you explain to the jury, Mr Hollingworth, how I have also come by the key to your old red Rover?” *Now I told my one and only lie.* “I’ve been on the Swansea website. It was so easy. I just typed in your name and address. Up it came. Red Rover. It must be a good little runner. Still going strong. Belongs to a Mr Whiston in Peterborough. I have the address. If you fancy a day out we can drive up there tomorrow and try it in the lock. I’ll take my camera to snap it. Or I might just leave it all to the police. One key fitting your front door might be an amazing coincidence. A second one fitting your old car would be an impossible miracle. How many times did you go back and try to find them?”

He lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke, curiously without inhaling.

“Whad’ye want from me?”

“You know what I want.”

“Money?” He laughs. “You’ll ‘ev a job.”

“I don’t want money!!” I retorted. “You broke an old man’s heart, you greedy, useless bastard! He’s dead now. But his widow isn’t. I want the bike back. For her.”

He laughed again and I had an almost irresistible urge to hit him in his blubbery mouth.. He must have seen it in my eyes because he stopped laughing abruptly.

“You are going to tell me who you sold it on to if you want to save your carcass from prison. How could you go a year or two in there without the booze? Do you think you could survive it, the shape you’re in? You’d be a big, fat target for the bully-boys. They’d really take a shine to your flabby buttocks in the shower.”

“I kern’t tell yer.” he wailed.

“Right. You had your chance.”

I stood up to go but as I entered the dingy hall he shouted me back.

“D’ yer swear you wuln’t tell the cops if I tell yer?”

“It’s Alan Morgan isn’t it?”

“ ‘Ow the ‘ell.....?”

“Never you mind. Did he put you up to it? Or did you contact him?”

He shook his head and wiped his eyes into which smoke had drifted. I thought of Arthur and the dignity of his labour, compared to this thing opposite me which was only of the same species as him in a biological sense. I told him that I was promising nothing.

“You had better get onto your partner in crime and tell him about my visit. If the bike is back on Evelyn’s drive by Sunday, I’ll think about dropping these keys down a drain.”

I left him coughing and rasping and went home to carry out the second part of my plan.

Dear Alan Morgan,

Eight years ago you wittingly or unwittingly bought a stolen Vincent Black Shadow from an Earlstone man called Alan Hollingworth. You have until Sunday to put it back on the drive of 120 Summerwood Rd, Earlstone. Otherwise I will hand over conclusive proof to the police that

he was the thief. Via ultra-violet light you will see the name Arthur Watts written in magic pen on the underside of the engine.

I have also retained as evidence our previous correspondence which, given other material facts, would surely convince a jury of your lack of scruple concerning the provenance of a motorbike you particularly covet, as well as your lack of curiosity regarding the identity and bona fides of the person (me) who would supply it.

One way or the other, Mr Morgan, that machine will be returned to its rightful owner. I trust now that you will do the honourable thing - or at least the sensible thing and thereby avoid the unpleasant consequences to yourself of police involvement.

I prayed that he had not sold the bike on. I prayed that Hollingworth had managed to dispel any doubts which might linger in Morgan of my serious intent. I unblocked his email address and waited. Nothing came back.

I drove past on Saturday afternoon and evening. The only things on the drive besides the moss were the wheely bins.

On Sunday morning I was due to tie in the runner beans. I turned gently into Summerwood Rd hoping that the machine would be standing there down the side of the house but the drive remained empty. It was such a lovely morning that I offered to take Evelyn for a spin and lunch in one of my favourite pubs. Once settled, I asked her if Arthur had been a local man and was not surprised to hear he had come from Belfast.

On the way back I shut my eyes for a second and concentrated really hard, "telling" the Doctor to get his finger out. I "heard" him tell me that I'd already had one wish - and that I should be patient. I turned into her drive and I shut off the engine.

"Where on earth did that come from?" exclaimed Evelyn. "Has someone brought it round to be mended? Don't they know he died?"

She cried and shook herself silent. I unfastened her seat-belt. I came round and helped her out of the door.

"Come and have a good look, Evelyn. Tell me what you think."

We came alongside the huge machine in whose petrol tank the sun was gleaming and throwing out steely sparks. She stroked the leather seat with a trembling hand, uttered a cry of shock and almost collapsed. I picked her up and placed her side-saddle on the seat. All the tears she had ever suppressed she now cried, without restraint, without shame and in exquisite grief and joy.

"The men who stole it have done the right thing, Evelyn. Arthur told me where to find the keys. He knows what has happened, I'm certain now. If I could, I'd take you for a ride on it."

A very contrite Morgan offered to buy the bike back for a very tidy sum and after much soul-searching Evelyn accepted the offer, provided that she could take a run-out with me to his farm to see it whenever the fancy took her.

Never was a garden more productive. I asked the vicar of the URC to return my parking favour and a note placed in the church magazine appealing for pickers and hoers - for a share of the garden produce - attracted a number of people to Evelyn's house. She made and deepened

friendships and when she offered a cauliflower to her neighbour - with whom there had been a minor falling-out years ago about Arthur's workshop and noise - she accepted. The following Sunday she received an invitation from her to lunch. Her cauli was on the menu.

In September we could make plum jam, damson jam and damson chutney and paste on AUNT EVE'S PRESERVES labels I would have printed. I planned to take them round her near-neighbours and then further afield. Some would doubtless close the door in my face, but others, having seen the poster I would have printed for her window, would be keen to buy, especially when reminded that profits would go to charity. Hopefully some would knock on her door and ask for new supplies and she would ask them in for a cup of tea.

At Christmas I will buy an old Dansette record player to play the old seventy-eights for her and we might even manage a little dance.

*

I woke up in a sweat, having had a nightmare about the school beyond the fence. I said before, I think, how greatly the noise had disturbed me while I was digging the garden. The memories I had held back at that time had broken free in my dream like ghouls in the night from the crypt I had constructed to contain a terrible past. Like my half-brother I had given teaching a try but unlike him, found myself unsuitable for the task and had the good sense - sparing myself and the pupils - to head off in a different direction after only two years. My half-brother, David Payne, was just over a year older, equally academically gifted but had the common touch which I, a lofty intellectual, disdained. He was a linguist. Within five years he had become a head of department in an inner city school which had an excellent reputation in spite of its problems, a school with a multicultural population where over twenty nationalities were represented.

My next deed was, I need to say at this point in my story, already taking shape but first I must recount the story of David's decline and demise which his wife Helen had told me in full before emigrating to Australia to live with her son from a previous marriage.

That school David had loved in Leicester was closing due to falling rolls and due to the desire of the council - kept secret at the time - to redevelop the busy junction on which it stood. He had been put on the redeployment list and it seemed a godsend that a job came up so soon at a school - feeder school to the one beyond Evelyn's fence - in Earlstone. The woman who had been in charge of languages had had some kind of breakdown, he heard. On his preliminary visit he immediately saw why. The languages staff told him horror stories. The pupils were about as anti-French as it was possible to be. Many were also rude. As he walked around at break he greeted the woodwork teacher who had already been redeployed from that sinking ship in Leicester. A pupil ran past and asked him - the woodwork teacher had his hands in his pockets - if he was playing with himself again. In one classroom David recognised the woman teacher and she exclaimed *I know you!* As soon as he asked her where they had met before, a large, red-faced boy exclaimed *In bed, I bet!* This was only 1984 and David, my brother, was astonished that children in that school could be so utterly fearless and so utterly foul.

Without a word he picked up the boy's table to move it out of the way to make room to confront him. To everyone's bewilderment the top came off in his hands as he stood quivering with anger behind the frame. Everyone gasped. David had demanded to know how the boy DARED to speak to his teacher and a visitor in such a shameless manner, and had then left the

class stunned into silence. Next on his itinerary had been the departmental cupboard where he surveyed the shabbiest collection of textbooks imaginable. The whole lot would have to go in favour of his home-spun materials and, Helen had told me, he lost no time in saying so to the Head Teacher, a boss-eyed man called Dyson whom he would soon come to loathe.

The weeks passed. David heard nothing about his redeployment. He phoned the school. His Head in Leicester phoned the school. He went to County Hall and was told that the matter was *in hand*. One day as he left for work he called at a newsagent's and bought The Earlstone Gazette. There was his face (they already had his photo as he had been a Labour Party candidate at the council elections) and above it streamed the banner headline WE DO NOT WANT THIS TEACHER - SAYS SCHOOL.

The article reported that the Head had objected to his redeployment, although no reasons were given. But the reporter has spotted that Biggs, the Chairman of the governors has been twice David's adversary in the ward for which Biggs was always elected as the Tory councillor. The report also mentioned that David Payne was the President of the local CND.

But no matter how strenuously Dyson protested at a decision being made over his head at County Hall, like Canute he had to give way. In fact I remember David saying at the time that Dyson was a curious mixture of a would-be tyrant and a wishy-washy liberal, telling him once - and I had to laugh at the thought - that if he was too strict and punitive, pupils would misbehave elsewhere (in other lessons, in town, in shops) leading David to retort that the country had better quickly let out all the criminals from prison, in case their stored-up resentments led to other crimes.

In their first meeting after David was finally redeployed and was on the eve of taking up his post there, the fur flew. Dyson had his two deputies - one, a man of laissez-faire, idle views and the other a fat woman equally lazy and unprincipled - to sit like bookends on either side of him while he enumerated the objections he had to my brother's appointment.

How dare he, a visitor, he shouted, take it upon himself to discipline a boy - a boy with special needs of whom he knew nothing - and damage school property (the table) in the process?

It was a pity, David had retorted, that the discipline in Mr Dyson's school was so lax that any boy - and there were, he assured him, plenty of boys in Leicester much more stupid, but who knew at least how to speak properly to staff - should feel so free as to make such a grossly impertinent and obscene remark? And how could he be blamed if the furniture came to pieces so easily?

How dare he, shouted Dyson even louder, walk into a school on his first visit and arrogantly assert that the books in the French cupboard were unsuitable, without consulting potential colleagues who might be able to teach successfully from them?

It was a pity, he replied, that Mr Dyson - a modern linguist himself - had allowed the French department to become the laughing stock of the school and allowed staff to teach from books which were already out of date in the 1960s. And how dare he accuse him of arrogance when he had not taken the trouble to return one of the many calls he knew David had made to the school?

- How dare he insist on a new approach without consulting others?

- How could *he* tolerate a situation where less than twenty out of a year group of more than two hundred chose French at the Upper School? How could he tolerate a situation where the school caretaker had to intervene to stop children, kept behind by his predecessor, from climbing out of the windows?

- If he thought he could wear his CND lapel badge in school he would have another think coming.

- If he thought he had the authority to tell him to take it off in a country which still just about deserved to be called free, he was much mistaken.

This was more or less the interview I have reconstructed from first David's and then, much later, Helen's account.

He felt so angry and frustrated, having endured so many weeks of uncertainty and high-handedness, that he could not help but shed a tear or two. Sensing that he had carried the day, the cowardly Dyson had glanced at his generals like a grim Hitler for their tacit admiration. He settled back in his chair and surveyed the quivering wreck to which he thought had just reduced David. But David rallied and first accused the deputies of fawning cowardice. He suspected that their silence - interpreted by Mr Dyson as approval - was due to embarrassment.

"And you, Mr Dyson, seem to take my tears as a signal of some kind of victory. Let me assure you it is no such thing. It simply occurred to me again what a wonderful school and headmaster I am leaving behind. Your behaviour could not possibly make the contrast more marked. I am now the head of department and I will run my department in the way I determine - in keeping with the modern communication-based approach in the county, which somehow seems to have by-passed this school by a country mile. You are a bad loser, Mr Dyson. Good morning."

After Easter he began. His reputation had preceded him and in his classes he commanded immediate respect. But his female colleagues still experienced disruption and he found himself called on to restore order. After a few days he decided to bring the whole third year to the hall for a pep-talk. This did the trick for most, but one woman had a very difficult class dominated by a few sporty boys. Earlsstone High was a rugby school and David found their macho arrogance disgusting. How he dealt with it would not meet with the approval of remote educational psychologists and I have to admit I found myself in two minds when he told me about it. But this was the situation he found himself in one afternoon and, like it or not, this was his solution.

Summoned to that class for a second time in a week, he decided he would play it cool at first, intending to turn the heat up all of a sudden for a greater impact. But his strategy had to alter when a voice from the back greeted his arrival with a comment meant for everyone to hear despite the hubbub.

"Hey up, here's Pain in the Arse."

This was so shocking that there was immediate silence. David paused and then went through his sermon again on the learning rights of others etc, etc, etc and then turned to go.

"Oh, by the way. Is the young man who called me a pain in the arse brave enough to own up? Or is he just a coward hiding behind the noise the girls were making?"

The boy had been placed in an impossible position by the question. He was the focal point now of every turned pair of eyes. Slowly the hand of the burliest boy in the school went up. David invited him to wait for him outside. Telling the group to get on with their work and deliberately leaving the door wide open for all to see what is about to happen, he sauntered out. In those days it was still permissible in Leicestershire to smack a naughty pupil - boy or girl - below the knee, so technically David was in the wrong. But he could not resist this unmissable opportunity to establish his sway once and for all. That great boy was, he reasoned, not unaccustomed to dealing and trading in the coin of brute force. He was standing with his back to David as he emerged. He swung his foot at his arse and launched him through the air. He went to retaliate but

David was quicker and had him by the throat against the brick pillar gripping his special rugby team tie.

“I really am a pain in the arse.” whispered David. “And don’t you ever forget it. Stand there until the bell. Then run home and cry to Mummy and Daddy.”

But of course he did not. That was the last discipline problem he would have for many years and the numbers opting for French grew year on year until they were good by County standards.

Even Dyson had to admire this progress. He was such a pompous arse and liked to impress with his knowledge of classical literature, referring often to difficult situations metaphorically as *a Scilla and Charybdis*, which was basically a rock and a hard place. It turned out one day - and it was a local press sensation - that he had ever found himself between the *Scilla* of the urge to visit dodgy websites and the *Charybdis* of the certain knowledge that he would one day be caught, and in 1988 he was finally shipwrecked by Charybdis and forced to resign.

Ironically however, this marked the slow decline of David’s heyday and authority, as Dyson’s successor - a tall woman with bolstered shoulders - was determined to stamp out all authoritarianism - apart from her own over the staff - in classrooms. She was one of the New Thinkers, one of the Enlightened, from whose baleful influence schools in this country would never recover, and who share responsibility with shockingly bad parents and the vulgar media for the utter lack of self-discipline seen on estates and in town centres from coast to coast on any night of the week in shabby Britain.

David’s greatest strengths under the Stalinist regime of Ms Arblaster were to become his greatest weaknesses and, as with a Shakespearian hero, were to prove his undoing, for she set out to emasculate all who could not admire her or who crossed her. David’s outspoken honesty had often made him enemies, and while many shared David’s criticisms at the Earlstone Academy, as Earlstone High was renamed - an ennoblement which David opened mocked as a smokescreen to disguise moral, cultural and intellectual bankruptcy - they had the good sense to keep their thoughts to themselves in the tyrant’s presence or only whisper them behind her back. David’s candid and pungent comments on initiatives from the OWI - the Office of Wacky Ideas, as he called it, soon marked him out as her number one enemy. I would have been more subtle and subversive, but not him. Warnings - first unofficial and then official - began to pile up though they could not hold his tongue in check for long. His second strength also began to work against him: his strictness became a challenge to pupils whose malicious desire to put one over on him was encouraged - wittingly or unwittingly (?) - by Arblaster’s “liberal” regime. Thirdly, his desire for the highest standards of effort and achievement became a weapon turned against him in the tiny hands of those determined to fail and thereby provoke him to anger and despair. As subversion and disaffection spread like shadows through his classroom, David visibly declined under the daily pressure of trying to hold them in check. His hair turned grey and he became balder; his square shoulders rounded; his face sagged and his mouth turned downwards; his cheerfulness dissolved into sourness and he began to drink.

Ms Arblaster had already suspended him for issuing too many behaviour referral forms and had even, humiliatingly, confiscated his detention book one lunchtime - to the delight of the pupils she released, like a large child playing *levo*. One afternoon, not long afterwards, the inevitable happened. A boy - ever a thorn in his side - told him that he didn’t give a shit about French and, to giggles and guffaws, swept all his books onto the floor. David screamed and laid hands on

him. The trap had been sprung. A disciplinary hearing would be held and in all likelihood his job and pension would be the forfeits he must pay. Margaret, his wife, could not understand, on the day after a heavy envelope of documents outlining the case against him had dropped on the mat, why the car engine was still chugging away in the garage a full half-hour after he had said in a huff that he was going to the shop. They had just had a furious row in which she accused him of putting his pig-headed principles before her happiness. He had not gone to the shop. He had placed wet towels at the bottom of the up-and-over door and sat back in the driver's seat with a bottle of brandy to die in the fumes.

In his cups David had confided to me once how he fantasized about Ms Arblaster - fantasized about ways of killing her and getting away with it. He described her as a tall glamorous woman in her forties who had been appointed against the wishes of a minority of more thoughtful governors - mainly women. He was sure her blonde hair and long legs, deliberately swung around, with knees parted under the nose of the Chairman, Phipps and other males had *done her cause no harm at all*. Phipps et alia were, he said - in characteristic pungent fashion - suitably *cuntstruck*. At that time I had laughed off David's tales of his murderous fantasies - he even knew, he said, of a place in the school where her great body would never be found - but after his suicide a powerful desire for revenge had seized me which had taken a massive effort of will to suppress.

My nightmare had restirred that old pot of emotions and I now began to consider - in the light of my association with Doctor Mephistopheles - some act of retribution which would do somebody a good deed at the same time. I knew that Dave had had some allies on the staff - one was a Maths teacher who disliked Arblaster as much as he had. What was her name? I looked on the school website and found her straightaway on the staff list - Barbara Blower. More in hope than expectation I addressed the following letter to her c/o the school.

Dear Barbara,

Four years ago this June, my half-brother David Payne took his own life and my mind cannot rest. I know he was - in more than one way - the author of his own downfall but from conversations with him and his widow I also know he was to a great extent the victim of the regime introduced by your headmistress, Ms Arblaster. A man of integrity, David was slowly and steadily undermined by her petty spite and put under such intense pressure that he finally snapped. Arblaster did nothing illegal but her behaviour was, I aver, so amoral that she deserves to be punished in some way. I know that he and you were agreed that she had a meretricious effect on behaviour and standards. If you could supply any suggestions of how to topple her and rid the school of her baleful influence, I would be most grateful. I have a powerful ally who could help and I would, of course, never reveal your name or any part you might decide to play,

Yours etc

Professor Gerald Fist.

As soon as I posted it, I realised that she would think me a crank - and yet within four days I had her reply.

Dear Professor Fist,

I was astonished to read your letter. Can you be serious? Punish Ms Arblaster? Topple her? Ms Arblaster is no different to any of the liberal-fascists, as David called them, who have destroyed discipline in schools. Getting rid of her would only make way for another of her stamp. Much as I dislike her, much as I still simmer too with anger at her treatment of David and much as I would like to assist you, I cannot see any way to undermine her. She is popular with key governors - as an erstwhile teacher-governor I have seen this first-hand - and she has many cronies on the staff. Ofsted described the school three years ago as "good". Good? I think she must have corrupted and bamboozled the Chief Inspector too!

Professor, I am weary and worn down, as much as David was. At Christmas I retire. My advice to you is to accept what has happened and move on. Please excuse the brevity of this letter - I have to prepare now for an Open Evening for new parents next Monday - an occasion where I shall suffer agonies in not feeling free to express myself honestly,

B Blower.

*

"Doctor, I need a huge favour."

"One of your three wishes?"

"Yes. I want a total makeover; manicure, skin-toning, hair, clothes, teeth, the works.... And I want you to lend me your Aston Martin Virage."

"WHAT? Have you any idea how much it is worth??"

"No, but I'm a very careful driver. And I'm insured to drive other vehicles besides my Montego."

"You're fully comprehensive, driving that old nail? And I thought you were mean!"

"I am. Just think how much it will be worth in twenty years time."

"Borrow my Virage? Out of the question, old fellow.....What for?"

I told him the story and tried to justify my desire for revenge. He sniffed and told me that it did not really amount to a good deed. I told him that if I could get rid of Arblaster and pave the way for the installation of someone else then the school would have been exorcised of an evil spirit.

"Any successor would be better! She killed my brother as surely as if she had poisoned him. In a way she did poison him! And I want even!!"

"Come Professor. Revenge is a base emotion. And as far as good deeds are concerned - who knows? - it might turn out to be a case of better the devil-you-knew."

"No. She uses her charms shamelessly to hold people in her influence - as you do."

"I?"

"Do not be so disingenuous! Come on - admit it - Arblaster's a witch, the Queen of the Night."

He agreed that she did not seem a very pleasant human being - but he was under few illusions about the base motives of our species anyway.

"History is by and large the study of human cruelty."

"Yes, yes, Doctor, but she is a ghastly person. She combines ignorance, stupidity, shallowness and pettiness with a considerable power - a lethal combination. Let me tell you about one of her idiotic utterances so that I might convince you."

“Very well.” He glanced at his - (amazing) - watch and settled back.

One of David’s colleagues, Nicole, a French native, had organized an exchange to Normandy and Arblaster invited herself along. At the altar screen in Le Mans cathedral, she announced to the pupils with pomp and assurance that the reliefs all around them were street scenes from mediaeval France. Nicole was astonished by her headmistress’s brute ignorance but too embarrassed to overrule her in front of children, and so secretly put it about, as the party dispersed to look around in small groups, that Ms Arblaster - a amateur linguist - had not quite understood the French in her leaflet, and that the scenes were in fact the Stations of the Cross. This finally reached the ears of Arblaster who decided to save face by announcing that *some* of the scenes were also depictions of Christ’s final walk through the streets of Jerusalem. The frostiness which she then subjected Nicole to during the rest of the stay had spoilt the whole week for her.

“Her own dignity was more important to her than the education of children or the wellbeing of a colleague - who had not wished to cause her any embarrassment. The woman is an ignoramus - and a very spiteful one at that.”

Mephostophilous raised his eyebrows. It had, he said, been a source of puzzlement to him that the leaders of British schools could reach their positions by way of letter, reference and interview, whereas their counterparts in France and Germany had to sit rigorous examinations.

“A system open to subjectivity, bias, favour and abuse. Such a person as Arblaster - if they have a cunning enough strategy - can quite easily undermine it. Very well, Fist. You have my approval. I will....*arrange*.....for you to visit one of Paul Wells’ beauty parlours - and even have you measured for a tuxedo. Go along to Squires in town and look out for an assistant with a limp. Just mention my name.”

He winked.

“But I cannot allow you to borrow my Aston Martin,”

“Doctor, how can I impress anyone as snobbish as Arblaster with my Austin Montego? Make that the second wish - or count it as two. Please, I’m begging you.”

Paul Wells was delighted to see me. I would, he said, be a challenge but he was impressed that I had lost such a lot of weight. He was in the last stages of selling the old house and had booked a long cruise. I again politely declined his invitation to join him and explained that I had important business afoot and it was imperative for me to look the part. I shall not go into all the hours of slapping, wrapping and capping and trimming and skimming I underwent. Suffice it to say that I was most impressed when I stared at my new self in the long mirror. I inhaled my fragrances and felt almost dizzy.

It was Open Evening at Earlstone Academy and I felt like James Bond as I rolled up in the doctor’s amazing sports car. I let the engine roar and then switched off. I admired myself in the glass door and made my entrance into the lobby. Someone whistled, others gasped. Taking my time, I strolled along the main corridor and spotted a tall blonde woman at the end, dressed in an elegant black suit, gladhanding and directing parents. She was wearing a lapel badge. The silence which rolled along with me like a tide eventually attracted her notice, and she turned to look. I smiled to watch her eyes widen. The dumpy woman she had been bending down to attend to ceased instantly to exist for her. In the silence I became aware of music - something operatic - coming from loudspeakers mounted high on the walls. Like Tristan and Isolde, never taking our eyes from each other’s, we met and I held out my hand to her.

“You must be Ms Arblaster. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Professor Gerald Fist.” She took my hand. Hers was limp. She was blushing and stammering under my intense gaze. I hoped that she would not object to my looking around her school and apologized that my daughter, Helena, was unable to attend.

“She has suddenly decided that she dislikes Roedean intensely and wishes to try a local school. We have leased Butterworth Hall near Dadlingcote for a year.”

“Really?” she said breathlessly. “Butterworth Hall?”

“And my wife Rosalind cannot be here - she is busy casting for Steven’s new movie in Hollywood. She wanted to break off and attend tonight but the private jet is kinda out of sorts and in for overhaul. So I’m afraid you’ll have to make do with me.”

She gripped my hand tightly and asked me to follow her – imperiously delegating a very stout woman to take over from her - who looked aggrieved and put upon - and in the privacy of her study she poured me a sherry and bade me sit down.

“You are American?” she asked.

“Close. French Canadian. A Professor of Metalinguistics from Ottawa taking a sabbatical in your beautiful Leicestershire countryside. My ancestor, Arnaud De Fuist, came over with the Conqueror and was granted land near Bosworth. I just thought it would be nice to come over and take a look.”

She parted her knees slightly and I smiled beautifully - I could see my face in the darkening window. She saw I had noticed her unsubtle opening gambit and she widened her marbled eyes too.

“Ms Arblaster, may I take the liberty of saying how surprised I was to see such an attractive woman in charge of a school. One would never guess you were a schoolma’am, Ma’am. Rosalind has been looking *everywhere* to cast a tall, elegant English lady - have you ever had a screen test?”

She blushed even more from the throat upwards and she laughed nervously - it sounded like the yelp of a small dog.

“Professor!” she said at last. “Can you be serious? Please.....tell me a little about your daughter Helen.”

“Helena. Well, she’s about as smart as a kid of thirteen can be. Excels at sport...junior tennis champ....but she feels she needs to mix now with children - shall we say - less privileged than herself? It will do her good....She tires of the rather *materialistic* young ladies at school....We happened to read your mission statement online and it truly appealed. She would have loved to have been here tonight but she had an invitation to visit the French Alps with her close friend Princess Ranai Bandersaneriawi of Indonesia. You may have heard of her - her father has a share in one of your premier league soccer clubs - is it Sheffield City?”

“Who’s put you up to this?” she said out of the blue. “Tommo?”

“Excuse me?”

“Bob Tomlinson???”

Via David I had heard of Bob Tomlinson - master practical joker on the staff - but I took this accusation in my stride, managing to frown and smile at the same time. Rolling my head around, I chose to ignore the question as if I found it incomprehensible but was far too polite to query it. “It was sheer chance” I replied at last. “An internet search for an *academy* and - there - up you came!”

She smiled in congratulation to herself upon hearing the word *academy* and for a second her doubts disappeared. Asking if she would mind me seeing myself around, I got to my feet and

looked long at the doctor's very expensive watch. I told her I had just an hour to spare before my dinner invitation at the university. She was evidently very undecided so I admired her office while she made up her mind about my bona fides.

"Might I call on you before I take my leave, say at eight thirty. To give you, maybe, some feedback?.....Ms Arblaster??"

She hesitated and then came down in my favour, saying with a great smile that my comments would be very welcome. Could she in fact, she wondered, be my guide?

"Ab-solute-ly not! I saw how busy you were with those good folks back there - and now I will not take up one - more - second of your precious time."

The watch, I reckoned, had clinched it and I patted it as I strolled back into the school, feeling her eyes burning into my back. A pleasant girl-pupil attached herself to me and took me from one classroom to another where I admired the exhibits as long as was decent before moving on. A bell rang and something told me I ought to be on my way. I sashayed downstairs and saw the shape of her framed by the office doorway. I strode towards her like a long-lost lover then stopped short, searching my pockets.

"Have you lost something, Professor?"

"My car keys. Maybe I left them in the ignition. A terrible habit."

I had in fact pushed them under her cushion and I did not have to wait long in the car park. Out she came jingling them.

"Ah! How foolish of me. Rosalind says it won't be long before my other - my favourite - Aston gets stolen."

I pointed to the Virage and her great eyes almost popped. David had not exaggerated the woman's vulgarity. I told her briefly that I had been impressed by the school and would like to come in with Helena to see classes at work. I gave her my card and left her standing agape in the yard as I drove away. The bait was juicy enough - now I needed to set the trap.

I left the sports car on my drive and the next morning was puzzled to see my Montego there - it had been in the garage overnight - but, to my horror, the Virage had gone. I panicked and phoned the doctor but he laughed, told me not to worry and hung up. When I went to put the tuxedo away there was only my old jacket hanging on the back of the chair.

I played a waiting game but began to wonder after three days whether she had forgotten all about me, and then in the afternoon the phone rang.

"Hello. Jennifer Arblaster here, Earslton Academy. I was wondering when you might want to come and look around my school, Professor."

"Ah - it's not so convenient at the moment - Helena has been delayed because of a reception in Monaco - and my days are rather taken up with meetings and research into the lyrics of the post-Norman medieval lays of Leicestershire and Rutland. But if you would care to discuss my daughter's enrolment over dinner, I would be very honoured. I know a very, very exclusive restaurant. Very private."

The pause at the other end seemed to go on for ever.

"Gerald, is Rosalind not back from California yet?"

"No - and besides she can do her own tour of the school. I ought to have told you that we lead, shall we say, rather separate lives."

A longer pause.

"Gerald. Please be my guest at home. I do a famous paella."

"You do? My favourite! I'll bring the wine. What is your favourite colour in roses?"

“Red.”

“Of course.”

She lived in an old cottage on the main street of Fairleigh Parva. I parked my Montego two streets away. She welcomed me in a kaftan which buttoned down the middle. Her face and breastbone were flushed and the wine glass in her hand explained why. I asked her if she had a husband or a partner and she replied that she valued her independence and freedom of action too much. She was a formidable woman and a formidable cook. After tucking into her paella it was not long before I was tucking into her in front of her log fire. She was a demanding and energetic partner and I managed to swallow my pride in the cause of justice. I explained that I could stay no longer than midnight - my butler, Johnson, was fetching me - when she tried to persuade me. I dressed and picked up my mobile phone where I had placed it on an armchair while she had been breathlessly removing her underclothing.

“My, you are a fine looking woman, Ms Arblaster!” I had declared as she grabbed hold of me and wrestled me onto the fleecy rug which had no doubt seen plenty of similar action. My conscience saw in the end no reason not to combine business and pleasure - in fact her pleasure was my business and as a by-product my pleasure too.

“Did you get most of that, Doctor?” I asked over the phone as soon as I walked in.

“Until your battery ran out. I had no idea that you were such a Casa Nova, old fellow! She was quite a noisy subject. I’ll do the editing in the morning. I need to get some sleep - and you certainly do!”

I picked up the CD he had burnt for me. It was just the ticket, beginning with me saying *My, you are a fine looking woman, Ms Arblaster!* then cutting to her greedy instructions as to what to do to various parts of her anatomy, punctuated with unearthly cries. David had always maintained that she was an alien. The proof was in my hand. I drove to the school in the full knowledge that she would be busy with her cuntstruck chairman, Mr Phipps, that morning in her study. I knew that break was a quarter of an hour away and I had, I reckoned, just about time to carry out my plan. I told the grim receptionist that I was a technician from County Hall with an appointment to service the PA system (of which Arblaster had told me she was so proud and which idea had been copied by many rival schools. It served, she said, to calm *the savage beasts* as they rampaged down the corridors.)

“Ms Arblaster has said nothing to me about it,” announced the cross lady behind the counter. I pointed to the photo ID I had mackled up - **FIST - Technical Services** - and put a job-sheet under her nose.

“May be it just slipped her mind - I have this trouble every school I visit - nobody remembers Service and Repair. Go and ask her!”

Doubtless servicing her chairman, Arblaster would have left - I knew - strict instructions not to be disturbed..The lady confirmed this and so I said that if the job could not be completed there and then that it might be weeks and months before another appointment could be made. I gave her my most winning smile and she softened a fraction. She studied the job-sheet which I had concocted from a download from the County’s own website and after a sniff and a sigh she decided to press the buzzer and the security door into the corridor sprang open. I had seven minutes before the start of break. I opened my tool box and fiddled and attached spurious wires to the sockets of the CD player for a while until the clock reached ten twenty-eight. I asked the

lady if she would mind going out into the corridor to check for any distortion when I turned up the volume, and reluctantly she agreed. As soon as she exited I pushed up the latch and locked her out. The break bell sounded and soon there were children running and shouting in the corridor. I pressed play and turned up the volume.

Arblaster was having an orgasm when she began banging on that door. A few parents had arrived in reception and were listening with some interest. I had burned twenty copies and I gave them to a boy who had come on a message, telling him that he was to give one to his classmates. I opened the door to a vision of utter red despair and collapse. She had been shouting to the children to leave the building. A fat man - Phipps? - was standing beside her - this time *thunderstruck*. I picked up my case and looked her straight in the eyes.

“My half-brother was David Payne, Ms Arblaster. You have a good day, now, you all.”

It was announced on a middle page of the Gazette the following Friday that the head teacher of Earlstone Academy had unexpectedly tendered her resignation and that it had been - reluctantly - accepted.

On the next page my final good deed revealed itself. I took the paper around to Doctor Mephostopholous to ask his opinion. There was a photograph of a woman appealing for public attention to her woes. She and her son were the victims of a notorious family living a few houses away from hers, at whom the whole street quaked in fear and with whom no-one dared to remonstrate lest they too were added to their grudge list. The woman, a Mrs Snell, insisted that she had tried to solve her problems informally - first speaking to the parents only to be rebuffed - then contacting her councillor and only involving the police when the first two measures only succeeded in stirring up more resentment. To name-calling had been added stone-throwing, damage to property and besetting. The culprits were always careful to do their worst after nightfall when the police were at their busiest and when, if they did turn up, there was ample opportunity for the youths, disguised by hoods, to melt into the darkness. Officers always found the area around Mrs Snell's house deserted and, lacking any evidence or other witness, could only repeat what they always said: they were unable to charge anyone.

“What do you think, Doctor?” I asked. “Would that do as my last deed? If the whole street were rid of them, I would have done a lot of people a huge favour. But I might need to cash in one of my wishes.”

“One of them? You have none left, old fellow. The beauty parlour, the sports car and the tuxedo - one, two, three. Four - if you count my help with the motorbike - and what about the CD?”

“But you said the car and the tux would count as one - I'm sure you did. And how, precisely, did you help with the motorbike? That was all down to my powers of deduction and ingenuity!”

We argued and argued. Finally he gave way.

That evening, just before dusk I drove to the Bragwell road named in the report, and parked near a shop. I showed the photo of Rosemary Snell to the Asian shopkeeper and he whispered that she lived a few doors away next to a white caravan. I drove there and got out under the suspicious eyes of a gang of children.

“Go away! Leave us in peace!” shouted the voice through the letter-box. “I'll call the police!”

“Mrs Snell? I want to help. My name is Fist. Can we talk?”

“Are you from the council?”

“No. I read your story in the Gazette. I can solve your problem - believe me.”

The door opened a crack and then a few inches. The face which appeared - red and heavy - was nothing like the newspaper photo. Behind her in the gloom stood a thin boy with glasses. He had a cricket bat in his grasp. I held up the palms of my hand in a gesture of peace and was allowed in. The smell took away my breath. There were cats everywhere. The boy had no socks on and his feet were grubby. The mother apologized for the mess and ushered me into a sitting room which was almost a no-stink zone. She gave me the background to the campaign of harassment she suffered.

Lawrence Snell, her son, had special needs and the trouble had begun at school where the two main culprits, identical twins, had teased him for his stupidity. This had extended into the street - abetted and aided by the eldest brother, an unemployable yob - after Rosemary had complained to the head teacher about bullying and had been reassuringly ignored.

"I gave up with the school. The parents were in denial for a start and just ignored what their lads did. Now they condone it and - I reckon - even encourage it when they've had a drink. It's nearly dark - it won't be long before they start."

An ugly, fat woman, she had an aura of terror about her - someone born and bred to be a victim. She had been bullied herself at school no doubt, so what had ever changed for the better in her life? How cruel fate could be. What would the doctor have to say to her regarding the impermanence and unimportance of suffering? Her looks, her shape - her genes - had predestined her for it.

"Is your...husband not around to deter them?"

She emitted a sound between a laugh and a grunt.

"Long gone. Couldn't face life with Lawrence. Too ashamed...."

A whoop in the street stopped her.

"It's started. The gate'll go in a minute."

There was a clang. I looked through the curtains. A gloved hand had hold of the gate, swinging it to and fro. The apex of a hood was just visible above the private hedge.

"Lawrence...you coming out to play?" sang someone out there. His mother told him to go into the back. The doorbell rang, the letter-box clattered. Rosemary's head hung.

"You'd really think they'd have something better to do - with all the games and gadgets they've got," she murmured, more to herself than to me. I told her to wait in the living room and went to the front door. The instant the doorbell rang again I wrenched the door open and grabbed the black-cladded youth as he went to make off. He struggled and swore, causing two more triangular heads to appear, one by the gate and another like a hooded giraffe high above the hedge.

"Leggo you fucking paedo!" yelled the twin I was holding by the collar at arm's length as he thrashed with his arms and boots in an effort to make contact. His terrified face put me in mind of Macbeth's cream-faced loon.

"Not pleasant" I said calmly "To be trapped in a frightening situation.....is it?"

The tall youth pushed past the twin at the gate and pulled at my captive who was by now in tears. Attracted by the clamour, a gang of children were gathering to enjoy the street-theatre. The other twin had hold of his brother as well by now and I grabbed the gate post, easily holding my own in the tug of war, until the three of them were on the edge of a puddle and then suddenly I let go. Splash! The onlookers laughed and cheered - amongst them, from his bedroom window, Lawrence Snell.

"You fucking wait, you spoon!" shouted a twin up at him. "I'm 'aving you at school tomorrow!" I stood over him and told him that he would not do any such thing.

“Wa’ sit gorra do wi’ you, you bald old twat?” he replied, getting to his feet. “ You shaggin’ the old bag? God, you must be desperate!”

You see, whatever the apologists say about very naughty children - *understand and forgive them for they know not what they do* - they do have an uncanny knack of finding the most malicious, hurtful comments with remarkable facility. Bearing that in mind, I slapped his face hard - an unanswerable piece of repartee, if not of wit. Gasps all round.

“You kern’t do that!” said a voice out of the gloom. “It’s against the law! You’re in trouble, mate.”

It was the tall brother who had spoken. I told him quietly to go and call the police.

“I’ll wait here while you do.”

He stalked back to the other side of the street and entered a path with a missing gate. Now I had them.

“Some bloke just hit our Adrian,” he was shouting as I approached the front door which was letting out a wide shaft of light turning the wilderness of the lawn, with its bottles and tins, lime green. I entered the grimy hall which smelt of damp and fried onions and pushed past the lanky youth. The father was tattooed and fat and drunk.

“This is him!” shouted the son.

I held out my hand to shake his and asked him his name.

“Mr Note-to-do-wi-You. Get out of my house!”

“I will, just as soon as you pledge to keep your sons under control.”

“Under control? They’re good lads - only having a bit of fun - no harm in them at all!”

“They are harassing your neighbour, Mrs Snell.”

“Her! She’s a snooper - always peeking out of the curtains - deserves what she gets. Anyway, it’s only high spirits.”

“The lady doesn’t think so. It’s making her ill. So you’ll make them stop.”

“Or what?”

“Or you’ll be really sorry.”

“Sorry? You hit my lad. I could call the police.”

“I wish you would. I’ve witnessed your boys trespassing and causing nuisance.”

A noise caused him to look upstairs. A wheezing woman was slowly descending, muttering about the draught from the open door. Pale and haggard, hair unwashed, she studied me and then looked at her husband for an explanation.

“Police again?” she asked.

“No. Mam,” said the boy. “He was round at Smelly’s. Grabbed Liam by the collar, pushed us over and then hit Adrian for no reason at all. Troublemaker.”

“Just like her, then. Telling lies to the police about our lads when they’re only out playing. You her new bloke? A bit posh for her ain’t you? Perhaps now though she’ll have less time to spy on everybody out of the window - no wonder the kids - not just our’n - take the piss out on her.”

“Did you not read the report in the Gazette? She needs help because of your family. So, in a way I am her man. And it stops now.”

I walked out to find my Montego bouncing and rocking on its springs, stood on and sat on by the gang. They scampered off as soon as I appeared. I gave Mrs Snell my phone number and told her to ring me if she or her boy had any more trouble.

“Lawrence said you slapped Adrian. They’ll only take it out on him at school.”

“Well, you have my number - so give me a ring.”

Two hours later she did ring, sobbing. She had phoned the police but no-one had turned up. An hour after my departure a brick had shattered a downstairs window.

“Listen!”

She held the phone away from her for me to hear the whoops and yells and jeers.
Cruel little bastards.

“I need to cash in my third wish, Doctor.”

“What third wish? In the middle of the night? Do you know what the time is, Professor?”

I explained what had happened and he asked why I could not leave it to the police to deal with.

“Because they are too busy - and too indifferent. Here’s the favour I want...”

I told him and he laughed. Did I honestly think such a crazy plan would work? How did I imagine such a thing could be arranged??

“In view of everything else you’ve managed, I can’t see why it would be so difficult. Come on! The poor woman - and the whole street need help!”

Finally he agreed it was a good deed. He told me to have a couple of stiff brandies so that I would drop into a deep sleep.

“Picture the house in question hard before you drop off and it might work.”

“This is my last labour. Then we’re quits. Agreed?”

“Mmm - I suppose so. But there are so many more outrageous things you could do. You are a free agent. Remember the bonus-brick through the window of that lying bank? Inspired! There are hundreds and hundreds of people who deserve their come-uppance - and you are just the man to do it. Aren’t you even tempted? Think it over.”

“How can I be a free agent if I am in your power? Your plaything?”

“Oh please don’t start at this time of the morning! You have had an amazing few weeks - and don’t deny it. How ungrateful.”

“I thank you for it, but now I have other plans. To grow old gracefully. I have my argument ready and it is unanswerable.”

“Mmmm.....I look forward to answering it nonetheless, old fellow. Anyway, if you want your plan to work, best you go to bed.”

The road was dark and silent. A cat on a fence stared at me and fled. I pushed at the peeling old front door and met no resistance. My feet were quickly on the first riser of the staircase. On the landing the cooking haze gave way to the sweet, stuffy smell of bodies and their gases. An ensemble of pops, whistles and snores grew louder on my ascent. The chief instrument, the nose of the father, rumbling like a train in a tunnel, guided me into the master bedroom where two shapes below a duvet swelled and fell and swelled again. In the dim light I could see the father’s open mouth in which teeth were awash in a dark sea like jagged rocks. I thought first of Mozart and then Hitler, wondering to which of those two poles the majority of humankind gravitated. Gazing into the eyelids of the father, I blew steadily into his face and the snores ceased. He coughed and a tiny eye opened.

“Who’s there? Adrian?” he asked raising his useless head from the pillow.

“No. I am,” I whispered. The table lamp went on.

“Where?”

“Here. Over you.”

Then his wife woke.

“ ‘T’s up?” she growled.

“Dunno. I must have dreamt it. Somebody standing over me.”

There was a packet of fags on the little table. Slowly I picked it up.

“God!” he yelled. “One of them. A polter-*thingy*.”

I threw the packet onto the wife’s pillow and she screamed. The scene froze until the lanky son appeared at the door.

“ ‘S gooing on?”

My next flying object was a pillow which hit him square on his stupid face, causing him to scream and retreat. Now the lighter came in handy. I flicked it open and held another pillow below the flame. The corner turned brown and fire licked its way along the seam.

“ ‘Kin HELL!” yelled the father. “What do you want? Who are you?”

I stuffed the pillow under the duvet to extinguish it. I floated shrieking and howling into the terrible twins’ room and wrenched their bedclothes from them. They bolted in horror. Everything I could lay my hands on I swept from shelves and tables on my progress from room to room, banging doors and hooting, stamping the floor until the family of five were outside on the pavement, shivering and whimpering. Finally I grabbed the front door and slammed it shut, locking them out.

I woke up at gone four with my fingers hurting. They were red and swollen with burn. I smelled of smoke. In my left hand was a cigarette lighter.

HAUNTED! read the Gazette headline the next Friday. The family were refusing to return to their home. I phoned Rosemary Snell and she sounded a different woman. The family from hell had gone to live with relatives in Leicester and someone had taken advantage of their absence by putting the windows in and wrecking the downstairs rooms.

“I did warn them, Rosemary. I think you will be fine from now on.”

Conclusion

I went to see the doctor, having carefully prepared the arguments to secure my release

“Doctor, I am ready to reveal the flaw in your reasoning.”

“Oh really, old fellow?” he purred. “This should be fascinating.”

“You will not renege on your promise to release me from your...influence?”

He nodded and invited me to sit but I insisted on standing.

“Right....You spoke of the implicit urge in matter - and even of the *native* urge of organic matter - to assert itself, to occupy space and to oust competitors and intruders.”

“I did indeed. You put it in a nutshell. Well done. Just think of all those long-winded pages in your library – I’m glad you -”

“You asserted that all life forms had “inherited” that original tendency to obtain - in both senses of the word. You spoke of the cat - a furry gut on dynamic, cruel paws which had established itself because it was superior to its competitors and its prey. Man is, you said, the most skilled predator of all - immeasurably superior to the cat who can only choose to be a biped for a few temporary seconds as he pleads to be fed.”

“A good way to put it! You - your species - are the ultimate embodiment of that primeval urge on this planet - the urgent surge in matter to thrust and obtain. Unless you sit in your library all day and *read!* Or in a monastery and do not speak, nor eat, nor drink, nor mingle with the flesh, nor even think on it - or so they pretend. Bah! How abhorrent to the Spirit within the bubbling foment at the heart of the atom, at the heart of all being and in the genius of God!”

“But that is precisely where your error lies, Doctor Mephostopholous!”

“Professor Fist, there is no error!”

“You assert that we - men - are the ultimate mortal executors of some universal Will - and the inheritors - in our genes and matter - of that bequest - and that *not* to execute it - to step to one side as I do in my library - is to deny and pervert our essential being and *reason* for being; an act of disobedience.”

“Indeed!”

“But, Doctor, if I choose to disobey and disconnect myself from that...fundamental...*urge*.....then I exercise my *own* will. If I choose to sit and contemplate the roses in my garden - which have no choice but to bloom or wilt - if I choose to stroll in a wood and admire the trees - which have no choice but to bear leaves and shed them, and no choice but to stand rooted to the spot, and fall when they are exhausted - if I choose to stare at birds who have no choice but to squabble, mate, build nests - then that, Doctor Mephostopholous, is *my* decision! I might be seen as a skinny tube erect on two legs with an entrance for food and an exit for waste which have to function in order for me to live - but I also have an intellect. If I wish to read a book, or walk by a stream or choose to do nothing for days and days on end - or wish to fast - then what the hell has it got to do with you or your God? If I choose to reject, out of dislike, a life of constant motion - adventures you call them - if I tire of activity and desire to sit by a log fire at peace and at rest - then I exercise my own will by stepping off that terrific fairground ride you deem the world. You can - apparently - force me to be your plaything or playmate. But you cannot force me to enjoy it. There is a part of me you cannot rule where I am free to exercise my own will. I am not a leaf to be blown in the eternal wind of God. There lies the error in your logic!”

There was something in his face I had never seen before. Anger. His cheeks were red and his eyes were sharp. I saw immediately that I had scored points. I decided to press my victory home. “Am I a stone? A stone is as much a victim of creation as I am. We both *have* to exist. But I - my mind if not my atoms - can choose not to exist once it tires of existence. A stone cannot choose to be or *not* to be a stone - or sand, just as the water and wind cannot choose to erode or not to erode it. The forces within and without objects determine how and where they are. The forces themselves have no choice. The wind cannot choose to blow or not to blow and the electron cannot choose not to be an electron or choose not to be imprisoned in the atom - or refuse to be ejected from an unstable heavy atom. And your God - if he is yours - cannot choose not to be God. He is a slave of his own urge to create. But I can choose not to obey him as Adam chose not to. And though I cannot resist your power - in the same way as I cannot resist an avalanche or a tornado - I can choose to loathe it. And if I decide to fold a wad of toilet paper over double and double again when I wipe my bottom - then who are you to sneer and interfere?”

To show him my power I clenched and unclenched my fist. He flew into a rage.

“I offer YOU the chance of experiencing fantastic things - a meeting with Mozart and Hitler - and this is your attitude and gratitude? You do not wish to ride with Hannibal? Nor sit at the feet of Socrates and debate with him? You would disdain a meeting with Alexander - and a million other heroes and villains?”

“All clever illusion! Please, Doctor. I *am* grateful. My new life was breathtaking - fizzing around from place to place and from one time to another. I satisfied all my senses. I upset the grandiose and grotesque and spoke to a man who was truly a great and *humane* genius. But anything else would be pale in comparison. I know, however, that the experiences - in spite of their amazing verisimilitude - are only mirages which your strange power induces somehow in my mind. I

thank you for all that, but I am content. You must concede that even *real* experiences feel like illusions just moments even after they have taken place.”

“But that is why you need a constant stream of them to be content. I warn you, Professor. You will not be offered a second chance - so when you return here one day bored or guilty or anxious about the point of living - it will be in vain.”

“Please hear me out. Helping Evelyn and seeing her face when the garden and the motorbike were restored gave me the greatest pleasure of all. And I have the opportunity now to make her even happier.”

“Do-gooder!” he sneered. “You will soon tire of putting labels on jars and being kind to an old woman!”

I shook my head and told him he took no account of the human desire for serenity.

“I admit it - for years I have been selfish and withdrawn in my dusty, bookish world - my life was out of balance and my poor Enid suffered. Now I am changed and I thank you for that. I can sit in my garden now - and work in Evelyn’s - and look at flowers and the birds on the feeders and stare at clouds passing and never feel bored. Your way is restless and dissatisfied. You are as much a prisoner as those you criticize - a prisoner of a desire for novelty and distraction ...and a desire to play with and torment creatures weaker than yourself - like a cruel boy with a bird or a butterfly he has captured.”

He glowered and for a second I thought he was tempted to strike me. Finally he said

“So now you want to grow old - *gracefully*? How long do you think it will be before you begin to tire of such commonplaces - birds on feeders and clouds - as you did with your dusty books?? A few weeks?”

“Never!”

“It will be no use seeking me out then for novelty and distraction. I shall be gone.”

“If I ever tire of such things then I shall know I have lived long enough. The contemplation of such wonders - not commonplaces - would surely be enough to fill a thousand years. To read and adore the world is the true calling of mankind - as far beyond the level of a hairy or a skinny tube as the sun is beyond a particle of dust. Knowing you has taught me this - and I thank you for it.”

“You have learnt...NOTHING.”

He intoned the last word with an unearthly growl and I started. The growl in fact came from the direction of the cat who had jumped on the end of his desk. All the time I had been speaking he had been eating and now he sat licking his paws which were *not* bloodied with a kill as his distant ancestors’ paws had been. I pointed at him and smiled and declared that this inherited behaviour kind of proved my point about capture and liberty.

“It is absurd that pet cats still do that. He can’t help it. I can.”

Doctor M leant back and said, after a while, that he would think over what I had said. I duly took my leave.

That evening I read a little, ate some delicious prawns and crab claws, drank just two glasses of white wine and went out for a walk in the balmy May evening. I slept well that night and did not dream. The next morning I rang his office but there was no reply so I went round. I pushed the door back and found his office not only empty but stripped bare of furniture. A meow drew me into the back. The black cat in the corner, Blackheart, swelled to an enormous size, turned briefly into the doctor, hissed, howled and vanished.

That afternoon and evening I celebrated rather too much and fell into a very deep sleep. Upon

waking, my eyelids felt glued down. Like a chick breaking out of its shell, I eventually found the strength to open them and look out. Was it a farewell trick of the doctor's that the first thing I saw was Enid's face? She was not scowling.

"Gerald? Gerald?...Gerald!" she shouted "You're back?"

She buried her face in my neck.

"Back? Back where?" I gasped.

"Back from the dead!"

"But Enid, you're a ghost, I'm ever so sorry to tell you. You died in the car!"

"Died?"

She burst out in a mad fit of laughter and shouted for the doctor.

"Oh no! Not him! Please Enid."

"It was you who died, Gerald. Twice they brought you back from the dead."

Now Judith came in dressed like a nurse.

"Gerry!" she exclaimed. "Thank God!"

Enid reached out and turned off a Mozart piano concerto. They hugged each other. I pinched my arm but could not wake up.

"Doctor!" I yelled. "What are you up to now? This isn't fair. You've broken your word!"

Enid was laughing and crying and asking what on earth I was talking about. She said I had parked outside the post office two months ago and had a massive stroke. I had been in a coma ever since. I looked around my body, connected to a drip and monitors.

"No. This is a dream or a nightmare."

She kissed me and promised that when I was better we would go on a world cruise - to hell with the expense! In her face close up I saw the photograph of my sweetheart and involuntarily I sobbed.

"Enid, you are so beautiful!"

She stood back into the light from a window for me to see her properly.

"Enid...have you gone and had.....a face lift?"

She had to confess that she had.

"I thought you wouldn't mind if you were fast asleep. I had no idea whether you would wake up or not.....so I thought, well if he doesn't, he can't complain! So I went for it!"

"You're really not dead? You didn't have a heart attack?"

"Feel here!"

She placed my hand on her breast and I felt her racing, thumping heart.

"Oh Enid! You know what? I'm going to buy enough toilet rolls to fill every cupboard in the house - and trade in the old banger for a newer Montego....and if we go on the cruise, I promise I'll get rid of all those old philosophy books."

"What philosophy books? You've got that one David lent you - Bertrand Russell's History of Western Thought. He wanted it back and you couldn't find it. He was really mad."

"He's not dead?"

"Dead? Of course not!"

"I'm not a professor of philosophy?"

"A *pro-fessor*?? No, but David is."

She giggled just as she used to giggle as a girl and accused me of pulling her leg. She turned to Judith and told her I was a German teacher.

"Am? A bloody German teacher? Still am? Oh no. Doctor! What's going on? Why is Judith alive again?"

“Alive? This is Judith’s eldest daughter, silly! *Sally Wells*. Image of her, isn’t she? She’s been nursing you.”

I heard someone whispering that it would be best to give me a mild sedative. A man in a white coat and a face mask was pushing past the others.

“How are you feeling, Mr Fist?”

He came close and pulled down one of my eye-sacks - and winked.

“You’ve been through quite a lot haven’t you, old fellow? Now then, I’m just going to put you to sleep for a little while.”

Then he came even closer and whispered in my ear. “Competing for space - that’s what it all boils down to, you know. You really should *not* have parked in mine.”

That rich chocolate voice...

Those eyes.....