

THIS GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND

1. The Bar At The Red Lion September 2015

Sam is obsessed with conspiracies. He is reputed to spend his idle days on YouTube, watching videos about what he calls False Flag operations, prime amongst which are so-called exposures of the “real neo-Con villains” behind the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York.

“You tell me this then. How can a building a quarter of a mile high collapse on its own footprint in ten seconds as if there’s nowt there to stop it but fresh air? Well??”

His answer, when none is forthcoming in the dumbfounded bar of The Red Lion is -
“dustification” - due to some remote energy weapon. Really?

“Or - or *as well as* - nano-thermite explosives used in demolition. They found traces in the wreckage.....*and* Lyndon B Johnson masterminded Kennedy’s assassination because he was cutting subsidies to oil wells. Bet you didn’t know *that*.”

The shrugs from the backs at the counter do indeed confirm the bar’s ignorance.

Sam has some rare and mysterious bone condition which prevents him working, but which, fortunately, is no impediment to his prodigious consumption of craft ale.

Since my return to Fairley Parva, a village of which I mean to paint a fuller picture later, I have been meaning to keep Sam a little more at arms’ length, for, in my naïve enthusiasm to be accepted in the bar of that lovely and ancient pub, which I have come to patronise three or four times a week for an hour or so, I made the error of providing a willing ear to this friendliest and most charming of men, and even agreed to play him at chess for a pint, ignoring the snigger from another drinker over my ready acceptance of the challenge. No local, I discover later, has ever beaten him at chess. Over that board, as my pieces followed one another dismally into the box, I put my foot in it by asking, on account of his coffee colour, where his family had originated.

“Leicester”, I was sharply told.

“I’m not Asian. My condition turns me this colour.” Then louder, so that a Ukipper at the bar could hear “The BNP would have me rounded up - which shows how stupid the BNP are and anybody who sympathises wi’ ‘em. Checkmate. Pint of Old Speckled, pal. Play again?”

I looked at my watch and told him I would soon have to be on my way.

Sam is an entertaining character, but too much of a good thing can cloy the pleasure buds. He drinks a huge amount but is never drunk.....unless he is never sober. He “smokes” a pipe empty of tobacco. It reminds him of how it used to be and his imagination does the rest. He is tall and, in spite of his ale consumption, very thin. He might be anywhere between thirty and fifty. His penetrating dark eyes tell of a sharp intelligence. I heard that he had been dishonourably discharged from the Royal Navy and his John Player beard does no harm to the rumour. He lives over the nearby newsagent’s and serves in the shop early on as part of his rent. Old Tom Moore, the owner, is a kindly man and the presence of Sam above his precious shop nights, means he sleeps easily in the back.

The bar at the Red Lion is perhaps fifteen yards long by six wide. Two bench seats clad in green leather run along both sides and across the window end – the window being in Georgian style of course – and nine round tables with wrought iron legs and three stools each complement the seating. On the right, a bookcase full of old books which no-one ever reads (although I discovered a lesser-known Trollope there and was grateful to be allowed to take it for a small donation to the Help For Heroes tin). A high shelf in parallel with the bench seats is well laden with knick-knacks - bells, bottles and vases. Traversing the ceiling, an original seventeenth

century oaken beam helps to hold the place together, and from hooks drilled into it are suspended pewter tankards. Were it not for the large television attached to the wall over the window, I dare say that any long-vanished customer whose shade might suddenly rematerialise with a thirst, could settle down in comfort with his pint and be pleased that the old place had barely changed at all.

At the first table on the left, near the bar and the doorway, always sits Sam in an apparent trance; a trance which is broken by a controversial remark from his enemies on the bar stools, or by the entrance of a potential chess-victim.

The bar at the Red Lion comes as close as I can imagine to that Ideal Form in Plato's heaven. Almost effortlessly it creates that ambience which eludes the envious efforts of foreigners, mainly Germans, to recreate in their native towns. It is the main thing English which I have missed in all my years abroad. Now I am finally home, it is a delight to re-breathe its unique atmosphere, to study surreptitiously its craggy faces, to eavesdrop on its conversations, silly and serious, and, of course, to drink slowly of its delicious ales which have gloriously ousted those fizzy keg imposters of decades previous.

And I should perhaps mention its other delight; lovely Zelah the barmaid, who will figure a little later on.

*

“There's no money in dairy. Who can blame him?”

This has been said more than once in the bar since it became known that Farmer Jack Burroughs means to sell up his numerous acres to a national builder, eager to take a tasty bite out of our green and pleasant land on the southern edge of prestigious Fairley Parva.

“Village is already too big for its own good,” is the usual rejoinder.

“You can hardly get down Windsor St now for all the parked cars”

In truth, Fairley Parva does now rather merit the tag Magna. Its old heart is Christmas calendar pretty, with the church spire, its great blue cedar tree in the graveyard overarching the road, the thatched Red Lion opposite, and with a stately row of white Georgian buildings processing to the splendid copper beech on the bend. The village's proximity to the Euston mainline at Rugby has become an added attraction in an age of commuting, an advantage which local estate agents have been no slouches in pointing out. A half-decent house in the neighbouring town, Earlstone, were it possible to move it over to Fairley, would add half as much again to its value. Earlstoners, I'm told, resent this.

In my nineteen fifties childhood, there were fields between the village and its ugly bigger sister, the town. In my lengthy absence, after I had studied languages in London and had then embarked on a world tour of embassies with the FO, Fairley lost its famed rose nursery and a large farm which kept Earlstone at bay. The roses were long ago uprooted and the tranquil grazers rounded up, slaughtered and devoured. In the sixties and seventies, that clear green, pleasant demarcation was replaced by a sprawling housing estate called Thorpe Meadows, Thorpe having been the name of the extinct farmer.

“And who's thinking about the extra traffic and pressure on the schools and GPs?”

“And if we don't leave the EU, God knows how our services'll cope with all them free-loading foreigners.”

In truth, I was yet to meet one.

“It's all about this,” says Sam - roused from his chess game with another perplexed victim -

rubbing forefinger against thumb and screwing up his face like old Steptoe."No planning, no consideration for effect, just PROFIT."

Brian, bespectacled and bald, the second speaker, ex football referee, Daily Mail reader and pretend deadly enemy of Sam, now makes the error of responding.

"Well, that's how it was, is and ever shall be. End of."

As the Premier League football match is kicking off on the wide TV, he does mean this to be the end of the discussion, but Sam is not to be silenced by such a truism.

"You know what, Brian?"

"Go on tell me if you must."

"It wouldn't surprise me if the supermarkets squeezing the dairy farmers were hand-in-glove with the housing developers. They all donate to the bloody Tories. Big shops put the farmers out of business, builders buy up their land cheap as chips, and hey presto! Money in the bank all round. What Green Belt? As if the Powers-that-be care about the Fairleys of this world, in their London mansions and gated communities."

Brian sighs and rattles his specs.

"You can't prove that! All left-wing Corbynite twaddle."

"Well, if I can think it, so can they."

This is his usual shoot-em-down-dead argument. No-one dares comment and Sam looks round the room in triumph. My pretending to be deep in the Leicester Mercury means that I can ignore the stare.

"But if you only read that fascist Tory rag" - (he means The Mail, not my Mercury) - "how will you ever find out anything they don't want you to know?"

"You just get on with your damned draughts, Sambo, and leave us in peace to watch the footy."

Brian has his views, not very profound admittedly, but in that respect I reckon he is no different to ninety percent of the voting population. I think Sam would say of him that he chooses to ignore, like most people, anything that threatens to disturb his uncomplicated view of the world. As for me, I generally keep my views to myself, so I think Sam classes me as a pretty dim light too - my ineptitude at chess probably strengthening that impression? Whatever my opinion might be worth, I honestly think it might have been a mistake by a desperate Mr Cameron, desperate because of the threat of Ukip, to cause the entire adult population of Britain to have to wrestle with the complexities of EU membership, when the majority struggle to understand the proper use of an apostrophe s.

"What do you think, Stephen?"

I look at him and try to be, as I ever have been in my career, diplomatic.

"I just think it's a great pity Mr Burroughs has to sell up."

2. The Burroughs Farm

My hobby is social history and joining the Fairley Historical Society recently has proved rewarding (and almost as entertaining and informative as the gossip in the bar of The Red Lion.) The Burroughs farm, I have discovered, has been in the family for nine generations, originally rented from the Morley family who abandoned their ploughs centuries ago, allowing others to pick them up so that they, the Morleys, could dust themselves down, don finery and live, as gentefolk should, by drawing rent from their tenants' sweat and toil. When James I came to the throne selling baronetcies to raise cash, the third William Morley, prodded by his wife, decided to buy one. Alas, those rougher genes, as we now know, much to the chagrin of eugenicists, cannot be suppressed by genteel manners, bone china and lacy sleeves, and when the Morley line

produced an absolute wastrel and cad - an eighth William - in the early nineteenth century, the days of glory would come to an end. The Burroughs, their most hardworking tenants, had been prospering and were continuing to prosper while the Morley fortune was being diminished by the reckless gambling and brandy-drinking of William VIII. Inevitably, he was forced to sell land to pay off his debts and the Burroughs were happy to buy - at a very favourable price.

In 1961 the farm was passed onto Jack Burroughs, the present incumbent. Only too conscious of the weight of family tradition resting on his strong shoulders, Jack had resisted longer than many other dairy farmers, the grinding erosion of his wealth and morale by the "greedy" supermarkets. He had tried without much conviction to diversify into yoghurt and pick-you-own fruit but his spirit was now all but broken. He was selling milk at quite a loss and many of his cows were old. But this was not the only cause of his depression. His wife's failing health and the conduct of his son Jacob were the others. But before I continue with the Burroughs, let me finish off the Morleys.

In 1799, the seventh William Morley, father of the wastrel, had decided to abandon his large house in the centre of Fairley (it is now the home of the Constitutional Club along from the Red Lion) to build himself a far grander mansion at the end of Bullfurrow Lane on the southern edge of the village next to the farm which he already rented out to the Burroughs. For this he needed to pinch some land from his tenant which did not go down too well with him. But it was Morley's land and Burroughs had no say. He shrugged his shoulders and got on with it. His son would get his revenge though when the aforementioned reprobate fell on hard times in the 1830s. The sale of the farmland was only a temporary halt in the decline of Morley. But it was not bankruptcy which saw an end to the Baronetcy but the hangman's rope in Leicester. In a drunken temper Morley threw his complaining wife from a bedroom window in full view of the gardener. The surviving infants were sent northwards to an aunt in Derbyshire and the Great House, as it had come to be known, was eventually purchased from Morley's creditors by the Wileman family, hosiery manufacturers from Earlstone. In their hands it would stay until after WW1 when it was bought by a wealthy Canadian who wished to play the part of a thorough English gentleman, by introducing pheasants to shoot in the spinneys on his land, and by inaugurating the Fairley Hounds to terrify foxes which had been untroubled for centuries in the south of the county. His son carried on the tradition and had objected vehemently to the new motorway which would cut the countryside in two in 1975. Compulsory purchase by government of a neighbour's land to the south of his property ended all argument. Chasing foxes across six lanes of traffic was not a good idea and the Fairley Hunt had to be disbanded, many huntsmen joining either the Atherstone or the Bileby. Young Jacob Burroughs, when of age, decided to join, to his sister's disgust and his father's apprehension, the Bileby.

And so I feel it is time to explain the generally low opinion of Jacob - although he will later make an effort to redeem himself. He is supposed to fancy himself a dashing young man. He is into fast cars and faster women and at the age of thirty-one he is not of a mind to cast off this image. "Thirty going on sixteen." had sneered Brian as soon as his latest escapade - described below - came to light.

Jacob is reputed to be handsome, with mischievous blue eyes, a mane of blonde hair and a fine manly figure. He is a leading light in young right-wing circles, although the Young Conservatives no longer officially exist (which some, mainly non-Conservatives, think a great pity.) Their base is the bar at the less than salubrious Fox and Hounds on the Allingworth Rd, and it is tacitly understood that only their kind should frequent it. Sunday is their big day out and

lunch plates lie scattered and uncollected to deter neater and tidier people from entering, and if any innocent stranger should make the mistake of lingering too long, drunken loud laughter, farting and belching usually do the trick. I only know this from hearsay, not from experience, I hasten to add.

Jacob makes his money playing the stock market online and buying cars at auction, sprucing them up in his father's yard and selling them on. He gambles a bit on the horses as well but only boasts of his wins, never bemoaning his losses. To keep the peace at home he does his father's accounts. Milking cows and shovelling shit is not for him, whereas his sister Amelia, younger by nearly three years, and entirely modest and sensible like her parents, is the backbone of the farm. She is reputed to be plain and quiet like her mother, (but later I will take issue with the plain.) At the age of twenty-six she was jilted two months before her wedding by one of Jacob's mates and a famous scene took place outside The Fox between the two one drunken Friday night, the friend ending up at the Leicester Royal Infirmary with a fractured eye socket and other nasty injuries. Jacob nearly went to prison, the sentence of one year being suspended. Three years previously, he had brought shame on the family by writing off his car in a hedge through drink. He lost his licence for eighteen months.

"And now this," groans his father one late September morning. "What on earth were you thinking of? You'll get sent down for sure. How can your mum stand anymore in her condition?" Her condition is rheumatoid arthritis, so severe that Jack and Amelia have had to do the work of three for two years. "I wish I were dead!" would groan Jack more than once that evil day. (I only know this because Amelia told me so weeks later.)

What then had happened to drive Jack closer than ever to the edge? It was this. Early that Monday morning a car had pulled up in the drive.. Two men in uniform got out. They looked like a wet day in Skegness.

"What's he done now?" had gasped the father at the door.

Answer came there none. The officers had gone to sit in the car while Jacob was hauled out of bed and told - very quietly - to get his backside downstairs.

"What you done?" hissed his sister vehemently while her dad slumped down at the table, head in hands.

"Summat and nowt," grunted Jacob as he pulled on his Tigers rugby shirt and stalked outside. The police car then drove away with Jacob in the back.

"What on earth were you thinking off?" asks his father again, having had no reply to his question."You'll be the death of me and your mum. Selfish, immature idiot."

Jacob grabs his ankles, puts his knees under his chin and sulks.

"It were those damned saboteurs' fault! Tried to yank me off Sabre."

"You look a grown man but behave like a teenager. I gave your credit for brains. Why can't you control your temper? Who do you take after??"

So what had he done to warrant the police visit? Well, chivvied and harassed by two hunt saboteurs, calling him a f***ing sadist, he had lashed out with his whip, inflicting a welt on the cheek of one, and had kicked another in the chest, cracking two ribs.

"It were provoking, the bloody leftie pansies."

(In fact, one was a medical student and one a zookeeper.)

Jack runs his fingers through his sparse sandy hair, trying to think while his brain storms with these images.

"There were witnesses, friendly ones, I suppose?"

“Yep. Dags will make a statement and lay it on thick, so will Mandy.”

“I just thank God you’re out of your twelve month suspended. Amelia, not a word about this to Mum. It stays with us, in this kitchen. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a fine and have to pay compensation. I’ll give Webster’s a ring.”

“It’s sorted, Dad. Paul’s a solicitor. Offered to represent me for free - or as near as.”

“Paul?”

“He rides with us. Good bloke.”

This is at least one worry, the financial side, which Jack can discount. Jacob senses his father relax a whit.

“Anyway, why worry about money? You’ll get squillions for the farm.”

“Not the point, not the point at all. If the builder thinks he can’t get planning permission, we’re stuffed. And doesn’t our good name matter to you?”

“Most Fairley people hate the hunt sabs.”

Amelia is in tears. At twenty-eight she is more than ever convinced she will end up an old maid. She knows how much - far better than her father - how violently Jacob is despised by the nice people of the village. Since Sixth Form she has always been Jacob Burroughs’ “ugly, fat sister who never goes anywhere and reeks of cow muck.” She has tried to maintain a stoical attitude to this. Very few know how devoted a daughter she is - how she takes scarcely any wages for what she does out of love and devotion. - and how she lies awake at night worrying about the mental health of one parent and the physical health of the other while Jacob snores in the attic above her. (I can now reveal that I saw her recently in the post office and can affirm that she is not ugly. True, she will never be Miss Earlstone but only vacant pretty faces achieve that dubious honour. Though it is rather round, her face is pleasant and intelligent with earnest blue eyes; and she is not fat but sturdy and strong. I dare say that she tries to like her brother but cannot forgive or ignore his faults. No doubt the father has thought more than once of telling him to pack his bags, but the condition of his wife and her motherly love for the Prodigal has made such a step impossible.)

Now Jacob is opening, of all things, a bottle of wine and fetching glasses.

Ever the peacemaker, the father reluctantly agrees to the offer but Amelia places a shaking hand over her glass. Doubtless she suspects that a few good pulls on his brandy flask and slurps of sherry handed round on the Bilesby village green have played no small role in Jacob’s rash reaction to the sabs.

“Come on Ammy, it could be worse. I could have killed the bastards.”

“No, Jake. No reason to celebrate as far as I can see. I’m taking Mum a cup of tea.”

“Well, they ain’t charged me yet “*pending further enquiries*”. Those guys weren’t exactly innocent bystanders. CPS might decide six o’ one, half a dozen of t’other. Lighten up, sis, for Christ’s sake.”

Lighten up? Oh dear, Jacob could not be wronger. A week later, he is invited by phone to attend Earlstone Police Station to be charged with causing Grievous Bodily Harm. He asks glumly when the trial will take place and is told by the discomfotingly cheerful Sergeant that he has no idea.

“When? Good question! Could be months, Jake.”

“Jacob.”

“Sor-ry. Closing courts all over the county due to the cuts. And there’s no let-up in villains.”

In fact, it would turn out to be May. Bad enough? No, because worse, much worse was to follow.

3. The Great House in Bullfurrow Lane

The narrative in the previous chapter meant that I could not fit in all I wanted to say on the subject of the Great House and what it meant for me in particular. The house had been built by Squire William Morley in Tudor style at the turn of the nineteenth century, and was, as I said, subsequently squandered by his son. The Wilemans who took it over never quite settled there, Mrs Wileman particularly missing her circle of friends in town. The death of her grandsons early in the Great War destroyed her husband's health and he died of a stroke in 1919. She moved back into town and died a few years later. The Canadian I mentioned, Paul Sammels, lived a very contented life there and was well liked in the village, not being at all stand-offish. When a child, I met him once, a very old man, struggling with his stick up the lane. He smiled and patted our heads. Unthinkable now.

Every spring since the Second World War, he had thrown open his gates to the villagers for a garden party, and was much admired for it. In the sixties he began to ail and died a peaceful death surrounded by his adoring family. His son Max was determined to carry on where his father left off and to be even more generous than he. He paid for Christmas dinner at the two nursing homes and organized the carol singing around the great tree near the Constitutional Club and paid for the buffet, both there and in the Red Lion. His wife Carole was a famous beauty and known for her down-to-earth friendliness and ease with everyone with whom she came into contact. She was a mainstay of the church choir. Her death in 1968 from leukaemia left Max Sammels a near broken man; then the threat of the motorway to his precious hunt was too much to bear. The hounds had nowhere to go. Neither could he stand the thought of his vista ruined by lines of lorries. When the petition he launched against the motorway only raised a hundred or so signatures - times were changing and foxhunting was no longer popular - he decided he had had enough. In 1973 he moved with his young daughters to London, never to return, and remarried, leaving his steward with the heartbreaking task of selling off or putting down his hounds. The house was placed with an estate agent. No buyer could be found for it, and it was impractical to rent it out. So it was mothballed. Time, neglect and vandals took their toll. The windows had to be boarded up and rank weeds grew up where once a splendid lawn and flower beds had been the object of everyone's admiration. Gradually, as the years passed and a new century came in, the Great House in Bullfurrow Lane was largely forgotten.

*

Convinced that it would eventually fall down through neglect, most villagers have utterly discounted a recent rumour that a Bentley was seen squeezing down the lane up to the tall wrought iron gates. But Brian who knows everything and everybody has sussed it out "It's true! Somebody's bought it. My wife knows the estate agent's wife. A snip at a million. But it needs half a million spending on it."

"Who?" asks Sam.

"No idea. My wife's friend doesn't know. Sensitive information..."

"Bet it's Arabs." says Sam with a big smirk. "How would you like Muslims in Fairley, Brian? Might be Isis."

"Oh, do shut up, will you! Probably be some rich Londoner, stockbroker or summat."

"Now, why would a rich Londoner want to come to this cultural wasteland?"

"Cultural wasteland?" retorts Andy the landlord, leaning his meaty forearms on the bar

"Rubbish. We've got the Fairley Players."

“Ah, the Fairley Players. Of course.....They’ve moved up here to watch Arsenic and Old Lace.”

The following evening, Sam decides to wind up the bar a little more tight.

“Little bird tells me that they’re rich philanthropists who want to set up a refuge for homeless men and ex-cons. Fresh air, walking, gardening, carpentry - great therapy for down-and-outs.”

“Suppose you’ll be joining ‘em then,” retorts Brian.

Mumford, our moody solicitor, appalled, declares that he will launch a petition. His barstool mate is going home to write to the MP, at which Sam laughs loud and points his finger all round. “Bunch of narrow-minded fascists! Should see yourselves! Wish I’d told you that the gypsies were moving in.”

“Not true then?”

“No. Haven’t a clue.”

Nobody has. The shroud of secrecy begins to swing opinion against the newcomers. They are obviously snobs who do not care about the village. They drive a large Bentley with tinted windows. They have a chauffeur. Somebody says there was a French fellow in the butcher’s ordering lots of meat - he must be their chef! If there is a chef, there must be other servants. One crisp December morning, I decide to take a stroll along the lane to see what I can find out.

4. Bullfurrow Lane.

I am now 61. The last time I walked down this lane I was ten or eleven. We came with fishing nets to scoop out sticklebacks and minnows from the brook to imprison for a while in jars until they died inexplicably. I remember the water weeds waving like green hair in the gently flowing water. Septembers, there were blackberries as big as damsons dangling from red stems, mostly beyond our scratched, stretching hands.

At the top of the lane, where it joined the main road, there was rough tarmac and perhaps ten houses on either side. Before the farm gate - which I only now realise was ever the entrance to the Burroughs’ farm - the tarmac stopped and a gravel track ran past and on in a long curve up to the tall gates of the Great House. There was a pale blue enamel sign saying PRIVATE. To the left of the gates there was a stile allowing walkers access to miles of fields grazed by cattle, black and white. We explored those fields all day, nutting, nesting, mushrooming and chestnutting as the seasons allowed.

Here I stand again before those imposing gates. There are men scything grass and weeds which have been allowed to grow unchecked for over forty years. The whine and phut of a chainsaw tells another story of shrubbery gone wild. The house itself, windows boarded, is half visible through the bars and a memory of a hot day in spring comes to mind. I taste red jelly and ice cream. I briefly smell fresh mown grass and see children jiggling on the smooth lawn in play. Fairley Silver Band is playing to rows of adults in deckchairs. My brother says he feels sick. Was he sick? I cannot remember.

Brian’s words about half a million - an underestimate? - needing to be spent bring me back to the present. I turn to walk home and am soon forced to stand well back into the holly hedge to allow a dark purple limousine to creep past me. Through the tinted windows I can make out a man and a woman who has long sleek legs. They do not return my tentative wave.

Back at the gate, I lean on the post and look at the distant farmhouse. The red roof is white with frost. An outbuilding nearby where we hunted for swallows’ nests is now dilapidated. There are no cows in the field.

5 A Turn For The Worse

“T’aint looking very clever for Jake Burroughs, according to what I’ve heard.”

Brian collects his pint from the bar and makes sure he has his audience. What has he heard? It appears that the student teacher kicked in the ribs has had to return to hospital.

“Compli-cations.”

On Friday, the Earlstone Gazette has the story. A lung infection has set in and the young man’s mother is demanding that the Bileby Hunt disband itself. “Nothing but bloodthirsty thugs - and law-breakers!” she declares, questioning if they have any decency. “We will be seeking hefty compensation for this from the culprit.” The master of hounds has responded by saying that any rider found guilty of causing injury to a protester will be summarily expelled. (In fact, by this time Jacob has already expelled himself.)

*

The Gazette lies open on the kitchen table at the farm where the mood is unremittingly gloomy. This is not only due to Jacob’s violence. Another page reports that a campaign group has been set up in Fairley to oppose the sale of farmland to developers. “Our infrastructure cannot take any more, we face gridlock,” declares Claire Adams, the spokesperson. “And we are determined not to lose more of our fields to concrete.”

A leaflet has been delivered to every house in the village and one is now held in Farmer Burroughs’ trembling hand. It has a photo of Bullfurrow Lane and asks how it could possibly, being so narrow, carry more than one lane of traffic? It poses the very obvious question of where traffic from the proposed estate of more than two hundred houses will emerge. Burroughs already knows that a road will have to be built to join the Allingworth Rd, and knows how much trouble that will cause. All three Tory councillors are opposing the development and are promising all-out war.

Amelia tells her dad that she is getting cold-shouldered in the village. Someone had wound his window down and shouted abuse. Jack grimaces. On top of everything else, he is terrified that the developer will pull out if there are demonstrations and direct action. He crumples the leaflet and puts his head in his hands.

“I’m glad your grandma and grandpa aren’t here to see this,” he tells Amelia. “All going to rack and ruin. And not our fault feel powerless.”

He clenches his great grimy hands into fists. Amelia lays her hand on his broad shoulders and she watches in horror as her big, strong father - her hero - shakes and sobs like a child.

“Dad, listen, we’ll come through this. Pray with me.”

She kneels down and grabs his arm. “Dear God, please give us strength to overcome our problems. Show us the right way to go and the right decisions to make.”

The creak of the door makes her look round. It is her mother, frail and pale, shuffling into the room.

“I don’t know why you’re praying, our Amelia. Even if there is a God, he’s not on our side. He doesn’t care about us. And you needn’t try to pull the wool over my eyes about Jacob. I saw him go off with the police. What’s he done?”

Amelia has no choice. She gets to her feet and, while her father keeps his face hidden, she explains what Jacob has done, putting the best gloss she can on it. Her mum thinks it over and declares him a bloody fool.

“He’s made his own bed and now he has to lie in it. From now on, we’ve got to be here for Dad.” Amelia makes up her mind to ring the next morning for a doctor’s appointment for him.

6. Jane Sparrow

It is time, I reckon, to introduce into my chronicle a prominent protagonist, Mrs Jane Sparrow, senior Tory Councillor for Fairley, whom most decent folk respect but do not much like. She has been around for longer than most care to remember. She looked in once through the window of the Lion recently and Sam told me who she was. She was sharp-faced, tall and grey and stooping. If you were an ornithologist, you would have no choice but to call her heron-like. Her husband, Robin, who might have been the quarry of her gaze, is condemned as rather standoffish by the bar, but I find him rather shy. He is a stout man, perhaps a little ill-matched for his over-tall spouse, and is proud of the fortune he has made as a petrol station proprietor, believing that to be sufficient to warrant general respect. He is an infrequent visitor to The Red Lion where he confines himself to the corridor, never visiting the bar. Sam unkindly says of him that he would like to be a more frequent visitor than his wife would permit, and that his powers of conversation are not his greatest asset, being limited to the price of petrol and his defective carwash. I peek through the crack of the door. He stands there rocking to and fro on his heels, sipping brandy from the largest apple glass Andy has to offer, while his friends from Earlstone Golf Club, amongst them a bookmaker and an estate agent, lament the state of the nation. Once they made the big mistake of being overheard by the bar discussing scroungers. For this, they were loudly condemned by Sam, who made a political broadcast about *small* businessmen - (such they were) - content to pay their employees a pittance in the expectation of the Public Purse making up their wage to one on which they could narrowly avoid starvation. For this speech Sam only just avoided being barred by Andy, for one of the men so grossly slandered was McCreedy, director of a cleaning business - and magistrate who could frown or smile on licensing applications.

Sam loathes the Sparrows, claiming to have persuasive evidence of their hypocrisy. And it is this: three years previously, a local builder had applied to the council for permission to demolish a house and erect a few houses on an overgrown smallholding, which upon the death of its old bachelor owner had become available for sale. His cousin, sole beneficiary, had no wish to live there and was keen to cash in for three quarters of a million. Who would not? The old house would be swept away and eight narrow houses with admittedly tiny gardens would be squeezed on. Those residents nearby had objected, naturally, as is generally the case, and had written collectively to Earlstone Council, appealing indirectly to Mrs Sparrow who chaired the Planning Committee. They argued that there was plenty of derelict land in the town and that a buyer could surely be found willing to reinstate that forlorn property to its old glory, remembering fondly how vegetables and eggs from its chuckling hens had once supplied the needs of their street and beyond.

To their utter dismay, Mrs Sparrow, giving the rest of the committee an old-fashioned stare, had roundly condemned nimbyism and urged the passing of the bid. “They wouldn’t give a fig if wasn’t across the road from them,” she was quoted as saying “and it’s all brambles and weeds. And there are rats!”

The fact that said residents were part of the Thorpe Ward - between Fairley and Earlstone, where those cattle of my childhood had peacefully grazed - was soon the subject of an angry letter to the Earlstone Gazette, pointing out that Thorpe Meadows always returned a *Liberal* Councillor, implying that the Tory Jane Sparrow was acting out of pure spite and revenge.

“If the smallholding had been in Fairley Ward,” had declared Sam at the time (so he tells me) “she’d have whistled a different tune.”

“You know of course that the Tories are bankrolled by builders?” (Yes, Sam, so you keep telling me). “So why have they relaxed the rules about building on green field sites?”

“Dunno, Sam.”

“Easier to clear, and easier means more and faster profit. Sparrow is a God-damned hypocrite and” (fortissimo) “I don’t care who hears it out there!”

Luckily, Andy is in the cellar and there is nobody of significance in the corridor. Only me and old Tommo with his dog are in the bar this early. I drum my brains to change the subject and almost offer to play him at chess.

“And tell me this,” he adds with a sly wink “how many members of planning committees take a good whack here?” *Here* is his back pocket which he pats meaningfully. “Friend of a friend of a friend of a cousin or a spouse gets a nice tidy sum on deposit out of the blue one day, untraceable. “*Oh my goodness, where did that money come from?*” Or maybe a trip to Rome or a case of champers turns up on the doorstep....if I can think it -”

“-Yes, Sam, it’s possible, nay probable.”

“Can you be certain that no planning wallah has never taken a bribe in a round-about way? Corruption being quite discreet in Britain.”

“To believe so would be naïve.”

“Glad you agree, Steven! Game o chess?”

“Sorry, got to fly.”

“Let me get you a half.”

“No. I’ll get you one.”

Corruption. It is rather a taboo subject, is it not? It surely happens in faraway places, not in Fairley Parva. Having been all over the world, I have seen it quite openly on show. Is it really a common feature of our green and pleasant land? Perish the thought. This is England!

At this point, Brian walks in for the footy. Leicester are going to play Chelsea, and they are doing rather well, it seems. He gives Sam such a withering stare - perhaps he has been eavesdropping - that Sam resists the temptation to educate him. He sighs and sucks on his empty pipe.

As for me, I dare say that there are plenty of hypocrites and fraudsters about. Far be it from me to suggest, for example, that Sam’s mystery illness is fake, but he acts and speaks with such energy in the bar that I can only wonder why it deserts him between the hours of eight and five.

I am writing this mostly in the present tense (on the grounds of immediacy). So it might be considered as inappropriate - oh, I loathe that word and only include it so that I can lambast it - so it might be considered *inapt* to leap into the future at this point and report that Sam and his illness will soon be subjected to scrutiny by the callous agents of a government he loathes.

7. A Dilemma ?

“Now we see her in her true plumage!” declares Sam, brandishing aforesaid leaflet. “The bloody hatchet-faced gawky old hypocrite! “*Go to war over Burroughs Farm? Don the armour of righteousness?*” I’d like to see ’em find a suit of armour to fit her!”

We all know who he means. She is one of the three councillors supposedly prepared to sit in the road to stop the bulldozers. The bar has to concede that she did attack nimbyism in Thorpe Meadows - which only loosely belongs to Tory Fairley, proof being that it elects Liberals.

I examine the leaflet which I have not yet bothered to read. Mrs Sparrow is indeed a co-

signatory.

“Hold on though, Sam. It does say here she’s resigned from the Planning Committee. That’s hardly dishonest. The opposite.”

“Not dishonest??”

“And surely there’s no comparison between ten houses on the Thorpe and two hundred on the farm?”

“No comparison? I thought you agreed with me. Can’t you ever get annoyed, Steven? Do you think if she lived out in Old Fairley, she’d give a spit about Burroughs Farm?”

(Old Fairley is an exclusive hamlet of fewer than twenty large houses, with no pub, no shop, no indigents, with only one way in and one way out. A Premier League footballer lives there.)

“No comparison???”

Why should I get annoyed? At my age, life is too short to spend it gnashing my teeth, like Sam. He will burn himself out. True, the Sparrows do live in a large house on the Allingworth Rd which is only separated from the Burroughs farm by a spinney. True, the spinney “belongs” to a riding school which was leased long ago from Frank Burroughs’ father. True, if Burroughs sells up, then the spinney might have to be uprooted to provide access to the new estate.

“The new estate will be - literally - in her back yard. And she accuses the Thorpe people of nimbyism. Fair takes the breath away!”

He might have a point. People are in general, pretty hypocritical, so I cannot be too hard on Jane Sparrow. Isn’t Sam himself a bit of a hypocrite? So was Henry VIII. Would a cash-strapped Henry have felt so strongly about the monasteries and their false relics if the monks had been poor? And I feel a bit sorry for those poor souls threatened by HS2. But would they feel sorry for me if the monster came hurtling through my back lawn? To be fair to Jane Sparrow, she has a solid case about the size of the farm project. No doubt she would argue that her proximity to it is as irrelevant as it is coincidental. As councillor does she not have the duty to be in the vanguard - in her armour - leading, not following popular outrage? Does she not have an obligation to be a conduit for public disgust and an obligation to channel it, thereby converting a great, deafening swell of fury and indignation into a stream of sweet reason, so cogent that none can resist it?

Surely she is right to lay aside her principles on nimbyism lest it be an impediment to the execution of her solemn duty *pro bono publico*. She would doubtless refute the cynical comments of the Sams of this world and point to her democratic *sine qua non* and haughtily and and righteously ignore such comments, asserting that others of lesser stature depended on her, stressing their expectation of her to be their champion when the good of the village - and votes - were at stake.

With all of the above, all decent Fairley people would surely concur. Shame on you Sam! Look rather at the beam in thine own eye than look for the mote in the eyes of others. As I prepare to lay down my pen, I feel sure that Mrs Sparrow is sleeping quite easily in her bed half-a-mile away. I look forward to interviewing her.

*

Within a day or two, everybody knows that Jane Sparrow has nobly cast off the weeds of office, citing a conflict of interest, to don her suit of armour.

“Quite right too,” says Brian, patting the landlord’s golden Labrador. “Not everybody’s cup of tea, but as honest as the day is long.”

“Not very long at this time of year.” sneers Sam. “It’s a terrible dilemma for her and her Tories

this.”

“How come?”

“Well, usually the developers are welcome with their brown envelopes, cos they’re digging in somebody else’s back yard. They would love God to move Burroughs a couple of miles towards Thorpe Meadows. They’d give planning permission like a shot. “*We do need new houses, don’t you know?*””

“What a miserable cynic, Candy,” says Brian to the dog. “Don’t he know this is England, not Afghanistan?”

8. Polski Slep

It turns out that the gang working at the Great House are Poles. Poles, Romanians and Latvians are already settled in Earlstone, but none have ventured - as far as we know - to cross over into Fairley, property here being a hell of a price to buy or rent.

“You’d better put sauerkraut on your menu, Andy, if you can stand the stench,” says Brian to the distinctly unamused landlord.

“That’s Germany,” says his crony. “Don’t Poles eat goulash?”

“That’s Hungary. Poles eat smoked sausage and smoked ham.” say I from behind my paper.

“And sour cabbage.”

“Why can’t them new people hire local gardeners and builders?” says Sam.

Brian spins round on his stool. “Blimey! You’ve changed your tune.”

“Not really. Just saying what you’ll be saying in a minute, you old reactionary.”

Over the last few years, the shop near the post office has tried and failed to be many things, latterly a bridal wear outlet. Might the boards soon come down to open up a Polski slep??

Reverend Smellie, the new vicar at the Baptist Chapel, who last year shocked everybody, not least the elders who had appointed him, by campaigning for the Labour candidate (he scraped forty-odd votes) preaches goodwill to *all* men, including gentiles, to his dwindling congregation. Fairley is worried. A scruffy man who exposes himself - very brave in this December chill - to three Fairley High schoolgirls (who were apparently unimpressed) is supposed to have spoken in a foreign accent. (Was a running commentary necessary?)

An old lady goes to pay in the Co-op and finds her purse is missing from her bag. She is sure the young man by the cat food was a foreigner. The next day she apologizes to the police when she finds the purse in her knitting bag.

One night, a few days before Christmas, four pleasant young strangers enter the bar of The Red Lion and order, in good English, pork and stuffing cobs and pints of strong Tyskie lager which Andy, a man of vision, has put on specially for the week. They smile at everybody and sit in the corner by a somnolent Sam.

“Do you play, Sir?” says the one who has ordered, pointing at the chess set which always lies by Sam in sly wait. Sam has been on the Tyskie. He opens one red eye.

“I’m only a beginner,” slurs Sam and the bar is in instant uproar.

“Beginner be bugged,” shouts Brian. “He plays for money and is unbeatable. I know he don’t look very clever.....”

“I play you? These, my friends, never play. I like to play very much.”

“You any good?”

“Not grand master.”

“Play for a pint of Tyskie, then? It’s not a bad pint.”

“Sure. You be white.”

An hour later the Polish lads have gone and Sam is left staring at his devastated board in disbelief.

“Never saw it coming. Never smelt it.....bloody foreigners, coming over here and playing chess with our pieces.”

The bar rocks with laughter.

“Found out a few things though but, about the new people.”

“What?”

“It’ll cost you a pint.”

In spite of his principle of not knowingly assisting scroungers, Brian cannot resist the bribe and is soon back with the drink.

“Well?”

“Well, there are seven of them working there, four Poles and three Czechs. They’re staying at Allingworth on a caravan site....”

“Is that it?”

“Their bosses are an Asian couple - “

“Oh good God...”

“ - staying in that posh hotel on the square in Allingworth while the place is being fixed.

Property developers from London.”

“So, do they mean to live in it, let it out or sell it?”

“They didn’t know.”

9 A Short Evening With Jane Sparrow

Perhaps I was impetuous. Robin Sparrow was in the corridor rocking to and fro when I returned from the Gents. He looked at me and kind of smiled. Perhaps I had had one too many. I put out my hand and he took it. We got talking. It turned out that we had been in the same year at Fairley High. We swapped a few anecdotes about the scary headmaster, nemesis of naughty boys, and then I seized my chance, telling him that I had turned my hand since my homecoming to being a kind of chronicler.

“In years to come it might be of interest to the history group. There are periods in Fairley’s history which are frustratingly sketchy. Now I know your good wife is a significant member of the community and has long been so.....” etc, etc, etc.

I blush now to think of such hypocritical flattery, at which he puffed himself up like one of those exotic fish and rocked more quickly. At last he condescended to put to his wife a request for an interview.

“Mind you, better watch your p’s and q’s. She’s not always sweetness and light...I should know.”

And so, just after Christmas, here I stand one evening at the robust door of a great mansion in Allingworth Rd. It is called The Elms and in the front hedge, evenly spaced, are three stumps, sad remnants and monuments to the ravages of that evil parasite.

I am ushered into a nice old-fashioned lounge by Mr Sparrow where, through the wide window, I admire the long back garden (illuminated, I suppose, for my special appreciation) adorned with conifers, white nymphs modestly concealing a breast, and water features. Beyond the back and right-hand-side hedges, reaching up into the night sky, pale with the glow of the distant Thorpe Meadow housing estate and of brash Earlstone, stand the dark trees of the spinney which may have to go for the sake of Progress. Sparrow offers me a drink but I decline and he leaves

me to admire the view.

“We have bets from the spinney at dusk in summer,” announces a clear but cultivated voice, still dark with Earlstone undertones.

I turn to take Mrs Sparrow’s hand - unsettlingly limp - and am invited to sit in a chintzy armchair.

“So you see, it would not only be my husband and I who would be loath to lose it, there are bedgers in there tooo, and a variet-eh of birrrds.”

I take out my notebook and ask her what she might say to people who worry about the housing crisis.

“Certainly we need new-build, but let us begin first where we should begin, in our towns and cit-ehs where there is derelict lend.”

I remind her - gently - that her own party has relaxed the green belt and she considers a reply. I cannot help but think what Sam would say, sitting here, and almost smile.

She is sitting bolt upright and studying me with her heron eyes. Her nose is quite long but not broad. The face is long and narrow, the antithesis of beauty. Her hair is short and - please forgive me, for it is truly..... feathery.

“One cannot agree,” she finally declares “one hundred percent with one’s part-eh.”

I ask her what had led her to become a Conservative. Well, her father had been a sock manufacturer and had always been a hard-working and enterprising man.

“He brought us up to be self-reliant and thrift-eh. He was the chairman of our part-eh in the fifties.”

She reminisces for a while and I scribble a few pointless notes, biding my time. When she falls silent I ask what for her are the burning issues of the day.

“Immigration, unchecked. The white race in decline. The EU swindle. The welfare culture. Debt. And alcoholism.”

“You never touch a drop?”

“Never.”

“Where would you place poverty as an issue?”

“Mmmm...I reall-eh think these people need to be in work. Thet’s the way to improve their lives, not by depending on the State.”

“And what would you say to critics who mention employees who receive such low wages that the State has to top them up?”

She freezes. “Are you a socialist?”

“Not a bit. Maybe *they* could be called socialists.”

“Who?”

“The employers.”

“How so?”

“Well, they depend on the State to top up their workers’ wages so it *could* be argued.”

“I find the question politically loaded and provocative, Mr Howard.”

“Oh I am so sorry. May I bring up another matter?”

She looks at the watch on her slender wrist. I take the hint and hurry.

“Mr Burroughs. Do you feel any compassion for him?”

“Compassion?”

“You know - sympathy, feeling sorry for him.”

“I know perfectly well what compassion means, Mr Howard. No, I do not feel sorry for him. He

receives a subsid-eh from Brussels, does he not? What does he do with it? In this day and age, farmers have to be versatile businessmen. He has proved himself inadequate. His yoghurt and ice cream were dire. His pick-your-own venture was not well organized or promoted. It is a tough environment for business and if inefficient people go to the wall, it clears the ground for the more enterprising to thrive. If I have a poor rose bush, I prune it and it flowers again. Or I uproot it. His son cannot run the farm, he is a drunken good-for-nothing, and his daughter has no, no.....”

“Acumen?”

“No acumen, no presence! No remote bureaucrat ever spent a penny on my husband’s business when it was struggling. And my father made himself - his stockings were renowned as indestructible. It is a pity that Burroughs cannot cope, but that is the world we live in. If only he could!”

“But couldn’t the village get together to help him in some way? Financially or with business advice?”

“That is socialism, Mr Howard. This is Fairley, not a commune. Have you done??”

“Just one more thing.....the development at Thorpe Meadows. Did you describe the objectors as nimbyists?”

“I did. How is that of relevance?”

“What is the difference between their objecting there, and your objecting here?”

“Mr Howard. I do not know with whom you have been in conversation, but there is no link between the two. I could go to my filing cabinet now and fetch letters, as many letters, no more, in favour of the Thorpe plan as there were against!”

She rises in indignation and struts to the door. I beg her to stay, saying I believe her.

“I’m sorry if -”

“Residents were fed up of staring at brambles and foot high grass and a derelict house with smashed windows. Many were in despair of selling near such an eyesore. Some were even threatening to withhold council tax. There is no controversy over Burroughs but an overwHelming consensus. I challenge you to find one person - apart from Burroughs and his builder - who wants the sale to go ahead. Covering these fields, these ancient fields, with brick and concrete would alter this lovely village for ever. The motorway was bad enough. A few hizes on derelict lend over *there*,” - now she points Thorpewards with finger-trembling contempt - “was a plus not a minus. Perhaps you should be more assiduous in your research, Mr Howard, if you are to be a decent chronicler. Or are you really that? Aren’t you in fact a journalist from that left-wing, multicultural reg, the Mercury, here to stir up mischief?”

I am stuck for words, which she takes as a confirmation. She yanks open the door.

“Robin! Robin!!”

“Yes dear?”

“This gentleman is leaving. He is not what you said he was. Where did you meet him?”

“The Red Lion....”

“The Red Lion? That den of scoundrels and layabites?”

She advises him to take more care of the company he keeps and leaves the room. Robin totters as she sweeps past, as if in turbulent air. Has he been at the bottle on the sly?

He shows me, apologetically, to the door.

“What on earth did you say to upset the old gel?”

“I think she took what I said about nimbyism the wrong way.”

“Oh God! Her sorest point. Now she won’t speak to me for a week.”

I have to wonder, as I return to my car, whether that will be more a matter for rejoicing or lament.

As I drive home in the sleet, I cannot help but think how dismal is Jane Sparrow's prescription for the world. I think of dark satanic mills and indestructible socks. The great copper beech, presently of course bare of its leaves, around which the carollers gather on Christmas Eve is still magically lit up as I take the bend. No doubt, Jane Sparrow comes there to sing lustily, like her ilk, of charity, humility, love and goodwill. But I'm bound to say that for many, such sentiments do not seem to carry much further than the tree in this green and pleasant land.

10. Amelia Burroughs

I realise I am behind Amelia Burroughs in the checkout queue in the Co-op. She grabs one of those plastic thingies and separates her stuff from mine on the conveyor belt. I thank her and she smiles briefly in spite of the pain in her eyes. The till operator looks at her grimly and snatches her purchases across the magic eye and virtually throws them across to her. Amelia struggles to keep up in bagging them.

My car happens to be close to hers and she is still loading when I catch up with her. Can I find a reason to speak? It is a very cold morning and the tarmac sparkles with frost where the sun has not been shining. As she returns her trolley, she slips and falls. I hurry over to help and lose my footing, landing almost on top of her. We sit up and laugh. She grabs a pole, stands, offers me a hand and yanks me up as easily as a sheaf of straw.

"Thank you. Shall we sue? Amelia, isn't it?"

"Yes, how do you know? Oh, because of the farm...."

"Yes and no. I've just returned after decades away and I've been catching up on the news. I overheard somebody in the post office pointing you out the other week when you were at the counter."

Her face darkens. She realises, she says, that she is the butt of gossip. I hasten to reassure her that the lady in the post office had been very complimentary about her.

"She said you were holding everything together at the farm."

"I only wish there were more like her. People don't understand....."

Her lower lip trembles. She is in truth a very pleasant woman. I cannot help taking her arm. The difference in our ages means, I hope, that my next statement will be taken entirely at face value.

"I'm Steven Howard, ex-globe-trotter. If you'd like a chat, I live about five minutes drive away. I didn't fall over on purpose."

She laughs but declines the offer. Her peas will thaw out.

"I do have a freezer."

And so, over a cuppa, she tells me her tale of woe, confirming mostly what I had already heard in the bar.

"And how is your dad now?"

"Bit better. The tablets keep him calm. Someone from the developer came over yesterday, nice lady in a suit, and put his mind at rest."

"Please tell me if I'm being nosy."

"No, it's good to talk to a friendly person."

"Do they still intend to press for planning permission then?"

"Definitely. She said they'd been in similar situations before and had always won. The government means business on housing and our land is not a site of special natural beauty - especially with the motorway there."

“But won’t the motorway put people off buying?”

“No way. Dad asked her that and she said there would be loads of extra trees planted, springing up in no time. Nobody would know it was there, and it being so close was an advantage. We’d rather not sell up but we don’t have a choice. We’ll move away and start afresh on some smallholding, growing veg and raising poultry for Christmas. Money in that. People can grumble about us as much as they like, but we’ll be gone. I’ve been praying for guidance and God told me one night that we can’t always make the ideal decision. So, in a way I’m content.”

This ray of hope, tainted though it might be with regret and guilt, was not the only good news. Her brother Jacob, in a drunken moment of stupid optimism in September, had placed a twenty pound bet on Leicester City to be top of the Premier League at Christmas at 150-1, and indeed they were, even though they had lost the next day to Liverpool. Her dad had insisted on him handing the money over to pay any compensation for his misdemeanour and he had meekly agreed.

Fortunately, the injured student had made a full recovery.

11. Two Letters

Dear Occupants,

I am taking the liberty of introducing myself, in the hope that you will respond generously. I am an amateur historian, or chronicler, of Fairley Parva life and am particularly interested in the history of the Great House which you have recently acquired. The house was part of my childhood. We used to sneak, I am ashamed to confess, into the orchard to steal apples and pears. The owner, Mr Sammels, knew, I think, what we were about but was too kindly a man to make a fuss!

There has been much speculation - some unpleasant - in the village about you and your plans, and being inquisitive, I would love to know the truth.

I pause, wondering whether honesty is the best policy. It depends, I suppose, on national characteristics. Germans, for instance, are pretty blunt and not given to frills. The German for a nipple is *breast wart*. The Swiss are ultra polite and formalistic. Some of the least friendly and most apathetic people I have met have been French, particularly Norman French, although there are doubtless a great many lovely ones whom I have not been fortunate enough yet to encounter. I decide on frankness as the best approach, do not amend this last sentence, and carry on.

The Great House was owned by very charitable people until 1973 when it was vacated. It used to play a key part in village life. I only say this so that you might understand what expectations of you some people here might have. If you would like to learn more about its chequered history - there was even a murder there - I would only be too pleased to meet you at your earliest convenience. My postal address and email address are above.

PS - I would be interested to hear your views on the large housing estate which will be built, if planning permission is granted, adjacent to and behind your property.

I post this more in hope than expectation and am amazed when the very next day I find this message in my inbox.

Dear Mr Howard,

Your letter was a surprise in more than one way and not wholly pleasant.

Oh dear. I am about to be told to mind my own business.

Your news of a housing development has come as a huge shock. When we bought the house in October we had no idea of such a thing! Our estate agent has denied knowing of this at that time, but estate agents and truth are like oil and water. We would be pleased to meet you but have business in London to attend to this weekend. Maybe next Monday morning, here, at eleven? But you had better bring a warm coat.

Narinder Lall.

I can find no trace of foreign clumsiness here and have to assume it to be the work of an educated person of Indian or Pakistani extraction. But is it a man or a woman? An internet search proves it to be both a woman's and a man's name, popular with Sikhs.

12. An Interesting Meeting

Fadilah is stunningly beautiful. Her eyes are large and intelligent, her nose straight and perfectly formed. She is tall. Narinder is a head shorter, stocky and no match for Fadilah in looks. But he is genial and very affable. I reckon they are in their mid-thirties.

"We aim to produce all our energy using a solar farm beyond the vegetable garden," he says, with a Cockney accent.

"We will grow all our own food and sell the surplus," adds Fadilah with just a trace of Pakistani? in her voice. "We are vegetarian."

She pours me tea and hands it across. We are sitting in coats in one of the smaller downstairs rooms. There is a primus stove on which sits bubbling a pan full of curry for themselves and their crew. The room is high and is being made ready for replastering. The floorboards are laid bare. They intend to polish them. A stylish chandelier sits in one corner waiting to be connected to the wires protruding from the great ceiling rose.

"The whole house is being rewired," says Narinder, pointing to rolls of cable. "Our guys are a dab hand at it. We made our money as property developers. We met at uni on a business course." They aim to live here in private rooms on the ground floor whenever the mood takes them, and to let out luxury flats on the first floor to people they can trust. Fairley is exactly the kind of spot where city people can recuperate.

"It's easy to reach from the motorway and has some great pubs and restaurants, according to Trip Advisor. If you have any tips for visitors, Steven, they would be most welcome."

"Well, Stratford is only three quarters of an hour away, for a start. Leamington and Warwick are lovely. Kenilworth Castle. The Cotwolds are a couple of hours."

I mention the canals, Market Bosworth, Bradgate Park, Charnwood Forest, the Richard III experience amongst many other things in our county, and modestly offer to write their website brochure.

"That would be great, but now you tell us of this damned housing estate!"

"We have been to see our solicitor," says Narinder "who has re-read the deeds. It seems we hold the ace of trumps."

“Really?”

It turns out that the lane, the made-up bit, as far as the first hedge of the farm, is owned by the council. But the lane up to and including the farm entrance gate from their house belongs to them.

“The farmer has right of access only by custom. In law, he has none,” declares Fadilah very excitedly and even more beautiful for it. “We could deny him access and stop his car, his tractor and whatever else right now.”

“But that would only add to his woes.” I tell them briefly about the crisis he is going through and they seem sympathetic.

“But the point is,” says Fadilah “we can prevent all and any building traffic entering the gate.”

“The village would love you for that! Will you make it known?”

“We will think about it. To be honest, we would like to keep as low a profile as possible for the time being. We would appreciate it if you kept all this to yourself. We will play this card only when we judge it right.”

After telling them about the history of the place, I leave them wondering whether I should have mentioned the possibility of access through the spinney. What would Mrs Sparrow say if all the construction traffic and ultimately all the estate traffic would have to pass by her back garden? The residents of Bullfurrow Lane would of course be relaxed and delighted if their peace and quiet remained intact - and Allingworth Rd all the more furious.

Quite a storm is brewing. Seeing no solution to anyone’s problem, I am ready now to turn out my light and go to sleep.

13. A Surprise For Sam And Jacob

In the second week of January, Sam receives the letter which he has been dreading. It is from a private company tasked with assessing the suitability of invalidity benefit claimants for the world of work.

“How can I be employed?” he wails. “I might be fine on Monday morning and then hardly able to move on Tuesday. Who would take me on, knowing that?”

But that is not the point and Sam knows it. It is whether one is capable of performing basic tasks, such as lifting a pencil or tapping a computer key - not whether one is able to satisfy the criteria of an employer in the “real world” - as Mrs Sparrow might solemnly put it.

Not to turn up for the appointment, as Sam declares he will not, is not an option, as it will only postpone the evil day and risk loss of benefit.

“How am I supposed to afford the bus fare? And I can’t walk it.”

I think Brian is not being wholly sincere when he offers to lend Sam his bike.

“How can I ride a bloody bike?”

“I could lend you my ladder then.”

“Ladder?”

“Only I overheard a woman in the post office the other day saying her window cleaner had stopped coming. I bet Andy’d lend you a bucket, wouldn’t you Andy?”

“No comment.”

“How can I climb a ladder with my condition?”

“What is it again?” I ask.

I still fail to catch it, he speaks it so quickly. I cannot even tell you with which letter it begins. I reckon I am not the only one.

Anyway, he manages to attend for his interview in Earlstone. A week later, he receives the bad news. He will be transferred from invalidity benefit to jobseeker's allowance. He will be thrust into that harsh landscape which Mrs Sparrow and her ilk venerate. Will he flourish or will he be uprooted?

"Lots have people have done themselves in over it. Does the government care about that? No, it wishes we all would die. People call us scroungers, but how many do non-jobs? How many staff walk round with files from A to B and B to A at the Council Office and at the Outpatients when I go for me check-up? I've watched 'em! Non-jobs! And I **do** play my part in the economy. Andy's takings will be way down if I stop coming - and the people I entertain. Court jester, me. Most people work in services producing bugger all. They don't make a solid object to sell to the Germans. I bet the Tories would love to round us all up and take us for a short drive into the country. What's the point of a bloody MP? Our MP? Never asks a bloody question and claims for his duck pond. How does he deserve eighty thousand a year for sitting on his arse? And voting for stuff which hurts poor people. If they made the rich pay taxes, cancelled Trident and that high-speed rail project, they could easily afford me. Austerity is rubbish! And if I have to go on medication for me nerves, what will they save? Sod all."

Poor Sam. The Scrounger Bloodhounds have finally sniffed him out. I have a quiet word with Andy about some bar work for him but he pulls a face. I suppose he could tidy my garden for a tenner a week. Well, maybe twenty. The mood in the bar is sombre. The festive trimmings have come down and the plastic tree has been put away for another year. It is wet and very windy out there in the dark.

The next morning, horror! The gale has uprooted the great churchyard cedar and it has blocked the road. Its great roots are clutching a coffin!

And that very afternoon, the young student kicked in the ribs who made a full recovery, keels over in front of a class, dead before he hits the ground.

*

"He must have had a dicky ticker," sobs Jacob in Earlstone police station. "He would probably have died anyway, wi'out me kicking him!"

"If the post mortem shows any evidence of trauma, we will charge you with manslaughter quicker than you can say Jack Robinson," replies the officer who knows Jacob from previous contact and does not like him.

The post mortem shows no sign of injury to the heart and the cause of death is eventually ascribed to the very rare SUDS, or Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome, which takes off mainly young people, usually in their sleep. The heart simply stops beating as if it has an electrical fault. C.P.S. cannot decide whether or not to add to Jacob's woes. A half-decent barrister might be able to persuade a jury that the kick had absolutely nothing to do with the heart stopping months later. Or might the jury take an instant dislike to that fierce, arrogant young man - which most did - and convict him? In view of the fact that G.B.H. (surprisingly) carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, with the minimum term left to the discretion of the judge, it is decided that there is no point risking an acquittal of Jacob Burroughs on the charge of manslaughter. I know this because Brian "overheard" the group of ex-policemen who come into the bar every Friday to play dominoes quietly discussing the case. By Saturday the whole village knows.

I cannot imagine how all this is being received at Burroughs Farm. The only silver lining - if that

be not too optimistic a term - for that abject family is the rumour that Earlstone Council is now reluctant to refuse a planning application to build on their green and pleasant land, simply on the grounds of cost (though a cynic of my acquaintance might suggest that the realisation of venal opportunities might also be a factor), it having been widely reported that Bileby District Council had just lost thousands of pounds in legal fees and court costs when a furious builder had taken their planning refusal to a successful appeal in front of an adjudicator sent up from London. Earlstone taxpayers, renowned for their meanness, would not look kindly on such a waste of public money for the sake of “snooty” Fairley Parva. Mrs Sparrow is said to be incandescent with rage at the news.

“I’ve come in to get out of the way,” mutters the rocking Robin Sparrow to me in the passage when I enquire politely about his wife. “She feels so betrayed that she’s seriously thinking of joining Ukip. That’ll put the cat among the pigeons.”

I need to explain that the council of Earlstone, that drab, cheerless town, is held by the Tories by a slender majority of three over the harder-working Liberals and the solitary glum Labour councillor from Bragwell, an ex-industrial village of little beauty. If the other two Tory councillors from Fairley decide to follow Mrs Sparrow’s example, they will inflict a grievous blow - a hung council - on their colleagues in revenge. The threat of defections places the local Tories in an impossible dilemma; to allow the application would mean the loss of control and of electoral appeal in the village; to refuse it would mean an eventual loss of taxpayers’ money and of electoral appeal in both town and village.

At the bar, while Andy changes the barrel, I am told by Brian’s friend Biffen, a life-long Liberal, that he and his political friends are loving it. This tempts me to spice up the pot with the ingredient I have collected from the Great House. It will certainly overturn the apple cart if planning permission is granted. Might the last house on the left in Bullfurrow Lane have to be demolished to provide access to the site? The builder might be obliged to offer a sum of money no sensible homeowner could refuse. And it occurs to me as I make my way from the bar, that a certain kind of pressure might persuade a disgruntled Sparrow to give up The Elms - in spite of her implacable opposition - and resettle away from the fray. This would create a road onto the estate and not a leaf of the spinney need be harmed.

It is a strange feeling to be in possession of a key fact - regarding the gate - a secret unknown to everyone in the bar. Though I am tempted to tell Biffen, I keep it to myself

14. An Interview

“And just how am I supposed to get there?” wails Sam, smacking the letter he has received with the back of his hand. It is an invitation to interview for a position as a packer in a distribution centre for a clothing retailer we all know and love.

“It’s at Allingworth Business Park. And there’s no bus of course. Buses in this day and age?? Only on routes where they can make a profit, of course.”

As once advocated in the eighties, those of the Sparrow-ite tendency would urge Sam to accept the offer of Brian’s bike, even though that stretch of the Watling Street is not bike-friendly (and is not even very car-friendly.)

Sam has already been practising at employment that week by scratching around rather haphazardly one afternoon in my garden for twenty quid until it started to spit with rain.

He shows me the letter. The interview is for the Friday at ten a.m.

“Can you be ready for nine thirty, Sam? I’ll take you.”

We are on the Watling, heading south towards Allingworth, having passed The Elms. I tell him I've heard that the spinney will have to come out - unless the riding school gets the heave-ho. But he is not in his usual talkative mood and his tawny hand is trembling slightly on his knee. Perhaps he does have a genuine illness. His anxiety grows when we turn off from the main road and approach a gigantic, off-white cuboid - the warehouse. I hear his breathing quicken. As we park, he stares up at it, all eyes, and cannot bring himself to pop his seat belt.

"Like summat alien," he says, blowing out a breath in a whistle.

"You'll be okay, once -"

"No. I'm terrified. Can we go home? I don't care about the money."

"Just take some deep breaths."

He says he could do with a drink.

"Forgive me for saying this, Sam....but why didn't you tell the assessor.....that you're an alcoholic?"

"Because I'm not! I'm an alcoholic. I never wake up gagging for a drink. And I never touch a drop till five. It's just ...that building - doesn't it strike you as sinister - as if bad stuff goes on there?"

"Not very pretty, I admit. But they only distribute clothes from there. You can't duck out now. Shall I come in with you?"

He shakes his head, undoes the belt and strides towards the door marked RECEPTION. He disappears. He is right. It is sinister.

*

"Steven. Please pull into this layby. I feel poorly."

He gets out and retches. It has proven to be an unsettling experience. Three suits - one of them, a stern young woman in black - have put him under scrutiny.

"Just to move clothes from A to bloody B. Sheer overkill and ego-tripping. Bloody unnerved me as it was meant to. Kept scribbling, the young woman did, even when I wasn't speaking. Like a bloody black vulture. All a charade - no way they'll give a waster like me a job. Steven. Please pull into this layby...."

The lorries rock the car as they come hurtling by. This is the route to the real world. Sam is bent double hanging onto the door. A quarter of a mile further along there is a left turn to the pretty village of Wilney.

"You need a drink, Sam. I'll buy you a good lunch at The Farriers. If you can face it."

After two pints and an eight ounce steak, Sam is more his old self. He sucks his pipe and does all the talking. He had made a point of telling the panel at the outset about his condition, thinking that would bring the interview to an abrupt end. To his amazement and annoyance, they had made no comment and just gone through their procedure. The woman had scribbled and stared and the men had talked, taking turns to ask about his employment history and qualifications. He had told them he had left school without any certificates at sixteen and had joined the navy at eighteen. At the age of twenty-seven he had been drummed out for beating an officer for calling him a Paki.

"My skin had started to turn. He couldn't stand me because I was a left-winger and the feeling was mutual. To cut a long story short, I broke his jaw and was chucked out - dishonourable discharge - no pension. My girlfriend left me and the rest is history. I tried my hand at a few

things but I felt down. I don't like the way we live. Big business, rotten banks, London for the rich set and the pressures to consume, the bloody sickening adverts.....We're like chaff in the quernstones. If I could be born again, I'd choose the rainforest. I don't fit in. That's why I drink. I sit in the bar and float away. That great monstrosity back there...those people...the shit stuff they peddle...futile! Who's wearing it six months later? There was a woman on telly, young woman, thousands in credit card debt, being evicted, sat amongst clothes she'd never worn, crying her eyes up, with a young kiddie. And the Tories call me names! As if the disease starts with people who won't work. The whole way of life is corrupt and absurd, bollocking around from A to Z. What for?? No, I've made me mind up. I won't work for 'em. Won't go along with it. I'll live on the street.....One for the road?"

On the way back to Fairley, Sam tells me about a row he had had with Brian the other night when I was absent.

"He'd been sounding off about scroungers again. I was talking to somebody in the corridor and he thought I'd gone. "I've had a bad back for years" says he. "Carried on regardless though". Sanctimonious old git."

"You love him really."

"Mmm. He says some of these scroungers never worked because they had a twinge. Then I hear that laughing-boy Mumford agree. He blamed the soft, leftie doctors. He knew of a teacher who had got early retirement because he couldn't choose between his wife and the tart he was having an affair with and it was stressing him out."

"You're joking!"

"That's what Mumford said. Then he adds that the teacher died in America a month later with his tart crying at his bedside. "God was in his heaven after all." Then - amazing - the miserable sod does actually laugh, only it sounds like a cross between a magpie and a witch. Well, I can't let 'em get away with this. Andy is changing the bitter in the cellar so I march in. Just listen to this -

"Hold on. I don't like this junction...."

We turn off the Watling onto the Allingworth Road and at his suggestion we call in at the Fox and Hounds. His mouth is a bit dry and he has that good tale to tell. It's my round again, of course.

"So I tell Brian and Mumford to shut up and listen. Mumford folds his bloody paper and makes to go - he can't stand me and the feeling's mutual - but I won't let him past. I tell them about when I got assessed by that panel of vultures, and how there was an old guy in there in the waiting room with his daughter who'd be about forty. She was all flopped over in the wheelchair with cerebral palsy. Couldn't speak. He wheels her in and after about five minutes comes out all upset. It was the *daughter* being assessed about her invalidity benefit. They had taken one look at her and when he went to go they had asked him to stay. But he'd insisted on coming out - if she's fit for work she's got to do it without him! After five minutes one comes to the door and he goes back in. A minute later he's pushing her out. again They'd decided in her favour. Can you believe it? What stress, what an awful way to treat disabled people and their carers. "Well" says Brian, all sheepish "there are extremes. Some are fit and won't work and some are ill and can't." "Which am I then?" says I. "I'm not qualified to say." "Then don't be so judgmental then if you aren't fit to judge." Mumford pushes past me. I could have hit him, the bloody fascist. I don't hear him moan about the tax dodgers - he's probably one himself."

Two days later, Sam hears from the distribution centre that he has not been successful and need

never apply for another post with that company. Will he be for ever a jobseeker? Do I sympathise with him? Yes and no. Until I met Sam I had no time for scroungers. Millions reluctantly go at eight as grist to the mill and return at five to sit in front of the television, without making too much fuss.

Sam is bright and self-educated and genuinely out of kilter. I saw how he sweated and shook in Allingworth. He was genuinely ill afterwards. I once knew of someone in the seventies who registered at the employment exchange as a saxophone teacher. He never worked a day in all those years. He too was an oddball.

I think, on the whole, that it might be better to support such people than have them beg and sleep in doorways. But that is not the way of the world as presently configured.

It strikes me, the longer I think about it, that there might be more than a smidgin of hypocrisy in the government's drive to squeeze people into work. Ministers know full well that those who have never or rarely worked are not at all attractive to employers. Even an "interrupted" CV can prove fatal to a job application. Are not ministerial claims therefore, that they are acting in the best long-term interests of the long-term unemployed - via "tough love" - disingenuous? How many "invalids" lobbed into that harsh landscape have managed to put down roots? How many have been swept away like tumbleweed? Might it not be more humane to apply those assessments as to employability only to claimants below a certain age, thereby permitting those older and more set in their ways, like Sam, to grow old gracefully and peacefully - albeit, from a Sparrow-ite viewpoint - "uselessly" - and then gradually fade away? I only pose the question and offer no definite solution. On my return to Britain, may I say, I found it a less kind and less courteous place than when I left.

And as I write this tonight, the world is in pretty bad way, with savagery abroad, and thousands, young and old, risking drowning and walking miles through freezing mud to escape it, but facing rejection.

The matters which perplex and bother us in this green and pleasant land do seem minor in comparison.

15. A Nasty Rumour And A Ray Of Hope

Has Jane Sparrow really withdrawn from the C.A.N.T! - the Campaign Against Noxious Trespass? Rumour has it that the Premier League footballer has moved from placid Old Fairley, because of an influx of visitors staring at its most prestigious property - his - due to his team's phenomenal success. Rumour has it also that the buyer of said property is none other than Jane Sparrow!!

"I bet you," declares Sam "that the builder has bought the Sparrows off. Without her, the campaign collapses. The Elms can be demolished and there's your new road. The spinney survives and the conservationists lose half their argument. If I can think it..."

"It's true!" exclaims Brian the next evening. "They're moving out to Old Fairley and she's joined Ukup. The Tories are spitting teeth. Stab in the back."

This makes me wonder if Narinder and Fadilah have sprung their little surprise on the builder, forcing him to focus on Allingworth Rd. Or is it a coincidence? Maybe the builder has targeted Jane Sparrow, his main opponent, with such a sweetener that she has doffed her armour and sheathed her sword.

And blow me - a letter in the Earlstone Gazette on Friday does indeed confirm her retreat from the battle.

Due to both personal reasons and fundamental and irreconcilable differences with a Party I have supported all my life, it is with huge regret that I hereby announce my withdrawal from the C.A.N.T. . In doing so, I urge my fellow campaigners to remain constant in their opposition to this ruinous development. I only wish that my colleagues on the town council had as much appetite for the fight. Their lack of resolve has proven to be a tipping point for me and I shall now join the UK Independence Party and add my voice to a crescendo of protest against the country I love succumbing ever further to the toxic embrace of the European Union.

“Talk about kicking dust up into everybody’s eyes,” says Sam, jabbing at the letters page. “Fact of the matter is, she’s sold out. I bet you it’s a while before her old man shows his ruddy old face in here again.”

Indeed, since our brief encounter a while ago, he has not been in. When I get home I decide to bring my friends at the Great House up to date.

Dear Fadilah and Narinder,

I do not know how close you keep your ears to the ground or whether you buy the local newspaper, but it looks as if the campaign against the housing estate is set to implode. Its leader, Jane Sparrow has pulled out and rumour has it that she has done a deal with the developer. If so, he will have ready-made access to the farm if her house is demolished on the Allingworth road. This will trump your ace, I’m afraid. The local council will almost certainly pass the application due to the cost of an appeal - which the developer would definitely launch, given the millions at stake.

I know Amelia Burroughs, the farmer’s daughter, and she has told me how hard pressed her family is financially, having lost money in milk production for ages. The father, Jack is too depressed to make a fight of it. His previous efforts at diversification have failed. Amelia has spirit but her mother is ill and her brother is regrettably a waste of space.

I am truly sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings.

The next morning, I have their reply.

Dear Steven,

Your news is bad indeed. We have not let it be known that we can prevent the builder using the lane. Perhaps he’s realised that such a narrow road would be unsuitable for heavy plant. It has already occurred to us that the council might, as a condition of consent, impose a ban on the lane being used . We are going to have to think again. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting with Amelia to explore a few options? We have contacts in London who might be able to help, if she is an enterprising sort.

A ray of hope! I send her an email to let her know how keen the new people are to help if they can. Her reply:

My dad is in no state to be bothered with these matters. As far as he is concerned, the sale of the farm is a done deal and he has left me in total charge of everything. Mum and Jacob are fearing

the worst over the court case. For me, at home, it is like living in a morgue and I would only be too happy to meet the new people. Whether any good can come of it, I doubt, but I'm not giving up until the diggers are on the fields.

16. Meet The Neighbours

It is a mild day in late February. We are in the front garden of the Great House. Its Georgian stucco façade is being repaired and painted a gorgeous cream. The ten bedrooms are being converted into four luxury flats and guests will be catered for in the large dining room below, to the left of the flight of steps and grand entrance. Narinder's and Fadilah's entirely private quarters downstairs to the right are almost finished and soon they will be moving in. They are looking to hire a local person to come in and prepare breakfast and table d'hôte dinner for their paying guests. A waiter or waitress and housemaid and a gardener will also be recruited. The front garden is taking shape. Turf will be laid when the weather turns milder and roses, standards and shrubs, are already in, as well as square box hedging. In other borders, bulbs planted in December are peeping through. Around the back, the kitchen garden has been rotovated and manured ready for planting and sowing. The couple aim to meet all their needs for fresh vegetables and to sell off their surplus at bargain prices to callers in the summer. Amelia is as impressed as I am with the project. Fadilah points to the trees to the right of the frontage. They will screen the house and grounds from the housing estate and an area will be kept semi-wild for bees and butterflies, and there will be bird-feeders. Next to it there will be an adventure playground.

We are invited in for a hot drink and Narinder begins to talk business. Amelia tells him, when he asks very politely, that the family have been offered fourteen million pounds for their land. This he cannot match. His best offer is two million. At this Amelia sadly shakes her head. Her father has debts and they will need to buy a smallholding. Two million would not stretch far. But Narinder has only just begun. For two million they could stay exactly where they are, but would have to accept a business plan and listen to expertise which Narinder would pay for.

"There is no money in dairy herds now," says Fadilah "unless they are run on a very large scale."

"We know that only too well. We are just too small." replies Amelia.

"But there is money in goats."

"Goats?"

"And sheep. In their cheese and meat. Goat meat is very popular in London. And have you considered a petting zoo with children's parties? There's a lot of money to be made there.

Steven tells me that you are a hard worker and an optimist. Are you up for a challenge? It would save the farm, make you profitable and help us too. Win, win, win! You would be our tenants at a reasonable rate of rent with an option to buy back. We would be here to support and advise - or source advice. We know the ropes. We have contacts. How long has the farm been in the family?"

"Since the seventeen hundreds."

"It's a choice between a big payout - selling out - and staying put for far less but having a new lease of life. Take this offer back to your father and assure him of our goodwill and support. We would buy your cheese for example for our guests and we know of outlets in London which you could supply for top dollar. If it is good - and it would be good - our guests would buy it too. They will be wealthy people with wealthy friends. You could sell your own meat in your farm shop and our vegetables and fruit. This could be a valuable partnership and business and we would love to grow it on."

Amelia has said nothing to any of this and I am worried that her stern expression betokens scepticism - until a tear creeps into the corner of her eye and rolls down her cheek.

“You would do all this for us?” she whispers.

“For you and for us too,” says Fadilah taking her trembling hand. “We want this area to be beautiful.”

Amen to that I say. Amen.

17. How Burroughs Reacted

“Goats? Sheep?? A petting zoo and kids traipsing about? Have you gone soft in the head, our Amelia? I know about cattle and I’m too old to change. Look how much we lost over your brilliant Pick Your Own idea. This is a dairy farm.”

“But it won’t be if you sell up. Nine generations of farmers - do you want to be the last one? If God could line them up from grandad to the first, what would they say? They all worked hard and grandad’s great-grandad bought it off the landlord.”

“They’re all gone now and times have altered. We have to think of us. These Asians, what do they know about land? They get all this farm for two million? What’s to stop ‘em throwing us off and selling the land to Bewis themselves? They’re canny business people. Have you forgotten that Indian garage bloke who overcharged me?”

“But if you met them, you wouldn’t think like that. They’re lovely people. They’d never sell to a builder. Their plans for the Great House will be spoiled by a housing estate.”

“That’s it! They’re only thinking of themselves.”

“Not only themselves. By thinking of themselves they think of us as well.”

Jack puts his head in his hands. He can’t think straight, he can’t cope, he wants to be miles away.

“Fairley hates us and I hate Fairley. Jacob’ll be in prison and they’ll all cheer. Think of the shame of that. Do you want the old women in the village pointing and saying - “That’s her. Amelia Burroughs. Her brother killed somebody.”? Let’s make a fresh start, yes, but not here. Think of your mother. Think of the money.”

In vain she argues, his mind is made up. Fairley never came to his rescue by picking his strawberries or buying his ice cream. Fairley deserves all it gets. He hates Fairley. Her mother has heard all this in the next room. Jacob has heard the muffled row from his room and comes into the kitchen.

“What’s up?”

“She wants me to sell the farm to them greedy grasping Asians for a pittance and have a field full of goats.”

“Goats? A pittance? How much?”

“Two million. We’d be tenants on land we’ve owned outright for over a century.”

“What are you on, Amelia? Crazy! We can sell it for seven times that.”

“Is that all you think about, money? Money for you to booze and gamble away?”

“I ain’t touched a drop since I was arrested. When I come out of prison, who’ll give me a job? I’ll need every penny I can get for me’self.”

“Me, me, me. What proper job have you ever had? You waste of bloody space, swanning around thinking you’re the son of the lord of the manor. You never lift a finger here. I’ve a good mind to pack up and go!”

“Pleasestop it both of you.”

“You can run the bloody farm, Jake! Let’s see what kind of job you’d make of it. You’d probably try and milk the bull.”

“Please...”

“Run the farm? I’d sell it this second if it were left to me. We’re finished here, don’t you get it? And look how you’ve upset Dad.”

Poor Amelia does not pack up and go but jumps on her bike and comes round to my place. It strikes me that she has no chance of persuading her father while Jacob is involved.

“What about your mum? Can’t you get her on your side? I’m sure if they both met our friends...”

“Dad’s always been racist. Mum is more easy-going, but she dislikes Fairley people, at least all the newcomers and their flash cars. They both want away. They hate that snooty Sparrow woman who wanted to get the Fox closed down because of Jake and his mates. He’s stopped going in now he’s in trouble, of course. God, it’s such a mess. So much ill-feeling on all sides. Don’t think it can be mended.”

“Well the Sparrows are about to fly - to Old Fairley.”

“What, leaving The Elms?”

“Yes. People are saying in the Lion that they’ve had a nice bribe from your builder to get the house demolished for a new road.”

She stares at me in disbelief. Why do that when they have the spinney? I decide it is time to tell her about the ace which Narinder and Fadilah hold over the lane. Their refusal to use it to apply pressure on her father is surely proof of their goodwill.

“They could stop all farm traffic if they were of a mind. But they’re not petty. If they were as ruthless as your dad thinks, they would be holding him to ransom. Tell your dad that.”

“Thanks, but the trouble is, he’s past caring.”

“Tell your mum, then.”

“I will. Can I ask you something? Why are you so bothered?”

I shrug. It is because I really like her, but I’m not telling her that.

“I used to play on those fields before you were born. I suppose I’m just a sentimental old fool.”

She laughs, gives me a hug and goes. It would be lovely to see her laugh more and be the indirect cause of it.

18. Uproar From The Lion

I can only think that Mr Sparrow, under the strain of living with such a brilliant and complex spouse, had taken to himself one brandy too many in the corridor of The Red Lion that evening. Perhaps in the hope of gaining sympathy, he had said a little more than he ought. He had come in simply to bid farewell to his cronies, amongst them Peter McManus, brother-in-law of one of those other two Tory councillors from Fairley who had decided to resist the charm and magneticism of Mr Farage of the Ukip, while the third, a brash estate agent, had succumbed. Feelings were running a little high. Mr Sparrow’s well-intentioned attempts to procure sympathy for his wife were doomed to failure and I think the following can be taken as a lesson in just how paper-thin friendships in politics can be, particularly when they are subjected to the fiery fumes of alcohol. He had begun by mentioning, face as glum as he could manage whilst tipsy, his wife’s old friends - her palpitations - which had returned to torment her and rob her of much of her sleep. How could the “old girl” march onwards and upwards when tired to death? The doctor had found her blood pressure to be alarmingly high and had quickly put his finger on the cause - the stress of leading the C.A.N.T! army. His advice? Not only should she take off her armour and lay down her sword, not only should she refrain from issuing a clarion call in the general muster

of Fairley militants - no! She should consider withdrawal from the field altogether and retreat to some quiet place to recuperate beyond the beat of the drum and the shrill of the fife. Mrs Sparrow had duly gone home to struggle mightily with her conscience until she had resolved, that same morning, to put pen to paper and that (now infamous) letter had been sent to the editor of the Earlstone Gazette. But this was not all there was to tell. A religious woman, erstwhile sidesman at the church of St Catherine's, she had prayed that afternoon for further guidance, and, lo and behold, not half-an-hour later, answer there came in the sound of a loud, confident knock which signified the presence, beyond that stout, studded oaken door - for she had had a quick peek through the landing window - of a couple, man and woman, in dark suits, carrying briefcases. Suspecting an attack by the Mormons, she had wrenched open the door, having rehearsed a little speech about her Anglican faith, the epilogue of which speech was an invitation to regain the pavement, position beyond her gate clearly indicated by a thin, shaking forefinger. But these turned out to be neither followers of Joseph Smith nor overdressed pedlars of plastic windows. They were agents of Bewis, the company intending to cover over that green and pleasant land behind her property with horrid little hizes. The young gentleman had been so handsome, so charming and polite that Mrs Sparrow's initial urge to tell them to go to blazes had been blunted. In fact, within ten minutes they were sitting in her drawing room, drinking coffee and sifting through a sheaf of papers. An hour later, after some hard bargaining, an offer had been made and had been accepted. This had been presented to Robin Sparrow as a fait accompli - so obviously advantageous that no further discussion was necessary!

Robin Sparrow had at first irritated his auditors, principally his tiddly friend McManus, by his phoney concern for his wife (whom everyone knew he would love to be rid of) and then infuriated him by refusing, with a smug grin, to name the amount of money offered, referring to it at first as "a tidy sum" then as an amount "not to be sniffed at" and finally as a seven figure sum which "no reasonable person - there present - all things considered - would refuse."

I have to report with some sadness that this gave rise to an unprecedented event in the corridor of the quaint old tavern. Raised voices and cries of "sell-out", "bloody old humbug" and "downright hypocrisy" rang out to be followed by a brief episode of pushing and shoving whereby Mr Sparrow rocked backwards too far and finished on the floor with a brandy stain on his shirt. Andy solemnly called time on this cuffuffle and ordered the corridor-standers to drink up and leave and to return only when tempers had cooled.

So the Tory majority on Earlstone District Council now held only by a slender thread, amongst rumblings of discontent and bad blood. The breach was an ugly one and not liable to be healed overnight. I know there were special circumstances in Earlstone and Fairley, but the very unpleasantness which the PM had tried to avoid in his granting of a free vote (just set for June 23rd) in the referendum has begun to happen here and is surely due to be repeated in Tory clubs and councils all over the country. If the PM hoped that the blue sea could part for a while and come smoothly and amicably back together, he is probably in for a disappointment.

Sam's reaction was, I think, pretty spot on.

"The man thought he could torpedo Ukip and have plain sailing over the EU in his party once and for all. Thatcher stirred it all up for Major and Major couldn't settle it. Cameron hasn't a clue what a can of worms he's opened up. It's a measure of the man's arrogance and political uselessness. Watch Boris Johnson make a stab at the leadership now."

But the issue has not dominated conversation in the bar, much overshadowed by the continued success, against all odds, of the city's football team. Andy has replaced the Xmas trimmings with blue and white bunting and flags. I have to admit that my indifference to football is weakening

and I have even started to go in to watch the televised matches. And I can even put names to faces, particularly the dashing man with the sharp chin and the Algerian genius who strolls behind and to the sides of him.

19 The Reverend Smellie

The Reverend Bob Smellie I mentioned earlier in my chronicle. He is a man in his thirties, tall and thin, bearded and bald, who takes delight in casting himself in the role of a loveable eccentric. One endearing activity consists in his cycling around the village in black cassock and dog collar greeting all and sundry with cries of God Bless! I have it on good authority that at his initial meeting with the Baptist elders he did not sport his Victorian black beard which makes his sallow face measure over a foot long. Someone said that he has a tattoo saying Jesus Loves Me on his forearm but the proof is lacking. Sadly, I have to report that he is an eccentric not as well loved as he imagines, although he keeps bees. His wife, a very serious lady, and it must be conceded, very plain who never brings make-up anywhere near her face, is very much into meditation and yoga. She has given herself the taxing job of getting a small group of large Fairley ladies, non too supple, into impossible positions in the back of the Baptist Chapel. I think if she sold tickets for spectators, she could raise quite a lot for the organ restoration fund. Her husband seems to revel in notoriety and has recently kicked up a fair old stink by declaring himself in favour of gay marriage in front of his congregation of heterosexuals who mostly married long before Leo Abse's bill legalising homosexual activity - behind closed doors - was passed into law. He compounded this by telling them that he would like to be the first clergyman in Fairley to perform such a ceremony. So far no couple have deigned or dared to come forward and the village holds its breath.

Yes, he courts controversy, arguing that that Jesus was such a one as he, overturning tables, bamboozling Pharisees and telling folk to give away their money. Amelia Burroughs says she likes Smellie - he makes her laugh, something which she does, with good reason, too infrequently. I understand what he is trying to do in good old Fairley but it is an uphill struggle. The latest grenade he has tossed into its shallow waters has caused a great wave of indignation in at least one half of the population. He has actually argued that a good Christian should vote to remain in the EU. I was not present that Sunday morning (I do occasionally attend, more for entertainment than for spiritual re-energizing) and can only imagine the gasps/stunned silence which this sermon provoked - as if God should interfere, through him, in their democratic choosing! Fortunately, Rev Smellie had his turn at writing the Christian Comment column in the Earlstone Gazette that Friday - and below I give verbatim his arguments for remaining, made on the behalf of his Saviour.

Many in my flock are asking me (do they really ask him anything?) how they should vote in the coming referendum. I prayed that Mr Cameron would find common ground with his European counterparts, and it seems to me that those prayers were answered. So, would Jesus vote to stay in or come out? Many are pointing anxiously to the number of refugees and immigrants appearing at our borders. Might they pose a danger to our security, our economy and our services? Abroad, fences are being erected and KEEP OUT notices being posted. Is this a Christian response? Do they forget that, as a child, Jesus was himself a refugee in Egypt? Many claim that we have forfeited the power to rule ourselves to a foreign institution. But they seem to forget that the Holy Land was subject to a foreign power, Rome, which was much more overbearing than Brussels. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's - said our Saviour. He would

probably think that what we render up to Brussels is trivial in comparison, and repaid four or fivefold in a wealth of benefits through trade, grants and subsidies. Jesus uses the parable of the talents to illustrate the humane advantages of trade, investment and enlightened self-interest. The servant who ventures nothing by burying his talent in fear of loss or theft is berated. Jesus would recognize, I think, the rewards of belonging to an organization whereby hundreds of millions of people in twenty-eight countries, moving and trading freely, create wealth for themselves and for others. Jealously protecting what one holds leads to meanness, altercation, retaliation and counter-retaliation. This was the story of the thirties and we all know what was the result in 1939. Indeed, the EU was born in the aftermath of war by far-sighted statesmen of the two chief antagonists, Germany and France, seeking reconciliation and healing. Blessed are the peacemakers, said our Saviour.

As human beings, do we not grow together and grow more towards the Lord, when we co-operate? Is there not joy to be discovered in the fostering of understanding? I am not telling you how to vote in the coming referendum, as I do not need to. Jesus tells you where to firmly place your cross. In the same place where his was placed for the future of mankind.

I have to admit, I found much of this convincing. But with how much of the above a congregation of reasonable people would find fault, I have no idea. However, I did detect a certain sleight-of-hand in the argumentation here and there, and I look forward to the reaction in next week's edition from the Brexit camp, as they are calling themselves. Sam kept pointing at the column when Brian looked over sternly, and zipped his lips as he did so. Andy, you see, in response to the Battle of the Corridor, had put up a notice:

IF YOU WANT TO ROW OVER POLITICS
PLEASE GO OUTSIDE WITH THE SMOKER'S. (sic)

Andy, I know, is voting OUT. Am I surprised?

The Reverend Peter Dodds, vicar of Saint Catherine's across the road, whose nickname, not surprisingly, is Ken, pops over occasionally after a morning funeral to sip a half-pint. Asked if he agreed with Smellie, he smiled benignly and muttered that his Boss would probably have far better things to do than vote. This struck me as quite sensible and in keeping with the Church of England's cautious approach to everything.

A certain Mr Lineker has promised to present his football programme in his smalls if his team win the League Championship. I might suggest to Smellie that he do likewise at morning worship if the country votes to remain on June 23rd. I am sure that he would, being an eccentric, give it active consideration.

*

This might be the right place to add these further thoughts. It bothers me that immigration is going to play a key and maybe decisive role in the referendum. It is part of the human condition - beams and motes - that we are lenient with ourselves, finding all manner of excuses, regarding our own transgressions, but severe with those of others. So it is, I think, with nations. Invasion, enslavement, rape, theft, exploitation and tyranny are anathema to us free Britons. We went to war to defeat the Nazis, and yet for two centuries we were the principle exponents of those very crimes in the building of an empire of which most or many of us are proud. This double-think

has been pointed out to me, very politely, by diplomats and politicians in many capitals of the world.

My Junior School teacher, a mild mannered old lady, used to point with pride at her pre-war map of the world, coloured mainly red, and lament that the red stopped at the Canadian border due to a “difficult” man called Washington. She loved the empire, but had a sweaty, terrified negro been brought into our room to be whipped, she would of course have shrieked in horror.

Programmes have been made by the BBC attempting to justify and excuse the empire on grounds of its “civilising/cultural” effect. I doubt, however, whether the millions of victims who lost their wealth, their freedom or their life would have chosen that civilising influence when they already had a civilisation or a culture of their own, thank you very much. Hypocrisy? I am tempted to say so or at least admit the phrase “half-deliberate blindness.”

What has this to do with immigration? Well, why would we deny to others what we sought ourselves - and still seek - a better life abroad, the chance to prosper on pastures new?

It might be illuminating, at this point, to contrast the words immigrant and migrant. *Migrant*, due to its *ae* diphthong is redolent of aspiring and lightness, conjuring a seabird hovering, soaring.

Immigrant, with its short, ugly vowel sounds decidedly underhand, like some burrowing beast, a grub, insidious and greedy, popping up somewhere on the South Downs. Those opposed to the EU seem to prefer the former word not the latter. This burrows into the minds of those least able to resist.

I have been a migrant for most of my adult life, alighting in all kinds of places and have always been treated hospitably. Now I have migrated back and find the terrain not as green and pleasant as it was. For once, I shall be frank. There are lots of fat, ignorant, ugly, tattooed people shambling about who talk of immigrants with disdain. They seem quite content to be fat, ignorant, ugly and tattooed. I wonder whether our indigenous people are in mental and moral decline as well as physical. I say only what I know a lot of thin, intelligent foreign people are thinking.

20. Jobs

I have been thinking about what Sam said about jobs and usefulness. Although he was saying what he said for self-defensive and despairing reasons, I believe he may have a point. Mumford, our solicitor friend, performs a useful service - in sorting out the tangles in a divorce, in ensuring there are no hidden snags in a house purchase, in putting the most convincing arguments in favour of a defendant (indeed, he will defend Jacob Burroughs) - but does he have to charge so much? And if people acted more rationally, his usefulness would go away. If nations were so, diplomats could be abolished too. Andy, the landlord, performs a useful function in creating conditions for conviviality and pleasure. Sam would not be inclined to include him amongst the Useless, and nor would I, but Mrs Sparrow would. How vital was the indestructibility of her father's socks? Any modern conservationist would applaud, and scaled up, his business could have produced a once-in-a-lifetime pair of socks for every pair of feet on the planet which could have been passed down the generations. Sock problem solved. Useful.

Earlstone is notorious for its charity shops. Granted, there is a market for used clothes, but why do we allow there to exist a population of needy people when their needs could (and should?) be met by the State? If those people were not needy, then these cast-off clothes could be recycled or bundled up with the bales of clothes which are collected door-to-door and then sent by sea to the Third World for poor people to wear, many of whom produced them, brand new, in sweat shops in the first place. Is our economy not, to be candid, riddled with insanity?

Perhaps in a dictatorship, jobs would be allowed only if they met certain criteria as to usefulness. In a free democracy, the worst of political systems apart from all the rest, a futile chaos reigns. Sam is wrong however to rail against services. I would never now climb a ladder and would be happy to pay a sturdy younger man to clean my windows. A free-marketeer would be disgusted with Sam's viewpoint. If, he would argue, someone is happy to pay to watch one man to dig a hole, and happy to pay to watch another man to fill it again, he should be perfectly free to do so. In a totalitarian, planned economy this would be viewed as absurd and useless, for all labour should have a socially useful outcome. Digging holes to put free-marketeers in would qualify. I am no economist, and I have a sneaking feeling that even those who profess to be experts cannot really understand what is going on. I would love to know where all our money is coming from. I am led to believe that a lot of it is borrowed because we do not earn enough abroad by making things to sell to the Germans to fund our lifestyle. Who lends us the money? Are they mad? What would happen if they came to their senses?

Does "waste" matter? If millions are spent on computer systems for the NHS which are not "fit for purpose" (=useless), does the money disappear into a black hole never to re-emerge? Surely it puts bread on the table for somebody? Earlstone has a terrible traffic problem. How much money, I was wondering the other day, after ten minutes of edging along, is wasted in petrol going nowhere? Do we worry about that? If not, why worry about Sam?

And yet, dear Sam, think about it. Do you want to be useless all the rest of your days? I agree, sorting garments which customers might wear once and throw away or take to charity shops is futile, as futile as carrying files from one desk to another. We could perhaps take a piece of paper and draw up three columns with these headings:

USEFUL

NOT SO USEFUL

USELESS / HARMFUL

Producing sugary drinks? Making toothpicks? Renovating houses? Let me state here and now that I admire what Narinder and Fadilah do, making derelict houses habitable and attractive. They make money doing something useful and they create employment and comfort. I keep wondering if there is something for Sam in this endeavour of theirs. Gardening and farming are useful. Growing food is USEFUL.

21 A Game Of Chess

One evening, after writing the above, I offer to play Sam at chess and, looking at his half-full glass, he eagerly agrees.

"Reckon you can beat me then? Been swotting it up?"

"No. But we can have a bit of a chat at the same time."

After we make our opening moves in which I naively see no imminent threat, I ask him casually what he does with his days. He does not resent the question. He goes for walks when it's fine and reads when it's not, usually stuff on the internet. I would be amazed, he says, to know what he found out the other day. I prepare to be amazed. He sits back, sucks on his pipe and begins. A current *very* high-ranking Tory, when a young man, had gone out to South Africa at the behest of his leader, accompanied by her son, in order to negotiate the purchase of tactical nuclear weapons from the pre-Mandela government which had been secretly bought from Israel. These had then been sold on by that pair at a huge profit (benefiting both the son and Tory Party coffers) to an arms trader and had turned up in the Yemen, where they were offered for sale to Saddam Hussein, later to become the notorious weapons-of-mass-destruction, used as the *casus belli* by Messrs Bush and Blair.

Sam leans forward meaningfully and winks.

“Sam. I hate to contradict you, but that is untrue. I was a diplomat. I happen to know what happened to those weapons. The Israelis bought them back. Mandela didn’t want them.”

He looks at me doubtfully.

“Well you were part of the Establishment, you’re bound to peddle the official line. How do you know what you were fed was the truth? Eh? Eh?”

“Sam, listen. Wouldn’t you rather do something more useful, than look at conspiracy theories all day and every day?”

“Like what? Sort cheap clobber for morons made in sweat shops? I think not. Your move. Watch it.”

I had been thinking about the wilder end of my long garden and of turning it into something useful. It gets the sun when there is some - rare at the moment - all day. Sam has spent a couple of days tidying my garden - a little - but I have a more ambitious plan. It could grow lots of vegetables.

“I’m sixty-one Sam and I get it terrible in my shoulders if I try digging. Come and help me dig at the bottom. We’d share the produce. You would never need buy another spud. It’s March. Stuff needs to go in pretty soon.”

“But what about my -”

“As soon as it comes on, we’ll stop and have a cup of tea. I’ll even pay you to help me. Deal?”

He looks at the board and strokes his beard.

“Checkmate. Old Speckled Hen, pint of.”

“Is it a deal?”

“I’ll think about it.”

22. Mumford And A Brainwave

The news for Jacob Burroughs, if not already desperate enough, has just got even worse. A hunt saboteur, who had travelled up from Cambridge to disrupt the Bileby Hunt, hearing belatedly of the strange death of that co-conspirator, has contacted the Earlstone police. She had filmed the whole incident involving Jacob, and the film absolutely contradicts his version of events. It shows the two protesters gesticulating in his proximity though not directly at him. He turns to confront them and there is no attempt made at this point by them to lay hands on him. Only when he whips one and viciously kicks the other, does the former grab his boot, in an apparent attempt to stop him inflicting further hurt. The statements which Jacob and his allies have made regarding provocation and an original assault on him are thereby proven to be a pack of lies. Jacob has no defence and no alternative but to plead guilty.

Jacob has no defence and no alternative but to plead guilty.

After Amelia has told me this, I decide to approach Mumford, his solicitor, one evening. I have never exchanged more than a word or two with him because he makes it quite clear that he prefers his own company. He drinks one or two pints early on in the corner of the bar on a high stool and never stays long. Being a Leicester Tigers man who despises football, he is usually on his way when the teams come out on the big screen. He is quite a big fellow, offputting as I said, with thin, combed straight-back hair, saying little as he reads his Daily Mail, though I reckon he does not miss much of the bar gossip. The odd growl of agreement with Brian or disgust at something said by Sam does not escape my notice. It is Monday March 14th and the bar is filling with Leicester fans as their miraculous team prepare to take on Newcastle United with this and seven more games separating them from glory or despair. Mumford curses the Sodoku puzzle as usual, clicks his pen and rolls up the newspaper. He drains his glass, gives the bar a savage look

and gets up to go.

I follow him into the passage, still empty in the aftermath of the recent battle there, and call to him. Could he spare me five minutes? He looks at me in no friendly fashion and tells me he was planning to get a take-away. There is an area of seating by the log fire which everyone calls the snug. It being a Monday, it too is empty. I invite him to have a drink with me and he agrees to a half. He nods in the direction of the fire and we take a seat. I tell him that I know Amelia Burroughs and am very fond of her. I know that she and Jacob do not get on so I am wondering if he could pass on a proposal to his client without mentioning her - or me.

“A proposal? As to his case?”

“Not at all. I know that you cannot discuss his defence or the case. So maybe if you just listen? I know what a mess he is in and I know his defence is shot to pieces. I know he is disliked in the village. I know he has no character witness who can plead for him. So what I am proposing is this.....”

If Jacob can be persuaded to swallow his pride and come with me to meet the couple at the Great House, I know that they would offer him work in the garden. One of the Poles has had to go home due to a family bereavement and another has decided to take up the offer of a partnership with another London property developer. The project in Bullfurrow Lane has stalled a little. Narinder, seeing an opportunity to build bridges with his neighbour, would welcome Jacob's help and be prepared to testify in writing to his willingness if all went well.

I give Mumford, who has said nothing, Narinder's phone number and email address.

“If it comes from you, Mr Mumford, Jacob might be prepared to think it over if you stress what good might come of it. At least it could do no harm and it would give him something to do other than sit and feel sorry for himself. But please don't mention my name in any of this. Just say you have heard something on the grapevine.”

Mumford's undertaker face has remained mournful throughout and his eyes have flickered all over my face quite disconcertingly, as if he is thinking a host of nasty thoughts about me and looking for my real motives. I sit back, little hoping that I have persuaded him. A sudden roar from the bar means that Leicester City have scored. My companion grimaces.

“Much appreciated, Steven. I'll see what I can do.” He sticks out his hand and I take it.

I re-enter the bar to a scene of dancing. Sam shifts up to make room for me.

“You missed a great goal, Steven. Little Okasaki - overhead kick. Goalie never smelt it.”

Leicester survive a late rally from the Newcastle to record a narrow win. The dream continues.

At this point, I ought to reveal that I have had another idea which might just fly, as they say. I have hesitated whether to outline it in detail yet in case, in another moment, I decide, or it is decided for me, that it is, after all, a lame duck. It occurred to me as I was walking along Allingworth Road one mild March day. Come with me.

After the Fox And Hounds on the right going out of the village there is a row of eleven houses and bungalows, all built in their individual style, pre-war I should say. The footpath continues for a while and gives out after The Elms. The road then snakes and bends for two miles before linking sleepy Fairley to the roaring real world at a junction with the Watling Street. It has become a favourite stretch with bikers and boy racers who take delight in ignoring its fifty mile-per-hour speed limit. Such antisocial behaviour has been another evil which Jane Sparrow had attempted - in vain - to address with the help of the all-wise and all-powerful mandarins at County Hall. But to reduce the limit to forty, she was told briskly, there would need to be evidence of a road safety issue - to which she tartly - and, in my opinion, quite rightly retorted,

via the Earlstone Gazette, that perhaps preventative measures, rather than reactive ones to a death or two, might be more sensible. She has her good points, does Mrs Sparrow. Indeed, a boy racer had over-estimated his skill in January ice and finished up in a hedge, luckily unscathed. Him, not the hedge. Mrs Sparrow's mention of this was met with the municipal silence which greets most commonsense suggestions.

Anyway, back to the road. Between the last house in the row of eleven and the spinney next to The Elms stretches the riding school. It is quite a long field and quite wide too. On the far side is a cabin - where I assume riders get changed and discuss horsey matters - and then ten stalls. In the field there are jumps of varying design. There is a ranch-style fence bordering the road and an entrance gate near to which there is a dung heap. A rough cardboard sign tied to the gate post invites gardeners to help themselves. (I make a note of this.) There are five horses out, in coats, grazing.

The other problem for Allingworth Rd, which in my childhood was almost as quiet as Bullfarrow Lane, is caused by the congestion at the motorway traffic island two miles further north-west on the A5. This has turned the Allingworth Road, at peak times, into a rat-run. The motorway itself runs through a cutting under a bridge about a mile beyond The Elms although tree-planting has made its impact on this placid scene negligible. The problem for the residents and riders here is therefore not the motorway but the flow of traffic from and to the main road, although it would be ideal as a launch-pad into the real world. It is then that I have my brainwave (see below). The fact that a stubborn, poorly man - Jack Burroughs - will naturally oppose it, means that considerable diplomacy will be needed. Amelia and Jacob will need to be persuaded too. I am convinced that Narinder and Fadilah will see sense in it as it is of practical benefit to their project.

23 Sam Sees Sense

I am really pleased when Sam turns up one morning to make a real effort in my garden. In anticipation that he would, I have bought him a new shiny spade. He quickly gets the hang of double digging and the weeds disappear in a trench. He is strong! The early potatoes I bought in late February have chitted (sprouted) and I show him how they are best planted, deep in loose soil, well watered in with rotted manure, shoots uppermost. With a rake he makes a ridge as I supervise. I show him how to plant out the pea shoots from my greenhouse, in toilet roll inners, with a wooden skewer, both for support and as a deterrent against pea-loving pigeons. Sam suggests adding a photo of Mrs Sparrow but I frown. We sow beetroot, spring onions and spinach, not in rows, as I advise but in patches. Sam says he prefers patches because it feels more natural. I ask him what else he likes.

“Beans, French beans and runners.”

“Too early, Sam. Frost. We'll sow some mid April in the greenhouse, plant out late May.”

“This is great.”

He has not once complained about that mysterious condition.

“Gardening isn't rocket science. You just read what it says on the seed packet and the BBC has a great website. Come in for a cuppa and cheese on toast. We'll dig the rest over this afternoon.”

It is time to tell him that I can get him a proper job he will love because it is useful.

“Gardening.”

“But I don't know enough.”

“The people I have in mind won't know that and you'll learn on the job. I'm always there to help if you're stuck. In fact, I'd like to help out there too.”

He finishes off his toast and wipes his hand free of crumbs, never taking his eyes off me.

“Just why are you bothering so much with me? You’re not.....?”

I laugh. “No, Sam. I was married once.”

“To a woman?”

I laugh louder. “Sam. I just like to make myself useful.”

“What happened to her, your missus?”

“She just got fed up with being away from England and the rain.”

“What was she like then?”

“Very pretty. Very clever. Cleverer than me. We met at university. But I’d rather talk about something else.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Sore point?”

“Well, let’s just say I wasn’t the most considerate of husbands - I put my stupid career before my marriage. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“So, you’re divorced. It’s just that, you know, with older, single men, you do wonder.”

“Well, even if I were gay, I wouldn’t fancy you - with that beard.”

“Cheers.”

*

Sam has gone and it is late afternoon. The sun is out and the birds are singing. I sit alone with a glass of green wine in which the sun glows like a filament of gold. Trees are coming into leaf. I can see no reason not to hope for the best in Fairley Parva, though the world is a darker, different matter. The good we as individuals can do does not stretch for many miles, but close to home we do have a little power.

My garden is and will be beautiful. I bought the house and its long garden from a couple who were moving into a bungalow on the Thorpe estate. The gentleman was no longer able to cope with the garden and was leaving it with great regret. The previous August, when I bought it, he had said with a tear in his old eye that the lovely roses were in their second bloom. His children, he called them. He even used a marker pen to show me where to prune them. He told me that the spring daffodils and tulips would be a picture.

And so they are. They have been early due to the rain and mild weather and, without a hot sun to spoil them, continue to be spectacular. The daffs are interspersed with the radiant blues of forget-me-nots and grape hyacinths. The reds and oranges of tulips - and a stand of gaudy ones with red and yellow stripes - are truly gorgeous. Forgive me that, I know that this is the age of hyperbole and the superlative, but I cannot resist.

Oh, it is a pity that I have no-one to share this with except the pigeons. They never give up trying to reach the bird-feeder which I have tied out of their way to a branch of the holly. Out of tipsy pity, I scatter a few seeds under the tree for them. I decide yes, that I shall invite the old couple back for tea one nice summer’s afternoon....In fact, why not copy Mr Sammels’, the old Canadian’s example, and have an open garden day? We could raise money for a good cause.

24 Market Day

Once a month, on a Saturday, Fairley Parva experiences upheaval. The main street is closed to traffic for a farmers’ market. Someone has told me that the venison sausages are a thing of great delight and as I am there debating whether to add a string of wild boar sausages to my purchase, I feel a pressure on my arm. I turn to find Amelia looking up at me very sweetly. We have had

no contact since I made my suggestion regarding her brother to Mumford and I am anxious for news. Low clouds are threatening more rain and I invite her to a cup of coffee in the café at the top of the street opposite The Anchor, Fairley's one other public house.

A stall outside the pub is very busy and we soon see why. This is a stall run by Brexiters as they have been dubbed or dubbed themselves. They are handing out leaflets and other materials and there is no shortage of takers. We have to pass the stall to get to the café and I cannot miss one Brexiter who is a head taller than the rest of them, even the men, one Mrs Sparrow. As if to reinforce the rightness of her quitting the C.A.N.T! campaign, she has armed herself with a walking stick on which she is leaning at an angle no less alarming than that of a famous tower. She also looks quite defiant and ready to take on anyone foolish or drunken enough (The Anchor is open early and quite full) to cast doubt on her as a truly honest and upstanding politician. Very upstanding she is not at this moment on her stick and as she shuffles around to look down the street for potential recruits to the cause, she spots me and Amelia - who is astonished to be hailed by her.

"Miss Burroughs! I am so glad, believe me, to see that your present circumstances have not kept you-u-u from coming amongst us."

This is so amazing and insolent that Amelia cannot take another step. Mrs Sparrow refuses to acknowledge me by a nod or a word and I smile to see her purpose.

"How are your mather and father? Bearing up? Me, I have to be ver-eh careful now and do a lot less than I used toooo."

This is broadcast quite loud and her other purpose of self-justification in this harangue becomes obvious. Amelia recovers her poise and tells her coldly that her parents are quite well, thanks her and moves on, head aloft. But the lady is not for spurning.

"Would you like a leaflet?"

Significantly, none is held out to me and the one offered to Amelia she politely refuses, saying that she has decided to vote Remain.

"I have more pressing matters to think about, Mrs Sparrow."

"More pressing than the referendum?" enquires a rather fat, rather overconfident youth in a tight Union Jack tee-shirt who is clutching a pint from the Anchor. "What, when the country is swarming with immigrants tekking benefits and jobs and our doctors' appointments?"

"No, no," says Mrs Sparrow in an apparent attempt to come to Amelia's aid "Miss Burroughs gets good benefits herself from the Common Agricultural Polic-eh. And she has quite a lot on her plate - at home."

Still I am ignored. As we move away I congratulate myself on having made no effort to engage the lady. There is no fitter punishment for a snubber than for the snubber to be shown that the snub has entirely missed its target.

"Nasty, spiteful woman," hisses my friend, close to tears, as we enter the café.

"You did well not to let her see she upset you."

She smiles then, recalling that she has great news to tell about Jacob.

"He just got up the other morning and said he was going to see the "Asians" about a job he'd heard about. Dad had a grumble but Jake took no notice, just took himself off and they agreed to set him on - on probation."

I wonder how easy it was for Mumford to persuade him. But would it work out? Would the court, on that dread day, be able to see a gleam in that dross of a boy?

"This friendly Pole called Jurek showed him how to get the ground right and level for turfing and he did great. Came home chuffed to bits with cash in hand."

“I’m only too pleased that Mr Mumford managed to persuade him.”

“Mumford? His solicitor? He persuaded him? How do you know?”

My error forces me to admit my part in the plan.

“It just seemed a useful way of getting him acquainted with our friends.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You could let me have your little coffee biscuit if you don’t want it. Did you have a word with your mum?”

“I tried. She’s not as stubborn as Dad but she doesn’t want to upset him. He wants the simple solution because his head can’t take the worry of another plan which would go wrong.”

“Would he ever give you full rein, do you think?”

“He might have to. The doctor called me. He’s showing early signs of Alzheimers.”

The rain clouds have moved on and we emerge into bright sunshine. The street is busy. Amelia tells me she wants to avoid Mrs Sparrow, decides to peck me on the cheek and goes the other way. Quite a crowd has gathered around the Brexit stall, sensing the possibility of street theatre for none other than the Reverend Bob Smellie has paused on his bike to deliver a sermon.

“It would be like steppin’ off a ledge in the dark, not knowin’ how far down it is!” he declares in that Hampshire accent I loathe, to shouts of NO! and laughter.

“Can’t believe that Cameron has done it. If this was the SS GB in a storm, with one course leadin’ to shipwreck and one course leadin’ to a safe haven, would the captain be wise to let the passengers decide which to take?”

“Are you saying, Reverend Smellie,” demands Mrs Sparrow “thet we and the British people are too stoopid to make the choice?”

“Either stupid, misinformed or ignorant, yes! That’s why we have proper politicians and civil servants. Representative democracy. Cameron was too scared of you lot - Ukip. He should have kept his nerve and let the Tory rats desert the ship.”

Stupid? Ignorant? Rats? I almost dread to look on Mrs Sparrow’s outraged face. She inflates herself with a slow, indignant intake of breath and regains the perpendicular she had deserted in her display of stick-dependency. I doubt whether she will be in his congregation this or any Sunday. Cries of “rubbish” are hurled at Smellie’s departing back as he pedals away. That a lot of the laughter sounds hollow seems to suggest that he has landed some telling blows on his audience. I walk by and decide to refuse the leaflet I am offered by the loathsome boy.

25. The Bookmaker

I neglected to mention the tale of the bookmaker, Parry, who frequents the corridor. Or who used to when I began my chronicle. He has not been seen since Christmas when the Leicester team defied the pundits by remaining top of the division. Recently a tasty rumour about him has begun to circulate, the source being, as usual, Brian. Tim Parry was quite a popular and entertaining regular at the Lion, ever ready with a joke or a sarcastic comment about those we are supposed to admire, A-listers and the like, but who had an unfortunate tendency to “shoot his mouth off” if he had “one too many”. In this respect, he was similar to Sam, except that Parry’s mouth “shot off” salvoes against scroungers, immigrants and lefties, thereby causing little annoyance to eavesdroppers of like mind in his vicinity. Impetuous he was, and such impetuosity had finally landed him in deep water.

This goes back to May, 2015, when I was not yet back in England and I had not heard of the City’s amazing escape from certain relegation. Parry had been in The Anchor, the pub nearest his betting office in Windsor St, when a Leicester fan, a young man, wearing a club shirt had walked

in, pretty drunk, having been around the village celebrating the team's survival after drawing at Sunderland that Saturday. Parry had decided to provoke him a little, wondering if they would manage to escape doom the following season.

"I bet you think they'll finish in the top six or even top of the table now they've escaped!"

The fan had sneered and gone off to the toilet where someone told him that Parry was a bookmaker and a Coventry City fan. On his return, he had asked him for odds on a table-topping finish. Parry had laughed. He thought that they would be in the thousands to one.

"Go on then!" had said the fan. "You said "bet" - give me odds. You're a bookie."

"I wouldn't take the money off you."

"You frit?"

Parry did not like this. His mates were in attendance and one urged him to give the lad odds. He was so confident that Leicester had no chance that he quoted him the first figure that came into his head.

"Ten thousand to one!"

"You're on!"

The lad had put his hand in his pocket and the first thing he pulled out was a twenty pound note which he slapped into Parry's hand. At first he refused it, but more sarcastic comments decided him and he put the note in his wallet. A beer mat had its paper covering torn off and became a betting slip on which Parry wrote the date, the stake, the bet and the odds. He signed it and handed it over.

Now he desperately wanted it back.

Leicester had begun the season well, beating Sunderland, West Ham and Aston Villa, but losing at home to Arsenal 2-5. Parry had smiled to himself over this reassuring proof that the big teams would get the measure of City and finish well above them. Even when they were second in November, after holding the mighty Man United to a draw at home, Parry was not bothered. However, the opportunity of laying off the bet for long odds he had carelessly spurned. Pre-season odds of 5000-1 - ungenerous compared to his offer - had fallen to a measly 25-1 after the game against Manchester.

By the spring they were firm favourites and Parry had become so desperate to trace the lad and buy his beer mat back for a lot less than he was due to win, but still for many thousands, that he spent his evenings touring the pubs of the area trying to find him. The problem was that he only had a hazy recollection of what he looked like.

"He must be thinking of going into hiding or moving." says Sam. "Six games left and seven points up on Tottenham. Parry must be crapping himself."

"Well," says Brian "might teach him to keep his big mouth shut, Cov wanker."

But how could he disappear? His shop was in the main street. I feel sorry for him. We all say things we regret later. Two hundred thousand might not flatten him but would do him a serious damage.

"He's even thought of putting an advert in the Gazette."

One thing which surprised me on my return home the previous summer, after a long absence, was the number of betting shops on the country's high streets and the amount of online gambling. Was this craze due in some way to austerity? Of course the number of addicts had rocketed - predictably - and the response of the tempters in answer to criticism was to launch a campaign with the slogan "when the fun stops, stop." This had joined its boozy counterpart "drink responsibly" - as if either slogan made any difference to behaviour, meant rather to

provide a thin veil of rectitude for the purveyors of those evils! Which reminds me - in January, I think it was - new, austere guidelines had been issued about alcohol consumption which caused uproar in the Red Lion bar.

“You’ve had your one pint you’re allowed for today, Sambo!” shouted Brian. “Don’t serve him another, Andy, or the good fairies’ll close you down.”

“What a load of rubbish! Monks used to drink a gallon o’ larrup a day!”

“Well, you’d have made a bloody nobby monk!”

It struck me that if we followed the advice, the lights would go out in the pubs all over England, but I did not comment. Sam though was just warming to his theme. He never accepted the official version.

“Anybody can define a unit,” he said, holding his hands apart and waving them about. “Why isn’t that a metre...or this much? Just because Napoleon says it was this long, we accept it. It’s arbitrary.”

“What’s that mean?” asks Brian.

“You were a referee and don’t know? You decide it’s a foul, but the linesman thinks it’s a fair tackle. Who’s right?”

“The ref!”

“God help us.”

But might Sam have a point? An inch is an inch because a Stone-ager, millennia ago, decided an inch was an inch. Or maybe a committee in animal skins did. There is no perfect inch in Plato’s heaven, of which our mundane inch is a copy. Man is the measure of all things and if the man is a tea-totaller/killjoy there will be lots of nasty units in a bottle of beer or wine rather than harmless fractions. Furthermore, a drunk told me once that the evidence gathered by physicians from alcoholics and cirrhosis sufferers, when determining safe drinking levels, was corrupted by their guilty subjects’ underestimates of their own consumption. But he would say that, would he not?

Unlike alcohol, gambling does not cause road deaths but it does ruin people. Unusually, on this occasion, it will be the tempter not the tempted, unless the tempted one disappears or LCFC fail. It is April and it is being reported in the Leicester Mercury that some gamblers are indeed, under the pressure of spouses, selling out their bets for thousands of pounds. Others are gritting their teeth and clenching their fists in hope and defiance. Another win against Southampton with those six games left means that they can relax a little. But not the bookmaker. As I write this, some are wondering if Parry has known the identity of his nemesis all along and whether his failure to turn up might have a more sinister explanation. Perhaps he will walk into his shop in May, when all is favourably settled. We will see.

26. The Plan

It will be best to outline my plan to Amelia in writing. I email her the following.

Allingworth Road is quite busy. It is used as a rat-run. I doubt very much whether the horse riders are tempted out very often to use it. If the riding school could be relocated, in a field on the far side of your farmhouse, ie, adjacent to the boundary hedge of the Great House, access to be determined, the riders could use Bullfurrow Lane and even the grounds and parkland of the house. This would be an added attraction for the guests of our friends, and bring in more income for the school. The field on Allingworth would then be available for housing. How many? A survey would answer that one, but it is a large field, so quite a few. Houses here, carrying on

from those already there, would have less impact on the countryside and surely arouse less opposition. Earlstone Council would be very unlikely to refuse permission due to the cost of appeals. This would be prime land as regards commuting and would surely command a good price. With the capital raised from the sale and with the expertise offered via our friends - and not least, by your hard work, and one would hope with Jacob's support - I believe that the area encompassing the farm and the house could be a dynamic, cross-fertilising and productive zone, creating employment and wealth for yourselves and the village, in an eco-friendly and self-sustaining manner. (Please excuse the "blurbiness" of that sentence). I myself am so confident that it would be successful that I am willing to invest in you, interest rates being so miserly. Jacob has no doubt heard of crowd funding, whereby investors offer capital at risk to small companies for higher rates than normal for specific lengths of time. Carefully thought through, that could provide you with additional funding so that you will need not sell the rest of the farm at all, with all that implies about mortgage. You do not need me to tell you that your father is not the person to steer this. You and Jacob could surely make a go of it with the right support. If this project is in place by the time his case comes up, I am sure it would impress the court. You told me he has stopped drinking and has left the hunt. Plus, plus. It is a fact that he has two ailing, dependent parents. Plus, plus. If he can demonstrate that he has turned his life around and has found a new purpose in his life, then he might escape jail. Judges will impose other sanctions if they can, due to prison conditions and overcrowding. How much of this - or whether or when you show any of this to your brother is up to you. You know him and his moods best. On your sayso, I will send this to our friends for their comments. I feel sure that they would prefer a solution which does not tie up their capital. Why am I doing this? Because I think it is good to create wealth at local level in a way that is beneficial to everyone and everything. And I remember how peaceful Fairley was. My other reason is you, Amelia. I know how you have suffered and nothing would make me happier at present to see you smile again.

I almost delete my final sentence, thinking that she might misconstrue it. But trusting to her good sense, I leave it in.

27 Jacob Burroughs

To be honest, I think that it is a blessing in disguise that Jacob is in so much trouble with the police; otherwise, what chance of his improving? If we can accept that the poor student teacher's life hung by a thread in any case - and I think we can - then the foregoing sentiment is not malicious. It is obvious to me that Jacob could be seen as a partial victim of his own over-lenient upbringing. If the parents do carry some responsibility for his lack of self-discipline, then some people of the same religious inclination as Amelia might see the kick and the lash and the threat to his freedom as part of an intervention by a Parent from quite a different quarter. I shall not comment further on that view, except to say that my meeting with him revealed a character very different from the one I had been expecting.

The lawn he had been shown how to lay looked very smooth when I called on Narinder and Fadilah yesterday. The plenteous rain has ensured that it was knitting together well. Amelia had responded positively to my email and said that she would not mention it at home yet. She wanted to know the opinion of our friends, so, having forwarded the email to them I had decided to walk out in the mild sunshine to try and catch them in.

I had never met Jacob and I approached him in some trepidation, expecting a curt response to my

greeting. As far as I knew, he had no idea who I was and no reason to be polite. He was assembling part of the adventure playground equipment and seemed to be enjoying the challenge.

“Hello, you’re Jacob aren’t you?”

He straightened up, swept back his locks and nodded.

“I’m Steven, a friend of Amelia’s.”

He wiped his hand, shook mine, smiled and winked.

“Oh no, not that kind of friend. She picked me up at the Co-op.”

He threw back his head and laughed. I blushed.

“No, no! We fell over on the ice. She helped me up.....I know the couple here....how is it going?”

“Great! Nice people. My solicitor persuaded me to get in touch. The garden is starting to look great. It used to be a wasteland when I was a kid. I’d like to be around to see it finished but after May, I’ll likely be somewhere very different. Amelia has no doubt put you in the picture.”

“Yes she did. If the judge feels you are involved in something useful, who knows? Hunt saboteurs can be very provocative - some of them invite a violent response deliberately.”

“No, I overreacted. I’d had a drink. They’ve been known to frighten horses to unseat riders, but that’s no excuse.”

“I’m sure Mr Mumford will outline your mitigation pretty well..... How’s your father?”

“Not well. He’s getting so forgetful. He had two breakfasts yesterday. It’s very worrying.”

“He’s had a lot to worry about himself.”

“Me included. I feel very bad. If I could turn back the clock...”

Ah, Jacob, if only we all could!

I leave him to it, almost persuaded that he is no longer the silly, unconscionable man I have had described to me.

My interview with Fadilah in their beautifully refurbished quarters convinces me that the plan can work.

“In principle we find the plan a good one. The details we can flesh out later. The crowd funding is an excellent idea and we would invest if the interest rate was attractive. Narinder has been searching online and found a company that advises on diversification - Amelia would find the website very useful. They can put buyers of equipment and livestock in touch with sellers - I’ll send her the link.”

“Are you happy with Jacob?”

“Very. And he has initiative. I see him very much as part of the plan. If the parents are so ill, he’ll have to pull his weight. It should help him to grow up.”

28. Bewis Hit A Snag

Having received the green light from the Planning Committee and having seen C.A.N.T! effectively emasculated by the removal of its avian head, Bewis are in buoyant mood in mid-April. There will be no sit-down demonstrations by large female Tory buttocks and there is no impediment left to thwart their plans. The demolition ball is ready to swing into that beautiful house on Allingworth Road for which an extraordinary price has been paid, and the excavators are ready to roll over its foundations onto the green and pleasant fields of Burroughs Farm. Only the contract needs to be signed.

Amelia is present when the besuited couple armed with briefcases turn up. The cute blonde woman tries to cast her spells on her bemused father as, manicured finger-licking, she turns page

after page of the contract but she might as well have tried to explain to him sub-atomic physics. Complaining of feeling dizzy, he leaves the table and goes into the yard. Amelia stands.

“I’m afraid he’s been so poorly with his nerves that he’s in no fit state to sign anything. I’m applying for power-of-attorney, before he gets much worse.”

“But it’s only a question of him signing in the boxes indicated,” whines the charming young man. “It’s only what has already been agreed in principle.”

“Leave it all with me and I’ll take it to our solicitor.”

“But how long is that all going to take? We have our timetable and fixed costs. Plant and people sitting idle costs money, lots of it. The price we pay you might be affected.”

“Well, we’re not signing anything on your sayso. Over my dead body!” declares Mrs Burroughs from her corner. “You’d best go now. We’ll be in touch.”

And so the meeting breaks up. It is then, after their departure, that Amelia sees that the time is right to tell her mother about the plan, as if it hers entirely.

“So that would mean we could stay here, Dad could stay here till.....”

“Yes. As long as there are Burroughs left to inherit it, this stays Burroughs Farm.”

“We keep the cows?”

“Yes. As our friends.”

“But won’t it go wrong again, like the strawberries?”

“No, we’ll buy in proper advice and get investment. I plan to involve the community. You’ve got to trust me, Mum. I’ve got so many ideas. And this will be good for Jake, too, believe me.”

“The milk. My grandma used to make cheese. It was delicious. I bet I’ve got the recipe upstairs somewhere.”

“You won’t be able to do it - with your hands.”

“No, but you - or Jacob would. Why shouldn’t he learn?”

29 Stone The Crows

Late April, and there are crows nesting in the magnificent ash tree at the very bottom of my garden. Granted, they are not the most musical of beasts but their antics keep me amused as they chase off pigeons and starlings who dare approach or, worse, land in their tree. Since the foliage grew to obscure their great sticky nest I have had to imagine their most private domestic arrangements but they are kept very busy flying in and out in response to the needs of their fledglings.

My neighbour at the rear is a builder. He drives one of those open-backed monstrosities called a Barbarian. He is most probably a giant of the gentle kind - but, if so, why would he identify himself with barbarians? As I sit one pleasant Saturday afternoon on my patio, this thought will cross my mind again not long after a stone has landed perilously close to the pot which I have planted up with pansies. It cannot have fallen out of a cloud. Then a sound between a crack and a thud on wood draws my attention to the tree. Peering through the hedge into my neighbour’s back, garden I see a boy of about thirteen of the chubby variety holding a catapult.

“Excuse me, young man,” I enquire very politely but firmly “what do you think you’re doing?”

“Stoning the crows.”

“Why?”

“Cos they’re noisy and wake Josh up.”

“Is Josh....?”

“Me stepdad.”

“Does he know you’re doing this?”

“Mum told me to do it.”

“Could you ask your mum to come out for a word?”

He throws the weapon and a handful of stones down and shouts for his mother through the back door.

“What?”

“Bloke next door wants a word.”

I await her arrival with some trepidation as the WHAT has been almost as raucous as the caw of the crows. I am rewarded by the appearance of a very pretty lady of about thirty, blonde, peachy-faced and nicely proportioned. I expect the matter to be resolved entirely to my satisfaction.

Alas, the discrepancy between appearance and reality never ceases to surprise and disappoint me.

“Hello, I’m Steven -”

“Whassup?”

“It’s your lad.”

“Wharrabaht him?”

“His catapult. Stones are landing on my patio. Besides, the tree is part of my property and I would really appreciate it if he ceased firing stones into it forthwith.”

Arms folded, she says something vicious to him which I cannot catch. Thinking the matter resolved, I let the hedge spring back. But as I walk back to my garden chair to my cake and glass of wine another stone bounces up on my patio. Instantly I return to the hedge and hail the retreating lady.

“Excuse me!”

“Now what?”

“Surely you’re not letting the boy keep firing?”

“Course I am. The birds are a bloody nuisance croaking all day and night. Phoned the council and of course the idle sods said it weren’t owt they could deal with. So we’re doing it ourselves. I’ve told Kyle to aim lower to avoid your precious patio.”

“Well, apart from the fact that he’s just hit it again - that tree is in my garden.”

“But the branches with the nest overhang mine. If I wanted, I could get a bloke in, have all the branches cut off, dumped in your garden and send you the bill. I know my rights.”

“You can’t just vandalise a tree and kill the birds because they make a noise. It’s wrong.”

“I can do exactly what I want on my property. Carry on Kyle.”

“If he does, I’ll call the police. It’s an offensive weapon and he shouldn’t be using it. What sort of lesson are you teaching him?”

She comes closer, trembling. I notice a tattoo on her shoulder and see her eyes are rather cloudy. That first impression of loveliness is fading fast.

“You can’t lecture me on how to bring him up, you old fart. He’s my son and he does what I say. End of.”

“He’s breaking the law and you are abetting him. It’s illegal and immoral. And I won’t have it.”

“Crows aren’t protected.”

“They are. By me.”

“Immoral. Killing a crow! When my partner comes home, *we’ll* decide what’s immoral. Kyle, leave it for now. We don’t want to upset the old gentleman. He might drop dead and we don’t want that on our conscience.”

In the Lion I have listened to many horrendous tales of neighbour disputes. Shaken, I return to my table, drain my glass and wonder how to diffuse the situation, without giving up on the crows. Crows, as the woman has said, are not protected but why should their existence depend

on our assessment of their worthiness? Pigeons, deemed vermin, eat pea shoots and are quite messy but their persistence near my bird feeders and their intelligence in bypassing obstacles I set them is entertaining. Vermin? Visitors from another world might so label another species were they to fly low over Earlstone, Bragwell, Coventry and Birmingham.

A single rap at my door rouses me from my reverie. It must be the builder. All of a tremble, I peek out and there is my huge neighbour, muscles straining at tee-shirt sleeves, round-and-bristle-headed, tattooed down both arms. His jeans are smothered in red brick dust and he is wearing heavy duty boots. Is one destined for my manhood? My hifi is playing Brahms 3, the sleepy movement. He cocks his ear.

“Beethoven?”

“No, Brahms. Are you -”

He thrusts out a calloused hand.

“Josh, next door. Heard there was a bit of a difference of opinion this afto.”

“About stones and crows. I don’t want any unpleasantness, believe me.”

“Me neither. Deffo. Trace has a bit of a short fuse and is a lioness when it come to Kyle. *And* she had been out for a long lunch with the girls, if you get me. Kyle can be a bugger - not mine so I have to tread careful. I’m swapping his catapult for a new computer game. It keeps the peace. Sorry if things were said. Trace is sorry too. Okay?”

“What about the crows?”

“Bloody nuisance. But live and let live, eh?”

“Live and let live. Thanks for coming round. Please tell Trace and Kyle I’m sorry too.”

“He’s looking forward to the Swansea game tomorrow. Got tickets. We could be champions in a week.....Here’s my card, if you ever want a job doing. I’m reasonable and I’m good.”

30 A Great Day Out

May at last! My favourite month. Andy has somehow come by two tickets for the Manchester United v Leicester City match, with access to the Executive Lounge at Old Trafford. Unable to leave the pub and go himself - it is being televised so the pub will be “heaving” - he has decided to hold a raffle, a tenner a go, in aid of Help For Heroes. This could be the match at which, unbelievably, our city’s team could clinch the Premier League Championship, so demand for raffle tickets is high. I know that Sam, who has not been to a match since his teenage, would love to go, so on the quiet I buy ten tickets.

On the Wednesday night before the match, Andy’s beautiful wife Angie has the honour of drawing the winning ticket and I am astonished and delighted when she draws one of mine.

“But you don’t like footy,” says Sam as I sit down clutching the precious envelope, under the envious and hateful glare of Brian and most of the rest in the bar.

“More than you think. You know I’m a historian and Leicester are making history. But I’m in two minds. I might auction them off for the Heroes.”

“Oh. Right. Yes, that would be a good idea,” says he, crestfallen, and takes a gulp of his beer.

“I mean, I don’t really understand the game and I’d need somebody with me to explain the offside rule and so on. I’ve never been to a game....”

“Never been to a game? I went to Old Trafford once. Well, for what it’s worth, I *have* studied the game and know what’s what. It would be a great day out.....even if they lost.....Fancy a pint?”

“You’ve been to the ground? Would you come up with me then?”

“Come up with you? I’d walk all the way!”

“No. We’ll go on the train.”

*

“How much??”

“Four fifty, Sir,” says the smiling Asian girl behind the bar.

“For a pint of lager?”

“It’s okay, Sam. My treat.”

We have taken the lift to the lounge and been given wristbands and a programme each, having taken a tram from Piccadilly in the rain and called in for a drink already at the cricket ground—where lots of Leicester lads were already well on the way to a state of cheerful inebriation.

But I am nervous. “What should we do if Leicester score? We’ll be amongst home fans. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Mmm...what about....putting our heads in our hands and shouting “Oh, great” in a disappointed voice?”

“That’s good advice. But we’re not wearing anything red. Won’t we be suspected?”

“Just keep calm and do what I do,” he replies.

Ten minutes before kick-off, I manage to get him out of the lounge and we take the lift again up to the highest floor and step out onto the precipice of a huge red cauldron with a green base. The pitch. The sight takes my breath away. Apologetically, we edge along to our seats in the middle of the fourth row, causing supporters to stand and let us past. As we sit down, the teams emerge and the noise is truly deafening.

When United score after ten minutes of constant pressure, the noise is painful. Diplomatically, I stand to clap politely while Sam stays firmly and sternly seated, arms folded. Nobody seems to notice this or care. I realise then that many people in our vicinity have likewise not reacted.

Behind us sit a row of ten Japanese draped in red scarves, also unresponsive. This puzzles me. Is this part of their tour package?

I am alarmed when Sam begins talking to the man next to him. He is also wearing no colours.

“You a Leicester fan?”

“No, mate,” says he in a broad Leicester accent. “I’m neutral.”

Sam has had four pints. “Well put yourself into first and piss off, then.”

“Hey?”

“Joking pal. You’re from Leicester, and so am I.”

He claps him on the shoulder, the man smiles, puts his finger to his lips and I start breathing again. Ten minutes later, the thing I have been dreading happens. The big black fellow called Morgan rises above the United defence and heads the ball into the net. There are more local shouts of YES than I expect and I put my head in my hands. Through my fingers I can see the blue wedge in the far corner of the stadium jumping up and down in joy. But Sam has not taken his own advice and is standing arms aloft. Images of nineteen seventies hooligans, sideburned and tank-topped, flash in my head and I await a nasty reaction. To my relief there is none. The Japanese are even smiling as Sam does a little dance.

The Japanese do not return after half-time and I wonder if they are already on their way to do The Beatles Experience in Liverpool. The second half is a stalemate and Leicester will not be crowned champions that Sunday afternoon. Sam keeps on about a “good point” on the tram back to the station but I can tell he is disappointed. His spirits lift, however, when he spots a supermarket on the concourse. It sells Old Speckled Hen in bottles and he can manage two in each coat pocket. He is not the only fan with bottles and a long column of tipsy standers entertain

the seated passengers with their repertoire of songs all the way to Naunton. Did I enjoy the day? I have to say I did. The next time I see Sam, in fact the very next evening, he drapes a blue and white scarf around my neck. The bar is “heaving” because Andy is showing Chelsea v Spurs. Spurs must win to have any chance of hunting down the Foxes. At half-time the bar is glum because Spurs have taken a two goal lead and cannot surely be caught. At full-time, the whole pub is dancing and doing the conga into the street. Chelsea have scored two goals and for the first time in their long, mainly inauspicious history, Leicester City Football Club are League Champions!

*

Later that week, a scene of great pathos was enacted in the corridor of the Red Lion. I was not present, but Sam took great delight in telling me of it. Parry, the bookmaker, having waited nervously for his beermat-bearing nemesis to arrive in his shop to claim his immense winnings, had relaxed enough when two days had elapsed without his arrival, to resume drinking at our local. He was downing a double Jack Daniels and laughing with his cronies when the front door opened with its customary creak (Andy refuses to oil it perhaps for sentimental reasons) and a rain-bedraggled youth entered. Andy instantly asked him his age and was told seventeen.

“Then I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to leave.”

“Don’t want a drink. I’m doing the rounds looking for a man called Barry or Parry, a bookmaker. He owes my bro money.”

The rosy colour in Parry’s cheeks drained and the silence was deafening. This alerted the young man to the presence of his quarry.

“You Mr Barry?”

“N-no, Parry. What do you want of me?”

“Two hundred thousand quid.”

Conversation in the bar stopped and Parry dropped his glass. He looked as if the blood in his veins had frozen. He sat down on a chair in the snug and gaped.

“Are you crazy?” he managed at last.

“No.”

“Have you got a betting slip?”

“No. A beermat.”

Parry began to cough and choke. Many faces from the bar appeared around the door to witness the demise of Tim Parry who was not the most popular of regulars at the Lion. He had no sympathy for gambling addicts, arguing they came to him and not the other way round.

“My brother would have come, only he’s shy and he reckons you’d tell him to get lost. Because the beermat’s been washed.”

“Washed?”

“He was sick down his jeans when Leicester stayed up last year and our mum put ‘em in the wash. The beermat was in the pocket. You can read it though, just about.”

At this point, the broken man straightened up and demanded to see it. According to Sam, who caught a glimpse of it, most of the ballpoint pen had vanished. Parry looked it over and handed it back.

“If a betting slip has been adulterated, it’s void,” he declared most officiously.

“Tain’t been adulated - it’s been washed.”

“All you can see is a pound sign and some faint zeros, and the odd letter.”

“That’s your signature, look - an A and a Y.”

“That could be anybody. You could have heard about the bet and made up this cock and bull story.”

“You admit there was a bet then!”

“Yes. But this piece of pap proves nothing. What if the real McCoy turns up tomorrow?”

“Do the honourable thing, Tim and give the lad a thousand.” exclaimed Sam.

“You mind your own business.”

“My brother just lost his job,” wailed the lad.

“Not my problem. It’s void and I’m off.”

“At least give him his stake back,” jeered somebody at the back.

But Parry was already opening the door and leaving. For good.

31 The Brexiter

At the end of London Rd on which stand The Red Lion and the church, there is a row of five small detached bungalows, a unique feature of course in the housing landscape of this green and pleasant land. On my travels I have never seen anything remotely similar. Whatever the residents do to them they cannot help but be ugly and these were particularly so, with pointy roofs like goblin hats, two front windows like large horrified eyes and central front doors like mouths agog. These were the abodes of the elderly conservative readers of the middle?-brow press and the expression on their stony facades bore a remarkable resemblance to what I imagined were the faces of their people as they never failed to be appalled and astonished by the nefarious deeds of bureaucrats, eurocrats, asylum seekers and left wingers which those tabloid encyclopaedias of woe and despair daily exposed. Perhaps a combination of such propaganda and the shape of the bungalow gradually turns them, indeed, into gnomes and goblins, furtively and suspiciously walking their terriers at dawn and twilight so that they might get away with leaving a poop unscooped. Perhaps I have been talking too much to Sam. Perhaps they are thoroughly nice people. Some of them. I shall return to one bungalow in particular in a moment.

After the euphoria of the City football team’s success and the huge celebratory parade in mid-May - and the multi-ethnic unity of the city in that celebration - thoughts are turning anxiously to the impending referendum. The Out campaign have decided to concentrate even more on immigration which I find rather worrying - the campaign I mean. I think that the more one travels and mingles with “foreigners”, the more one realises that we are all very much the same under our skins. Friendship, family, prosperity, health and security are our main concerns. Xenophobia is surely the most basic - base? - of instincts, many thousand of years old and which has impregnated our RNA down the generations, founded on the fear of the Other due to tribal movements and the stress, conflict and mayhem these have created. Granted, the native Americans helped the new settlers to survive, perhaps because they initially saw those first few, ailing and perplexed, as no threat to their hegemony. The Vikings might have been welcomed at first, for all we know, by the curious coastal dwellers of Eastern England. Perhaps xenophobia is well rooted in betrayal.

But this is 2016. Poles have not come amongst us with crossbows and muskets but with spanners and wrenches to repair our water pipes. Others serve behind counters and bars. A recent visit to Stratford-on Avon convinced me that the town would shut down without them. In the fields of Eastern England, eager young migrants stoop to pick crops while many of their English counterparts, unable or unwilling to stoop, stay at home, allegedly, with their X-boxes. The myth of the scrounging, unscrupulous immigrant, sedulously repeated, is taking hold, I am saddened to

say, of an intellectually vulnerable British Constituency.

The bungalow I referred to might stand as a symbol thereof. One evening Sam comes in fuming. "What *is* a bloody bungalow? Half way between a house and a coffin. Bloody fascists."

He sits down next to me and drinks half of his pint of Hen in one go. Brian looks over half-amused. He lives in a bungalow.

"What's up wi' yer now, Sambo?"

In the front garden of the bottom bungalow a banner has been erected on two posts

STOP IMMIGRATION - VOTE BREXIT JUNE 23RD

The bungalow belongs to a grim, silent man who used to be the landlord of The Anchor who had been fined and evicted for showing bootleg Premier League matches. The question of what had happened to the darts team money had, in addition, never been resolved. He is married to a grim, silent woman of small stature, distinguished by a grey crewcut.

"Rich as Croesus and as miserable as sin," declares Sam "That Cowie couple."

"Oh them. How has he upset you now?"

"Drive past, Brian, you'll see. I phoned the police, but of course, it's nowt to do with them that they've got a racist banner in the garden."

"No politics till June 24th," growls Andy. "It's a free country. If he wants to put up a banner in his garden he has every right to do so."

"That's political! You should bar yourself."

Sam gets up and strides out in the direction of the toilets. Andy and Brian share a joke. In Sam's absence I am told that the Cowies had bought an ailing pub in Sibcote, promising to turn it round, but had sold it as building land within a month as three building plots. And now I find out Sam's main reason for hating them. Cowie had barred him from the Anchor. There had always been a Daily Express left on the bar and Sam, incensed one evening by its anti-refugee headline, had taken it into the toilet and left it symbolically on the seat.

Sam returns from the gents and swears retribution for the banner. When Fairley is asleep he is going to get up and set fire to it. Not Fairley, the banner. Six people hear him say this. Well, who would believe it? Lo and behold, two mornings later the banner is mere ashes amongst the marigolds between two blackened posts. Sam comes in and swears blind that he had nothing to do with it. Have the Cowies reported this heinous crime to the police? Has anyone in the bar snitched on Sam? He swears on his mother's life he was too ill with his disease to get up to do it. I believe him. Do even the Fairley Brexiters dislike the Cowies enough to do the dastardly? Is there a Remainer, just one Remainer in the village? Was there a bald man in a black cassock flying around on a bike at three in the morning with a cigarette lighter?

Me, I was sound asleep.

32 Trouble Abroad

May, which has been chilly and disappointing, becomes June and the first nine or ten days are very fine. I sit out in my garden and eat salads. Jacob Burroughs has appeared in court and has pleaded guilty to the charge of grievous bodily harm. The prosecution has not belaboured the point of the teacher's peculiar death. Sentencing has been postponed till late June while the court considers psychological reports, Mumford's plea of mitigation and our letters of support. The farm project has been placed on hold until the outcome is known. I consider asking the brother and sister around for tea but decide to wait until all is resolved. My own hunch is that Jake might, just might, get a suspended sentence again.

The fine weather turns to chill and rain as the football tournament in France gets underway. The

England manager, Hodgson, has disgusted the bar by leaving at home Leicester's fine midfield player, Drinkwater. In spite of his name, Sam is particularly scathing.

"You watch, it will be all Spurs players. Vardy will hardly get a look-in. Anybody'd think Spurs had won the title."

But the team selection is soon overshadowed by hooliganism in Marseilles, although it is unclear whether drunken English fans are more sinned against than sinning in clashes with Russians.

Brian declares that he is ashamed to be English. Sam says that Brian should be ashamed to be a Brexiter when it emerges that English fans are singing about hating Europeans and voting OUT.

Brian ignores this, pointing up at Andy's notice.

"I bet the French'll be glad if we do vote to leave," he whispers "and the rest."

The lack of evidence regarding the blame for the violence leaves Sam incredulous.

Considering the amount of scrutiny by the media and amateur film capture why are the facts not known?

"And look at the security! They couldn't organize a five minute orgy in a brothel. Mate of mine, French teacher, used to come in here till he got the sack for putting his paws on a girl - which he denied - said he hated the bloody French and only learnt it so he could insult them properly."

"But you want us to stay in the EU with the bloody French!" exclaims Brian.

"Politics!" shouts the rest of the bar and Andy.

"Yes, because we can't get rid of them and they can't get rid of us. We might as well hate each other as friends."

Concerning the football, I am no expert, but even I can see that England's play is lamentably slow, rigid and constricted. Sam says it reminds him of Subbuteo.

June 16th

A lovely woman, Jo Cox MP, has been gunned down in the street. Sam is in tears.

"You wonder why I'm pissed all the time? Why isn't everybody? And what does Cameron do, that slimy fraud? He pretends he's upset and then uses her in referring to Remain because she was a Remainer. As if people needed him to point it out! Doesn't he think he's subtle! And as for Brexit, their propaganda could come straight out of Josef Goebbels textbook."

"I'm sick and tired of it," whispers Brian. "Been Brexit since well before February and nothing'll change my mind."

I fear that much of the country is simmering with resentment against politics and austerity and is using the EU as a scapegoat. I reassure Sam that when many Brexiteres are confronted with the ballot paper they will calm down and choose the devil they know.

On June 23rd I go to bed immediately after the Newcastle result is declared. Expected to vote 60-40 in favour of remain because of many EU grants to the region, the city however records a margin in favour which is much more slender. The next morning my worst fears are confirmed. We have voted to leave.

33 Sam's Brush With The Law

The next day, Friday, Sam is worryingly quiet. Naturally, the Brexiteres are celebrating while Sam sits in his corner supping and staring into space. Andy's notice has come down, so Brian and his cronies - even Mumford - are debating how to spend the millions which GB will save every week. Biffen, the Liberal and a Remainer is scoffing at their optimism.

"Why do you imagine that this government, notorious for its meanness, will start spending

money like a drunken sailor? I thought you distrusted politicians! Talk about credulity. They'll give it away in tax cuts to the rich, and he'll cut corporation tax for Tory donors, you mark my words - "to stimulate the wealth-creators." Trickle-down. What rot!"

This is predictably met with denials, so Biffen, head shaking, puts on his coat and leaves. Brian decides to rile Sam.

"Quiet tonight, Sambo. Cat got your tongue?"

Laughter. Slowly Sam looks up at their gloating faces.

"He who laughs last, laughs loudest," he says. "You wait till they reduce your old age pension and the interest rates on your miserable building society accounts are negative."

In the opposite corner - I mentioned them earlier - sit five retired policemen on Friday nights.

"And they reduce his benefits," whispers one, smirking. But Sam hears. So does the bar.

"And they'll cut the police not that that will make much difference."

The one with his back to Sam, a John Bull-faced man with quite a paunch, turns to ask him less than courteously what he means by that "sarky" remark.

"Well, let's be honest, it's DIY crime-solving these days. Look at my landlord, Tom Moore. He reports somebody in his back yard last December and how long does it take 'em to come out?"

The policeman continues to stare. I sense trouble.

"Any guesses?" asks Sam. "An hour? Two hours? Three? Give in?"

"You tell me."

"They never did. Tom's an old man. He could have been broken into a beaten up and his mashed up face could have been on Midlands Today. It's a good job I was there."

"How do you expect the police to do what they used to do with less resources and less manpower?"

"Fewer resources..... I don't. But if we take the law into our own hands, who do the police come down on? The villain we've clouted? No, on us, cos we're an easy kill, cos we admit it."

"Complete bollocks."

I try to get Sam's attention and shake my head for him to desist. The atmosphere is tense. It being Friday, Andy is very busy at the lounge bar.

When I left England the police were universally respected. It could be conceded that their fall from grace is largely their own doing. Now Sam is getting into his stride, talking about Steven Lawrence, Milly Dowler, Hillsborough and Orgreave.

"So don't you have a go at me, my friend. It's you that talks complete bollocks! You couldn't catch a mouse with three legs. Look at you, you fat bastard. Did they employ you to give the obese villains a fair chance to get away? And I bet you're a Brexiter."

The man is purple with rage. He stands. His chair falls over. He invites Sam to discuss the matter further outside. Sam shakes his head. He declares the acceptance of such an invitation beneath his dignity. Fortunately, the man's friends persuade him to sit down.

"What's going on?" asks Andy, now aware of trouble. The five men empty their glasses and stand. One tells Andy they will drink elsewhere from now on.

"We don't like some of the company you keep, Andrew," says one of the other three.

They leave. Andy asks us for an explanation.

"Summat and nothing," says Brian. "The cops didn't like being told about Hillsborough. By Sam. But they started it. Called him a scrounger. And it was my fault too, winding Sam up."

I hold my breath. Sam is staring at nothing again, holding his glass tight, so tight that his brown knuckles have turned white. Andy clears his throat.

"Ah well. Shan't miss 'em. They come in here and sit for an hour on one pint. My cousin was at

Hillsborough. Useless bastards stood and watched.”

Mumford grimly folds up his Daily Mail and stalks out. Tommo pats his dog’s head and shakes his own. Somebody sighs. I empty my glass and go home. It might be a good idea to stay away for a while.

34 The Chapel Of Unrest

I bumped into Brian at the Co-op. A fantastic rumour had come to his ears regarding a falling-out at the Baptist Chapel, or rather in the hall at the back where Mrs Smellie’s yoga ladies were congregating on a Friday morning as usual, the day after the referendum. One of the ladies, quite a large one as I recall from the farmers’ market, the wife of a Ukip grandee in Fairley, who could spend the rest of eternity trying to place her foot below her ear without quite getting there, had arrived, understandably, in a state of euphoria. It was later alleged that champagne had flowed in her house - and into her - well into the night as the result became clear.

By contrast, Tilley Smellie, a Remainer, was in a particularly sober, severe mood that morning which put some of the ladies, who had already been listening to their friend’s joyous outbursts, into a state of high alert. Their bodily exertions were, perhaps sensibly, always prefaced by prayers and Mrs Smellie did not take kindly to a prayer exclaimed by her pupil when contributions were invited from the floor. Verbatim I cannot quote it, but the prayer - and responses - were supposed to have gone something like this.

“Oh Jesus, thank you! Thank you for freeing us from the clutches of the EU! Now we can start to free ourselves of the immigrants swarming around us, taking our jobs and our benefits....”

To be fair to her, the lady was a newcomer to the church, and, being devoted to her several dogs, not renowned for her human sensitivity. And could she be expected to know just how intolerant Tilley Smellie could be of dissent from her own *Weltanschauung* ? Such intolerance was one of her major weaknesses. During this prayer, the other ladies had been unable to suppress the urge to open one eye and squint at Smellie.

“Well!” said she when the prayer had finished “I cannot say Amen to that!”

The lady was bemused.

“Why not? Aren’t you pleased to be liberated, Tilley? Jesus has answered all my prayers.”

“Mrs Joyce is it beyond your ability to comprehend that there were nearly sixteen million people who do not share your view and who are, as I am, as desperately disappointed this morning as you are overjoyed? I also take great exception to your implication that Our Saviour would be in favour of turning His back on millions of people and retreating into a state of exclusivity beyond sharing and love. Did He not tell the Pharisees that His was a message for Jews *and* Gentiles?”

“But you have to admit there’s too many on ‘em.”

Ah, that hackneyed phrase parroted by so many readers of the dingy, stingy press. Do they really prefer their owners and editors to save them the trouble of thinking?

“Well,” said Mrs Smellie “I would expect such a slogan to be repeated ad nauseam in the bar of the Anchor but to hear it a place of worship is, to my ears, truly shocking.”

At this point, she surveyed the ladies on the floor in expectation of nods of approval, but saw only apprehension. In order to put the heretical lady further in her place and convince, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the rather uncomfortable onlookers, she then decided that further biblical references were required.

“When Our Saviour was confronted by the five thousand, did He say to his disciples, there are *too many on ‘em*? No! He had the five fishes and two loaves taken out into the crowd - and all

ate their fill. Were there too many? How many baskets of food were left over?"

The ladies looked at each other and shrugged.

"Twelve. Twelve baskets, such was the generosity and overabundance of Our Lord's love for his people. All of his people - because the crowd was diverse."

This should, of course, have provoked rapturous applause but sadly it did not. Mrs Trumper, a confirmed Brexiter (as I suppose were most of those doughty ladies) turning first to her friend Mrs Joyce, now made a sincere though foolish attempt at conciliation.

"Andrea, you have been a *little* over the top this morning. Tilley, that was a miracle what Jesus did. *We* can't magic up school places, doctors' appointments and jobs for our young people. And we can't catch our own fish anymore. Look at Fleetwood. I think that where numbers are concerned, the numbers are a bit, you know -"

"Right! Enough said! The Yoga Girls is hereby suspended, disbanded, aborted. Thank you."

The adjoining door to the chapel was slammed on the ladies, aghast in their leotards at the thought of a life without yoga. Ah, the unimaginable consequences of Brexit! Would this be just the beginning of social breakdown at local and national level? Could the split be healed? Would all be forgiven by next Friday? Would their fees, paid in advance, be refunded?

The pound has gone through the floor, holidaymakers stare glumly at the fewer Euro notes they have received for their ailing pounds, the Tory and Labour parties suffer internecine strife - (and the main protagonists will soon have either fallen on their swords or will have been stabbed in the back.)

There is much Churchillian rhetoric out there at present and I shall allow myself to parody one of his most famous utterances; that never in the history of British politics has so much changed in a day on the basis of such fatuous predictions and counter-predictions of a future we cannot know, by the votes of a people so little informed and therefore ill-equipped to decide rationally one way or the other.

35 Frozen Out

On the Thursday after England's extraordinary defeat by Iceland, I decide to return to The Lion, hoping that the rather unpleasant euphoria caused by Brexit will have been duly punctured. Sam is sitting in the bar on his own. The large television is off. It is eerily silent. Andy's pretty barmaid, Zelah, is examining her nails. As I join Sam I see his left eye is black and swollen.

"Got punched in the bogs when I turned round from the urinal. No idea who it was. He called me an effin' Paki."

"Good God."

"My fault. When Iceland equalized I couldn't help but cheer. You should have heard 'em all when we scored first, shouting how we were going to beat the bloody Europeans. I couldn't help it. Then the second goal. I went into the bogs for a good laugh. He followed me in."

He drops his head. He feels lost, he does not belong.

"I can't work. I can't help it. Nobody believes me or listens to me. They lap up all the twaddle like greedy dogs. I'm a stranger in my own land. Maybe I'll move to Scotland. Maybe I'll lie down in the road."

I buy him a pint.

"Cheer up. We'll go and see friends of mine tomorrow. They have a great garden that needs attention."

"I'm not up to it."

"I trained you, remember! The spuds and beetroot are coming along fine. You have green

fingers.”

He examines them for greenness. He agrees to meet me at ten thirty by the post office.

But when we arrive, buffeted by the unseasonal wind, at the great gates we find them padlocked. There is no sign of anyone. There are no lights on in the house this dull morning. The gaudy play equipment on the left looks somehow sinister. I call out a few times but no-one appears.

As we retrace our steps in silence, I catch sight of Amelia patting the rear of a cow in the field. She sees us and comes to the gate, looking sombre.

“They’ve gone. Jake turned up at eight and found Fadilah locking up. In tears.”

“What on earth...”

“They were out for a meal in Allingworth after the Iceland game and a car stopped. A youth jumped out and hit Narinder with a baseball bat. He’s recovering in the Infirmary. But they’ve decided to put the house on the market for what they can get. Project’s finished. We’re phoning Bewis. We’re going.”

“No, no. Let me speak to Fadilah. I’ll email her. Give me a day.”

Dear Fadilah,

We are all appalled at what happened to Narinder. Amelia tells me that you have decided to sell up. Is it simply because of the attack? Most people would condemn this, most people who have voted OUT too. I know that the vote has legitimised the expression of racist sentiments but the forces of decency far outweigh those of narrowness of heart and mind. I therefore urge you to postpone a decision until the horror of Monday night has faded. Ours is a marvellous and unique project for the future.

Within an hour, I have her reply.

Steven,

You need to know a little more background to understand our decision to go. I am, by birth, a Muslim and Narinder is a Sikh. We are apostates. There are people in my wider family who would kill Narinder and probably me too. This was the real reason we came to Fairley. We had been threatened. We are hated by some of our own people and by many of yours. It is no use pretending otherwise. On our walkabouts in your village we have felt uncomfortable. People’s eyes tell what they think. This referendum vote is just the beginning of a descent into a new era of intolerance and inter-racial hatred, evils which you combated with great sacrifice in the war. We cannot believe that you who laid sound foundations in 1945 for a new Europe based on cooperation not conflict are turning your backs on it now - your own child! We mean to emigrate - I shall not tell you to where - it is our great secret - to escape what must now become a country diminished in every way. We must emigrate while we still can. Our Polish and Latvian friends have returned to London, wondering what to do for the best. One of them, Pavel, who told me he had played at chess with your friend, also reported verbal abuse in a shop in Allingworth. Has the country taken leave of its senses, rejecting values it has promoted around the world, rejecting them for some grubby ungenerous isolationism which it dreams of turning to its advantage without knowing quite how? Our grandparents came here and were more or less tolerated; our parents were accepted, even befriended; now their sons and daughters are made to feel the cold

wind of rejection and hatred because a few ultra right-wingers managed after years of nagging to persuade a discontented majority to blame the EU for their problems. It beggars belief, Steven! We are both hurting. We feel at once that this is our home yet that many would send us into exile. Such a course we must now choose for ourselves. Until the country may right itself and regain its proper direction. I hope, Steven, that you will understand.

Yours in friendship, Fadilah

I calculate. My house is worth three quarters of a million; in the bank I have one and a half million. I have never committed to a cause in my life.

Dear Fadilah,

I hate to say this - but I think you might be - and I fully understand your present distress - overreacting. However, if you have made your minds up to go and nothing can change them, would you be willing to sell the Great House to me? If so, for what price?

Dear Steven,

Two and a half million pounds.

Dear Fadilah,

I could pay you two million almost at once if my house sells - as it should. Assuming income from the flats, I could pay the rest in instalments - to be arranged.

I wait three hours for a reply.

Dear Steven,

I have spoken with Narinder who is much better, but still adamant. We have settled on a price of 2.3 million, two up front and the rest to be paid by June 2018 at the latest. Our solicitor, a friend, would arrange all this for a small fee. His colleague would act for you likewise. If we can agree on a small percentage of the income from those flats for a number of years, based on an analysis of your books by a shared accountant, we will be entirely satisfied.

Thinking this entirely reasonable in consideration of the efforts they have put in, I give my conditional assent. Then I phone Amelia.

“Amelia! I am buying the Great House. No need -”

“I’m sorry, Steven. I can’t deal with this now. Dad’s gone missing.”

*

The motorway is rarely out of the Earlstone Gazette. I avoid it if I can by taking the B road it was meant to replace. The motorway is, let us be honest, two strips of racing madness. Cars overturn, collide and crash into the barrier because people are not driving but are driven. By an insane

desire to be a few yards further along than the rest. Why? When I left Britain the roads were less fraught and drivers more courteous. Why does the lorry driver behind me in a 50 mph limit zone insist on being a yard behind me? Why does he overtake me at 53 mph so that he can get in front by a few feet? Is he bored? The motorway strips us of our commonsense, decency and caution. It is the equivalent of the Wild West where all our frustrations with the hampered way we live are let loose. Sammels was right to hate it and leave Fairley. It is not a fairy at the bottom of the garden but a monster chasing its own tail, chivvied by the turbulence of the way we live now.

And that afternoon, the traffic grinds to an angry halt as a very poorly man slithers down the bank into the path of a charging lorry.

I am a chronicler, not an omniscient novelist and will not insult anybody's intelligence by claiming to know what thoughts passed through that man's poorly head in the last twenty minutes of his life while his daughter frantically searched the farm outbuildings and copses. It is only known that he went into his wife and hugged her, saying his head hurt so bad that he was getting some fresh air. The driver of the supermarket lorry could only remember a man scrambling down the bank and seeming to laugh, though he agreed he might have been crying - because the two facial expressions are similar. Jack will share his secret with the Almighty. Let us leave it to the coroner to guess at it and pry no more.

At the risk of appearing shallow, I shall lighten the mood and insert here my appreciation and tale of Zelah.

36 Zelah

Lovely Zelah is descended from Cornish stock and takes her name from a village south of Newquay. She is unusually pretty with glossy, dark brown hair, and an oval face which looks perpetually suprised due to the size of her intelligent, dark blue eyes. What makes her face even more delightful is its apparent unawareness of its prettiness and of its impact on those people stealing glances at it. Were you of a poetic vein, you might liken her to a gorgeous rose which is, of course, entirely unconscious of its loveliness. Under the gaze of the customers as she looks down, pulling pints, she is never flustered or embarrassed by their greedy eyes. She smiles briefly at their compliments and their occasionally salty comments, but never bothers to return serve, as if she has long become used to attention, behaving rather like a star for whom the initial thrill of stardom has worn away. Attempts, subtle and decidedly unsubtle, under the influence, to glean information about the status of her love life - her slender, ringless fingers give no clues - are rewarded with the briefest of smiles at best or a sardonic stare at worst. If she were ugly, her reticence might be judged discourteous and Andy would "let her go". Due to her prettiness, her reticence is intriguing. One other remarkable - and in these vulgar days - unusual attribute is her total absence of tattoos, at least as far as can be seen; and what can be seen is not ungenerous, for, blessed with a beautiful body, she is not too shy to display as much as decency allows.

Sam is disgusted by the attention which Brian and other late middle-aged bar-standers heap upon her as she deals with their wants, before retreating again to lean against the glass counter, to take considerably more interested in her nails than they surely merit. I always meet and match her cool blue gaze with a gaze which gives, I hope, none of my thoughts away, and am the soul of propriety and politeness. I strain to hold in check any temptation or primitive reflex to look down at her lovely figure which she insists on emphasizing by means of scant, tight dresses and tops. Sam never looks at her while ordering but stares instead at an ancient photo from 1919, to the left of the bar, showing the unveiling of the Fairley war memorial, while she fills his glass.

“Thank you, Zelah,” he mutters.

“You’re very welcome, Sam,” murmurs she.

One late afternoon in early July, when I have spent a warm afternoon mowing the lawn, I cannot get out of my mind the thought of a cold lager shandy, and so I take myself up the hill, past the post office and the memorial, on past the glorious copper beech, now in full radiant leaf, to the Red Lion. I forgot to mention that the breach in the cemetery wall opposite had been repaired and backfilled to receive a blue cedar sapling which in two hundred years will shade the road with its canopy like its predecessor, as this green and pleasant land continues to bask in the warm sun of the brexited future, reaffirmed on the television news only yesterday by a rather ugly Tory lady of that persuasion, attempting to smile - with quite unpleasant results.

I take my cold, misty glass from Zelah and saunter into the back garden to sit amongst the shrubs and tubs in which Andy takes much pride, and admire the geraniums and begonias, now approaching their best, and the delphiniums, dark blue and light blue, along the wall, and, though windblown into drunken angles, glorious and busy with bees. It is Tuesday 5th July and after a bout of cloudy, windy, wet weather we are enjoying a brief sunny respite before that “new” monster, the Jet Stream, coils itself around us again. I close my eyes against the sun in its early descent and enjoy its warmth on my face.

A tinkle of glasses awakens me. I open my eyes on Zelah not a yard away, clearing a table.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” says she, with that faint and beguiling Cornish burr she has inherited. “Been dreaming?”

“Yes, in fact I was. Dreaming I was back in Berlin, at the zoo, talking of all things to its blue parrots.”

To my surprise, she asks me in perfect German how long I had spent in Berlin.

“Neun Jahre, 1978 bis 1987. Aber, Zelah, dein Deutsch is so gut!”

“Danke. I did a degree in German and Music at Keele.”

“So you are a little too well qualified to do bar work.”

“Just a little bit. Hold on a sec.”

She takes a step to the side to look into the corridor and the bar counter. It is only Tommo and his dog leaving.

“What could I do? Teach? A friend of mine tried it. He nearly had a breakdown. The kids were so horrible and up themselves. “*Why should we learn German? Why should we wanna go Germany?*””

“I’m afraid the ignorant contempt of the English in matters European is one of their least endearing characteristics.”

“Tell me about it! You should hear them at the bar.”

“Oh, I hear them. You should pack your bags and go over there before it’s too late. You’re - what shall I say? - wasted on us here.”

She smiles that sardonic smile.

“No, no! It was not an oblique compliment, believe me.”

“I know you’re not like that. I was just pulling your leg. Well, they’d soon shut up and back off if _____ if they knew I was gay.”

Aha! The mystery solved.

“I did begin to wonder.....”

“Andy knows. He swore he’d keep it secret. It’s in his interest. They’d soon keep their distance if they knew. He prefers ’em to think I’m playing hard to get. Makes ’em try harder. Subtle is

Andy.”

“Well, why don’t you astonish them all and ask the Reverend Bob to marry you and your girlfriend?”

She puts a couple more glasses in her carrier.

“You know, when I hand my notice in, I might just do that.”

“Zelah!” bellows Andy, half-dressed, from an upstairs window. “Customers!”

“Can you believe it?” exclaims Sam later that evening. “Labour should be tearing into Cameron for putting party before country all along. Instead, they’re tearing themselves apart.”

“Well, Corbyn should do the decent thing and stand aside,” retorts Brian. “He stands as much chance of being PM as you, Sambo.”

Sniggers of derision all round.

Brian prides himself on his predictions. “They’ll have a woman, like the Tories will, mark my words. Women on top.”

“Gove’s better looking than Theresa May,” says Sam

“Oh, do shut up. Are you up for it, Zelah?”

More sniggers.

“I mean you’d get elected like a shot. You’d get my vote any day.”

She smiles her most sardonic smile and places a fresh, foaming pint on the bar.

“Not into politics, then?”

She shakes her head and her hair briefly separates before falling exactly back into place, a trick she performs very well.

“Three forty, please, Brian.”

He admires his beer.

“Very nice. You always put such a lovely head on it. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

37 In The Garden

A visit to Leicester Cathedral to see the tomb of Richard III has been long overdue. It is as magnificent as I have been told, a sarcophagus in Swaledale cream marble, polished and dotted with intriguing fossils of tiny sea creatures. Its magnificence has tempered somewhat my reservations about its twisted incumbent. I notice with a wry smile that the Church of England has been at its non-controversial best in its choice of word and phrase for its mural evaluations (“tributes” would be excessive) of the long-concealed king, such that neither foe nor friend, upon perusal, could honestly justify recoiling in disgust.

On my return that early July afternoon, having strolled around the old quarter of the city and visited the huge market, I notice that my garden gate is ajar. I assume that Sam has decided to use that duplicate key I had cut for him and put in a shift. I push open the gate and see him sitting on the path legs outstretched and head bowed, Pinocchio-like. The garden fork is sticking out of the ground and a potato plant has been dug up. New potatoes, several, are dotting the dark, disturbed soil. It is a good crop. These will all have to be dug up before my purchasers move in in early August. Is Sam asleep? Drunk?? I come closer and move around him. His eyes are closed and his cheeks are wet with tears.

“Sam?”

He looks up briefly, eyes half open, closes them again and sniffs.

“Have you been drinking?”

“No. I’m just sad and happy at the same time. This is so straightforward, so simple. This, digging up the spuds, took me straight back to when I was four or five in my grandpa’s garden
oh God.....”

“I’ll get you a cup of tea.”

I discover then that Sam had been whisked away from that garden very suddenly when his parents split up, the grandparents having taking sides with their son in that dispute. He had never seen them again and had no idea where they lived.

“Somewhere in Leicester. My mother remarried and we moved to Melton. It was cruel. My dad, God knows where he is.”

“And your mother?”

“Died. I was twenty-three. My step-dad, a man of no consequence to me, I wasn’t his, he was all his daughter, my stepsister.”

“And she?”

He shrugs.

“So you see, Steven, I’m a waif. I-I ain’t got no body, nobody cares for me.”

The liar. He is as drunk as a lord.

“And you ain’t got nobody either, me old pal, have you?”

“No, but I get along.”

“I can tell you like Amelia.”

“Of course I do. I can tell you do.”

“You my rival?”

“Don’t talk silly.”

“Do you think she likes me?”

“Ask her yourself. Come on, let’s get another spud up, then I’ll cook us some finny haddock I bought at the market. Green beans and buttered new pots sprinkled with fresh parsley. Mustard sauce?”

“Glass of white?”

“When you’ve had a sleep.”

38 In Court

Due to his father’s death, Jacob’s appearance in court was postponed. Today, July 12th, he will hear his fate. The judge, the traditional type, white middle-aged man, looks severe as he arranges the assessments and letters of support - written by me and Narinder - he has been reading before clasping and slowly rubbing his hands together. Mumford has risen to point out how indispensable now his client is to his family and their concerns in the wake of Jack Burroughs’ death. The judge looks around the court and then again at the documents on his desk before suddenly asking Jacob to stand. Amelia puts her arm around her mother who is sitting in an aisle in a wheelchair. The judge looks at them briefly before beginning his speech.

“Jacob Burroughs, this is the second time in three and a half years that you have appeared before this court accused of a serious assault. Prior to that, you lost your licence for eighteen months for driving while under the influence of alcohol. It appears from these court reports that you have continued to lead a dissolute life and have a drink problem which you have failed to address. One of your assault victims has since died although the prosecution has introduced no evidence of a link between said assault and his decease. I have therefore omitted it from my deliberations -”

“No!” wails a woman at the back of the room, and the judge pauses out of respect.

“The statements, attributing some blame to the victims, which you and associates of yours, gave in evidence have been exposed by a short film, handed belatedly by a witness to the police, as wholly false and malicious. You are, in short, shown to be a liar as well as a thug and I have taken that into consideration in determining the sentence I shall pass. Let me therefore state quite emphatically that the victims did in no way act in any manner which could be construed as mischievous or provocative - and are by such reckoning entirely innocent of blame. They were involved in a perfectly legal protest against a potentially illegal, some would argue unethical, pursuit, namely the killing of a fox by hounds. For you to lash one with your whip causing facial scarring which we have heard will never completely heal, and break the ribs of another with your boot was inexcusable and I shall not accept in mitigation that you had been drinking quite a lot of alcohol, for this was a personal problem which you had made no attempt to address. There have been many such incidents of assault on what have become known as hunt saboteurs and they deserve the full protection of the law, whether we approve of their methods or not. People such as you must understand that their dislike, indeed loathing of such protesters can never be seen as justification for taking the law into their own hands, whatever the provocation, though here none, as I have just determined. I do however take note of your decision to leave the Bileby Hunt. I have read letters by respected members of the Fairley Parva community in support of your better nature and I am impressed that you have been making efforts to become a useful person in that community. I understand that domestic matters have been difficult for you and your family and I take this opportunity to express my condolences over your recent tragic loss. In view of that and its impact on your family I have to say that this is one of the most complex and difficult decisions I have faced in a long time. Were there no or much weaker reasons to consider leniency, I should have no hesitation in sentencing you to a considerable length of time in prison. Have you now anything to say before I come to sentence?”

Jacob is red-faced and weeping. The dashing young hero of the Fox and Hounds is reduced to this.

“Your Honour, I have been a very silly man. At thirty-one I am beginning to grow up. I understand that I richly deserve to go to prison. I was showing off to my girlfriend in Bileby. I was drunk. I was arrogant and big-headed. I thought I had the right to behave just as I pleased and treat other people just as I pleased. I used to hate anybody who disagreed with me. I put myself first in everything. I never pulled my weight on the farm. I’m sorry Amelia, I’m sorry Mum sorry Dad. If you killed yourself it was partly m-my fault. Who did I think I was? A big shot in a fast car? Gambler and high-roller. I thought people admired and envied me but they hated me. But not as much as I now hate myself.....”

He can say no more and the judge tells him he can sit down.

“Jacob Burroughs, I hereby sentence you to fifteen months in prison.”

Gasps and cries and sobs.

“But I shall suspend that sentence for two years. For the sake of your sister and mother, I never want to see you in this room again.”

Compensation to the victims will be five thousand pounds each. And there will be costs.

39

I deliberately postponed recording events immediately subsequent to Jack Burroughs’ death until I had dealt with Jacob’s trial. So allow me to return. The tragedy stunned the village. It brought

home to his “enemies” what pressures he had suffered and cards of condolence poured in, one of them from one Jane Sparrow. Amelia, Jake and the mother were moved by the sympathy they received from all quarters. After the funeral, Mrs Burroughs made a surprise announcement - surprising most of all her two children - to friends and family solemnly gathered at the farm. The farm, she declared, had been in the family nigh on two hundred and fifty years. There she had lived with her husband for forty-two years, until recent times, very happily. Here she would stay, a mile from his grave in the new cemetery. Bewis could go and hurray! They would find a way because there was a will! The builder had one choice - the riding school - take it or leave it. The Dohertys, present at the wake, who ran the school and who had long been friends of the family were perturbed to hear this. This was the first they had heard of the plan, but once they had been told what it entailed their alarm turned to delight - instantly toned down in the sad circumstances. It was an idea they had considered proposing themselves before the financial problems of the Burroughs had become known.

As the prospective owner of the Great House and soon-to-be neighbour as well as ally of the family, I had been doing my own research based on the original efforts of Fadilah and Narinder. Of that, chapter and verse later. I had driven over to Allingworth to collect the keys from my friends in anticipation of the sale going through easily and of moving in during August. With Sam’s help, who turned out to be a wizard on the internet, I set up a website to take bookings for the flats. I also contacted an organization which lets holiday cottages for a five percent cut of the fee. A visit by one of their people led to instant approval. Sam eagerly agreed to be my gardener at a generous hourly rate. Not long after the funeral, he met Amelia in the lane for the first time and I saw straightaway that they would be friends. Jacob, she said, was planning to build an adventure playground on the farm, having negotiated a very favourable deal with the suppliers of the one he had installed for Fadilah. When Amelia mentioned that he would need help, Sam immediately volunteered.

Sam has been a less frequent visitor to the Red Lion and usually limits himself to two or three pints of Hen. The other evening he came in looking rather glum.

“Old Tom Moore is selling up the shop and buying a flat in a residential home in Earlstone. I’m going to be homeless.”

At the top of the Great House, accessed by the back stairs, there are three bedrooms untouched, which Fadilah and Narinder did not get round to doing up. Here had slept, in earliest times, the cook, the scullery maid and housemaid of the Morley family. These I had been intending to convert into a small flat as overflow accommodation. I had been round to my burly neighbour, Josh, stepfather of the catapulting boy, to ask for a quote.

“Sam, I’m getting Josh Spence to come over and give me a price for converting three small rooms into a flat at the back. If you labour for him for free, you can move in as soon as it’s done.”

“Live with you?”

“No. Above me.”

“You mean it?”

“I wouldn’t want my head gardener to sleep in the shed.”

“What about the rent?”

“It won’t be much.”

“Let me buy you a pint of Hen.”

“Go on then.”

“Bloody hell,” says Brian. “Sam’s buying somebody a drink!”
He brings it back.
“Thanks, Sam.”
“Game of chess?”

40 An Assignation

Sam has just silenced the bar more effectively than he has ever done with his conspiracy theories and political diatribes. What has he said? Was it a clever putdown? Is he a convert to Brexit? No, nothing he has said. He has walked in minus his thick-knit sailor’s jumper. He is wearing a jacket, white shirt and tie. And new shoes. He has trimmed his beard. Had he walked in naked, our astonishment would have scarcely been less. He goes to the bar and orders not a pint but a half pint of Hen. More gasps of astonishment.

“I’ve got it!” says Brian. “He’s going for an interview.”

“What at seven thirty?” says Andy.

“It’s for nights. He’s going to be a night watchman.”

Sam sits down unperturbed. I have just worked it out but decide to immerse myself in the Leicester Mercury.

Brian rubs his chin and holds up his finger in a state of revelation.

“I know! He’s got religion. He’s going to Smellie’s prayer meeting. Or St Cath’s - it’s choir night, ain’t it?”

“You are all very insolent,” says Sam at last. “Can’t a man dress smart once in a while?”

Andy leans on the bar and winks wickedly, looking in his book.

“Can you just confirm your booking in the bistrot for me, Mr Carnell?”

“The bistrot! *Mr Carnell??*” shouts Brian.

“Table for two? Eight o’ clock?”

“Well, blow me down with a straw! Sam has got a blooming date.”

Sam grins and gives Brian and Andy the evil eye. I draw back the paper and smile at him.

The entry of Amelia silences everyone. This Friday night, she is not dressed for muck-spreading. She has done her hair and face and is wearing an elegant blue dress with a stole. She is all elegance and, well, loveliness.

I get Andy’s attention and mouth “bottle of red” and nod in their direction.

“On the house,” says Andy, bringing the bottle and two glasses. I frown at him as he passes and he mutters “my treat”.

“Menus? Starters are on me too.”

The Red Lion bistrot is not cheap but it is good. Andy’s chef was on Masterchef.

“Try the black pudding with the scallops,” I whisper.

Sam says he has never had scallops and Amelia confesses also to an ignorance of that lovely, soft mollusc. They take their wine and disappear into the back

I am moving out tomorrow. At ten, as I am packing my clothes, I hear giggles in the street. I peek through the curtain and see a slightly tipsy couple walking arm in arm in the direction of Bullfurrow Lane.

41: Trying To Make Sense Of Us

Here are two nations between whom there is no sympathy or intercourse; who are as ignorant of

each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets.

These ideas, though expressed in slightly antique language, might describe just as well the social abyss today in our green and pleasant land, as in the year in which they were written - by Benjamin Disraeli in 1845.

On returning from my final posting in Budapest, I decided to spend a few days in London before retracing my roots in Fairley Parva. The enormous contrast in wealth and poverty in areas not a stone's throw from each other shocked me. The prices of food and drink in the most fashionable enclaves made me realise that for most ordinary British people their own capital city is a financial no-go area, indeed, another country. We of a certain age remember the cheery, put-a-brave-face-on-it newsreels of the post-war years. They exuded a sense of a common purpose - which has recently been caricatured so disingenuously by the slogan "we are all in it together". My exposure to Sam's invective and seeing the country I love first-hand with fresh eyes have caused the scales to disappear from them. I have heard of people - mainly women - doing two or three poorly paid jobs between dawn and a summer dusk in order to keep their family clothed and fed. There are food banks. A young woman of Zelah's acquaintance has an incredibly demanding and skilful job attending to the needs of young women with learning difficulties - some of whom are self-harmers and aggressive - residents of an Earlstone hostel, a job which requires her to sleep there twice a week. For such socially important work is she paid twenty pounds an hour? Fifteen? Ten? No, barely eight. The living wage. The work has been privatised to a "charity". Would that the charity treated its own workforce charitably.

Set against the poverty of so many, the bonuses of City gamblers and the remuneration of company bosses are unfair to an astronomical degree. Yet I see no political mechanism in prospect which might remedy such gross inequality. I would never air these thoughts in the Red Lion bar in the hearing of Brian and his allies.

"It's the way of the world," I hear him say dismissively. By one measure, of course, it is just so. Wealth begets wealth and the wealthy are in no mood to give any away, so the gap between the rich and the poor is bound to widen. The poor have no redress. To withdraw their labour when they live hand to mouth and when they have no union is not an option. Eager EU migrants are at hand to step into their cheap and broken shoes. The British poor and needy eye fearfully the foreign poor and needy. This is not new. Mill owners broke strikes with labourers from further afield. The capitalists hold the court cards in the economic game. Much has been made of so many working class people, seeing no joy for themselves in the Status Quo, voting Brexit. Perhaps they thought the devil they did not know preferable to the one which chivvies them day in, day out.

Thinking again of my opening quote, I must mention the notorious case of the Dewsbury woman - her story came to me in The Times which was always delivered crisp to the embassy the day after publication. She persuaded a relative to conceal her daughter and then reported her missing in the hope that she might obtain money from the McCanns' fund for poor Madeleine. The guilt of the woman was, of course, quickly detected by the police and her futile enterprise exposed. Here was a poor, bedraggled woman, toothless and ugly, a hag before her time, unprincipled and stupid. What disgust did she incite - and I must admit that at the time I shared it - amongst the aristocrats and plutocrats? Could there have been a more blatant demonstration of the gap between the two Britains - of the divide between the derelict, broken, post-industrial North and the rip-roaring champagne-guzzling casino of the South? North and South - Mrs Gaskell. I must read it. Trollope is my man at present. I mention him because it is clear from his novels that there

can never be a meritocracy. The theme of the wastrel son gambling and drinking away the wealth of his talented father is a recurring one. I think also of the Fairley Parva Morleys. The ingenious, inventive, resourceful father will rarely be succeeded by such a son. Shakespeare's Hamnet - what became of him? What music did Mozart's children compose to delight us? The undeserving inherit the wealth of the deserving and usually squander it. Is this the true "trickle-down" - it trickles out of pockets through the gaps in the pavement and enriches the lower strata? No. I have to conclude that "trickle-down" is a myth invented to salve the conscience of the rich and bamboozle the readers of the tabloid press. Sam summed it up once pungently. "Trickle-down," he said "is the rich pissing on the poor."

But what can be done? Try to be as useful as we can in our sphere, do a little good and hope it catches on....

*

Thinking of the vast and growing underpaid underclass of Britain - the badges of which are to be seen on the arms, legs, necks and trunks of many of its members - there is one aspect of their demeanour which begins to truly astonish me: their lack of anger. It would be uncharitable, I think, to explain this as due to ignorance of their lowly rank in the hierarchy of wealth, or due to distraction induced by the analgesic entertainment laid on in the media - akin to circuses for the plebeians. If so deliberate, it would imply the existence of rich, fascistic Puppeteers controlling the strings and jerking the limbs of their victims. Sam would subscribe immediately to such a conspiracy theory, but such theories are based in the world of Perceived Effects, not in the world of First Causes, a world which is, to say the least, obscure.

Is it to be concluded that their passivity implies a kind of contentment with their little lot - their smart phones, HD TVs, little noisy cars, takeaways, tattoos - so that they have no envy of the plenty of their betters, who, indeed, might as well be on a different planet? Should it be concluded that their "just enough" has been deemed by those invisible puppeteers to be just enough to maintain the peace? But what of those shocking riots and looting of city centres organized on the internet a few summers ago? 2011? A flash from a dormant volcano? But what happened to the militancy of many British workers in the seventies and eighties? What happened to their sons and daughters?

So far, I have mainly spoken and listened to middle-aged, middle class men in the creation of this account. I think I can fairly characterize them as easygoing, cynical and apathetic. Is there any idealism? To interview schoolchildren would be - yuk - inappropriate. What times we are living through. But I know of a place where I might find a safer audience. Not far from the primary school is a beautiful public garden called Pymm's Paddock, laid out as a memorial to the Reverend James Pymm, a much loved pre-war vicar of St Catherine's who, I have discovered, was run down and killed by a lorry careering out of the control of its driver, dead of a heart attack in his cab. The paddock, a lawn with rose borders and equipped with sit-in swings for infants, is a green and pleasant oasis of calm in the busy village, enclosed by a variety of specimen trees. I have noticed on the few fine mornings of this turbulent year that young mothers who have dropped off their little ones at the school gather there with their toddlers. This morning, this warm mid July morning, I open the complaining gate and wander in.

"Morning," I say to the three blonde heads bent over their phones while their toddlers fidget in their pushchairs. Had I said "I am Vlad the Impaler" the response could hardly have been more chilly. Thinking that they were lost in their artificial world, I dare to call it a "fine" morning. One

looks up now, squints at me and looks down again. Her child is yelling to get out, so she unbuckles him and plonks him into a swing. With one hand she shoves him while skillfully holding her phone in the other, flicking through pages with her thumb. She can hardly be much older than twenty but already has an armful of tattoos, a spare tyre and fleshy triceps. Should I broach the subject of my chronicle and ask for an interview? How did she vote in the referendum? Does she approve of Parliament's overnight decision - by 4-1 - to renew Britain's nuclear deterrent at a cost of many billions of pounds? The child is trying to get her attention - it sounds like "higher!" This elicits no response.

"I think he wants to go higher," I cannot help but say, with a conciliatory chuckle.

For this I am rewarded with a long, resentful stare. Now the child is wailing in complaint and she responds by taking a dummy and jabbing it into his mouth.

Thinking of Disraeli, I get up and leave.

42 More Trouble

That liberal fellow, Biffen, nearly came to blows tonight with Barry Mumford. Andy will no doubt put his sign back up tomorrow. Biffen walked in sporting a badge which announced that he was not to blame - he had voted Remain. At first, this provoked friendly guffaws and finger-pointing. Perhaps Mumford was in a worse mood than normal at his last ditch failure to solve his Soduko. Unwisely he told Biffen to emigrate to the Continent if he did not like the result.

"And take the rest of those moaning bad losers with you."

Zelah stopped pulling the pint she was pouring and almost said something. Sam beat her to it.

"Hardly the most diplomatic thing to say, Barry. But there again, you ain't renowned for your tact."

"Oh, hark who's bloody talking!" retorted he.

"Now, now gents," said Biffen. "Let's not get aerated."

Andy and Angie were having a rare night out, Tuesday being not of the busiest. Zelah was in charge and was looking a little alarmed. So I stood up.

"Mr Mumford. We can't all emigrate. We've got to live with each other."

"Ah, but some can't. They want another vote because the result was wrong in their opinion. What about democracy?"

"How democratic can it be," said Sam "if so many of the popular papers were for Brexit?"

"Nothing to do with it. People have eyes in their head and minds of their own. They could see what the score is. Was that you in the Gazette saying Brexiters have dementia?"

"Me?"

"Signed hisself Shyfox. You support them nancy footballers - you're a fox -"

"Oh is that it? The Tigers won bugger all and you're jealous?"

"- a fox - but not as shy as he might be."

"Hold on," shouted Biffen. "That's all irrelevant. What I'd like to know is - who we going to trade with and what we going to sell. Scotch whisky? And another thing - how environmentally friendly is it to have planes and ships bringing and taking stuff thousands and thousands of miles? Not that there'll be much stuff going out from our ports."

"Environmentally friendly? Carbon footprints? Typical Liberal twaddle. About time your balls dropped and you came into the real world."

Biffen turned red and his fist clenched. Zelah looked helplessly at me. Luckily, Biffen went and sat down.

"One thing that amazes me about Brexiters," I said "and I'm not saying they're demented or

don't have a case - is why, if they're so bothered about foreign interference, they never complain about so many of our companies being foreign-owned."

On my way home I felt quite pleased with the silence this had produced.

43 Developments

Around the world the news does not improve. A part of me wishes not to hear the news, though my conscience tells me that I must.

The farm project grows apace. Goats and sheep can surely be made to pay, even without subsidy. And a petting zoo for children's parties will be a money-spinner. In late July I pay a visit with Amelia and Sam to one in the vicinity of Tamworth and we are given very encouraging advice. The dairy farmer there had nearly been driven to sell up too due to the greed of the big stores. Now he is thriving. As part of a revised lay-out, he is applying for a restricted alcohol licence whereby he could sell beer and wine with food on an outside terrace with undercover options in bad weather. He is having a more extensive soft play area built nearby. Besides rabbits and guinea pigs, there are pounds with all kinds of creatures from geese to goats. For a reasonable fee, the proprietor would be happy to send his manager (his daughter) over to Fairley to advise on actual lay-out and the sourcing of materials and livestock. Goat-milking and cheese making could be incorporated as visitor attractions, possibly involving participation. School parties from town and city would provide a steady income during the week in term-time.

Jacob has driven out to a farm producing goat and ewe's cheese and come back with a roughly costed plan for equipment and structure. After a survey and after much deliberation, Bewis puts in a bid of four million pounds for the riding field which is duly accepted. Privately, Amelia has been reassured by a councillor close to the pulse that there will be no objection by the planning committee and that the Highways Agency will be placated enough by a reduction in the speed limit to thirty along the road as far as The Elms to allow an easement, permitting an access road onto the new mini-estate and through to the farm, using the end of the field. Only a narrow strip of trees in the spinney will need to come down.

Yes, there will be an increase in traffic both to the new houses and the farm but this will be counterbalanced by slower speeds. The existing residents of Allingworth Road who have long complained about speeding will therefore be placated too.

A starter herd of nanny goats and a lucky billy goat are expected soon. The sheep will come in the spring.

I awake very early one mellow August morning in my new home and feel a strange elation, reminding me of a morning in early childhood when I sprang out of bed and raced into the back garden - to collect snails. I go to the window and look at the fresh rose borders and lawn, sparkling with dew. Now I feel as if I have truly come home. I open the window and hear cocks crowing as I used to do as a child in Fairley. I recall my waking dream and try to delve into it. It was of Bullfarrow Lane and of the garden party. There before me on the lawn of over fifty years ago, I see the villagers of then - who lie now beneath the grass of St Catherine's cemetery - listening to Fairley Silver Band while their children, since grown and scattered, play tig and blind man's buff.

It is exactly then that I see how I can make myself a little more useful, and respond to the Bishop of Leicester's plea for people to come back together after the strife of the referendum - by organizing a garden party of my own. Why not September? It has become the gentlest month. On

the right, near the adventure playground there is room for a bouncy castle and a merry-go-round of some kind. On the terrace there is room for a band if I can locate one. On the left could stand the refreshment tents and gazebos in case of rain. In between, people can sit with their picnics. We could overflow into Amelia's fields for sports and races. Five-a-side football? French cricket? And all those silly races from a glorious childhood.

*

One fine early September morning I am sitting down with Amelia about to sort through a load of runner beans I have brought over, when she suddenly looks up and says something which takes me aback.

"I can see that what we're achieving is making you happy on the surface. But deep down you're not, are you?"

"Oh, I never knew you were psychic." I respond lamely.

"When you think nobody's looking, it's in your eyes."

"Lots of people look as if they're miserable when they're miles away. Look at people in their cars."

She shook her head. I was lonely and missing something - or somebody. She could tell. I like Amelia very much but not enough to allow her into my private domain.

"Well, I'm used to my own company. I'm too selfish to share and too set in my ways. I should never have got married. Let's change the subject.....If you can see or feel the beans, the pod will be tough."

"I meant to tell you - Sam has got the hang of milking the goats. He's nearly as good as me."

"Sam never believed in himself."

"We're getting married next June."

"Wonderful!"

I kiss her on the cheek.

"He wants you to be best man."

"And I would be honoured to accept."

I ask her to remind him that my late raspberries need picking before the frosts. My bones are bad at the moment and prevent me from doing the job. Sam is spending as much time on the farm as in my garden and I am considering setting on a part-timer. Brian enjoys his garden. Maybe he would agree to an afternoon a week.

I walk back through the gap in the hedge, thinking again of Amelia's remarks. I stand still to admire the grandeur of the house - when a pang of regret produces an off-note. Should it not be reward enough, I counter, to be the author of happiness for my friends? Did I wish to make, as I passed from middle to old age, the inevitable compromises which sharing life with another imposes? I console myself with the thought of Robin Sparrow living in fear and loathing of that nit-pecking virago. How many marriages deteriorate into a miserable arrangement, only tolerated by both parties as a divorce, being too messy and inconvenient, would be the greater evil? No, lonely I might be on occasion, but I preferred my freedom.

In view of Amelia's remarks, I decide it is time to pause and reflect on these past few months in which amazing changes have taken place; in the nation; in the county; in the village; and in me. I began with the intention of holding myself aloof from those events I meant to record. To get involved is not my style. Perhaps you might say that it was a latent vanity which broke that

resolution, but looking back I would prefer it to be thought that it was the plight of two human beings I could not help but love which drew me close. That they would choose to love each other was the most unexpected result. Both in their fashion have thanked me for the benefit my involvement has brought to them and that, and their evident joy and good fortune, ought to be reward enough. To borrow an analogy from Sam's beloved chess, such an endgame as theirs was unimaginable at the opening. Like most events in life, their game took shape and changed by degrees.

As well as Sam and Amelia, I must mention the name of Jacob. We have grown to like each other and his stock, once at rock bottom in the village, has continued to rise. For one thing, in memory of and, I suppose, in atonement for his father, he has set up a charity for sufferers of depression and with my blessing is organizing a fun day to take place in the spring on my lawns. He surprised me recently by asking me straight out - in view of compliments I had paid Amelia when I first met him - if I was jealous of Sam. Of course I laughed this off, but a little voice inside squeaked yes. There was an honesty and sincerity in Amelia which reminded me of someone else. My days of romance, however, are at an end. I have been to Amelia what Dickens' John Jarndyce was to Esther Summerson - minus his foolish proposal. Someone once said that we feel at our loneliest in a crowd. I disagree. In the business transactions of the day when I engage with lots of people I never have time to consider the issue of loneliness. It is in the quiet of the evening and in the dead of night that such a regret becomes more than a discordant note, easily silenced. I think that we eventually end up constructing an "official version" of our lives to keep ourselves sane. We try to suppress those memories which subvert it. If I am not careful, in the night, that horrible tunnel into the past I would rather forget can open up, dark before me, and I find myself falling in.

I began my life in good cheer in full expectation of happiness and success. My career and middle life were a failure. As interpreter and translator, I did my bit for Britain, never sparking a war or diplomatic incident. I was very well paid. But I was too diffident and introverted - some thought standoffish - to shine and attract the attention of the Great and the Influential. Ever solid and reliable, the life and soul I was not. I kept my opinions to myself, especially in the depths of the Thatcher years, when all around me were too keen to bray aloud theirs. They seemed to get on in their careers.

My wife soon tired of the life - the stiff parties and receptions; the small talk, the hypocrisy, the petty jealousies; the futility. In the end, we parted on good terms - in 1987, I think - but in spite of a resolve to stay in touch, I never saw her again and after a few greetings cards were exchanged, they stopped coming.

I dream sometimes that we are reconciled - then awake in a kind of despair. I console myself with the thought that she blissfully rectified her mistake in a second marriage. She was a very attractive and passionate woman. Sometimes I daydream that she has made efforts to trace me. She knows which county I came from originally - though I can never recall mentioning Fairley Parva to her. Does she wonder if I make efforts to trace her in Richmond? Is she alive?

44 Further Developments - And A Big Surprise

At the farm, a barn has been converted to house a variety of animals. Josh the Barbarian, one of the nicest and most hardworking men I know, is well into renovating and extending another outbuilding to become a restaurant for children's parties. It will not be fine dining and I intend to volunteer to do the chips and chicken nuggets. The goats are mingling happily with the ageing cows and many, according to the vet, are pregnant. The billy is housed away from them because

his smell raises their hormone levels, tainting their milk - so I am informed. The first batch of cheese was a little bitter for me but it is selling well in the shop - to which I have donated most of my produce. Mrs Burroughs is determined to have raised vegetable beds of her own to sow and tend next year. She has, it seems, a new lease of life. The strong farmhouse cheese she has produced with Jacob's help from the ancient recipe she managed to unearth is quite delicious. My first guests at the house loved it. I have catered from them myself so far and their empty plates are proof enough of my culinary skills. To my delight and the delight of the Burroughs, they called at the shop to buy goods to take home.

Wider afield, the horror claims made by the Remainers in the referendum campaign have so far largely failed to materialise, although Sam has described this late summer as the Phoney War. The pound and interest rates have dropped, but not so far the sky. However, the glorious changes promised by Brexit are in abeyance and many who voted OUT will not live to see the Glorious Day dawn. In the Red Lion harsh words have been forgotten and drinkers are much more interested in how Leicester City, the Premier League Champions, will fare in the new season. Plans for the fete at the end of September are well in hand and Amelia, meticulous as always, has made sure that nothing has been forgotten, from toilet vans to public liability insurance. The long-range forecast looks good, but of course Sam says that means it is bound to rain. The editor of the Earlstone Gazette was so excited by the whole project and the fete that she sent out a reporter and a photographer. The front page spread, with two more pages inside looked great and should be great publicity for all aspects of the project.

In the week following the publication of the Gazette, my inbox has been full of emails from people offering their best wishes and making enquiries. People are, I think, generally kind. After a brisk early morning walk across the fields through dew to inspect the building site which was the riding school - the land has been flattened and great ramparts of earth bulldozed to the edges - I switch on my laptop to see what new messages I have. There are over a hundred to work through. Many locals have been booking in their distant relatives for a stay in the flats - some for weddings - so that vacancies up to Christmas are becoming very few. I click on one from a pkennedy63@gmail.com and am amazed to read the following.

Hello Steven.

I was travelling up to Liverpool on Saturday to visit my daughter Paula when the train stopped at Rugby. A man came to sit down opposite and pulled out a copy of the Earlstone Gazette. I could not believe my eyes. Was I really looking at a picture of you?? I asked the gentleman if I could have a look. It was you! You were actually smiling and looking pleased with yourself in front of a lovely country house holding, of all things, a goat on a lead. You still have most of your hair and have put on a little weight. It suits you. You know me - I don't beat about the bush; this brought back the old feelings which never really went away anyway. My husband Paul died three years ago after a brave battle with a brain tumour. He was a lovely decent man, in many ways like you, and you would have got on well together. For ages I had been beating my brains out trying to remember if you ever said which part of Leicestershire you grew up in. In vain. Then there it was in black and white. Fairley Parva. The village photos on the inside were lovely. What a gift from God the newspaper was.

I shall leave Liverpool on Friday morning. The train calls at Rugby at ten to one. If you are not on the platform, I shall understand. Please do not respond to this - I have used my daughter's

email address and am deleting this message.

Charlotte x

45 This Green And Pleasant Land

Can that be Bob Smellie over there - in jeans and t-shirt?? Indeed it is. I notice that the t-shirt bears the slogan DON'T BLAME ME, I VOTED REMAIN encircled by the stars of the EU. If this is meant to provoke dissent, it seems to have failed. He is smiling and glad-handing bystanders and they do not resist. His wife I see is chatting amiably to various well-made ladies, one of whom is rather larger than the rest. I dare say that soon there will be impossible exertions taking place again in the Baptist church hall.

The gates opened on this special Sunday at one o'clock. Andy has tapped his beer barrels and is doing a brisk trade. The wonderful Earlstone Upper School band is tuning up below me. The poor pig is turning on the spit and stalls selling ethnic food already have queues. The mixture of aromas is startling. How I wish I could have persuaded Narinder and Fadilah to come along and sell their samosas.

Villagers have staked their claims on the lawn and set out their chairs and tables and hampers. There is a brisk breeze and scudding low clouds like galleons but rain is unlikely. The bouncy castle is bouncing with kids and others are crawling over the challenges of the adventure playground, anxiously watched by parents and grandparents. Are those young blonde women nearby, with their mobile phones to hand, the same ones who, justifiably, failed to engage with me, old buffer, in Pymm's paddock? Through the gap I then hedge I glimpse Jacob handing out sacks to children for a race. It is going up for two and with quite a crowd present I decide it is time to declare the event officially open. I walk down the steps to the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen and children, it is, I suppose, something of a truism to say that there is more that unites us than divides us. There are many things...not quite right with Britain but I would like to think that these are outweighed by the good things...."

"Speak up!" yells a voice from the beer tent. It is Sam, hand-in-hand with Amelia. "Put yer physog nearer the mike!"

"I'm sorry. Is that better?"

All shout YES!

"I know from personal experience that two people who are apparently poles apart politically are often surprised, the longer they speak, about how much they do agree on..." (Silence)

"What of me? I left Fairley when I was eighteen for London in the early seventies. I never came back because my parents moved south to Bedford. I travelled the world as a diplomat but when I retired something was pulling me back here, because with no surviving family, I had no reason to go elsewhere. I remembered long summer days roaming the fields hereabouts, scrumping apples and pears even if they weren't quite ripe just for the devilment of it, days blackberrying and generally running wild. My earnest wish now is that this wonderful area can be a source of delight for children of Fairley once again - in new ways. I have been very lucky to make new friends here and I have tried to help them as much as I could. I think I may have made the odd enemy but this was not deliberate" (I look over in the direction of the Sparrows sitting quite alone. Did she smile or was it a trick of the light?) "Of course, we gossip about each other and have our differences of opinion but it does us as much harm to bear a grudge as the person for whom we bear it - perhaps more. Mr Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* is one of my favourite

characters. He said - for what do we live but to make sport for our neighbours and laugh at them in our turn? Our neighbours we must try to love and tolerate, old and new, however unlike ourselves they may appear at first glance . With that thought in mind, let me say how sorry I am that Narinder and Fadilah could not be here today. Without their enormous vision and effort this wonderful house would still be derelict.”

Applause breaks out and spreads, including, I am pleased to see, a group of young men, one of whom I recognize as the fat Brexiter at the market.

“Post Brexit, we will soon be steering through some very choppy, uncertain waters, and it is important that we maintain patience and tolerance. The Prime Minister - now, alas, brexited himself - coined the phrase The Big Society. This I know is controversial -” (“Too true!” shouts Sam - “Oh do shut up!” shouts Brian) - I would like to put my own spin on it by saying that we are only truly a big society if we are a wide society too, wide enough to include all the people who have shown us, by making a home here, their admiration and respect. I hope my two good friends will one day be able to forget the stupid coward who assaulted them and realise that there are mercifully very many more decent and kind people amongst us than his sort. I am quite prepared to sell them back this wonderful house - for a reasonable profit of course - should they change their minds and return. The fields between here and the Allingworth road would all be under excavators now were it not for the determination of Mrs Burroughs, Jacob and Amelia. It will be a fitting tribute to them and to Jack - so tragically taken from us - if the village now supports their enterprise and business initiatives as they begin to come on line, as they say. These fields belong to them of course and have done so for many generations. But in another sense they belong to Fairley Parva and if Fairley is to maintain itself as a thoroughly lovely place to live, it should take care of this legacy stretching before us here, this green and pleasant land.I trust you will join with the E.U.S. orchestra in singing Jerusalem when we finish at six. I think now I have said enough!”

“Hear, hear!”

“This will be a yearly event. I declare the fete open! Enjoy yourselves!”

I return to sit with Charlotte on the top step and take her hand.

“I never heard you make a speech before. Not bad not bad.”

“Damned with faint praise again.”

“You know what?”

“What?”

“It’s strange that you went all round the world looking to some good - and did the most good when you came back home.”

THIS GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND, JULY 2016